CHAPTER 2
THE LANGUAGE OF CONSTRUCTION

by Briony Fer

Introduction

In 1924 two metal constructions were illustrated side by side in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, the Purist magazine that we discussed in Chapter 1. One was by the Russian Constructivist Konstantin Medunetsky (Plate 77), the other by László Moholy-Nagy (Plate 78), a Hungarian artist then working at the Weimar Bauhaus. No title or context was given for either of the works, but the juxtaposition suggested that they had something in common.

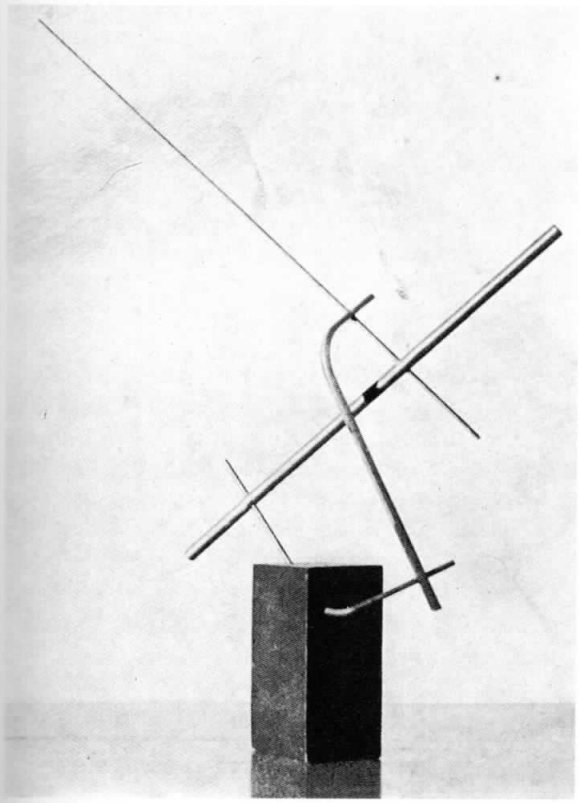

Plate 77 Konstantin Medunetsky, construction illustrated (untitled) in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no.21, 1924. Da Capo Press Reprint, 1968, New York.

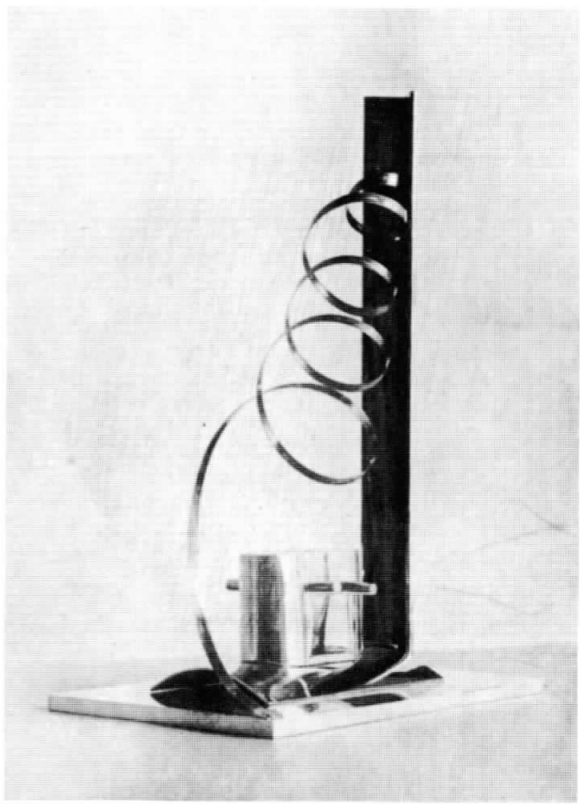

Plate 78 László Moholy-Nagy, construction illustrated (untitled) in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no.21, 1924. Da Capo Press Reprint, 1968, New York.

