PRESS RELEASE

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Lucia Moholy: Writing Photography’s History

On the occasion of the Bauhaus anniversary, the Museum Ludwig is dedicating a small presentation in the photography room to the photographer and historian of photography Lucia Moholy. Three newly acquired vintage prints by Lucia Moholy will also be shown for the first time. In addition to her photographs, letters from the Museum Ludwig archives will be presented that demonstrate the lively exchange between Moholy and the photography collector and historian Erich Stenger. They planned to write a book about the history of photography together around 1932. However, the rise of the Nazis drove Moholy into emigration, while Stenger became a sought-after expert in the field in Germany. Moholy ultimately published A Hundred Years of Photography: 1839–1939 on her own in London in 1939.

Her book became the bestseller she had hoped for and contained thoughts on photography that were radically new at the time: photography and painting were described as two equally valid ways of producing “abstract pictures,” for instance: “Photography (...) has been adopted by a few abstract painters as a new medium by means of which they tried to give shape to their feelings of balance. They are Man Ray, living in France, and Moholy-Nagy, living in U.S.A. They took up the method of ’Photogenic drawing,’ discovered by Schulze in 1727 and familiar to Fox Talbot before 1834, and applied it in their own way. (...) The question whether photography has been subjected to any influence of the abstract arts does not, therefore, arise with regard to these pictures. It was a process of assimilation, not of influence.”

As a photographer, Lucia Moholy herself had developed photograms (also known as photogenic drawing) and introduced the technique to her partner at the time, the painter and Bauhaus teacher László Moholy-Nagy. A photogram is a camera-less photograph in which objects are placed on light-sensitive paper and exposed. Their shadow is left behind as a bright area on the paper. As an (art) historian, she attributed the process to early photographic experiments, such as Johann Heinrich Schulze’s discovery of the photosensitivity of silver salts in the 18th century and William Henry Fox Talbot’s first photograms from the 1830s. Thus, she found the roots of creative photographic work in the prehistory of photography, which gave even more weight—a tradition—to the contemporary works. She also described photograms as equivalent to abstract tendencies in painting.
The pioneering nature of Moholy’s history of photography is particularly evident in comparison to Erich Stenger’s book *Die Photographie in Kultur und Technik: Ihre Geschichte während hundert Jahren* (Photography in culture and technology: Its history over one hundred years). In his view, photography was above all a technique that was used in many fields, but not a possibility for creative expression. He wrote about the photogram: “If one is content to capture the distribution of light and shadow of any object in a cone of light in an image, and thus to reproduce the object only in its silhouette, not as a photographic image, one arrives at the ‘photogram’ . . . . Occasionally, playfully charming silhouettes were created in this ‘camera-less’ technique, which have nothing in common with objective photography.” Stenger’s ironic, even condescending tone and his conservative taste in art make it hard to imagine a joint history of photography between him and Lucia Moholy. This makes the realization that they considered such an undertaking all the more surprising.

Their research was based on the Stenger Collection, which is now at the Museum Ludwig as part of the Agfa Collection. Here Moholy saw early photograms by Talbot, one of which is shown in the current presentation. Moholy also learned of Johann Heinrich Schulze’s early experiments through Erich Stenger. While Stenger did not succeed in making the connection to the “charming silhouettes” of his day, Moholy traced this broad arc—one more reason to pay tribute to her history at the Museum Ludwig.

Curator: Miriam Szwast
Website and social media
The Museum Ludwig will be posting about the exhibition on its social media channels with the hashtag #MLxMoholy.
Facebook/Instagram/Twitter/Vimeo: @MuseumLudwig
www.museum-ludwig.de