

The Telephone Paintings: Hanging Up Moholy

Louis Kaplan

I was not afraid of losing the "personal touch," so highly valued in previous painting. On the contrary, I even gave up signing my paintings. I put numbers and letters with the necessary data on the back of the canvas, as if they were cars, airplanes, or other industrial products.

--László Moholy-Nagy

A number of paradoxes tie up this scene of resignation. An identifiable subject speaks of his loss, of becoming anonymous. In an autobiographical narrative, *Abstract of an Artist*, the writes of his artistic techniques for losing himself, for losing his signature, the loss of assignment to a signature. In this manner, the text written as *Abstract of an Artist* documents the abstracting of an artist. In place of the identity of the maker, one will read an impersonal product label--numbers and letters of a computer bar-coded system stamped onto the back of a canvas in order to provide the "necessary data" in the age of mechanical production and reproduction. But at the point of this abstracting gesture, one reads about an "I" who returns to assign each of the acts of resignation to himself. What of the "I" who refrains from the personal touch, who will have given up signing "my paintings," who will have put numbers and letters on the back of the canvas or on the front of the graph paper, who will have treated himself and his productions like impersonal models--cars, airplanes, guns or even telephones? Who, if and when, anonymous?

While it should not make any difference--in the difference of the anonymous--who says this, the particular "I" who gives up, and who is given up for dead, belongs to László Moholy-Nagy [1]. By giving up and resigning the "I" that signs the painting, Moholy, or whoever, has crossed out the "I" who writes (i.e., the subject of the enunciation) so that the material shifts to the "I" who is written (i.e. the subject of the enunciated). These are the basic dynamics and mechanics of the unsigning "I." Its inscription converts all of the "necessary data" into an unhooked generation, of numbers and letters, anonymous, unlisted or unnameable which hang up on Moholy-Nagy.

It is the impossibility of making the proper connections, of hooking up with the receiver at all (or once and for all?). With these qualifications, disclaimers and dispensations of the anonymous hand that get the speaking subject "off the hook," so to speak, one follows the process through another passage of Moholy-Nagy's writing, which almost immediately follows the quote above. The following passage describes another specific instance of resigning of the signing of works of art. These works are called the telephone paintings (see Fig 1).

In 1922, I ordered by telephone from a sign factory 5 paintings in porcelain enamel. I had the factory's color chart before me and I sketched my paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone, the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper, divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct position. (It was like playing chess by correspondence.) . . . Thus, these pictures did not have the virtue of the "individual touch," but my action was directed exactly against this overemphasis. I often hear the criticism that because of this want of the individual touch, my pictures are "intellectual"[2].

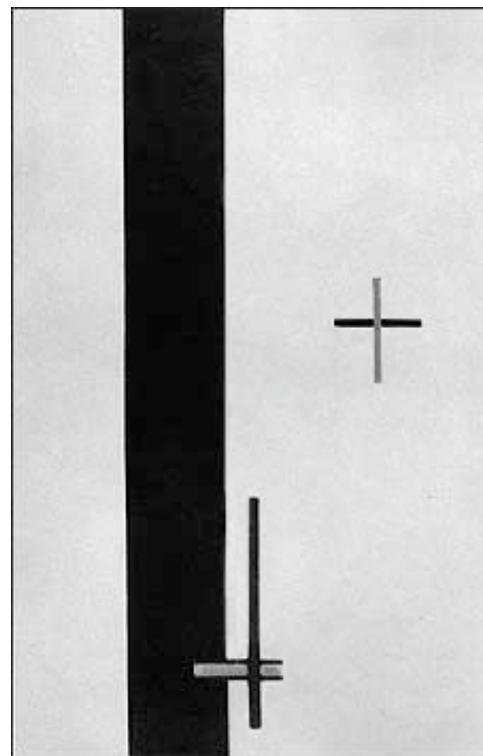


Fig. 1. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Telephone Painting* or *Em 3*, enamel on steel, 24x15 cm, 1922. (Reproduction, BauhausArchiv, Berlin. Copyright, Hattula Moholy-Nagy.) Permanent Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. This is one of the five enamel telephone paintings that Moholy-Nagy ordered from and had delivered by a Berlin sign factory.

