

Preface to the First German Edition of László Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion*

by Lloyd C. Engelbrecht

Vision in Motion, originally published in Chicago in 1947,¹ is only now appearing in its first German edition.² Yet the book is deeply rooted in German soil. László Moholy-Nagy, who was born on July 20, 1895, in Bácsborsod, Hungary, died on November 24, 1946, in Chicago. But it was in Germany where he first came to prominence when he was appointed to teach at the Bauhaus, then located in Weimar, in 1923. While teaching at the Bauhaus in Weimar, and later in Dessau, Moholy and the school's director, Walter Gropius, were co-editors of a series of Bauhausbücher. Although a longer series was planned, fourteen books actually appeared during the years 1925-1929.³ The last of these, Moholy's own *von material zu architektur*,⁴ was based on his pedagogy at the Bauhaus.

In 1937 Moholy was invited by the Association of Arts and Industries, a group that was very similar to the Werkbund in Germany (even though the Association was regional in scope), to set up a design school in Chicago that became known as the New Bauhaus. Moholy's plans for the school included a series of New Bauhaus Books. Although 28 books had been planned, only one actually appeared, since the New Bauhaus was in operation only during the 1937-1938 academic year.⁵ What did appear was the second American edition of *von material zu architektur*, known

¹László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, "id BOOK, INSTITUTE OF DESIGN" (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947). The only previous translation was to Hungarian: *Idem, látás mozgásban* (Budapest: Műcsarnok—Intermedia, 1996); the translation was based on a printing that appeared in 1961 and adheres to the format of the initial printing in English.

²László Moholy-Nagy, *Sehen in Bewegung*, Deutsche Fassung von László Moholy-Nagys *vision in motion* in der Übersetzung von Herwig Engelmann [on verso of title page: "Mit einem Beiheft mit Texten von Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, Hattula Moholy-Nagy und Philipp Oswald"] (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015).

³Ute Brüning, "Bauhausbücher," in: Ute Brüning and Magdalene Droste, editors, *Das A und O des Bauhauses; Bauhauswerbung: Schriftbilder, Drucksachen, Ausstellungsdesign* (Leipzig: Ed. Leipzig; Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv, 1995), 114-139; and Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism* (Cincinnati: Flying Trapeze Press, 2009), 286-304.

⁴László Moholy-Nagy, *von material zu architektur*, bauhausbücher 14, schriftleitung Walter Gropius [und] Moholy-Nagy (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1929).

⁵Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 587-590.

in the United States as *The New Vision*.⁶ Facing the title page was a series description: “The New Bauhaus Books, editors /Walter Gropius, L. Moholy-Nagy, No. 1.” Illustrations of work by his students in Chicago appeared along with illustrations of work by his German students retained from the 1929 edition. This set it apart from the first American edition of 1932,⁷ which was basically just a translation of *von material zu architektur*, although with some illustrations dropped and replaced with others.

In 1939 Moholy set up his own school, known at the School of Design in Chicago. Soon it attracted the support of Walter Paepcke (1896-1960), president of the Container Corporation of America, a pioneering company in cardboard packaging, and his wife, Elizabeth, known as “Pussy” (née Nitze; 1902-1994).⁸ In 1944 Walter Paepcke helped Moholy re-organize the school as the Institute of Design, also known as the I.D.⁹ Moholy used the I.D. as the base for a new series of books. The first of these, *Rebuilding our Communities*,¹⁰ utilized the text of a very well received lecture that Gropius delivered February 23, 1945, in Chicago.¹¹ The second book in the series, and the one that proved to be the last, was *Vision in Motion*.¹² On or preceding the title page of each book was an identical series note in the form of a logo that read: “id BOOK, INSTITUTE OF DESIGN.”

It should be borne in mind that Moholy’s second wife, Sibyl (née Pietzsch; 1903-1971), though born and raised in Germany, was fluent in English, while he was far from fluent in the language even at the end of his life. Thus a great amount of help from Sibyl was required to produce the book, graciously acknowledged on page 9 of *Vision in Motion*. In her biography of her husband Sibyl described the last stages of preparing the book for publication in autumn of 1946. The first galley proofs had arrived, but she quoted brief passages added by Moholy to the introduction and first chapter during “two nights of intense concentration,” and added: “Now all

⁶László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, translated by Daphne M. Hoffmann, revised and enlarged edition, The New Bauhaus Books, no. 1, editors Walter Gropius, L. Moholy-Nagy (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1938). This edition was also published in London in 1939 by Faber & Faber.

