

THE **PAINTINGS** OF**MOHOLY-NAGY**THE **SHAPE** OF THINGS TO COME

Vinyl colors:

Title: Small type:White; "Paintings": Oracal #209 Maize Yellow;

MN: Black; "Shape: Gerber Medium Gray, all matte finish

Text: White, matte finish

László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) is perhaps most familiar to us as a photographer and as an early and enthusiastic advocate for the integration of art with technology. Along with an entire generation of avant-garde artists active between the wars, Moholy believed that the very concept of art had to be radically transformed. Instead of making paintings for a privileged few, Moholy believed that art had to become scientific, egalitarian, and technologically advanced in order to train the viewer to respond to the challenges of modern life. Appointed in 1924 to the renowned art school Bauhaus, established in Weimar, Germany, Moholy became notorious for advising artists to exchange brush, pigment, and canvas with camera, television, and searchlight. In pursuit of this ambition, Moholy would abandon painting in 1928 in order to focus his energies on his most ambitious project, his *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*. Completed in 1930, the work was a kinetic device meant to produce lively light displays for a thoroughly modern stage.

Moholy's abandonment of painting was short-lived and his return to painting coincided with a period of unprecedented economic, political, and moral crisis in the 1930s and 40s, marked by the Great Depression and the Second World War. This is the first monographic exhibition of Moholy on the West Coast to examine why he would revise his seeming readiness to abandon brush and canvas in the 1920s and take up painting as a crucial resource in his late career.

This exhibition brings together rarely exhibited paintings on a range of industrial supports including Formica, Plexiglas, and aluminum and brings them into dialog with his film, photography, painting, and his seminal kinetic light display machine, *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*. The show concludes with a contemporary video work by Jan Tichy that engages Moholy's film work executed in exile. It also includes new work, made by Alex Rasmussen out of anodized aluminum and produced by his company Neal Feay, inspired by the art of Moholy and designed especially for this special presentation.



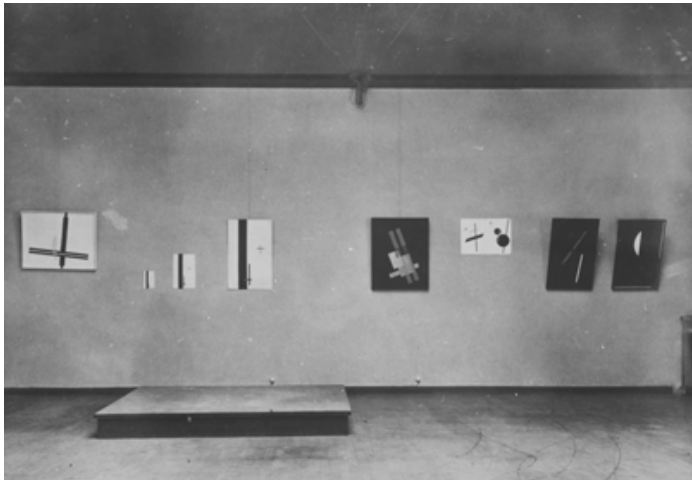
42" O.D.

DONOR CREDITS (SIZES VARY; SEE ELEVATIONS)

The exhibition was made possible through the generous support of the Tom and Charlene Marsh Family Foundation, Cecille Pulitzer, SBMA Women's Board, an anonymous donor, Marcia and John Mike Cohen, Dead Artists Society, The Dwight G. Vedder Family, Susan Bowey, Gregg Wilson and John Maienza, The David Bermant Foundation, and The Moholy-Nagy Foundation.

EARLY WORKS

In 1924, Walter Gropius, director of the Bauhaus, appointed Moholy as the youngest faculty member at the school, which was known for its integrative approach to art and design. Moholy had only arrived in Berlin in 1920 but by 1923, he had become a fixture at Herwarth Walden's influential Galerie der Sturm. Through



several key exhibitions that year, he gained a reputation as a radical constructivist artist because of his geometric abstract work. Constructivism had started in the young Soviet Union and it was identified in the West with its

stringency of form and for its enthusiastic embrace of science and technology. Gropius hired Moholy as an avant-garde artist prepared to shape the future direction of the Bauhaus. Gropius announced the year of Moholy's appointment that the task of the school was to bring art and technology into a new unity.