This paragraph also employs the use of the first person pronoun to play out other paradoxes. It is a four-fold authorial "I" who orders and dictates from a sign factory, sketches on graph paper, studies, plays, and hears criticism. But if this is the same "I"--another "I"--who gave up signing, who prefers anonymity, who eschews the virtues of the "individual touch," then who is there to talk about, or in the case of the telephone pictures, who is there to talk to? Who is on the other end of the line if the "I" is put on the line?

These pictures have places in operation the telephonic solicitation of the author and of the production of works of art in general. He (the authorial "I") still employs terms of mastery and authority, but he is caught unaware in the work carried on by the fine print of the telephone directory which detaches him from his signature. The telephone paintings are the connecting, and consequently, the disconnecting link between László Moholy-Nagy and his passing away into anonymity. From dictating to dispatching and transmitting signals, with the dispensing of the author, the Romantic conception of the artist has been put at risk. Smoothly, facilely, with the greatest of ease, the telephone has turned Moholy into an operator for feeds and feedback. He has also brought into question the concepts of the creative genius and the original artist. In the book *Kunstismen/Isms of Art*, these art exchanges, telephone exchanges, make the ex-Bauhaus master seem quite common--a common house painter, a common name, a bedroom farce, a simpleton or even a nobody. Moholy overheard the following advice: "Now the production of works of art is . . . so facilitated and simplified that nobody can do better than order his works by telephone from his bed, from a common painter"[3]. Oddly enough, a Moholy photograph from the same period illustrates the same basic elements, as a house painter is set off against a backdrop of telephone lines (Fig. 2).

This mode of production, utilizing a sign factory and a design charted on graph paper, has sketched a network that interrogates the structure of the sign. The telephone paintings set up static in the lines, on the graph paper, in the sign factory, in the final product--a buzzing for telecommunications and for communication in any form. With the gesture of the dialing or the push-button hand that generates art by telephone, it is the impersonality and anonymity of the language machine or of the telephone machine which has gone into a remote-control reproduction.

But even as we listen to Moholy's words, the effaced "I" of the telephone paintings does not like the sound of a certain criticism raised against him. From where did this personal affront come and to where is it going? "I often hear the criticism that because of this want of the individual touch, my pictures are 'intellectual'." He claims the pictures as his own through the most possessive of all the pronouns ("my pictures"). But, in giving his reason, he says a personal touch is missing. Meanwhile, the terms "intellectual" and "individual touch" are indicated with quotation marks. They are marked off from the communication that surrounds the telephone paintings and are overemphasized in the presentation. These acts of quotation also remove the communication from the authorial origin and place them in an anonymous hand, in that this quoted material invades the space from an unknown origin. Perhaps these terms, or the criticism itself, while have been effaced (like the "I" that resigns from signing the paintings) through their quotation and through the anonymous gesture of the telephone paintings.

One wonders what the pedagogical value of this production could have been or even where its teacher might be found. Lucia Moholy decides this question by going back to the source, but she overlooks the consequences of the telephonic action upon this source. She argues that since Moholy *himself* did not talk about the telephone paintings in his posthumously published text *Vision in Motion*[4]. or deal with their educational implications in *Abstract of an Artist*, they are not intended to teach anything. "These are significant symptoms; for Moholy-Nagy's wisdom and circumspection as a teacher being of a high order, any gaps left in the didactic system must be understood as intention"[5]. I agree that the telephone paintings do not serve to instruct, but not for reasons that Lucia Moholy cites, nor for the sake of reason. The pictures do not circumscribe a didactic system of the highest order or of any kind. If these paintings do instruct, it is through the gaps, the holes, the patterns of interference they leave between the author and the work, between both of these and their significance, and between the "I" who writes and the "I" who is written--through the insertion of an anonymous hand dialing or a coin placed in the slot of a machine. It places a long-distancing device, a telephone or a sign system, between the author and the production of the art work. Therefore this anonymous hand writing distances every intent from the teacher and from the

