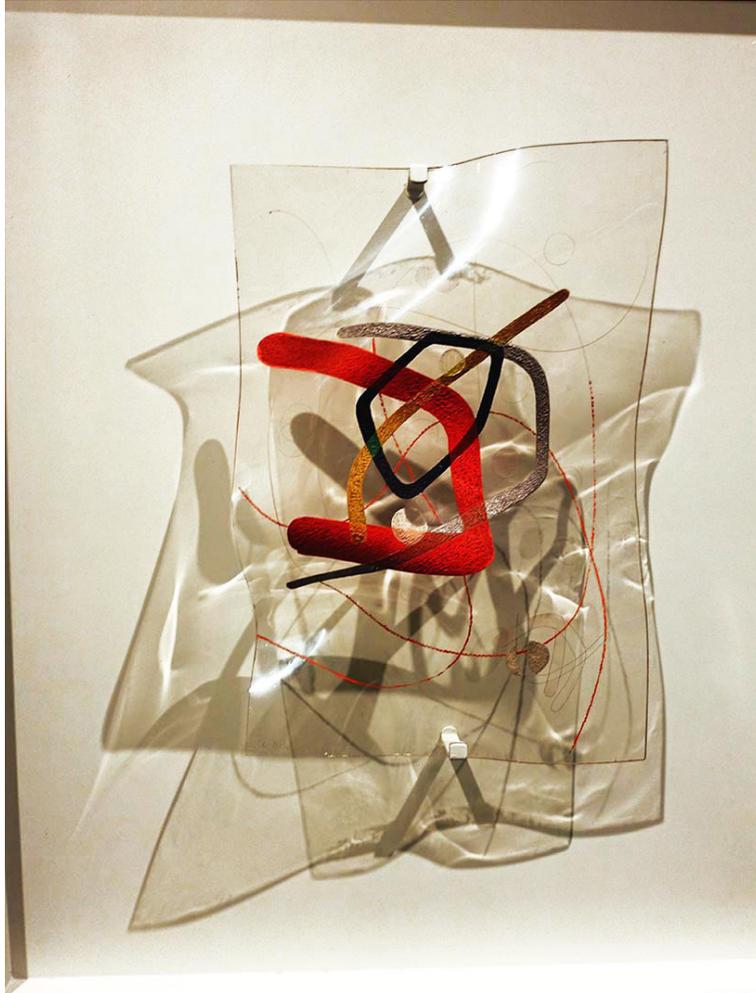


## Paying Tribute to Moholy-Nagy with a Concert of Light and Sound

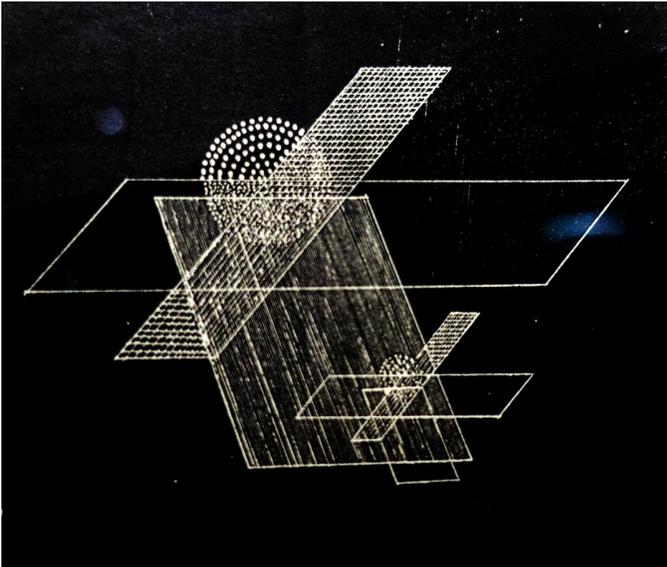
by Ellen Pearlman on August 2, 2016



László Moholy-Nagy, "B-10 Space Modulator" (1942) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

"Moholy-Nagy: Optical Sound," a recent three-part concert curated by artist Luke DuBois and musician Zach Layton at the Guggenheim Museum, highlighted both the history and the modern trajectory of optically inspired sound, especially as put forth by visual artist László Moholy-Nagy. The artist is currently the subject of a retrospective at the Guggenheim, with which he had a long association: the institution's founder and namesake, Solomon R. Guggenheim, started collecting Moholy-Nagy's sculptures, paintings, and works on paper for the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (now the Guggenheim Museum) as early as 1929. When Moholy-Nagy died in 1946, the museum paid homage by giving him an exhibition.

