THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE AND RADICAL MODERNISM

An Introductory Reader

Edited by Dennis G. IOFFE
and Frederick H. WHITE

Boston 2012

1. Kazimir Malevich: His Creative Path[1]

Evgenii Kovtun (1928-1996)

Translated from the Russian by John E. Bowlt

The renewal of art in France dating from the rise of Impressionism extended over several decades, while in Russia this process was consolidated within a span of just ten to fifteen years. Malevich's artistic development displays the same concentrated process. From the very beginning, his art showed distinctive, personal traits: a striking transmission of primal energy, a striving towards a preordained goal, and a veritable obsession with the art of painting. Remembering his youth, Malevich wrote to one of his students: "I worked as a draftsman... as soon as I got off work, I would run to my paints and start on a study straightaway. You grab your stuff and rush off to sketch. This feeling for art can attain huge, unbelievable proportions. It can make a man explode."[2]

Transrational Realism

From the early 1910s onwards, Malevich's work served as an "experimental polygon" in which he tested and sharpened his new found mastery of the art of painting. His quest involved various trends in art, but although Malevich flirted with Cubism and Futurism, his greatest achievements at this time were made in the cycle of paintings he called "Alogism" or "Transrational Realism." *Cow and Violin*, *Aviator, Englishman in Moscow, Portrait of Ivan Kliun*—these works manifest a new method in the spatial organization of the painting, something unknown to the French Cubists. In using "Alogism," Malevich tried to go beyond the boundaries of "common sense" the condition that establishes relationships between surface phenomena. Endeavouring to find a deeper understanding of the world through intuition, Russian painting—through Malevich's experiments—attempted to master intuition as a creative method. This same aspiration inspired the work of poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, Elena Guro, and others. What was closed to com-

mon reason would now become accessible through intuition, allowing the deliberate extraction of ideas from the unconscious.[3] Malevich's *Cow and Violin* is the earliest "manifesto" of "Alogism." On the back of the canvas Malevich wrote: "Alogical comparison of the two forms—violin and cow—as an element in the struggle against logic, natural order, and philistine meaning and prejudice. K. Malevich." Absurd from the view of common sense, the combination of a cow and violin proclaims the general interconnection of phenomena in the world. Intuition reveals distant connections within the world, connections which logic interprets as absurd. This same position was maintained by Khlebnikov, who wrote: "There exist certain quantities through the transformation of which the blue color of a cornflower (I mean pure sensation), is changing continuously and passing through spheres of rupture unknown to us, turns into the sound of a cuckoo bird calling or that of a child crying—and it becomes it."[4] To recognize any isolated event as part of a universal system, to see and incarnate the invisible revealed through "spiritual sight"—this is the essence of the Post-Cubist research in Russian painting, and the most intense expression of this movement is found in Malevich's work. For him "transrational" did not mean madness—its logic was of a higher order. In 1913 Malevich wrote Matiushin: "We come to the rejection of reason, but this has been possible only because a *different* form of reason has arisen within us. When compared with what we are repudiating, one could call it transrational. It has its own law and construction and also meaning, and only in the light of this knowledge will our work be based on a totally new, transrational precept."[5]

A painting executed according to the system of Transrational Realism which manifests a new relationship, with the environment. It still has a sense of "above" and "below," but is now deprived of weight. Its plastic structures are, as it were, suspended within universal space. This "absence of gravity" as a structure-organizational principle finds vivid expression in *Aviator* where the figure seems to rise or soar in weightlessness.

Victory over the Sun

The idea of Futurist performance arose after the merging of the Union of Youth artists and the Hylaea literary group in March 1913 (the members of Hylaea were Khlebnikov, Guro, Kruchenykh, Vasilii Kamensky, David and Nikolai Burliuk, and Benedikt Livshits).[6] The First All-Russian Con-

gress of Futurists was held during the summer of 1913 at Matiushin's dacha in Uusikirkko (on the Karelian Isthmus). Malevich and Kruchenykh both attended this gathering. The participants issued a manifesto announcing the establishment of a Futurist theater and impending performances and it was here at the dacha that work began on the opera *Victory over the Sun*.[7] Kruchenykh wrote the libretto, Matiushin the music, and Malevich sketched the costume designs. They were united by a mutual understanding: "Kruchenykh, Malevich, and I worked together. And each one of us used his particular theoretical approach to enhance and elucidate the others' work. The opera grew out of our collective efforts—via words, music, and the artist's spatial image."[8] Produced on 3 and 5 December 1913 in St. Petersburg's Luna Park, the opera combined the endeavours of the poets Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, the composer Matiushin, and the artist Malevich.[9]

Khlebnikov wrote the prologue to *Victory over the Sun*, but it was declaimed by Kruchenykh who also played the roles of the Reciter and the Enemy who fight among themselves—"an end to future wars" is how Matiushin defined the sense of this image. Overturning the conventional notion of theatre, this unusual opera provoked outrage among the audience, which divided into two factions—an indignant crowd, and a small circle of cheering spectators. The curtain was not drawn apart but ripped in half. Brilliantly lit by the glare of a spotlight, the characters appeared on stage before the stunned spectators. The "future strongmen" were especially impressive. Matiushin recalled: "In the first act, in order to create the colossal size of the two strongmen, [Malevich] built shoulders level with their mouths, the head was constructed of cardboard like a helmet—thereby creating the impression of two enormous human figures."[10]

Malevich's designs for this production provided crucial groundwork for the development of Suprematism. Most of them followed the tenets of Cubism, leaning towards the non-objective, and Suprematist restructuring was particularly evident in the backdrop designs. In Act V, the drama unfolds against the background of an entirely "Suprematist" square depicted in black and white. At this time Malevich himself was not aware of the importance of these changes in his creative work, but his subsequent realization is evident in a letter he wrote to Matiushin—before the projected second staging of *Victory over the Sun* in 1915: "I'll be very grateful if you yourself would position my curtain design for the

act in which the victory is won. . . This drawing will have great significance for painting; what had been done unconsciously, is now bearing extraordinary fruit."[11] It was precisely in his designs for *Victory over the Sun* that Malevich took the definitive step towards Suprematism.

The Exhibition of the "Last Futurists"

For some time the new direction in Russian painting remained untitled. Until the fall of 1915 no one besides Matiushin knew what was going on in Malevich's studio, but by mid-1915, after producing no less than 30 non-objective canvases, Malevich finally named his new trend Suprematism. In 1915, as Moscow artists prepared for the last Cubo-Futurist exhibition, Malevich prepared to show and affirm his new art. Ivan Kliun and Mikhail Menkov, the first artists to adopt the ideas of Suprematism, exhibited their work together with Malevich's. However, the other participants refused to enter Malevich's work as "Suprematist" in the catalogue. Malevich was forced to concede to his fellow artists, although he had already prepared a brochure about Suprematism which he distributed at the opening of the exhibition. In addition he hung up a sign alongside his paintings reading "Suprematism of Painting, K. Malevich."[12] The "Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero Ten)" opened on 17 December 1915 at Nadezhda Dobychina's Art Bureau on the Field of Mars in Petrograd. No one pondered over the strange numerical ending to the exhibition's name: evidently it was regarded simply as one more Futurist whim.

Critics noted that the title of the exhibition was "arithmetically incorrect," and, in actual fact, "0.10" (i.e. "one tenth") did not correspond to the explanation in parentheses—"zero, ten." However, Malevich's correspondence provides some insight into the idea behind the title. On 29 March, 1915 he wrote: "We are undertaking the publication of a journal and are beginning to discuss the whys and wherefores. In view of the fact that we are preparing to reduce everything to nothing, we have decided to call the journal Zero. Later on we too will go beyond zero."[13] The idea of reducing all figurative forms to nothing and step beyond zero—to the non-objective—came from Malevich. In the brochure circulated at the exhibition Malevich announced his complete break with figurative forms: "I have transformed myself in the zero of forms and have gone beyond 0-1."[14] The nine remaining participants in the exhibition also

strove "to go beyond 0." Hence the parenthetic message—"zero–ten." This explanation is corroborated by Ivan Puni's letter to Malevich dated June, 1915: "We have to paint a great deal right now. The premises are too big, and if all 10 of us paint 25 pictures each, then even so, that will still be hardly enough."[15] Malevich showed forty-nine canvases at the exhibition, including the famous *Black Square*—the visual manifesto of Suprematism. For decades critics have been perturbed by this square. Loathe to admit that after the Suprematist period Malevich also painted a large number of figurative paintings, critics relate all of his creative work back to the square rather than to his final work. However, these figurative paintings exerted a considerable influence on post-Revolutionary Russian art.

The exhibition encountered a barrage of "heavy artillery" from the critics. Alexandre Benois led the attack. He, in particular, was enraged by the *Black Square*, "the 'icon' that the Futurists propose as a replacement for Madonnas and shameless Venuses. *Black Square on a White Background*—is not just a joke, not a simple challenge, not a small chance episode which happened to take place on the Field of Mars. It is an act of self-affirmation—of the principle of vile desolation. Through its aloofness, arrogance, and desecration of all that is beloved and cherished, it flaunts its desire to lead everything to *destruction*."[16] Malevich was unable to respond to Benois' criticism through a newspaper, so he sent his rebuff directly to the critic with the intention of publishing his letter as a separate brochure. However, his mobilization prevented publication.

Suprematism

But while receding ever further from the portrayal of visible reality, Malevich never completely lost touch with nature, and he persisted in defining his creative methods by titles such as "Cubo-Futurist Realism" and "Transrational Realism." Even the Suprematist manifesto bore the subtitle, "New Painterly Realism." The "naturalism" of Malevich's Suprematist canvases was simply expressed on a different level—that of the interplanetary cosmos.

