Recollections and Reflections on László Moholy-Nagy

ELIZABETH SIEGEL

In 1937, artist László Moholy-Nagy directed a new school based on Bauhaus principles, The New Bauhaus: American School of Design, in Chicago. Although the school lasted only one year, Moholy-Nagy soon reorganized it as the School of Design in Chicago and then as the Institute of Design, which was later incorporated into the Illinois Institute of Technology. The author conducted numerous telephone and in-person interviews with teachers and students of the school to find insight into Moholy-Nagy's teaching and working methods, the unusual pedagogy of the school across its iterations and the camaraderie and mutual support felt by the students at this exciting place and time.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH THE SCHOOL

Myron Kozman
I happened to be in the vicinity, on South Prairie Avenue in Chicago, the day it opened, and I just popped in and looked around and Moholy sold me on the idea. If I was interested, he could probably get me a scholarship, because I showed him some of my work—and by golly, I got a four-year scholarship.

Olga Halberstadt
When I went to be interviewed, I was wearing a black skunk coat, a fur coat. It was secondhand, but it was a fur coat. I was told afterwards that that was absolutely the right thing to wear, because the school needed money. Anybody that came in with a fur coat had money. I had enough for my tuition, but not to endow anything.

Emerson Woelffer
I needed a job, and I just went over to see Moholy and he said, “I’d like to come over and look at your work,” and he came to my studio—I lived over at the dead end of Pearson Street. And he said, “How would you like to teach for me? Lay out a program and bring it in.” I didn’t know what the hell a program was supposed to be. But anyway, I wrote something up and he hired me, and it worked out very good.

STUDENT EXERCISES

Myron Kozman
The first thing we did was photograms. The very first day, it happened to be a sunny day, and we took printing paper and went outside and had the sun help us make photograms.

Juliet Kepes
They had a project where you just used lots of different textures. . . . I just began with a sort of long ribbon of metal, and I started just treating it with a hammer and then scraping it, and so on. And eventually, when this project was finished,
Richard Filipowski
Photography was required of every student at the School of Design, more of a method of recording what the students had accomplished. If they did a tactile chart, for example, they would photograph that in various lighting conditions. If they did a space modulator, there was a requirement to photograph this modulator with different conditions of lighting, to see the effects of light upon the finished product. And this is very revealing, that you could change the physiognomy, the characteristics of the modulator through light. So the modulator served the purpose of studying space, but then it served another purpose of studying the effects of light. It could change the nature of how we perceive the object.

Milton Halberstadt
The first class of Moholy’s, which was a drawing class, we had pads of 15-by-20 newsprint and he said, “Start with writing your name in the upper-left-hand corner. And then you should take part of that name and blow it up about ten times, because when you start out in this world you’re creative, and when you stick around long enough and have other people tell you what to do and how to do it, you lose your creativity and this will show you how creative you’ve been.”

Harold Allen
They would turn us loose in the studio, and for the transparency lighting problem they had all kinds of lights, basically floodlights and spotlights, and all kinds of junk material that was transparent, either because it had holes punched in it or because it started out transparent or translucent through many different kinds of transparency. And this was a chance for us to try all of them out with the two kinds of lights, spotlights and floodlights. And we did that for about a month and then he started us on reflections, and they had all kinds of boxes full of reflective materials, and we found out how these two kinds of light worked with the reflective materials.

Eudice Feder
I do not feel that there was the heavy hand of any instructor. It was always, Here are the elements, here is the equipment, here is the material, and a lecture on general abstract ideas—and get to work. . . . So we really had a lot of freedom. That’s not meant to indicate that we didn’t get criticism. We did. We had seminars and discussions with each other. And at the end of the semester we had to show our work. That was our examination.

Barbara Mate
One of the things that kept us afloat financially was so many things were contributed to the school by industry, hoping we’d come up with a better way of using it or a way to expand the use. And Marli Ehrman would get huge bundles of synthetic fabrics, which we were to try to make into cloth or something usable. And Moholy was thrilled with that, because here were all these new textures—Saran, before it was used for screening, we were making screens out of it. We used synthetic fabrics, and many of them refracted light in a very interesting way. So he would come through and just take whatever he wanted as soon as we could get it off the loom! And he used those to break up light.

MOHOLY-NAGY AS TEACHER

Myron Kozman
Moholy emphasized the integration of art, science and technology, and that if possible and if we could be interested, we should concentrate on all the media. It was Moholy's concept that it was important to know something about everything, rather than just specialization in any one thing.

Harold Allen
He was compulsive. He loved to teach and loved to impart information about—well, his main program was to bring graphic design into the 20th century. And by graphic design he didn’t just mean drawings, but also photography. There wasn’t any question in his mind whether it was art or not. If you could see it and it looked beautiful, it was art. He didn’t draw a line between it the way so many people do. There’s good art and bad art, and good photography and bad photography, but the line isn’t between photography and art, it’s in between quality.

