

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “Painting, Architecture and *Gesamtkunstwerk*” (1925)

Abstract

The Hungarian painter, photographer and stage designer László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) had a decisive influence on the Bauhaus during his time as a teacher from 1923 to 1928. From 1924, he published the *Bauhaus books* together with Walter Gropius, from which this text is taken. Moholy Nagy’s text reflects a central component of the Bauhaus philosophy, namely the interaction of different forms of design as an organic whole.

Source

The view of life held by the previous generation was that man has to live his workaday life and that only in his leisure hours may he occupy himself with the phenomena of ‘artistic’ creation, with its ‘spiritually refined’ works. As time went on this view led to untenable positions. Thus for example in painting: instead of judging a work in the light of its expressional law, of its rootedness in the life of a collective entity, purely personal standards were applied and matters of universal concern were dismissed as individual fancy. This excessively subjective attitude of the recipient reacted upon many artists in such a way that they gradually forgot how to produce the essential, the work with a biological basis and, their purpose instead now being to ‘create works of art,’ they seized upon the trivial, the unimportant and often upon aesthetic formulae derived historically or subjectively from the great individual works. The opposition which emerged to this decline of painterly creation (**Cubism, Constructivism**) tried to purify the expressional elements and means themselves without intending to produce ‘art’ in the process. ‘Art’ comes into being when expression is at its optimum, i.e. when at its highest intensity it is rooted in biological law, purposeful, unambiguous, pure. The second way consisted in an attempt to bring together into one entity singular works or separate fields of creation that were isolated from one another. This entity was to be the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, architecture, the sum of all the arts. (The De Stijl Group, Holland; first period of the Bauhaus.) The concept of a total work of art was readily intelligible, yesterday, at the period when specialization was at its height. With its ramifications and its fragmenting action in every field, specialization had destroyed all belief in the possibility of embracing the totality of all fields, the wholeness of life. Since, however, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is only an addition, albeit an organized one, we cannot be satisfied with it today. What we need is not the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, alongside and separated from which life flows by, but a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing *Gesamtwerk* (life) which abolishes all isolation, in which **all individual** accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a **universal** necessity.

Source: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969, pp. 16–17.

Source of original German text: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, Bauhausbücher 8, 1925; reprinted in *Neue Bauhausbücher*. Mainz: Florian Kupferberg Verlag, 1967.

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