

# Jeannine Fiedler Painting with light: László Moholy-Nagy's visionary "Space Modulator Experiment"

"Space Modulator Experiment Aluminum 5" takes us directly into the cosmos of its creator, László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946). The acronym version of the title sounds almost like the name of a spaceship tasked with a secret mission in outer space, "SMEA 5"! In fact, this work from the 1930s is nothing less than a brilliant turning point in Moholy's mission to explore the nature of light.

Light became the central preoccupation of Moholy's art as early as 1919, when he became part of the Hungarian avant-garde. Europe's young artists had been left traumatized by their experiences during World War I. Many of them – including Moholy – had served on the front lines. The world they had known before the horrors of the trenches was gone forever. National borders had been shifted, nation states broken up and re-formed, while political ideologies of the

left and right were calling for the creation of a "new Man." Artists, too, were busy searching for new social strategies. As the old way of life under the monarchies fell apart, innumerable attempts at re-interpreting culture and politics were made. The manifestos of the day – some of which Moholy helped write in Budapest and during his sojourn in Berlin from 1920 onward – called for a radical re-evaluation of everything that had been set in stone in the pre-war societies. Academic artistic traditions, in particular, were called into question: Now that artistic expression was to become an integral component of modern life, colours, paintbrushes or blocks of marble seemed too limited to interpret the challenges posed by scientific progress, industrialization, and advanced means of communication.

The avantgardists made ready use of these technological innovations in order to absorb the experience of the accursed war and digest it in artistic terms. The young Moholy became one of their leading spokespersons when it came to the theory and practice of this new aesthetic. They invented concept art, multimedia objects, and collages. They experimented with steel, sheet metal, concrete, glass, and celluloid sourced from the labs of the war industry and from motion picture industry – materials which had hardly been used in art before and which offered fantastic new possibilities. The brothers Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo, for example, were the first to employ celluloid in their sculptures between 1918 and 1920.

Moholy first met them in Berlin, at the various gatherings where artists discussed modern concepts, forms, and materials. Like his colleagues, he, too, found these circles to be a wellspring of new ideas for painting, sculpture, collage, photography, film, set design, and advertising. Yet as he recollected towards the end of his life, "The intellectual capacity of any given individual rarely allows them to deal with more than a single problem area. I suspect that this is why my work from those days onward can be seen as one long paraphrasing of the original problem: light. I began to become interested in painting with light." Yet

what Moholy modestly interprets as a personal limitation in his retrospective "Abstract of an Artist" (1944) actually served to guide and light his way as he evolved into a visionary creator of translucent, transparent, and kinetic objects.

It bears noting here that "painting with light" not only means a painting process that transcends the use of coloured pigments – the term also refers to the process of creating "light paint-ings" that become imbued with a life of their own thanks to the interplay of light and shadow generated by the artist's "space modulators" and "light modulators." In effect, the "modulator" serves to transmit the imaginative impulses sent by the artist-engineer to the recipient-viewer as the modulation of a signal. These and other original terms coined by Moholy, such as "photogram" and "photosculpture," serve precisely to describe his art.

Certain materials that at first glance seem too hard to use – such as cellulose-acetate, plexiglass or the Rhodoid and Galalith which Moholy favored at the time – actually become soft and pliable with the careful application of heat. Thus, they can be cut, bent, etched, and worked in any number of ways. But what made them so attractive to Moholy was that they can break up light so as to create potentially endless effects of light and shadow. This in turn allows optical sensations to be triggered by the changing light of day, by electric light sources or by the shifting positions of the viewer. The result is a multi-layered dialogue between the viewer and the work. Using just these sorts of materials during the 1930s, Moholy developed a kinetic visual form that crossed over into three-dimensionality and pointed the way into the future, all the way to the artist group Gruppe ZERO and the light artists of today. It allowed the artist to extend the optical effects of light and colouration by emphasizing the transparent substance of the material itself, making it possible to experience space in novel ways, while putting an end to the illusionistic perspective of panel painting.

