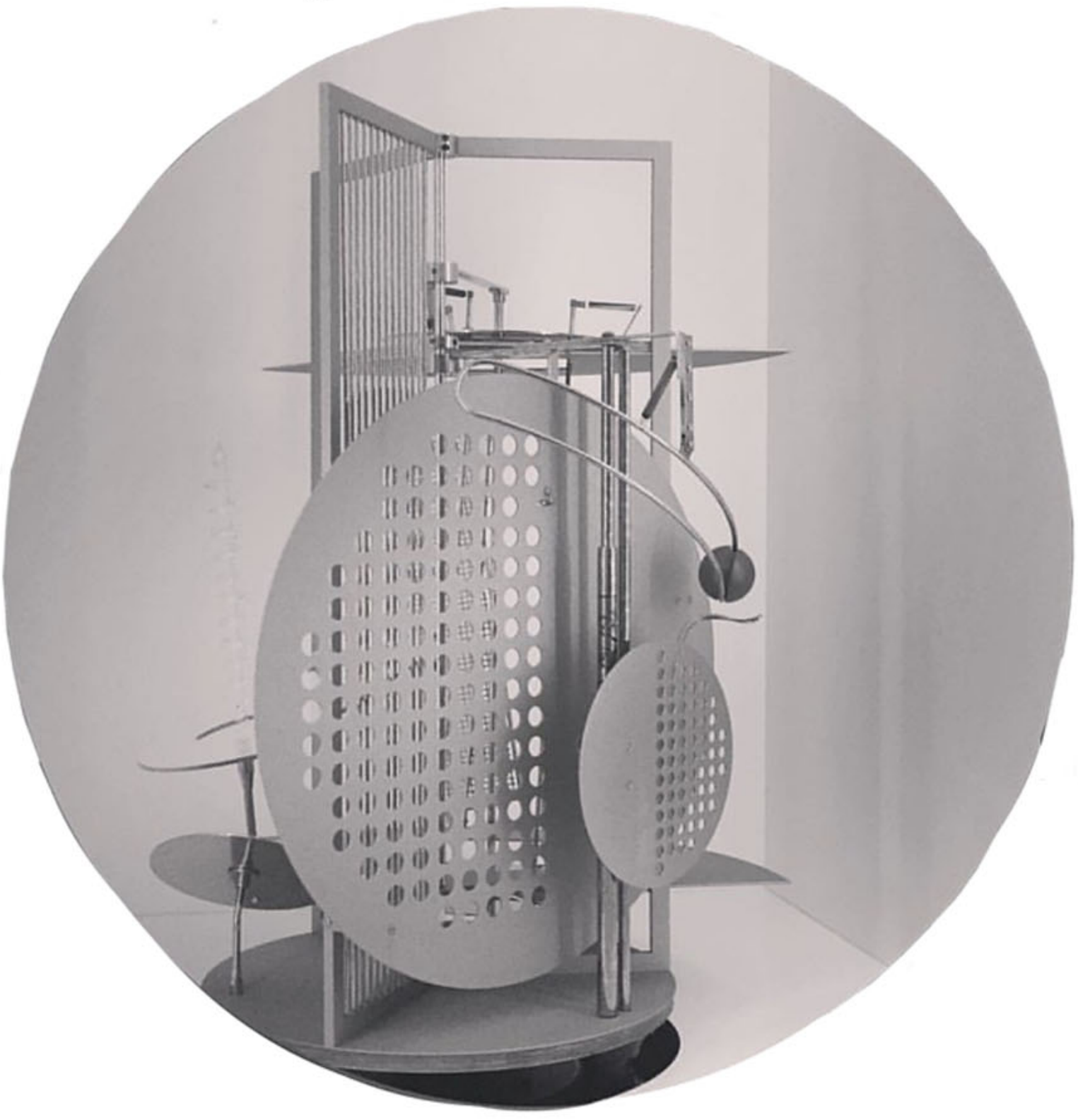
FUNCTIONALISM, INC.

by KENT SAGENDORPH



ONTARIO STREET in Chicago, like London's Pudding Lane, is a quaint part of a great city. Marching bravely eastward from Michigan Boulevard, it is lined with expensive shops and haughty apartments only to end, baffled, in a motley collection of warehouses.

Sandwiched between the rear exits of a garish night club and the blank brick bulk of a skating rink, one unadorned concrete warehouse has two signs on the door.

One says: "Corned Beef and Cabbage." The other proclaims in Latin script: "School of Design. Second Floor."

Entering, one may turn left and seek solace in corned beef amid the noisy clatter of a thick-cup restaurant full of truck-drivers. Or one may angle to the right and climb the steel-edged stairs, built for the boots of freighthandlers.

This unprepossessing place is the American survivor of a great international movement, the *Bauhaus* of Dessau—which filled the world with tubular chairs and sectional sofas. The *Bauhaus*, like so

many other things German, drew Hitler's ire because it was too intellectually independent. Hitler dissolved it in 1938.

Some fragments of the *Bauhaus* fled to America. Dr. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy escaped with some remnants of students' work and sought refuge in Chicago. There, in his concrete warehouse, Moholy-Nagy's movement has taken root.

