GYORGY KEPES

LANGUAGE OF VISION

Painting, Photography, Advertising-Design

paul theobald and company

Visual experience is more than the experience of pure sensory qualities. Visual sensations are interwoven with memory overlays. Each visual configuration contains a meaningful text, evokes associations of things, events; creates emotional and conscious responses.

Literary imitation of nature tied to a fixed point of observation had killed the image as a plastic organism. It was quite natural, therefore, that the associative meaning should be identified with the literary content and hence disposed of as unnecessary. Non-representational art clarified the structural laws of the plastic image. It reestablished the image in its original role as a dynamic experience based upon the properties of the senses and their plastic organization. But it threw overboard the meaningful signs of the visual relationships.

The image was "purified." But this purification overlooked the fact that the distortion and disintegration of the image as a plastic experience had not been due to represented meaningful signs as such but rather to the prevailing representation-concept which was static and limited, and consequently in contradiction to the dynamic plastic nature of the visual experience. The structure of meaning had been based upon the same conception which generated the fixed point of view of space representation, linear perspective and modelling by shading. Things had been represented together in a fixed system of empirical order and their meaning also had acquired the characteristic of this fixity.

Juan Gris, one of the foremost of the painters working toward the new language of vision, made it clear that new, healthy plastic structure is not an ultimate goal, but only a new start toward the understanding of values inherent in the relationships of the meaningful elements of visible nature. "I try to give concrete form to what is abstract, I pass from the general to the particular, by which I mean that I take abstraction as my point of departure and the real fact as my point of arrival . . . I consider mathematics to be the architectural side of painting, the abstract side, and I want to humanize it; Cezanne makes a cylinder of a bottle, I began with the cylinder in order to create an individual unit of special type. Of a cylinder I make a bottle, a particular bottle. Cezanne works toward architecture, I work away from it; that is why I compose with abstractions, (in color) and I arrange when these colors have become objects; for example I compose with a white and black and I arrange when the white has become a paper, and that black a shadow! I mean to say that I arrange the white to make it become a paper and the black to make it become a shadow."

Whitehead, one of the leading scholars of today, understands this when he writes:

"Thus 'art' in the general sense which I require, is any selection by which the concrete facts are so arranged as to elicit attention to particular values which are realizable by them. For example, the mere disposal of the human body and the eyesight, so as to get a good view of a sunset is a simple form of artistic selection. The habit of art is the habit of enjoying vivid values."•

What are these values? What are the concrete facts? Value is, stated very generally, that which renders anything useful. Values are, in human terms, the recognized directives toward a more satisfactory human life. They are the comprehended potential "order" in man's relationship to nature and to his fellow men. Order makes sense only as an order in a definite field. Values are conditioned by concrete events of the physical, psychological and social realms. Values have not yet been formulated for our time. We are living in a formless age of transition, of chaos, incomparable to anything man has ever experienced before. In this confusion, plastic art, the most direct experience of order, the forming activity par excellence, gains significance. Order for our time can only be formulated in the concrete terms of the dynamic field of the present social forces. Only if we encompass in thinking and in seeing the dynamic forces the present contradictions in biological and social processes, shall we be able to resolve them. Only if we can guide the events of our time toward "planned," integrated social organization, can we reach a new temporary equilibrium; a more satisfactory human life.

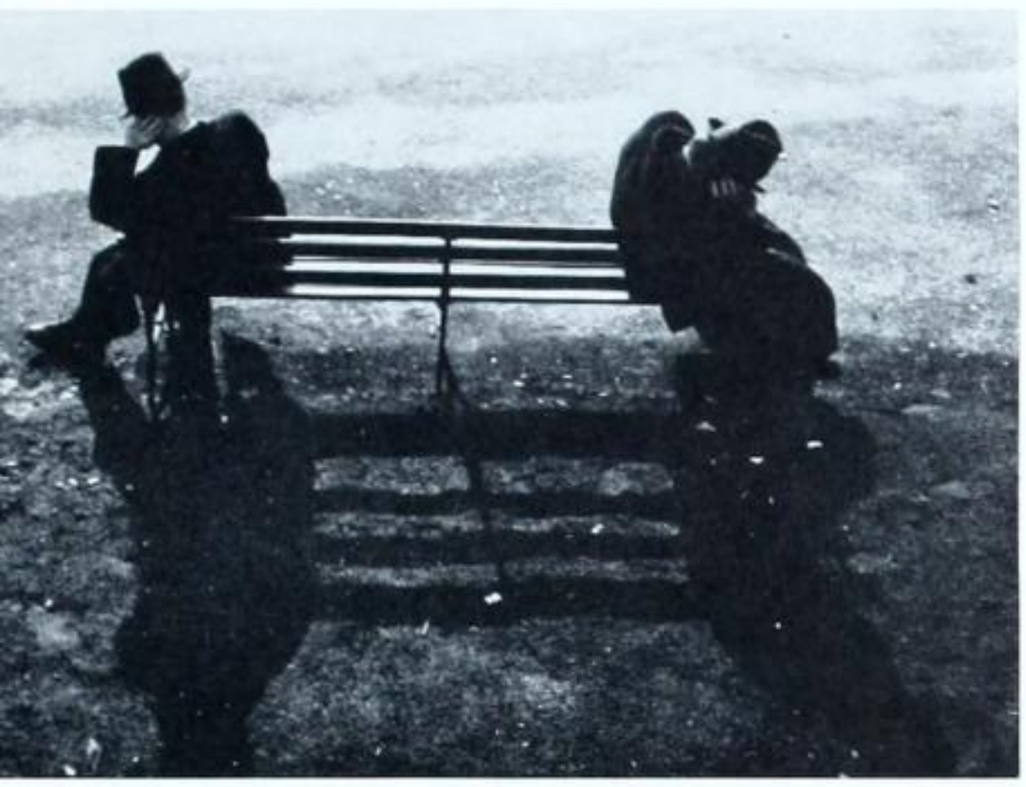
Thinking and seeing, in terms of static, isolated things identical only with themselves, have an initial inertia which cannot keep pace with the stride of life, thus cannot suggest values—plastic order—intrinsic in this dynamic field of social existence. Common sense regards rest and motion as entirely different processes. Yet rest is, in reality, a special kind of motion, and motion is, in a sense, a kind of rest. The plastic image can fulfill its present social mission only by encompassing this identity of opposing directions and referring it to concrete social experiences. Inherited visual language has fossilized the events in a static sign system. Revolution in the plastic arts has brought back a dynamic approach on the sensory level. The plastic structures must expand to absorb, without giving up their plastic strength, the meaningful images of current concrete social experiences. The task of the contemporary artist is to release and bring into social action the dynamic forces of visual imagery. As contemporary scientists are struggling to liberate the arrested energy of the atom, painters of our day must liberate the inexhaustible energy reservoir of the visual associations. To accomplish this, they need a clear grasp of the social field, intellectual honesty, and creative power capable of integrating experiences into a plastic form. This goal will be reached only when art once more lives in inseparable unity with human life.

• *Whitehead, Science and the Modern World*

Laws of organization of meaningful visual signs

Each representation of an object or a thing acts on the picture surface and discharges its own unique direction of associations as a point, a line, a shape, acts on the picture-plane, and forces the eye into virtual spatial directions. These representations have positions, direction, shape, size, distance, and weight. They can advance until one is keen to follow them, or they can recede so that one is willing to miss them. They have textures of sensory warmth; or they are cold, with geometrical or theoretical exactness. They have brightness and color and can move with various velocities. As one searches for spatial order, and through the interrelationships of the plastic forces creates a unified spatial whole, one also searches for a meaning-order and builds from the different association-directions the common, meaningful whole.

