



Lucia Moholy. Hands Peeling Potatoes. C. 1930.

Lucia Moholy's Idle Hands*

JORDAN TROELLER

*I want to let you in on something:
I am actually not a photographer.*

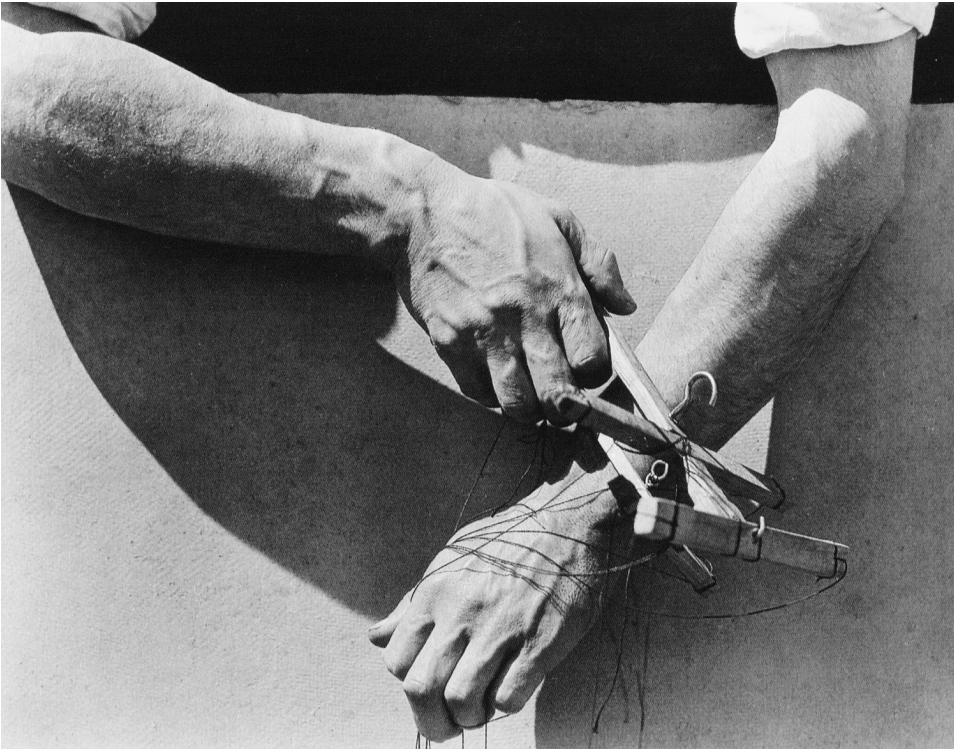
—Lucia Moholy¹

A photograph taken by Lucia Moholy, sometime around 1930, depicts two hands poised over a wooden bowl. One holds a potato, while the other wields a small knife from which a ribbon of peel unfurls into the sitter's lap. The peel bends toward us, its surface dissolving into a gray haze as it passes through the shallow plane of focus. That arc gestures to Moholy's single-minded gaze, her foregrounding of certain, seemingly unimportant details, while allowing others to fade into a blur or be cut off entirely, with the camera's aperture opened up to its full diameter. Minuscule furrows in the skin become monumental, like cracks in a desert floor. We can even make out the ridges of the thumb pad pressing against the knife, ridges that would index the sitter's identity if we knew who this was—which we do not, Moholy having cropped off the body at the neck and knees and left much of what remains in harsh shadows. Even the edge of the bowl curves in and out of clarity. As if a purposefully careless image, fixed by what would seem to be an untrained hand, the photograph purports to offer us an “artless” scene, a visual counterpart to Moholy's own curious disavowal of the medium cited above.

One question that this essay poses is whether the photograph—and others like it, in which Moholy portrays hands stilled in acts of domesticity—is an image of labor. And by that I do not mean whether the potato-peeling counts as labor

* This essay benefited from Maria Gough's encouraging comments, as well as the assistance of Barbara Günther and Silke Mehrwald at the Archiv der deutschen Frauenbewegung in Kassel, Germany, who facilitated the discovery of previously unknown photographs by Lucia Moholy. I am also grateful to Laura Frahm, Rolf Sachsse, Robin Schuldenfrei, Trevor Stark, and, above all, Susan Laxton for feedback on various drafts. An earlier version was presented at the Whitney Independent Study Program in March 2019, and I thank the participants, as well as Ron Clark, for the opportunity to discuss these ideas with them.

1. Lucia Moholy, unpublished interview with Rolf Sachsse, June 18, 1982 (all translations are mine unless otherwise noted). My thanks to Rolf Sachsse for kindly making available material from his personal archive.



Tina Modotti. Hands of the Puppeteer. 1929.

(we all know it does), but rather whether Lucia Moholy's own labor, as the author of this image, does. For despite taking on an *image* of labor, the photograph's formal properties mark it as structurally different from those photographs of the industrializing 1920s that we immediately recognize as depicting work, images that isolate and augment the laboring body as productive: August Sander's bricklayer confronting the camera comes to mind, whose hand authoritatively stabilizes the weight on his shoulders, but so does Tina Modotti's *Hands of the Puppeteer*, in which the tools of the artist, rather than wooden bowl and paring knife, signify a heroic (and masculinized) street performer in contrast to Moholy's apron-clad homemaker. Modotti took this photograph in 1929, while still in Mexico and active in the country's radical agrarian movement, a year prior to her arrival in Berlin. Moholy, who was also living in Berlin, may have learned of it in a small exhibition that was organized by fellow photographer Lotte Jacobi.² In an era of the worker-photographer, who analogized photographic labor to wage labor and declared the camera

2. On the exhibition, see Margaret Hooks, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary* (London: Pandora, 1993), p. 214. Modotti resided in Berlin between April and October 1930. A client of Lucia Moholy's colleague Umbo (Otto Umbehr) at Johannes Itten's school in Berlin was Egon Erwin Kisch, who had seen the show organized by Jacobi and written positively about it.

a “tool,” Moholy’s anonymous subject, sitting and preparing food, appears domesticated in comparison, the feminized Other to Modotti’s working artist.³

If *Hands Peeling Potatoes* departs from more familiar representations of labor in the interwar period, it also stands out within Moholy’s own oeuvre. Comprising a vast body of work, her career as a photographer is all too often reduced to those iconic views of Bauhaus architecture and its design objects, which she took as the school’s official photographer in all but name. This was a role that Moholy voluntarily stepped into between April 1923, when she arrived at the school in Weimar as the wife of László Moholy-Nagy, and April 1928, when the couple left and moved back to Berlin. During these five years, which were primarily spent in Dessau, Moholy produced the corpus of photographs that now overwhelmingly defines her seven-decade-long career, a career that spanned journalism, architectural photography, portraiture, art history, print-based reproductive technology, and library science. The some 560 negatives taken at the Bauhaus transformed the school and its accomplishments into a media phenomenon during its existence but also afterward, as they circulated in journals and newspapers, as well as the books authored by Bauhaus faculty members—publications that also established these authors’ individual reputations.⁴ Moholy was not paid for this labor nor given a title; in fact, many of these images, when attributed at all, were subsequently *mis*attributed to her husband.⁵ Hers was a kind of labor, not unlike that of housework, that was real but negated in its recognition—rendered as idle, in the sense of nonproductive, and thus unremunerated.⁶ This was the case because such labor was expected of her as one of the *Meisterfrauen*, to use her term, “those wives

3. Tina Modotti, “On Photography” (1929), cited in Hooks, *Tina Modotti*, p. 193. Compare Modotti’s text with Moholy’s exposé for a manuscript, “Der Amateur bei sich zuhause,” in which she implores readers of all social classes, whether they live in “bourgeois” or “proletarian” homes (but especially “housewives”), to take up a photography of everyday life—a claim, *avant la lettre*, for the personal as political: see Sachsse’s short introduction to the text and the facsimile in *Manifeste! Eine andere Geschichte der Fotografie*, ed. Franziska Maria Scheuer (Göttingen: Steidl, 2014), p. 391; pp. 208–09. (Thanks to Steffen Siegel for locating this for me.)

4. Robin Schuldenfrei, “Images in Exile,” *History of Photography* 37, no. 2 (May 2013), p. 186. My argument builds on Schuldenfrei’s insight into (mis)perceptions of Moholy’s authorship by Walter Gropius and others who later used her Bauhaus negatives without her permission, even withholding the negatives for decades, despite repeated requests on her part that they be returned.

5. This is compounded by the fact that Moholy-Nagy’s name is often abbreviated to “Moholy” in the literature, thus making it challenging even linguistically to reassert his wife’s presence. In what follows, I use their full last names to refer to each respectively (i.e., “Moholy” for her and “Moholy-Nagy” for him). On how Moholy was cast as the passive, supportive wife in contrast to her active, productive husband, see Anja Baumhoff, “Zwischen Kunst und Technik: Lucia Moholy und die Entwicklung der modernen Produktfotografie,” in *Klassik und Avantgarde: Das Bauhaus in Weimar, 1919–1925*, ed. Hellmut Th. Seemann and Thorsten Valk (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), p. 170. See also Mercedes Valdivieso, “Eine ‘symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft’: Lucia and László Moholy-Nagy,” in *Liebe Macht Kunst: Künstlerpaare im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Renate Berger (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000), pp. 65–85.

6. I use the term “housework” as theorized by Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James, in the 1970s, as a qualitatively different kind of labor under capitalism than wage labor, one that is to be continually “transformed into a natural attribute rather than to be recognized as a social contract,” thus “reinforcing the common assumption that *housework is not work*.” Silvia Federici, “Wages Against Housework” (1975), in *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972–1977, History, Theory, Documents*, ed. Silvia Federici and Arlen Austen (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2018), p. 203 (emphasis in original).

of the Bauhaus masters, who had no official status and yet crucially participated in the history and reception of the Bauhaus” through “critique, engagement, ambition, and independent work.”⁷

Attesting to that “independent work,” *Hands Peeling Potatoes* was taken not at the Bauhaus but 220 kilometers south of Dessau, as part of a very different kind of pedagogical experiment. Named after the abandoned farm that it acquired in 1923, Schwarze Erde (“black earth”), or Schwarzerden, as it is better known, was a school by and for women as well as a self-sustaining agricultural commune whose members daily practiced what sociability might look like outside of both patriarchy and industrial capitalism. A remarkable, though little-known, episode in the German women’s movement, the commune was established by the poet Marie Buchhold and the pedagogue Elisabeth Vogler. Both were highly critical of the capitalist economy as leading to “a one-dimensional, unequal division of production” whose consequences were “in favor of accumulation at the exhaustion of the worker . . . the disempowerment of millions for the benefit of a few.”⁸ As if this were not enough to raise eyebrows, coming as it did from a rural corner of the Rhön Mountains populated mostly by Catholic farming families, Schwarzerden extended its critique beyond one of class to one of gender, arguing that capitalism wrought particular damage on women. Not only did the bourgeois institution of marriage limit opportunities for women in the workplace and exploit the unpaid domestic labor that they performed in the home, the founders argued, it also led “only too easily” to the exclusion of women from their larger community and from these essential social bonds as “the fertile wellspring of resistance.”⁹

Moholy visited Schwarzerden on several occasions between 1922 and 1930, a period that coincided with her Bauhaus affiliation. She took dozens of photographs on her visits, often with the large-format wooden camera that she used in Weimar and Dessau, which she valued for its capacity to render detail.¹⁰ And like her activity at the Bauhaus, this engagement blurred the line between work and leisure; she had made friends with Buchhold, Vogler, and Tilla Winz, another leading member, long before she arrived in Dessau and seemed to have donated her skills as a photographer to the commune. Many of her photographs appeared in its publicity materials, devising—as at the Bauhaus—a visual language for a pedagogically motivated social movement that, in this case, rejected marriage, motherhood, and traditional forms of female wage labor. Other photographs taken at Schwarzerden, though, are clearly personal documents, intimate portraits of a

7. Lucia Moholy, “Zur Zeit als ich mein Elternhaus verließ . . .” (Zurich, after 1974), pp. 16–17, Lucia Moholy Papers, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

8. Marie Buchhold, “Sommerkurs I, July 1925,” cited in Ortrud Wörner-Heil, *Vor der Utopie zur Sozialreform: Jugendsiedlung Frankenfeld im Hessischen Ried und Frauensiedlung Schwarze Erde in der Rhön 1915 bis 1933* (Darmstadt: Hessische Historische Kommission Darmstadt, 1996), p. 458. Marta Neumayer is sometimes referred to as a third founding member, although Wörner-Heil argues that the roles played by Buchhold and Vogler, given their close relationship, were more substantial.

