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"LANDSCAPE (BRIDGE AT ÓBUDA HAJÓGYÁR?)": Painted in 1918-19, this oil on acidic composition board by László Moholy-Nagy is one of the most substantial works on display in "Technical Detours: The Early Work of Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered," which opened Friday at the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick. The show can be seen in the Voorhees Special Exhibition Galleries and will run through October 31. The museum is located at 71 Hamilton Street on the College Avenue campus of Rutgers University. Hours are from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, and from noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Admission is \$3 for adults and free for museum members, Rutgers students, faculty and staff (with ID) and children under 18. Admission is free on the first Sunday of every month. For more information, call (732) 932-7237, ext 610.

Moholy-Nagy: "Like a Telegraph Wire Transmitting Strange Secrets"

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Before plowing through Saturday's Ernesto-driven rain to visit "Technical Detours: The Early Work of Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered," which opened Friday at the Zimmerli in New Brunswick, I researched László Moholy-Nagy online and found that after leaving Hitler's Germany in 1934, he lived in London. According to the Google genies, he resided in a Hampstead complex of flats with a community kitchen, where it's tempting to imagine him cooking bangers and mash with another ex-Bauhaus luminary, Walter Gropius. In his three years in London he also created special effects (eventually rejected) for fellow Hungarian Alexander Korda's science fiction movie *Things to Come*; worked on a film about the sex life of the lobster; designed a mobile exhibition to tour the British empire in a railroad car for Imperial Airways; and became display consultant for Simpsons of Piccadilly, creating abstract compositions of striped shirts and bowler hats. In 1937, at the invitation of the chairman of the Container Corporation of America, he came to Chicago to establish an American version of the Bauhaus that, after some difficulties, became the Institute of Design. He died in Chicago in 1946 at the age of 51.

When you ride the magic Google carpet, you don't always know where it's taking you. That I landed in London in the period following the 1918-1923 span covered by "Technical Detours" was fine with me since I wasn't familiar with Moholy-Nagy's art and was curious to see the works for which he's best known. The web provided a dazzling tour (see www.artcyclopedia.com), and on my way to the Zimmerli, I kept thinking of a piece I'd seen on the National Galleries of Scotland link. According to the description on the site, *Sil I* was "incised" on a "new type of aluminium" called silberit (thus the title): "Aluminium had associations with new technology and also satisfied Moholy-Nagy's desire to, as he put

it, 'paint with light,' since the material was reflective ... and gave the impression that the colour was floating in front of it." That impression was still with me the next day as I drove to the exhibit, prompting me to imagine the vertical pattern of thread-thin silver lines Moholy-Nagy carved into the subtle sheen of the aluminum taking the form of the steady, driving rain lit by the headlights of oncoming vehicles cutting through the downpour that was coating the hood of my car. One thing this artist does is open your mind (or your mind's eye) to the everyday interplay of nature and machinery we usually take for granted.

The Poetry of Technology

Walking through the Special Exhibition Galleries at the Zimmerli, I couldn't help wishing there were more works like *Sil I*. The posted commentary's reference to Moholy-Nagy's "early International Constructivist paintings" in relation to *Architektur I*, the feature attraction in the Zimmerli show, suggests a subject and style alien to "painting with light." Yet something like a visual equivalent of that technical/poetical dialectic is what this artist is all about; he brings the two seemingly disparate forces together in almost everything he does, including *Architektur I*, which is painted in metallic oil pigment and graphite on the other side of a "Constructivist" painting he had apparently rejected and which you view against the raw wood backside of the same frame.

Moholy-Nagy (he added the "Moholy," after the village he was born near) began as a writer, contributing short stories and poetry to Hungarian journals; the translations of his poems on display show that the technical was already closely integrated with the poetical; in "Like a Telegraph Wire Transmitting Strange Secrets" (1918), the theme and the language of a love poem are metaphorically energized by the language of his chosen medium; he not only speaks of living "as a wire" and the desire "that all transmissions might run through me," but transforms passion to electricity, "every moment alternating with the fire of her lust": "It's through me her charge courses" and "It's me her secret power electrifies."

