



in The Contest of Meaning:
critical Histories of Photography
ed. Richard Bolton

London: MIT Press, 1992

Alexander Rodchenko,
Chauffeur, 1933 (Collection,
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York)

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The Armed Vision Disarmed:
Radical Formalism from Weapon
to Style

Art photography, although long since legitimated by all the conventional discourses of fine art, seems destined perpetually to recapitulate the rituals of the *arriviste*. Inasmuch as one of those rituals consists of the establishment of suitable ancestry, a search for distinguished blood lines, it inevitably happens that photographic history and criticism are more concerned with the notions of tradition and continuity than with those of rupture and change. Such recuperative strategies may either take on photography *toute entière*, as in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Before Photography*, which attempted to demonstrate that photography was engendered from the body of art, or selectively resurrect the photography of the past, as in the case of the publication and exhibition by Stieglitz of the work of Hill and Adamson and Julia Margaret Cameron to emphasize the continuity of a particular aesthetic. Although a certain amount of historical legerdemain is occasionally required to argue that *a* evolves or derives from *b*, the nature of photography makes such enterprises relatively easy. An anonymous vernacular photograph may look quite like a Walker Evans, a Lee Friedlander may closely resemble a Rodchenko; put side by side, a close, but specious, relationship appears obviously, *visually* established.

Nowhere is the myth of continuity more apparent than in the recent Aperture offering *The New Vision*, which traces the fortunes and fruits of the Chicago Institute of Design, or, as John Grimes puts it in his essay, "The New Vision in the New World."¹ Although the leitmotif of the book—both in the Grimes essay as well as in Charles Traub's "Photographic Education Comes of Age"—is the enduring presence and influence of the Founding Father (and his founding principles), it is perfectly evident that a substantial amount of the photography to have emerged from the I.D. has little in common with the production, much less the ethos, of the Dessau Bauhaus. In fact, on the evidence of the work reproduced, I would venture to say that much of the photography to have emerged from the Bauhaus of the diaspora is more closely allied to indigenous currents in Ameri-

can art photography than to the machine-age ethic that informed Moholy's thinking.

Such reflections are suggested, among other things, by the concluding sentence in the book's first (unsigned) essay, "A Visionary Founder: László Moholy-Nagy," which reads as follows: "The Utopian dream Moholy worked for never became a reality, despite his dedication and energy, but his new vision was a powerful legacy, especially for photographers, who could see their 'mechanical' art as the means for objective vision, optical truth, and personal enlightenment."² Objective vision and optical truth were indeed linchpins of Moholy's program for photography, even as early as 1925. Personal enlightenment, however, was a notion utterly uncountenanced in Moholy's thinking, and the quotes around the word "mechanical"—the precise attribute which made the camera a privileged imagemaking technology in the Bauhaus scheme of things—are an obvious signal of a profound *volteface*.

The problems raised by the kind of photographic history proposed in *The New Vision* are compounded by what appears to be a general confusion as to the notion of formalism in photography. Most photographic cognoscenti, when asked what type of photography is represented by the I.D. at least up to the early 1970s, will respond that it represents the "Chicago School," or "formalism," by which is intended a label that will describe such disparate photographers as Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Ray Metzker, Art Sinsabaugh, Barbara Blondeau, or Kenneth Josephson. To the degree that formalism has undergone (I would argue) the same kinds of permutations and ruptures as did the Bauhaus/I.D. itself, it seemed a useful project to trace generally the radical formalism of Rodchenko as it was disseminated into Weimar *fotokultur* and its additional transformations as it was absorbed and modified in Moholy's practice, within the institution of the Bauhaus. Finally, I was curious to see how the formalism of Aaron Siskind and some of the later graduates of the I.D. related to that of their European forebears. That this forty-year period traces the change from an explicitly political and aggressively antiexpressionist production to its virtual antithesis is implicit testimony that photograph, like all social production, is not merely the vessel, but is itself constitutive, of ideology.

"All art," wrote George Orwell, "is propaganda, but not all propaganda is art." The radical formalist photography forged in the Soviet Union in the span of years immediately before and for several years after the Russian Revolution disclaimed all aesthetic intent and instead defined itself as instrumental in nurturing a new, collective consciousness. "Art has no place in modern life," wrote Alexander Rodchenko in the pages of *Lef* in 1928: "It will continue to exist as long as there is a mania for the romantic and as long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deception. Every modern cultured man must wage war against art as against opium."³ Refusing the appellation of art and embracing the medium as an ideal instrument for perceptual renewal and social progress, the photographic work of Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky has nonetheless come to signify more as art than as revolutionary praxis. Despite their having whole-heartedly consecrated their work as propaganda, we view them now as having been—preeminently—artists. In this *a posteriori* aesthetic recuperation is inscribed a second death of radical Russian photography: its first was effected in its native society by official suppression; its second was determined by its rapid assimilation in Western Europe and the United States—a victim, one might say, of its own success. Diffused and defused, photographic strategies invented in the service of revolution were quickly conscripted for other uses, other ideologies. It is this

latter fate that I wish to discuss here, in part because it reveals so clearly the profound mutability of photographic practice in general and in part because the fortunes of formalist photography itself provide a paradigm of aesthetic institutionalization—from the barricades to the Academy (so to speak) in less than three generations.