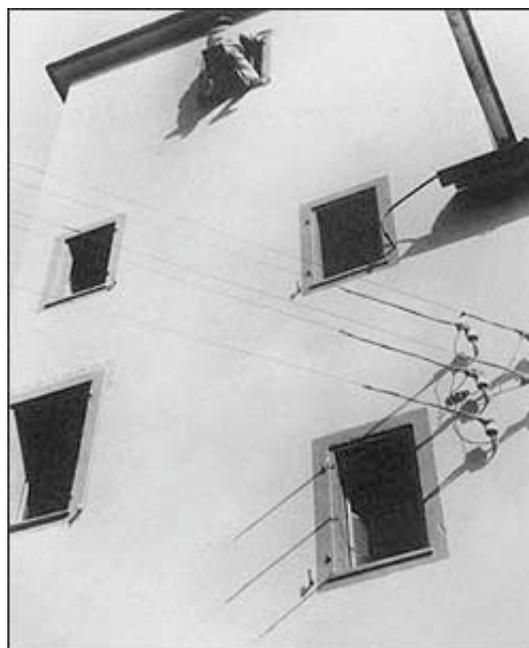


Fig. 2. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painter's Works in Switzerland*, photograph, 39x30 cm, 1925. (Reproduction, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin. Copyright, Hattula Moholy-Nagy.) "Now the production of works of art is so facilitated and simplified that nobody can do better than order his works by telephone from his bed, by a common painter"[12].

records.

Lucia Moholy's *Marginal Notes* also offers strong opinions on the role of the telephone in the paintings. Lucia disputes the paintings removed origins. According to this Moholy, that Moholy did not really order the paintings on the phone. This is a telephone prank, minus the telephone, and Moholy is a *tele-phonie*. Later on, Lucia transforms the story in this game of telephone talk in a version that goes in one ear and out the other. She says he did the job in person. Lucia turns the crank and recalls: "I distinctly remember the timbre of his voice on that occasion--'I might even have done it over the telephone' "[6]. Lucia Moholy invokes the format of a personal memoir in order to speak with an authoritative voice. This memoir is similar to the photo portraits of her partner (see figure 3) in which Lucia seeks to capture László as visual image rather than as voice. But, in the act of quotation, an indistinct overtone slips in through the wavering of the words "I might have done it over." Between this future conditional tense and the certainty of the version in the *Abstract of the Artist* (i.e. "I ordered by telephone"), this remounting of remembering has afforded another detached and detaching possibility that blurs the borders of fact and fiction.

Furthermore, Lucia Moholy states that the name "The Telephone Paintings" is a misnomer. She insists that these works, which border on the namelessness of anonymity, were originally named "The Enamel Paintings," "Email" for one, "Emaill" for plural, or simply "Em" in Moholy's abbreviated style of naming and numbered from 1 to 5. She insists that the enamels were intended only for experimentation with the effects of color in relation to the size of their reproduction. But with the logic of the dispatch in the production and reproduction of the paintings, something has been lost in the mails and later recalled--that is, the telephone paintings.

Through a later call, the telephone paintings receive another calling. This is emblematic of the secondary role of a biographic writing practice that assumes a reality of its own and that estranges an artwork or its author from an original entitlement. Speaking against herself, Lucia Moholy senses how the margins creep into her notes via her telephonic reconsideration of Moholy. "The role played by industry, a secondary consideration for him to start with, gradually assumed in his mind a reality of its own, the metaphor of the telephone becoming the emblem of the day"[7].



Fig. 3. Lucia Moholy, *Portrait of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Dessau, photograph, 23x15.9 cm, 1926.* (Reproduction, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin. Copyright, F. Karsten.) Lucia Moholy shot a portrait of the painter as a young Bauhaus master posing in the overalls that represented the workman's life.

