Vom Gesicht zum Gesicht: The Weimar Subject in the Photography of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and August Sander

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To photograph *das Gesicht* in Weimar Germany meant to shift between the double signification of the word, for the word *Gesicht* has two meanings. On the one hand, it denotes the human face; however, it also means vision or the sense of sight. Considering this duality, the word links the visage with something viewed, imagined, or imaged. This tension between the physical object and its perception became a source of perplexity in the task of picturing the Weimar individual, particularly in the period between the wars when so-called "objectivity," or accurate and quantifiable representation, emerged as an artistic goal. By comparing the photographs of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and August Sander, two Weimar contemporaries, the significance of *das Gesicht* amid this fervor to photograph objectively becomes apparent.

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy produced a number of photographs during the 1920s depicting his friends, family, and colleagues at the Bauhaus where he taught for several years. One such photograph (Figure 1) grants the viewer an intimate look; however, our gaze meets resistance. The jarring visual peculiarities of this image, as well as Moholy's decision not to title the photograph or identify the sitter, collaborate to de-emphasize the figure in what appears to be a type of headshot. Several elements complicate an instant reading of the face, including the brilliant light over-exposing the woman's features and the soft focus of her nose and lips in contrast to the crisply defined pebbles. Furthermore, the body has an unsettled relation to the space it occupies. The woman's head and torso jut obliquely into the squared frame while the stones float around her, and the awkward descending camera angle leaves one guessing about the contorted position of the photographer. Not actually a figure study, the woman is treated on equal terms with the inanimate objects surrounding her, thereby rendering expected hierarchies strange.

August Sander's on-going engagement with the Weimar face eventually gave birth to *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Countenance of the Time*) and *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*People of the Twentieth Century*)—two projects initiated during the 1920s that reflected Sander's commitment to the documentation of German society. Sander continued his work on *People of the Twentieth Century* producing hundreds of photographs well after the Second World War; however, only sixty of these images went to press during his lifetime. Published in 1929, the book, *Countenance of the Time*, presented these select photographs prefaced with an introduction by Alfred Döblin, the celebrated author of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Despite representing only a slender portion of Sander's work, *Countenance of the Time* was nonetheless applauded by contemporary critics for "capturing the pregnant faces of the contemporary with the lens."[1]

Shot as part of this photographic endeavor, Sander's image of an anonymous brick carrier (Figure 2) presents a manual laborer as subject matter. Preserving the conventional studio divide between the photographer's and sitter's space, Sander created a distinct stage for the display of the subjective self. In contrast to Moholy's image, Sander's use of composition and light facilitated a straightforward presentation of the human subject. In the case of the laborer, the piercing illumination carves out a space that finds resonance in the bricks' architectonic concavity—a solid pile buttressing the three-dimensional face against the encroaching two-dimensional darkness—thereby maintaining a superiority of the figure over the ground. Despite the growing disregard for photographic conventions by the Weimar avant-garde and mass media alike, Sander, instead, relied on familiar visual grammars to complete his project.

Regardless of the apparent differences between Moholy's and Sander's approaches, the contemporary vocabulary used to defend this work displays similarities. As photography came to rival painted and drawn visual representation during the 1920s, its supposed retreat away from expressive handwork and shift towards objective precision and mechanization was a move acknowledged in both Moholy's and Sander's work. Asked in 1929 to clarify his stance on appropriate pictorial treatments of the body, Moholy adamantly argued that only the "objectivity of the lens" could adequately capture people on film.[2] In similar terms, German critics praised Sander's images for remaining within the "borders of objectivity" less than a year after Moholy's statement.[3] It is at this equivalence of terms that the present discussion locates a point of inquiry into these pictures. In recent scholarship, Moholy's images of the face have been interpreted as capturing the sitter, particularly his female models, in the dominant gaze of the male

[1] Adolf Meuer, "Bildende Kunst in Hagen. Februarausstellung des Karl-Ernst-Osthaus-Bundes," *Kölnische Volkszeitung und Handelsblatt* [Köln] 21 Feb. 1930, evening ed.

[2] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Scharf oder Unscharf?" *i10* 1 April 1929:165.