This gallery features examples of Moholy's early work that helped to establish his reputation as a constructivist made both before and during his time at the Bauhaus. He adopted an experimental strategy to devise abstract compositions that were meant to exemplify what he called the "will to precise and impersonal technique," aesthetic values that would best serve the needs of a rapidly changing, modern, industrial world. By sticking to a set vocabulary of simple forms—circles, arced segments, rectangles and other basic shapes—he researched different combinations against a number of supports whose characteristics related specifically to newly developed industrial materials like plastics, enamel and metallic alloys. These abstract pictures were meant to introduce the viewer to a new way of seeing the world unbounded by tradition and infused with the dynamism of the modern present.



26" O.D.

Vinyl colors:
 Title: Gerber Warm Red, matte finish
 Text: Black, matte finish

ART, TECHNOLOGY AND INDUSTRY

Moholy arrived in Berlin in 1920 and would quickly establish himself as an important member of the avant-garde community and by 1922 had firmly established himself as an artist identified with International Constructivism. Moholy's work was hailed by artists and critics who defined constructivism as a revolutionary ethos, not merely a stylistic designator for hard-edged geometrical abstraction. Constructivism demanded that painting, along with all creative activity, be treated as an organizational feat. Forms and colors were arranged within set limits, be they three-dimensional or flat, in order to maximize their capacity to modernize the perceptual faculties of the viewer. Abstraction was pursued not as a style but as a project intended to examine structures and forms that might help bring about new ways of seeing, commensurate with the scientific rationality and technical precision demanded by the age. These values were prized at the Bauhaus, especially after Walter Gropius announced the necessity to unify art with technology in 1924, the year Moholy was appointed to the faculty. Moholy sought to convey these ideas not only through the structural rigor of his compositions but also through his use of new industrial materials as substrates for his paintings. Moholy had long demonstrated his willingness to work with new unusual materials, but in the mid-1920s, his work with industrial materials was also motivated by a desire to cultivate possible relationships with manufacturers.

The Bauhaus lost state support in 1924 and was forced to close the school in Weimar and reopen a year later in Dessau. This move brought the school into the proximity of new major industries, including lighting and aircraft manufacturers in the area. The Bauhaus was extremely keen to develop private partnerships to ensure its own financial security. Painting on aluminum, sandpaper, and plastic advertised Moholy's, and by extension, the Bauhaus willingness to explore and adopt the latest materials and techniques in their work.



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THE RETURN TO PAINTING

Moholy stopped painting in 1928 but resumed around 1930, after he debuted his ambitious kinetic light display machine, *Light Prop for an Electric Stage* in Paris. He had hoped the prototype would prepare artists to work cooperatively with industry but the start of the Great Depression prevented any further investment in research or development for this experimental prototype. In 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power and Moholy found himself in exile with few resources to continue working with new technologies or advanced industries. Even more distressingly, Moholy witnessed the production of an enormous electric light display from abroad.



In Nuremberg, Albert Speer requisitioned over a hundred anti-aircraft lights to his *Cathedral of Light* to illuminate a massive Nazi Rally. The use of the latest technology was directed not in the service of a progressive modernization of a mass audience, but instead towards Fascist indoctrination. Against such a backdrop, Moholy was forced to reconsider the promise and perils of modern technology as well as the future possibilities of painting. Where new technologies required enormous capital investments and technical expertise, Moholy argued that the production and exhibition requirements of painting were far more minimal, and its effects no less transformative, by contrast.

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PAINTING IN LIGHT


 26" O.D.

Moholy had long described a shift in the trajectory of his art from painting in pigment to the exploration of light itself as the basis of an artistic medium. This narrative of progressive technological dissolution of material support towards the creation of powerful, projected light, color, and shadow effects remained a constant leitmotif in his writings. However, the language he used to his work with light took on painting as its practical and theoretical model, which the artist described in the mid-1930s as “light painting.” His Kodachrome slides, made throughout his time in Chicago, often exemplify this idea through their painterly aesthetic.

Moholy experimented with color photography in the early 1930s, but was limited by the technical complexity and expense of early processes. Kodachrome, introduced in the United States in 1935, resolved these early problems. It was chromatically brilliant and film was commercially processed, making it accessible to a broad, non-specialist audience. After Moholy arrived in the United States in 1937, he worked almost exclusively in Kodachrome, developing his film at the drugstore like any other amateur photographer.