Malevich's non-objective paintings immediately attracted the attention of Khlebnikov who followed his fellow artist's progress with great interest. According to Vladimir Tatlin's correspondence with Nikolai Khardzhiev, Khlebnikov attended the "0-10" exhibition in December

1915. The following spring, most likely in March, he visited Malevich's Moscow studio in order to get a closer look at the non-objective drawings. In an unpublished letter, Malevich wrote to Matiushin: "Khlebnikov came to see me. He took away several drawings in order to study the ratio between their various dimensions—and came up with the numbers 317 and, apparently, 365. Apparently, he has established the laws for various causes with these very same numbers." Further on Malevich added: "The numbers that Khlebnikov has discovered suggest that something powerful lies within 'Supremus'; an inherent law governs this sphere, perhaps the very same law that has guided world creativity. Through me passes that same force, that same mutual harmony of creative laws that governs everything. Whatever existed heretofore just wasn't the real thing."[17] Khlebnikov's interest in Malevich's new work focused on the concept of "planetary autonomy" in which each art work was a kind of "little universe" subordinate to specific numerical expression. According to Khlebnikov, the category of time is at the very foundation of the universe. The poet decided to "calculate" Malevich's plastic worlds in order to show that these worlds were subordinate to the same concept, and he did this in 1919 in his theoretical draft, *The Head of the Universe, Time in Space*, which resulted from an analysis of "shaded drawings," or in other words, of Malevich's sketches. Khlebnikov wrote about the unity of the macro- and micro-worlds. This unity results from the category of time located at the foundation of both worlds. Comparing the earth's surface with that of a red blood cell, "Man—Citizen of the Milky Way," Khlebnikov wrote: "An agreement has been drawn up between the citizen of the heavens and the citizen of the body. It reads: the surface area of the earthen star divided by the surface area of a blood cell equals 365 to the tenth power (365^{10})—the two worlds exist in perfect harmony, and it is man's right to be first on earth." He then added: "The dead Milky Way and the living one, here, have signed the agreement as two citizens with equal rights before the law." From this position Khlebnikov "calculated" Malevich's designs and came up with the same fundamental number, 365, about which Malevich had written 3 years before. According to the poet, this number represented the 'shaded year.' Khlebnikov's text presents two theses, concluding with the results of his analysis of Malevich's designs: "In several of Malevich's shaded drawings, among his favored black planes and spheres, I have discovered that the ratio between the area of the largest shaded square and that of the smallest

black circle is 365. Thus, within these collections of planes there is the shaded year and the shaded day. In the sphere of painting, I have seen anew that time is governed by space. Within this artist's consciousness, the colors white and black now wage a battle with themselves and, now completely disappearing, yield to a pure dimension."[18] Within these few lines lies the key to understanding Malevich's non-objective art. Just as an all-consuming concern with time is evident throughout Khlebnikov's work, so Malevich's vivid appreciation of space permeates his thinking and determines his artistic relationship to the world. During the summer of 1917 he even pronounced himself "president of space."[19] Moving away from the previously understood role of space in art, Malevich noted that in Futurism and Cubism "only space is the exclusive object of elaboration while form connected to objectness did not even provide the imagination with a sense of universal space. Space is confined to the space which separates things from each other on earth."[20]

In Malevich's Suprematist paintings space is both the model and the analogue of cosmic space. His painting feels "cramped" on earth and "strains towards the heavens." He wrote: "my new painting does not appertain solely to the earth. . . And at the same time, in man, in his consciousness, there is a yearning towards space, a pressing 'alienation from earth.'"[21] In cosmic space, planets move in unity, and, believing that pictorial space resembles cosmic space, Malevich constructed a corresponding interrelationship of figures within his art so that "weight would be distributed throughout systems of weightlessness."[22] In developing his ideas about space in art, Malevich was the first Russian artist to arrive at analogous futurological conclusions. In 1913 he was already dreaming about a time "when large cities and studios of contemporary artists will be held up by zeppelins."[23] In 1920 he published a brochure in which he substantiated the possibility of interplanetary flight with satellites orbiting earth and intermediary satellite space stations—allowing man to master the cosmos.[24] One of these "futurological" projects the artist called Future "Planity" (Houses) for Earth Dwellers (People). From the very first, Suprematism exerted an enormous influence on the work of many artists both in Russia and then abroad. Among Malevich's followers were the artists Olga Rozanova, Kliun, Puni, Nadezhda Udal'tsova, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova, and Alexander Rodchenko. Suprematism was a sign of the times. After 1920 the movement extended beyond the limits of studio painting. As early as 1915, at

the exhibition of the "Last Futurists," Kliun, Malevich's disciple, showed several volumetrical Suprematist constructions—the first examples of the *arkhitektony* on which Malevich would start to work in the 1920s. The spatial ideas in Malevich's paintings would become "objectivised" through these *arkhitektony*—Suprematist structures would enter the domain of real volume. Malevich's *arkhitektony* became the prototypes for contemporary architecture. During the 1920s, Malevich and his students Nikolai Suetin and Ilia Chashnik also devoted time to porcelain production, textiles, printing, and various other forms of the applied arts.

The Revolutionary Years: Unovis

Malevich's creative work and his social activities reached new heights during the Revolutionary years. He directed the Art Department of the Moscow Soviet and was a member of the IZONKP Collegium, a senior artist at the Moscow Svomas, and a professor at the restructured Academy of Art. He also printed programmatic articles in the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the Commune] and in the journal *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* [Visual Art]. At the same time, Malevich continued to work creatively. He made the designs for Vladimir Maiakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* that premiered in Petrograd in the fall of 1918 and had his first one-man exhibition in Moscow the following year.

In November, 1919 Malevich arrived in Vitebsk in order to teach at an art school there. As fate would have it, within a short time this sleepy provincial town turned into a hotbed of artistic life. In December 1918 Marc Chagall, who had organized the art school, wrote: "The city of Vitebsk has begun to stir. In this provincial 'hole' of almost a hundred thousand inhabitants—today, in the days of October—it's being shaken up by a tremendous amount of revolutionary art."[25] With Malevich's arrival, life at the Vitebsk school suddenly started in full swing. He not only knew how to talk, but was able to show and explain things with pencil and brush in hand. His indomitable energy, his belief in the validity of his own ideas which had opened new artistic horizons—within a short time these qualities helped Malevich establish a collective of artists who came to play a major role in the development of Soviet art. During his stay in Vitebsk, the artist Lev Yudin made a typical entry in his diary: "How strong K.S. is—while we are all whining and complain-

ing about expenses and it really seems as if the world has come to an end. K.S. turns up and immediately you fall into a different atmosphere. He's a true leader."[26]

In January, 1920 the group called Posnovis (Followers of the New Art) was founded at the school, opening its first exhibition on 6 February 1920. Then, on February 14, the group Unovis (Affirmers of the New Art) was founded at a meeting of artists in which Malevich participated. Unovis sought to renew the world of art completely according to the tenets of Suprematism and to transform the utilitarian-material aspect of life through new forms. After its establishment in Vitebsk, Unovis started up other groups in Moscow, Petrograd, Smolensk, Samara, Saratov, Perm, Odessa, and other cities. Under the leadership of Malevich, the nucleus of Unovis was composed of the artists Vera Ermolaeva, El Lissitzky, Nina Kogan, Chashnik, Suetin, and Lazar Khidekel.

Unovis brought a new alacrity and dynamic energy to the Vitebsk art scene. The town suddenly experienced an artistic explosion, something especially noticeable during the Revolutionary celebrations. On those days, Vitebsk was adorned in a remarkable manner which must have been quite incomprehensible to the town residents. The artist Sofia Dymshitz-Tolstaia recalled: "I arrived in Vitebsk after the October celebrations, but the town still glittered with Malevich's decorations—circles, squares, dots, lines of various colors, and Chagallian people flying through the air. I felt as if I'd stumbled into a bewitched city. At the time everything was possible, everything was fantastic, and the inhabitants of Vitebsk all seemed to have turned into Suprematists.[27]

Unovis presented a series of theatrical productions in Vitebsk: the Kruchenykh-Matiushin opera, *Victory over the Sun*, designed by Ermolaeva, the prologue from Maiakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*; and Maiakovsky's *War and Peace*. Unovis also organized and participated in many exhibitions, and several of them took place in Vitebsk. Twice—in 1920 and 1921—Malevich's students showed their work at the Cezanne Club under the auspices of the Moscow Vkhutemas. The 1922 Russian art exhibition in Berlin also displayed the work of Malevich, Ermolaeva, Lissitsky, and a group of students from the Vitebsk school.

Malevich's sojourn in Vitebsk was extraordinarily productive for him, especially in terms of theoretical work. His research attained such a point of intensity that in December 1920, putting aside paint and canvas, he announced: "I will describe in writing all that I see in regard to

the infinite expanse of man's skull."[28] The meetings organized by Unovis and devoted to experimental drawing—always involving the analysis of students' work—held special importance for the development of the analysis of plastic forms. The following is an excerpt from the minutes of one such meeting, dated 22 March 1920:

"Zuperman (showing one of his paintings): For me the violin did not exist as a subject. I constructed a particular, straight plane and demonstrated depth. The entire construction should be reduced to the energy of the painterly masses, to painting in its purest aspect, without objects."

Malevich: At this point in the development of his work, Zuperman is following a painterly approach—he doesn't need any subjects; the forms of the object were simply painterly masses which have been reproduced in a completely arbitrary construction. We must view the object as a purely painterly manifestation of substance. Before us stands an organized body—the separate elements become one within the structure of the body. Similarly, the artist brings together various elements in order to create a unified whole—and this ability constitutes his genius. If in the old days an artist's work portrayed things and various episodic adventures, the painting now becomes its *own justification* for creative forms.[29]

Ginkhuk: The Theory of the Additional Element

The Vitebsk 'renaissance' proved to be short-lived. In 1922 Malevich, along with a large group of his students, moved to Petrograd. Once there they began to work at the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Ginkhuk).

A number of artists, acutely aware of the significant developments in Russian art, had conceived the idea of a research center dedicated to the elaboration of new problems in art. Pavel Filonov described the proposed plan as the "transferral of the center of gravity in art to Russia."[30] The new artistic trends required a theoretical basis; traditional criticism proved inadequate for the interpretation of the problems raised by new art; and the rift between the public and artists had widened. Artists had no choice but to take up theoretical work themselves. The State Institute of Artistic Culture was founded in 1919, as is noted in the catalogue *The First Regular Exhibition of the Chief Administration for Science within Narkompros* (Moscow, 1925). However, before the ideas espoused by the Institute could find full expression, it had to pass through an "incuba-

tion period." Everything began with the foundation of the Museum of Artistic Culture (MKhK), and the following are certain documentary highlights in the development of Ginkhuk.