[3] Peter Panter (Kurt Tucholsky), "Auf dem Nachtisch," *Die Weltbühne. Wochenschrift für Politik, Kunst, Wirtschaft* 25 Mar. 1930:471.

photographer, thereby pushing his images closer to a discourse of oppression.[4] One may challenge this assessment because it neglects the significance of so-called "objectivity" in Moholy's project. By juxtaposing these images to Sander's photographs, this paper excavates Moholy's means of picturing the face "objectively." Although both photographers fall under the rubric of visual verisimilitude, Sander's photographic techniques and publication structure work hand in hand as a means of assigning recognizable pattern to a world alienating in its complexity and mutability. He proffers "objectivity" to facilitate identification and organization. Moholy, on the other hand, found the face to be a site for discovering and recording the strange in the familiar. The photograph's optical precision, as Moholy stated, would allow one "to see the world with entirely different eyes," even when an object as recognizable as the human figure was depicted.[5]

Moholy's Bauhaus book, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (*Painting, Photography, Film*), was originally made available in 1925 and later revised and re-printed in 1927. Moholy used this book to compile numerous texts outlining the theoretical and technical potential of the camera. Paired with his essays, he included reproductions of many different types of photographs from varied sources, including the popular press, scientific laboratories, and fellow artists. A significant portion of the photographs Moholy selected for the 1927 version feature the human body, including a distinct section of the book dedicated to the theme.[6] The images of people included by Moholy are captioned by phrases describing the effects of light, space, and movement. For example, under a negative reversal of a walking woman he wrote, "the transposition of the tone-values transposes the relationships too; the small amount of white becomes most strikingly visible and so determines the character of the whole picture."[7] Explicating another image (Figure 3), Moholy wrote, "the charm of the photograph lies not in the object but in the view from above and in the balanced relationships."[8] At the heart of this series Moholy paired two headshots—an image produced by his wife and a Hollywood promotional photograph of Paramount Studios actress Gloria Swanson (Figure 4)—two images that explicitly addressed the issue of portraiture. Moholy's caption for the photograph of the famed cinema personality read, "the refined effect of lighting, materials, factures, roundness, and curves," thereby emphasizing the actress' face as object rather than as a signifier of personality.[9] Moholy removed these images from their original context in order that they might avoid functioning as recognizable representations of friends and celebrities, and consequently dissolve into previously overlooked abstract form. As Weimar social critic Siegfried Kracauer similarly acknowledged in a 1927 essay, "photography grasps at what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance."[10] Moholy abolished the restrictive parameters of acknowledging only those visual fragments that are personally significant, and, instead, his faces presented an all-inclusive, equalizing mode of vision. Seen anew, these images of the face served as a public inter-*face* for Moholy's theories that call for a world viewed with different eyes—eyes less conditioned by established patterns of cognition.

Turning to Moholy's photograph of his Bauhaus colleague Oskar Schlemmer (Figure 5), one can observe Moholy's preoccupation with disorienting configurations of light and space. Reclined on the ground, the body in Schlemmer's photograph complicates one's reading of the image. The camera levitates at an awkward level somewhere between above and below, confusing perceptions of a body upright or prone. The framing of the background accentuates the disorientation by eliminating straightforward spatial landmarks in the surrounding environment, leaving the viewer to negotiate abstract planes of varying tone and pattern. The resulting effect is a flattening of space accentuated by the cast shadow throughout the image. A play of light imposes a grid pattern over a majority of the composition creating a tension between planar surface and undulation, thereby speaking of a compromise between two dimensions and three. In addition, the intersecting lines of the different grids scramble the orthogonals of spatial perspective. Together, these elements disrupt expected grammars of vision, leaving the viewer with little more than the light that plays over surfaces.[11] No longer put to the service of the

4 Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism, Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) 138. In her discussion of the body in Moholy's photographs, Hight argues that his use of shadow and skewed camera angles speaks of "a kind of oppressive manipulation and control enacted by the photographer."

5 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (1927; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967) 29.

6 The photographs picturing the human figure added to the 1927 edition of *Painting, Photography, Film* include—*Balconies* by Moholy-Nagy (page 60), *In the Sand* by Moholy-Nagy (page 61), *Dolls* by Moholy-Nagy (page 92), *From Above* by Moholy-Nagy (page 93), *Portrait* by Lucia Moholy (page 96), and *Negative* by Moholy-Nagy (page 98).

7 Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 98.

8 Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 93.

9 Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 97.