This particular migration is by no means limited to photography, or even formalist photography. Leo Steinberg's observation that the "rapid domestication of the outrageous is the most characteristic feature of our artistic life, and the time lapse between shock received and thanks returned gets progressively shorter"⁴ fairly describes the history of radical art movements in the twentieth century; no art practice has yet proved too intractable, subversive, or resistant to be assimilated sooner or later into the cultural mainstream. Examination of the transformations that occur when a given art movement or idea traverses frontiers and oceans, as well as time, is instructive for the way it compels recognition of the essential instability of meaning in cultural production. This is nowhere more conspicuous than in the passage of photography from one society and context to another. Thus, while a historical understanding of the goals, conditions, and determining factors that produced constructivist and productivist photography can be obtained from any book on the subject, the ability to perceive a Rodchenko photograph or an El Lissitzky photomontage as their contemporaries did is lost to us as though it were centuries rather than decades separating us from their images.

The radical formalism that structured the new Soviet photography had little to do with the Anglo-American variety that propelled the photography of Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, et al. toward a fully articulated modernist position, although there were common grounds in the two formalisms—shared convictions, for example, that the nature of the medium must properly determine its aesthetic and that photography must acknowledge its own specific characteristics. Deriving ultimately from Kantian aesthetics, Anglo-American formalism insisted above all on the autonomy, purity, and self-reflexivity of the work of art. As such it remained throughout its modernist permutations an essentially idealist stance. Such concepts, as well as related notions of immanence and transcendence, with the parallel construct of the promethean artist, were, however, anathema to the Russian formalists. Resolutely opposed to all metaphysical systems, the Russian literary critics who provided the theoretical basis for the movement focused their attention on a systematic investigation of the distinguishing components of literature: those elements, qualities, and characteristics that defined literature *as such*.⁵ The radical nature of this critical enterprise lay in its strict materialism, impersonality, and anti-individualism, all essential aspects of constructivist and productivist practice. The key concept of *ostranenie*—the making strange of the familiar—developed by Victor Shklovsky in 1916, was conceived for literary purposes, but it had obvious applications to photography. The defamiliarization of the world effected in prose and poetry, the renewal and heightening of perception that was understood to be a primary goal of literature, had its natural analogue in the ability of the camera to represent the world in nonconventional ways. Revolutionary culture required new forms of expression as well as new definitions of art, and the camera—both film and still—and its operator served as ideal agents of this new vision.

But while the art photography simultaneously emerging in New York posited a modernist aesthetic that insisted on photography as a medium of subjectivity—even while acknowledging its mechanical attributes—radical practice in both the Soviet Union and Germany rejected absolutely the notion of the artist's function as the expression of a

privileged subjectivity. This repudiation of subjectivity, personality, and private vision was linked not only to revolutionary tenets of collectivism and utilitarianism, but also to the widespread reaction against expressionism—"a culture of mendacious stupidity," in Raoul Hausmann's assessment. One did not, in fact, require Marxist credentials to reject expressionism: futurism, de Stijl, Zurich and Berlin dada, suprematism, and of course, constructivism, all in one form or another defined their agendas in opposition to expressionist culture, for its atavism, utopianism, and emotionalism were antithetical to the critical and socially oriented art movements that emerged after World War I. Moreover, the antitechnological stance of expressionism was totally at odds with the passionate enthusiasm for technology and urbanism—all that comprised the machine-age ethos—which was to figure so prominently in both Weimar and Soviet culture.

For an artist like Alexander Rodchenko, not yet thirty at the time of the October Revolution, the internal logic of constructivism as well as the imperatives of revolutionary culture led inevitably to a repudiation of easel painting. "The crushing of all 'isms' in painting was for me the beginning of my resurrection," wrote Rodchenko in 1919. "With the funeral bells of color painting, the last 'ism' was accompanied to its grave; the lingering last hopes of love are destroyed, and I leave the house of dead truths. Not synthesis but analysis is creation."⁶ A few weeks after the last "laboratory" exhibition of the Moscow constructivists in 1921 ($5 \times 5 = 25$), the twenty-five young artists, including Rodchenko (whose work was represented in the exhibition by his three "last paintings"—three painted surfaces, one red, one yellow, and one blue), renounced "pure pictorial practice" altogether, and instead embraced a wholly materialist orientation—productivism. Osip Brik, the formalist critic and theoretician closely linked to both Rodchenko and the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, wrote yet another of the many obsequies for easel painting: "We are practitioners—and in this lies the distinctive feature of our cultural consciousness. There is no place for the easel picture in this consciousness. Its force and meaning lie in its extra-utilitarianism, in the fact that it serves no other function than 'caressing' the eye."⁷ Although in part a resolution to the "crisis of images" represented on the one hand by the absolutism of Malevich's *White on White* of 1918, and on the other by the effective closure of Rodchenko's "last paintings," productivism signaled

a kind of return to the earth after the long cosmic flight of Malevitchian suprematism and the super-specialization in which nonobjective art was recklessly engaged in the years 1915–1918. In fleeing the labyrinth of extreme theorization, the productivists hoped . . . to lead art back into the heart of society.⁸