9. Marie Buchhold, “Die ländliche Wirtschaftsgemeinde” (1925), cited in Wörner-Heil, *Vor der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 461.

10. Lucia Moholy, “The Missing Negatives,” *British Journal of Photography* (January 7, 1983), p. 6.



*Page from an album in the Schwarzerden Papers,
Archiv der deutschen Frauenbewegung, Kassel,
with photographs by Lucia Moholy.*



Top: Moholy.

Portrait of Tilla Winz. 1927.

Bottom: Moholy.

Portrait of Florence Henri (in Profile). 1927.

tightly knit community of women that bear striking similarities to her portraits at the Bauhaus. Later circulating as gifts among the women and filling the pages of personal photo albums, these photographs not only attest to a neglected chapter in the history of German feminism, they gesture to a form of radical politics held together by intimacy between women and non-normative forms of family, one that posed a powerful alternative to the sociability on offer in Dessau.¹¹

What follows focuses on the photographs that Moholy took at Schwarzerden, considering what the commune was and what it became through her lens. I propose that her capacity to lend Schwarzerden a viable representational idiom derived from her experience of marginalization at the Bauhaus, and that we should see these photographs as the revalorization of a kind of feminized photographic labor that was systematically negated at the Bauhaus, and, as such, as an oblique commentary on the gendered nature of avant-garde discourse in the 1920s. Many, including Moholy herself, undervalued her work, dismissing it in rela-

11. These albums are located in the papers of Schule Schwarzerden at the Archiv der deutschen Frauenbewegung in Kassel, Germany (hereafter "AddF, Kassel"). As Susan Laxton pointed out to me, it may be that this alternative sociability was closer to that of the early Bauhaus under Johannes Itten; see Elizabeth Otto, *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), pp. 26–32.

tion to the supposedly more “artistic” output of her male colleagues. This happened first in relation to her husband’s photograms—which originated on one of their early trips to the Rhön Mountains—and then later in relation to the cult of authorship more broadly at Gropius’s Bauhaus. Coded as “reproductive,” in distinction to the “productive” work of her male colleagues, Moholy’s photography was not maliciously ignored so much as it was naturalized as a labor of love on the part of a devoted wife, whose status as an artist was never seriously considered.

Where I depart from previous feminist readings of Moholy’s work at the Bauhaus is to argue that this naturalization only partly had to do with gender; a more encompassing explanation requires looking at the terms of production/reproduction in which it unfolded—terms articulated by Moholy-Nagy, above all, but also, perversely, by Moholy herself, as it was she who composed the Hungarian artist’s texts during this period (having a better grasp of the German language than he did and having trained professionally as an editor and translator). Understanding the language in which that rejection was articulated illuminates how recalcitrant notions of photographic transparency persisted, paradoxically, within the rhetoric of radicalized vision. Contending with the character of labor on both sides of Moholy’s camera, in other words, requires grappling with the contradictions of originality at the heart of New Vision photography.¹²

“Vogler, *Biology, Loheland*”

On August 10, 1922, László Moholy-Nagy wrote to Theo van Doesburg from the small village of Weyhers in the Rhön Mountains, where he and Lucia Moholy were spending the summer. Trying to lure the Dutch artist, then living in Weimar, to come out for a visit, he describes their humble accommodations:

I’ve asked around what it would cost if you wanted to come here for a while. In the village guesthouses board and lodging for one person costs 150 marks per day. We live with farmers, but they haven’t yet told us what we’re to pay. We hope, of course, that it will be much cheaper. Otherwise a catastrophic bankruptcy awaits us. Of course—if you have serious intentions to come here (the scenery is beautiful) and are satisfied with very simple food (soured milk, salad, cured meats, vegetables,

12. My formulation of these issues owes a debt to Anne Wagner’s exemplary study *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), and particularly her challenge to a one-dimensional biographical recovery of women artists: “I have returned to the familiar ratio, female to male, to make visible its inherent complexity and incompleteness—and above all to show that those qualities are importantly a matter of visual form. When transposed to visual representation, the relationship need not always—did not always—involve subordination and dependency. I think it is high time we learned to think more deeply about the representational purposes and ambitions of work by women, and to assess their place in a cultural dialogue. Only if we do so will we begin to give them their due” (p. 285).

potatoes—though not all at once!)—then maybe we could ask local farmers whether or not you could be housed? The cost would then be half (or a little cheaper).¹³

The letter reminds us of how crucial friendships were to the early-twentieth-century avant-garde: that work got done around the dinner table; that money was a constant worry; that intellectual labor was never far from the necessity to put food on the table and pay the rent. But the statement also testifies to Moholy-Nagy's ambivalence toward a place where he seemed to feel out of his element and clung to his male colleagues: "The farmers, though," he wrote smugly, "are real sticks-in-the-mud. So please write to me in this respect. I'm curious whether Lissitzky is already in Weimar? A trip with him and Röhl and Graeff—even in the case of only a short stay—would be very nice. Please think about it."¹⁴

At the time of this letter, the couple had been married for a year and a half. They had met in Berlin in April or May 1920 and shortly thereafter began sharing an apartment before marrying on her twenty-seventh birthday on January 18, 1921. She then took on his last name and he acquired her Czech citizenship, which he needed to remain in Germany. While the Prague-born Lucia Schulz had been in Germany since 1914, working as an editor and journalist, Moholy-Nagy was a new arrival from Hungary, where he had participated in the short-lived Soviet Republic. His situation, unlike hers, was precarious. Trying to make his way as a painter and doing side work as the Berlin correspondent for the avant-garde Hungarian journal *MA*, Moholy-Nagy brought in little money; his first show at Herwarth Walden's gallery in Berlin sold few works. It was her salary that sustained the couple in these early years.¹⁵ Eager to escape "all the business" of Berlin, as Moholy-Nagy described his artistic engagements, but needing to find an alternative to the pricey seaside, the couple found respite in Weyhers in the Rhön because it was affordable—even if, in Moholy-Nagy's mind, terribly provincial.¹⁶

Whereas he complained of intellectual boredom, she saw things differently. The visits to the Rhön, which the couple took regularly throughout the 1920s, were in her mind "self-evident," the consequence of shared intellectual interests

13. László Moholy-Nagy to Theo van Doesburg, August 10, 1922; reprinted in Theo van Doesburg, *Grondbegrippen der nieuwe beeldende kunst*, ed. Umberto Barbieri et al. (Nijmegen: Socialist Uitgeverij, 1983), p. 102.

14. *Ibid.*

15. In June 1920, she was hired by the publishing house Rowohlt, where she performed editorial duties as well as oversaw the company's press and public relations; see Rolf Sachsse, *Lucia Moholy* (Düsseldorf: Marzona, 1985), p. 9. It is unclear when Moholy stopped working for Rowohlt; Sachsse states here that her duties ended on July 31, 1921. Elsewhere, he reports that she continued working there until 1923, when the couple moved to Weimar; see Rolf Sachsse, *Lucia Moholy: Bauhaus-Fotografin* (Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv, 1995), p. 12.

16. László Moholy-Nagy to Doesburg, July 26, 1924; reprinted in Doesburg, *Grondbegrippen*, p. 107.

and the “fruitful mental labor” that she and he were able to pursue in the “invigorating” climate of the Rhön:

Staying in one of the many little senior cottages with a view of meadows and mountains, where we were allowed to lead a modest summertime existence according to our own wishes, we soon came to know many other people who, in this harsh—at the time, still unfrequented—region had found, or had hoped to find, the rhythm of their lives. Among them was Elisabeth Vogler, already then filled by an enthusiastic will towards new life, which was to be realized a few years later in the founding of the Schule Schwarzerden.¹⁷

Her tone, unlike that of her husband, embraces the community of the rural area, and the women of nearby Schwarzerden above all. That community had been long in the making; it can be traced to friendships that Moholy had cultivated in the German youth movement, in which she was an active participant.¹⁸ In 1918, while working at the Leipzig publisher B. G. Teubner, Moholy met several fellow members with whom she would become lifelong friends, including the activists Friedrich Vorwerk and Paul Vogler, who was Elisabeth Vogler's brother. These contacts brought her to Hamburg in December 1919, where she began working for one of the movement's publishers, Adolf Saal, whose bookstore Moholy later described as “a meeting place” of socially engaged intellectuals.¹⁹ Saal was a central figure within the youth movement, publishing its main journal, the *Freideutsche Jugend*, and directing the eponymous publishing house. It was while working for Saal that Moholy, likely through Paul Vogler, first met Marie Buchhold and Elisabeth Vogler, the two founders of Schwarzerden.²⁰

A pressing concern for all three women at this moment was what Elisabeth Vogler described as the “body-soul problem.”²¹ In an article for *Freideutsche Jugend*, Moholy elaborated the stakes of this “problem” in the terms of the symbolic.²² Defining her use of “symbol” in terms of speech (*Sprache*), visual representation

17. Lucia Moholy's contribution to Karin Oeking, *Elisabeth Vogler* (Gersfeld-Bodenhof: Gymnastikschule Schwarzerden, Rhön, 1977), p. 33.

18. When and how Moholy became involved in the *Jugendbewegung* is not known; for an account of her relationship to the movement and its impact on her intellectual formation, see Oliver Botar, “The Origins of László Moholy-Nagy's Biocentric Constructivism,” in *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond*, ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 320–30.

19. Moholy, “Autobiographical Notes”; cited in Botar, “The Origins of László Moholy-Nagy's Biocentric Constructivism,” p. 321. Paul Vogler, then studying economics in Hamburg, turned to medicine out of a desire, Botar writes, to reform what he saw as the capitalist/corporate nature of the medical system. See p. 329 for Moholy's description of Adolf Saal's bookstore.

20. Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 188. Marie Buchhold was then an editor at the *Freideutsche Jugend*.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Lucia Schulz, “Symbol,” *Freideutsche Jugend* 5, no. 10 (October 1919), pp. 406–08.

(*Bilder einer ewigen Welt*), and religious signification (*Wege von Mensch zu Gott*), Moholy describes a new set of conditions for her generation, in which such symbolic relations no longer tie the subject to the external world; the self is inextricably bound to that reality in ways that exceed representation. In Nietzschean language, Moholy describes this encounter with the world as a “sublimation” of “language as symbol. No symbol can any longer bind me with the world that I [now] am. Two become one, and language dies.” Evoking Vogler’s terminology, Moholy explains how this insight reengineers the relation between body and subjectivity: “Body [*Leib*] und soul [*Seele*] arise out of the same foundation [*Wurzel*, literally ‘roots’]; they are one. We no longer know the spiritual content of a corporeal world . . . we are God.”