The material Moholy-Nagy used in his earliest artwork was supplied by the Austro-Hungarian army. After surviving trench warfare at the Russian front during World War I, he made more than 400 drawings on military-issued postcards, some of which are on display at the Zimmerli. The first piece that catches your eye, however, is "Barbed Wire Entanglement" (1918), which is done with grease pen on paper and is so antithetical to the clean lines of his characteristic work as to represent a visualization of the formal barrier he's already well on his way to transcending the same year with two oil paintings focused on the industrial suburbs of Budapest. The picture with the title translated as "Factory Landscape" (1918) is clearly that: you can see the buildings and the smokestacks but while a Monet or Whistler might make you think you could smell (or at least see) the smoke, all you can "smell" here is the paint. The colors and the purity of the forms matter more than the subject. Each picture is a beautiful improvisation on reality, each discovering the abstract design latent in the scene. Again, it's the work of an artist who is already blending poetry and technology. In the oil on acidic composition board from 1918-19 with the uncertain title "Landscape (Bridge at Óbuda Hajógyár?)," Moholy-Nagy has moved even closer to the cleanly stylized clarity of his later work, this time painting the factory buildings the color of light, a slightly paler version of the same sunset hue dominated by the blue-black sky and heavier, darker factory buildings in the earlier painting. The effect is also much more fluid and curvilinear, with lines flowing in the foreground (a portion of the bridge and the futuristic-looking thoroughfare unwinding from it) and background where the thin red arcs spanning the sky have little to do with nature or reality or industry and a great deal to do with the creative excitement of an artist following the trajectory of his imagination as he redesigns the firmament.

You can also see Moholy-Nagy coming into his own in a pair of boldly sketched and remarkably intense portraits done in graphite and grease crayon, one of which is of his first wife Lucia's former lover. Both studies are densely, extravagantly worked, with no open spaces, none of the Brancusi-style simplicity of line you might expect; everything seems to be fermenting in a kind of inky chaos but not at the expense of a recognizable result. You feel you are not only seeing an accurate image of the subject but the interior complexity of his character. At the same time, neither portrait (nor the self-portrait done in the same aggressive style) is the sort you would expect an artist to casually bestow on a friend. In each case, the art consumes the person it depicts.

On view with these portraits, by the way, is Moholy-Nagy's photographic study in silver gelatin of Lucia — one of the exhibit's rare examples of the area of his genius that was to manifest itself in his "photograms," many of which can be seen on the George Eastman House website.

An Excess of Context

So far this review has been faithful to the title of the show, which suggests that the early work of Moholy-Nagy is the sole subject. The truth is that if you were to count how many of the artist's pieces are on display compared to the number by his contemporaries in Budapest, Vienna, and Berlin, the proportion would be, at best, maybe 50/50. While it makes sense to locate an artist in the context of time and place, Moholy-Nagy's works should substantially outnumber the others, if only because he's more interesting and more accomplished. Another quibble: at one point, the posted

commentary seems to be promising visitors that they are about to see examples of the "veritable funhouse of stylistic excess" the artist worked within in 1920 in Berlin, but nothing you see merits the build-up. What you do see are some interesting but hardly excessive set designs from 1920 for *Die Menschen* and a series of untitled hieroglyphical linocuts that show how far this artist had moved from what the commentary calls "ordinary figuration." The images do have a sense of fun but there was a good deal more "stylistic excess" in the abovementioned portraits.

The two most impressive contributions the exhibit itself makes are the Moholy-Nagy-style gateway to the show, and Peter Yeadon's digital animation of the artist's Kinetic-Constructive System, which actually has more of the "funhouse" about it than anything from the Berlin period. Besides putting a Moholy-Nagy construct in motion, it reminds you that his art found many outlets, including film, architecture, and one venture in particular that predated the psychedelic lightshows of San Francisco by 40 years. Begun during his Bauhaus period and called the "Light Prop for an Electric Stage," it was a huge kinetic sculpture capable of color, light, and movement, all contained in a box with a porthole through which the audience watched the machine responding to a two-minute illumination sequence created by 116 coloured lightbulbs flashing on and off. Yeadon's light show may not be quite so dazzling but it should not be missed, and since it's the last thing you see as you exit, you may want to sit down and get acclimated to "ordinary figuration" before you venture out, especially if you're driving a car. A Moholy-Nagy-in-motion can make you drunk if you look at it long enough.