That common ground is my starting-point. For here we have two works produced in quite different circumstances but that were thought to share something significant in their appearance – in the way in which they were put together, in the materials they were made of and in their geometric form. The connection between them was not simply that they were two pieces of sculpture, but two objects of *construction*. And that idea – of the modern art work *as* construction – is one of the issues I'll be discussing. For 'construction' was a loaded term, and it pervaded the language of art in the inter-war period. It implied a particular view of modernity, not only in terms of what was considered 'modern' in art, but of how modern art related to a rationalized, modern culture.

Medunetsky's work is now lost, but it may have been made of more than one metal, and even painted in parts, like his *Spatial Construction* (Plate 80) of about the same date. Moholy-Nagy also used metal, attaching a spiral to a vertical plane (Plate 79 shows this more clearly). Although both artists arranged and shaped the metal elements, they made no attempt to mask the fact that these were modern industrial materials: Medunetsky used metal rods, which he either left straight or bent at an angle; Moholy-Nagy used nickel-plated iron. These were materials that did not conventionally belong to the realm of art, but that did conventionally belong to the realm of industrial production. What each artist made with these materials was an abstract construction concerned with basic formal elements, the line or the spiral, in space. This begs the question, to which I shall return, of what marked these works out as constructions, and why certain types of material were considered appropriate to 'construction', while others were not.

L'Esprit Nouveau ('the new spirit') claimed these works as the products of *un esprit de construction* ('a spirit of construction'), where art was harnessed to the larger processes of modernization – industry, science and technology. Whatever their differences, they shared certain features in that they, like the other art works and industrial products illustrated in the magazine, expressed the 'constructive' as the ideal form of the modern; their formal similarities were more significant and of greater value than the differences in the material and ideological conditions in which they were made. What mattered in this ideal form of the modern were order, clarity, discipline, control and the Classical, which won out over the negative terms of the decorative and the ornamental, the fugitive and the incidental. David Batchelor discussed in Chapter 1 how the Purist aesthetic was bound to the rhetoric of the post-war 'call to order' and the French tradition. Yet the language of construction was by no means circumscribed by this rhetoric, or by Paris. And my aim in this chapter is to consider why the language of construction was so compelling to a much wider range of artists, working in radically differing social and political contexts.

For example, although Russia, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire had all experienced revolutions at the end of the First World War, the results of these upheavals differed considerably. Following the successful Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Lenin drew Russia out of the war, having won victory on the platform of 'peace, land and bread'. The German revolution that followed almost a year later in November 1918 was defeated, but it brought down the Kaiser and put in place, not Communism – as many on the German Left, as well as in Moscow, had hoped – but an unstable social democracy. In both countries, the overthrow of authoritarian rulers was accompanied by acute problems of recovery from the war; and in Russia, the dismantling of the Tsarist autocracy and the transformation to Communism entailed massive social and political upheaval.

For many artists on the Left in the 1920s, including Moholy-Nagy, the single most significant reference point was no longer the Parisian avant-garde but the revolutionary connotations of construction, with revolutionary Russia as the new symbol of advanced culture. Yet what Moholy-Nagy understood by construction was in practice at odds with what it meant to Medunetsky and the Russian Constructivists themselves. Despite the ground shared and the similarity of appearance, Moholy-Nagy's *Nickel Construction* was still produced as an *art* object, whereas Medunetsky's, ostensibly at least, was not.