We look at a photograph of two men sitting on a bench, and each unit of the picture brings up associations. One man is better dressed than the other. They are sitting back to back. Their bodies, their postures are full of associative suggestions. We compare them and contrast them, discovering differences and similarities. We try to bridge the differences by use of the similarities. The image becomes a dynamic experience. It has a self-movement because of the discovered opposition. The experience attains a unity as we fill out, with a living story, the latent human background of the visible situation. We do not see things, fixed static units, but perceive instead living relationships. We look at the photograph of an eye stuck in mud and see in the same picture barbed-wire. The contradiction inherent in the associations of the respective elements keeps our mind moving until the contradiction is resolved in a meaning; until that meaning, in turn, becomes an attitude toward things around us and serves as ferment for protest against life under inhuman conditions. Contradiction is then the basis of dynamic organization of the associative qualities of the image. When representational units within the same picture contain statements which seem counter to the accepted logic of events, the spectator's attention is forced to seek out the possible relationships until a central idea is found which weaves the meaningful signs together in a meaningful whole. The association-fields of the representation of a man, a tree, a machine, and so on, in their combination on a picture surface, can reinforce one another or clash with one another, creating strains, stresses, tensions. Each tension is resolved into a meaning configuration. These configurations in turn serve as a basis for further tensions; consequently for further configurations. Meaningful signs have thus their laws of organization similar to the plastic organization. But whereas the relationship of plastic qualities emerges through the dynamic organization of the spectator into a spatial whole, in the case of organization of meaningful signs the unifying whole has the dimensions of human attitudes, feeling and thought.



F. Levstik. *Photograph*

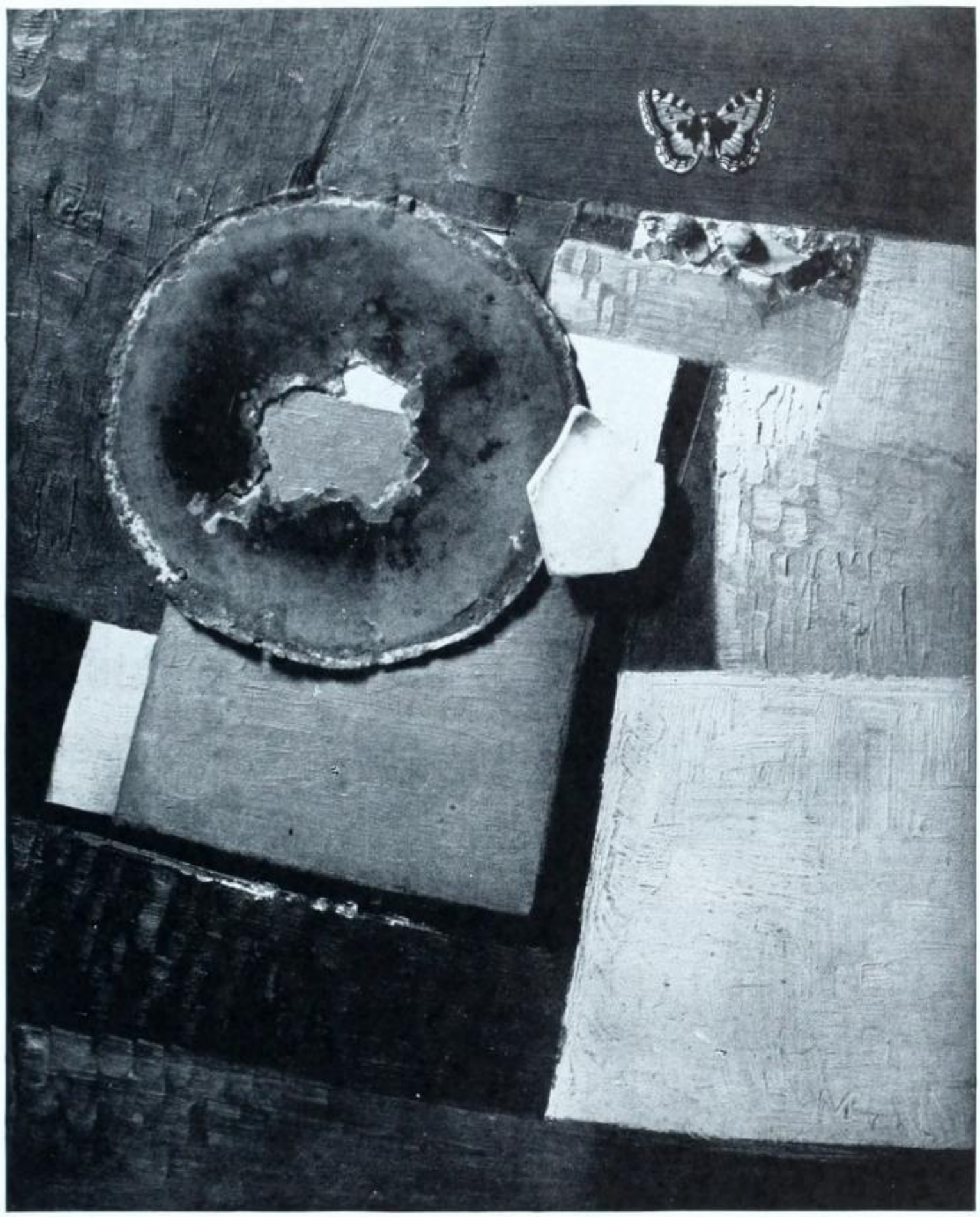
N. Lerner. *Eye and Barbed Wire*

It was pointed out before that the line of our communication into the dynamic background of association was cut by a short-circuit when picture elements were presented in static correspondence with the things they represented, when the representation of things and the things themselves were considered identical. The path led then, not to progressive, evolving discovery of the relationships of things, but only to things themselves and their associative meanings. On a weak plastic foundation, it became progressively dangerous to build a structure of associations referring to concrete feelings and values. But after painters had tested and rebuilt the plastic foundation, visual expression went ahead to use this structure for redirecting us to the plastic order—the meaningful order—in the life man makes for himself.

The stages of development through which the structural use of associations has passed correspond to those in the search for the laws of plastic organization. Meaning-unity was first disintegrated into meaning-facets. Later, these meaning-facets were understood in their interconnections, evaluated as forces and fields, tested in their tensions, dynamic equilibrium, and reorganized into a new meaningful whole.

