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## A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words: László Moholy-Nagy and the Photobook

Sarah Hill

In this paper in the form of a visual exhibition, I will examine Hungarian modern artist László Moholy-Nagy's 1925 photobook *Malerei Fotografie Film* (Painting Photography Film), Moholy-Nagy's influence on other important photobooks of the era, and the important 1929 *Film und Foto* (Film and Photography) exhibition, known as *FiFo*, in Stuttgart, Germany. I will draw particularly on Pepper Stetler's 2015 book *Stop Reading! Look! Modern Vision and the Weimar Photographic Book* in order to discuss the significance of Moholy-Nagy's work and ideas within the context of the genre of photobook, a new type of book in which photographs were dominant and integrated with text that emerged in the 1920s, and the important *FiFo* exhibition that showcased Moholy-Nagy's ideas. Moholy-Nagy was a twentieth-century artist who is particularly known for his work in the fields of photography and film, especially in the New Vision and International Constructivism art movements in the 1920s. He was also an influential figure at the Staatliches Bauhaus, the Bauhaus school of art and design, where he was a professor. Moholy-Nagy is known for his unique perspective on photography and his groundbreaking work in this medium. In his own photography, he took snapshots from different perspectives and used unusual techniques to give perspectives of the world rarely seen at the time. As part of his philosophy on photography and cameras, he believed that technology could aid humans in seeing optical phenomena that they would otherwise not be able to physically see. Moholy-Nagy's *Painting Photography Film* was an innovative photobook that also details some of his ideas about color, painting, and chiaroscuro. In *Painting Photography Film*, Moholy-Nagy writes about the usefulness of the camera to extend human vision, "For if people had been aware of these potentialities they would have been able with the aid of the photographic camera to *make visible* existences which cannot be perceived or taken in by our optical instrument, the eye; i.e., *the photographic camera can either complete or supplement our optical instrument, the eye.*"<sup>1</sup> Since humans have a limited optical spectrum and can only see certain types of light, Moholy claims that the camera can bridge the perceptible gap between the human eyes and brain and reality. In addition, he believed that the camera gave a true, purely "objective" view of the world because it can capture "distortions, deformations and foreshortenings."<sup>2</sup> Moholy-Nagy believed that photography could allow humans to see what was invisible to them before and therefore offer a new world view to people.

*Painting Photography Film* explores these and other concepts of movement and light through photographic illustrations and innovative graphic design. It was a trailblazing photobook not only for detailing Moholy-Nagy's ideas about photography, but also because it revolutionized typography and book design by changing the way that information is organized, including by adding visual messages to written communication.<sup>3</sup> The book included types of photographs that had not previously been used in an artistic context and new photographic technologies, such as photograms, x-rays, telescopic photos, photomontages, and split-second exposures, among

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<sup>1</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (1925; repr., Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987), 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Pepper Stetler, *Stop Reading! Look! Modern Vision and the Weimar Photobook* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 23–24.

others.<sup>4</sup> Moholy-Nagy's revolutionary typography included new methods of displaying photography alongside text in the work. In 1925, he coined the term "typophoto" to describe a new form of visual communication in the 1920s that would fully integrate text and photo, describing typophotos as "the visually most exact rendering of communication" because of this combination of visual and verbal communication.<sup>5</sup> Many of the photographs in *Painting Photography Film* were deliberately paired to showcase Moholy-Nagy's belief that the camera is an extension of the human eye and that it depicts the world in an unadulterated view, which people cannot see on their own because of physical limitations and their inclination to use their imaginations when making art. Of these illustrations, this paper will focus especially on his photograph pairings of *Palucca* and *Untitled (Renntempo Gebannt)* (Untitled, Racing Tempo Immobilized), along with *Sternspektren mit Objektivprisma aufgenommen* (Star Spectrum Photographed with a Prismatic Lens) and *Spiralnebel in den Jagdhunden* (Spiral Nebula in The Dogs), in order to demonstrate Moholy-Nagy's photographic philosophies.

