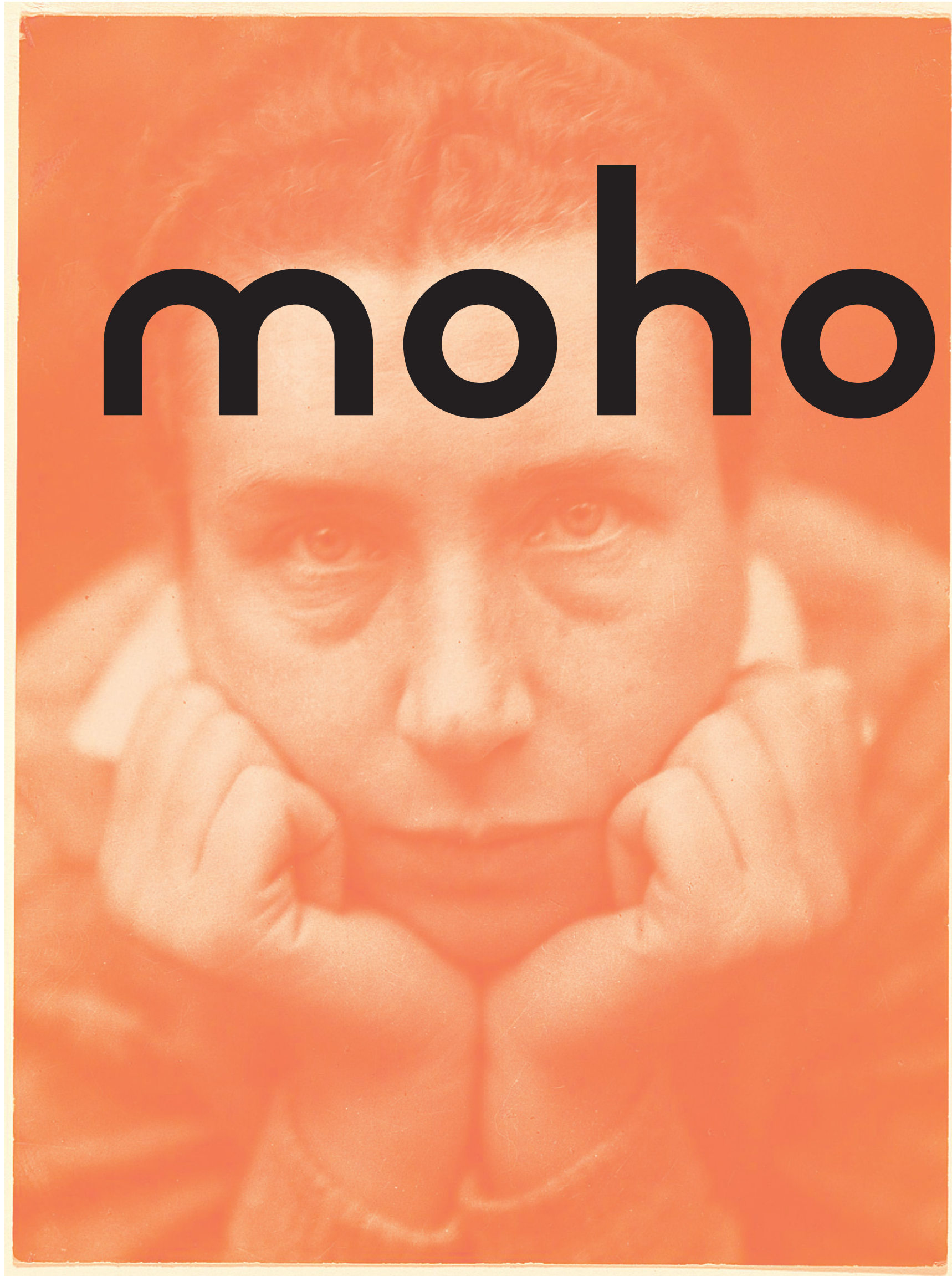


lucia moholy



Lucia Moholy, Self portrait, 1930, Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin.

Approaching the Individual

by Hannah Healey

hannah.healey@hmc.ox.ac.uk

Moholy saw herself always as a passive artist. In a diary entry written at the age of 21 she described photography as 'My First Flight into the World':

The interest in photography awoke in me. I am a passive artist. I can capture impressions and would surely be able to record everything from its most beautiful perspective, put them through chemical processes I have learnt and allow them to appear how they affect me...