Disintegration of the fixed system of meaning organization

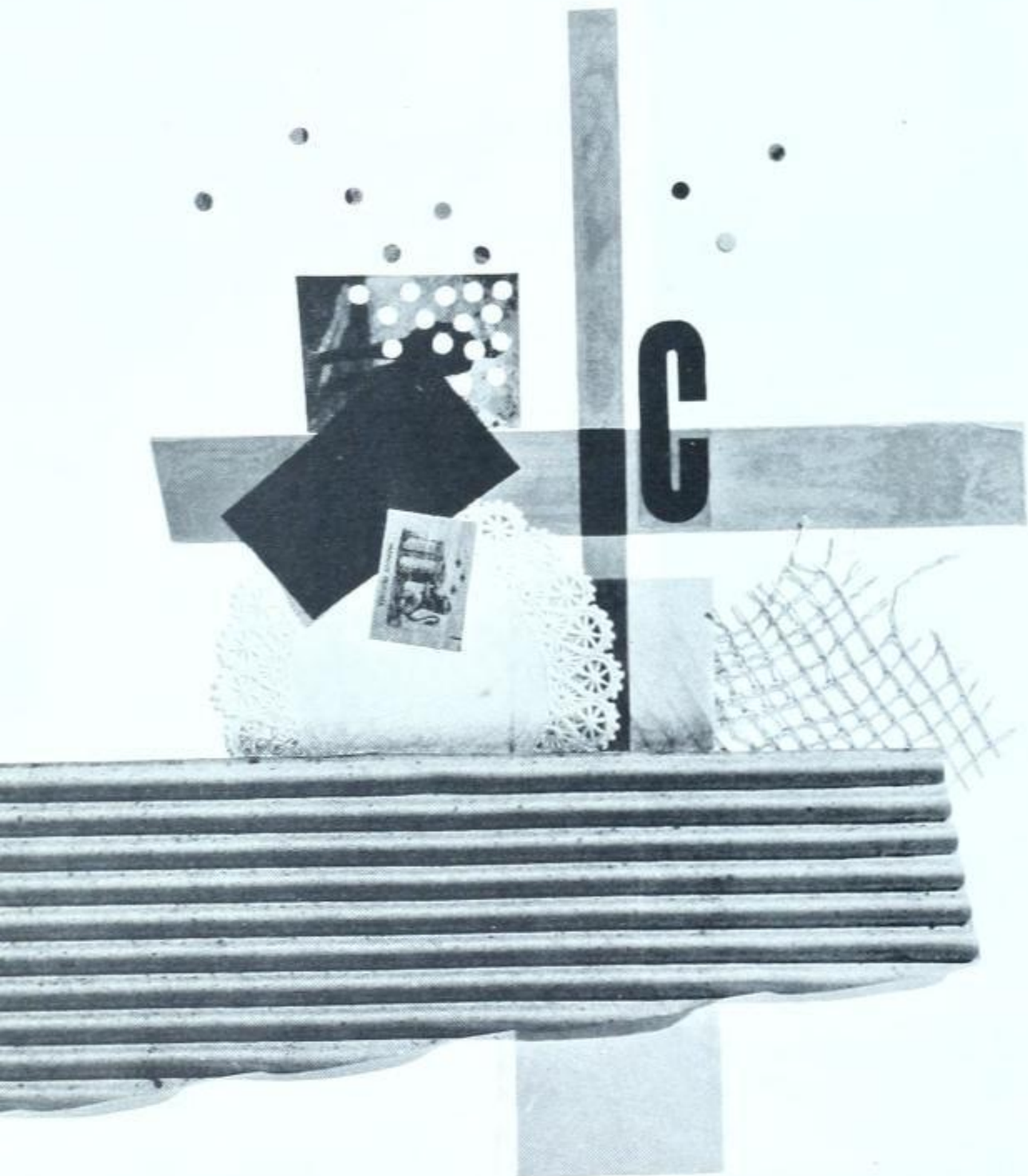
The disintegration was provoked by the social contradictions in which man was living. At the end of the last war, in revolt against an apparently hopeless mess of political and cultural frustration, against the piracy of mediocrity, fake values, and false authority, men eagerly discarded every value, and thus every meaning. Artists, no less than other men, lost their belief in the meaningfulness of their own lives and of life in general. In blind hate they set forth to destroy everything which contained the smallest kernel of meaningful coherency. Social institutions, customs, ethical or moral values, feelings and works of art were, they declared, a perpetuation of the old nonsense—a cancer in human existence. They saw about them evidences of tremendous, painstaking effort in the creation of works of art whose final results were devoid of social meaning. They attacked, therefore, fiercely and without discrimination, the meaning-structure of art. With bitter irony, they took fragments as their plastic raw material: the rubbish of the wastebasket, newspapers, streetcar tickets, blotting-paper, old buttons, torn photographs, postcards. But they could not rid themselves of the instinctive desire to form, to mould a plastic order. They bound together all these fragments which were taken from their context and had no logical connection whatsoever, and this random conglomeration of unrelated, fragmentary signs of meaningful pictures revealed an unexpected power of expression.



Kurt Schwitters. ***Relief Merzbild 1915***
Courtesy of Art of This Century

Each material, each shape, each photograph carried within itself characteristics of the world from which it was taken. The observer was forced to find order in the unrelated fragments, to trace back some latent meaningful connections in the basically meaningless haphazard dada and merz-pictures, collages or photomontages. The wider apart the elements were in meaning and the more impossible it seemed to find integration for them, the greater became the tension of the spectator as he struggled to find a source of integration. This tension was a zero point of the meaning-organization. It served as a basis for redirection.

Harold Walter. *Collage* •



M. Martin Johnson. *Collage* •

• *Work done for the author's course in Visual Fundamentals Sponsored by the Art Director's Club of Chicago, 1938*

Just as, after the disintegration of fixed Renaissance perspective, lines and color-planes had revealed a dynamic quality and had moved in every spatial direction, so after the disintegration of the fixed meaning-unity of traditional logic, associative energies inherent in every visible fragment of reality were suddenly released. The next step was made toward the reintegration of these liberated meaning-facets.

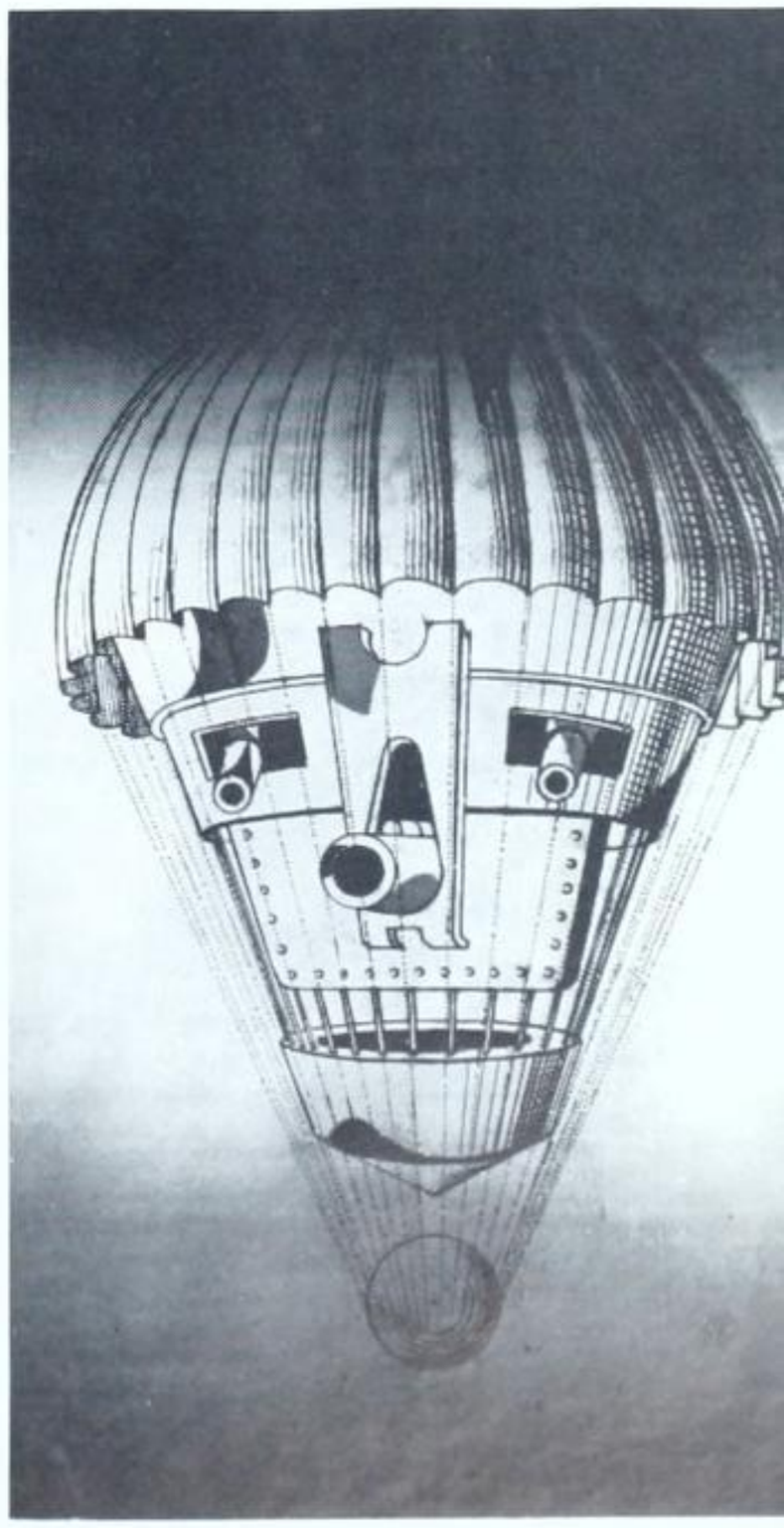
The new tendency—and to a great degree its results—was not so new as it appeared. As the revolutionary innovations in spatial representation had rediscovered the original basis of the image, the researches in the handling of "subject matter" and the dynamic ordering of the meaning element reestablished an old basic principle of creative expression, the freedom of expression from one-sided naturalism. It reaffirmed this principle with hitherto undared consistency. It reinforced the bloodless primitive symbolic iconography with a sensory dynamic basis of plastic organization. It evaluated allegory, the static balance of meaningful signs, into a dynamic equilibrium.