The *FiFo* exhibition was an art exhibition sponsored by the association of German artists, architects, and designers the German Werkbund and took place in Stuttgart, Germany during the summer of 1929. *FiFo* incorporated Moholy-Nagy's view of the camera extending human vision and as a more efficient way of capturing the world, as its organizers wanted to disseminate his perspective on modern photography and to explore its place in contemporary visual culture in the exhibition. Moholy-Nagy was also inspirational for the exhibition displays, and his designs were used in creating them. At *Film und Foto*, the photographs were seen as furthering "objective" forms of knowledge, such as that of science, medicine, criminology and sports, and not the dominant photographic style at the time (Pictorialism), thus expanding Moholy-Nagy's notion that photography is a tool to extend human vision by capturing the world as it really is. For example, the photographs at *FiFo* were not hung as fine art pieces as if they were in an art gallery, but rather as functional objects usually without being mounted or framed in a conventional way.<sup>6</sup> They were attached to cardboard frames (to protect the photographs when they were shipped to different exhibition locations) and attached to the wall with glue, pins or tape.<sup>7</sup> Moholy-Nagy's photographic ideas and many of his works were incorporated into multiple aspects of the exhibition, along with his design sensibility for the displays in *FiFo*.<sup>8</sup> He designed the first room at *FiFo*, in which he combined the concepts of light and history; for the light portion, there may have been a light bar to hang X-ray photographs on them (this would have demonstrated his idea of the importance of light in photography).<sup>9</sup> For the historical part,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Bajac, "The Age of Distraction: Photography and Film," in *Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949. An Online Project of the Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 10.

<https://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Bajac.pdf>; Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Stetler, *Stop Reading!* 41.

<sup>7</sup> Olivier Lugon, "Prints from the Thomas Walther Collection and German Exhibitions around 1930," in *Object:Photo*, 6.

<https://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Lugon.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Stetler, *Stop Reading!* 39.

<sup>9</sup> Lugon, "Prints from the Thomas Walther Collection and German Exhibitions around 1930," 2.

Moholy designed an homage to early photography and featured the work of the historian and photochemist Erich Stenger.<sup>10</sup>

In concordance with *FiFo*, three new photo books were published: *Foto Auge: 76 Fotos der Zeit* (Photo Eye: 76 Photos of the Time) by Jan Tschichold and Franz Roh, Werner Gräff's *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* (Here Comes the New Photograph!), and Hans Richter's *Filmgegner von heute, Filmfreunde von morgen* (Film Enemies of Today, Film Friends of Tomorrow). These particular photo books were meant to be extensions of the exhibition catalogue, didactic primers and informative pamphlets that explored the new photographic techniques and philosophies of the 1920s.<sup>11</sup> The new genre of the photobook was hugely influential and showcased in *FiFo* because it had radically changed photography and typography in popular publications such as the magazine by changing the way information was distributed to the viewer: most significantly, as mentioned, it mixed visual and written messages. Roh and Tschichold's photobook published concurrently with the *FiFo* exhibition was originally printed in three languages, German, French and English, in order to expand its audience base. Like *FiFo* as a whole, it was influenced by Moholy-Nagy's work and photographic philosophy, as they both tried to give the audience a new way of seeing the world and also show modern visual culture in a new light. Roh and Tschichold were concerned about how photographs in their publication were viewed, not necessarily with the contents of the works themselves, and an example of this is their photographic juxtaposition of *The Orator* and *Russian Worker Assembly*. In this pairing, as I will discuss, Roh and Tschichold show the potential of and connection between the modern art mediums of photography and film. In the visual exhibit that follows, I will use five sets of images, including photographic juxtapositions from the above-mentioned photo books and other images, as examples of Moholy-Nagy's notions of photography and how he believed it could change his contemporaries' ways of seeing the world, as well as how his influence was manifested in the *FiFo* exhibition and the new photobooks published along with the exhibition.