Interpreted against this background, "SMEA 5" can be seen as a ground-breaking work which, liberated from the "viscousness of the pigment" (Alexander Dörner), celebrates Moholy's visions of playing with light. Here, the only element left over from panel painting is the brightly varnished slab of wood onto which the aluminum plate is affixed, leaving a space of roughly 5 cm. Mounted at a lesser height, the round acrylic glass disc "floats" above the vectors painted in red oil that zip centrifugally across the plate and its circular openings, which are either lit up or left pitch black. The clear acrylic, meanwhile, is fired up by energy vectors streaming from a different sun. These black vectors are laid out diametrically across the red ones. We see satellites approaching the orbit of the disc, black holes, burned-out stars ... and gaze into the furthest reaches of outer space. In this extra-terrestrial system of his, Moholy sets energy and vision in motion, eventually transforming the whole *gestalt* into a kinetic image-object.



László Moholy-Nagy. "Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne", 1930 (replica from 1970)



Lot 20

## 20 László Moholy-Nagy

Bácsborsód 1895 – 1946 Chicago

„Space Modulator Experiment, Aluminum 5". 1931-35

Multi-Media-object: Oil on incised transparent plastic disk and aluminium plate, mounted on panel painted by the artist. 86,5 × 71 × 8 cm (34 × 28 × 3 1/8 in.). On the aluminium plate signed and dated lower right (incised): L. Moholy=Nagy 31-35. Signed, titled and dated in pencil on the reverse. Accompanied by a confirmation by Hattula Moholy-Nagy, daughter of the artist, Ann Arbor, dated 22 June 2021. The plastic disk was expertly replaced 2015 due to aging. In places with scuff marks. [3016]

### Provenance

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (Inv.- no. 1112, presumably sold in the 1960s) / Galerie Schlégl, Zurich (at least until 1991) / Private Collection, Rhineland

EUR 600,000–800,000

USD 698,000–930,000

### Exhibition

László Moholy-Nagy. Valencia, IVAM, Centro Julio González; Kassel, Fridericianum, und Marseille, Musée Cantini, 1991, cat. no. 67, ill. p. 115 / Verschmelzendes Rosa und schwarze Spannung. Werke des osteuropäischen Konstruktivismus aus einer deutschen Privatsammlung. Winterthur, Kunstmuseum, 2001, ill. p. 55 / Von Kandinsky bis Tatlin. Konstruktivismus in Europa. Bonn, Kunstmuseum, 2006, p. 188, ill. p. 119 / From the Bauhaus to the New World / Vom Bauhaus zur Neuen Welt. Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy. London, Tate Modern; Bielefeld, Kunsthalle, and New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006/07, cat. no. 73, ill. p. 59 / László Moholy-Nagy. Retrospektive. Frankfurt a. M., Schirn-Kunsthalle, 2009/10 / L'abstraction en Europe. Le choix d'un collectionneur allemand. Saint-Paul de Vence, Fondation Maeght, 2011, cat. no. 87, ill. p. 124 / Constructivism in Europe. From Malevich to Kandinsky. Peking, National Art Museum of China, 2012, cat. no. 88, ill. p. 122 / Die Revolution entlässt ihre Bilder. Von Malewitsch bis Kandinsky. Münster, Kunstmuseum Pablo Picasso, 2014, cat. no. 46, ill. p. 122 / Moholy-Nagy. Future Present. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim; Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago, und Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2016/17, cat. no. 238, ill. p. 204, p. 194, ill. 9 (detail)

### Literature and illustration

Roberta Smith: Moholy-Nagy. Future Present. Vision and Precision in a Fluid Braid (review of the New York 2016 exhibition with a photo of the work; <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/27/arts/design/moholy-nagy-future-present-vision-and-precision-in-a-fluid-braid.html>; query date 22.10.2021) / Ben Davies: The

Big Missed Opportunity in the Guggenheim's László Moholy-Nagy Show. Compared to Moholy-Nagy's own vision, the Guggenheim show feels genteel (review with a photo of the work in the New York exhibition 2016; see: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/laszlo-moholy-nagy-guggenheim-exhibition-507140>; query date 22.10.2021)

- **László Moholy-Nagy was one of the most important artists and teachers at the Bauhaus School in Weimar/Dessau**
- **The work once was owned by the Guggenheim Museum in New York**
- **A ground-breaking inspiration for the 3D kinetic art of subsequent generations**



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