⁷László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: from Material to Architecture*, translated by Daphne M. Hoffman (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam Inc.), 1932.

⁸Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 587-590.

⁹Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 618.

¹⁰Walter Gropius, *Rebuilding our Communities*, “id BOOK, INSTITUTE OF DESIGN” (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1945). “The first of a series of monographs written by eminent authorities in their field, under the editorship of L. Moholy-Nagy, expounding the basic philosophy and creative approach of the Institute of Design, Chicago.”

¹¹Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 621-623.

¹²László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947).

the writing is done.”¹³ After that she stood in for her husband to take care of any remaining details he would have had to work out with the publisher before the book appeared.

The publisher was Paul Theobald (1900-1955), a native of Cologne who arrived in Chicago with his parents in 1914. With his wife, Lolita, he ran a bookshop and also published books related to the arts in one way or another, including books about architecture and city planning.¹⁴ *Vision in Motion* proved to be a success for the publisher, and was reprinted numerous times to keep up with the demand. This German translation is based on the seventh printing. But, curiously, few reviews appeared. I have found only two, one American and one European, both from 1948.

The American review was written by Beaumont Newhall (1908-1993), one of Moholy's friends. Although Newhall was a widely published photographic historian, his review appeared in an informal, small-circulation publication, reproduced from typescript rather than set in type.¹⁵ It was known as *Photo Notes*, and was published in New York by the Photo League, Inc. Newhall noted, near the opening of his review of the book, that:

Its greatest contribution is the explanation of the pedagogical method of the Institute of Design, of which he was the founder. This occupies the first half of the book, and is liberally illustrated with reproductions of work by students. The second half of the book is devoted to various types of art production: Painting, sculpture, photography, moving pictures, literature, music, city planning.

The bulk of what Newhall wrote was a general discussion for his fellow photographers of Moholy's activities with respect to photography rather than a discussion of Moholy's book itself. Following that, he ends his review with limited praise:

This book is a record of accomplishments; it is our loss that it does not more vividly mirror the warm personality of its author.

¹³Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*, with an introduction by Walter Gropius (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1950), 236-237; and *idem, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, ein Totalexperiment* [übersetzt von Sibyl Moholy-Nagy], mit einem Vorwort von Walter Gropius, und mit einem "Vorwort zur deutschen Ausgabe" (Mainz: Florian Kupferberg, 1972), 192.

¹⁴About Paul Theobald, see: Victor Margolin, "Paul Theobald & Company: Publisher with a New Vision," *Printing History; the Journal of the American Printing History Association*, volume IX, number 2 (1987), 33-39.

¹⁵Beaumont Newhall, "Vision in Motion, by L. Moholy-Nagy," *Photo Notes: Official Publication of the Photo League, Inc., New York* (March, 1948), 9-11. A small part of Newhall's review was published in: Richard Kostelanetz, editor, *Moholy-Nagy, an Anthology* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 70-71.

The European review, written by Sir Herbert Read (1893-1968), appeared in a British architectural magazine.¹⁶ Read had visited Moholy's I.D. classes in Chicago in April, 1946; he also presented two lectures at the school.¹⁷ Thus he was able to write:

To see Moholy-Nagy in action as Director of the Institute of Design which he founded in Chicago was a demonstration of the fact that teaching, too, is an art—that the teacher is fundamentally an artist who works among a group of artists, a little ahead of his companions, setting the pace.

This substantial volume . . . is a record based on more than twenty-five years experience, first at the Bauhaus in Germany, afterwards in Chicago. It is illuminated by typical examples of the work of leading modern painters, sculptors and architects, but also the work of pupils, produced in the course of their education.

Read went on to point to Moholy's methods:

The methods which Moholy-Nagy used to develop emotional literacy are too various to be summarized here; but essentially they consisted of an analysis of the physical properties of materials and of the laws of growth, and the experimental rearrangement of the elements thus defined.