It was through the intellect that Moholy sought to produce images, and by using intellect as a means of approaching the creation of photographs Moholy's work is representative of the New Objectivity movement which emerged in Weimar Germany and which foregrounded an interest in the rational, the objective, of pictorial accuracy and a sense of wholeness of representation.



Lucia Moholy, Bauhaus Building Dessau, South Face, 1925-26, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA.

Moholy's images of the Bauhaus school in Dessau take advantage of the sparse open site to create an expansive feeling of space which imagines the Bauhaus as a whole world existing solely according to modernist principles. This sense of wholeness is reinforced by Moholy's documentation of the site through seriality, as buildings such as the Director's house were photographed successively from the north, north-east, east, south-east, south, west and north-west giving the impression of capturing the totality of views of the building. In doing so Moholy communicated both a sense of forming a straight forward and objective documentary record, and at the same time rendered the images markers of the modernist aesthetic ideals that Gropius' architecture sought to articulate by underlining the structures' defining rectilinearly through many views of their architectural lines.

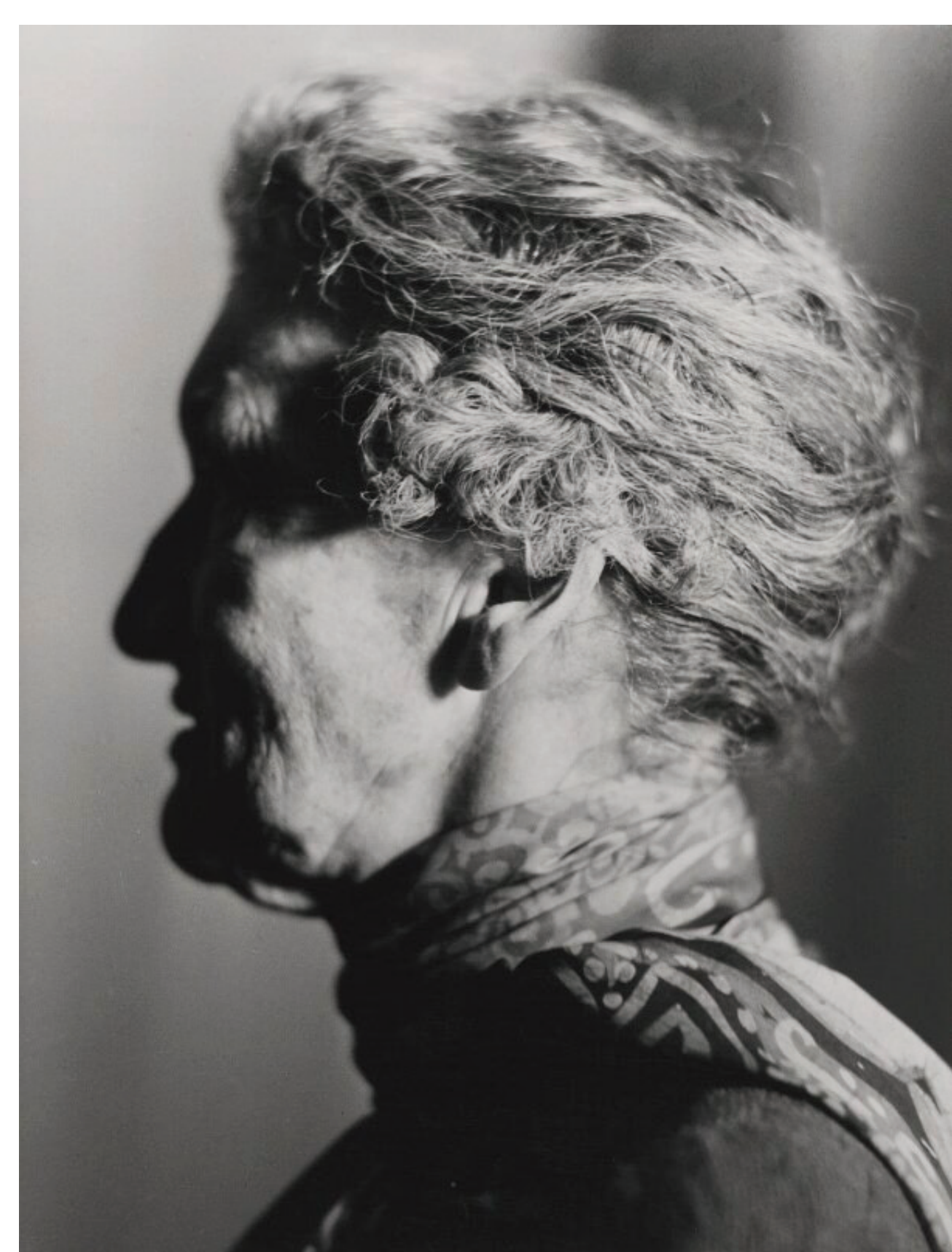


Lucia Moholy, Patrick Blackett, 1936, National Portrait Gallery, London.

In contrast to the Bauhaus images' vastness of surroundings, a unifying feature of the portraits Moholy produced in London is the close crop which has the sitter close up to the picture frame. The field of focus further emphasises this, resting solely on the face of the sitter so that it is only the central features of the face which are in sharp focus. The vast majority of these photographs were taken in a studio with a plain backdrop that provides no description of surroundings or distraction from the figure. In doing so, Moholy distinguished her images from those by leading portrait photographers of the day such as Cecil Beaton who used elaborate backgrounds, costume and props to stage romantic or dramatic portraits in the Pictorialist tradition. Moholy therefore understood wholeness within a portrait, the markers to the subject's identity and the image's meaning, to be communicated not by depicting the sitter's entire figure framed by paraphernalia which indicated wealth or social standing, but in capturing and presenting what Moholy found to be the most important aspect of the sitters; the face and expression. In photographing individuals, she saw the way to let the sitter speak as to come up close to them, describe clearly the most central features of their face and allow the rest to fall away.