With its references to an embodied nature, Moholy’s text anticipates the agrarian imagination of what would become Schwarzerden’s feminist politics, a politics rooted in the German youth movement. While Oliver Botar has uncovered the extent of Moholy’s engagement with the *Freideutsche Jugend*, and especially its influence on her husband’s “biocentric pedagogy,” I invoke it here to point to its consequences for an environmentally conscious female communalism in interwar Germany, one that Botar himself suggests in describing Buchhold as “an unrecognized pioneer of eco-feminism.”²³ The movement’s rejection of anthropocentrism and its embrace of a neo-vitalist, ecological view of the world, although varied across practitioners, took a particular form in Buchhold’s writings and in Vogler’s pedagogy, as both occupied themselves with the question of gender equality, particularly within “co-education.”²⁴ For Buchhold, this was an engagement with the role of Eros in the relationship between student and teacher; for Vogler, with new forms of “bodily training [*Körperlehre*]” that departed from both contemporary forms of Expressionist dance, on the one hand, and structured gymnastics, on the other.²⁵ For Moholy, it meant revising categories of signification in terms of the symbolic. For all three, though, how to live communally as women in an economically dire postwar Germany was central and took concrete form in their participation in several experimental communities, including the Marxist colony Barkenhoff near the Bremen Soviet Republic, in which Moholy participated as an undercover informant.²⁶

23. Botar, “The Origins of László Moholy-Nagy’s Biocentric Constructivism,” p. 333.

24. See Buchhold’s article in *Freideutsche Jugend* 5, no. 11 (November 1919), pp. 475–78.

25. Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 349.

26. Heinrich Vogeler, a leading member of Barkenhoff, recalled, “The now wife (and very good photographer) of the abstract painter Moholy-Nagy” and Klara Möller “committed themselves—under the cloak of medical aid—to providing news and information to those workers who had fought in the battles.” Heinrich Vogeler, *Werden: Erinnerungen mit Lebenszeugnissen aus den Jahren 1923–1942*, ed. Joachim Prieue and Paul-Gerhard Wenzloff (Berlin: Rütten and Loening, 1989), p. 277; cited and trans. in Sandra Neugärtner, “Utopias of a New Society: Lucia Moholy, László Moholy-Nagy, and the Loheland and Schwarzerden Women’s Communes,” in *Bauhaus Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism’s Legendary Art School*, ed. Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 77 (trans. modified).



Moholy. Portrait of Elisabeth Vogler, From Above. 1927.

An autobiographical note in Moholy's papers alludes elliptically to her activities in the Rhön during the summer of 1922: "Vogler, biology, Loheland."²⁷ The three terms abbreviate Moholy's intellectual interests at this moment: Elisabeth Vogler's nascent commune that she was then planning with Buchhold (both of whom were living that summer in the village of Rabensnest near to where László and Lucia were staying); a continued conversation around the social ramifications of a biological worldview, which she was having with Moholy-Nagy; and, lastly, an encounter with Loheland, another intentional community centered on questions of the body, land, and craft, but one, as I argue, of a very different kind than Schwarzerden (although they have often been compared). Moholy's visits to nearby Loheland would have been mediated through Elisabeth Vogler, who had spent six months at the school, studying and teaching theories of the body, in early 1920—just months after she and Moholy had met in Hamburg. Vogler left the school early, however, disagreeing with the founders' anthroposophical approach and later arguing against the exclusive character of such Rudolf Steiner-inflected

27. Lucia Moholy, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 14, Lucia Moholy Papers, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

methods, as she set out a conception of the body that put communalism at the center of a feminist pedagogy.²⁸ Moholy's developing conception of the body and its representation in the terms of symbolism, as the radical lamination of sign with referent, prefigured the photogram experiments that she would "implement" with Moholy-Nagy—an "invention," as her husband would later describe it, that took place in the very same context in which Moholy would later dramatically reject those masculinist terms of production.

The Artist as (Re)producer

If the Rhön was in many ways *her* territory, as the site of proto-feminist elaborations of the German *Jugendbewegung*, it was also where she and Moholy-Nagy began to experiment with the photogram. "I clearly remember how it came about," she recalled, matter-of-factly:

During a stroll in the Rhön Mountains in the summer of 1922, we discussed the problems arising from the antithesis Production versus Reproduction. This gradually led us to implement our conclusions by making photograms, having had no previous knowledge of any such steps taken by Schad, May Ray, and Lissitzky (or others for that matter). . . . The deliberations which formed the basis of our activities were published in *De Stijl* 7/1922 and reprinted in other magazines.²⁹

The publication to which Moholy refers is the essay "Production-Reproduction," a short statement that sets out two opposing terms that would become crucial for the reception of not only his but also her photographs.³⁰ Drawing biological comparisons, the essay proposes a definition of subjectivity as physiological: "Man is most realized when his constituent faculties—the cells as well as the most complicated organs—are developed to their full potential." As a privileged means of shaping those faculties, art constitutes "creative activity [*gestaltende Tätigkeit*]" and, as such, is to be distinguished from "reproductive" activity as the "reiteration of already existing relations." If iteration entrenches old habits, creativity "produces new, so far unknown relations," for it is "above all Production (productive creativity) that serves human development." This definition of "creative activity" is then elaborated with the example of technological means of

28. Neugärtner, "Utopias of a New Society," p. 83; Wörner-Heil, *Vor der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, pp. 191–92.

29. Moholy's own translation of a statement that she originally made in her essay "Das Bauhaus-Bild" (1968), in Lucia Moholy, *Marginalien zu Moholy-Nagy: Dokumentarische Ungereimtheiten/Moholy-Nagy, Marginal Notes: Documentary Absurdities* (Krefeld: Scherpe, 1972), p. 59. See the translation of "Das Bauhaus-Bild" in this issue.

30. László Moholy-Nagy, "Production-Reproduction," *De Stijl* 5, no. 7 (July 1922), pp. 97–100. The authorship of this essay is contested, as I discuss. Historically, it has been published as the sole work of Moholy-Nagy, but it is increasingly believed to have been significantly developed, if not co-written, by Lucia Moholy.

reproduction, including photography, which, up until that point, has only been “used for reproductive purposes” but could be “revaluated”—a key term in the argument—“to use the light sensitivity of the silver-bromide plate to capture and fix light-effects (movements in the play of light) produced by our manipulation of mirrors or lenses, etc.”³¹

The photograms that the couple began producing upon their return to Berlin that fall were unique objects; there is no evidence that Moholy-Nagy ever made photograms directly on the silver-bromide plates of which he writes (and which would have allowed him to replicate such images).³² This was certainly the case with the earliest photograms, made on daylight paper, which required only water (rather than an outfitted darkroom) to develop the image, but it also holds true for those photograms that the couple made in the basement darkroom of their Master's House in Dessau, which they moved into in 1926.³³ Moholy-Nagy subjected the unique prints to a series of photographic operations, a process that he termed “revaluation [*Umwertung*]” and that included tonal reversal and mirror-imaged compositions. He also had his photograms enlarged to resemble a common format for paintings at that time (60 x 90 cm), as well as cut up and reassembled, sometimes as collages but also as the juxtaposition of two photograms, as in the case



László Moholy-Nagy. Untitled. 1925–26.
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Rights Society (ARS), New York.

31. László Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction,” in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 79–80 (trans. modified).

32. Renate Heyne and Floris M. Neusüss, eds., *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms: Catalogue Raisonné* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), p. 41. Moholy attributes part of this to “trying to keep expenses down”: “Neither at Dessau, nor later in Berlin, where a well-appointed laboratory had been installed, did we dare to use highly sensitive emulsions as a primary base for producing photograms. If reference was made in *Painting, Photography, Film* to ‘silver bromide plates,’ this was perfectly true in theory, but did not apply to everyday practice.” Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, pp. 61–62.

33. On the darkroom in that house and its impact on several photographers at the Bauhaus, see Wolfgang Thoener, “Das Fotografenhaus/The Photographers’ House,” in *Die Zeitschrift der Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau* 4 (November 2012), pp. 42–53.

of a hand juxtaposed with the profile of a face.³⁴ Because of the unique character of the photogram, the expenses involved in making the photograms resistant to further exposure from light, and the fact that contact printing was unreliable, these operations often necessitated taking a photograph of the original in order to replicate it.

Significantly, it was Lucia Moholy who carried out these reproductions. Moholy-Nagy neither had nor was interested in acquiring the extensive technical knowledge of photographic reversal required to create these “revaluations.” As Beaumont Newhall put it, “Moholy[-Nagy] did very little darkroom work. Certainly, so far as his camera pictures were concerned, he had no interest whatsoever in what we call the ‘fine print.’ To him the image which the camera or the photogram could capture was the exciting thing.”³⁵ Moholy, by contrast, had almost a decade of professional experience in print technology by the time the couple arrived at the Bauhaus. She expanded this knowledge by apprenticing with the studio photographer Hermann Eckner in Weimar and studying briefly at the Akademie für Graphische Künste und Buchgewerbe in Leipzig, where she acquired “the fundamentals of reproduction techniques.”³⁶ It was here, too, that Moholy began studying the history of photography, with which she was already familiar, having studied art history (as well as philosophy) at the university in Prague; Moholy-Nagy, by contrast, began studying law in Budapest, under pressure from his parents, but never completed his degree. It was not simply that her husband had no interest in the technical knowledge around photographic reproduction, as Moholy herself was quick to point out. It was rather that he, like his male colleagues, viewed such knowledge as derivative, the work of “technicians,” in comparison to the more consequential work of the painter and architect.³⁷ Or, as Moholy-Nagy put it succinctly in explaining why he would not be the one to set up the darkrooms at the New Bauhaus in Chicago: “I am not a photographer, but a painter.”³⁸

34. Heyne and Neusüss, *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms*, p. 40. The small formats (13 x 18 and 18 x 24 cm) were best for the arrangement of objects onto the photosensitive surface but meant that for any larger sizes, one would have to rephotograph the image in order to print it at an enlarged size.

35. Beaumont Newhall, taped remarks transcribed by Alice Swan in November 1973, cited in Leland D. Rice and David W. Steadman, eds., *Photographs of Moholy-Nagy from the Collection of William Larson* (Claremont, CA: Pomona College, 1975), p. 7.

36. Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, p. 85. On the photography class there, see Rolf Sachsse, “Beginnen wir! Die photographischen Abteilungen der Hochschule für Graphik und Buchkunst in Leipzig zwischen 1890 und 1950,” in *Fotografie: Leipziger Schule, Arbeiten von Absolventen und Studenten 1980–93, 100 Jahre Fotografie an der Hochschule für Graphik und Buchkunst Leipzig*, ed. Joachim Jansong (Leipzig: Hochschule für Graphik und Buchkunst, 1993), pp. 7–15.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 77. See also Sachsse’s remarks in an interview with Moholy (June 17, 1983), in which he proposes that one reason there was no photography workshop at the Bauhaus under Gropius’s leadership may have been because Gropius regarded photography as a “vehicle for delivering images of his built objects” and photographers as “technicians [*Handwerker*].”

38. László Moholy-Nagy, cited in Henry Holmes Smith, “Across the Atlantic,” in Rice and Steadman, *Photographs of Moholy-Nagy*, p. 18. On the exchange between these two media in his work, see Joyce Tsai, *Moholy-Nagy: Painting after Photography* (Berkeley: University of California, 2018).