On 5 December 1918 the Commission for the Organization of MKhK held a meeting—the participants were Natan Altman, Alexei Karev, and Alexander Matveev. On 11 February 1919 a Museum Conference took place in the Winter Palace, ratifying the organization of MKhK. MKhK was then given space in the Miatlev Mansion on St. Isaac's Square, and Altman was appointed chief organizer. On 3 April 1921 the MKhK Painting Department was opened to the public showing works from the most contemporary artistic trends. Later on, departments devoted to drawing, icons, and industrial art were also opened. Thus MKhK became the first museum in the world dedicated to the latest trends. At a Museum Conference in Petrograd, on 9 June 1923, Filonov gave a paper in which—as a member of the "group of leftist artists"—he proposed that MKhK be changed into an "Institute for the Research of the Culture of Contemporary Art." On 15 August, Malevich was elected director of MKhK, and on 1 October, research divisions opened under its auspices. In October, 1924 MKhK became the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Ginkhuk). Malevich was elected director with Punin as deputy. In addition to these two artists, the Institute's Council was composed of Tatlin, Matiushin and Mansurov. On 17 March 1925, the People's Commissariat ratified Inkhuk's status as a state institution. Ginkhuk became a large center for theoretical research in art with its various departments headed by Malevich, Tatlin, Matiushin, Mansurov, and Punin. The Ginkhuk artists sought an art whose spatial structures would develop according to the principle of natural form, i.e. an art based on a primary, essential foundation. They felt that in its form and construction art should derive from the natural experience. Organics versus mechanics and "machine" civilization—that is how we might define the spirit of the research conducted at Ginkhuk.

Overturning the accepted logic that dictated using a right angle as the basis for construction, the Constructivist Tatlin designed his Monument to the Third International using an inclined construction and a spiral. Exhibited in Paris, in 1925, the model for Tatlin's Tower was actually made at Ginkhuk. Establishing his method of "Analytical Art," Filonov tried to make the painting "grow" and structure itself in the way a living organism develops. As early as 1912, in his unpub-

lished article "Canon and Law," Filonov denounced the impasse that Cubo-Futurism had reached "thanks to its mechanistic and geometric bases."[31] Matiushin's work was based on a careful examination of the laws of nature which led him to evolve his theory of "extended viewing." At the Institute he was the most brilliant exponent of the question of an organic artistic culture, even naming his department the Department of Organic Culture. Finally, in the Experimental Department, Mansurov also worked on the problems of "organics," examining the influence of natural structures on artistic form. The most important department at Ginkhuk was the Department of Formal Theory headed by Malevich. Its staff consisted of research assistants, graduate students, and student interns, and many famous Leningrad artists spent time there, including Chashnik, Khidekel, Valentin Kurdov, Anna Leporskaia, Konstantin Rozhdestvensky, Vladimir Sterligov, Suetin, and Yurii Vasnetsov. The Department had two colour and form laboratories directed by Ermolaeva and Yudin. Malevich's collective of research assistants began an intense study of the five major systems of the new art: Impressionism, Cezannism, Futurism, Cubism, and Suprematism. In elaborating his theory of the supplementary element in art, Malevich relied substantially on these findings. Kazimir Malevich was not only a gifted artist, but also a researcher, seeking to understand both the causes for new forms in the world and art, and the logic of their evolution. Intense theoretical effort followed the appearance of the Black Square, for Malevich did not think of Suprematism as an isolated phenomenon, but as a decisive step in the global development of artistic culture. In 1913-1916 Malevich found ready support for his enthusiastic researches in theory thanks to a very fortunate circumstance: he found an interlocutor in the person of Matiushin, a man deeply involved in the study of the new, as yet unnamed, movement in art, who became the editor and publisher of the first Suprematist manifesto. In their correspondence we can find the embryo of the ideas that would result in the creation of the theory of the supplementary element.

In order to study artistic development, to see it not as a chance occurrence, but as a logical progression from one plastic form to another, one should believe at the very least that its progression is governed by indisputable and concrete laws, even if they remain unknown. From the very first, this was the position that Malevich maintained.

In May 1916, in a letter to Alexandre Benois, Malevich defended

Suprematism: "And I am happy that the face of my Black Square cannot fuse with any other artist or any other time. Right? I have not heeded my predecessors, and I don't resemble them. And I am a step—not. Do you or don't you like it—art doesn't ask you that, just as it didn't ask you when it created the stars in the sky."[32]

The evolution of plastic forms is not arbitrary and has its own inner logic just as Malevich thought. Indeed, there is a consistent and inevitable "world line" in the movement of art. Not only is the strict regularity of this evolution evident in the past, but the vector of its movement into the future can also be determined. This vector is neither invented nor constructed, but is formed through the study of each phenomenon that helps the development to "come forth." In this lies the peculiar spirit of Malevich's research—manifest both in his early documentary studies and in the theory of the supplementary element that he evolved at Ginkhuk. It is difficult to determine exactly when the idea of the supplementary element came to Malevich, although he claimed that he was already thinking about it when he arrived in Vitebsk. Once there he encountered a group of young people obsessed by art and involved in a program which ran counter to all of the various new trends in art. Malevich recalled: "Before me there arose the possibility of conducting various experiments to research the effect of additional elements on the painterly perceptions of the nervous system in real people."[33]

With the establishment of Ginkhuk, elaboration of the theory of the supplementary element became the major task of Malevich's department. Malevich understood the "supplementary element" to be a new structural principle arising in the process of artistic evolution. The introduction of this new principle into a fully developed painterly-plastic system tunes this system to a different pitch. During structural analysis, supplementary elements were found in numerous examples of the new art: the "fibrous graph line" of Cezanne, the "crescent line" of Cubism, the "straight line" of Suprematism, and these "supplementary elements" were determined for each system both in color and form. For example, the introduction of the Cubist crescent graph into a Cezannesque structure can reorganize the resulting picture into the scheme of a Cubist painting. Malevich made considerable use of the theory of the supplementary element in his teaching. He would present a novice with "still-life recipes" (incorporating the plastic elements of this or that artistic system) in order to determine the artistic inclinations

of the student. After making a "diagnosis," Malevich would then guide the novice's work in such a way as to encourage the development of individual, artistically original elements. During one of the discussions concerning Kurdov's work, Malevich said: "We should look for all the elements in Kurdov's work and improve them, but not so as to turn you into a Cubist, Suprematist, etc. . . We must try to preserve the unknown element [peculiar to the individuality of the artist—E.K.] and allow it to develop in the future, while getting rid of borrowed elements." This analysis occurred during one of Malevich's visits to the studios. Kurdov has preserved a remarkable document—notes taken during three such visits (the above quotes are taken from these notes).

Malevich's theory of the supplementary element was an original experiment in the structural analysis of a work of art. The results of this analysis revealed the effective elements or "signs" that determine the artistic "organism" of a work within each artistic trend. The value of this "sign system" lay in its ability to explain the development of plastic forms and reveal the "mechanism" whereby from one form grew into the next.

The proofs of Malevich's article "An Introduction to the theory of the Supplementary Element in Art" date from 1925.[34] Banned by the Chief Science Administrator to which Ginkhuk was subordinate, the article was composed but never published, and, from the mid-1920's onwards, Ginkhuk came under continuous attack. With its high standards of creative work, Ginkhuk was a thorn in the side of AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia) which was then gaining in political force. Talented young people aspiring to commune with genuine art-AKhRR now deflected them from the ranks of Ginkhuk. For Ginkhuk, 1926 proved fatal. The next exhibition of the institute's research and creative work opened in June of that year, featuring the work of Malevich and his followers, the Matiushin group, and Mansurov's experimental works. Mansurov put up two manifestoes, one of which declared: "At this time, the artist's peculiar position compels him to oppose, with every means at his disposal, those ideas that have no concrete or even simple, logical basis in their application to art, i.e. the ideas of the administrators, politicians, and businessmen whose philosophy has now filled every possible position convenient for their discourse with the people. The predominant political philosophy has resulted in the physical extinction of the artist just as it has the total destruction of the art school."[35]

The critic G. Seryi attended the exhibition, presenting himself to Malevich as an ideologist from AKhRR and publishing his review. "A State Supported Monastery," in the newspaper, *Leningradskaya pravda* [Leningrad Pravda] on 10 June, 1926: "A monastery with several crazy residents has taken refuge under the disguise of a state institution. Making a travesty of our Soviet educational organs, these people, perhaps unconsciously, are openly spreading the counter-revolutionary word." This was one of the first articles in which an analysis of works of art, i.e. art criticism, descended to the level of ideology or, more exactly, political denunciation. This kind of publicistic genre was to be used extensively later on. After the *Leningradskaya pravda* article, investigations and commissions began to scrutinize the work in Ginkhuk. Composed of serious scholars, they confirmed the scientific merit of the research conducted at Ginkhuk. But the wheel was already turning and its direction could not be reversed. On June 16, at a general meeting of the Institute's research assistants, Malevich expressed regret that "perhaps it will not be possible to continue these meetings. Tomorrow, thanks to Seryi's article in *Leningradskaya pravda*, there will be a commission that may well put an end to all of Ginkhuk's cultural activities—activities which could be so beneficial to the study of art and the explanation of its nature."[36] In the fall of 1926, in spite of the defence it received from the academic world, Ginkhuk was liquidated.

The Berlin Exhibition

Malevich had long standing connections with German art. As early as the 1912 Munich exhibition organized by the *Blaue Reiter* association, Malevich showed his canvas the *Head of a Peasant*. In 1922 a large Soviet exhibition opened in Berlin organized by IZO NKP at which Malevich showed five paintings—four Suprematist works, including *White on White*, and the 1911 Futurist canvas *The Knife Grinder. The Flashing Principle*. A meeting with German artists during the Vitebsk period also took place. According to Unovis (put out by the Vitebsk Committee for Artistic Creativity) for 20 November 1920, "a cargo of Unovis materials has been sent off to Germany." Unfortunately, hitherto we have not been able to establish of what exactly this "cargo" consisted. Malevich's Berlin exhibition had a fairly long prehistory. By early 1925, motivated by an invitation from Germany, the Ginkhuk Academic Council had already

decided to organize an exhibition of the Institute's work abroad. On 16 March 1925 Malevich sent a letter to the Leningrad Department of the Chief Science Administration mentioning among other things that: "The reason for this exhibition is the considerable interest displayed both by the Western press and by people visiting from abroad who have found the Institute's work to be of primary importance. This is confirmed by the fact that private entrepreneurs such as the Kestner-Gesellschaft in Hannover are also interested in organizing a similar kind of exhibition."[37] While the official letters went backwards and forwards the entire Institute prepared for the exhibition, for it was intended that the departments under Malevich, Mansurov, Matiushin, and Tatlin would all take part, Malevich was preparing to acquaint the West with the theory he had developed about the supplementary element in painting, and his assistants drew up diagrams and graphics to illustrate the tenets of this theory. However, the idea of an exhibition abroad did not meet with the sympathy of the Chief Science Administration.