The courage to lead this cultural exodus and the patience to keep it going in spite of appalling obstacles are apparent at once in the face and figure of this inexhaustible man. He is a 45-year-old Hungarian, bright-eyed, smiling, optimistic as a new father. He has learned English a little too fast, and can walk clear across a room before remembering to include a verb in his freight-train sentences.

THE SCHOOL has students, largely because the name Moholy-Nagy means a great deal to artists and designers the world over. They are adults—serious workers in the field of design. This includes all kinds of design; architectural, industrial, textile, everything that bridges the gap between the creative artist and the productive machine.

They do the oddest things. They seem to be building toys, and having a great time cranking little wheels, flapping flexible frame-

Moholy~Nagy

works of wire or paper or wood, carving Idaho potatoes out of wood and regarding them with profound deliberation. One student built a "smell-o-meter" which Moholy-Nagy insists is an odor organ; it will combine several selected odors, then separate them.

These things are serious experiments. This is the way his students recite their lessons. They are pioneers in their own fields, too. They study materials, stresses, textures and surfaces. They work with their hands ten hours for every hour spent in creative design. They must be able to build, finish and demonstrate any object they can design, which is vastly different from the mere ability to draw a sketch.

A chair might be just a double loop of shellacked plywood. It is steamed and shaped so that it has a seat, and a back, and stands on the floor. "Go on," says Moholy-Nagy. "Sit on it—it'll hold you." He plunks his two hundred pounds down into the fragile-appearing thing. The chair bends easily, giving a springlike effect. "Lift it," he says. It weighs a pound and can be built for a dollar.

It doesn't look much like a chair, but it is a chair. It will do the job for which chairs are sold. You can make an attractive coffee-table

out of that stuff for fifty cents, and it will serve the purpose just as well as a wrought-iron and marble masterpiece lovingly displayed at a fancy price in decorators' salons.

One of his students built an experimental wall. It isn't a wall at all; just a horizontal pipe near the ceiling with cords stretched down from it. For purposes merely of partition, it suffices. You can hang pictures on it and get ventilation through it, and you can buy new cords for a dollar or so when you tire of the color. It fulfills its job.

"It's functional," says Moholy-Nagy, proudly.

This word "functional" seems to trail after him like an echo. Everything his students design and build must be functional—it must serve the purpose for which it was designed.

In his white mechanic's coat he leads the way from one exhibit to another: past the print-shop, where advertising artists learn the mysteries of typography, past the rows of planers, shapers and lathes in the woodworking shop. In the stonecutting shop he pauses beside a pneumatic air-chisel. Removing the tip from the air-hose, he balances a screwdriver in the whistling blast of air. There it hangs, daintily.

"That's fun," he grins. "It's a stunt, to show the buoyancy of air. Who knows? Maybe some day we have chairs without legs—springed on columns of compressed air like this. Some day—"

Even the bleak old warehouse is functional. It is the commissary of a defunct chain of restaurants, and in the blackened rows of bake-

ovens Moholy-Nagy now stores big sheets of plywood at a constant temperature. Where long rows of heavy beef carcasses once chilled in huge refrigerators, he has built photographic darkrooms.

The students all begin with simple things. They build "hand-sculptures" which are just blobs of wood that balance easily, feel right to the touch and display the natural beauty of the material. Others are building things out of wire that look like mouse-traps. They are identified as structural experiments to prove the little-known strength of wire. Every student builds a device with all forms of surfaces arranged on it; prickly tacks, smooth fur, raspy sandpaper, velvety mohair. Then he draws a chart analyzing the "touch response" of each one. He will always know how to use any surface in its proper relationship.

As THEY progress, the work becomes more specialized. The usual course requires four years and leads to a bachelor's degree. An additional two years of intensive classroom and shop work will qualify a candidate for a degree in architecture. For busier artists there is a shorter two-year course and a dozen different one-semester evening combinations. Children have a Saturday morning class of their own, where they paint, model in clay and have a swell time.

The School of Design's faculty is one of Chicago's minor mysteries. It embraces so many famous names that it reads like an academic "Who's Who," but the secret lies in the sublimated fact that they all donate their skill for purely cul-

tural reasons. Nationally-known artists lecture there, free.

Moholy-Nagy and his disciples are experimenting with furniture, textiles and interiors so far in advance of current thought that their creations are sometimes breath-taking. Logic says that these implausible creations are right—that they do their jobs well, at a lower cost and with untold future possibilities.

But walls of yarn, springless chairs of plywood, three-dimensional pictures made of twisted celluloid—in *your* house? Who's crazy? And who's right? These students, in the future, will answer that. They will find a happy medium between Moholy-Nagy's brilliant concepts and the reluctance of the conservative citizen to go too far into "modernism."

Even the students, apparently, are functional.

—*Suggestions for further reading:*

INDUSTRIAL ART IN ENGLAND
by N. Pevsner $4.50
The Macmillan Company, New York

COLOR AND DESIGN IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS
by Elizabeth Burris-Meyer $5.00
Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York

HAVE WE AN AMERICAN ART?
by E. A. Jewell $2.75
Longmans, Green & Co., Inc., New York

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October, 1941: p.107