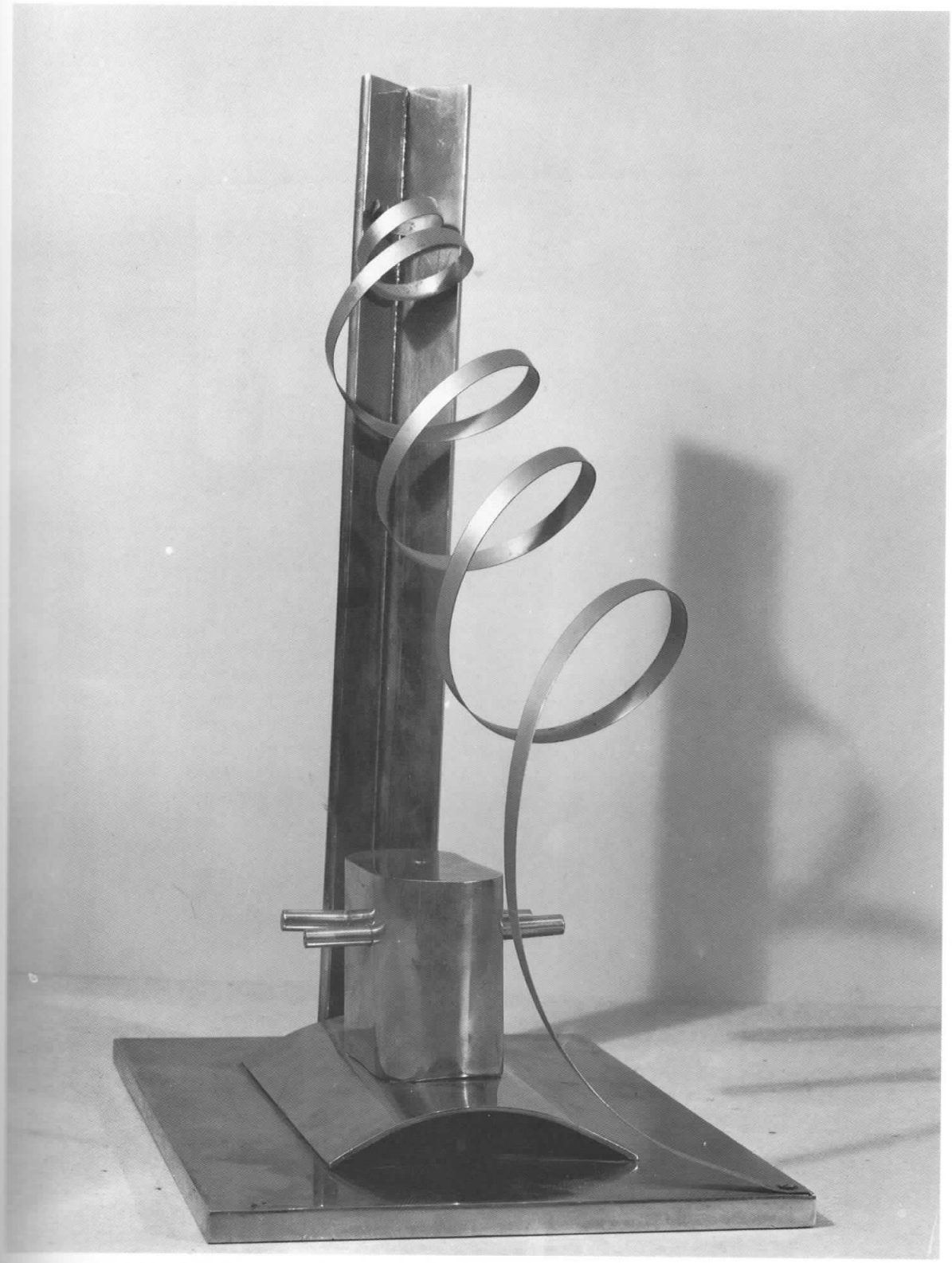

Plate 79 László Moholy-Nagy, *Nickel Construction*, 1921, nickel-plated iron, welded, 36 x 18 x 24 cm. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Mrs Sibyl Moholy-Nagy.

Plate 80 Konstantin Medunetsky, *Spatial Construction*, 1920, tin, brass, iron and aluminium, 45 cm high. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; gift of Collection Société Anonyme.