As their Bauhaus colleague Max Gebhard recalled, “In my opinion, Lucia’s labor was decisive for the photographic work of Moholy-Nagy, for the photograms as well as the photographs that were produced over the course of several years. I often experienced her coming out of the darkroom with a still wet photograph and into [Moholy-Nagy’s] studio, and the two would talk about it.”³⁹ Because Moholy-Nagy often required images for specific purposes, this work of enlargement and replication could be quite complex. One could not simply replicate the original photogram, “for in photogram-making,” as Moholy explained, “every phase is subject to varying influences, and the ultimate effects are not to be foreseen or calculated with any amount of certainty. The grading of tone values, moreover, is largely a matter for ad hoc decisions during the process of chemical treatment in the laboratory.”⁴⁰ In lieu of being able to simulate the same results, Moholy had to make reproductions of existing works, which she did either through contact printing or, as was more often the case, through photographing the photogram. This process was made more complex by Moholy-Nagy’s desire to illustrate both the positive photogram as well as its negative inversion, which meant that suitable negatives for publishing had to be produced of both the original photograph and its mirrored, tonal-inverted opposite.⁴¹ These processes often required devising inventive methods in lieu of proper equipment—pinning the photogram to a board, for instance, when mounting it under glass was not possible—and detailed postproduction in order to crop out the thumbtacks. It sometimes resulted in substantial errors, like the loss of tonal values and blurred edges if the camera was not perfectly parallel to the original.⁴² Sometimes entire photograms would go missing or were never returned from the publisher, and Moholy-Nagy, believing he had already made the “work,” would ask Moholy to refabricate it in the darkroom—even though, as she explains, this was never simply *refabrication*, but rather the creation of a new work. Her skill became indispensable for realizing his ambitious vision—a vision that was all the more challenging to implement given that the artist had little understanding of the steps involved in bringing it to fruition.

Statements like Gebhard’s observation of Moholy’s labor appear all too frequently in testimony from former Bauhaus members. Often, these comments

39. Max Gebhard, cited in Irene-Charlotte Lusk, *Montagen ins Blaue: László Moholy-Nagy, Fotomontagen und -collagen 1922–1943* (Berlin: Anabas, 1980), p. 181.

40. Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, p. 63.

41. See explanations of this terminology in Heyne and Neusüss, *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms*, p. 41. Lucia Moholy distinguishes between these reproductive methods in *Marginal Notes*, p. 64, and evokes a comparison with the contemporary practice of the multiple in the 1970s.

42. Heyne and Neusüss, *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms*, pp. 52–53. Many photograms bear added graphite and ink, techniques then typical for improving the registration of photos in print and in which Moholy had been trained; see Julie Barten, Sylvie Pénichon, and Carol Stringari, “The Materialization of Light,” in *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, ed. Matthew Witkovsky et al. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2016), pp. 188–202.

reverse gender stereotypes, such that Moholy's pragmatism is figured as the rational counterpart to the "feverish sensory perception of his new vision."⁴³ Consider Xanti Schawinsky in a letter to Moholy-Nagy's second wife, Sibyl:

Lucia often sat in the atelier in Weimar and Dessau and it was said that she kept an eye on him, making sure that he painted. She was a serious person, who seldom laughed. Moholy-Nagy's photography was, without a doubt, supported by her technical contribution. She took on his darkroom work, and, I believe, deserves a certain amount of Moholy[-Nagy]'s reputation as a photographer; most of the photographs that are of any importance were made during that time.⁴⁴

This "contribution" was at times figured as an "unusually close working arrangement" (Moholy's own words) and at other times as a collaboration.⁴⁵ That is even more apparent in her husband's texts, beginning with the 1922 essay "Production-Reproduction," at which point the Hungarian artist could hardly write a postcard to friends in German, much less craft a theoretical argument.⁴⁶ "What he needed was not only the translation of his stilted verbal attempts into fluent, written German, and adequate expressions for thoughts that were often still in a very nascent state, but also someone with whom he could think out loud in the creative process and see it to the end—the last of which was very often left to me. The initial idea came from him, the argumentation was done together, and the formulation was mine."⁴⁷ The formulation, but also, it would appear, the content of those texts, given that a "methodical reading of scholarly, especially scientific, texts did not appeal to him," according to Moholy; it was she, in combination with him, who generated what Otto Stelzer described as "the wealth of technological Utopias buried in the footnotes of his book *Painting, Photography, Film*."⁴⁸ This was labor

43. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, cited in Valdivieso, "Eine 'symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft,'" p. 69. Valdivieso describes this as a "reversal of gender binaries" in which the rational is aligned with the female integer (pp. 78–81).

44. Xanti Schawinsky to Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, August 25, 1948; reprinted in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (Weingarten: Kunstverlag Weingarten, 1986), p. 425.

45. Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, p. 55. The German phrase she uses is "*symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*"; Moholy, *Marginalien*, p. 11.

46. Rolf Sachsse, "Moholy, oder: Vom Wert der Reproduktion," in *Das neue Sehen: von der Fotografie am Bauhaus zur subjektiven Fotografie*, ed. Rainer Wick (Munich: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1991), p. 94. Before Moholy, it was Alfred Kemény who had helped to write her husband's essays in German.

47. Moholy, cited in Valdivieso, "Eine 'symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft,'" pp. 68–69.

48. Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, p. 54 (Moholy cites Stelzer's postscript to the 1967 edition of *Painting, Photography, Film*). Her role appears to have been extensive: "There was not a single text that he sent out that I had not read, and there were moments, or opportunities, where I had to say, hey, listen, that's just not true. Then he would say, well, then just say it the other way around. So his logic was unreliable [*unverlässlich*]." Moholy, interview with Sachsse, June 17, 1983.

that, as Lothar Schreyer recalled, far exceeded that of simply correcting diction and style and took on the character of co-authorship.⁴⁹

Moholy's decisive role in the photograms as well as the theoretical texts is perhaps how we can begin to explain why Moholy-Nagy so vehemently cultivated a mythology of originality. Artistic agency lay in verbal instruction. This is made explicit in one of Moholy-Nagy's most iconic works, his so-called telephone paintings of 1922, which he claimed to have had made in conversation with a fabricator over the phone; paintings that became emblematic of Moholy-Nagy's devaluation of physical labor as artistic meaning.⁵⁰ But it is highly ambiguous as to whether those gestures actually accomplish what Moholy-Nagy claimed for them, for invocations of the artist's "touch" persisted, even if they were purportedly emptied of significance in being assigned to an iconographic register. A paintbrush, the preoccupation with hands, even the smuggling in of a signature, retooled in stenciled script—and ironically no different from Lucia's name at this time—effectively reinstates an authorial conception of the work of art, even if the mechanical is the vehicle by which it does so.⁵¹ This mythology distracted attention away from his wife's actual role in the realization of his artworks and focused it instead on the question of who (of his male colleagues) had first "discovered" the photogram (a debate in which Lissitzky had accused Moholy-Nagy of plagiarizing Man Ray).⁵² Moholy-Nagy responded that he had come to the photogram "through theoretical work," referring to the 1922 essay. He further distinguishes his approach from that of "a woman at Loheland," whose use of transparent organic materials placed onto photographic paper was, unlike his use of the technique, he contended, "*nothing more* than the fixing of an accidentally charming effect, *nothing more* than a naturalistic photograph that had come about without an actual mastery of the photographic process."⁵³

49. See Lothar Schreyer, *Erinnerungen an Sturm und Bauhaus* (Munich: Langer-Müller, 1956), p. 238; cited in Valdivieso, "Eine 'symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft,'" p. 68.

50. This was a mythology that Moholy deconstructs, tracing Moholy-Nagy's declaration of the paintings in 1946 "as having been ordered over the telephone" (in his *Abstract of an Artist*) back to the actual circumstances in 1922, when he exclaimed, extremely satisfied with the fabricator's work, that he "might even have done it over the telephone!" See Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, pp. 75–76.

51. On the issue of names, see Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, p. 52. "Nagy" was his proper last name and he had added "Moholy" (adapting the name of his family's estate), "a name which lacked any reality of its own for the simple reason that it was the bearer's own invention."

52. El Lissitzky to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, September 15, 1925, reprinted in *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt Typograf Fotograf*, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (Dresden 1967, new ed. 1992), pp. 63–64.

53. Moholy-Nagy, "Fotoplastische Reklame," *Offset-, Buch- und Werbekunst* 7 (1927), p. 388 (emphasis added). It is now well established that Moholy-Nagy refers here to photograms produced by Bertha Günther, a teacher at Loheland from 1916 to 1926, who made small-format photograms on daylight paper using plant material. See Herbert Molderings, "László Moholy-Nagy und die Neuerfindung der Fotograms," in *Die Moderne der Fotografie* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2008), p. 51; see also Molderings's essay in Heyne and Neusüss, *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms*, p. 18. In contrast to her husband, Moholy argued that the making of these photograms was not a hobby of Günther's but rather "formed, in one way or another, part of the artistic training of the students at Loheland," just as it would Moholy-Nagy's own pedagogy at the Bauhaus and New Bauhaus in Chicago (Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, p. 61).

Mastery indeed. Under these circumstances, the photograms of the 1920s reveal the stakes of picturing hands in these years and the labor that they elided. Given that this is Moholy's own profile pictured here, in *Untitled*, whose "idle hand" is it, exactly, that rested upon the photosensitive emulsion?⁵⁴ And does it coincide with the hand that chose the paper, prepared the chemicals, operated the enlarger, adjusted the exposure, and carried the print from bath to bath? If so, what is left of Moholy-Nagy here? Can we—*should* we—continue to describe the celebrated double-portrait photogram of the couple as evidence of their "symbiotic working arrangement"? Does this not incriminate exactly the opposite, the unequal division of labor upon which the (masculinist) avant-garde relied, in both rhetoric and practice—Moholy-Nagy, of course, being in good company here?⁵⁵ In many photograms, the presence of a female hand is unmistakable, just as we also encounter her stamp on the backs of several prints, in and among his. As was to be expected, whatever shared authorship Moholy-Nagy may have acknowledged in the 1920s was, in later years, thoroughly erased, even during her and her husband's own lifetime, as when the initial caption to the now-iconic "double portrait" later read "self-portrait," and then "double self-portrait," referring to the male artist alone.⁵⁶ "Labor" was a highly contradictory term for someone who repeatedly stressed "production" and yet seemed to have been incapable of realizing such work without the direct help of others, a kind of "*Raphael without hands*," as Rolf Sachsse has pointed out, "an avant-gardist without any foundation in artistic technologies."⁵⁷

What we begin to see in the distinction between "production" and "reproduction" is that it describes a formal operation as much as it does a gendered division of labor. She, skilled in replicative technologies and thus perceived as a kind of stenographer, did "nothing more" than carry out the artist's dictation, while he claimed singular authorship through a jargon of authenticity that she, perversely, helped to craft. We should recognize in such images not only the reassertion of artistic genius in the very medium whose technology posed the greatest threat to those conventions but, more significantly, the labor that made that reassertion possible, the invisible hand of the artist-as-reproducer, who brought it into being.

54. The phrase comes from Renate Heyne and Floris Michael Neusüss, who write of one photogram of hands juxtaposed with paintbrushes as "the artist's hand at rest, idle, in a certain sense, while his picture is painted by the light." See Heyne and Neusüss, *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms*, p. 155. The claim that "this may be a portrait of Lucia Moholy" is made on p. 153.

55. To cite just one example, Herbert Bayer wrote to the historian Andreas Haus: "We let our wives, who were photographers, work for us"; cited in Andreas Haus to Lucia Moholy, November 4, 1977, Lucia Moholy Papers, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

56. *Popular Photography* 5, no. 6 (December 1939), pp. 30–31; reprinted in Heyne and Neusüss, *Moholy-Nagy: The Photograms*, p. 253. The caption to the image reads: "Moholy-Nagy laid his head down on the projection paper to make the photogram shown above. He then turned his head on the paper and made a second exposure."