Indeed, it was precisely this intense engagement with the larger society at hand, as well as the belief that the artist must function as an active, sociopolitical being, that contrasted so dramatically with the almost ritualistically alienated stance of the expressionist artist. "The aim of the new art," wrote Ilya Ehrenburg in 1921, "is to fuse with life,"⁹ and productivist texts abound with exhortations that the artist turn from the museum to the street, from the studio to the factory. Echoing Mayakovsky ("The streets our brushes/the squares our palettes") Rodchenko proclaimed:

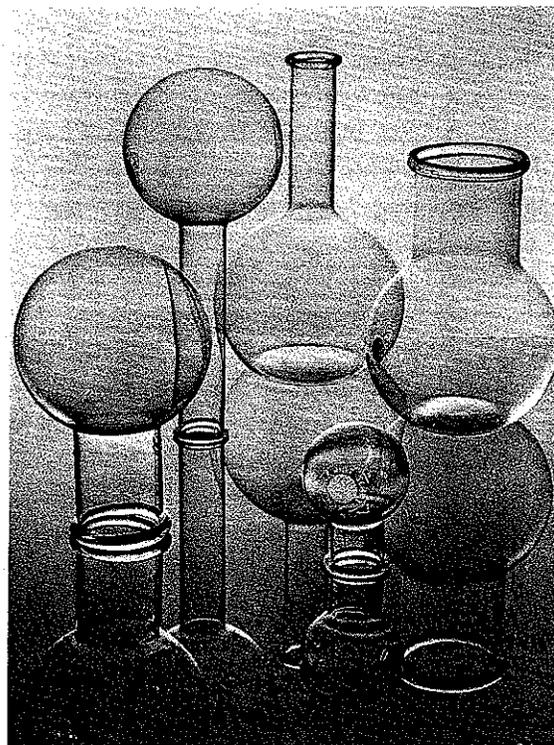
Non-objective painting has left the Museums; non-objective painting is the street itself, the squares, the towns and the whole world. The art of the future will not be the cozy decoration of family homes. It will be just as indispensable as 48-storey skyscrapers, mighty bridges, wireless, aeronautics and submarines which will be transformed into art.¹⁰

The productivists' stance was thus not so much anti-art, their more excited polemics notwithstanding, as it was opposed to the ghettoization of art as an activity of the privileged few for the production of luxury items. With the renunciation of easel painting, Rodchenko turned his attention to the range of materials, technologies, and practices that collectively constituted a reconciliation of creative energies with the felt needs of Soviet society. These activities were, perforce, those that existed in the public sphere: the design of exhibitions and pavilions (including the Worker's Club for the Soviet Pavilion at the 1925 Paris *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs*, which introduced the work of the Russian avant-garde to western Europe), furniture, textile, theater, typographic and graphic design, including posters, book covers, and advertising,¹¹ and, from 1924 on, photography.

Rodchenko's photography drew equally from notions derived from the formalist circle, presumably through people such as Brik and Sergei Tretiakoff, and from the precepts of productivism itself. Of the former influence, the concept of defamiliarization has already been cited. Additionally, Roman Jakobson's concept of the "laying bare of the device"—the inclusion within the work of art of those material or formal elements that reveal its construction—was readily assimilable to a new photography practice. Much of Rodchenko's most innovative photography from the 1920s is notable for its refusal of "naturalized," conventionalized viewpoints, the insistence that it was a camera lens and not a window pane that yielded the image. Worm's-eye, bird's-eye, oblique, or vertiginous perspectives relate not only to a strategy of defamiliarization, but also to an affirmation of the apparatus itself as the agent of this vision. Making the point even more emphatically are photographs by Rodchenko, such as *Chauffeur—Karelia 1933*, in which the photographer himself is contained in the image. Returning to the observation made at the beginning of this discussion—that photographic practices employed in one historical moment may have their significance altogether transformed when employed in another—it should be noted that Rodchenko's presence in the photograph has infinitely more to do with Dziga Vertov's inclusion of the filmmaking process in *The Man with the Movie Camera* than it does with Lee Friedlander's self-referencing devices.¹² What is being stressed is the manifest presence of the means of production, and an implicit rejection of the notion of the photograph as either transparent or neutral.

The productivist influences on Rodchenko's photography thus derived more from the mechanical-technical attributes of the medium than from its purely formal possibilities. The camera was obviously a fundamentally democratic instrument; it was easily mastered, produced multiple images relatively cheaply, and represented (like the airplane or the radio tower, both powerful and pervasive symbols of technological promise) speed and science, precision and modernity. Most suggestive to Rodchenko, however, was the realization that the camera performed in an aggregate, analytic way rather than in a unitary, synthetic one. Rodchenko's statement that creation was analysis, not synthesis, was based on his understanding that contemporary reality could not be apprehended in essentializing syntheses. In "Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot" (1928), Rodchenko argued, "One has to take different shots of a subject, from different points of view and in different situations, as if one examined it in the round rather than looked through the same key-hole again and again"—a notion equally central to the practice of the cubists. Posterity's physical knowledge of the historical Lenin would be known, Rodchenko added, not by a single exemplary oil painting, but through the hundreds of photographs taken, Lenin's letters and journals, and the memoirs of his associates. Thus, Rodchenko concludes, "Don't try to capture a man in one synthetic portrait, but rather in lots of snapshots taken at different times and in different circumstances!"¹³

Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Schott
Laboratory Glass*, c. 1936
(Collection, The Museum of
Modern Art, New York)



By the early 1930s, if not before, the photographic formalism pioneered by Rodchenko fell increasingly under attack. Leon Trotsky himself had spearheaded the attack against the Opoyaz group (the literary formalists) in 1925 with *Literature and Revolution*. The laissez-faire cultural policy of the cultural commissar Lunacharsky, which had sustained the extraordinary production of the avant-garde, did not long survive him. *Novy Lef*, in whose pages Rodchenko's photographs and photomontage had appeared, for which he had written, and which had published Brik and Tretiakoff, suspended publication in 1930, and the field was eventually left to *Proletarskoe Foto* and the photographic equivalent of socialist realism. Rodchenko, unlike many of his avant-garde companions of the revolutionary period, survived Stalinism, retaining his position as dean of the metalwork faculty at Vkhutein. In 1936, submitting to antiformalist pressure, he declared himself "willing to abandon purely formal solutions for a photographic language that can more fully serve (the exigencies) of socialist realism";¹⁴ four years later he returned to easel painting. In the space of about fifteen years, Russian formalism had passed from an officially tolerated, if not sanctioned, art practice, conceived as a tool in the forging of revolutionary consciousness, to an "elitist," "bourgeois," "decadent," and "counterrevolutionary" practice that condemned those who employed it to exile, silence, repudiation, or death.

But in the few years before the photographic formalism exemplified by Rodchenko was more or less effectively exterminated in the Soviet Union, it thrived, albeit in transfigured form, within the photographic culture of Weimar Germany. The diagonal compositions, suppressed horizons, tipped perspectives, bird's-eye and worm's-eye views, serial portraits, extreme close-up portraits, and various technical experiments with the medium had become, by 1930, relative commonplaces in that range of German photographic practice encompassing the popular press, advertising, photographic books, and exhibitions, as well as the work of the photographic avant-garde. While much of this photographic activity tends to be unreflectively clumped within general categories such as the Neue Sach-



Martin Munkacsy, *A Field
Full of Children*, Kissingen,
Germany, 1929 (Collection,
San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art)

lichkeit or the New Vision (so-called by Moholy-Nagy), I am here concerned with that photography which had most thoroughly been informed by the Russian model. And while in the cultural crucible of Weimar Germany it is difficult to disentangle the skeins of influence, the various forces that acted upon each other and cumulatively formed the *fotokultur* acknowledged by the late 1920s, it is nonetheless clear that the 1922 Soviet Art exhibition that took place in Berlin had an immense—and immediate—influence. For the German left, still in disarray after the abortive 1918 revolution, the range of Russian art therein represented was greeted as a frontline communiqué of vanguard practice. To the twenty-seven-year-old Moholy-Nagy, an exile from the Hungarian White Terror (as were his compatriots George Lukács and Belá Balazs) then painting in a dadaist/abstract-geometrical vein, the constructivist work in the exhibition struck with the force of revelation. Reporting on the show for *MA (Today)*, the Hungarian futurist publication, Moholy wrote: “This is our century . . . technology, machine, Socialism . . . Constructivism is pure substance. It is not confined to the picture frame and pedestal. It expands into industry and architecture, into objects and relationships. Construction is the socialism of vision.”¹⁵

In terms of photography and photomontage, it was El Lissitzky who was most active in disseminating the new formalist photography. Through the trilingual magazine *Veshch/Ge-genstand/Objet*, which he published with Ehrenburg, as well as his organization and design of such exhibitions as the extraordinary Cologne *Pressa*, Russian formalist photography was siphoned into the pluralist brew of German photography. Any precise tracing of the course of the formalist photography theorized and practiced by Rodchenko and El Lissitzky as it was assimilated into German photography must await closer study. But bearing in mind that the function and ideology of such photography were integrally bound together, one can begin to distinguish important divergences by the time the New Vision photography became a dominant force.

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With the earliest introduction of Russian experimental photography, which is generally dated to the early 1920s, German photography was divided among the pictorialism of the camera clubs, the rapid expansion of photography in the illustrated press and advertising (a function of new developments in camera technology, for example, smaller cameras and faster film), and the use of photomontage by the left avant-garde (Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Hoch, John Heartfield, George Grosz, and others). Throughout the 1920s, German photography was in effect cross-fertilized by radical Russian photography, so that by 1929 and the Deutsche Werkbund *Film und Foto* exhibition—a veritable *summa* of the New Vision—various constitutive elements of Soviet work had been absorbed and, depending on the particular practice involved, transfigured. Essentially, the formalism imported into Weimar Germany became splintered into different, occasionally overlapping, components. Thus, for example, the use of a vertical rather than horizontal perspective, which was for Rodchenko one particular optical strategy of *ostranenie*—an implicitly political notion—was widely employed in Germany. There it signified, among other things, the modernity, urbanism, and technological glamour of elevators, skyscrapers, airplanes, and cranes. “We all felt a demonstrative enthusiasm for lifts, jazz and radio towers,”¹⁶ wrote Hans Joachim in 1930, and, of course, some of Moholy’s best-known photographs from the 1920s were aerial views shot from the Berlin radio tower. For Rodchenko, who had also made aerial photographs from the Moscow radio tower, the tower itself was “a symbol of collective effort.”