There were many convergent directions in these attempts to bind the liberated meaning-facets into a new dynamic whole. Painting enriched with new idioms, collage and photomontage, contributed toward the structural understanding of the relationship of representational signs, and cleared the way for this redirection. The motion picture made the first thorough analysis of the structural connection of representational images in actual time sequence. Advertising art pioneered in testing representational images in combination with pure plastic units and verbal elements.

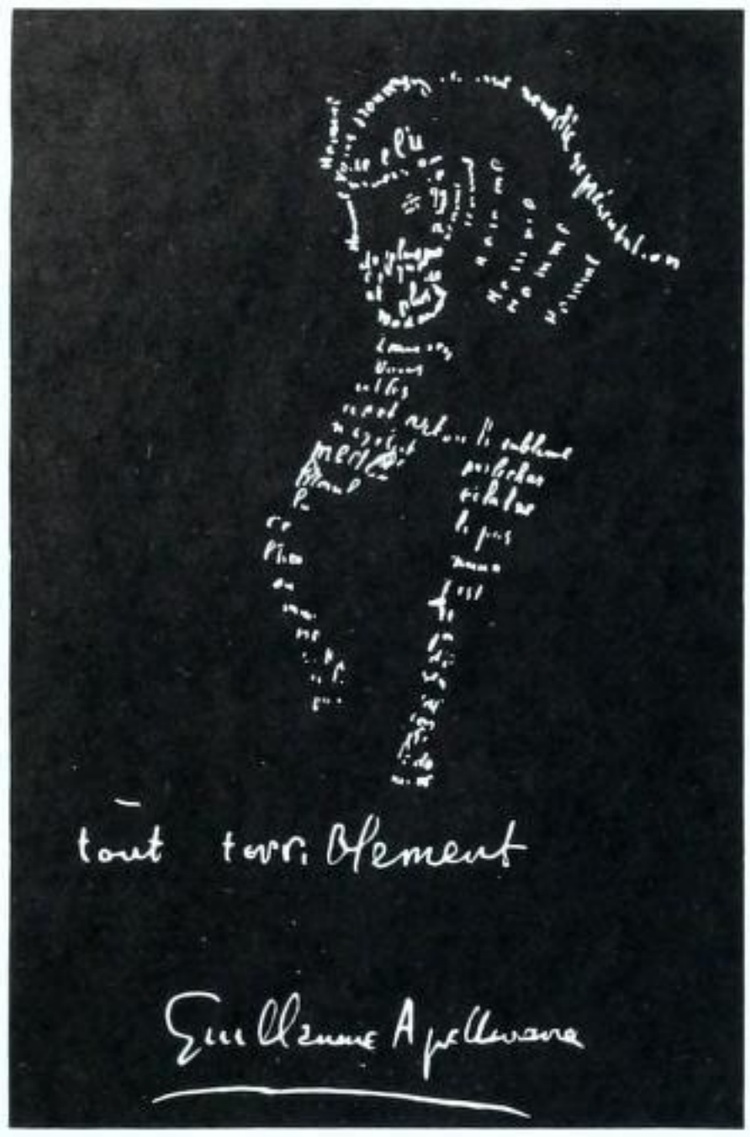
Mexican Picture Postcard.

Giuseppe Arcimboldo. ***Summer***

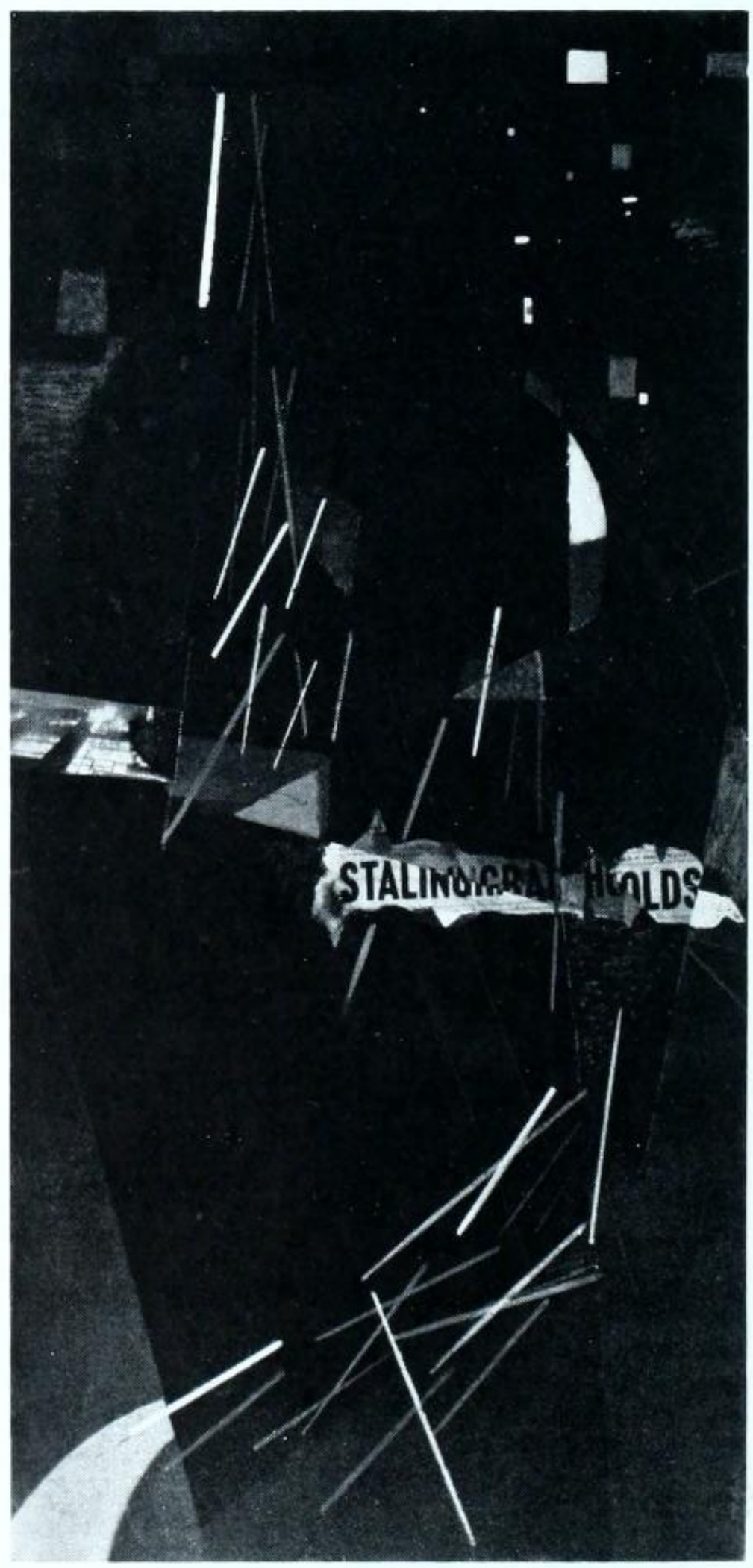
Reproduction Courtesy
The Art Institute of Chicago



