"This Is the Century of Light"

László Moholy-Nagy’s Painting and Photography Debate in *i 10*, 1927

ÉVA FORGÁCS

The emergence in the 1920s of the idea that photography could be a full-fledged form of artistic expression—rather than mere mechanical imaging—led artists and art experts alike to wrestle with the question: What exactly constitutes art? Photography now challenged painting, both figurative and abstract, and as photography’s many previously unsuspected potentials were revealed and explored, artists and experts felt an urgency to articulate photography’s relationship to the concept of art. Invested in photography and ever the advocate of a new innovative medium and genre, László Moholy-Nagy wanted to hear what some of the most respected artists and experts of the time had to say about photography, and so in 1927 he moderated a debate on the subject of “painting and photography” in the journal *Internationale Revue i 10*.

Fascinated by photography as a new medium in the visual arts, László Moholy-Nagy recognized with a sense of historical moment, “This is the century of light” [1]. Unlike the German political left, which saw documentary and propagandistic potential in photography [2], Moholy-Nagy distinguished the *Lichtbild*, or the light image, by “its own inherent potential, the infinitely subtle gradations of light” [3], which he amply exploited in his photograms (Color Plate A). In his capacity as editor of film and photo and graphic designer for Arthur Lehning’s Amsterdam-based journal *Internationale Revue i 10* (hereafter, *i 10*), Moholy-Nagy opened a debate on painting and photography. The changing status of photography, and its relationship to painting, had been a central topic of concern for artists throughout the 1920s. His Bauhaus colleague Oskar Schlemmer had sent Moholy-Nagy’s recent book *Painting, Photography, Film* [4] to a friend, along with the question, “But will you agree with [Moholy-Nagy] when he wipes the slate clean of anything that might be called painting? That is the crucial question in the Bauhaus, and in part of the art world as well” [5].

The differences between painting and photography constituted a theoretical issue for some, and a vital, existential or even moral issue for others, in the context of parallel discourses about realism or abstraction, “grand art” or art for the masses, and manual versus technological creation.

Having practiced photography for half a decade with and without a camera, Moholy-Nagy had a critical role in shaping the discourse about painting as the old and photography as the emerging new visual medium. With the publication of independent critic Ernst (Ernő) Kállai’s [6] programmatic essay “Painting and Photography”—in which Kállai posited the materiality and artistic autonomy of the painting above photography—Moholy-Nagy saw an opportunity for public debate. When Moholy-Nagy published Kállai’s essay in the fourth issue of *i 10* (1927), he introduced it with an invitation for others to respond with their own views on the subject.

THE BAUHAUS CONTEXT

The *i 10* debate unfolded amidst the crisis of the Bauhaus. After moving the school from Weimar to Dessau in 1926, director Walter Gropius replaced the art and design program with a new, design-oriented program—a shift in direction that alarmed the painters of the Bauhaus [7]. Klee, Kandinsky, Feininger and Schlemmer believed that the spiritual and aesthetic orientation of the school, as well as their own influence, was threatened, so Kandinsky published a counter-article to Gropius’s new agenda in the Bauhaus’s own journal, emphatically arguing for what he saw as the integrity of the teaching of painting, the end result of which has to be, he insists, a sense of materiality, the student feeling “in his fingertips” what he wants to express [8].

Gropius and Kandinsky’s conflict reflected the fundamental dualism of the Bauhaus, originating from early-20th-century art debates in Germany about whether technological-industrial design or the full autonomy of the individual artist was the higher priority. Gropius and Kandinsky grew antagonistic toward one another, especially after Gropius’s 1923 pronouncement “Art and Technology: The New Unity.” In this conflict Moholy-Nagy, with his enthusiasm for photography and new technologies, was seen as Gropius’s advocate [9].

While the Bauhaus was adjusting to Gropius’s new goal of...
providing designs for an increasingly profit-oriented economy (the word “art” did not even figure in Gropius’s Dessau program), Moholy-Nagy was pursuing his interest in photographic technologies in a visionary and futuristic rather than pragmatic mode. He anticipated unlimited expressive and aesthetic possibilities by way of new technologies, both visual and musical, rather than economic advantages. However, the painters at the Bauhaus overlooked this essential difference between Moholy-Nagy and Gropius’s approaches, and they considered Moholy-Nagy a technological modernist.