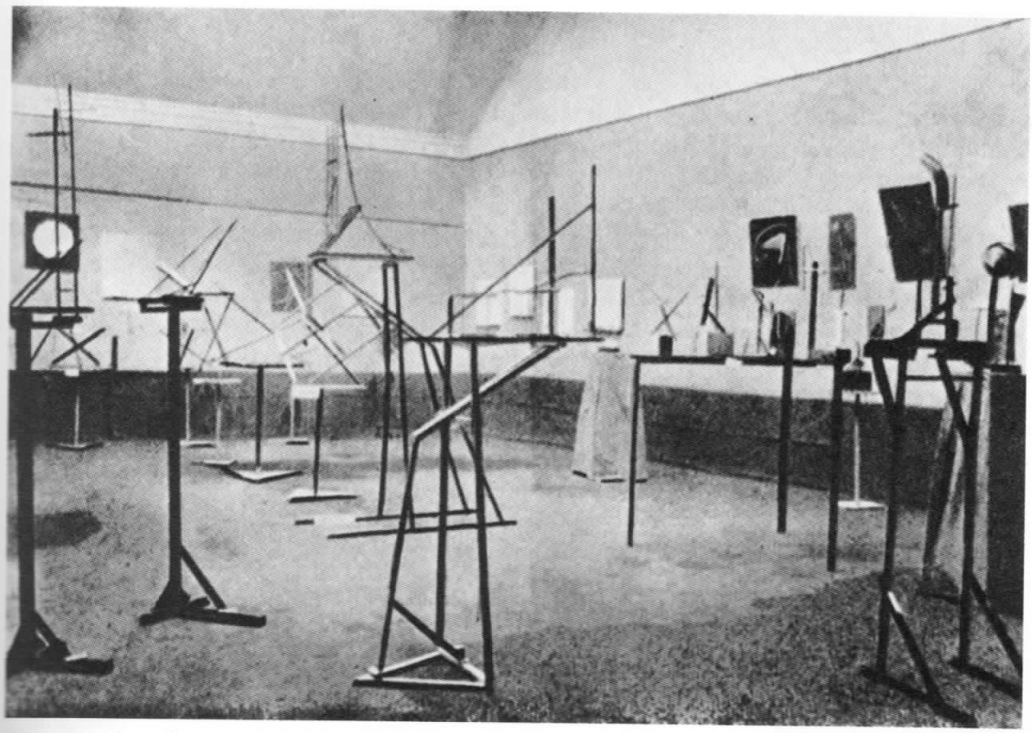

Plate 81 Installation of the third OBMOKhU exhibition, Moscow, May 1921. 'Veshch' no.1/2, 1922, British Library Cup.4085.g.25. Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board.

Medunetsky's constructions had been exhibited in Moscow in 1921 at an exhibition of so-called 'laboratory work'. This was the third exhibition of the OBMOKhU group, the Society of Young Artists (see Plate 81). The photograph appears to show an installation of an exhibition of art works; yet the rationale behind the group show was that these pieces were 'experiments' in the scientific sense. They were not shown simply as art objects, but as work in progress that did not fit into the category of 'art'; they may have been exhibited *like* art works, but they were not to be read *as* art works. Aiming to show 'practical ways of working and using new materials' (Vladimir Stenberg, quoted in C. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.96), the OBMOKhU group used industrial materials to make 'constructions' rather than 'art objects' (by which they meant easel painting and figurative sculpture).

In this context, Medunetsky's work in three dimensions was an experiment on the basic material and spatial elements of construction. The premise behind it and the other works in the exhibition was that a rational, calculable system of construction could be investigated scientifically, and that the principles established could then be applied in utilitarian work, in what we would now call design. This investigation was considered specialized work, whereby artists could become involved in the processes of production under the transformed conditions of the new society. After the Revolution of 1917, art had increasingly come to be questioned as a viable category; easel art was seen by many avant-garde artists and theorists as the product of individualist, bourgeois societies, and inappropriate to a society organized on collective, proletarian bases. In March 1921, the First Working Group of Constructivists had produced a programme outlining their strategy, in which they identified their aim 'of achieving the communistic expression of material structures' ('The Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists', 1921, quoted in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.94). The basic structural tenets established in 'laboratory work' would be applied to produce useful goods; and this work in

'intellectual and material production' would play a vital part in the construction of communist culture.