The features that Moholy described in her portraits and the way she did so was not intended to flatter her upper class sitters. In this regard the portrait of Margot Asquith, countess of Oxford and Asquith taken when she was 71 years old is particularly interesting. The image is a full profile portrait lit so that her face is cast in shadow and her profile line strongly contrasted against the pale backdrop. A well-known socialite and wit, Margot Asquith was thought to be interesting rather than attractive looking, with a distinctive nose and misshapen lips acquired as a result of a hunting accident. In this portrait Moholy emphasises these features, her crooked nose and slightly ajar lips captured in silhouette; along her jaw, the light catches the sagging skin of older age just so, highlighting it against the shade of her face. The words of Margot Asquith in a letter to Moholy are invaluable in understanding the appeal of sitting for this unconventional German photographer who refused to idealise her subjects:

I think your photographs quite wonderful, so do all my friends. They are different from the modern photography which goes in for what might be called 'beauty parlours'. Your photographs make real men and women, and will be contributions to the biography of great and famous people in the future.



Lucia Moholy, Margot Asquith, Countess of Oxford and Asquith, 1935, National Portrait Gallery, London.



Lucia Moholy, Bauhaus Building Dessau, View of the workshop through the vestibule window, 1925-26, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA.

Moholy's images of the Dessau buildings underline the dynamic lines of their structures, for example in the view of the workshop wing through the vestibule window wherein Moholy stands so that the window frame creates a distorted oblong silhouette against the repeated diagonals of the panes of glass of the workshop wing pushing out from the right to finish all at once at the boxy end of the structure, inside this vestibule window-frame. In her London portraits sitters are photographed in three-quarter profile and from odd angles, seen in the image of Patrick Blackett taken in 1936. Blackett appears as though leaning with his head turned and looking down to the ground so that the top of his head is visible to the viewer. In this glance his slim features are emphasised by the gently sloping line of his profile against the backdrop, complemented by the waves of his coiffed hair. Moholy ascribed this manner of depicting features to the influence of modern object photography, describing it as 'the first time in the history of photography...the sculptural details of the head and the texture of skin, hair, nails and dress became attractive subjects to the photographer.' Perspective could therefore be used not only in architectural photographs but also in a new type of portrait photography to accentuate the sculptural aspects of the sitter's face as lines and forms and textures.

What Moholy valued was not the beauty, wealth, or status of these individuals but their intellect. Just as she photographed the Bauhaus buildings so as to articulate and underline the design philosophy that those at the Bauhaus believed would create a new and better world, her portraits celebrated prominent British figures as rational and intellectual individuals, and it was with this same approach that she photographed them.