In a second letter that he sent to the Chief Science Administration, Malevich, no longer hoping to secure the exhibition, asked for a research trip abroad for himself, Punin, Suetin, and Boris Ender, and if this would prove to be to be unfeasible, he wrote, "then request your cooperation in receiving visas and a mandate to help me make the journey to France via Warsaw and Germany by foot. I expect to start out on 15 May, reaching Paris by 1 October, and intend returning by train on 1 December."[38] Not until September 1926 did Malevich receive permission to make a trip at his own expense. Leaving for Berlin in 1927, Malevich took with him: 1) paintings, 2) drawings and gouaches, 3) arkhitektony, 4) explanatory theoretical tables, 5) several theoretical manuscripts and 6) a number of Matiushin's theoretical tables. On the way to Germany Malevich stopped off in Warsaw, where he had a small exhibition at the Hotel Polonia. Malevich reported back to Matiushin: "On the 20th I'm opening an exhibition in Warsaw. The exhibition is tiny, just 30 canvases."[39] The Polish avant-garde received Malevich warmly and the exhibition was a success. On 25 March Malevich gave a talk to the Polish artists about Ginkhuk's theoretical research. The note sent to Matiushin attests to the very positive impression that the Warsaw meetings had on Malevich: "My dear Misha, I showed them your tables as I did my own. Both promoted strong interest. Ah, there is a wonderful attitude here. Praise pours down like rain. But they've brought me back to the right path and

when I return in May, I'll tell you about everything: in detail. Give my greetings to all of yours. Twenty-five banquets and that's it."[40]

In March Malevich arrived in Berlin, remaining there until 5 June. His one-man exhibition—part of the "Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung" was open from 7 May to 30 September. After visiting the exhibition, Anatolii Lunacharsky wrote: "Within his own genre, Malevich has attained significant results and great skill. I don't know whether canvases like these will be painted after he's gone, but I am sure that his method—which, for example, the late Popova used could well have a rich future as a decorative method."[41] In June 1927, Malevich left Berlin before the close of his exhibition.

After Suprematism

The last period of Malevich's extraordinary creative activity began soon after his return from Berlin. During a four to five year span, he created more than a hundred paintings and a multitude of drawings. Almost all of these pieces were part of the "Second Peasant Cycle," a kind of painting that had not been included in Malevich's pre-Revolutionary exhibitions. Such works are not in Amsterdam and they were not at the exhibitions of the 1920s. So how and when is it possible to date the first of these works? In 1929 the Tretiakov Gallery opened a one-man exhibition of Malevich's work consisting of sixty works. A booklet containing an article by Alexander Fedorov-Davydov was published, but there was no catalog.[42] In the list of the paintings which we have now located,[43] several titles allow us to infer that this exhibition did include a number of canvases from the late peasant cycle. However, these paintings were first recorded publicly in the catalogue of the exhibition "Artists of the RSFSR over the last XV Years" held in the Russian Museum in 1932 which included *Colored Composition*. *Three Figures*, *Sportsmen*, *Red House*, and other canvases. The emergence of similar characters and resolutions in the work of Malevich's followers also attests to the later appearance of these *White Faces*, for it is only after the 1932 exhibition that we see them in the paintings of Ermolaeva, Eduard Krimmer, Leporskaia, Sterligov, and Suetin.

This was the last exhibition at which Malevich showed his canvases, and for many decades thereafter they were absent from museum displays. Malevich's later works manifest his unique creative evolution.

During the 1910s he came to non-objectivity, to the *Black Square* which was the negation of the art of painting in the traditional sense. To return to objective forms of art might have seemed impossible Indeed, we would be hard put to find another artist in the 20th century who managed to return to figurative painting after non-objectivity—not only to return, but also to create works of brilliance. Malevich's later works testify to a new flowering of the artist's painting talent.

As early as 1919 Viktor Shklovsky predicted this return to objectivity: "I don't think that painting will remain non-objective forever. Artists did not strive toward the fourth dimension in order to remain in two dimensions. . . Suprematists have done in art what chemists have done in medicine. They have isolated the active element of their medium."[44] Yes, Malevich returned to figurative painting. But it was enriched by the achievements of Suprematism, something that we can see in the very different sense of colour and form—pure, severe, penetrating, laconic. The faces and figures of the peasants against the background of the colored fields connect with Ancient Russian art, although certainly with less immediacy and proximity than in the pre-Revolutionary "peasant heads." Malevich strove consciously toward a distinctive acuity of image thanks to his economy of plastic means and visual understatement. He told Yudin: "Non-objective objects and half-figures such as my peasants have the greatest significance for our time. They have the sharpest effect."[45]

Peasant images extend throughout all of Malevich's work. From 1908 to 1912 there are the paintings of work in the fields and the peasant heads close in their severe devoutness to the Russian icon. Even at the beginning of the Suprematist period the artist tried to maintain a connection with these images. For example—in the catalogue of the 1915 exhibition the famous *Red Square* was called *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Women in Two Dimensions*. Recalling his early years in his autobiography, Malevich kept emphasizing his interest in the peasant way of life and folk art: "The life of peasants has had a powerful hold on me."[46] His enthusiasm was the manifestation of an anti-urbanist which he retained throughout his life. It was amidst the boundless Ukrainian fields where Malevich spent his youth that the colored impulses of his future canvases were born: "Peasants, young and old, worked on the plantations, and I, the future artist, feasted my eyes on the fields and the 'colored' workers, who hoed or planted the beetroot. Platoons of

girls in colourful clothes advanced side by side across the entire field."[47]

Malevich's second cycle of peasants of 1928-32 differs significantly from the first. Characteristics of everyday life are now missing, there are no reaper-women or mowers, and in all the paintings the peasants are seen against the background of the colored fields. They are always depicted *on face* and any of the pictures in this cycle elicits the impression of the solemnity, monumentality, and significance of what is occurring, even though there's nothing very special in the subject-matter. *Peasant Woman (with a Black Face)* and the other characters in the peasant cycle seem to have become an organic component of Malevich's "Suprematist universe" which hitherto had remained uninhabited. Created after Suprematism, many pieces in this cycle such as *Girls in the Field* and *Sportsmen* preserve the same "cosmic" impression that Malevich's non-objective works had also expressed so sharply.

Malevich's last paintings—their depth and inner complexity, their plastic perfection—are now one of the most vivid and original phenomena of twentieth century painting. Malevich died more than 40 years ago, but his artistic ideas have maintained their value, and interest in his creative work continues to grow throughout the world. The passage of time has left no doubt that Malevich belongs to that select group of artists whose creative endeavour can change the artistic physiognomy of an entire epoch.

Endnotes

1 Another version of this article was originally published as: "Kazimir Malevich: His Creative Path," in *Kazimir Malevich 1878- 1935*, ed. Wim A. L. Beeren and Joop M. Joosten (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1988) 159-170.

2 L. Yudin, diary, entry for 27 October 1934. Family archive, Leningrad.

3 Matiushin, "O vystavke poslednikn futuristov," 18.

4 Khlebnikov, *Neizdannye proizvedeniia*, 320.

5 Malevich, letter to Matiushin (June, 1913) in the Manuscript Section, TZGALI f. 25, d. 9, 1.8.

6 Mikhail Matiushin and Elena Guro were responsible for the idea of establishing the Union of Youth (1910-14). Its members included Pavel Filonov, Waldemars Matvejs (Vladimir Markov), Olga Rozanova, losif Shkolnik et al., and on 3 January, 1913 the Muscovites David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich, and Vladimir Tatlin were also elected to the association. Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov were regular contributors to the Union's exhibitions.

7 M. Matiushin, A. Kruchenykh, K. Malevich, "Pervyi Vserossiiskii sezd baiachei budushchego (poetov-futuristov). Zasedaniia 18 i 19 iulia 1913 goda v Uusikirkko (Finliandiia)," in *Za sem' dnei*, Moscow, 15 August (1913).
8 Matiushin, *Tvorcheskii put' khudozhnika*, in the Manuscript Section, Pushkin House: Institute of Russian Literature (IRLI), f. 656.
9 Khlebnikov wrote the Prologue for the Opera.
10 Matiushin, *Tvorcheskii put' khudozhnika*.
11 Malevich, Letter to Matiushin (27 May 1915), in *Ezhegodnik Rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1974 god*, 185-86.
12 See Alexander Rostislavov's note in *Apollon*, p. 1916, No. 1, 37.
13 Malevich, Letter to Matiushin (29 May 1915) in *Ezhegodnik*, 186.
14 Malevich, *Otkubizmaksuprematizmu*, 14.
15 The ten participants were: Kseniia Boguslavskaia, Ivan Kliun, Kazimir Malevich, Mikhail Menkov, Vera Pestel, Liubov Popva, Ivan Puni, Olga Rozanova, Vladimir Tatlin, and Nadezhda Udaltsova. They were joined by Natan Altman, Mariia Vasilieva, Vasilii Kamensky and A. M. Kirillova. Quote from the Manuscript Section, IRLI, L, f. 172, d 871.
16 Benois, "Posledniaia futuristskaia vystavka."
17 Malevich, Letter to Matiushin (4 April 1916) in the Manuscript Section, IRLI, f. 656.
18 V. Khlebnikov, *Golova vselennoi, vremia v prostranstve*, 1919, in the Central State Archive of Literature and Art (TsGALI), f. 665, op. 1, d. 32.
19 Malevich, Letter to Matiushin (10 January 1917) in *Ezhegodnik*, 182.
20 Ibid., 192.
21 Ibid.
22 Malevich, "Bog ne skinut" in *Otkubizma k suprematizmu* 15.
23 Malevich, Letter to Matiushin (9 May 1913) in the Manuscript Section, TG, f. 25, d. 9, 1.2.
24 Malevich, *Suprematism*.
25 Chagall, *Iskusstvo kommuny*.
26 L. Yudin, Diary, entry for 12 November 1922. Family archive, Leningrad.
27 S. Dymshitz-Tolstaia, Vospominaniia in the Manuscript Section, RM, f. 100, d. 249, 1.67.
28 Malevich, *Suprematism*, 4.
29 UNOVIS-Protocols in the Manuscript Section, RM, f. 55, d. 1, 11.7-8.
30 Filonov, *Intimnaia masterskaia zhivopistsev i risovalshchikov "Sdelannie kartiny."*
31 Manuscript Section, IRLI, f. 656.
32 Malevich, Letter to A. Benois (May 1915) in the Manuscript Section, RM, f. 137, d. 1186.
33 Malevich, *Vvedenie v teoriiu pribavochnogo elementa v zhivopisi*, 1925 (galley proofs). Private archive, Leningrad/Malevich Archives, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. See also Andersen, *The world as Non-Objectivity*, 173.
34 An expanded version was published by the Bauhaus as a separate book, i.e. Malevich, *Diegegenstandlose*.
35 P. Mansurov, *Vmesto opisaniia rabot*, 1926 in LGAOR (Leningradskij Gosudarstvennyj arhiv Oktjabr'skoj revoljucii) t. 4340, op. 1, d. 66, 1.12.
36 Malevich, Paper presented at an interdisciplinary meeting of Ginkhuk personnel. Meeting was convoked to critique and discuss the works of all departments. Stenograph (16 June, 1926) in LGAOR, f. 2555, op. 1, d. 1018,1.160.
37 LGAOR, f. 2555, op. 1, d. 805, 1. 34.
38 LGAOR, f. 4340, op. 1,d. 66,1.207.
39 Manuscript Section, TG, f. 25, d. 9, 1. 23.
40 Ibid., 1 24.