10 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 50. Kracuaer explains, "Memory does not pay much attention to dates—it skips years or stretches temporal distance. The selection of traits that it assembles must strike the photographer as arbitrary. The selection may have been made this way rather than another because dispositions and purposes required the repression, falsification, and emphasis of certain parts of the object; a virtually endless number of reasons determines the remains to be filtered." He goes on to state, "memory images are at odds with photographic representation. From the latter's perspective, memory images appear to be fragments—but only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments. Similarily, from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage."

11 It is precisely in his manipulation of traditional composition that Moholy's contemporary critics located his images' ability to exercise the viewer's

object's legibility or in the words of Moholy, "for fixing (reproducing) individual objects"—light, instead, has come into its own.[12] Thus, attention is shifted away from the sitter and, consequently, light and form become the protagonists. In fact, Moholy described an image of a woman whose face is marked by illumination and shadow (Figure 6), as a photograph where "peculiar *lighting* and *leveling* [make] the head appear significantly *masked*."[13] Here, light obscures the plasticity of the pictured objects rather than adhering to conventional photographic practice where illumination typically articulates physical volume. Moholy made this move in the name of photographic "objectivity" stating in *Painting, Photography, Film*, "that in the photographic camera we have the most reliable aid to a beginning of objective vision" because the camera "shows the optically true distortions, deformations, foreshortenings, etc.,"—those that the human eye and mind usually correct.[14] Moholy's faces wore this new mask of distortion, and as a result, the pictorial interest is to be found not in the Weimar subjects, but, instead, in how they are made visible.

August Sander, on the other hand, took care to emphasize the face in his project, *People of the Twentieth Century*, and its abbreviated counterpart, *Countenance of the Time*. The latter collection assembled a diversity of figures including—the farming couple, the urban coal carrier, the working woman (Figure 7), the businessman, the art historian (Figure 8), the high school graduate, uniformed government officials, and even the urban unemployed. The title printed below each photograph indicated the sitter's generic social position, and only rarely did Sander provide the sitter's personal name. As a result, these images speak not of the autonomous, unique being, but of the individual whose identity is anchored in the economy of the collective and its need for the adhesive commonality of types.

Turning to Sander's image of three young farmhands on their way to a social function, one observes members of a trio assuming similar poses and wearing similar attire—three cocked hats, three white shirt collars, and three canes (Figure 9). Although the youth differ physically, their identical wardrobe and posture diminish their individuality to convey characteristics particular to the "farmer" type, which is compounded by Sander's generalizing title below the image. His alignment of linguistic labels and visual traits relied on categorization to represent the world truthfully, and the medium of photography collaborated in this aim. To do so, Sander avoided the strange, and instead, he adhered to established pictorial motifs. These norms include a defined horizon line, a hierarchy favoring the foreground to the background, as well as a distinct preference of the figure to the ground. Given these accustomed modes, the viewer is granted a frictionless view of the farmers' patterned attributes—a redundancy exploited as a means to communicate a fixed typology. Moholy, on the other hand, employed photography to challenge one's immediate recognition and comprehension. At first glance, an image by Moholy (Figure 10) presents a balanced composition of geometric shapes, however, with closer inspection the viewer detects three uniformed sailors, not so far removed from Sander's trio, securing a ship to its gangway. In this photograph, the matching white caps shot from above are visually no more compelling than the repetitious grid on the pier below. The aerial view flattens the space, thereby blurring hierarchies of figure to ground and of human to non-human form. Here, this "spatial continuum" levels the animate and inanimate into an abstract whole. The final result is that Sander's viewer sees past photography and observes the socially determined subject, while Moholy's viewer is asked to see past the subject in order to reassess habits of seeing in a culture obsessed with modern means of representation.

In her scholarship on urban visual culture of the Weimar era, Janet Ward eloquently concludes that in the 1920s there was a move from the *Sein* (being) to the *Schein* (appearance).[15] As a world predicated through surfaces, the Weimar reality and its propensity for ruptures of identity offered a challenge to the reliability of the new primacy of the optic. Trusted social, political, and gender boundaries were being redrawn. Sander's search for typologies that could be read visually was an act charged with notions of organization and categorization during this moment when, in reality, identities were not so straightforward. Sander's images situate the body in a social fabric falling into line with a cultural concern with the efficiency of "sameness."[16] In fact, Sander allowed his sitters to assume the pose they felt best represented their occupation for the camera, thereby reinforcing a social taxonomy.