Barbara Mate
I can remember one time we had been down to the Art Institute as a group and we were coming across the bridge—and most of us were intent to get back. And Moholy had said, “Stop! Now look down.” A small boat had gone through and left an oil trail, and he said, “Just everybody stay here and watch that, and see what that does in the water.” We must have been there about 20 minutes! And he said, “Now, we’re going back and you translate that any way you want.”

Myron Kozman
On one of our field trips, which meant just walking around the block of the school for example, someone had spit on the sidewalk. Moholy took me by the collar, so to speak, knelt me down, and we looked at and discussed the little bubbles, the highlights of the bubbles in the spit.

Richard Filipowski
I came to the School of Design with the attitude that I’m going to win. But then I came up against Moholy, and I realized what a determined, strong personality he was. And I was, indeed, a very stubborn young man. So I was working on a project called a tactile chart that was three-dimensional. I carved the front part, where the hand fit into grooves in the sculpture—a very, very nice sensation of sculptured curves. And it proceeded to different textures, but it was mounted in a way that if you depressed it, it would bounce back at you. And the darn thing would bounce, bounce, bounce—and bounce right off the table. I couldn’t figure a way of controlling the bounce, and so on. So I threw it in the wastebasket,
and Moholy said, "Well, how are things going?" I said, "Oh, I just threw out an experiment." He said, "You will finish it." I said, "No sir." He said, "Come into my office." And he said, "You must always finish everything you start, Filip." I said, "Sir, I don't want to finish it." "Yes, you will finish it!" said he. And then he got up from his chair and I said, "Sir, I have no intention of finishing it!" And he looked at me and he said, "What? Do not stand there like a young horse pissing. Go finish that!"—because I was standing there like a cadet, my hands behind my back, legs spread apart, like a young horse. And then I finished it, then threw it out and started another one. But then I realized why I had to finish it, because you carry that idea—if you don’t finish something you’ll always end up at that point. If you finish it, you then have criticized yourself to the point where you understand why it isn’t working. But if you don’t finish it you never find out. So I learned a very important lesson from Moholy.

Harold Allen
I’d say that a big part of his personality was excitement. He was excited about art, about design and about teaching, and he was a compulsive teacher—but he was never my teacher. When I took the photography course, it was a beginning course, and they began you with lighting, a whole semester of it. And that was taught by Kepes, who was still quite a young man then. But every night after our regular classes were finished, Moholy would call us into his office and talk with us about a half an hour, as a group, showing us what was going on in the school. Most of it was work in progress—parts of a film, for instance, parts of a group of pictures that somebody was making, or very advanced ideas of using photography. I was never in a class by him, but I learned a great deal from him.

MOHOLY-NAGY’S CONCERN FOR THE STUDENTS

Myron Kozman
Moholy was very much concerned about our eating habits, strangely enough, for a head of an art school to even think about what people ate. He invented a poem for himself: “The whiter the bread, the sooner you’re dead.” Okay, then he wanted to know—because I was so wrapped up in the Bauhaus and the classes and the workshops and so on—if I had a girlfriend, which is very nervy, if you stop and think about it. But I said "No" first, and he said, "Get one!" which I proceeded to do. I obeyed the master all the time.

Eudice Feder
He was a very warm father figure. I lived alone in Chicago, and when I got sick he was very concerned and he sent me to his own physician to find out what was wrong with me. You know, it was just a case of lingering flu, but the point was that—his great consideration.

STUDENT LIFE, LIVING CONDITIONS, SOCIAL INTERACTIONS
Myron Kozman
We transformed the whole Marshall Field mansion. His carriage house became the sculpture studio, and the bedrooms on the second floor became drawing studios, and the basement was full of Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck supplying all the materials and the tools, hand and power tools that we needed. We were richly endowed in the beginning, until the earth sort of fell between us, when those who had sponsored expected to see immediate results. They were genuinely interested in industrial design, use of materials, and didn’t expect to see paper cutouts and… the kinds of things that you see in Vision in Motion, for example.

Juliet Kepes
The building we were in on Ontario Street was once a bakery. The darkrooms were in the ovens. And the workshop was down the other end, and the floors were concrete or something, so it was just awful when the ripsaws were going, and it made a terrible amount of noise.

Christina Gardner
There was a nightclub on the third story of the building. And the Chez Paree was a very, very big part of our lives, because the students worked every night till two and three in the morning. And they used the same elevator. But you’d hear these stomplings upstairs, and we always supposed that it was a chorus line or dancers or acrobats or something. But then we figured no, they’re rolling the beer barrels across the thing, or maybe they were moving a stage, because all these rumbles and sounds! It was so potent and it happened night after night after night.