57. Sachsse, "Telephone, Reproduktion, und Erzeugerabfüllung: Der Begriff des Originals bei László Moholy-Nagy," in *Über Moholy-Nagy*, ed. Gottfried Jäger and Gudrun Wessing (Bielefeld: Kerber, 1997), p. 74 (emphasis in original).

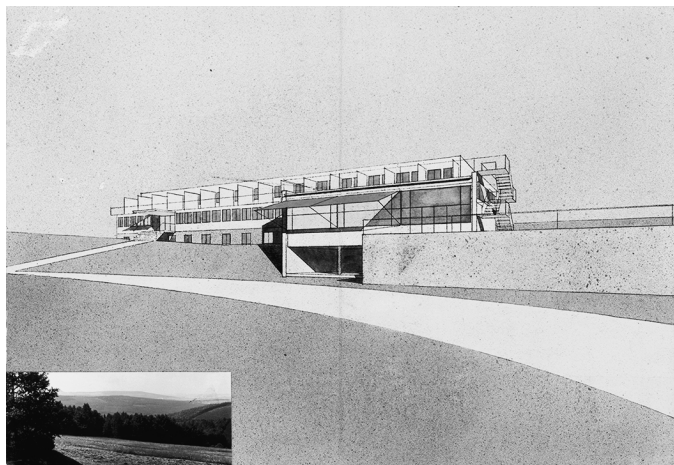
A Collective Corpus

This redefinition of the production/reproduction dyad has profound consequences for the role gender played in the construction of avant-garde photographic discourses. To grasp those consequences, though, we need to look more closely at the photographs Lucia Moholy took during the years in which she was visiting Schwarzerden while simultaneously living in Dessau as the wife of a Bauhaus master. As others have pointed out, these two worlds had much in common: Both were indebted to the German youth movement and its toppling of the hierarchy between student and teacher, body and mind, older and younger generations. Both embraced holistic conceptions of pedagogy in which physical movement, dance, and gymnastics played central roles. And both were deeply invested in establishing collectivity as the basis for a new social fabric in contemporary Germany.⁵⁸ This shared ground led to collaborations that exceed Moholy's photographs: In 1930, Walter Gropius drew up plans for a new building for Schwarzerden, whose design took advantage of the hilly nature of the school's property to create a two-level complex.⁵⁹ Like the Bauhaus building in Dessau, living quarters for students were housed in the same structure as the school's library, seminar rooms, a large gymnastics hall, and faculty offices, facilitating an educational experience that permeated everyday life. Although the building was never realized, Moholy-Nagy's wall-painting scheme for the commune's existing gymnastics hall was, thus implementing ideas he had devel-

58. Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, pp. 507–08. See also Neugärtner's comparison of the Bauhaus and Schwarzerden in "Utopias of a New Society," p. 87–91, and her assertion that although Lucia Moholy's "theoretical affiliations rested with Buchhold and Vogler," the Bauhaus (e.g., Moholy-Nagy) was much closer to Loheland than to Schwarzerden (p. 91).

59. Reginald R. Isaacs, *Walter Gropius: Der Mensch und sein Werk* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1984), p. 550.

Walter Gropius
(design) and
Stefan Sebök (drawing). *Perspectival
plan for Schule
Schwarzerden, 1930.*
Gropius © 2020
Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York/VG
Bild-Kunst, Bonn.





Moholy. Double Portrait of Elisabeth Vogler and Tilla Winz. 1927.

oped on the dynamic construction of light and space.⁶⁰ Moholy-Nagy, furthermore, furnished Paul Vogler's medical offices in Berlin with Bauhaus-designed tables, chairs, cabinets, lighting fixtures, and textiles (an interior that Moholy also photographed). We can safely assume that these commissions were only possible because of the relationships that she had cultivated through her personal and professional connections with the women of Schwarzerden.⁶¹

Many of the photographs that Moholy took at the commune have the intimate character of snapshots taken by close friends. One depicts Elisabeth Vogler and fellow member Tilla Winz in a grassy meadow, sitting close enough to one another that their bodies touch; both smile, while Winz looks down at her own hands playing with a blade of grass. Moholy must have had the camera on a tripod, because in another photograph—this time with Moholy pictured—the same roof

60. Viet Loers, "Moholy-Nagy's 'Raum der Gegenwart' und die Utopie vom dynamisch-konstruktiven Lichtraum," in *László Moholy-Nagy* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1991), pp. 37–53. Schwarzerden's newsletter describes "gay pastel colors, gray and yellow, with a light-colored burlap wall covering"; see *Mitteilung des Bundes für sozialangewandte Gymnastik und Körperpflege* 1 (July 1930), p. 5.

61. For more on Lucia and László's friendship with Paul Vogler and his wife Paula Vogler (née Doodt), who had also studied medicine in Jena, see Botar, "The Origins of László Moholy-Nagy's Biocentric Constructivism," p. 324, where he also illustrates a portrait that Moholy took of Paula Vogler at Schwarzerden. See also Moholy's contribution in *Elisabeth Vogler*, p. 33.



Portrait of Lucia Moholy, possibly taken by the artist. 1927.

(of the commune's original building) and two trees appear in the background.⁶² All three women wear white, button-down shirts and dark ties, as if Moholy did not simply visit when she came to the commune but conformed to the life of its members. Moholy had much in common with the founding women of Schwarzerden: All were around the same age (Vogler is thirty-five years old here, Winz thirty-one, and Moholy thirty-three), all had participated in the German youth movement, all came from bourgeois homes, with fathers who owned companies, worked as lawyers, and were members of the clergy. Some of these women took great personal risks staying at the commune against the wishes of families who wanted them to follow a "normal" path.⁶³ It was likely that Moholy had much more in common with these women than with the other so-called *Meisterfrauen* at the Bauhaus, many of whom seemed less interested in their female peers than they were in supporting their husbands. Ise Gropius, for one, seemed to embrace her expected duties, whereas Moholy, although clearly a willing participant, later in life expressed reservations about how "women's work" was treated at the Bauhaus.⁶⁴

62. The identification of this photograph as having been taken at Schwarzerden (and likely not by Moholy-Nagy, as indicated in Sachsse, *Lucia Moholy: Bauhaus-Fotograf*) benefited from conversations with Meghan Forbes.

63. Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, pp. 465–66.

64. Lucia Moholy later reflected: "When it came to editorial work, I, of course, had to contribute, and when one looks back, one can only say that that was the tendency then, that women

Both photographs were taken on the grounds of Schwarzerden, which included a forty-acre farm that sustained the commune's members and functioned as a working model of an alternative to what Ilse Hoeborn, another leading member (and frequent subject of Moholy's photographs), described as the often "one-dimensional diet of potatoes and bread typical of proletarian children."⁶⁵ The commune also consciously rejected the monetization of the land, criticizing the use of chemicals, fertilizers, and agricultural technologies by the "capitalist farmer and large landowner," which pushed the earth to the point of "exhaustion [*Ausnutzung*]."⁶⁶ Although rejecting industrial food, the commune significantly did not idealize pre-capitalist primitivism. Buchhold warned against the romanticizing of commune life and the "danger that one becomes self-satisfied," a danger because "the *political* gets forgotten."⁶⁷ The rejection of the city was not a rejection of urban life per se but of urban life in the form that it had become under capitalism, wherein, as Buchhold saw it, men devised jobs for women that excluded them from creative work and stifled their potential for self-realization. To counter this, the commune saw as its task the necessity of "contending with the current capitalist economy," by generating a "collectively oriented living body."⁶⁸ The idea was to model "life in a new sociological form," as Buchhold put it, "a visible work, or better a thing [*Sache*] through which and out of which we will realize something. It is the Schwarze Erde, an attempt [*Versuch*] to build for ourselves an economy that corresponds to our own logic, one which will allow us to create in it and out of it a living organism."⁶⁹

The year of these two portraits was a decisive one for Schwarzerden; in 1927, the commune realized its goal of becoming a state-recognized school. From the start, Buchhold and Vogler had devised a pedagogical component as a way to introduce the larger community to their more radical ideas, which they did through summer programs for children during their school holidays (in which city kids would

were'n't allowed to participate, even though they were very strong. Today, of course, it is different. Why I played along, though, is another question" (Sachsse interview with Lucia Moholy, June 18, 1982).

In contrast, Ise Gropius wrote in her Bauhaus diary, which she later revised in the 1970s: "I did not enter any of the workshops, since my particular talents lay in the literary field, which made me a natural collaborator for the endless output of statements, articles, and reports that were required of my husband." Ise Gropius, cited in Valdivieso, "Ise Gropius: 'Everybody Here Calls Me Frau Bauhaus,'" in *Bauhaus Bodies*, p. 173. She also rationalized the unpaid labor of women at the Bauhaus by pointing to its "meager budget," such that there was never enough "secretarial help," and so, "under great pressure, the wives of the young masters would help out." Ise Gropius, cited in Valdivieso, "Eine 'symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft,'" p. 71 n. 29.

65. Ilse Hoeborn, "Notwendigkeit der sozial-gymnastischen und körperpflegerischen Tätigkeit an Kinderheimen," *Gymnastik* 3, no. 1/2 (January 1928), p. 9.

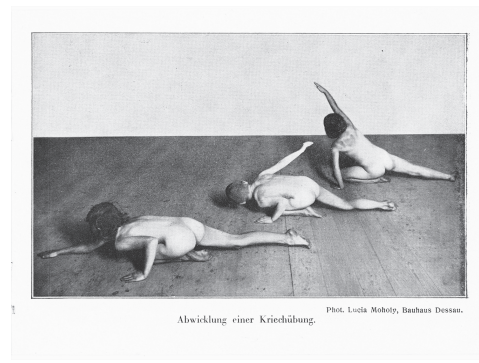
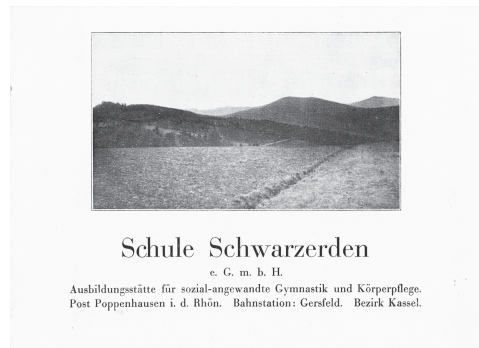
66. Buchhold, "Bildungselemente," p. 21, cited in Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, pp. 447–48.

67. Marie Buchhold, "Herbstrede auf der Schwarzen Erde," November 4, 1923, box 41, AddF, Kassel (emphasis in original).

68. "Ländliche Wirtschaftsgemeinde," in Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 467.

69. Marie Buchhold, "Herbstrede auf der Schwarzen Erde," November 4, 1923, box 41, AddF, Kassel.

spend weeks at a time in the countryside) and “vacation courses” for working women based on gymnastics, breathing work, and massage, as well as lectures and cultural activities. Such courses augmented programs that they implemented in orphanages, women’s prisons, and psychiatric wards. The agricultural commune both modeled the utopian dimension of this “social work” and supported it financially, providing “an economic basis for the future of our pedagogical work.”⁷⁰ Finding a visual analogue for this pedagogical project, Moholy took photographs that appeared in the school’s inaugural publicity materials. A substantial but unknown commission in Moholy’s body of work, the series recalls similar such uses of her photographs in Bauhaus publicity materials, but in this case, the message delivered was not that of functional design but rather a conception of the body called for by Schwarzerden’s feminist materialism. That materialism took concrete form in offering women an eighteen-month-long course of training in a new professional field that the founders of Schwarzerden had devised: “socially applied gymnastics.”⁷¹ At the end of the training period, women were qualified to work in early-childhood and youth education, as nurses and health-care workers, in prisons and mental institutions, and as caretakers, with the objective of achieving a more equitable society through physical and mental self-care. As the brochure read, this “new social career,” intended “for the modern woman,” offered a form of “creativity” and thus an alternative to alienated work: “As a creative woman [*schaffende Frau*], you will find satisfaction in a career that makes a difference, that is never repetitive, but always vital.”