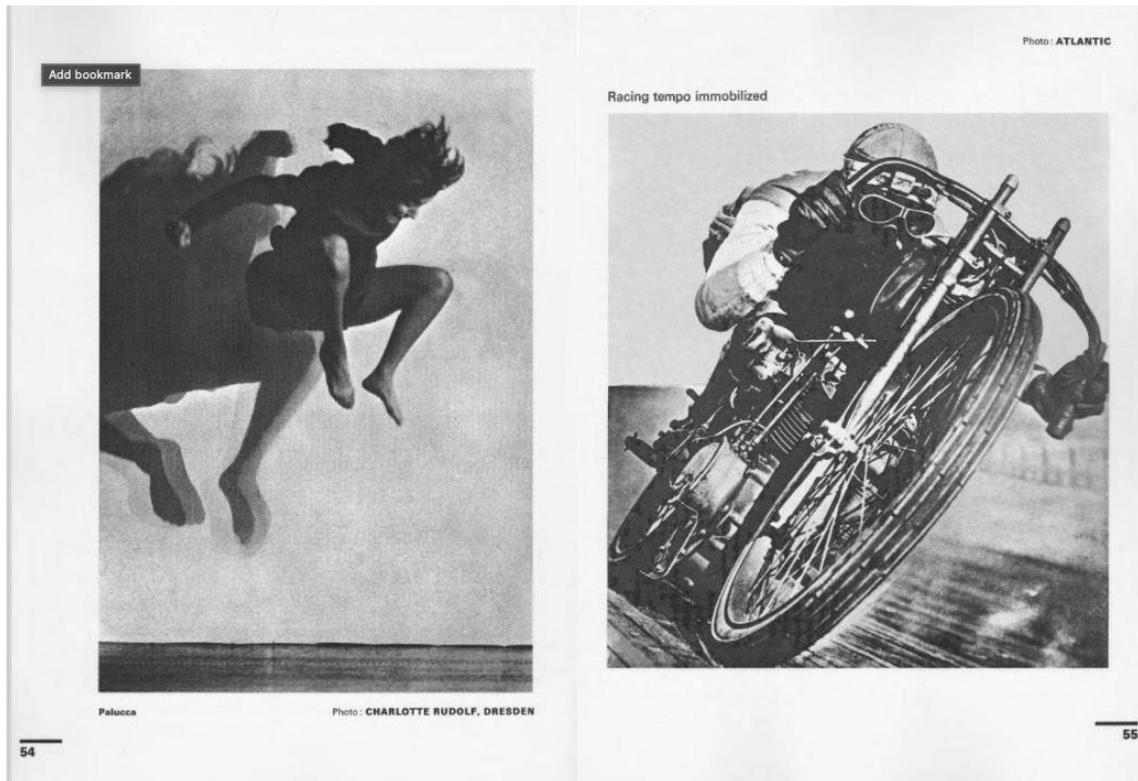
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<sup>10</sup> Inka Graeve Ingelmann, "Mechanics and Expression: Franz Roh and the New Vision—A Historical Sketch," in *Object:Photo*, 3.

<https://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/GraeveIngelmann.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Stetler, *Stop Reading!* 42.

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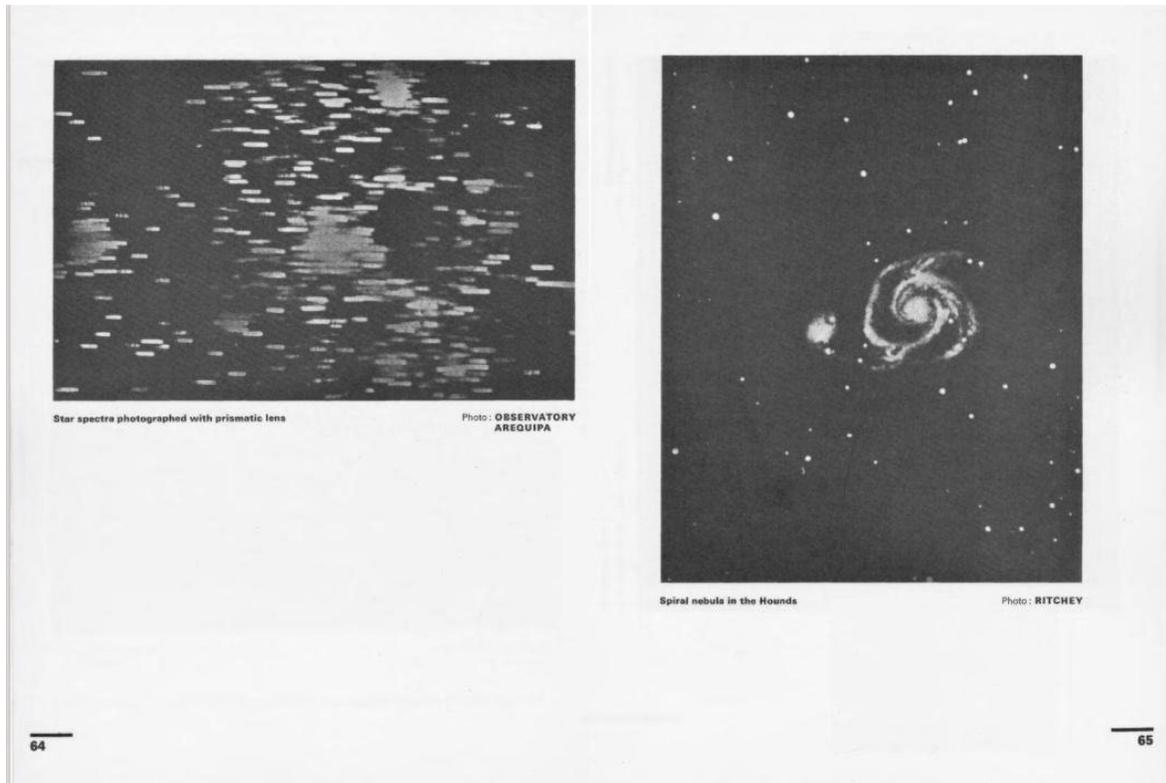