Telephone becoming, taken as metaphor, rewires the signals from message unit to message unit. The "assumed" character of the graphics that later rewrote the history of art carry over to the point where, according to some critics, Moholy becomes the primary source for conceptual or telephone art--ideas that were not on his mind at all. Again--this regrafting operation of *telephone becoming* surpasses intentions, hand executions, ideas--even what László Moholy-Nagy, in person, dubbed the "mental process of the genesis of the work" [8]. Lucia Moholy argues that Moholy could have had nothing to do with the origins of Conceptual Art or its thinking. ("It is erroneous to think of Moholy as the ancestors of those tendencies" [9].) But at another point, certainly unintentionally, she acknowledges the unintended consequences of *telephone becoming*, of a production in reproduction, outside of the power of intentions of the author of the work of art. It pulls the present argument apart. In *Marginal Notes*: "The present argument apart: the notion of *Telephone Art* might, in the computer age, take on a new meaning with connotations of a very different nature hardly foreseeable today" [10]. In the slip of a disk or on the tape of a telephone answering machine, this talk doubles back on Lucia Moholy and produces doubletalk--that is, statements that "take on a new meaning with connotations of a very different nature hardly foreseeable today."

For *telephone becoming*--very different from nature--the redialings of the telephone game, take and transform. Present and future arguments aside, it can give new meaning to anything Moholy might have said about it--especially when he who executes the anonymous telephone pictures has given up his signature, that which attaches something to himself. But this difficulty in tracing the call will not have been made in service of meaning. *Telephone becoming*, to cite a phrase, takes away from authorial intentions--puts meaning on hold--only through an anonymous handwriting, the "I" that is written and rewritten. It produces every autobiographical statement in an anonymous hand, unnamings it with an anonymous hand.

All of these telephonic switches raise a chorus. It is an affirmation that rises to ever new heights, again and again. It is the party line of the dispatching signature taken upon by different voices and by different timbres. Amid the din, his voice becomes distinct: "So they came to a new device of the literary expression--to a crisscrossing, zigzagging thought-pulsation of as many currents and messages as could be transmitted

at the same time. We have an analogy in the synchronous multiplex telegraphy and in the coaxial cable system" [11].

With these reflections, Moholy returns yet again to the metaphor of the telephone--to the super-syncretistic science of "synchronous multiplex telegraphy"--as the meanings to describe contemporary literary and artistic production, to describe the telegraphic writings and practices that sent him and his voice through the wires. At that juncture and with that device, in the space of "literary expression," where the history of ideas gets tangled up in the materials and materiality of writing, this crisscrossing and zigzagging of thought--its currents and messages that put the term "intellectual" in a marked form, in the intertwining of the lines, the patterns of interference, the static of that dispatch network, the systematic overloads of the coaxial cable system, this long drawn-out death sentence, the telephone rings, sounding the death knell of the author.

This scenario posits a world where an anonymous phone call, a telephone painting or a biographical experiment in defamiliarization--and the risks that these pose to authority--would not automatically be called a practical joke nor considered obscene.

It resembles the H-U-M of a dial tone, of an anonymous phone call--Hanging Up Moholy.

References and Notes

1. László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision* (New York: Wittenborn, 1947) p. 79; László Moholy-Nagy, *Abstract of an Artist* (New York: Wittenborn, 1947).
2. see Moholy-Nagy [1] pp.79-80.
3. Anonymous, "Constructivism," in Hans Arp and El Lissitzky, *Kunstisten/Isms of Art* (Munich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925) pp. x-xi
4. László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: George Wittenborn, 1947) p. 314
5. Lucia Moholy, *Marginal Notes* (London and Krefeld: Scherpe Verlag, 1972) p. 79
6. Moholy [5] p.. 76.
7. Moholy [5] p.. 77.
8. László Moholy-Nagy, "Domestic Pinacotheca," *Painting, Photography, Film*, Janet Seligmann, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969) p. 26.
9. Moholy [5] p. 77
10. Moholy [5] p. 79. Lucia Moholy refers to the 1969 exhibition Art by Telephone at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.
11. Moholy-Nagy [4] p. 314.
12. See [3].

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