In his cultural study of Weimar Germany, Helmut Lethen describes this time as a moment when

> the diffusion of trusted boundaries, roles, and fronts was feared, then [as a result] the symbolic order answered with a crisp schematic…All phenomena—from constructions of the body to character, from handwriting to race—were classified. Strangely enough, the new technological

lazy muscles of perception. In 1935, Sigfried Giedion stated, "Moholy-Nagy saw that…the camera was a means of increasing the range of precision of visual perception (i.e., in the arresting of movement, bird's-eye and worm's-eye views, etc.)." Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Praeger, 1970) 202.

12 Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 28.

13 Franz Roh, ed., *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: 60 Photos* (Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1930) 59.

14 Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 28.

15 Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces, Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001) 1.

16 Ward 35. Ward discusses the Tiller Girl phenomenon in Weimar urban culture to explain the contemporary propensity to pattern the body. This was thought to be a means of "training" the masses and thereby evacuating inner subjectivity.

> media, such as photography, became an instrument that defined.[17]

Sander's photographs, with their labels, provide a handle on the reality that Bertolt Brecht laments as lacking anything "that man can hold on to."[18] By taking for granted an accurate correspondence between the image and its label, the viewer escapes an anxious moment of mis-identification and instead, takes shelter in determined classification. It is this tidy ordering of the world that Moholy's images of the face subvert by showing the mutable.

At the heart of his theories expressed in *Painting, Photography, Film*, resides Moholy's opposition between "production" and "reproduction"—where "production" was the charge of the contemporary photographer. Moholy wanted the camera to be used as an instrument to produce new relationships and impede the replication of fatigued visual connections. He stated that only with the camera could one "abolish that pictorial and imaginative association pattern which has remained unsuperseded for centuries."[19] Thus, his making visible the face did not rely on a perceptual mode based on familiar typologies. Rather, in the hands of Moholy, the viewer witnessed a breakdown of accustomed hierarchies—those pictorial and conceptual constructions that Sander maintained. During an era when it was common to use appearances to organize the world, Moholy called for a "conquest of the structure instead of the facade" by means of "constant changes of light, materials… positions."[20]

To return to our point of departure with newly informed eyes, *das Gesicht*, both the face and the vision, is one intersection where Weimar photographers puzzled through the problem of "objective" representation. Both Sander and Moholy attempted to accurately re-present the modern situation in which they found themselves. For Sander, generalizations and categories rendered the world understandable, while Moholy taught a visual perception based on the idiosyncratic. This split revealed the paradox of "objectivity" and its assertions of a singular truth. Less a tidy entity, the burden of "objective" representation in Weimar Germany proved a scattered plurality. As a result, we are left with the substantial task of investigating the many remaining faces of "objectivity" that came to shape an artistic discourse pre-occupied with modern vision.

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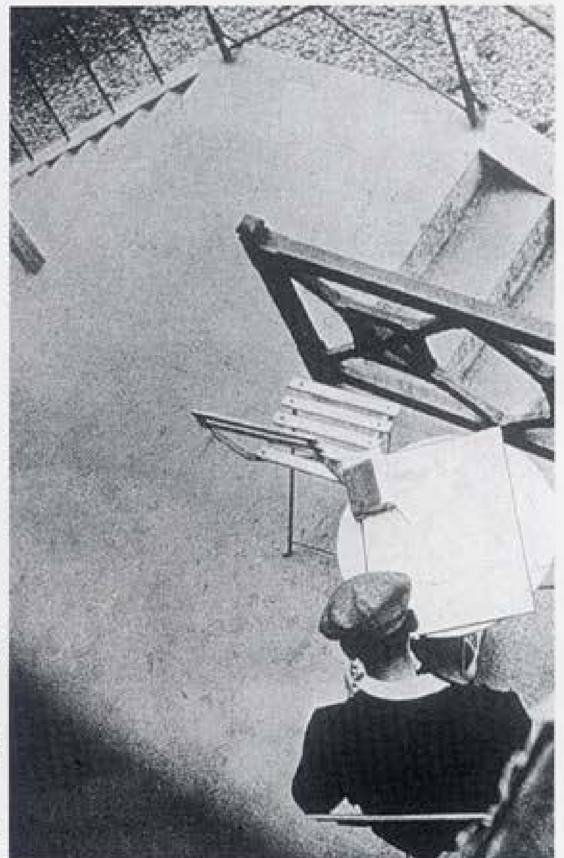
17 Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte, Lebenversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994) 10.