After reading what Newhall and Read wrote it was refreshing to encounter a fresh look at *Vision in Motion* written by critic Richard Kostelanetz twenty-one years later, that is, in 1969. He had been born in 1940 and thus was only seven years old when the book was originally published; Kostelanetz wrote:

. . . Moholy's truly great work is his last book, the summary of all his ideas and interests, which was written in English (that is at times peculiar), mostly in Chicago . . . Though considerably less known than it should be, selling only forty thousand copies in twenty years, and scarcely credited in print, *Vision in Motion* is clearly among the half-dozen great studies of modern art, as well as the best example I have ever seen of, in Moholy's own phrase, "text and illustration welded together."

¹⁶Herbert Read, "A Great Teacher . . . Review of *Vision in Motion* by L. Moholy-Nagy," *The Architectural Review*, volume CIII, number 647 (May, 1948), 221. Most of Read's review was republished in: Kostelanetz, editor, *Moholy-Nagy, an Anthology*, 203-206.

¹⁷Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 678.

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Compendious, discursive, conglomerate, *Vision in Motion* accomplishes several things. It is first of all a summary of Moholy's program at the Institute of Design, enhanced by many illustrations of his students' adventurous work . . . here the theme is the nature and necessity of a multi-sensory education. Second, *Vision in Motion* is an implicit record of Moholy's own quest for a perceptual and creative sensibility distinctly appropriate to modern times and his own artistic ambitions; and as a man of artistic and intellectual action, who instinctively translated his ideas into schemes and objects, Moholy frequently illustrates his own endeavors in painting, film, sculpture, photography, light machines, industrial design and even poetry. . . .¹⁸

By 1991 Kostelanetz was ready to announce:

I have long held an opinion I have never before committed to print, that Moholy's greatest single creation, representing the sum of his imagination and intelligence, is his book, *Vision in Motion*, written in America, in Chicago, a book that, appearing posthumously, concludes his life as only a book can do. Not only is it the single most illuminating survey I know of avant-garde modernism in the arts, it is also an "artist's book" of the very highest order, demonstrating that few artists ever wrote as well or as truly about their own esthetic aspirations.¹⁹

A note of explanation is in order because a large part of *Vision in Motion* is devoted to literature. As a young man Moholy had decided to become a writer, and produced a small body of short stories, poems and book reviews.²⁰ In Chicago Moholy himself offered seminars on avant-garde literature to his students,²¹ and also brought in guest speakers for two series of

¹⁸Richard Kostelanetz, "Moholy-Nagy: the Risk and Necessity of Artistic Adventurism," *Salmagundi*, number 10/11 (Fall, 1969-Winter, 1970), [273]-291, here 283-284. The quoted passages were republished in: Kostelanetz, editor, *Moholy-Nagy, an Anthology*, 207-208.

¹⁹Richard Kostelanetz, "A Contemporary Appreciation of Moholy-Nagy," in: Terry Suhre, editor, *Moholy-Nagy: a New Vision for Chicago* (Springfield: University of Illinois Press and the Illinois State Museum, 1990), [102]-113, here 113.

²⁰On Moholy's literary career, see: Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 55-61; "Four Poems of László Moholy-Nagy," introduced and translated by Oliver Botar, *Hungarian Studies Review*, volume XXI, numbers 1-2 (Spring-Fall, 1994), 103-112; Oliver Botar, "The Erotic Bases of 'Enhanced Reason' and 'Intensified Senses': Three Short Stories by László Moholy-Nagy," *Hungarian Studies Review*, volume XXXVII, numbers 1-2 (2010), 125-130; and László Moholy-Nagy, "Maris/Maris, Találkozás/Meeting, [and] A csodálatos angol táncsoport/The Wonderful English Dance Troupe," translator: Hattula Moholy-Nagy, *ibid.*, 131-165.

²¹Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 552-553.

lectures, one on T.S. Eliot and one on James Joyce.²² These activities formed the basis for the section of *Vision in Motion* headed “Literature”.