Moholy-Nagy envisioned photography as the first stage of what he held up as the ultimate modern medium—film—but he nevertheless spent time exploring the possibilities of the still photo, photomontages and photograms as a challenge to painting. The painters in the Bauhaus had not been ready to accept such a radically different medium as photography as ranking with painting.

**PHOTOGRAPHY AS PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION**

In his article “Production—Reproduction,” published by Theo van Doesburg in De Stijl [10], Moholy-Nagy discusses photography, photography and film as means of both producing new artworks and reproducing existing ones. He was the first to call attention to the latter function of mechanically produced artworks as a game-changer in the visual arts as well as in music.

In *Painting, Photography, Film*, Moholy-Nagy envisions that “painterly methods of representation suggestive merely of past times and past ideologies shall disappear and their place be taken by *mechanical means of representation* and their as yet unpredictable *possibilities of extension*” (emphasis Moholy-Nagy’s) [11]. Although he refines this dictum in subsequent chapters of the book, this view provoked a response from Kállai. Kállai had advocated Constructivism, abstraction and, specifically, Moholy-Nagy’s art since the early 1920s [12], but by about 1923–1924 he no longer felt that the artistic and social utopias of these tendencies were relevant. He became, once again, attentive to painterly skills, especially modeling, brushstrokes and the layering of colors.

**THE DEBATE**

As editor of i 10, Moholy-Nagy inserted a note between the title and the text of Kállai’s essay:

I am glad to publish Kállai’s highly interesting article. I also find, however, that I do not agree with him in every respect. For this reason, and because the whole question of painting and photography is highly topical at the moment, I would like to open a debate in these pages [13].

He invited Willi Baumeister, Adolf Behne, Max Burchartz, Will Grohmann, Wassily Kandinsky, Lajos Kassák, Piet Mondrian, Georg Muche and Kazimir Malevich to participate, and he also contributed. The international community was thus asked to produce a verdict on the priority of manual vs. technically executed visual works, that is, to publicly espouse either past or future.

In his opening essay Kállai first of all takes issue with the contrasting of production and reproduction by assigning “reproduction” to photography and “production” to painting [14]. He recognizes photograms, for example, as “works of formal design and craftsmanship on an elevated level of artistic culture” [15]. The difference, he argues, is in the materials used by painters and photographers, which become the *faktura*, the “fully material, tangible vehicle of the image”; photography, he says, “is not capable of this degree of materiality and objecthood” [16]. For Kállai the tension arising from the spiritual contents of a painting and its materiality is its most salient feature—“the Russians, Tatlin, Pevsner, Roza nova, and Altman, among others, turn facture almost into an end in itself” [17]—and he says that this feature is not available to photography. His verdict on the latter is that “there is no facture: no optically perceptible tension between the substance of the image and the image itself” [18]. He closes his remarks by stating that “between a static culture that has lost all its social influence and a new, kinetic formulation of our world-view” [19], the alternative to painting is not photography, but film. He agrees with Moholy-Nagy about the crucial role film would play in the future, but attributes more lasting value to painting and judges photography to be materially thin.

Few of the participants in the debate take up a clear position for or against Kállai’s argument. The responses are short—Moholy-Nagy must have specified a length limit—and so they appear political rather than theoretical. Malevich’s position is closest to Kállai’s, but Malevich’s response is the only one that was not published. Malevich defends painting and opposes photography much less diplomatically than the other participants: “I have never supported and approved the dead mechanical glazed photographic objective and have never written in my theory against painting. On the contrary” [20]. He writes that Kállai has noticed the art world’s current hostility toward painting and art, signs of which are the “materialization, mechanization, ‘lithographization,’ ‘photographization,’ simplification” [21] that he, too, is painfully aware of. Malevich spent the spring of 1927 in Berlin, where he had a solo exhibition and was informed about the ongoing art discourse. In his response to Kállai he comments on some points about which he felt particularly strongly. It is probable that Moholy-Nagy omitted Malevich’s contribution because of its highly emotional intonation, bordering on hostility toward photography. Given emerging myths surrounding Malevich’s Suprematism and his person, Moholy-Nagy likely would have found it difficult to account for Malevich’s response to the question.