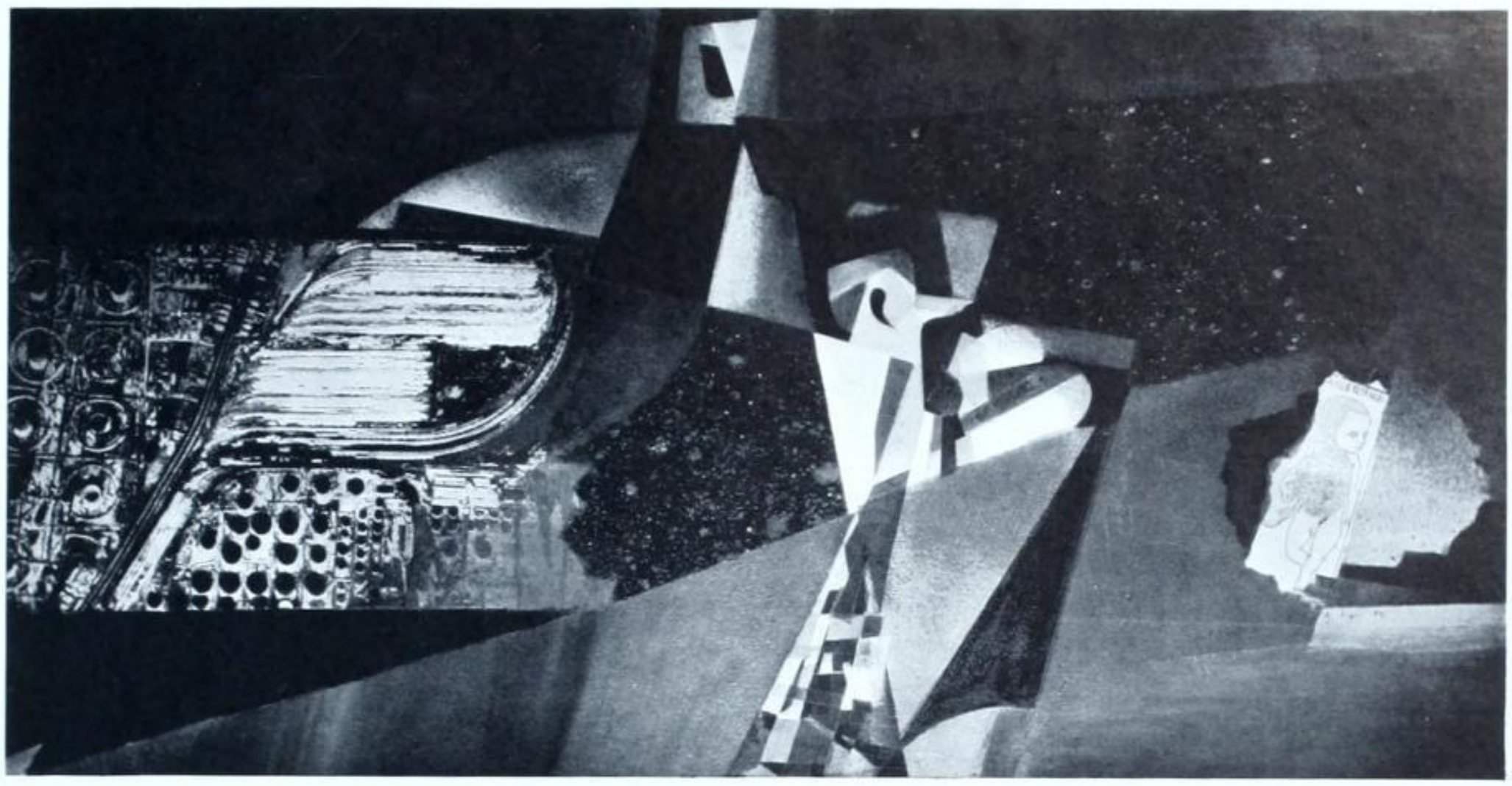
Xanti Schawinsky. ***War***



G. Apollinaire. *Ideogram*



Gyorgy Kepes. *Stalingrad 1942*



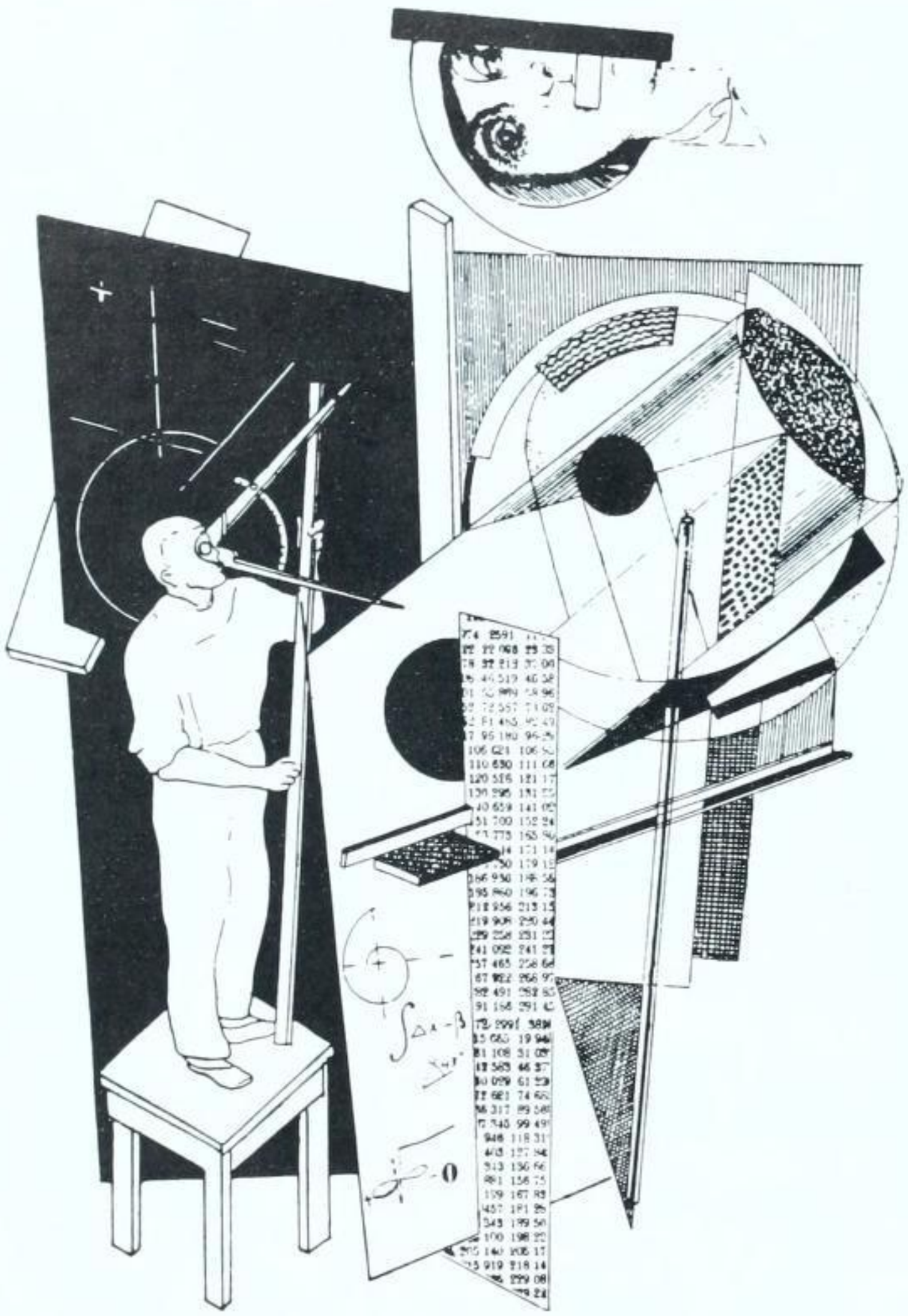
Gyorgy Kepes. ***Aerial Photography China 1942 Collage***
Courtesy of Mr. H. Ziebolz

Apollinaire in his ideograms, Miro in his painting-poem incorporate the written word in the plastic ensemble with a dynamic interaction of the verbal significance and the sensory qualities of the pictorial elements. These painters are fusing the two into one expression that evokes associations of great depth because of the sensory intensity of plastic values, and of great width because of the associations discharged by the linguistic basis. Color, shape, and texture, line, and symbol attain an organic unity and thus train the spectator to form into an organic whole his own experiences of the divergent qualities.