His color slides used a range of light filters to apply washes of color to abstract studies, paying close attention to how overlapping hues interacted with one another and with the surfaces upon which they were projected. He made nocturnal photographs taken on the street. Simply by using a long exposure, light emanating from passing traffic, streetlamps, or garish neon is transformed into brilliant tendrils of color painted by the gestures caught on film with the camera cradled by hand, reanimated with the light projected through the slide.

These color slides relate closely to the project of his late paintings that attempt to capture the world in constant movement through means that do not require the fabrication of an elaborate mechanism as he had done years prior with the *Light Prop*.


On view in this gallery are the color slides transferred into digital form, preserving the luminous quality of the projected slide and its one-by-one delivery.

THINGS TO COME

Vinyl colors:
 Title: Oracal #209 Maize Yellow, matte finish
 Text: Black, matte finish

In the winter of 1935, László Moholy-Nagy shot special effects for the British science fiction movie, *Things to Come*. He filmed explosions, glittering cascades of light, gyrating contraptions, and spinning glass globes to show future industry in action. Using a range of highly reflective metallic materials, translucent plastic sheets, glass cones, and tautly stretched wire, Moholy built cityscapes with dynamic spinning parts, open parabolic arcs, cantilevered forms and crystalline skyscrapers. However innovative these effects were, very few of Moholy's contributions were included in the movie and he was never credited during his lifetime. Much of what survives of Moholy's contributions exists in the form of photographic stills, included in this exhibition. However, a film canister with his unused special effects was discovered in the archives of the Denham Studios in the 1970s.

Jan Tichy's synchronized three-channel digital projection makes use of Moholy's once-lost film clips. Each cycle begins and ends with Moholy's original, played in its entirety in a single channel. In between, Tichy subjects Moholy's film segment to a number of transformations. Mirroring, reversals of positive and negative sequences, superimposition, and other techniques create profoundly different effects. The first cycle unfolds into luminous, syncopated waves of lights. Individual sheets of plastic and metal coalesce by the end of the second cycle into a cavernous and jagged interior. The third plays with globes and viscous liquid to suggest the fluid materials of a mysterious laboratory experiment. The final cycle starts with Moholy's mockup of the city of the future and through the tight doubling and trebling of images across the three screens, the model exterior becomes the dizzying stage set for abstract moving parts. Working over three quarters of a century after these special effects were filmed, Tichy uses our present technology to recover Moholy's lost film and creates a vision of the world as future past.

 Jan Tichy (Czech, b. 1974) works at the intersection of video, sculpture, architecture, sound and photography; many of his works combine these elements. Tichy, who is now based in Chicago, also teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as Assistant Professor of Photography and Art and Technology. His work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

29.875" O.D.

Photo at final size: 3.18" sq.

THINGS TO COME 1936

Displayed here are facsimiles of vintage movie posters advertising the film *Things to Come* (1936). Based on a book by H.G. Wells, *Things to Come* was an ambitious, big-budget science-fiction movie directed by William Cameron Menzies that imagined a world destroyed by global warfare and redeemed through science and technological progress. At the time of filming, László Moholy-Nagy was living in exile in London and the producer, fellow Hungarian, Alexander Korda invited him to produce special effects for the movie. Little of Moholy's vision ended up in the film but the set designs and clips he made found their way into his typography and, in altered forms, into his late paintings.



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VON ROMBERG TEXT (PRELIMINARY)

ALEX RASMUSSEN **NEAL FEAY DESIGN** GOLETA, CA

This unprecedented presentation also features ‘interventions,’ inspired by Moholy’s art, by the high-end Santa Barbara based designer, Alex Rasmussen, whose company Neal Feay reinterprets artistic forms in anodized aluminum. In many ways, Rasmussen’s innovative fusion of technology and the arts is the 21st century continuation of Moholy’s legacy.