Cover and interior page from the publicity brochure “Schule Schwarzerden,” 1927, with photographs by Lucia Moholy.

70. “Ländliche Wirtschaftsgemeinde,” in Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 454.

71. The curriculum was extensive and covered anatomy, nutrition, hygiene, air and sunbathing, massage practices, sociology, history, the women’s movement, geography, and social welfare, as well as music, singing, and drawing. All women eighteen years of age and older, who had some kind of secondary-school education, were invited to attend; see a copy of the brochure (box 41), whose cover bears a landscape photograph by Moholy, and the course plans (box 15), AddF, Kassel.



Moholy.
Children's Chairs (1923).
1924–25.

employed standard studio techniques, such as neutral backgrounds, giving these images the appearance of having been unauthored—again, attesting to Moholy's self-effacing approach to photography. Paradoxically, however, this calculated arrangement produces a visual rhetoric of *Sachlichkeit*, or matter-of-factness, one which served the ideology of functionalism (as opposed to Expressionism) at the Dessau Bauhaus. It is particularly striking here, in the treatment of juvenile bodies, because it injects a logic of seriality into a pedagogical project of holism, and then further renders those two attributes—repetition and wholeness—compatible.

One reason for that compatibility was a shared materialist commitment. For the women of *Schwarzerden*, that took the form of a repeated insistence on maintaining an “objective” understanding of their present, its challenges, and the “tasks at hand.”⁷³ Buchhold and Vogler were explicit in their approach to the body as not therapeutic but social; they were not interested in gymnastics as a form of treatment or restoration, mental or physical, but rather as a structural means by which everyday life—in the home, workplace, and school—could be reconfigured.⁷⁴ For Moholy, it meant going one step further: desexualizing the

Moholy's photographs do not simply illustrate the school's activities, they find a visual analogue for its pedagogical logic. In one instance, she arranged three children at a diagonal, with each demonstrating one position of a sequence known as the “crawling exercise.”⁷² Moholy's decision to treat the individual body as a serial unit recalls techniques she had developed in her Bauhaus product photography, whereby multiple exemplars of identical objects, positioned in different ways, visualize a spectrum of attributes within a single image. This serial approach

72. The crawling exercise fell into the category of “functional” gymnastics, which, alongside “static” and “rhythmic” gymnastics, was a central component of a curriculum devised by Vogler. Functional gymnastics aimed to stimulate “the regeneration of the entire organism through the activation of vital functions of individual bodily components.” See “Lehrstoffpläne,” box 15, AddF, Kassel.

73. Marie Buchhold, “Herbstrede auf der Schwarzen Erde,” November 4, 1923, box 41, AddF, Kassel.

74. Buchhold and Vogler, “Sozial angewandte Gymnastik und Körperpflege,” *Gymnastik* 3, no. 1/2 (January 1928), p. 6.

body in order to heighten its generalizability. Faces are turned away from us and genitals obscured. The pose, embodying a pedagogical principle, takes precedence over the individual characteristics of the sitter—here is the body not as a site of subjectivity but as an organism training to live within a collectivity. This is why the unclothed, prepubescent body of the child becomes pervasive in these photographs. Just as she has assumed the position of a passive observer, “merely” reproducing someone else’s program, decisions of framing, focus, and arrangement produce a photograph that asks us to assume the position of a disinterested viewer, to suspend the gendered conditions of representation. We are asked to consider their position spatially, to see the body as a demonstration piece rather than as an object of desire.⁷⁵ At times, that materialist approach to the body is so extreme that some photographs seem to go too far, to de-humanize their subjects through sameness and seriality.

Moholy’s erasure of her own libidinal investment in the photographic image, under the sign of *Sachlichkeit*, analogized Schwarzerden’s philosophy of collectivity. Many of the exercises that Moholy depicts happen in small groups, as if micro-experiments in the “dismantling of the self [*Ich-Abbau*]” that

75. That captions frequently accompany these photographs further disciplines their meaning. A special issue on Schwarzerden in the journal *Gymnastik* (ibid.) includes several photographs that she very likely took in summer and fall 1927, one of which portrays a group of women outside with captions underneath each pair or trio: “breathing in,” “breathing out,” “drumming” on the back, and so forth.



Moholy. Children Demonstrating Stretching Exercise. C. 1927.



Moholy. Blanche Moll and
Luise Möhl. 1927.

Buchhold called for as a challenge to the ego-driven patterns of bourgeois identity and private property.⁷⁶ Although members of *Schwarzerden* were allowed to have a minimum of personal effects, everything else was held as common property. Individualism was a remnant of the nineteenth century to be dispensed with, not unlike architectural ornament at the Bauhaus. In its place would be a new emphasis on communication: Courses were built around “listening,” “listening to,” “understanding,” “accepting,” and “articulating.” Buchhold even used the term *Erosgemeinschaft* (collectivity of Eros), founded on a principle of communism with a small *c*, of living in common, not only materially but as a means to reshape patterns of sociability, of subjective self-regard, and of one’s own relationship to one’s body.⁷⁷ Although mobilizing repetition and seriality, Moholy’s photographs also feature the body in dialogue with other bodies. This must have struck a chord with the leading women of *Schwarzerden*, given that Ruth Hallensleben—a former preschool teacher and trained social pedagogue

76. Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 462.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 462 n. 98 and p. 463. Elisabeth Vogler had studied with the controversial early-twentieth-century pedagogue Gustav Wyneken, who advanced the notion of an erotic relationship between student and teacher, usually of the same sex. This raises the question of *Schwarzerden*’s lesbianism, of which I found no hard evidence (Sachsse, though, recalls learning of an affair between Tilla Winz and Florence Henri; in conversation with the author, June 6, 2019). Any expression of nonnormative sexuality was no doubt complicated by living in a conservative part of rural Germany, of which the women were keenly aware.



Ruth Hallensleben. Exercise at Schule Schwarzerden. 1938.
© Ruth Hallensleben /
Fotoarchiv Ruhr Museum.

(later known for her industrial photography)—mimicked her aesthetic to a remarkable degree.⁷⁸

Borrowing from the contemporary German educational reformer Fritz Klatt, who also held courses at the school, Schwarzerden theorized a counter-version of labor, one that was oddly in accordance with Moholy's anti-individualist approach to photography. Broadly defined in the terms of "creative rest [*schöpferische Pause*]," as opposed to capitalist productivity, recovery and rejuvenation protested capitalist efficiency as the primary means in which the body itself, under such conditions, was exhausted.⁷⁹ Such critiques not only build upon socialist and communist strategies of combating exploitation, they also anticipate the New Left-era protests that embraced nonwork, idleness, and even sleep as a means of pointing

78. Hallensleben was employed as a preschool teacher in Kassel until 1930 and had to leave this profession after a court case was brought against her (likely on the grounds of homosexuality, which Paragraph 175, in effect since 1871, had made illegal). She then undertook studies in photography in Cologne and was allowed to practice from 1934 onward. Correspondence with Rolf Sachsse, March 8, 2020. Hallensleben did not have relationships with men, but she also—for obvious reasons—did not embrace a lesbian identity; see Rolf Sachsse, "Eine deutsche Fotografin," in *Ruth Hallensleben: Frauenarbeit in der Industrie*, ed. Ursula Peters (Berlin: Dirk Nishen, 1985), pp. 74–79. On the use of Paragraph 175 against female teachers during the Weimar Republic, see Marti M. Lybeck, *Desiring Emancipation: New Women and Homosexuality in Germany, 1890–1930* (Albany: State University of New York, 2014), pp. 117–21.

79. Marie Buchhold, "Schöpferische Pause," a review of Klatt's eponymous book, cited in Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 457.

to the foundational antinomy between capitalism and sustainability.⁸⁰ Labor, redefined as unalienated—as “idle” in the eyes of capital—became directed toward meeting the needs of the body, intellect, and emotional life, with the work of the hands playing a prominent role in exercises like massage, partner movement-work, and various forms of hand-based training like drawing with both the right and left hands as well as modeling in clay. Whereas the most immediate purpose of such “leisure” activities was to strengthen the hands, “to refine their sense of feeling and to teach a sense of proportion,” a further goal was to introduce students to an “expanded definition of gymnastic pedagogy,” which included an introduction to the history of art, which “awakens the feeling for aesthetic values and deepens the understanding of other times and other peoples,” so that students come out of their program “neither one-dimensional nor unworldly.”⁸¹ The hand took on significance not only as a healing entity, in massage and other forms of restorative touch, but also as a source of self-care in the face of exploitation and as the “foundation of artistic creation.”⁸²

Hand/Head

This conception of idle creativity, as a kind of queering of conventional models of creation, for which Moholy found a unique visual language, stood in stark contrast to Moholy-Nagy’s revalorization of the hand as the font of artistic value. His integration of so-called hand sculptures as part of his courses at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, where he arrived in 1937, guided students in exploring tactile materials, like clay and wood, that they would shape into objects “modeled to fit the sensibilities of the hand that grasps it.”⁸³ Described as honing “the function of the hands to catch, to press, to twist, to feel thickness, to weigh, to go through holes, to use his joints, etc.,” these exercises served the liberation of sensory perception only to the extent that the body could be retooled to better conform to industrial capitalism. As Emma Stein has argued, in examining how World War II shaped Moholy-Nagy’s curriculum in Chicago, such exercises were forms of “wartime pedagogy,” whereby “creative programs” for veterans addressed “break-downs, . . . psychopathic cases, . . . [and] injured industrial workers”—even implicating wartime trauma in the capitalist workplace.⁸⁴ In language that superficially recalls that of Schwarzerden, Moholy-Nagy termed this “rehabilitation,” whereby “buried energies” were to be “released for contemporary orientation” and thus

80. See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014).

81. “Lehrstoffpläne,” box 15, AddF, Kassel.

82. Buchhold, cited in Wörner-Heil, *Von der Utopie zur Sozialreform*, p. 468.

83. See Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision* (New York: Norton, 1938).

84. Moholy-Nagy, “Better Than Before,” *The Technology Review*, 46, no. 1 (November 1943), cited in Emma Stein, “László Moholy-Nagy and Chicago’s War Industry: Photographic Pedagogy at the New Bauhaus,” *History of Photography* 38, no. 4 (2014), p. 401.



Moholy. Lessons with Modeling Clay at Schwarzerden. 1927.

“can be applied to all types of work in the artistic, scientific, and technical sphere.”⁸⁵ But the difference is crucial: If Moholy-Nagy sought out exercises that would respond to the destructive tendencies of industrial capitalism, in order to better prepare the body to withstand that destruction, Schwarzerden’s restorative practices sought to circumvent it altogether by proposing counter-models within the context of a feminist and anti-capitalist critique.