**Figure 1:** *Palucca* and *The Motorcyclist*, in László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, London: London Humphries, 1967 (originally published by the Bauhaus in 1925), pages 54-55. Public Domain.

Moholy-Nagy paired *Palucca* and *Untitled (Racing Tempo Immobilized)* together in order to demonstrate important aspects of his photographic philosophy. *Palucca* is a photograph that was originally captured by Charlotte Rudolf, showing the dancer Gret Palucca in mid-jump. *Palucca* was also used in Dada artist Hannah Höch's assemblage, *Scrapbook*.<sup>12</sup> *Untitled (Racing Tempo Immobilized)* is paired with *Palucca* in *Painting Photography Film* because both demonstrate Moholy-Nagy's notion that cameras capture time and motion differently than human eyes. *Untitled (Racing Tempo Immobilized)* was a photo from the magazine *The Atlantic* and depicts a motorcyclist in mid-motion: Moholy removes all doubt that this particular photo was merely an ordinary still snapshot by including the caption "racing speed immobilized" alongside it. Moholy-Nagy used these images as visual evidence for his idea that the camera extends human vision by showing the world like people could never see with their eyes alone because of physical limitations; the camera captures motion differently than that of eyes because it captures a still, comprehensible shot of the motorcyclist and Palucca that humanity's ocular instruments and brains would perceive as just a blur. *Untitled (Racing Tempo Immobilized)* follows a similar concept as *Palucca*: both are meant to show a reconstruction of time, as the photo captures a moment in

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

time in which both the subjects are depicted as still, even when in motion.<sup>13</sup> By doing this, Moholy-Nagy plays with the concept of time, as he depicts things that would be physically impossible in nature (i.e. Palucca being suspended in air for eternity without support), to make it seem as if the audience is “stuck in a moment of time.”