41 Lunacharsky, "Russkie khoduzhniki v Berline."
42 *Vystavka proizvedenii K.S. Malevicha*, Moscow, TG, 1929.
43 Manuscript Section, TG, f. 811, d. 286, 1. 31.
44 Shklovsky, V. "Prostranstvo v iskusstve i suprematisty."
45 L. Yudin, Diary, entry for 21 September 1934. Family archive, Leningrad.
46 Malevich, "Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika," 107.
47 Ibid., 103.

2. Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s[1]

Christina Lodder

> "All forms of everyday life, morals, philosophy, and art must be recreated on communist principles. Without this the further development of the communist revolution is not possible."[2]

Boris Kushner's comment of early 1919 expresses the strong identification that artists were beginning to make, in the first years after the October Revolution, between their own activity and the social and political aims of the new state. His words epitomize the artists' aspiration to use their art in the service of the Revolution, a desire that underpinned the formulation of Productivist theory and Constructivist practice during this period. In this essay, I should like to look at some of the ways in which this theory and practice developed in the following decade, in response both to external pressures and internal debates.

A practical and ideological emphasis on industrial technology is inherent in Lenin's famous remark of 1920 "Communism equals Soviet Power plus the electrification of Russia." Indeed, the idea of uniting art and industrial manufacture appeared soon after the October Revolution. David Shterenberg, the head of the Department of Fine Arts of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Otdel izobrazitelnykh iskusstv pri Narodnom komissariate po prosveshcheniu, IZO, Narkompros) asserted that as soon as it was established in 1918 the department was committed to "art's penetration" into production.[3] As another writer observed, "the theory of production art was developed in 1918-19 and formulated in the pages of the newspaper *Art of the Commune* (Iskusstvo kommuny)."[4] The paper was published by IZO in Petrograd between 7 December 1918 and 13 April 1919. Its contributors included theorists and critics like Osip Brik, Nikolai Punin and Boris Kushner, artists such as Natan Altman and the poet Vladimir Mayakovskii. As the official organ of IZO, the journal expounded a whole range of ideas that

were being discussed by avant-garde artists at the time, including such fundamental issues as the nature of proletarian art, the role of art in a socialist society, and whether art itself was not an essentially bourgeois phenomenon. It is not surprising that the journal was eclectic and never formulated a coherent program. Nevertheless, many of the ideas that were later developed by the Constructivists were first articulated within its pages. As Nikolai Chuzhak later pointed out, "It was a time of happy attacks on the most inviolable 'cultural values' . . . all the most important words used later were employed in *Art of the Commune* . . . but half were issued by accident."[5]

In the first number, Mayakovskii issued his famous poem, "Order to the Army of Art," which exhorted artists to go out into the urban environment, proclaiming "the streets are our brushes; the squares are our palettes."[6] Brik went further in bringing art into closer contact with everyday life. He declared, "Do not distort, but create . . . art is like any other means of production . . . not ideas, but a real object is the aim of all true creativity".[7] As soon as Brik defined art as a category of work, or rather of industrial work, he opened up the way for the concept of production art. He declared that the existing division between art and production was "a survival of bourgeois structures". Punin tried to distinguish between this new relationship between art and industry and the already established category of applied art. He stated, "It is not a matter of decoration, but of the creation of new artistic objects. Art for the proletariat is not a scared temple for lazy contemplation, but work, a factory, producing completely artistic objects."[8]

Some of these ideas were developed at greater length in a small collection of essays entitled *Art in Production*, written in November 1920 and published the following year by the Art and Production subsection of IZO Narkompros.[9] According to the editorial, "The problem of art in production in the light of the new culture is, for us, one of the basic problems of liberated work, linked in the closest way to the problem of the transformation of production culture on the one hand, and with the problem of the transformation of everyday life on the other."[10]

The booklet was not at all unified in the solutions that it offered, which suggests that in the winter of 1920-21 a clearly formulated theory of production art had not as yet emerged. Indeed, the phrase "artistic production" (khudozhestvennoe proizvodstvo) seems to have been used almost as much as the term "production art" (proizvodstvennoe iskusst-

vo). At this point, the two terms seem to have been employed almost interchangeably; both were used to denote the rather imprecise and general involvement of art in the manufacturing industries. In his own article, Shterenberg emphasized the role that art could play in improving the quality of factory-made items, and highlighted the importance that Narkompros and the government placed on this aspect in their official policies, which were geared to promoting the coming together of art and industry.[11] Yet, his praise of revolutionary ceramics as a paradigm of the potentials of what he called "artistic production" (khudozhestvennoe proizvodstvo) suggested that his idea of production art differed very little from the old concept of applied art. Brik's contribution was far more visionary. Clearly influenced by the recent publication of fragments of Karl Marx's *The German Ideology*, with its liberating vision of the future, communist society, Brik foresaw the eventual destruction of the existing divisions between work and art. He argued therefore that the aim had to be a "conscious and creative attitude towards the production process" which would result in "not a beautifully decorated object, but a consciously made object." To achieve this, he stressed that "the worker must become a conscious and active participant in the creative process of the creation of the object," and the artist must be persuaded to "put all his creative powers into industry."[12]

Further debate was galvanized by Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, which was exhibited in Moscow in December 1920. This important event was accompanied by Tatlin's statement of intent, which challenged the avant-garde to expand their sphere of activities beyond the studio.[13] Subsequently, in March 1921, a group of artists called the Working Group of Constructivists was set up within Inkhuk (Institut khudozhvennoi kultury—The Institute of Artistic Culture) in Moscow.[14] The group consisted of seven members in all: the three founders Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Aleksei Gan, as well as Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, Konstantin Medunetskii and Karl Ioganson.[15] The seven defined and embraced a new synthesis between art and industry. As their program made clear, their intention was to relegate their purely artistic explorations to the role of "laboratory work," and to extend their experiments of manipulating three-dimensional forms in a purely abstract way into the real environment by participating in the industrial production of useful objects. They called the new type of activity that they envisaged "intellectual

production," proclaiming that their ideological foundation was "scientific communism, built on the theory of historical materialism" and that they intended to attain "the communistic expression of material structures" by organizing their material in accordance with the three principles of *tektonika* or tectonics (the social and politically appropriate use of industrial material), construction (the organization of this material for a given purpose), and *faktura* (the conscious handling and manipulation of it).[16]

Their formal concerns were epitomized by the works shown at the *Second Spring Exhibition of the Society of Young Artists* (Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov—Obmokhu), which opened in Moscow in May 1921.[17] The majority of works exhibited were constructed in space using materials like glass and metal as well as more traditional wood. The works by the Stenberg brothers comprised open-work, skeletal constructions, containing strong references to the materials, forms and articulations of existing engineering structures such as bridges and cranes. This is very evident in Vladimir Stenberg's *Construction for a Spatial Structure No. 6* of 1920-21, which is built up of small metallic elements, some of which seem like miniaturized versions of I and T beams. Alongside these, Rodchenko exhibited a series of hanging constructions, made from wood painted silver: an ellipse, a square, a circle, a triangle, and a hexagon. They shared a common method of construction. Concentric geometrical shapes were cut out from a single plane of plywood. These shapes were then arranged within each other and rotated from a two dimensional plane into a three dimensional form, suspended in space with wire. The emphasis on basic materials and simple, economical methods of construction were seen by certain theorists, for example Boris Arvatov, to parallel and therefore to be highly compatible with industrial processes.[18] He argued that an artist who had no knowledge of working with materials was "utterly meaningless in a factory."[19]

Quite rapidly, interest in Constructivist ideas began to extend beyond the confines of the initial group. By the end of 1921, Lyubov Popova and Aleksandr Vesnin had also adopted a Constructivist position, while artists like Anton Lavinskii and Gustav Klucis became aligned after coming into contact with Constructivist ideas at the Vkhutemas (Vysshie Gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie—the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops), which were set up at the end of 1920 to train "highly qualified master artists for indus-

try."[20] Of particular importance were the Basic Course and the Wood and Metal Working Faculty of the Vkhutemas, the latter directed by Rodchenko. Here, the new generation of artists was being trained to be "engineer-constructors" or "artist-constructors" who would fuse a complete grasp of artistic skills with a specialized knowledge of technology. At the same time, it was in these faculties that a design methodology was being developed by Rodchenko, Lavinskii and others. Yet within the Vkhutemas the Constructivists were always in a minority. As the avant-garde and pro-Constructivist magazine *Lef: Left Front of the Arts* (Levyi front iskusstv) reported in 1923, "The position of the Constructivists is extraordinarily complicated. On the one hand, they have to fight the purists [easel painters] to defend the productivist line. On the other, they have to put pressure on the applied artists in an attempt to revolutionize their artistic consciousnesses."[21]

Perhaps it is not surprising therefore to find that the practical implementation of Constructivist ideas seems to have been relatively slow. The circumstances outside the school were hardly propitious. Industry had been decimated following almost seven years of conflict, and those enterprises that had survived were not sufficiently progressive to accommodate the new type of designer. When Tatlin approached the New Lessner Factory in Petrograd, with the aim of becoming involved in designing products for mass manufacture, he was directed to the technical drawing department.[22] The government encouraged and promoted production art in general, but had far more traditional aesthetic attitudes than the Constructivists. Narkompros was reorganized in 1921, and most of the avant-garde employees, including all the Constructivists, lost their jobs. By 1922 Gan was complaining of the open and covert campaign being waged by the State and the Party against the avant-garde.[23] In this situation, there were several different strategies that the artists could adopt. Gan, for instance, devoted considerable energy to advertising and propagandizing Constructivist ideas through his brochure *Constructivism* of 1922 and through numerous articles. Others tended to publicize the Constructivist approach by working in areas where the idea of artists' participation had already been established, such as in the theatre (the Stenberg brothers), and in typographical and poster design (Rodchenko). As one artist complained in 1923, the two chief areas of practical activity for the dedicated Constructivist were designing advertising posters or constructing models.[24] For these reasons, in the first

years after 1921, Constructivist products tended to be experimental or exploratory in nature, rather than being fully utilitarian and practical in solutions to specific tasks.