Music, performance, and technology intertwined as early as 1885, when a telephone subscription service arose in Portugal that allowed people to listen to broadcasts of the opera. Moholy-Nagy's home country of Hungary quickly followed suit with its own creative technological innovation: Telefon Hírmondó, the first newscast over the telephone. Early ideas about the possibilities of a phonographic film projector inspired new uses of the then radical technology of film, and as early as 1922 Moho-



ly-Nagy foresaw a time when the phonograph would be transformed from an instrument of reproduction to one of production; his ideas presaged the music of such later luminaries as Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage. During the 1930s, different radio stations across Europe (in Germany, France, Italy) experimented with electroacoustic music, but most people are not aware that Hungarian Radio (HEAR) was among them. Many of HEAR's experimental sounds, especially from the 1970s, wound up being archived at the Budapest Music Center, where Layton journeyed to locate them for this special event.



Thomas Dexter spinning an illuminated Plexiglas sculpture and producing black-and-white projections for his and David Linton's 'Escaping László Moholy-Nagy (Three Fugitive Acts)'

The concert, co-presented by the Balassi Institute Hungarian Cultural Center New York, began in the Guggenheim's basement auditorium with *Escaping László Moholy-Nagy (Three Fugitive Acts)*, a duet between moving-image and sound artist Thomas Dexter and musician David Linton. Linton had set up stacks of old models of audio equipment, complete with a neon green sine-wave monitor. He produced a host of gurgling and zither-like sounds, and would occasionally play his electric guitar or pull a bow over its strings.

Dexter scribbled on transparent film stock with a magic marker while it fed through a traditional, whirring projector. As he made thicker and thicker lines on the ratcheted cellophane, the images became a kind of moving calligraphy. He then began pointing a video camera at a spinning, lit Plexiglas sculpture; the sculpture's internal light went into the camera lens, where it was processed and projected onto a series of rayograph-like positive and negative circles on the theater screen. The camera also produced kaleidoscopic images that, combined with Linton's audio sine waves, seemed to presage the onslaught of the mechanical age. At the tail end of the performance, the artists projected color onto a number of black-and-white images. The results resembled old Kodachrome photographs, nodding to Moholy-Nagy's early use of the film, as shown in the museum's exhibit.



Marina Rosenfeld and Greg Fox playing 'GREATEST HITS: A Reproduction,' with Moholy-Nagy's sculpture "Dual Form with Chromium Rods" (1946) hanging in the center of the Guggenheim's rotunda

When the set ended, everyone moved upstairs into the main rotunda, which was reserved for the next two sections of the performance. On top of a slightly raised dais in the center of the space, artist and composer Marina Rosenfeld and musician Greg Fox presented GREATEST HITS: A Reproduction. For the piece, Rosenfeld DJed with unique acetate dubplates while Fox accompanied her on

drums, accentuating her sounds. Since the audience was no longer bound by seats, most attendees began ascending the museum's spiral ramp towards its apex. The musical environment made for the ultimate cinematic soundtrack for viewing Moholy-Nagy's work. Even though I was familiar with the general thrust of his oeuvre, the timelessness of his pictures, along with rarely displayed Plexiglas sculptures and transparent Plexiglas paintings from the early 1940s, hijacked my attention. The experience of moving up the ramp, listening to the music, and looking at these images morphed into a 21st-century version of Musorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, albeit with turntables and drums substituting for strings and oboes. The Guggenheim's sloped Frank Lloyd Wright interior served as a perfect acoustic chamber.

As I continued ascending the ramp, the sets switched, and a new piece began to play: the multichannel Hungarian Electronic Scene Concert, a live mix by György Kurtag Jr. with sound design by Zach Layton. Though the piece is mostly comprised of innovative, early Hungarian electronic music from 1970–81, it prompted my friend — who did not know its origins — to remark that it "sounded like what you hear at a



lot of electronic music conferences.” I pointed out that it was not contemporary, but originated from avant-garde Hungarian sources from almost 50 years ago. The sounds lacked the scratchy and high-frequency waves of typical electroacoustic music, instead featuring more booms and springy, loud bleeps. The music grew ghostly as the acoustics of the rotunda shot the sounds to the top of the museum. They sounded almost like organ bells, and in a way, they became pseudo bells in this temple of art and music, clanging out synesthesia’s ultimate orgy.

“Moholy-Nagy: Optical Sound“ took place on July 21 at the Guggenheim Museum (1071 Fifth Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan). The exhibition Moholy-Nagy: Future Present continues at the Guggenheim through September 7.