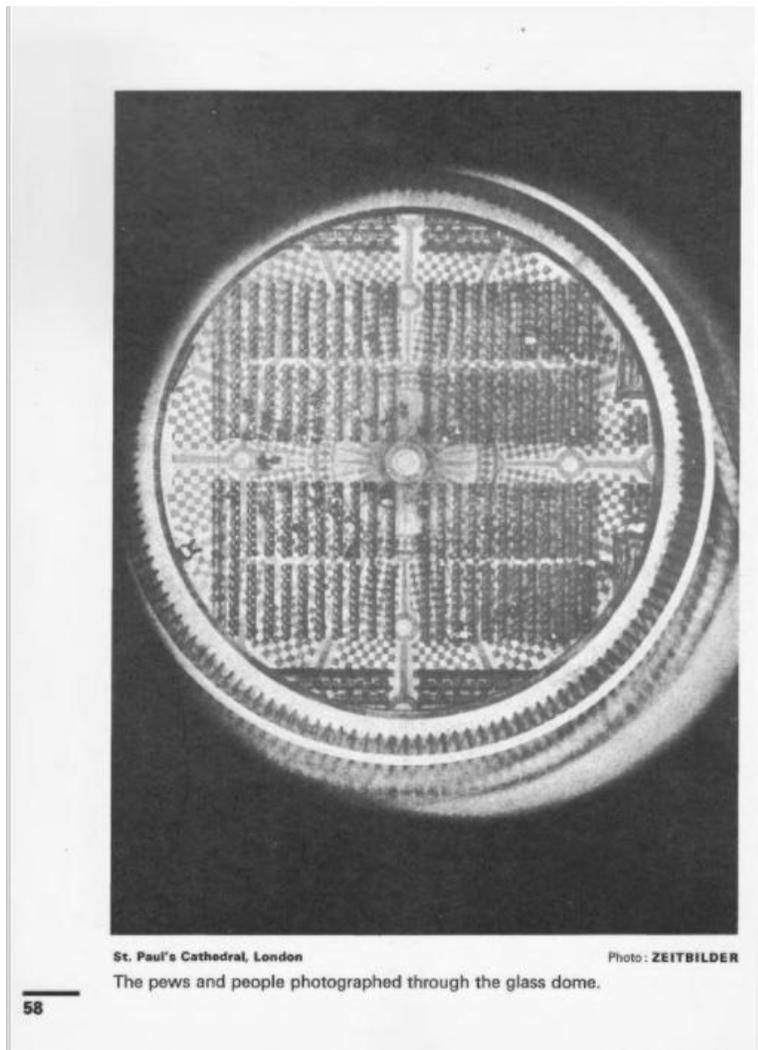


**Figure 2:** *Star Spectrum Photographed with a Prismatic Lens* and *Spiral Nebula in The Dogs*, in László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, London: London Humphries, 1967 (originally published by the Bauhaus in 1925), pages 64-65. Public Domain.

Another key photographic juxtaposition in *Painting Photography Film* is that of the images *Star Spectrum Photographed with a Prismatic Lens* and *Spiral Nebula in The Dogs*. Moholy-Nagy explores the realm of scientific photography with these works, as both of them may be seen with a scientific instrument, and one of the photographs (*Star Spectrum*) came from a scientific institution, the Observatory Arequipa in Peru. The other image (*Spiral Nebula*) is attributed to the astronomer George Ritchey. Here, Moholy-Nagy focuses on light in order to give a different perspective on it, as it is a necessary element of photography and for the optical sciences. *Star Spectrum* depicts stars that were viewed through a prism, whereas *Spiral Nebula* depicts a galaxy. Both works offered a new angle on light and our universe, as they gave the audience photographic evidence of heavenly bodies and introduces them to celestial objects, such as stars or a galaxy. By using telescopic photography with *Star Spectrum* and *Spiral Nebula*, Moholy-Nagy furthers his photographic philosophy of the camera aiding human vision by showing an image that a human could not see with the naked eye, but only with an optical instrument, such

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 33.

as the telescope. László Moholy-Nagy creates a sense of “real space” with the *Star Spectrum* and *Spiral Nebula* photographs and demonstrates his idea that the camera captures an unbiased view of the world and space with optical instruments like telescopes and cameras.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3:** *St. Paul's Cathedral, London*, in László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, London: London Humphries, 1967 (originally published by the Bauhaus in 1925), page 58. Public Domain.

The photograph *St. Paul's Cathedral, London* in *Painting Photography Film* is a visual representation of Moholy-Nagy's perspective that optical machines give people a new view of the world. This photo was taken from the publication *Zeitbilder* and demonstrates two aspects of Moholy-Nagy's beliefs about photography: first, that like many photos in *Painting Photography Film*, it came from a popular publication and represented the evolution of modern visual culture. In addition, *St. Paul's Cathedral, London* gives a unique view of the world. Moholy-Nagy was