Some of the earliest Constructivist designs were prototypes for temporary agitational stands or small, portable and sometimes collapsible kiosks. Among the former are Gustav Klucis' designs of 1922 for a series of "radio-orators," "radio-tribunes" and "cinema-photo stands" with three-dimensional and dynamic slogans. These were to be placed on the streets of Moscow during the celebrations of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern and the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution.[25] The stands were devised to perform specific agitational functions: displaying photographic material and posters, or giving a spatial and audio-visual presence to revolutionary slogans. Some performed only one function as a loudspeaker or "radio-orator" while others were conceived to execute several different tasks simultaneously, e.g. *Propaganda Stand, Screen and Loudspeaker Platform*. Using a language clearly derived from the kind of stands utilized by the Stenberg brothers for their sculptures at the Obmokhu exhibition of 1921, Klucis reduced the construction of his various propaganda items to their essential elements, clearly revealing the structure of each stand, and providing stability through a multiplicity of vertical, diagonal and horizontal supports. Although material scarcities may have encouraged this method of construction, in many of the stands the geometry of the straight lines and their interactions seem to have provided a design impetus in their own right. All the stands appear to have been made from wood, canvas and cables and were painted red, black and white. In conjunction with this, Klucis developed a kind of modular system, not far removed from the principle inspiring the modular wooden constructions of Rodchenko, which explored the variety of structural frameworks that could be devised using essentially similar elements. In *Screen-Tribune-Kiosk*, the openwork frame supports the tribune, the screen, and the book display unit at the bottom. The tribune sits on top of an open-work, box-like structure, which is strengthened by a central pillar and at the top, bottom and two sides by the crossed struts and on the remaining two sides by the larger vertical supports which hold the screen. The screen here surely also has a double function, acting not only as film screen, but also as a visual device to frame the speaker and perhaps even offer him a measure of protection during inclement weather conditions. The box device el-

evates the speaker, but also gives the tribune a sense of weightlessness. The central inner pillar is also utilized to support the book stand. In *Propaganda Stand, Screen and Loudspeaker Platform*, Klucis has incorporated a bookstand, loudspeaker, screen and an expanding structure at the bottom right, which might be for the display of posters. The compression of several functions into a small compact unit, along with economy of space, manufacture and materials and other features that Klucis devised became established components of Constructivist design.

A natural extension of the stand was the kiosk. Amongst the earliest was Gan's folding street sales stand (skladnoi stanok) of c. 1922-23 for Mosselprom (Moskovskii trest po pererabotke selskokhazaistvennoi produktsii—Moscow Association of Enterprises Processing Agricultural and Industrial Products). This was a small folding structure, apparently made from wood, which could be carried to its destination and then quickly erected in the street or any open public space. After use, it could easily be re-folded and carried away. It contained a tray (on collapsible legs) with a removable glass lid for displaying small items of merchandise such as stationery supplies or cigarettes. Gan also designed a larger structure for the sale of books and journals in c. 1923. This was not a portable piece as such, although it could be moved. It consisted of two cuboid structures of different sizes, which opened out to form a large area of shelving for displaying books and magazines. This prototype clearly went into production at some point and, with certain modifications, was manufactured from wood for use inside public buildings, like the entrance halls of Moscow University and of the stations on the Moscow Metro, where some examples are still in use. When shut, the prominent lettering advertised the role of the kiosk and with the colored panels provided elements of decoration.

Working along similar lines, in 1924 Lavinskii produced a more permanent structure for Gosizdat (the State Publishing House). This design was to be erected on the streets, and at least one kiosk was built on Revolution Square in Moscow. The essential structure elaborated the basic cube and consisted essentially of a truncated, four-sided pyramid, with the corners cut away, which had been inverted over a cuboid base. All four sides were used for display. The windows and service hatch were covered by flaps, which could then hang down when the kiosk was open in a way that repeated the shape of the top. This arrangement meant that items could be left on display indefinitely in the windows. The ex-

citing articulation of the roof angles necessitated an effective drainage system. The design was attractive, compact, economic to manufacture, and easy to use. With its innovative design and practicality, this kiosk represented an enormous advance over the almost classically inspired model that Lavinskii had produced for the All Union Agricultural Exhibition of 1923.

A similarly adventurous approach to geometry characterized Gan's design for a rural kiosk of c. 1924. Primarily intended for the sale of books, it was also conceived to serve as a focal point for the social activities of the village. In an attempt to convey, in the structure of the kiosk, the important ideological role that it was to play in the life of the community, Gan turned his design into a piece of permanent propaganda and made it literally look like a flag ship. The nautical imagery was utilized in the prow-like arrangement of the facade and the rigging, with structures echoing the crows nest, and the funnels being attached to the top of the building. Although these features make the *Rural Kiosk* visually arresting and architecturally exciting, their maritime emphasis seems somewhat inappropriate for the rural settings of the vast land-locked areas of Russia. In other respects, the design displays an admirable pragmatism. The steep inclines of the walls and roofs, for instance, were justified on climatic grounds: it was intended to channel the snow and rain in such a way as to keep the entrance clear. Despite this, the whole design has a decidedly more rhetorical feel than Gan's more temporary structures such as the folding sales stand and his book kiosk, and, of course, there is no evidence whatsoever that it was ever actually built.

Whatever their success, such items were only limited realizations of Constructivist ideas. One area of creative endeavor in which it seemed possible to realize a synthesis of "the new way of life" with a total visual environment was the theatre: "In the theatre, Constructivism . . . united constructive furnishings (the decor, the props and the costumes)—designed to show, if not the objects themselves, at least their models—with constructive gestures, movements and pantomime (the biomechanics of Vsevolod Meierkhold)—the actors organized according to rhythms."[26] If the actor was transformed into a kind of robot, the stage was transmuted into a machine. The first Constructivist stage set was Popova's design for Meierkhold's production of Crommelynck's farce *The Magnificent Cuckold*, which opened on 15 April 1922. The mill

of the action became a multi-leveled, skeletal apparatus of platforms, revolving doors, ladders, scaffolding and wheels, which rotated at differing speeds at particularly intense moments during the play. The traditional costumes were replaced by overalls or production clothing (*prozodezhda*), working clothes, the form of which was determined by the function to be performed. In this instance, they were designed to facilitate the actors' movements on the stage. Popova stressed that in her design overall she had been concerned "to translate the task from the aesthetic plane onto the Productivist plane."[27] A similar approach determined Vesnin's set for the Kamerny Theatre's production of Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday* of 1923, which was enacted on a far more complex construction, incorporating elements derived from engineering and industrial structures as well as more specific urban elements of scaffolding, stairs, and a lift.[28] Stepanova's set for Meierkhold's production of Sukhovo-Kobylin's *The Death of Tarelkin*, which opened in November 1922, was less architectural. She devised a series of separate apparatuses, each built using thin planks of wood of standard thickness, painted white. Although their functions tended to be playful within the theatrical context, the principles inspiring their production could be applied more widely and directed to the design of objects of greater utility in everyday life, such as chairs and tables. Nevertheless, there were severe limitations on the extent to which the theatre could function as an experimental laboratory for design in the wider environment. Perhaps recognizing this fact, for *The Earth in Turmoil* in 1923, Popova devised a set based on a gantry crane and simply employed a plethora of props, which all consisted of objects that had in fact been mass produced.

During this early period, the only area in which the Constructivists established a working relationship with any specific industrial enterprise for the design of everyday objects for mass manufacture was in the field of textile design.[29] Popova and Stepanova accepted the invitation issued in 1923 by the First State Textile Print Factory for artists to work there. Once employed, they began to wage a battle "against naturalistic design in favor of the geometricization of form,"[30] producing numerous designs based on the manipulation of one or more geometric forms and usually one or two colors. Undoubtedly, the venture was a success because the artist had an established role within the industry. It was an area of "applied art", which was far more bound up with traditional ideas of ornament and embellishment than with re-organizing the material

environment in a fundamental way. Even so, Popova and Stepanova effected some changes in the patterns of the fabrics produced, and asserted the importance of such elements within the wider environment. In writing about this new area of Constructivist activity, Brik explained the opinion, which Popova and Stepanova undoubtedly shared, that "a cotton print is as much a product of artistic culture as a painting."[31]

Given the constraints and frustrations, it is not surprising that the Constructivist movement began to fragment. It is difficult to date this precisely, but it had certainly occurred by mid 1922, when Gan published his book *Constructivism*, in which he referred quite explicitly to The First Working Group of Constructivists.[32] It seems probable that he was distancing himself, Rodchenko and Stepanova from the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii who had exhibited as the Constructivists in January 1922.[33] By adding the epithet "First," Gan was asserting the priority of himself, Rodchenko and Stepanova in developing the term and the concept. In an article of 1922 he explicitly stated that they were the founders of the group, thus by implication relegating other users of the Constructivist label, such as the Stenbergs and Medunetskii, to a secondary status.[34] The rift between the two factions is confirmed by the fact that in 1924 the catalogue for the *First Discussional Exhibition of Active Revolutionary Art Groups* listed the Constructivists as the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii and placed them in a group, which was distinct from Gan and his entourage.[35] But by this time, the cohesion of the movement had fractured even further. Gan, Rodchenko and Stepanova no longer presented a united front. The First Group of Constructivists was now listed under Gan's leadership alone and its membership was given as comprising Grigorii Miller, Aleksandra Mirolyubova, L. Sanina, N[ikolai?] G. Smirnov, Galina and Ol'ga Chichagova.[36] By 1925 Viktor Shestakov was included.[37] This faction asserted quite categorically its independence from "all other groups calling themselves Constructivists" such as "the Constructivists from the Kamerny theatre" (presumably the Stenbergs, Medunetskii and Vesnin), "the Constructivists of Meierkhold's theatre" (Popova and Stepanova), and "the Constructivists of *LEF*" (Rodchenko, Stepanova, Lavinskii, Popova, and Vesnin).[38]

