

# **John Bunyan – Vortography – The Digital Age**

## **September 2011**

**The British Vorticist movement of 1913 to 1915 captured, particularly in the woodcut work of John Wyndham Lewis, some strong proto-cubist elements and themes.**

**Subject matter focuses on the built environment – city blocks, and simplified and stylised representations of the human form compressed to two dimensions and following a classic primitive line of representation.**

**Angularity and dismemberment are prevalent in these forms, which compete in the flattened space of the pictures with broken and random elements drawn from the environment and reduced to strong rectangles combining with the human representations to produce coherent and aesthetic geometries.**

**Alvin Langdon Coburn later produced a set of ‘Vortographs’. These were pictures of crystals and glass photographed with the aid of mirrors to produce kaleidoscopic but unbalanced images. Opinions of them at the time were mixed. Never the less they were seen to be the first examples of ‘Abstract’ Photography.<sup>1</sup>**

**The aggregate body of Vorticist work however, through its individual exponents, shows little development towards totally abstract goals. Coburn’s Vortographs eventually feel very much out of step with the movement’s general aims – they lead to a creative ‘cul-de-sac’.**

**I want to return to the core themes of the Vorticists one hundred years later and explore the way Photography in the Digital Age can be used to locate the human form in the built environment. I aim to apply the post-production tools now available to manipulate and structure the human and fabricated elements, removing them from their points of function and reference, reworking them into the framed graphic space.**

**Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the influential Hungarian Artist and Photographer built a kinetic sculpture in 1930 – the ‘Light Prop for an Electric Stage’. It is also known as the**

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn and the Vortographs, Tom Normand. The Vorticists, Manifesto for A Modern World. Edited by Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene. Tate pubs. 2011.

**‘Light Space Modulator’<sup>2</sup>. When spotlighted it “creates a dramatic play of shadows, translucencies, transparencies and reflections generated by the rotating machine’s multiple surfaces”<sup>3</sup>.**

**The sculpture itself strongly resembles a combined cheese grater and egg-slicer with attitude. In the way it modulates light however it offers considerable utility to the Vorticist agenda – or more speculatively to a direction it may have moved in had it lasted the First World War.**

**Modern buildings, with their glass and metal structures and interior spaces, provide modern light machines on a scale that make a joke of Moholy-Nagy’s Sculpture. The best I know is one I use every day. I have called it ‘Stairwell Q’.**

**Its potential is enormous. It can be viewed from an infinite number of viewpoints and manipulates the entering shafts of sunlight in terms of defining its own strong stripped and counter-directional forms, cast shadows, silhouette, reflections in windows and off its polished elements, broken stepped shapes and tonal variations.**

**I force the posed human body onto this space, making use of its ability to entrap and intertwine with the body form. Further it offers tunnelled perspective, dis-orientating, multiple surfaces and planes upon which I can place my subject, challenging the functional context of the stairs and rails.**

**I can use this space to further modulate the directional light to augment the chiaroscuro play over the body with shadow elements. These serve to break up the over-all human form. There arises a difficulty in perceiving that form other than by identifying key human components such as fingers, toes, ankles, limbs, genitals and the human face.**

**My aim in the final presented photographs is to modulate the recognisability and relevance of the human form. I want the viewer to search for it in the abstracted, fragmented and reconfigured elements of the built environment, to consider and reform it if they can. The human in the photographs must demand his light and space, competing for attention within the graphic melee.**

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<sup>2</sup> Light Display Machines: Two works by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.  
<http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2007/07/23/34596.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.