Taken as a whole, *Vision in Motion* is profusely illustrated. But Moholy did not use any illustrations on the pages of his foreword, introduction or first chapter. He did, nevertheless, include broad left margins to enliven these pages; in some cases, the margin was left blank and on others he placed relevant quotations, some of them extended. What he wrote about in his first chapter was the changes in education since the advent of the industrial revolution, and how education can be improved by broadening it, even for those students who need specialized instruction.

Two points about Moholy’s own experience should be borne in mind when reading the first chapter. One is that from 1905 to 1913 he attended one of Hungary’s finest secondary schools, then known as the *Szegedi Állami Főgimnázium*, currently known as the *Radnóti Miklós Gimnázium*. The curriculum was broad but rigorous.²³ The other point relates to page 29, where Adolf Hitler’s hatred of modern art, and his attempts to suppress it, are discussed. The best known of Hitler’s expressions of his hatred of modern art was the exhibition called *Entartete Kunst* that opened July 19, 1938, in Munich; it was later seen in other German cities. Included in the exhibition was at least one work by Moholy.²⁴

In discussing the illustrations in *Vision in Motion* it is crucial not to overlook the footnote at the bottom of page [6], where it is noted that: “The illustrations of the students’ work are marked with a thin O, those of the faculty are marked with a thicker circle O.” This means that illustrations not marked with a circle were not created by Moholy’s students or his faculty colleagues. Nevertheless, some readers wrongly attributed some illustrations to Moholy. One example is figure 2 on page 36, clearly identified on page 9 as being from the *Chicago Tribune*. Another is figure 40 on page 57 showing the “51” fountain pen brought out by the Parker Pen Company; this is a bit complicated because Moholy did do work for the company but did not design this pen.²⁵

²²Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 619-620.

²³Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 12-26.

²⁴Engelbrecht, *Moholy-Nagy: Mentor to Modernism*, 507.

²⁵The Parker “51” fountain pen was patented in 1938 by Kenneth Parker and Marlin Baker. Had Moholy in fact been responsible for the design the caption he wrote for it would have been uncharacteristically immodest.

The photograph by William Keck shown in figure 261 on page [201] is inverted and cropped (see my figure one).²⁶ Also, two illustrations from the initial printing were dropped for the second and all later printings and replaced with different illustrations: these illustrations are figure 215 on page [169] and figure 217 on page 172 in the initial printing (see my figures two and three).

Finally, one of the innovative features of the Bauhausbücher is the integration of text and images. In *von material zu architektur*, the last in the series of Bauhausbücher, Moholy placed as many as three images on some pages. In *Vision in Motion*, helped by a larger page size, Moholy placed as many as seven images on some pages. He chose the illustrations with great care, as exemplified by his preliminary draft of pages 202 and 203 (see my figure four).

Vision in Motion continues to fascinate later generations of artists, architects and designers as well as young students, because the broadness of imagination that is the hallmark of Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* is still refreshing today, and thus the book continues to be of special value.