Indeed, the entire repertoire of Russian formalist photography was intended as the optical analogue to revolution—quite simply a revolutionizing of perception to accord

with the demands of a revolutionary society. Although the romance of technology and urbanism was fully a part of the Soviet culture, it was, at least in the early 1920s, closer to wishful thinking than reality; this was, after all, a barely industrialized society devastated by revolution, civil war, and foreign invasion, that required the services of Armand Hammer to manufacture its pencils.

The formal innovations of Russian photography were nowhere more thoroughly grasped or intensively exploited than in the burgeoning and sophisticated German advertising industry. In his important essay on the photography of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Herbert Molderings discussed the implications of this phenomenon:

If we consider the "new vision" in the context of its economic and social functions, what the historical content of the "new realism" is, becomes clear. Along with heavy industry, the machine which was its substratum and the new architecture which was its result, "neo-realist" photography discovered the world of industrial products, and showed itself as a component of the aesthetic of commodities in a double sense, affecting both production and distribution. Such photographers as Burchartz, Renger-Patzsch, Gorny, Zielke, Biermann and Finsler discovered that an industrial product develops its own particular aesthetic only when the serial principle, as the general basis of manufacture, becomes pronouncedly visible.¹⁷

It requires but a single intermediary (photographic) step to the commodity fetish:

Commodities also came to be shown from a different point of view, directly linked with the needs of advertising. The development of *Sachfotographie*—the photographing of individual objects—is recognized as an important achievement of photography in the twenties. . . . Objects hitherto regarded as without significance are made "interesting" and surprising by multiple exploitation of the camera's technical possibilities, unusual perspectives, close-ups and deceptive partial views. . . . The advertising value of such photographs consists precisely in the fact that the objects are not presented functionally and contain a promise of mysterious meaning over and beyond their use-value: they take on a bizarre unexpected appearance suggesting that they live lives of their own, independent of human beings. More than all the fauvist, cubist, and expressionist paintings, it was applied photography which modified and renewed the centuries-old genre of the still-life from the bottom up. It created the actual still-life of the twentieth century: pictorial expression of commodity fetishism.¹⁸

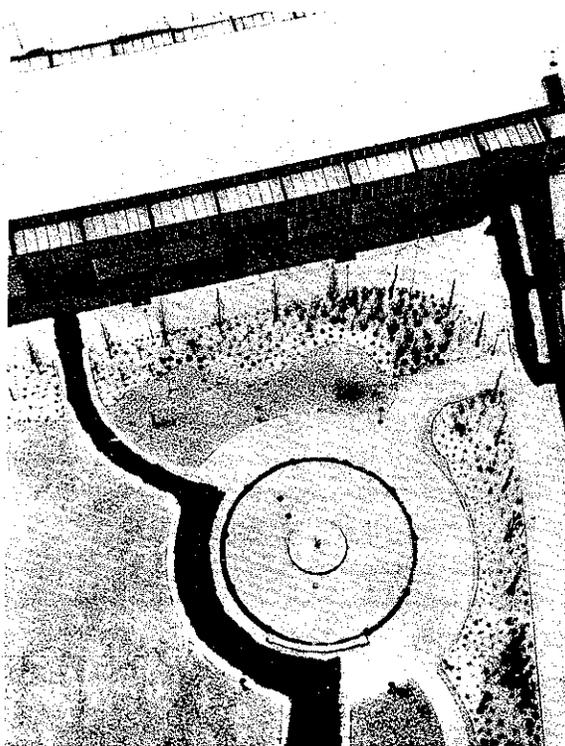
In the work of Albert Renger-Patzsch (preeminently the photographs contained in the 1928 *Die Welt ist Schön*), elements that are coeval, if not derived from Russian formalism, are collapsed into the older, Kantian conception: the belief that governing laws of form underlay all the manifestations of nature, as well as the works of man, and that the revelation of these structures yields both significance and beauty. Thus, on the one hand, images of machinery, modern building materials, architecture, textures, and details, photographed to reveal "that it is possible to regard a machine or an industrial plant as no less beautiful than nature or a work of art";¹⁹ on the other hand, images of landscape, animals, and people, photographed to display and underline "that which is typical of the species."²⁰ The nature of this enterprise is not only essentializing but symbolic, a point made with some emphasis by Carl Georg Heise, who wrote the preface to *Die Welt ist Schön*:

They [Renger-Patzsch's finest photographs] . . . are true symbols. Nevertheless we should not forget that it is basically nature and created life itself which bears within it symbolic power of this kind, and that the work of the photographer does not create symbols but merely makes them visible! . . . The last picture is of a woman's hands, raised, laid lightly over one another. Who can fail to recognize the symbolic character of this picture which speaks with an insistence far more powerful than words!²¹



Hein Gorny, *Untitled*, c. 1928
(Collection, San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art)

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László Moholy-Nagy, *From
the Radio Tower, Berlin*, 1928
(Collection, The Museum of
Modern Art, New York)

Walter Benjamin immediately grasped the implications of Renger-Patzsch's photography and was concerned to distinguish it from both progressive avant-garde practice as exemplified by Moholy-Nagy and from the work of Sander, Blossfeld, or Krull:

Where photography takes itself out of context, severing the connections illustrated by Sander, Blossfeld or Germaine Krull, where it frees itself from physiognomic, political and scientific interest, then it becomes *creative*. The lens now looks for interesting juxtapositions; photography turns into a sort of arty journalism. . . . The more far-reaching the crisis of the present social order, the more rigidly its individual components are locked together in their death struggle, the more has the creative—in its deepest essence a sport, by contradiction out of imitation—become a fetish, whose lineaments live only in the fitful illumination of changing fashion. The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. *The world is beautiful*—that is its watchword. Therein is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connexions in which it exists, even where most far-fetched subjects are more concerned with saleability than with insight.²²

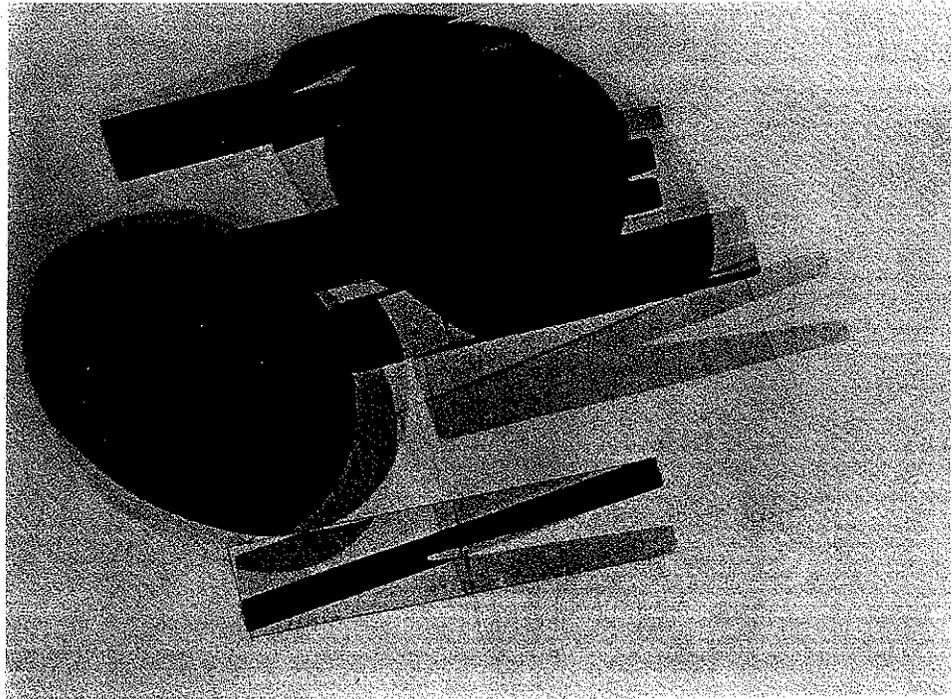
It was, however, in the Bauhaus that all the myriad facets of formalist photography were systematically appropriated, theorized, and repositioned with respect to the range of practice and application that functioned pedagogically, artistically, and commercially. In much the same way that Weimar Germany itself was a cultural transmission station, the Bauhaus in its various incarnations, and through its influential propagandists and productions (exhibitions, books, product design, architecture, typography, etc.) was a powerful cultural disseminating force. With respect to photography, it is Moholy who is the crucial figure, even though photography was only taught as a separate course in the Bauhaus in 1929, and then not by Moholy, but by Walter Peterhans.

Moholy had become friends with El Lissitzky in 1921, a year that witnessed the Russian influx into Berlin: Mayakovsky, Osip and Lily Brik, Ilya Ehrenburg, as well as artists like Pevsner, Gabo, and Kandinski (hired to teach at the Bauhaus), who although opposed in various ways to the productivist wing were nonetheless the standard-bearers of the new Soviet art. By the following year, Moholy was making photograms with his wife Lucia and producing photomontages. He was also independently repeating much of the same theoretical program as the productivists. Thus, in 1922, the year of his one-man show at the Sturm gallery, he included a group of elementarist compositions, which like Rodchenko's last paintings signaled not only a rejection of easel painting and its accompanying ethos of originality and subjectivity, but also the positive embrace of mechanical methods of production. Moholy described his project in strictly matter-of-fact terms:

In 1922 I ordered by telephone from a sign factory five paintings in porcelain enamel. I had the factory's colour chart before me and I sketched my paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct position.²³

The following spring, Walter Gropius, the director of the Bauhaus, hired Moholy to become an instructor in the metalwork shop, making him the exact counterpart of Rodchenko at Vkhutein. Moholy's arrival signified one of the first decisive shifts within the Bauhaus away from the earlier expressionist, utopian orientation aptly symbolized by Lionel Feininger's woodcut logo for the prospectus (a Gothic cathedral), under which Gropius proclaimed, "Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all go back to the crafts." The atmosphere of the Weimar Bauhaus prior to the departure of Johannes Itten was almost the exact opposite of the functionalism and technologism associated with its later attitudes. The emphasis on crafts and artisanal methods of production in the curriculum was accompanied by vegetarianism, a vogue for oriental religions, and the occasional tenure of

László Moholy-Nagy,
Photogram, n.d. (Collection,
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York)



