

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Isms' or Art?" (1926)

Representative—non representative

During recent years these two modes of expression, the "representative" and the "nonrepresentative" modes, have been fervently played against each other—particularly in the field of visual design. To this day one has had to decide for one or the other, otherwise one was considered inconsistent.

In reality—according to the present knowledge of design—these two modes of expression have so very little to do with each other that they cannot but be taken to be mutually exclusive. This had become unclear only because of impure intermingling of these modes of expression, which we can analyze from the history of their development, and because of the interchanging and mixing of their means, which resulted from necessity. . . .

The "isms" [in painting]

"Isms" play a most important role in today's terminology. But in reality there are no isms. There are only the individual works of individual artists who derive their work from general premises that are predicated on their time. The final result of their work, despite all formal differences, is an attempt at one and the same clarification of visual design principles.

The "isms" are efforts at overcoming the traditional form of picture painting. They are preparing the way for purely functional design in which the fundamental means of expression ... correspond to the latent tension relationships within ourselves. But before it became possible to arrive at a pure design, many digressions had to be made....

The common denominator of all the "isms," from naturalism to constructivism ... is the continuous, unconscious struggle to conquer the pure, primary, and autonomous means of expression and design.

All painters, at all times, tried to apply ... the fundamental means of expression of the visual arts. All the known compositional rules used by the old masters—the golden section and other artistic canons—have their origin in the perfectly natural human desire to maintain fundamental order and to express themselves in a fundamental way. All the "isms—impressionism, neo-impressionism, pointilism, futurism, expressionism, cubism, suprematism, constructivism—are also nothing but the intensified individual interpretation of this immanent "will-to-form" ("Gestaltungswillen") which is part of the time. All the deformation, dismemberment, and disintegration of the object, the disfiguration of its naturalistic image, came about from the unconscious desire to elevate the forms and colors that are burdened as carriers of naturalism to sovereign, completely visual means of expression.... The possibility of mechanical illustration given in photography has, however, greatly infringed upon the monopoly of representation by means of the manual picture; the desire for autonomous visual representation, free of the constrictions of objective portrayal, became increasingly stronger. The painter wanted to work with color and surface according to their relationships and tensions. Each one in the series of successive "isms" has attempted to carry out such intentions in its different way... . But none knew that that which was important was not the manner of destroying, but rather the struggle to find ways and means for autonomous formal possibilities. None had faith in the individual forms [and] methods of the others, for no one discovered their orientation. Hence, at first the painter overlooked all the still indistinct results, and time and again the newcomer has started the struggle against the constraints of nature all over again.

There was the taboo of the old picture: "painting" always had to "represent" something; its point of departure could not be anything but the object in nature, although photography had come a long way in the meantime and the problem of representation had thus been solved by a mechanical process.... Consequently, the painter could have devoted himself easily to working on the expression of color with fundamental means ...

The visual artist works with visual means of expression ... The clearly recognizable goal enables one to distinguish between concern for fundamental visual relationships and concern for representation.

The representation (photography, film)

Theoretically it is irrelevant whether an artist employs three-dimensional, linear, pictorial, black-and-white, colored, photographic, or other means to represent something. But today it has become almost natural to favor a representation done by mechanical means, with all its consequences, over a painstaking, manually executed visual representation. Hence, the position of photography (film) is clearly outlined. The way in which things in nature, or things in the realm of fantasy and Utopia, or the dreamlike and the supernatural can be represented has been so well defined by this mechanical process and has been developed to such a point, that similar experiments using manual means of representation are hardly ever likely to produce similarly convincing effects. And this is true even with respect to the effects achieved by chance. In this competition the photographic process will win out, because of the immense possibilities for representation. Only a kind of fetishism for "handwork" can be the reason for opposition against this contention. Whoever is capable of abstracting the surface projection of a "holy" hand and of a "soulless" apparatus and is able to discern the creative powers of the artist which went into this effort finds it impossible to be for the brush and against the device. The fact that photography yields such extraordinarily rich results—for those who can see—and that these results have far advanced the new vision of clarity, precision, chiaroscuro, and the immaterial and nevertheless real aspects of representation, compels us to say that the representational artist would do well to concentrate his talent on this most capable of being developed, most versatile, and most magnificent of all methods of representation.

It is certainly true that with the advancement of the photographic-representational process the formal qualities of the new representation will be totally different from those of the hand-produced picture we have known so far. It is obvious that a new technique must create a new and adequate form. It is only natural that technical and mechanical means must be applied to nonobjective visual art as well. The very next step in this inevitable development is the use of reflectors, projectors, and spray-guns, of exact, highly polished surfaces, enamel, artificial horn, "Trolit" and other synthetic plastic materials, which, with their homogeneity of surface-texture, make possible a progressively pigment-free, nonsubstantial luminous effect. . . .

But despite all this sincere enthusiasm for photography, the questionable aspects should not go unmentioned. The very next period of photographic and film practice will attempt to clarify—for better or for worse—the principles of representation through a large number of reports and commentaries on the social and political events of today. Some of these may, of course, destroy many of the more subtle aspects of our fundamental knowledge of design and organic principles ... by employing a kind of romantic, sentimental monumentality, brutal emotionality and cheap (secondary and tertiary) effects. But this is not because the finer aspects would be worthless or less valuable for the "masses," it is rather that the masses are, for the time being, unable to assimilate them relative to the easy comprehension of exciting events. That is, for the

time being and supposedly so. Consequently, at this moment it is particularly important to formulate, in popular terms but nevertheless accurately, the aims of the modern designer and how his achievement can be used to build an organized social order, or even better, to promote the development of a more human human being. It would be disastrous if the next generation would also have to use up its best forces in the external struggle in order to achieve ... material equality without being able to do anything for its mental and physical harmony. One cannot work hard enough to try to lead people to an understanding of their organic, basic functional structure. This functional structure is the basis and in its ... effects the essential substance of every creative achievement and of every healthy way of life.