

The Museum of Modern Art

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NO. 12
FOR RELEASE:
FEBRUARY 2, 1974

KERTESZ, RODCHENKO, AND MOHOLY-NAGY: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE COLLECTION

Forty photographs made in the 1920s and 1930s by three of this century's most important photographers -- André Kertész, Alexander Rodchenko and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy -- will be on view from February 2 through April 7 in the Steichen Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition has been selected entirely from the Museum's Photography Collection by Dennis Longwell, Assistant Curator of Photography.

Several factors unite the work of these photographers. "Most important, perhaps," according to Dennis Longwell, "is the dizzying vantage point embodied in the vision many of them record: in pointing the camera down at the earth, the horizon line is displaced or completely eliminated, and the result for the viewer is a kind of vertigo at once disturbing and pleasurable. It is as if one suddenly were able to fly."

Also functioning in many of the photographs is a tension between the actual flatness of the picture plane and the illusion of three-dimensional space. The use of distortion, abstraction, negative images, and the cutting off of objects by the picture frame so they are no longer recognizable, all emphasize the picture as a flat pattern. The deep space provided by the use of a high vantage point contradicts the flatness while at the same time the unusual viewpoint makes orientation to the space difficult.

All three photographers were born in Central Europe within four years of one another -- Rodchenko in St. Petersburg in 1891, Kertész in Hungary in 1894 and Moholy-Nagy also in Hungary in 1895. Both Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy were influenced by Malevich and Russian Constructivism. Rodchenko renounced

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painting in 1922 for the more "socially useful" activities of photography and design; he died in Moscow in 1956. Moholy-Nagy moved to Berlin and from 1923 to 1928 taught at the Bauhaus. In 1938 he founded the School of Design in Chicago, where he taught until his death in 1946. Moholy-Nagy explored various uniquely photographic techniques such as negative prints, photograms and photo-montage. Kertész moved to Paris in 1925, where he met and photographed many artists and writers. Since 1936 he has lived and worked in New York City.

In spite of similarities among the three men, there are differences, notes Dennis Longwell. "Kertész's [photographs] appear more elegant, supple, and diverse. He uses his camera, too, not as they have (as a machine for better seeing or a knife to dissect society), but as a beloved extension of his own self, holding it, one imagines, as carefully as one holds a child."

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