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László Moholy-Nagy: Experiments in Colour

Moholy-Nagy (1895 – 1946) was one of the most ardent seekers of the ‘New Vision’ among the early twentieth-century avant-gardists. His ongoing preoccupation with the phenomenon of light defined all periods of creativity, and his strength lay in his effortless skill in translating light and spatial dimensions from one medium to another.

In the early 1930s the first color processings became marketable. After he had mastered the different fields of black/white photography, it was only expected that Moholy would focus his creative energy on the next big issue among photographers: color photography. Not only in his Dutch and English emigration years, but also at the New Bauhaus and the Institute of Design in Chicago, for Moholy, the Hungarian Bauhaus master from Germany, color photography proved to be one of his most important media of artistic production.

-Jeanine Fiedler & Hattula Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy “Color in Transparency – Photographic Experimentation in Color 1934 - 1946”, Bauhaus Archiv/Steidl, 2006

The ten color photographs presented in this exhibition are from the years 1934 to 1946, almost all of Moholy’s presently known color photography consists of small format, 35 mm slides (diapositives) shot on Kodachrome film, around 200 of these 35 mm slides are known to exist. The limited and expensive technology of color printing at the time may have discouraged him from publishing these slides or making prints of them for exhibitions. These 35 mm Kodachrome slides were assembled by Moholy’s Daughter Hattula Moholy-Nagy from various sources including the family estate, the Slide Collection of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy at the University of California at Santa Cruz, the Collection of Helmut Franke, George Eastman House, the archive of Lolita Theobald at the Art Institute of Chicago, and Albert Szabo, an Institute of Design student during the 1940s, who rescued them from a wastebasket at the Institute of Design. Some are old Kodachromes, but many have the glass and silver cardboard mounts that indicate they were Moholy’s teaching and lecture slides.

There have been few presentations of Moholy-Nagy’s late period color photographs as publications, slides, projections and prints, however they have usually been upstaged by the earlier and better-known black/white photography. Among the most significant recent presentations are 20 color images in the Moholy-Nagy volume of Phaidon 55 Photos series on important photographers and 50 slides displayed as projections at the reconfigured Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, in 2004, and in the “Albers & Moholy-Nagy” exhibition organized by the Tate Modern, London, in 2006. In 2002-2004 Liz Deschenes made C-print enlargements of 27 slides, each image as an edition of 10 for the Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. These enlargements have been shown at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York 2002, 2003, 2007, at Galerie de France, Paris in 2012, and most recently at 1301PE, Los Angeles in 2018. Ten of these enlargements are being presented in this exhibition at Natalia Hug, some of these enlargements were printed as Exhibition Prints outside of the edition of 10 and have been marked as Estate Prints.

Generous thanks to the Moholy-Nagy Estate, Hattula Moholy-Nagy and Daniel Hug for making this exhibition possible.