Myron Kozman
Moholy also was very economical; he picked up paper clips from the floor. . . . He also had us saving paper like crazy. He couldn’t stand somebody to have drawn something, say almost in a corner of a piece of paper, and throw the rest away. We couldn’t do that, so we had stacks of flattened-out paper that we made use of, thoroughly, all of it that we could possibly use.

Eudice Feder
At this time the school was really poverty stricken. And we really weren’t aware of how limited the financial resources were. It was a terrible problem. So the equipment was not really elaborate, but on the other hand, we were always doing work. We actually spent not only the whole day, but almost into the evening there, every single day.

Milton Halberstadt
We picked the lock on the door so we could work Saturdays and Sundays, which I think was a blessing that the door had a lock that we could open. We were there all week.

Olga Halberstadt
I know some of the guys, they would stay and work at the school for 36 hours or more, and some of them would just stay and sleep overnight somewhere because they didn’t have money to pay rent or buy food. . . . But still, the excitement—it was all very intense. Maybe intense is a better word than excitement, though I was excited about it all. I was excited about the intensity.
Barbara Mate
Somebody would come who had an exhibit somewhere. . . . Gropius came regularly, and when Gropius would come, we’d usually have a picnic out on the water, on Navy Pier or someplace like that, and he would give us a lecture, with much laughter from everybody. He was a funny man, because he was on holiday and noncompetitive with Moholy.

Emerson Woelffer
Moholy was always lecturing, always lecturing. I know he used to show that Bauhaus film. He always had people, groups, coming in, because he was always trying to get people to give money for the school. One day he called me, and he was giving a lecture to about 50 nurses there. I was just new there. He was called on the phone. He says, “You carry on from here. You can finish it all up,” and he walked out of the room. And there I was—they put the film on and it was the wrong film. In the meantime, I was standing up in the front with all these nurses there, waiting for the film to come, and they finally got it. In the meantime, I was turning all colors, I guess.

Moholy-Nagy’s Own Work
Milton Halberstadt
I did Moholy’s prints for the Museum of Modern Art. You know, Metol [a compound used in photographic processing] was poisonous to Moholy, so he never printed there unless he was wearing rubber gloves, and then you didn’t see him around very much.

Myron Kozman
So it was I guess what you would call a genuine cooperative, especially because we, for the most part, never signed what we had done because what was accomplished was everybody’s; that is, we couldn’t be certain and it didn’t matter, especially to Moholy, who did what, which is an unusual kind of position and we seemed not to be bothered by it. It just automatically happened that I might find my name on a half a dozen prints, but not on any of the rest of them. And so we have Moholy-results, we’ve got Kepes-results, and we got Nate Lerner and Art Siegel, but not duly signed, which for some individuals became a problem.

Photography
Myron Kozman
I think the first thing we did was make photograms of our hands. It’s just like the caveman. That was a biggie, because that was the first experience we’d had with light-sensitive paper that did these miraculous things that record exactly what we were looking at. As long as we hid it successfully from the sun, we had a permanent record of what was being portrayed. Then we began to get fancy and overlap fingers over other fingers. And we found transparent pieces of materials, such as plastic, and so on, and cellophane, and we got some fantastically creative, contemporary-looking pieces of art as a result of that.

Eudice Feder
Well, once we were taught the relationship of light to photography, which is chemical interaction, and what a photogram was, we were really pretty much on our own.

Mel Menkin
The course catalogue was one immense project for us, the ones who were interested in not just the photography but the layout. That was a big thing, in making dynamic layouts, and so you incorporated photography, drawing, collage, lettering—whatever—in making interesting layouts, and the catalogue really is the result of, primarily, the Kepes tutelage of those elements. Page layout was a big dominant theme in combining photography and lettering, and so on, and making interesting finished products.

Myron Kozman
My best experience with the darkroom is in the Chez Paree building, in the room where they had the ovens formerly used. . . . We could see in the dark with infrared. I remember heating up an iron and recording it photographically, without being able to see it until we exposed the light source.

Milton Halberstadt
I used the photograms every time I taught. I used a lot of things that came out of the School of Design. I made pinhole cameras every time I taught.

Film
Richard Filipowski
[Making Do Not Disturb, a 1945 experimental study seen by Moholy-Nagy] was sort of spontaneous at times. We thought it was a good day to shoot outdoors, so we’d wander around and do that. Or we dreamed up a scene where I would jump through a flaming cutout and we did that, with buckets of water to douse the flames before they consumed other items. So, we made it up as we proceeded. We’d shoot and then we’d review what we had and we’d store it away. And then the final project was putting all these snippets together. Moholy assigned me that task, so I was locked up in a closet one summer, splicing, trying to make sense out of all the nonsense we shot, and eventually a type of pattern emerged. Moholy would review my day’s splicing, and he would say, “Remove one frame here.”