We have seen that the image becomes a living experience on the sensory level only through dynamic participation of the beholder. We saw that plastic experience is based upon the dynamic tendency of the beholder, who cannot bear chaos, cannot bear contradiction, and consequently searches for order, for a unified whole which can bind the apparently opposing or contradicting virtual spatial directions of the visual units into a spatial unity. A similar dynamic participation also brings about the integration of meaningful visual signs.

The living fibre of our unconscious responses is given by the concrete images of the surrounding events. Visual expression, based upon the understanding of the dynamic structure of the visual imagery, can be invaluable in readjusting our thinking as a dynamic process. When the plastic organization and the organization of the meaningful signs are synchronized into a common dynamic structure, we have a significant implement of progress. Such images suggest a new thinking-habit, reinforced with the elementary strength of sensory experience. From them the nervous system can acquire the new discipline necessary to the dynamics of contemporary life.

El Lissitzky. *Illustration 1923*



Moholy Nagy. *Leda. Photomontage 1926*

Technological motivations. The invention of photomontage

The complexity of machine culture confronted man's vision with serious obstacles. Machines and many machine products cannot be understood from their exterior image alone. A machine is a functioning, moving unit. The only adequate way to master it visually is to perceive it in its dynamic quality, in the functioning interconnections of its visible parts. Naturalistic photography, with its traditional fixed point of view, could not represent it. Most of the new technical units were commodities to sell; optical sales-talk, therefore, needed to make use of the simultaneous projections. And long before painters began to attack the problem, advertising in this country was already making use of the photomontage. The solution resembled the cubist analysis of space, but it had this difference; whereas in cubist paintings the connectedness of the elements was dictated by the aim of making the object clear in all visible spatial aspects, in the photomontage that connectedness was dictated by the functional, meaningful relationships of the represented object-elements.

The idea of dissecting and rearranging photographic elements and combining them with drawings was carried further in the experimental forms of photomontage. Like an interaction of cogwheels, space was represented by the interaction of lines and shapes without naturalistic references and by photographic and drawn units with fragments of the familiar spatial aspects. The resulting image produces a dynamic spatial experience by the coordination of representations of actual three-dimensional units and pure plastic elements of lines and shapes.

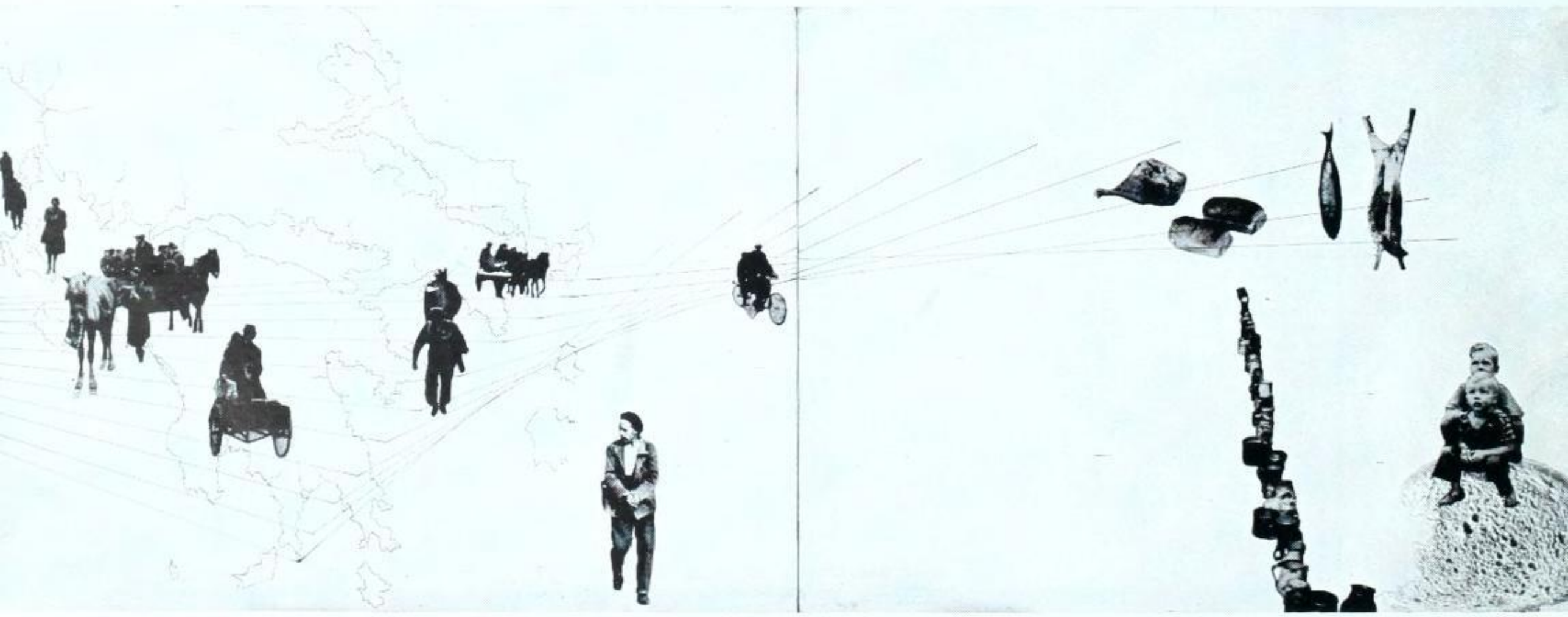
Ruth Robbins. ***Montage***

Work done for the Author's course in Visual Fundamentals School of Design in Chicago

Clifford Eitel.
Photomontage.

Elsa Kula Pratt.
Photomontage.