The status of the hand figured prominently in such debates, because it emblemized the vexed nature of authorship under such conditions of alienation. Photography, for Moholy-Nagy, had the most to offer this “rehabilitation” of the senses because, as he saw it, its mechanical basis undermined the role of human agency and instead stressed the agency of materials and technologies. Moholy-Nagy repeatedly espoused defamiliarization as the means by which one develops “an integrally photographic approach that is derived purely from the means of photography itself,” including extreme contrast of tonal values, oblique-angle views, distortion using concave and convex mirrors, avoidance of perspective, X-ray technology, cam-

85. Ibid.

erless photographs, and “unknown forms of representation.”⁸⁶ Such arguments were mounted in the context of a debate on the respective advantages (and disadvantages) of photography and painting as media.⁸⁷ Unfolding in the pages of the avant-garde journal *i 10* during the very months that Moholy likely took many of her photographs at Schwarzerden, this was a debate from which she was excluded, even though she had drafted a contribution and even helped to found the journal.⁸⁸ (She was, however, allowed to submit book reviews, presumably because the work in question was not properly “hers” but a gloss on someone else’s.) Those debates centered on the “objectivity” of photography in comparison to painting, wherein the trace of the artist’s hand (often coded as “facture” in these debates) continued to guarantee some degree of authorial intention.⁸⁹ Although Moholy-Nagy took the position that photography should be embraced as a medium for artists, arguing for a modernist approach in which “photography relies on its own possibilities” and as a consequence profoundly destabilizes authorial intentionality as a site of meaning production, he—and every other participant in the debate—left the foundational definition of “production” intact: artistic originality, guaranteed by the criterium of formal novelty. The most consequential implications of mechanical reproduction, however, remained untouched.⁹⁰

These debates were part of a broader cultural understanding of the hand in Weimar Germany to which the masculinist avant-garde fully subscribed: “In its perceived immutability, [the hand] was seen as a true sign of character,” a belief evidenced by a contemporary fascination with palm reading and handwriting analysis.⁹¹ One thinks not only of its repeated use as an emblem for new visions of the artist as

86. All of which are cited in Moholy-Nagy, “Unprecedented Photography,” trans. and reprinted in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 83–85. On his rejection of photography as a form of knowledge, see Susan Laxton, “Moholy’s Doubt,” in *Photography and Doubt*, ed. Sabine T. Kriebel and Andrés Mario Zervigón (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 141–60.

87. The debates were spurred by Ernst Kállai’s contribution “Malerei und Photographie” (which illustrates a photograph by Moholy of a magnolia flower) in *i 10* 1, no. 4 (1927), pp. 148–57. When Moholy-Nagy, as co-editor of the journal, included Kállai’s article, he invited several others to submit responses; these were published as “Diskussion über Ernst Kállai’s Artikel ‘Malerei und Fotografie [sic],” *i 10* 1, no. 6 (1927), pp. 227–40, and ends with a response by Kállai.

88. See Moholy, “International Avant-Garde, 1927–1929,” in this issue. An undated typescript in Moholy’s papers at the Bauhaus-Archiv, with the title “malerei und fotografie,” suggests that she drafted a contribution to the debate; whether she was invited and then rejected, or not invited in the first place, is not known.

89. On the various meanings of facture in the Russian context (of which Moholy-Nagy was aware) and how these meanings mapped onto shifting conceptions of the artist, see Maria Gough, “Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde,” *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 36 (1999), pp. 32–59.

90. This would be theoretically challenged by Walter Benjamin a decade later. On a discussion of reproducibility in relation to Benjamin and Moholy-Nagy, see Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin, “Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 11–12.

91. Stephanie D’Alessandro, “Through the Eye and the Hand,” in *Moholy-Nagy: Future Present*, p. 66.

engineer, as in El Lissitzky's self-portrait *The Constructor*, and as central motifs in John Heartfield's agitprop photomontage, but also marshaled for consumption, as in a photomontage of Marcel Breuer's hands that Moholy-Nagy adapted to advertise the Schocken department store in Nuremberg. The hand as metonym for the autonomous subject was even extended to the collective subject in Walter Gropius's vision of *Handwerk*, or craft-based production, as the basis for shifting artistic production away from "meaningless salon painting" and toward the generation of work in direct dialogue with social needs, above all housing.⁹² But even as Gropius resuscitated references to medieval guild labor as a counter-model to the panel painter, neither he nor the coterie of painters that he hired could actually disavow the nineteenth-century conception of the artist as genius—even at times parodying their own veiled traditionalism, as in a series of handprints made by Bauhaus members of their own hands (signed and dated), one of which by Moholy-Nagy reads, inscribed to Gropius, "my right hand at your service."⁹³ While everywhere claims were being made

92. This was a common refrain in Gropius's founding texts of the Bauhaus, and the figure of the hand as a metonym for artistic labor also concludes his 1919 manifesto: "Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting as one unity and, one day, rise, like the crystal symbol of a new faith, toward heaven from the hands of a million workers."

93. On these works, see Jan Tichy and Robin Schuldenfrei, eds., *Ascendants: Bauhaus Handprints* (Chicago: Institute of Design, 2019). Stein corroborates this position when she points to how "the hand acts as a symbolic trace of authorship in the form of the artist's imprint as indicative of his or her presence" (Stein, "László Moholy-Nagy and Chicago's War Industry," p. 403).



László Moholy-Nagy.
Handprint. 1926.
 © 2020 Estate of László
 Moholy-Nagy/Artists
 Rights Society (ARS),
 New York.

to move away from “traditional forms of representation,” assumptions underlying those representational forms, regarding aesthetic labor as fundamentally different from manual labor, proved as stable as ever.⁹⁴ Moholy-Nagy may have quibbled with the “fetishization of *Handwerk*,” but he himself resuscitated the legitimacy of the artist’s touch as a guarantee of the value of that (intellectual) labor, perversely reinscribing the very authenticity that he claimed to contest.

Lucia Moholy, by contrast, was able to mount a more powerful critique of traditional forms of artistic authorship, precisely because she was working from a position of marginality. As a female practitioner excluded from those photographers generating what Moholy-Nagy would identify, in his championing of Florence Henri and others as generating “productive,” New Vision images, Moholy made seemingly “artless” photographs, refusing those photographic attributes that would be read as “innovative”—oblique angles, abstract composition, X-ray technologies, and the like. In fact, it was only because these photographs erased her agency as author that she was given space and resources at the Bauhaus at all: Her approach complemented Gropius’s understanding of photography as handmaiden to the architect, as “entirely subordinated to the object” depicted.⁹⁵ This aspect

94. Moholy-Nagy, “Unprecedented Photography,” in *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 84.

95. Jeannine Fiedler, cited in Olivar Botar, “Lucia Moholy’s Fotografische Arbeit der 20er Jahre: Eine Nicht-Künstlerin Erschafft Kunst,” in *Lucia Moholy: Material und Architektur: Fotos der Bauhauszeit* (Berlin: Derda Galerie, 2016), p. 8.



Albert Renger-Patzsch. Hands. 1926.
© 2020 Albert Renger-Patzsch Archiv/
Ann u. Jürgen Wilde, Zülpich/Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York.

also rendered her illegible as a *Neue Sachlichkeit* photographer, whereby New Vision tactics of disorientation were also avoided. But even here the resulting images remained recognizable within the category of artistic production, as in the example of Albert Renger-Patzsch, who figured hands as expressive entities that had the capacity to “speak” and thereby deposit authorial intention as the horizon of the work’s meaning.⁹⁶ Moholy’s “objectivity,” by contrast, was dismissed as the uninspired realism of a bygone era, and, moreover, collapsed with her personhood, the unfortunate consequence of her “all-too-large *Sachlichkeit*,” under which Gropius “suffers,” as she “never allows for a warm, heartfelt note.”⁹⁷

Reflecting on the pervasive use of the hand as a physiognomic feature in portraiture in the work of Juliet Margaret Cameron and David Octavius Hill, Moholy introduced her own conception of portraiture as a de-psychologized study of detail. Speaking in the third person, though with reference to one of her own images, she writes: “For the first time in the history of photography it was not only the shape, delineation and expression of the human face, but the sculptural details of the head and the texture of skin, hair, nails and dress, which became attractive subjects to the photographer.”⁹⁸ Tracing its emergence to “object photography” as well as Soviet film, Moholy admits that “to the general public in Western Europe, this style appears strange and exotic. They find it interesting and worth discussing, but few of them wish to have their portraits taken in the same way.” This was a fact that Moholy knew well, having run a struggling portrait studio in London, where she photographed English artists, writers, and pacifists in ways that amplified the close-cropped, shallow focus that she frequently employed in the 1920s. This emphasis on disciplining the body to the point of mimicking means of social control was the aspect that most distinguished Moholy’s photography from that of her husband, who fetishized non-perspectival representation. Moholy-Nagy hardly veiled his contempt for an approach that he dismissed as a kind of reconstructed realism, and Moholy recalls on at least one occasion how he publicly embarrassed her for espousing legibility as a photographic value.⁹⁹

96. See, for example, Adolf Koelsch, *Hände und was sie sagen: 64 Bilder* (Zurich: Füssli, 1929), which includes photographs by Renger-Patzsch, who also wrote that “the hands, in addition to the head, belong to any good portrait.” Renger-Patzsch, “Einiges über Hände und Händeaufnahmen,” in *Photographie für alle* (Berlin, 1927); reprinted in Renger-Patzsch, *Die Freude am Gegenstand: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Photographie*, ed. Bernd Stiegler and Ann and Jürgen Wilde (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2010), p. 95.

97. Ise Gropius, diary, July 2, 1925, cited in Valdivieso, “Eine ‘symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft,’” p. 78.

98. Lucia Moholy, *A Hundred Years of Photography 1839–1939* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), p. 165.

99. In 1927, she noted in her diary a conversation with Moholy-Nagy and a printer in his studio. He “asked (whistled) for me, to weigh in on a design. when I expressed that one can’t recognize what the title picture represents, he laughed at me, ‘one doesn’t need to recognize it, it should just look good.’ he could have said the same thing seriously, especially since we were with someone we didn’t even know.” Moholy, “notiz über ein gespräch December 16, 1927,” diary, Lucia Moholy Papers, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

The series of hand portraits that Moholy took at Schwarzerden forwarded this radical de-subjectivization of the individual and in doing so challenged avant-garde discourses of “production” that left in place—despite rhetoric to the contrary—the autonomy of the author-artist. Moholy fragmented the body, identifying it with its parts and then again with its various forms of domestic (i.e., reproductive) labor—labor that was, like her own act of taking the image, maligned as artistically unmeaningful, “merely” reproductive. These are rightly *her* images—taken neither for publicity (at either school) nor as “documentation” nor on the instruction of others, like her husband, who, in one “self-portrait,” with his right arm outstretched toward the camera, claimed that the photograph was his “idea” and Moholy simply carried it out.¹⁰⁰ This subordination of *techne* to concept, embodied in Moholy and her husband, respectively, is not an isolated case, but, as I have argued, characterized the discourse of the German avant-garde. It is against that ideology of authorial autonomy that we should see the radically de-subjectivized hand portraits of Moholy—radical not only in their embrace of photography as first and foremost a reproductive medium but radical, too, in her willingness to put her own authorship on the line in making self-consciously “nonproductive” imagery.

“Hausfotografin”

Although Moholy was extremely busy at the Bauhaus, responding to the high demand for her photographs, she complained of a depression that impacted her well-being.¹⁰¹ A draft of a letter to her husband expresses a strong desire to leave Dessau:

I reluctantly came along to Weimar at that point, and then reluctantly to Dessau—after these four years I simply can’t stand it anymore. . . . I need something that I’m not finding here . . . other people, as well, and another kind of energy around me, and it doesn’t help that each week twenty friends come to visit. They are our captives and bring nothing more than organs that must be filled. I have to go where others exhibit strength and where I, too, now and again, can unwind.¹⁰²

100. László Moholy-Nagy, “Scharf oder unscharf?,” *i 10* 2, no. 20 (April 1929), pp. 163–67. See the caption to the photo in Oliver Botar, *Sensing the Future: Moholy-Nagy, die Medien und die Künste* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2014), p. 17. Moholy-Nagy’s statement has since led to a confusion over the authorship of this image, whether it should be attributed to her alone, to both parties, or to him alone (as evidenced by the photograph’s varying attribution across the collections of the Met Museum, the MoMA, and the Bauhaus-Archiv). This confusion—stemming from his claim versus the fact of who was actually behind the camera—points to how resilient this notion of “production” continues to be and how its legitimacy relies on invalidating “reproduction.”