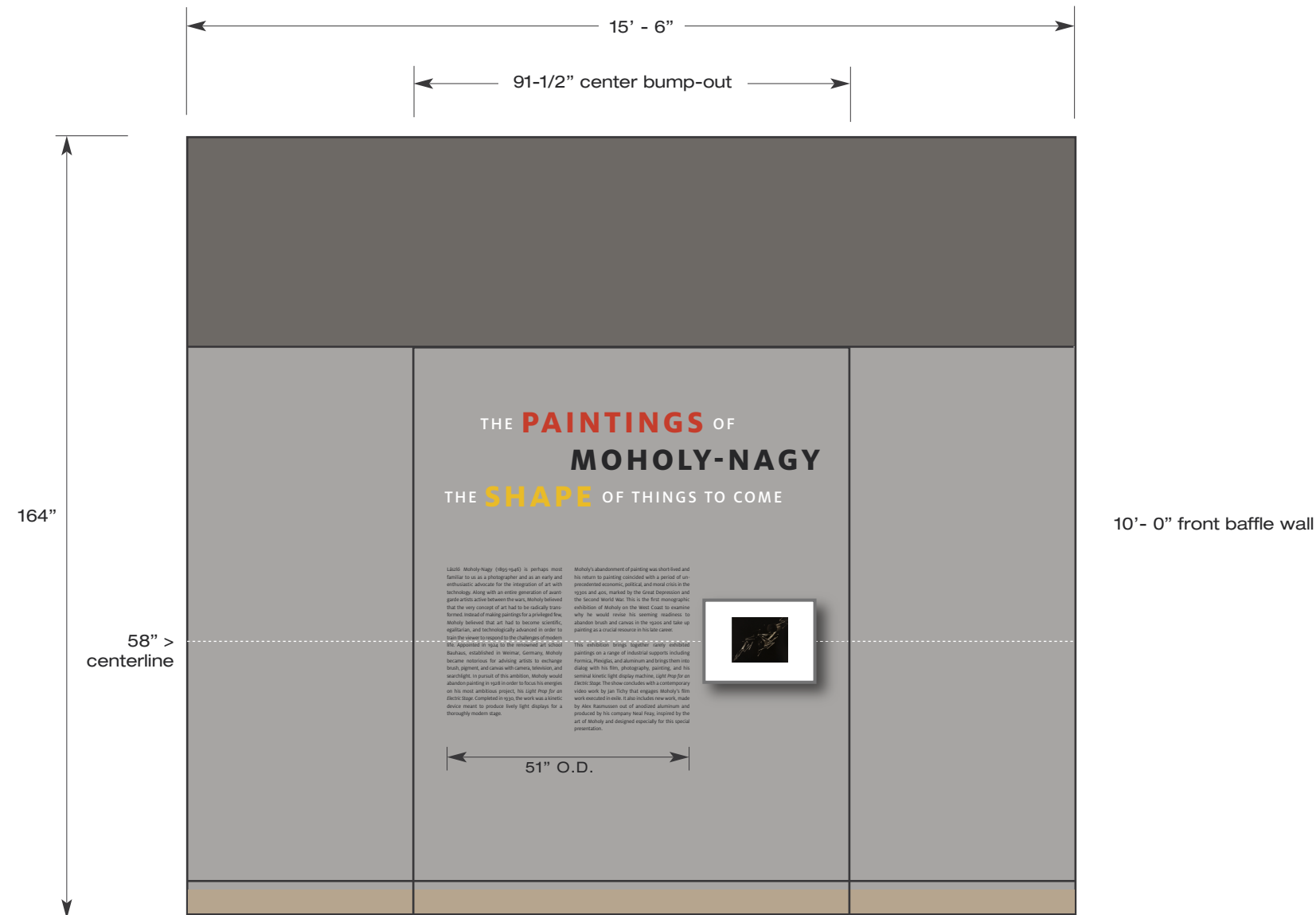


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Colefax Gallery: North Elevation

Above baffle walls = BM 1546 Gargoyles
 = BM 1543 Plymouth Rock



Title graphic vinyl colors:
White, Black, Gerber Warm Red, Oracal #209 Maize Yellow as shown,
all matte finish

Intro text: Black vinyl matte finish

Photogram, ca. 1924
 Gelatin silver print
 84.XM.231.4
 Getty
 9 7/16 x 11 3/4 in
 Framed dim.:
 17 7/8 x 23 7/8 x 7/8 in.

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