Moholy-Nagy, as I've said, took a somewhat different approach. He did not seek to abandon 'art' altogether in the way that some of the Russians did, but instead advocated a new unity between art and technology. He saw himself as part of a far wider 'constructive' movement, in terms that were loosely compatible with the way in which his work was represented in *L'Esprit Nouveau*. In *The Book of New Artists* that he wrote with Lajos Kassák in 1922, he juxtaposed one of his own works with a construction by the Russian Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko and a photograph of the OBMOKhU exhibition (Plate 82). Though his work was identified with the Russian Constructivists, Moholy-Nagy worked with different resources – with a Constructivist vocabulary but also with elements of a Dadaist mistrust of the authentic aesthetic object. Although still within the realm of art, *Nickel Construction* seems fairly close to the edge of how far art could go in the direction of technology without losing its identity completely. This aspect is accentuated if we look at Moholy-Nagy's work in the context of Theo Van Doesburg's Dada magazine *Mécano*, where it had been entitled *Nickel-Plastik* (*Nickel Sculpture*) (Plate 83). Here it is the incongruous figure of the spiral that assumes priority, rather than the 'constructive'

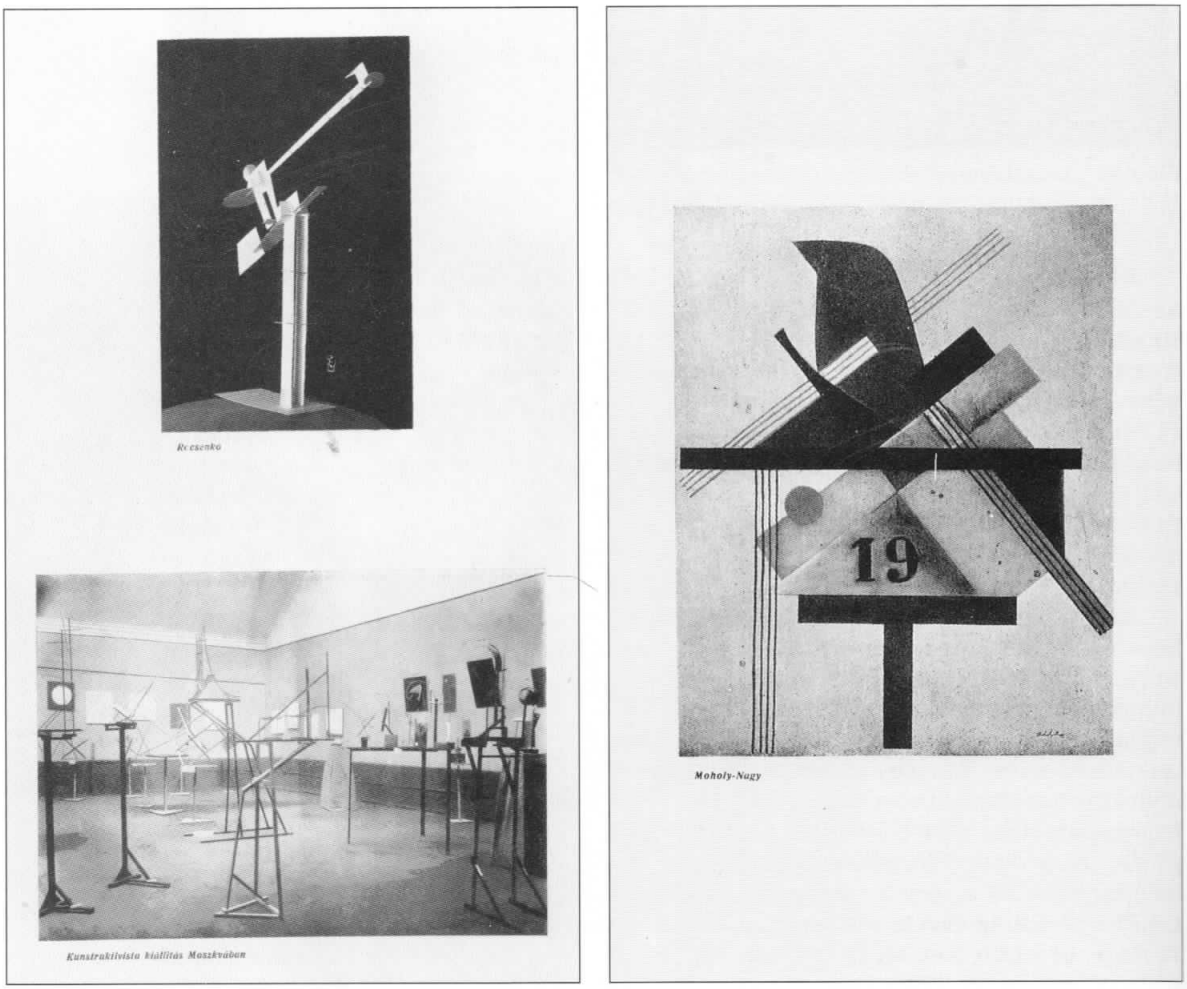

Plate 82 Double-page spread from L. Kassák and L. Moholy-Nagy, *Új Müvèszek könyve* (*The Book of New Artists*), 1922, showing (left) work by Aleksandr Rodchenko and the third OBMOKhU exhibition, and (right) a work by László Moholy-Nagy. National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