Clearly the largest grouping outside of Gan and his entourage were the Constructivists associated with *LEF*.[39] The magazine had been founded in 1923 and among its other activities it promoted the work of the Constructivists, using the weapons of "example, agitation and pro-

paganda."[40] The magazine published Constructivist projects and numerous articles about them. Boris Arvatov was perhaps the first theorist to distinguish between Productivists and Constructivists. For him, the Productivists were primarily theoreticians, whereas the Constructivists were artists, who were actually attempting to implement a practical link with industry.[41]

The validity of Productivist theory and the effectiveness of Constructivist practice were brought into question and subjected to close and critical scrutiny on 16 January 1925 at LEF's first conference. The presidium of the meeting included practicing Constructivists like Lavinskii, Gan, Rodchenko, and Shestakov, as well as writers and critics like Mayakovskii, Brik and Chuzhak.[42] Over 150 attended. At this and at a further meeting in July that year, it was agreed that there was a crisis and certain fundamental issues were raised.[43]

Some of the severest criticisms were voiced by Nikolai Chuzhak, who considered it essential to eradicate the remaining influence of the vulgar simplifications and excesses of the early Productivist theoreticians (1918-1920), particularly their intransigent opposition to art itself. Although he did not name these Productivists he was presumably referring to Gan and his fellow contributors to *LEF*, Brik and Arvatov.[44] Chuzhak was equally negative about the practice of the Constructivists and asserted that "Rodchenko's group is worried about 'style' and textiles, which Brik idolizes. The Constructivists comprising Gan and company have made 'production' a fetish, almost an aim in itself."[45] The remedy for this, as Chuzhak saw it, was for the Constructivists to engage in more concrete, practical activity, and undertake projects that were tied into the real, rather than the hypothetical needs of society.[46]

Pertsov was equally brutal and frank in his assessment of the problems confronting the Constructivists, and identified some of the weaknesses in the theoretical principles of the Productivists. He argued that the notions of "the artist as the organizer of production" and the "rejection of fine art" were fallacious concepts, based on a total misunderstanding of communist ideas.[47] He also criticized the Constructivists' current output, which he considered amounted to little more than a new kind of "applied art." He suggested that the greatest contribution that the artist could make to industry lay precisely in his "technical ignorance and the fact that he is not tied down to earth by so called 'technical possibilities,' and that he can easily imagine a general technical idea, industrial form,

project and combination."[48] Pertsov suggested a new slogan: "Artist! Remember—your Constructive idea can fertilize industry."[49]

To some extent the crisis was due not so much to internal disagreements, the inadequacy of Productivist theory or the shortcomings of Constructivist practice, as to external pressures.[50] The market forces, which Chuzhak had mentioned, were powerful influences, acting against the production of Constructivist designs by industrial enterprises. Evidence suggests that manufacturers were far from eager to embrace the Constructivists' rather austere and perhaps unduly utilitarian products. Even in the textile industry, which had initially welcomed geometric patterns, there seems to have been a change of heart. By July 1925 Stepanova had reported that fabric designs were being accepted for mass production only if they contained naturalistic imagery: "Drawings reminiscent of the town and industry, for example straight lines, and circles are not being made now, they are accepting only drawings recalling the countryside: streams and flowers."[51] The social and political situation was also not advantageous. Gan highlighted the fundamental problem of taste under the conditions of the New Economic Policy, explaining that those responsible for selecting merchandise to be sold in the shops were reluctant to invest in Constructivist designs. He also emphasized the increasing role that negative criticism, supported by official dislike of the avant-garde, was playing in closing doors against the Constructivist designer.

Gan claimed that these critics tended to support the traditional categories of artistic activity and the aesthetic position of realism. Gradually, as official policies hardened and began to have an impact, and social and political values came to be more firmly linked to academic values in painting, Constructivists became more vulnerable. Pletnev observed: "It is no accident that right-wing art has driven LEF into a corner . . . LEF has lost its socialist orientation, and where can you go without a foundation."[52]

It is against this background of neglect by the market and attack by the critics that one of the most important manifestations of Constructivist design during the 1920s must be viewed—the Workers' Club, which was designed by Rodchenko and made for the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925. It perhaps underlines the gulf between Constructivist aspiration and reality that the only completely Constructivist environment ever made

was produced for an international exhibition, not in communist Russia but in capitalist France. For an occasion that was regarded as a publicity promotion exercise, the government was able to direct valuable resources towards the realization of Constructivist principles. Although Constructivism was neglected at home and derided by officialdom, the government nevertheless realized the enormous propaganda value of such artistic innovation abroad. As one Soviet reviewer pointed out, "our section at the Paris Exhibition constituted an undoubted cultural victory for the USSR."[53]

The ideological significance of the workers' clubs was immense. They were regarded as crucibles for creating the new society, centers for the diffusion of culture, and even places where the new proletarian culture would be created by the people themselves.[54] The cultural programs that were undertaken by the clubs ranged from basic literacy to more advanced courses in artistic and literary creativity. The clubs were also intended to combat the old way of life and to eradicate habits associated with the former social and political system. The club had a social role in replacing the old social center of the church in the life of the community, a political role in inculcating the new social and political values of collective life and communism, and a cultural role in educating the workers, helping them to acquire and appreciate existing "bourgeois" culture and helping them to liberate their own creative potential so that they could develop their own culture.

The ideological importance of the Workers' Club is indicated in Rodchenko's design by the prominence given to Lenin. Rodchenko includes a Lenin Corner. This practice had become common after the leader's death in 1924 and represented an adaptation to socialist purposes of the traditional Red Corner where the icons had hung in pre-revolutionary Russian Orthodox homes.[55] In Paris, this consisted of a large poster-sized picture of Lenin, complemented by the famous poster by Adolf Strakhov, issued shortly after the great Bolshevik died in 1924 to celebrate his revolutionary vision. At the top of one wall, Lenin's name is spelt out in large letters. It is interesting to note that this skeletal lettering is built up from standard squares and triangular divisions, and therefore acts as a programmatic statement of Rodchenko's method of standardization and economy, which he had employed in the Club's overall design. Indeed, all of the designs for items within the Club consisted of strictly rectilinear combinations of Euclidean geometric forms.

The furniture was painted in four colors, white, red, grey and black, either alone or in combination, to reinforce the ideological significance of the forms themselves. These colors, particularly red and black, had come to symbolize the Revolution during the Civil War.

Rodchenko's approach entailed devising furniture for "simplicity of use, standardization, and the necessity of being able to expand or contract the numbers of its parts."[56] This was achieved by making some items collapsible, so that they could be removed and stored when not in use. Into this category come the folding tribune, screen, display board and bench. Moreover, dynamism was an intrinsic element of the conception, from the revolving hexagonal display components of the show case, lit from below, to the chess table with its rotating chess board, and pieces of furniture like the tribune complex, which were compact in storage, but folded out for use.[57]

The pragmatism of Rodchenko's approach was also underlined by the fact that he used wood. It was undoubtedly the most economic material at that time in Russia. It was cheap and plentiful, whereas steel was expensive, difficult to process, and in very short supply. Moreover, Russian industry already possessed considerable expertise in the mass production of wooden furniture. The choice of wood was therefore a highly sensible decision, based on the state of the Russian economy and the nature of the country's natural resources. Yet the choice of wood hardly seems compatible with the Constructivist commitment to technology, which was stressed in the program of the Working Group of Constructivists, and which Rodchenko underlined further in the original model, which bore the slogan "technology improves life: the newest inventions." He was also at pains to reduce the impact that the nature of wood as a material would have on the look of his designs. He painted the wood so that the texture of its surface was completely smooth and free from any characteristics that would give it a rural or organic resonance. Perhaps the ultimate irony was that for reasons of convenience, the furniture was actually made in Paris.

The components of Rodchenko's design were intended to cater to every aspect of club life, and so included chairs, reading tables, cabinets for exhibiting books and journals, storage space for current literature, display windows for posters, maps and newspapers and a Lenin corner.[58] The most prominent element was the reading table. In place of the traditional flat surface, the top consisted of a flat central piece abutted

by two sloping sides. The sloping sides supported books and journals easily for reading, while allowing the top to be used for temporarily storing books not in current use. This arrangement is more economic in the space it occupies than a flat reading table would be. At the base, two triangular wedges ran along the length of the table, providing support for the readers' feet, structurally strengthening the upright supports at either end, but also playing a formal role in reiterating the slope of the reading section of the table.

This rethinking of basic items pervaded the whole scheme. It is also clearly seen in the chairs. These comprised three uprights (two thinner rods at the front and a wider plank behind) which are attached together at three levels: at the top by the open semi-circular form, at the seat level by the flat semicircular plane of wood and at the bottom with three standardized wooden elements. Throughout the design, the forms of the structural units are derived from the three basic geometrical forms: the circle, rectangle and triangle, in the manner of Rodchenko's earlier hanging constructions and unit constructions, but these forms are combined in a new way to provide a sturdy easily constructed chair.

Amongst the most ingenious devices was the apparatus that compressed into a box for storage, but, when required, could be folded out to incorporate a film screen, a tribune for political and educational speakers, a bench and a display board. This answered the need for strict economy in materials, and mode of production, but it was also space saving. Rodchenko employed telescopically extending parts and ball and socket jointing to achieve this transformation.[59] Once again the design relates to the earlier phase of "laboratory work." The principle of construction, incorporating the collapsible strut, has affinities with the kinds of folding and rigid constructions made by Ioganson and displayed at the Obmokhu exhibition of May 1921. Some of these changed their spatial parameters when the string was pulled, returning to the original configuration when the string was pulled again. Rodchenko's design can also be seen as a development from the principle of the skeletal structural framework, which had been utilized by Gustav Klucis in his designs for a *Screen-Tribune-Kiosk* and for a *Propaganda Stand, Screen and Loudspeaker Platform* of 1922. There are particular similarities between Rodchenko's and Klucis' book display units. Both artists exploited telescoping devices and the same set of bold colors. Rodchenko was also harnessing elements from Stepanova's theatrical devices of 1923, which

had been constructed from rods. In devising the various elements for the Workers' Club, therefore, Rodchenko was working within an established language of design.