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itinerant crackpots. Although consecutively expelled from the cities of Weimar, Dessau, and finally Berlin and considered by the more conservative elements of local governments to be a very hotbed of bolshevism, the radical left tended to view the Bauhaus program with a certain amount of contempt. The evaluation of *Starba*, the leading Czechoslovakian architectural periodical, was not atypical:

Unfortunately, the Bauhaus is not consistent as a school for architecture as long as it is still concerned with the question of applied arts or "art" as such. Any art school, no matter how good, can today be only an anachronism and nonsense. . . . If Gropius wants his school to fight against dilettantism in the arts, if he assumes the machine to be the modern means of production, if he admits the division of labor, why does he suppose a knowledge of crafts to be essential for industrial manufacture? Craftsmanship and industry have a fundamentally different approach, theoretically as well as practically. Today, the crafts are nothing but a luxury, supported by the bourgeoisie with their individualism and snobbery and their purely decorative point of view. Like any other art school, the Bauhaus is incapable of improving industrial production; at the most it might provide new impulses."²⁴

By 1923, however, the Bauhaus had undergone a fairly substantial change of direction. No longer "A Cathedral of Socialism," but rather, "Art and Technology—A New Unity," was the credo. Notwithstanding the fact that the important international journals such as *De Stijl* and *L'Esprit Nouveau* still considered the Bauhaus too individualistic, decorative, and arty, Gropius was resolved to make the Bauhaus a force in architecture, industrial design, and contemporary art. The change of direction and the implementation of

Gropius's ideas became fully established only after the Bauhaus's expulsion from Weimar and its reestablishment in Dessau, housed in the landmark buildings that Gropius himself had designed.

Given Moholy's patron-saint status in the history of modern photography, and his undeniable importance in the dissemination of his particular variety of formalism, it is important to remember that Moholy never thought of himself as a photographer—certainly never referred to himself as such—and that much of his enthusiasm for photography was predicated (at least in the 1920s) on his conviction that the machine age demanded machine-age art: functional, impersonal, rational. Formalism for Moholy signified above all the absolute primacy of the material, the medium itself. Thus if photography, and indeed a photographic processes including film, was defined by its physical properties—the action of light on a light-sensitive emulsion—formalism could be distilled into a bare-bones recipe for the creation of exemplary works. Written out of this equation was not only any notion of a privileged subjectivity (in keeping with progressive avant-garde theory), but even the camera itself: “It must be stressed that the essential tool of photographic procedure is not the camera but the light-sensitive layer.”²⁵

Moholy's codification of the eight varieties of photographic seeing in his 1925 Bauhaus book *Painting, Photography, Film* indicates to what degree his assimilation of Russian formalist photography tended toward a more purely theoretical and abstract rather than instrumental or agitational conception of “camera vision”:

1. Abstract seeing by means of direct records of forms produced by light; the photogram . . .
2. Exact seeing by means of the fixation of the appearance of things: reportage.
3. Rapid seeing by means of the fixation of movement in the shortest possible time: snapshots.
4. Rapid seeing by means of the fixation of movements spread over a period of time . . .
5. Intensified seeing by means of: (a) micro-photography; (b) filter-photography . . .
6. Penetrative photography by means of X-rays: radiography . . .
7. Simultaneous seeing by means of transparent superimposition: the future process of automatic photomontage.
8. Distorted seeing . . .²⁶

Whereas the technical and formal possibilities of photography were for Rodchenko, too, a wedge to prise open conventionalized and naturalized appearance, a visual device against classical representational systems, for him these constituted specific strategies in the service of larger ends. In Weimar Germany the photographic production oriented toward those ends was to be primarily that of the photomontagist John Heartfield, whose means, needless to say, were not those of the formalists. To the degree that “camera vision” became itself a fetishized concept in Weimar culture, the political implications of Russian formalist photography were sheared away from the body of New Vision photography.

Moholy's embrace of photography, like Werner Gräff's or Franz Roh's, did not in any way distinguish between the uses, intentions, and contexts of photographic production, having thus the dubious distinction of anticipating contemporary critical and curatorial practice by a good forty years. In exhibitions such as the seminal *Film und Foto* and in publications such as Roh's *Foto-Auge* or Gräff's *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* scientific, advertising, documentary, aerial, art and experimental, even police photography, were enthusiastically thrown together into an aesthetic emporium of choice examples of camera vision. Moholy's championship of photography, like that of his contemporaries, had finally more to do with the widespread intoxication with all things technological than it did

with a politically instrumental notion of photographic practice. The camera was privileged precisely *because* it was a machine, and camera vision was privileged because it was deemed superior to normal vision. Herein lay the total reversal of terms that had historically characterized the art versus photography debate. "The photographic camera," wrote Moholy, "can either complete or supplement our optical instrument, the eye."²⁷

Within the Bauhaus scheme of things, particularly in its Dessau days, photography existed as one of a number of technologies for use in the training of designers. Throughout the 1920s Gropius sought to establish the Bauhaus as a source of production as well as ideas or designers. In 1926 a limited company was set up by Gropius with a group of businessmen and the participation of some labor unions for the commercial handling of Bauhaus designs and products. Although the *politique* of the later Bauhaus remained collectivist, anti-individualist, and of course, emphatically functionalist, these were not necessarily radical positions within the political spectrum of the Weimar Republic. Moreover, the Bauhaus Idea—it was referred to as such at the time—envisioned a society made better through the works of the architects, designers, and craftsmen it produced. This, then, was the legacy that Moholy carried when he resurrected the New Bauhaus on the distinctly American terrain of the city of Chicago.