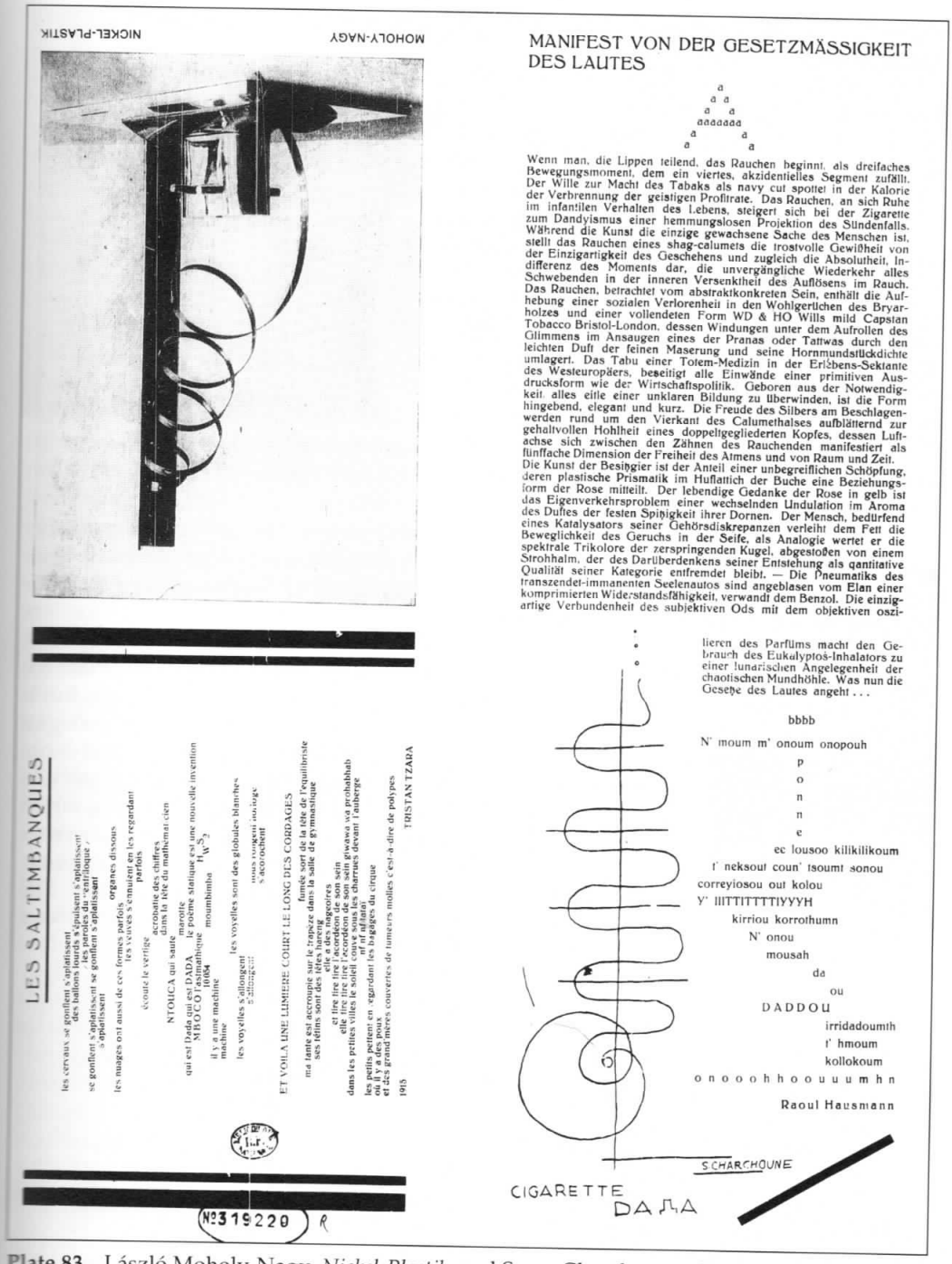

Plate 83 László Moholy-Nagy, *Nickel-Plastik*, and Serge Charchoune, *Cigarette Dada*, in an unfolded spread of four pages from *Mécano*, no.Blau, 1922. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

relationship of art and technology that would be emphasized in *L'Esprit Nouveau*. In this number of *Mécano* of 1922, Raoul Hausmann's poem of jumbled sounds and letters tumbles down the spiral of Serge Charchoune's drawing, *Cigarette Dada*, formally echoing the spiral of Moholy-Nagy's construction.

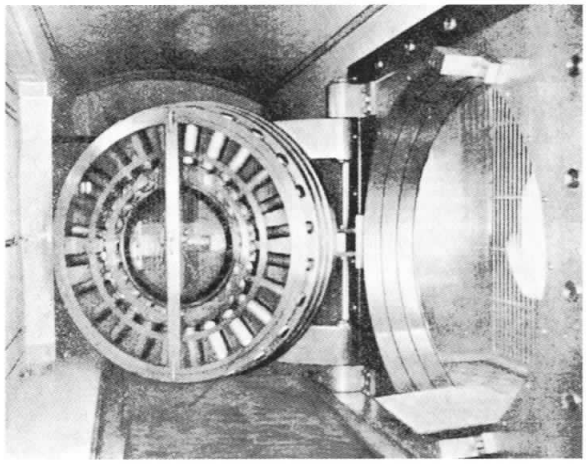

Plate 84 A bank vault, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no.21, 1924. Da Capo Press Reprint, 1968, New York.

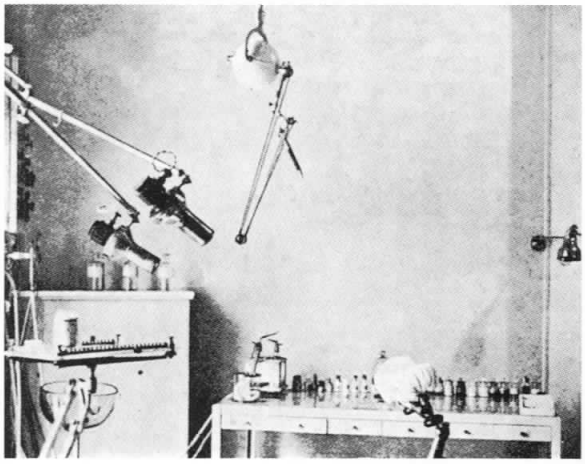

Plate 85 Dental equipment, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no.21, 1924. Da Capo Press Reprint, 1968, New York.

In *L'Esprit Nouveau*, on the other hand, Medunetsky's and Moholy-Nagy's constructions appeared as part of a series of illustrations that included a safe door of a bank vault (Plate 84) and Purist paintings by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) and Amédée Ozenfant. Although the links were only implicit, these images followed on from Ozenfant and Jeanneret's article 'Formation de l'optique moderne' ('Formation of a modern optics'), where analogies were drawn between Roneo filing cabinets, dental equipment (Plate 85) and modern works of art. The selection of images may appear highly idiosyncratic, but it corresponded to a view of modernity exemplified in a wide range of artefacts. Analogies operated on a number of levels – between formally similar types of object, and more broadly between modern utilitarian objects and modern works of art. Where contrast was intended, it was spelled out clearly. For example, the geometric typewritten form, which corresponds to 'our natural functions', was contrasted with the (disparaged) handwritten 'tortures de l'informe' ('the tortures of formlessness') (Plate 86). Fear of the 'informe' or 'formless' was the constant underside of the preoccupation with construction. The comparison was made on the assumption that human beings function rationally, like a

Théâtre.