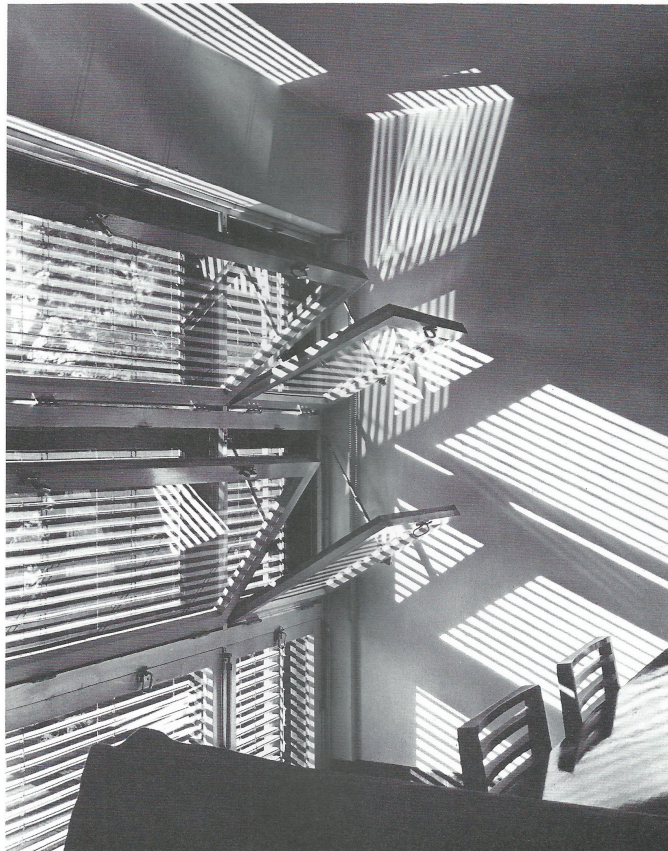


figure one: William Keck, *Reflections and Mirroring*, photograph (gelatin silver print) of 1937 or 1938 showing the dining room in the apartment of William and Stella Keck and their daughter, Margaret, located in the Keck-Gottschalk apartment building at 5551 South University Avenue, Chicago, designed by Keck & Keck, completed in 1937

Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File # M525274.

(used by permission of the Art Institute of Chicago)

²⁶William Keck's photograph shows a window in his apartment in the three-unit apartment house he designed with his brother, George Fred Keck, located at 5551 South University Avenue in Chicago. It was completed in 1937.

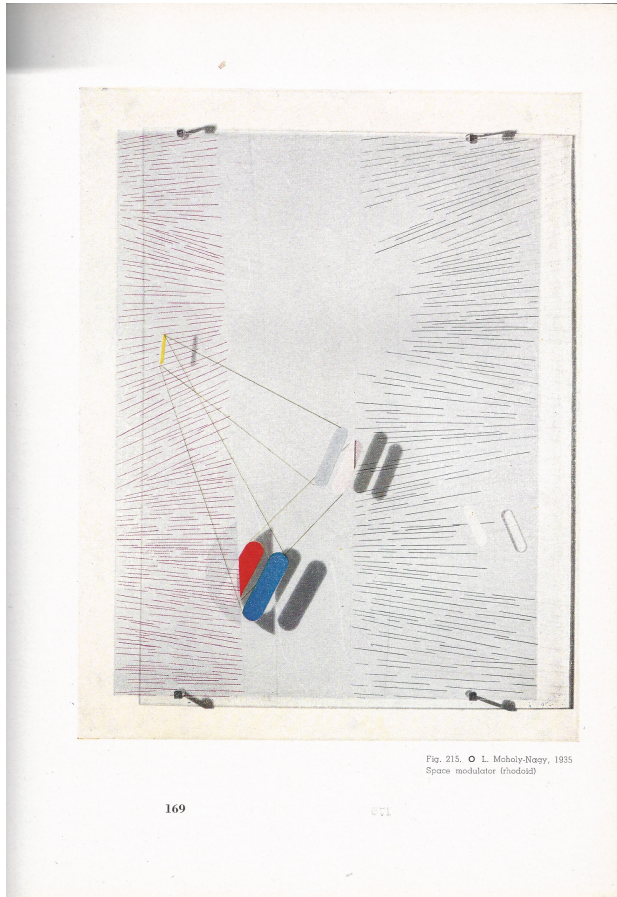


Fig. 215. O. L. Moholy-Nagy, 1935
Space modulator (rhododiz)

169

271

figure two: László Moholy-Nagy,
figure 215 on page 160 in the first
printing of *Vision in Motion* (dropped
from later printings)
(used by permission of Hattula
Moholy-Nagy)

figure three: László
Moholy-Nagy, figure 217
on page 172 in the first
printing of *Vision in
Motion* (dropped from later
printings)
(used by permission of
Hattula Moholy-Nagy)



Fig. 217. O. L. Moholy-Nagy, 1935
Moebius rings
(Duloy color photography)
For this experiment colored, transparent
cellophane and opaque white rings were
used. It was hoped that the dyes employed
in the emulsion would more faithfully
reproduce the color of the cellophane (which
uses the same type of industrial dyes)
than it would reproduce pigmented sur-
faces.