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Within his own career Moholy had traveled from the pronouncedly avant-gardist, revolutionary milieu of the *MA* group, and later, the constructivist circle around El Lissitzky, to that of an emigré artist and educator whose activities between 1937 and his death in 1946 were dominated by his efforts to reconstitute the Bauhaus and the values it represented in a time and place light years removed from the culture and politics of Weimar Germany.²⁸ The contradictions that *Starba* had identified in the Weimar Bauhaus between the demands of industry and the conditions of craft, between the different assumptions governing the production of art and the practice of applied arts, remained problematic in the American version. These contradictions underlie the conflicts that seem regularly to have arisen between the expectations and assumptions of the New Bauhaus's initial sponsors (The Chicago Association of Arts and Industries, a consortium of businessmen, and Walter Paepcke, who was one of the principal supporters of the school until 1946) and Moholy's determination to transplant the Bauhaus Idea with as little compromise as possible. Similarly, these contradictions surfaced with every subsequent change of director, staff, enrollment, and student profile. While the curriculum of the I.D. remained basically comparable to its earlier German version (e.g., the first year foundation course, the experimentation with various media, etc.), the nature of photographic teaching (and practice) became in time a distinct and discrete aspect of the I.D. whose function was less linked to the imperatives of the industrial age than it was to those notions of art production that had preceded the establishment of the I.D. in America by twenty years. Added to that was the fact that America after the Second World War was hardly a hospitable environment in which to transplant even the *bien-pensant* leftism of the Dessau Bauhaus, and that American artists and photographers were in the process of implicitly or explicitly repudiating the politically and socially oriented practice of the previous decade, whose most developed expression had been in documentary form. How then was photographic formalism understood and expressed at the I.D.? Was there, we might ask, a new inflection to formalism which made it substantially different from its earlier incarnations and might be seen to link Arthur Siegel, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind? And what, if anything, made the I.D.-based formalist practice similar to, or different from, the indigenous American variety—that is, purist, straight photography—exemplified by Paul Strand after 1915 and the *f/64* group in the following years?

Reflecting back on the various sea changes to which Russian photography had been subjected in Germany, what seems most conspicuous was the tendency to separate out various components of radical formalism and to factor them into different discursive functions: seriality, unusual close-ups, and graphic presentation of the object were, as we have seen, promptly assimilated to advertising photography; defamiliarizing tactics such as unconventional viewpoints and the flattening and abstracting of pictorial space all became part of a stylistic lexicon available to commercial photographers, art photographers, designers, and photojournalists—a lexicon, it should be added, that had assimilated surrealist elements as well. In a general way, formalism had become a stylistic notion rather than an instrumental one, an archive of picture-making strategies that intersected with a widely dispersed, heroicized concept of camera vision. In the work of Bauhaus and Bauhaus-influenced photographers, one of the most durable legacies of Russian photography was the continued emphasis placed on experimentation. It was this latter characteristic that made I.D. photography rather different from American art photography of the 1950s and 1960s. Whether through the encouragement of color photography or through the various workshop exercises utilizing photograms, light modulators, multiple negatives, photo-etching, collage, and so on, I.D. photography encompassed a broad range of photographic technologies and experimentation that distinguished it somewhat from the dominant purist notions of East and West Coast art photography.

By the early 1950s, as the I.D. became more firmly established and as the photography program gradually took pride of place in the curriculum—becoming, in fact, its principal attraction—the native circumstances and conditions of American photography were themselves acting on the I.D. For Moholy, the pedagogical system of the I.D. was conceived literally as a training program, a vocational system that would prepare designers, architects, and photographers to go into the world and in some vague, utopian sense transform it. The enormously gifted Herbert Bayer, designing exhibitions, books, posters, and typography, employed by Walter Paepcke on the advertising series “Great Ideas Of Western Man” for the Container Corporation of America, was the very model of what Moholy intended his alumni to become and accomplish. But after the initial influx of G.I. Bill students who studied at the I.D. with the expectation of working as commercial photographers or professional photojournalists, the gulf between commercial or applied photography and the progressively rarified approach to photography coming out of the I.D. widened. And although Arthur Siegel (who had been one of the first photography teachers hired by Moholy) moved back and forth between professional photojournalism, teaching stints, and his personal work throughout his career, this was to prove more the exception than the rule.

What eventually emerged from the I.D. as model careers for serious photographers were those of Henry Holmes Smith, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind; that is to say, teachers of future generations of art photographers who would themselves end up teaching photography and, to a greater or lesser extent, pursuing their own photographic destinies within an expanding university and art school network. This alone would have constituted a significant shift away from the Bauhaus Idea, inasmuch as up to that point the *raison d'être* of the institution was the implementation of its program in the world of industry, design, and manufacturing. Indeed, the very notion of the artist-photographer producing images for a knowledgeable or peer audience was essentially at odds with the dynamic, public, and functionalist concept of photography sanctioned by the German Bauhaus.



Aaron Siskind, *San Luis Potosi*,
Mexico, 1961 (Permission of
the Visual Studies Workshop)