Mondrian also agrees with Kállai concerning the role of *faktura*, but shifts focus from the medium to the artist, whose creative power, he is convinced, ultimately determines the value of an artwork, regardless of its medium and technique. He notes that photography is a medium of reproduction—“imitative”—but suggests that “the technique of photography will change, as the technique of painting has changed” [22]. Moholy-Nagy’s Bauhaus colleague, painter Georg Muche, adds a scientific touch to the discussion, citing the photo-
chemical material's superiority over the human eye in the perception of light and color vibrations, but he underlines that the eye of the painter captures "complementary and simultaneous contrasts, [while] to the camera they are undetectable" [23]. He agrees with Kállai that the photograph is lacking in tactile value and that he considers it inferior: "The photograph and the photogram are secondary forms [because] they presuppose the existence of an object that . . . has been designed and shaped" [24]. His conclusion is that photography belongs to the field of scientific research, because it eliminates subjectivity.

Most of the other contributors argue that photography is the medium of the future. Painter Willi Baumeister remains vague about the "large quantitative element of Naturalism and a small but intense element of abstraction" [25] in photography. The highly respected critic and art historian Adolf Behne argues that photography also has "light facture"—"light facture"—while he finds that Kállai has overrated the importance of facture and overlooked the character of the photogram, which is as artistically composed as a painting. Photographer Max Burchartz dismisses the choice between photogram, which is as artistically composed as a painting.

Will Grohmann focuses on the "production–reproduction" issue, mentioning that for the wider public photographic reproductions of paintings emulate the paintings themselves without any particular demand for faktura, and so he concludes that "the future prospects of painting and photography will lie in the hands of the minority who can recognize freedom of formal design in whatever disguise, and see the reproductive image for what it is: technology" [27]. That is, he leaves the decision of priority to future experts—a minority—who would be better able to judge any visual work for its inherent artistic power regardless of its medium or the techniques by which it was created.

Kandinsky focuses on Kállai's final conclusion, the contrast between "static" and "kinetic" creation, offering a strategic and measured response: Westerners should pay more attention to Eastern cultures, which are "more concentrated" and understand "forces in stasis" [28]. He argues that the answer is "and" rather than "or"; even in the age of fast trains and airplanes people still walk, he argues, and even in the age of photography and film, painting will continue to exist, as it should.

Hungarian editor and author Lajos Kassák contrasts the "subjective visual capacity" of the painter with the "objective visual capacity" of the camera lens and concludes, in the true spirit of progress, that in our age, in which we pursue collectivity and constructive rigor, the camera's objective vision and anti-psychological essence mean that photography is ranked higher than painting. . . . Painting as art is the expression of culture; photography is a representative of (industrial) civilization [29].

In his remarks, Moholy-Nagy differentiates between "fak-tura" and "tactile value," the latter being the former's equivalent in the photographic work, and considers Kállai's article "a disguised attempt to rescue manual, representational painting" [30]. Using the most derisive language of the art discourse of the time, he declares that "as soon as facture becomes an end in itself, it is or ornament" (emphasis mine) [31]. Moholy-Nagy is strongly convinced that photography and all subsequent technologies developing from it belong to the future, while painting belongs to the past: "The fanatical zeal with which people in every section of the society are taking photographs, indicate that in the future the illiterate will be the person who lacks expertise in photography" [32]. Painting, he suggests, may survive as a "pedagogic instrument for the development of inwardness" [33], not to be underestimated, but "the new generation, which has not so much to discard as we have" [34], will embrace photography, film, abstract painting and colored-light projections.

In his closing "Reply," Kállai explains that he has sorted out the different qualities of painting and photography without ranking them. Still, he emphatically confirms that all paintings, from Duccio's to Kandinsky's, belong together, because "brushwork facture is basic to both" [35], while all photographs, regardless of their merit, originality or reproductive function, "are light images, [offering only] the illusion of materiality" [36]. However, he states, "It would be wrong to allow an emotional love of the manual craft of painting to lead us to ignore the artistic possibilities of photography" [37]. He ends his reply by underlining, once again, the decreasing social influence of painting and the tremendous popularity of film.