Myron Kozman
I produced a film with students, and I don’t know what kind of film you’d call it, but it included painting directly on the film. And that was exciting, combining that with cinematography of surrounding areas and telling a story, in effect, with sound and light and color and shapes, welding that all together into a highly experimental film, which has not seen the light of day.

Richard Filipowski
We had no experience in cinematography, so the special effects and so on were just things of our spontaneous invention. That was delightful on our part, to see what we had
dreamed of, to see it projected. That was a totally different world. That’s what movies are: metamorphosis, from the mundane to something that’s noble or tragic or whatever you want to read into it.

**IMPACT OF THE SCHOOL**

**Myron Kozman**

Before I knew it I was in an organization, or a school, that was really not an art school. It was designed for, I guess you’d say, living, actually, for multi-experiences. Photography was one of them, but not to the exclusion of graphics and sculpture and painting and furniture designing. We did everything at once and everything was related.

**Juliet Kepes**

I really found it very nourishing. It was a wonderful school, and it’s too bad that it couldn’t go on quite the same way with the same enthusiasm, but it’s those people that were there that made it. You can’t copy anything and redo it, or make courses out of it, because that immediately stultifies it. They were constantly inventing, they just—they would have gotten bored to repeat anything!

**Christina Gardner**

My observation, as the outsider looking in, is that because of his methodology, because of his charisma and his humanity, Moholy taught those people a different way of looking at everything and he changed their approach to materials. They knew their materials so thoroughly, that they didn’t have to, any more, experiment when they branched off and began actually using the materials. . . . It was a way of looking that he conveyed that changed their lives!

**INTERVIEWEES**

**Harold Allen (1912–1998), interviewed in Chicago 12 August 1998.** Also in attendance: Jack Brown, Bart Ryckbosch, David Travis, Jay Wolke and Mary Wooleyver. Allen took a night class in photography at the School of Design from 1940 to 1941, learning lighting from György Kepes; he later became an instructor of photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and pursued his lifelong interest in documenting architecture.

**Eudice Feder (b. 1918), interviewed by telephone 6 October 1999, with Mel Menkin.** Feder studied at the School of Design between 1939 and 1941; a painter, she later specialized in computer graphics and design, producing colorful landscapes.

**Richard Filipowski (1923–2008), interviewed by telephone 17 March 1999.** A sculptor, painter and designer, Filipowski studied under Moholy-Nagy at the Institute of Design from 1942 to 1946 and continued to teach there for four years before joining the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

**Christina (Chrissie) Gardner, interviewed in Oakland, California, 1 August 2000.** Also in attendance: Susan Ehrens, Lloyd Engelbrecht, April Halberstadt, Barbara Beardsley Mate and Leland Rice. Gardner, a photographer and assistant to Dorothea Lange, accompanied her husband, Homer Page, to Chicago when he was a student at the School of Design in 1940–1941.

**Milton Halberstadt (1919–2000), interviewed by telephone 4 May 1999.** Halberstadt studied with, and assisted in the darkroom, Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes at the School of Design from 1940 to 1941; he later operated a noted Bay Area studio specializing in advertising photography and taught photography at various schools on the West Coast. He was married to fellow student Olga Halberstadt.

**Olga Halberstadt (1911–2001), interviewed by telephone 27 July 2000.** Artist Olga Halberstadt, married to fellow student Milton Halberstadt, attended the School of Design between 1940 and 1942.

**Juliet Kepes (1919–1999), interviewed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 29 May 1998. Also in attendance: Julie Stone.** Kepes was an artist in many media, known particularly for the 17 children’s books she wrote and illustrated. Married to György Kepes, who led the Light Workshop at the New Bauhaus and School of Design, she was one of only five students in the first graduating class of the school in 1942.

**Myron Kozman (1916–2002), interviewed by telephone 25 February 1999 and 11 March 1999.** A lifelong artist and educator known for his abstract printing and visual design, Myron Kozman entered the New Bauhaus in 1937 and was among the five graduating students in the first class; he continued at the school for a master’s degree and later joined the faculty.

**Barbara (Bobbie) Beardsley Mate (1920–2014), interviewed in Oakland, California, 1 August 2000. Also in attendance: Susan Ehrens, Lloyd Engelbrecht, Christina Gardner, April Halberstadt and Leland Rice.** A student at the School of Design for two years beginning in 1939, Mate worked in design before becoming a librarian.

**Mel Menkin (1919–2010), interviewed by telephone 6 October 1999, with Eudice Feder.** An artist and designer who spent his career as a high school photography and art teacher in the San Fernando Valley, Menkin studied at the School of Design between 1939 and 1941.

**Emerson Woelffer (1914–2003), interviewed by telephone 12 May 1999.** An abstract painter, sculptor and printmaker, Woelffer taught at the School of Design/Institute of Design from 1941 to 1949.

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