

JOYCE CHIA CHI TSAI

Crosstalk: Moholy-Nagy's Enamel Pictures as Telephone Pictures

Abstract

My dissertation, "Painting after Photography: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1921-1936," argues that our understanding of this crucial figure in the history of the avant-garde must grapple with the broad range of his practice. Moving away from a photo-centric account of his oeuvre, my dissertation seeks to develop the theoretical richness of his thought by attending to the surface of his work and reading them against the familiar claims of his writings. Rather than seek to establish a contextual framework within which Moholy's oeuvre might be situated, this study seeks to discover through the complexly modulated surface of his paintings, the delicate velvety ground of his photograms, the abstracting textures of his aerial photographs, and the disembodied flashes of light thrown off the metal skin of his "Lichtrequisit" something akin to an artistic or aesthetic intelligence that refuses to conform to notions of medium specificity. Moholy's life-long engagement with a number of different practices in an astonishing range of media insists nonetheless on a deep commitment to testing, to pushing the material support to a point that both liquidates its own conventionally understood possibilities and re-describes its imminent qualities.

This project on Moholy grew out of my interests in aesthetic theory and my commitment to art history as a fundamentally materially-based discipline. The Humanities Center offered me the unique opportunity to earn an MA in German, focusing on aesthetic philosophy, while working towards a Ph.D. in the History of Art Department. I began to see over the course of my studies that the task for

me, as a student of both, was not to try to develop a theoretical framework in advance of a serious engagement with the artwork. I had to first discover in dialogue with the work of art, the language commensurate to its description. This basic task led me to explore the long-standing problem of description, that is, the problem of linguistic mediation, and by extension, the problem of expression and its material mediation in the work of art.

My recent work all touch on these central themes. In my article, "*Der Kuckuck* and the Problem of Workers' Photography," in the Fall 2005 issue of *History of Photography*, I explore the ways in which the transparency or opacity of photography's formal language becomes the crucial problem for Austrian Social Democrats seeking to establish a proletarian political art. I am currently at work on the Adelbert Stifter's notion of "wirkliche Wirklichkeit" in which I shall argue that his ever more passionate pursuit of an idiosyncratic understanding of realism, of a precise, as if unmediated mode of expression, leads to a radical form of abstraction in his late work, both prose and painting.

Zur Person

Joyce Tsai is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Humanities Center and History of Art Department at Johns Hopkins University. She is also currently a pre-doctoral fellow with the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts in Washington, D. C. and with the Dedalus Foundation, New York.

Her dissertation, "Painting after Photography: László Moholy-Nagy 1921-1936," seeks to demonstrate that any account of Moholy as a photographer remains incomplete without first considering how this body of work is indebted to his concerns as a painter. Her work engages with the history of the avant-garde and modernism, history of photography, and aesthetic theory.

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