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Hilde Heynen, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy: Architecture, Modernism and its Discontents

London, Bloomsbury, 2019

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Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (1903-1971), the subject of the first book in a new series edited by Tom Avermaete and Janina Gosseye, aptly fits their brief of expanding our understanding of the modern movement by looking beyond the figures they term “grandmasters,” while retaining a focus on biography. The widow of the Bauhaus master Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the subject of her first major work of non-fiction, Moholy-Nagy never embraced what became known as postmodernism. As Hilde Heynen demonstrates in *Sibyl Moholy-Nagy : Architecture, Modernism and its Discontents*, she was nonetheless a challenger of modernist orthodoxy who proved equally talented at provoking powerful men and inspiring ambitious students.

Whether or not she was a “grandmistress,” there is no doubt that Moholy-Nagy led an interesting life. The daughter of the prominent Dresden architect Martin Pietzsch, she had a brief career as an actress, during which, in the first of many self-inventions, she anglicized her maiden name to Peech. She left her philandering first husband, a good friend of Theodor Adorno, after his money began to run out. She subsequently became involved with Moholy-Nagy, whom she married in 1935. In 1936 the family emigrated to Chicago, where until her husband’s death in 1946, she played a secondary, if supportive role, in helping him establish first the New Bauhaus and then the Institute of Design.

Widowed at the age of forty-three, with two young daughters to support in a country in which she had lived for only a decade, Moholy-Nagy at first attempted to continue to play a role at the Institute of Design. This failed when she proved unable to work with Serge Chermayeff, her husband’s successor as director of the Institute. It is not easy in retrospect to determine to what degree Moholy-Nagy’s reputation as a difficult woman (a “kill-joy”, to use the term Sara Ahmed employs in *Living a Feminist Life*)¹ was the product of the misogyny of the time, which has by no means vanished in our own. Certainly, it was not a direct outcome of the feminism Ahmed champions, although it may well have been

1 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

21 | prompted by the fact that Moholy-Nagy was never afraid to voice controversial opinions. Chermayeff described her in a letter to his patron Walter Paepcke, as “apparently a schizophrenic completely unable to control her innate frustration which leads her to destroy verbally people and situations with which she comes into conflict. This has produced a record of mischief and stupidity.”² Gropius, to whom he sent a copy, was more sympathetic, noting “she is very much alone. She was good on the side of Moholy, who knew how to control her, but she hasn’t got enough creative substance to be on her own as her faculties are mainly intellectual.”³ Heynen more politely notes that her subject “had a reputation for being very critical and not sparing her wrath when dissecting buildings or ideas that she disliked.”

Moholy-Nagy’s choice of a career, supported by the flair with which she lectured, proved a shrewd one. She was without a doubt a brilliant and influential teacher as well as a prolific and original critic. At Pratt Institute she presided from 1951 to 1969 over a three-year sequence of undergraduate architectural history classes taught with a rigor that was certainly unusual in American architecture schools of the day, and at a time when most of the leading scholars in the field remained embedded in art history departments. Although she regarded herself as an architectural historian, her true contribution actually, Heynen rightly points out, lay more in the realm of what would now be termed theory, even if this was an area about which Moholy-Nagy herself remained skeptical. Above all, Moholy-Nagy investigated the past, very much including unornamented vernacular architecture, in order to present her students and the readers of her books with sources and approaches for contemporary architectural and urban design that challenged modernist orthodoxy, without renouncing a commitment to abstraction. Often dismissive of American architectural historians, whom she accused of being preoccupied with style rather than form, Moholy-Nagy was also not interested in the relation between patronage, design process and intellectual context that occupied fellow émigrés such as Erwin Panofsky and Rudolf Wittkower (Neither Moholy-Nagy or Heynen mention her talented juniors, James Ackerman and William Jordy, who refused to do this, and instead wrote extensively about exactly these issues). One wonders if the fact that New York city’s top art history departments had hired a number of émigrés, who might have recognized that her claims to have studied alongside them in the 1920s were demonstrably bogus, also played a role in the distance she put between herself and their field. Ironically, although she was in the 1960s very critical of the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, in the 1950s she wrote a great deal for the *College Art Journal*, published by the American professional association for art historians and studio art teachers.

2 Serge CHERMAYEFF, letter to Walter Paepcke, 25 February 1948, copy sent to Walter Gropius, “Serge Chermayeff, undated, 1948-1949,” Washington, DC (USA), Archives of American Art, Reginald R. Isaacs Papers folder, Carton 7.

3 Walter GROPIUS, letter to Serge Chermayeff, 7 April 1948, “Serge Chermayeff, undated, 1948-1949,” Washington, DC (USA), Archives of American Art, Reginald R. Isaacs Papers folder, Carton 7.