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

particularly known for his daring, cutting-edge perspectives in *Painting Photography Film*, of which this photograph and his famous aerial view photo of the *Berlin Radio Tower* from 1928 are good examples. Aerial perspectives were a relatively new depiction method, as humans had newly gained the technological means to create these views due to the availability of more portable cameras and other developments. The aerial viewpoint in this photo was meant to provide a new view of St. Paul's Cathedral to its audience and force viewers to look at normally recognizable buildings in a new light. In *Painting Photography Film*, Moholy included many photos of objects seen from unusual unique perspectives that seem abstract at first glance, such as *The Biggest Clock in the World in Jersey City, US* or this photograph of St. Paul's Cathedral.<sup>15</sup> The aerial perspective of this photo makes St. Paul's Cathedral seem like it is an abstract artwork, as the pews, people and tiled floor design are broken down into geometric shapes.<sup>16</sup> Through his aerial photographs like *St. Paul's Cathedral, London*, Moholy-Nagy changed the way we view the world, along with modern visual culture.

**Figure 4:** Poster of the Film und Foto International Exhibition of the Deutscher Werkbund, Berlin, 1929. [Poster may be accessed online.](#)

Translation of the Poster:

International Exhibition of the German Work Union:

Film and Photo, Berlin 1929.

Photography from 19 October to 17 November

Special Film Performances from 19 October to 19 November.

This work is a poster for the *FiFo* exhibition; more specifically, it is an advertisement for the Berlin iteration of the *FiFo* exhibition in the autumn of 1929. As mentioned, *FiFo* had originally debuted in Stuttgart, but it also was exhibited in Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Zagreb, Gdansk, Zurich and Japan.<sup>17</sup> *FiFo* was an exploration of the modern mediums of photography and film, along with exposing the public to different photographic techniques that were gaining momentum in the art world, such as photograms. *FiFo* examined the emerging visual culture of the 1920s and its impact on society, especially with the advent of film and photography in mass media. Even though Moholy-Nagy was a major artistic figure at *FiFo*, there were many other artists exhibited in the exhibition of 1929, such as John Heartfield (Room 3), Sasha and Cami Stone (Room 2), along with El Lissitzky (Room 4).<sup>18</sup> Room 4 is particularly interesting, as it represented the Soviet Union and its artists. Designed by the Russian artist El Lissitzky himself, this particular room uniquely combined the use of film and photography, and the integration of technology into art by including a duoskop viewing device to project photograms.<sup>19</sup> Since Room 4 showcased

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 38–39.

<sup>18</sup> Lugon, "Prints from the Thomas Walther Collection and German Exhibitions around 1930," 2–4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 2.

contemporary Russian artwork and artistic advancements within film and photography, there were also short extracts of films by Russian filmmakers shown here.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 5:** Photo: *The Orator* and *Russian Worker Assembly*, in Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold. *Photo-Eye: 76 Photos of the Time*, Stuttgart: F. Wedekind, 1929, pages 26-27. [Images may be accessed online.](#)

Roh and Tschichold had similar notions of photography to Moholy-Nagy in the sense that they tried to use photography to give a new perspective of the world to the viewer, in addition to experimenting with new photographic techniques. *The Orator* and *Russian Worker Assembly* are two photographs that are shown side by side in Roh and Tschichold's *Photo Eye: 76 Photos of the Time*. These are paired together because they draw meaning from one another, as Roh and Tschichold experimented with a new way of delivering visual messages to their audience that went along with the new emerging visual culture in the 1920s. *Russian Worker Assembly* and *The Orator* are meant to correlate with each other, as if *The Orator* was supposed to be speaking at the assembly at which the workers are gathered on the previous page. These two works are meant to be viewed as if seen in a film: the scene starts in a crowd of Russian workers, and then cuts to the orator's mouth who is speaking to them. Through this way of expressing the world, Roh and Tschichold could capture modern visual culture by using modern technology, depicting techniques of film and photography, and demonstrating the new ways of seeing the world afforded by these technologies.<sup>21</sup> Along with experimenting with the visual messages in photos, Roh and Tschichold wanted to combine the use of certain technological advances of the early twentieth century and their effects on art.

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<sup>20</sup> Frauke Josenhans, "FiFo," *LACMA Unframed*, last modified August 6, 2013, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2013/08/06/fifo>.

<sup>21</sup> Stetler, *Stop Reading!* 45.