JE VOUDRAIS JOUER .....

Il y a " Le Tombeau sous l'Arc de Triomphe". J'en parlerai. Déjà on peut en juger plus tranquillement, les passions se décantant assez vite, surtout lorsque-ainsi que cela s'est produit pour la pièce de M. Paul Raynal - adversaires et amis ne sont ni les uns ni les autres convaincus à la manière de pièces de bois. Le Tombeau a été attaqué au nom de préjugés puérilsanimes ; il a été défendu pour des raisons d'"esprit de guerre" devant lesquelles nous devons nous incliner avec respect, mais devant lesquelles l'art n'a

La machine à écrire elle-même affranchit notre œil des tortures de l'informe ; la géométrie de la typographie se conforme mieux à nos fonctions naturelles.

Plate 86 Examples of handwritten and typewritten script in A. Ozenfant and C.-E. Jeanneret, 'Formation de l'optique moderne', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no.21, 1924. Da Capo Press Reprint, 1968, New York.

machine; the typewriter is a kind of prosthetic object that improves on the human hand as an instrument for writing; the 'informe' is tortuous and needs to be suppressed, because it does not correspond to use.

It has been suggested that only the aesthetic dimension, the formal trappings, of Russian Constructivism were assimilated in the West, and not its utilitarian base – in short, that Constructivism was understood wrongly. The way in which Medunetsky's work was almost casually placed next to Moholy-Nagy's in *L'Esprit Nouveau* appears to confirm this, by suggestion at least. The juxtaposition seems to confer the status of an *art* object equally on both works, and to show them as examples of a 'constructive' tendency that extended across national boundaries. Certainly the intention was to identify a common purpose, and to this end Le Corbusier in particular made many contacts with artists and commentators outside France and gave their work exposure in *L'Esprit Nouveau*. The magazine was to be a showcase of new work from home and abroad, and not simply a consolidation of a French tradition. Notably, it published articles on the changes in revolutionary Russia at a time when, in France in particular, such information was hard to come by. Simply to say that Russian Constructivism was understood 'wrongly' does not really help us to explain the powerful affinity that was perceived between the works as 'constructions'. Nor, I think, should we assume too hastily that the Constructivist rejection of 'art' *per se* was straightforward, when it may be that the status of objects as 'laboratory work' was at least ambiguous. And while *L'Esprit Nouveau* did not reject art in favour of utilitarian work, it celebrated – and made central to its aesthetic – utilitarian, everyday artefacts. It is also doubtful that the Constructivist works produced in the West, such as Moholy-Nagy's, were 'simply' art objects, if that is to imply that their status is entirely secure. Moholy-Nagy may have produced his work in different circumstances, but it may also have fitted uneasily with established ideas as to what an art object should be and how it related to other utilitarian objects.

Some real or imagined relationship between 'art' and 'utility' seems to be at stake in all these examples, despite the diverse ways in which the relationship was proposed. More generally, construction can be seen as a redefinition of the art object in these symbolic terms, but in ways that varied according to context. The question we shall consider here is why the language of construction seemed so powerful, and could translate into different cultures – although, as with all translations, its meaning was transformed in the process. Why was geometric form considered not only appropriate but such a potent expression of the modern? These questions hinge on the relations between 'high' and 'mass' culture, utility and decoration, the art object and the manufactured object, geometric form and 'formlessness', pure form and the capacity of forms and materials to trigger associations. I begin by looking at Russian Constructivism and the various meanings of 'construction' current in the years that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, when the language of construction was identified with revolutionary change. I go on to consider 'construction' in the broader European context as the site of a mythology of the modern, in which ideas of technological change and social liberation were interwoven with a belief in the power of geometric form, and in which a geometric, abstract art was part of a Utopian project.