18 Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, *Aufsteig und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, original musical score (1927; Vienna: Universal Edition, 1963).

19 Moholy-Nagy, *Painting* 28.

20 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Photography in a Flash," in Kostelanetz 64.

Handlanger



[*upper left*] Figure 1. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Hungarian, 1895-1946), *Untitled*, 1925, gelatin-silver print, 12 x 9 3/8 inches (30.5 x 23.5 cm). © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

[*upper right*] Figure 2. August Sander (German, 1876-1964), *Handlanger* (*Handyman*), 1928, gelatin-silver print, 7 3/4 x 5 3/8 inches (19.8 x 13.4 cm). © 2002 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur-August Sander Archiv, Cologne / ARS, New York.

[*right*] Figure 3. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Hungarian, 1895-1946), *Untitled*, *c.* 1925. © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Figure 4. Lucia Moholy (Czech, 1900-1989), *Porträt* (*Portrait*) and Paramount, *Gloria Swanson*. Photographs published in Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 1925 and 1927 reprint. © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Figure 5. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Hungarian, 1895-1946), *Oskar Schlemmer*, 1926, gelatin-silver print, 14 5/8 x 9 7/8 inches (37.2 x 25.1 cm). © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Figure 6. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Hungarian, 1895-1946), *Untitled*, no date, gelatin-silver print, 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (29.2 x 21.6 cm). © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Putzfrau, 1928

[*left*] Figure 7. August Sander (German, 1876-1964), *Putzfrau* (*Cleaning Woman*), 1928, gelatin-silver print. © 2002 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur-August Sander Archiv, Cologne / ARS, New York.

[*right*] Figure 8. August Sander (German, 1876-1964), *Der Kunstgelehrte* (*The Art Historian*), 1926, gelatin-silver print, 11 1/4 x 8 3/8 inches (28.5 x 21.4 cm). © 2002 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur-August Sander Archiv, Cologne / ARS, New York.

Der Kunstgelehrte

Jungbauern

Figure 9. August Sander (German, 1876-1964), *Jungbauern* (*Farmhands*), 1914, gelatin-silver print, 9 1/8 x 6 3/4 inches (23 x 16.9 cm). © 2002 Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur-August Sander Archiv, Cologne / ARS, New York.

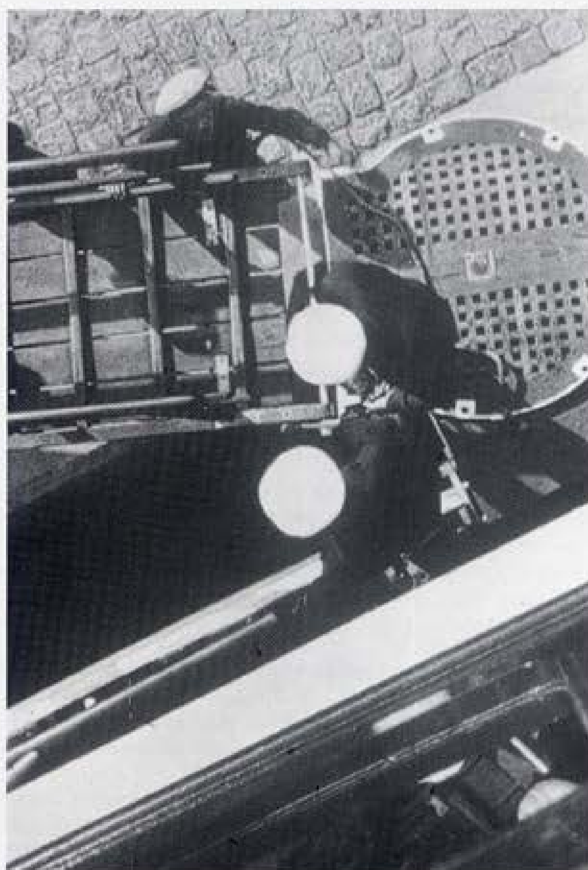


Figure 10. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Hungarian, 1895-1946), *Untitled*, *c.* 1926, gelatin-silver print, 9 5/8 x 7 inches (24.5 x 17.6 cm). © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.