**REVERBERATIONS**

A later resonance of the "painting and photography" debate comes from composer Ernst Krenek, whom Gropius had invited to the 1923 Bauhaus Week in Weimar. Krenek published his article “The Mechanisation of the Arts” in i to a a few months after the debate [38]; the article explores similarities between mechanical image-making and mechanical musical instruments and recordings that can be “soullessly replayed at any place or time” [39]. Like some of the debate participants, Krenek underlines in his article that “the machinery character [of mechanical music] lies in an inhuman clarity, exactness and precision of the acoustic process” [40], which tends to eliminate the random, arbitrary human gestures for the sake of a shining, perfect surface. Krenek’s views reflect both the recognition of technical progress in the arts and reservations about embracing them, with the conclusion that “it is the Zeitgeist that requires clarity, clear definition, purity, coolness and objectivity” [41] but that the demands of the culture to exploit technical possibilities and aim at perfection may be overrated.

**THE CORE OF THE DEBATE**

Moholy-Nagy’s next article in i to a, "sharp or blurred?" was published a year after he had left the Bauhaus; the article focuses on the photographic representability of the human face.
Moholy-Nagy asks whether precision of details allows a subjective impression of the whole. This article inadvertently shines light on an issue implied in the painting and photography debate: the question of subjectivity versus objectivity as a matter of concrete artistic choices. While only Kassák was articulate about this dualism, in the cultural discourse of the 1920s the dilemma was epitomized in Expressionism versus Constructivism. The autonomous artist’s self-expression was rejected by the utopian vision of the representatives of geometric abstraction, who claimed that impersonality is the token of the collective society of the future. At the same time, the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, marked yet another fault line between the nongeometric abstract artists like Klee or Kandinsky, who did not discard self-expression, and newer groups of artists who claimed realism as the truly progressive style [43]. Moholy-Nagy generated the painting–photography debate at a moment when all these questions were being discussed, along with experimental films like Walter Ruttmann’s, or Viking Eggeling’s animations, and Léger and Dudley Murphy’s recent (1924) *Ballet Mecanique*, and photography was claimed as the art of the future by several groups for its realism, its expressivity, its political and propaganda potential and its innovative aesthetic possibilities. Moholy-Nagy’s last contribution to *i 10* is a passionately future-bound article, “Photogram and Its Borderlands” [44], in which he envisions light studios taking the place of painters’ academies.

While the debate eschews discussion of the uniqueness of the material artwork, the issues in question pertain to and anticipate the almost-decade-later essay by Walter Benjamin (one of *i 10’s* contributors), “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

References and Notes
Translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author.


4 László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, 8th volume of the Bauhaus Books series (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925). Referred to in this article as *Painting, Photography, Film*. A revised edition was published in 1927.


6 Ernst Källai (1890–1954) was a fellow Hungarian who lived in Berlin from 1920 to 1935.


22 Piet Mondrian, *i 10* No. 6, 235 (1927); English translation in Benson and Forgács [1] p. 694. All remarks are published in *i 10* under the title “Kallai Diskussion,” without individual titles; all “Discussion” pieces are translated in Benson and Forgács [1] by David Britt.

23 Georg Muche, *i 10* No. 6, 235 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] p. 695. (See Ref. [22].)

24 Muche [23].

25 Willi Baumeister, *i 10* No. 6, 227 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] p. 689. (See Ref. [22].)

26 Max Burchartz, *i 10* No. 6, 227 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] p. 691. (See Ref. [22].)

27 Will Grohmann, *i 10* No. 6, 230 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] p. 691. (See Ref. [22].)

28 Wassily Kandinsky, *i 10* No. 6, 231 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] p. 692. (See Ref. [22].)

29 Lajos Kassák, *i 10* No. 6, 232 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] pp. 692–693. (See Ref. [22].)

30 László Moholy-Nagy, *i 10* No. 6, 233 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] p. 693. (See Ref. [22].)

31 Moholy-Nagy [30].

32 Moholy-Nagy [30].

33 Moholy-Nagy [30].


35 Ernst Källai, “Antwort” (Response), *i 10* No. 6, 238 (1927); Benson and Forgács [1] p. 697. (See Ref. [22].)
ÉVA FORGÁCS is adjunct professor of art history at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. She had taught at the Graduate Program of the László Moholy-Nagy University in her native Budapest. Her latest book is Hungarian Art. Confrontation and Revival in the Modern Movement, Los Angeles: DoppeIlHouse Press, 2016.

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Color Plate A. László Moholy-Nagy, photogram, 1939. Size unknown, private collection. (Courtesy Hattula Moholy-Nagy.)