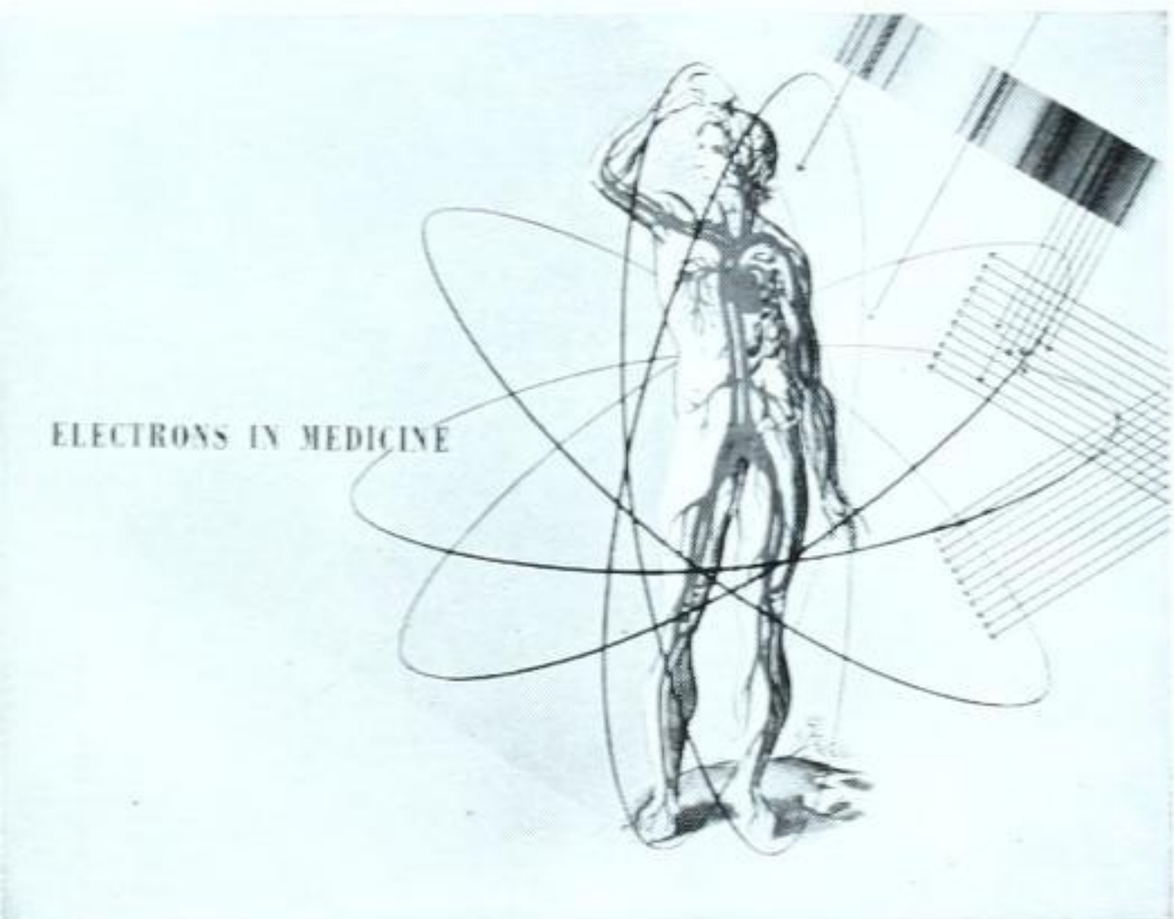
Work done for the Author's course
in Visual Fundamentals
School of Design in Chicago



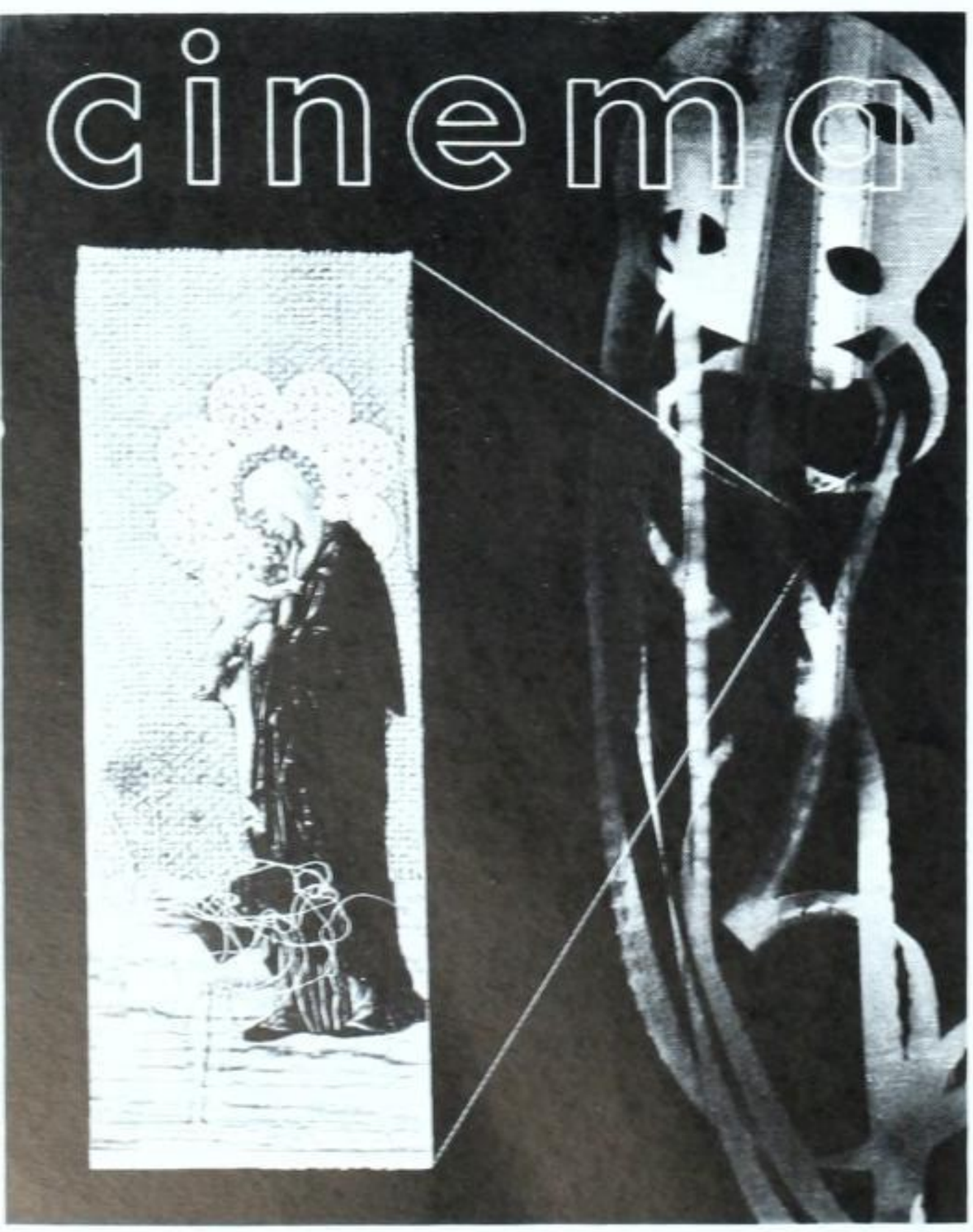
All these findings came to focus in the practical tasks of contemporary advertising art. Advertising could utilize them because it was not handicapped by traditional forms. Advertising was made to utilize them because it belonged to its very nature to be contemporary and forceful, and it could be so only through the use of the new dynamic visual idioms. A sheer illustration of a fact or of an idea was not vital enough to induce strong responses in the spectator. To put an advertising message through effectively, the most heterogeneous elements—verbal message, drawing, photography and abstract shapes—were employed. This variety of meaningful signs and symbols could only be integrated by a dynamic meaning organization. Visual advertising, however, has the eye as its customer. To satisfy this customer, it must be vital as a visual experience and it must offer comfort to the eye. Each meaningful unit has an optical basis. It has color, value, texture, shape, direction, size and interval. Advertising for its well-conceived interest learned to use the dynamic plastic organization of these optical qualities; that is, it became an art. Here lies a great challenge for advertising today. Contemporary man-made environment makes up a very large part of man's visible surroundings. Posters on the streets, picture magazines, picture books, container labels, window displays, and innumerable other existing or potential forms of visual publicity could then serve a double purpose. They could disseminate socially useful messages, and they could train the eye, and thus the mind, with the necessary discipline of seeing beyond the surface of visible things, to recognize and enjoy values necessary for an integrated life. If social conditions allow advertising to serve messages that are justified in the deepest and broadest social sense, advertising art could contribute effectively in preparing the way for a positive popular art, an art reaching everybody and understood by everyone.