101. Moholy, diary entry, April 13, 1927, Lucia Moholy Papers, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

102. Moholy, diary entry that begins “an Iaci,” May 27, 1927, Lucia Moholy Papers, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin (emphasis in original).



Moholy. Hands Pinning Cloth. C. 1930.

Whether she found that respite at Schwarzerden is not known. Certainly, the circumstances of her marriage were on her mind, as suggested by a book review published in *i 10* entitled “the perfect marriage.”¹⁰³ Shortly thereafter, in April 1928, she and Moholy-Nagy moved to Berlin; they separated a year later. Moholy founded her own photography class at Johannes Itten’s school. She kept doing dark-room work and taking photographs for Moholy-Nagy, particularly his stage sets at the Kroll Opera. Hands continued to feature prominently in her work, including in a series of Clara Zetkin in conversation with the German Communist representative Theodor Neubauer, as well as a portrait of Yella Curjel, wife of the Kroll director Hans Curjel, with her hands obscuring her face.

In an autobiographical text entitled “Woman of the Twentieth Century,” Moholy described her role in the 1920s with the term “*Hausfotografin* [house photographer].”¹⁰⁴ I do not believe that she meant this contemptuously, but as an objective description of her labor, in the sense of “in house,” for hire, and thus work that she did not see as “creative.”¹⁰⁵ But the term, for our purposes, means much more; it encapsulates the ambiguous reception of both her labor and her photographs in relation to her avant-garde peers, but also her interest in marginal practices of photography engendering new ways of seeing, as when she appeals to an amateur photography “of the house and kitchen”: “Think for instance of the housewife, who daily interacts with her kitchen appliances. Among those thousands of housewives hardly one has probably thought to pay attention to the *play of form, light, and shadow*, which emerges from her work with sieves, plates, eggs, meals, leftovers, liquids, and other minor things [*Kleinigkeiten*] of all kinds.”¹⁰⁶ While other scholars have traced her work’s marginalization to biography—to her gender and, in one case, to her assimilated Jewish background as playing a role in that “negation of self”—I have argued here for the significance of her images and their reception.¹⁰⁷ *Hands Peeling Potatoes*, for one, was the initial spark for this planned book on domestic photography.¹⁰⁸ Those images lay bare photography as a replicative medium with profound consequences for conventional conceptions of creation and, in doing so,

103. Lucia Moholy, “die vollkommene ehe, boekbespreking,” *i 10* 1, no. 12 (December 1927), pp. 459–60.

104. Moholy, “Frau des 20. Jahrhunderts,” p. 35; cited in Valdivieso, “Eine ‘symbiotische Arbeitsgemeinschaft,’” p. 78 n. 45.

105. Moholy would often deny her identity as an artist, construing her and Moholy-Nagy’s collaboration as “the symbiotic alliance of two diverging temperaments. Innate boldness and passionate fervor on the one hand, restraint of approach on the other, had each, it appears, a part to play in the outcome, initiative and implementation remaining the artist’s [i.e., Moholy-Nagy’s] birthright”; see Moholy, *Marginal Notes*, p. 55.

106. Lucia Moholy, “Der Amateur bei sich zuhause,” reprinted in *Manifeste! Eine andere Geschichte der Fotografie*, p. 209 (emphasis in original).

107. Rose-Carol Washton Long, “Lucia Moholy’s Bauhaus Photography and the Issue of the Hidden Jew,” *Women’s Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2014), p. 45.

108. Conversation with Rolf Sachsse, March 8, 2020.



Moholy. Yella Curjel, Hands. 1927.

fundamentally challenge a discourse of New Vision photography that had sublimated replication under the sign of authorial intention. As such, they “question the transcendence of the New Vision’s ‘one of form,’” as Carol Armstrong has argued in relation to Tina Modotti’s photographs, drawing on Luce Irigaray’s critique of essentialism.¹⁰⁹ While those (primarily male) practitioners—Moholy-Nagy above all—essentially repressed the full threat of photography to those

109. Carol Armstrong, “This Photography Which Is Not One: In the Gray Zone with Tina Modotti,” *October* 101 (Summer 2002), p. 52 (emphasis in original). This needs to be done not only within this field but even within Moholy’s oeuvre, part of which has been recruited for what Armstrong calls “modernism’s monotheistic monopoly of the self-definition of photography as an avant-garde optics.”

models of mastery, Moholy embraced this aspect of the medium, with all the consequences that it entailed for her own self-effacement.¹¹⁰

And those consequences were extreme. In August 1933, Neubauer, with whom Moholy was having a relationship, was arrested by the Gestapo in her Berlin apartment, prompting Moholy to emigrate quickly. In the haste of this departure, she was compelled to leave her glass negatives behind, with the intention, as she later wrote, of retrieving them at some point in the future.¹¹¹ That recovery was delayed by the outbreak of World War II, and Moholy believed that the negatives had been destroyed, until she began to see them reproduced in publications. With the help of a lawyer, she gradually pieced together that they were in Walter Gropius's possession: When Moholy-Nagy left for England, he had moved them into Gropius's basement, and Gropius had them shipped, along with all of his other possessions, upon his emigration in 1937. As Robin Schuldenfrei has argued, in recovering this remarkable episode, Gropius retained the images because he believed that, given that the photographs were of his school and his buildings, he had a right to their usage; that his authorship (of the referent) therefore outweighed hers (of the image).¹¹²

Many of the photographs in the Schwarzerden archive bear the numbering system that Moholy devised in the 1950s in her effort to regain possession of her negatives and thus her authorship.¹¹³ This numbering system is written in pencil and in Moholy's handwriting from that period (as opposed to the 1920s). Some prints also bear her Berlin-era stamp (1929–1933), gesturing to the complex temporality of this body of work, which indexes two very different periods in the self-consciousness of a female artist, one producing and one reassembling her oeuvre (and, moreover, one that she never would have described with that lofty term). The inscriptions further attest to Moholy's renewed contact with Vogler and Buchhold after World War II: Judging from correspondence and statements, she very likely sent them additional prints that they then pasted into albums. On the occasion of Vogler's death in 1975, Buchhold solicited recollections from close friends, to which Moholy enthusiastically responded. The end of Moholy's contribution suggests the high regard in which she held the women of Schwarzerden and particularly Vogler: "It was only after many years of painful separation that the

110. Anja Guttenberger explores this aspect of Moholy's "serial self-portraits," which she, furthermore, excluded from her own photographic oeuvre; see Guttenberger, "Mit eigenen Augen: Serielle Autoporträts von Lucia Moholy und Florence Henri," in *Gespiegeltes Ich: Fotografisches Selbstbildnisse von Frauen in den 1920er Jahren*, ed. Gerda Breuer and Elina Knorpp (Berlin: Nicolai, 2014), p. 101.

111. Moholy, "The Missing Negatives," p. 7.

112. Schuldenfrei, "Images in Exile," p. 201.

113. This system consists of her initials in lowercase, a roman numeral I or II, a slash, and a number. It corresponds to a card catalogue that Moholy created for her photos, which is now in the Bauhaus-Archiv in Berlin. It is only because of this inscription on the verso of several prints in the AddF that I was able to identify these photographs as Moholy's at all, given that many are not among her papers at the Bauhaus-Archiv.

symbol of awakening life, sent by me from London via personal messengers (Moholy-Nagy had died in Chicago in 1946), secured the continued existence of the old friendship. This symbol was followed by a reunion, which confirmed our loyalty and sparked a deep admiration for her successful work.”¹¹⁴

Abigail Solomon-Godeau wrote not long ago that photography is “a medium which by virtue of its supposed transparency, truth, and naturalism has been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender.”¹¹⁵ What the Schwarzerden photos show us is how that ideology unfolded on multiple registers: It was not simply that Moholy’s photographic labor was feminized because she was a woman (although that certainly played a role). It was feminized because it did not conform to the hegemonic terms of originality then underpinning the distinction between artistic and nonartistic labor. At the very moment in which Moholy’s hands were busy laboring for her husband’s career, her own were dismissed in the highly gendered language of “reproduction,” as the “reiteration of already existing relations,” to borrow from the 1922 essay. What is so extraordinary is to see just how resilient those terms were: Moholy herself played a large part in securing them, not only by participating in that system as the Other against which her male colleagues defined their own “productive” work, but by crafting its very discourse. To read the gendered dimension of her Schwarzerden photographs is to read them against the intentions of their maker, for although Moholy later asserted authorship of her images, she never pointed to gender as playing a role in their devaluation. Nor was she involved in the German feminist movement beyond her tenuous connection to Schwarzerden. This is one of the conundrums of women photographers of the interwar period: While they led independent lives, pursuing their careers in the face of rampant sexism, none of them seemed to have embraced the feminist movements in their respective countries.¹¹⁶

As the exception that proves the rule, Moholy’s photographs at Schwarzerden reflect on that conundrum in ways that go beyond biography and begin to dismantle the avant-garde’s own mythologies about visual reproduction. Gropius—or Herbert Bayer or Sigfried Giedion or Moholy-Nagy, for that matter, men who all protested Moholy’s requests in the 1950s to have her name credited—never actually contested her authorship; they knew perfectly well that she had taken the photographs. The ground on which they protested was that her author-

114. Moholy, in *Elisabeth Vogler*, p. 34.

115. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 257.

116. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “New Women and New Vision Photography in the Crucible of Modernity,” *Jeu de Paume: Le magazine* (October 21, 2015), <http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org/2015/10/abigail-solomon-godeau-new-women-and-new-vision-photography-in-the-crucible-of-modernity-en/>.

ship was qualitatively different from theirs.¹¹⁷ That difference was predicated on the false premise that there exist certain forms of visual representation that merely transcribe the world as it already is. We now recognize that that is rarely, if ever, the case; that every act of reproduction implicates decisions, interests, and priorities, whether intended or not. But to have admitted this would have been to admit that her authorship—her embrace of the medium’s realism, its replicative nature, and its mechanical limitations—was on an equal footing with theirs and thus would have profoundly destabilized the myth of nonmimetic representation as an inherently progressive mode of artistic production, a myth on which they had built entire careers and one that continues to underpin histories of the avant-garde and its “originality.” It is a lesson we have heard before and one that is worth hearing again.¹¹⁸ This time, though, with more attention paid to how discourses of originality unfold as much on the surface of the image as they do through the material lives, economic conditions, and gendered bodies of their makers.

117. This is an attempt to explain why, as Schuldenfrei points out, “the object photographed took precedence over the authored photograph as object,” an aspect that Moholy also observed when she described how isolating the object through the photograph effectively lent it greater significance than it previously possessed (Moholy, *A Hundred Years of Photography*, p. 164, cited in Schuldenfrei, “Images in Exile,” p. 202).

118. The reference is to Rosalind Krauss’s *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985). I hope my own argument will not be read as a “return” to the historicist model of art history that Krauss critiques, one in which the meaning of the work is grounded in “the biographical matrix of its author” without ever questioning “the categories of such a discussion—work of art, medium, author, oeuvre” (p. 4).