These examples show an investigation
of the genuine properties and behavior
of color photography

own medium, its new and genuine "quality". Then he will be able to begin with
fundamental experiments. This justifies the hope that indigenous results can be
developed as the work progresses.

Among the significant properties of color emulsion and of the photo apparatus is
the ability to mechanically reproduce fleeting light and colored reflections as well
as colored shadows (such as Goethe's complementary shadow effects) so that the
translation becomes ethereal, not pigment but colored light. In the past these could
neither be observed thoroughly by the eye nor recorded with exactness and true
quality by the easel painter. And exactly there is the territory of new and exciting
promise.

It is also possible to present color-light values not in order to create an illusion
of a naturalistic scene but to build up a new feeling of space through different colored
lights within a colored light display, as they appear, for example, in the "light box".
Promising experiments can be made with color filters, especially if some white

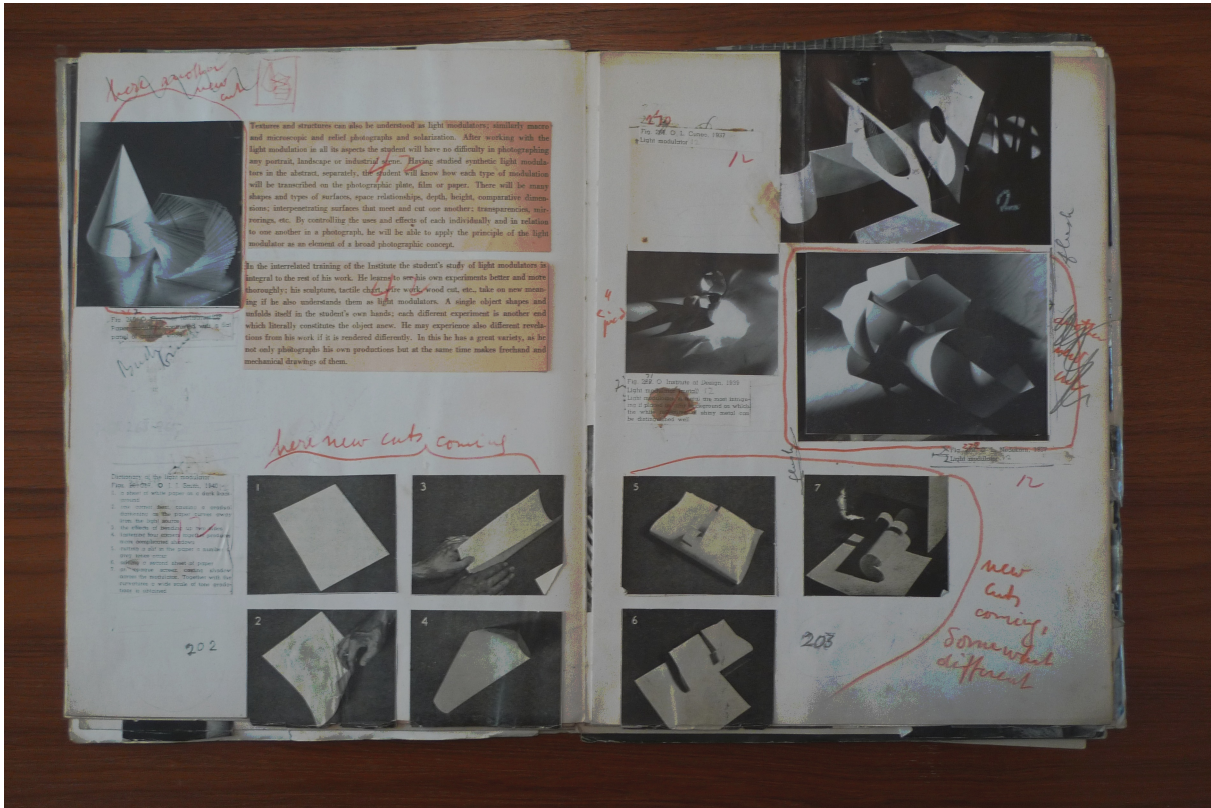


figure four: László Moholy-Nagy, re-working of preliminary printing of pages 201 and 202 of *Vision in Motion* (used by permission of Hattula Moholy-Nagy)