Morton Goldsholl. ***Advertising Design 1943***

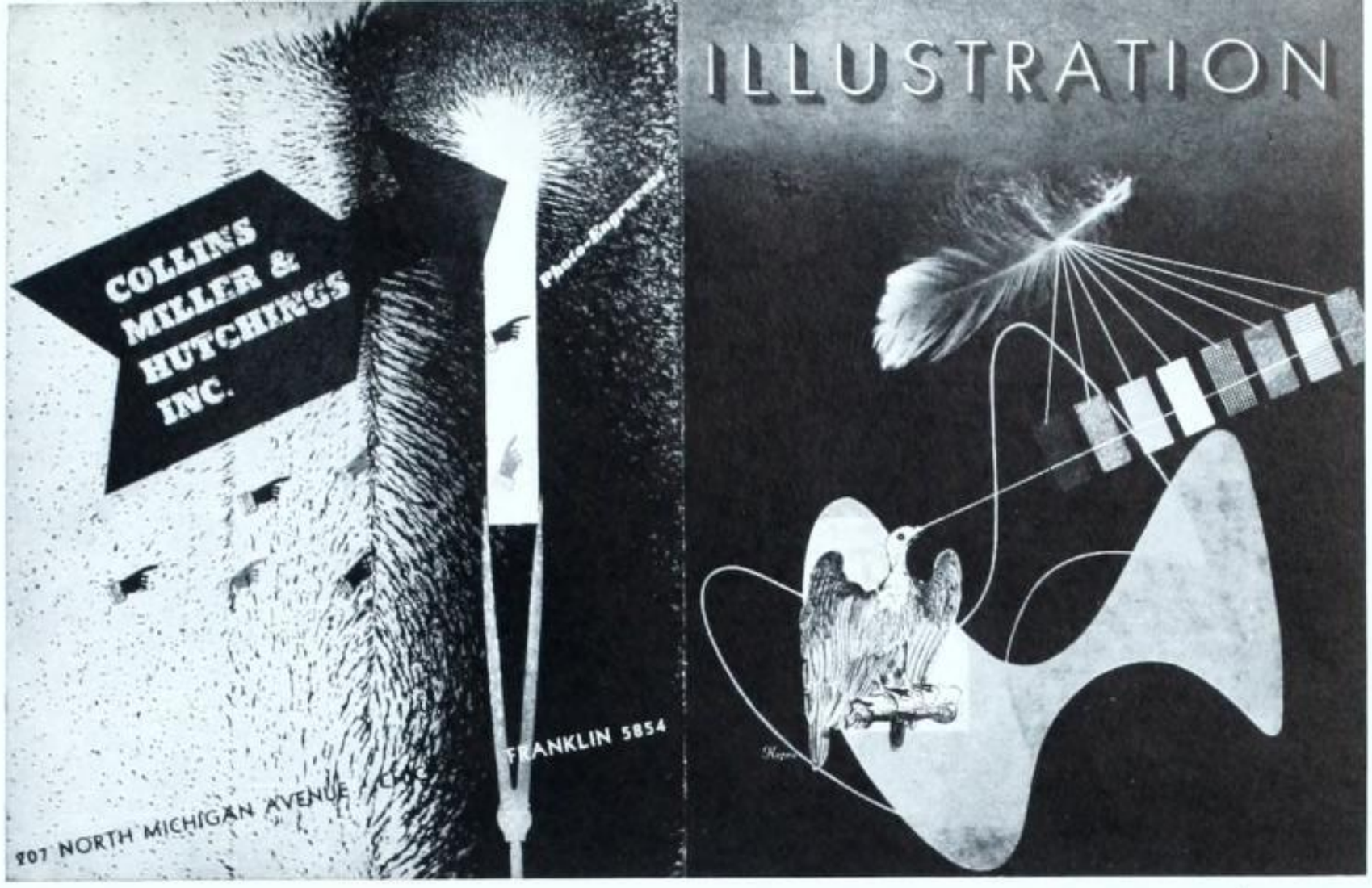
Herbert Bayer. *Advertising Design 1943*

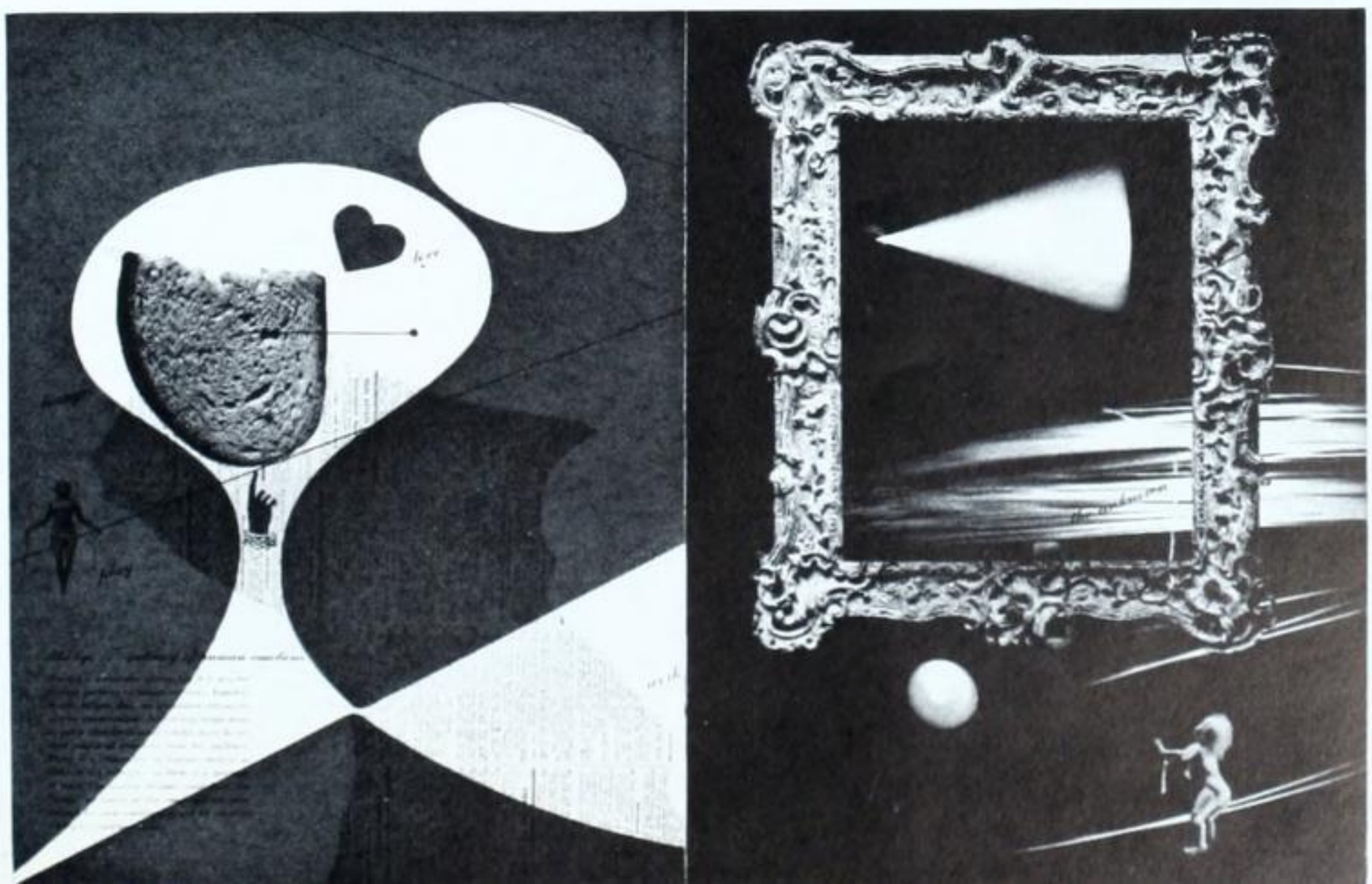


Herbert Bayer. *Advertising Design 1943*



Harold Walter. *Collage 1938*



Gyorgy Kepes. ***Cover Design***
Courtesy of Collins, Miller & Hutchings Inc.

Gyorgy Kepes. ***Advertising Design***
Courtesy of Collins, Miller & Hutchings Inc.