Moholy-Nagy may not herself have been aware of the extent to which American women had already for a century contributed to the American discourse about architecture, but, although Heynen does not draw attention to this, she was certainly part of a distinguished tradition. The first history of architecture published in the United States was Louise Tuthill's *History of Architecture from the Earliest Times*, which appeared in 1848. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Mariana Griswold von Rensselaer forged a distinguished career as an architectural critic, as well as the first biographer of Henry Hobson Richardson. Already in the nineteenth century American magazines targeted at women readers played an important role in shaping architectural taste; in the middle decades of the twentieth Ethel Powers and Elizabeth Gordon both edited the particularly influential *House Beautiful*. The careers of Gordon, Ada Louise Huxtable, Jane Jacobs, and Aline Saarinen all overlapped with that of Moholy-Nagy, although Heynen addresses only her rather surprising dismissal of Jacobs, whose critique of urban renewal overlapped with her own.

Heynen is indisputably one of Europe's most renowned historians of modern architecture as an intellectual project as well as a committed feminist scholar. She is at her best in addressing Moholy-Nagy's key texts and in unpacking her complex attitudes towards women's roles and her own position in a male-dominated arena. She is less adept at reconstructing the specific American context in which Moholy-Nagy wrote, which proves a particular problem when she addresses the importance of *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*, published in 1957. For Heynen, Moholy-Nagy is a key pioneer on focusing attention on the vernacular, seven years before the appearance of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects*. This is undoubtedly true, but Moholy-Nagy's interest in what Americans term "colonial" architecture was hardly unique among German émigrés or indeed American supporters of modernist alternatives to Bauhaus dogma. Walter Gropius understood the house he and Marcel Breuer designed for him in Lincoln, Massachusetts, as an appropriate extension of the tradition of local farmhouses erected from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century.⁴ Erich Mendelsohn collected illustrations of pre-industrial dwellings, few of whose architectural pretensions would have impressed contemporary Europeans. In 1931, Eleanor Raymond published *Early Domestic Architecture of Pennsylvania*, a book which Moholy-Nagy almost certainly found useful. Most crucially, however, some of Moholy-Nagy's views appear to dovetail with what Vincent Scully was professing at Yale, the architecture school other than Pratt with which Moholy-Nagy had the closest association. She contributed to its in-house journal *Perspecta* and wrote a book on her friend Paul Rudolph, who was the school's dean. It would be intriguing to know how Scully's strong advocacy of the early colonial vernacular as a source for contemporary design, plus his fascination with Native American architecture, possibly affected her thinking and the degree to which she in turn may have influenced him.

4 Kevin D. Murphy, "The Vernacular Moment: Eleanor Raymond, Walter Gropius, and New England Modernism between the Wars," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2011, p. 308-329.

Both *Native Genius* and its successor, *Matrix of Man : An Illustrated History of Urban Environment*, which appeared in 1968, are particularly engaging today for the range of Moholy-Nagy's references. In the spirit of a project like *The Family of Man* photography exhibition, organized by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955, after which it was sent on tour around the world, Moholy-Nagy takes a cross-cultural perspective that often collapses cultural difference. In *Native Genius* she gathered together examples from French Colonial Canada, the United States, Mexico, Haiti and the Virgin Islands, with only a few illustrations from German-speaking central Europe to provide antecedents from across the Atlantic for the ingenious practicality that she favored, at least when it generated understated harmonious and functional forms. The frame of reference for *Matrix of Man* was truly global. Here the emphasis was on urban planning rather than architecture, allowing Moholy-Nagy to illustrate canonical as well as vernacular examples from pre-historic times to the present from across the Americas and Eurasia as well as occasionally from Africa. Here she is particularly effective in offering alternatives to the mechanistic approach to planning that was then in vogue in a book that probably commanded the admiration of counter-cultural students whose goals, as her condemnation of affirmative action demonstrates, she did not always share.

Heynen is spot-on in identifying the ambivalence that Moholy-Nagy's and indeed her generation of professionally successful women often had about the exceptional situations they often fought hard to achieve. While she believed that mothers should stay home when their children were small, and that "absolute equality" in society has never and will never exist," she took particular pride when she had accomplished something as (or perhaps despite being) a woman. Much of the reason that her writing still matters today is that she refused to show deference towards her male counterparts, as for instance when she was a prescient critic of Emery Roth, Pietro Belluschi and Walter Gropius's Pan Am tower just north of New York's Grand Central Station. She also, as Heynen details, failed to be impressed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose Lafayette Park in Detroit, designed in collaboration with his Illinois Institute of Design colleague Ludwig Hilbersheimer, she criticized for, among other things, displacing the site's African-American residents. Moreover, despite her critique of Jacobs, she was quite capable of displaying solidarity with other women, such as the philosopher Hannah Arendt or the Polish architect Helena Srykus. And yet she was consistently dismissive of "women's lib," as were many of the women of her cohort, such as the colour-field painter Helen Frankenthaler or the acid-tongued writer Mary McCarthy, who, unlike their daughters, had gotten as far as they did without it.

In short, in *Sibyl Moholy-Nagy : Architecture, Modernism and its Discontents* Heynen captures the essence of the consistently fascinating life and work of a woman who defiantly charted her own independent course as a woman, as a critic and as a teacher.