Rodchenko's Workers' Club as a prototype, worked out in every detail according to utilitarian and aesthetic demands, stands as one of the great achievements of Constructivism. It is a design that combines an authentic functionalism with a powerful programmatic statement about the kind of art and environment that Constructivism might create in the new Communist world. It demonstrates precisely how the Constructivists applied the principles of tectonics, *faktura* and construction to the solution of a specific design task. In devising the Workers' Club, Rodchenko took into account the ideological requirements of Communism, and the industrial processes involved in manufacturing the various items. He also chose his material in line with those two factors and in response to the given function of each piece of furniture. For the Constructivists, tectonics embraced both the physical and ideological function of the object. They believed that geometry and standardization embodied the impersonality and rationality of the collective and were vital ingredients in their technological vision of the Communist future. Hence, construction entailed reducing each object to its essential geometric components and discarding all extraneous details, while *faktura* resulted in the wood being treated in a way that minimizes its associations with nature and maximizes its affinities with the machine. Along with Tatlin's Tower, the Workers' Club represents one of the canonical creations of the Constructivist aesthetic. Sadly, it remained an isolated realization of Constructivist potential.

Whatever the actual quality of their designs, in their statements, the Constructivists tended to assert the exclusive importance of the "utilitarian" at the expense of the symbolic and ideological purpose of form and design. Their stridency should be seen as a particular response to a specific situation. In order to combat the "old aestheticism," the Constructivists adopted a crusading and somewhat intransigent tone, demanding "an end to art". In trying to formulate a new relationship between art and reality, they had to clear the path of previous approaches, which included the whole range of applied art from the World of Art's theatrical designs onwards. In asserting their close link with industry, the Constructivists were expressing the need for artists to take contemporary technology and its practical manifestations in industry into

account in their work. Ultimately, the Constructivists were idealists, wedded to a belief in the possibility of fusing the aesthetic, the political, the social, the technological and the industrial into a new unity.

Laudable as such aspirations were, the undeniable fact was that they were operating in a very un-ideal environment. They had given their allegiance to the Revolution, which had compromised with capitalism in 1921 with the New Economic Policy. The result was that they were working in a mixed economy for a society that did not yet exist. They embraced industry, but this was at lower ebb than it had been in 1913. While they were committed to abstract formal values and a new language for the new society, the government increasingly supported academic painting and realism.

Moreover, during the New Economic Policy, the taste of the new entrepreneurial class with money was for more ornate, traditionally conceived furniture, and the austere designs of the Constructivists seemed to exert little charm. Likewise, the Constructivists had no success with the working class or its leaders, who were equally dismissive of strict utility, and dreamt of more luxurious artifacts. It was perhaps as a response to obvious consumer demand that later Constructivist designs display a more conventional approach towards the articulation of furniture. Rodchenko's sets for the play *Inga* epitomize this development, indicating a subtle change in both his stylistic language and in his approach to the whole problem of interior design. The play concerned the new communist woman and the environment in which she lived. Just as 1925 had allowed him to demonstrate how Constructivism could create the ideal Workers' Club, so *Inga* gave Rodchenko the opportunity to demonstrate another hypothetical new interior, as well as the enormous potential of rationally designed items, some of which could fold away. Yet in place of his innovative, geometric and skeletal designs of 1925, Rodchenko modified his basic elements to more curvilinear planes, demonstrating their adaptability and potential universality using one set of easily constructed elements and creating items that could easily be modified to represent the internal furnishings of a club, an apartment, a bedroom and an office. In a published statement he expressed his disillusionment with items of furniture that performed a dual function. He had obviously come to realize that "It is not possible for a table transformed into a bed to perform its straightforward duties."[60]

Ultimately, however, the solutions are less formally exciting than his earlier work. The wardrobe, for instance, is compact, and possesses some ingenious storage features, but these are arranged within a structure, which, although devoid of ornamentation, and entirely geometric, represents a simplification of existing wardrobe types, rather than embodying any new structural concepts. It is not reduced to an essential skeletal structure, and the method of construction is not revealed on the exterior. The integral, material plane has replaced the wooden rod. The same can be said of the 1929 showcase, which, in contrast to the display units of 1925, comprises four segments of circles arranged around a central square and built up of wooden planes. Rodchenko's designs possess some innovative qualities, but these are clothed in more traditional outward forms. A critic unsympathetic to Constructivism could perhaps justifiably deride them as "old wine in new bottles",[61] but for those engaged in the arduous task of trying to develop and promote new furniture design, Rodchenko's solutions were viewed in a more positive light. They were "constructed in an interesting fashion" and their use on the stage had "great educational significance." The sympathetic critic hoped that these prototypes might eventually go into mass production.[62]

My account of their design endeavors might suggest that the late 1920s were years of unremitting gloom for the Constructivists. This is not so. They did achieve some notable successes, particularly in the field of photomontage. Even in 1925, Pertsov had regarded this as an isolated area of positive achievement.[63] Yet not all critics found such developments desirable. Chuzhak, for one, could not see its potential and regarded it less as a desirable end in itself than as an interim, rather transitory development.[64] Such an analysis of its potential may have been responsible for the Constructivists' initial decision to become involved in such areas. But typographical, poster and exhibition design also had the important advantages at the time of representing small-scale, well-defined design tasks which fitted into traditional artistic categories. Moreover, the Party's stated aesthetic preferences were for realism, and government bodies, such as the Trades Unions and the Red Army, actively patronized artists who supplied realistic paintings. The photograph provided a way of using images without resorting to conventional realism. At the same time, the photograph was the product of a mechanical process: it could be mechanically reproduced and it thus complemented the Constructivists' commitment to technology. The

ability of photomontage to present a concrete image, which linked the everyday life of the viewer with the political and social precepts of the Communist Party, made it a valuable propaganda weapon. Klucis' photomontages employed the diagonal and asymmetrical compositional principles that he had developed in his earlier paintings and constructions. Posters such as *We Will Repay the Coal Debt to the Country* (1930) create an impact through the unusual viewpoint of the figures and the rhythm created by the ascending parallels of their diagonally advancing legs, which endow them with the coherence, power and dynamism of a collective machine. The simplicity, monumentality and documentary nature of such images makes them most persuasive. A similar approach is displayed in Lissitzky's work for his exhibition layouts such as *Pressa* (Cologne 1928) which rely on the impression created by combining integral images within a monumental format. The use of the medium, however, exerted its own pressure, and the illustrative image eventually came to dominate the formal principles with which it was manipulated, a process encouraged by the more stringent demands of the Party in the early 1930s.

Yet while conditions were fostering this pragmatism, certain Constructivists like Tatlin and Petr Miturich were revealing a heightened idealism as they concentrated on developing an alternative technology. These artists sought to return to an intensive investigation of nature and to the fundamental principles of growth and movement in organic form. Their studies led both of them to evolve new forms of transport. Miturich developed the concept of "wave-like motion" based on the principle that the curved line conserves more energy than the straight line. He demonstrated this with an apparatus, which consisted of two three-meter paths; one of these possessed three level stretches, with inclined planes between them (like three large, descending steps); and the other comprised three downward, curved swoops. Setting off two metal balls simultaneously, the ball on the curved path completed the course, while the other was only two-thirds of the way along its trajectory.[65] Convinced that wave-like motion was therefore faster, Miturich used this principle as the basis for the design of a series of vehicles, the *Volnoviks* and the *Letun* or flying machine. Working separately, though in a similar direction, Tatlin developed a flying machine, the *Letatlin* or Air Bicycle. He rejected the solutions of contemporary aviation and science, and is reported to have said: "The engineers make hard forms.

They are evil. With angles. They are easily broken. The world is soft and round."[66] His studies of baby birds, like wild cranes, their physical structure and its adaptation to the problem of flight provided the basis for the mechanics and the form of the *Letatlin*. Like Leonardo and his design for a flying machine, Tatlin and Miturich studied nature in order to re-create it. They both used nature to give man wings and emancipate man from the restrictions of nature, to liberate him from gravity. From the reconstruction of man's physical environment, Tatlin and Miturich had attempted to move beyond this to the reconstruction of man's physical capabilities. From designing a liberating environment, they designed objects to liberate human beings from the laws of gravity. This is perhaps the ultimate idealism, and it epitomizes the visionary impulse which runs through the entire Constructivist episode in Russian art.

Endnotes

1 A version of this article was first published in the catalogue of Andrews and Kalinovska, 99-116.
2 Kushner, "Kommunisty-futuristy," 3.
3 Shterenberg, "Pora ponyat'," 5.
4 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 56.
5 Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniya," 27.
6 Mayakovskii, "Prikaz po armii iskusstva," 1.
7 Brik, "Drenazh iskusstvu," 1.
8 Osip Brik, "Primechanie redaktsii," 2 and Nikolai Punin cited by Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniya," 27.
9 Although it was published in 1921, the editor's introduction is dated November 1920. See *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*, 4. The Art and Production Sub-section of Izo was set up in August 1918. (See *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*, 36).
10 "Ot redaktsii," *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*, 3.
11 Shterenberg, "Pora ponyat'," 5-6.
12 Brik, "V poryadke dnya," 6-7.
13 Tatlin, et al, "Nasha predstoy-i rabota," 11.
14 See "Programma uchebnoi podgruppy konstruktivistov Inkhuka." For details concerning Inkhuk, see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 78 ff. and Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*. The name of the group has been given variously as The Working Group of Constructivists and The First Working Group of Constructivists. Archival material gives the name of "The Working Group of Constructivists," but the first public pronouncement about the group to appear in the press in August 1922 in the Moscow magazine *Ermitazh* (no. 13, 3-4) used both names. The introduction entitled "Konstruktivisty" gave the group its full title declaring that "On 13 December 1920 the First Working Group of Con-

structivists was formed." It cited Rodchenko, Stepanova and Gan as the founders and stated, "Directing their attention to the future culture of communism and proceeding from present specific conditions, they worked out a program and production plan and started to enlist collaborators." This introduction was followed by "The First Program of the Working Group of Constructivists." The presence of both names in this publication, suggests that they were used concurrently and inter-changeably. It may well be that the shorter form was a short-hand version of the fuller name and that both names were used in this way from the very beginning.

Alternatively, the affixing of "First" to their title may have been a later development, possibly of 1922. In the introduction Gan mentions that "Constructivism has become fashionable". The "First" may, therefore, simply have been adopted to distinguish his group from any other groups or artists using the name. It may have been prompted, for example, by the exhibition of the Stenberg Brothers and Medunetskii at the Cafe Poetov which took place in January 1922 and for which the catalogue used the title *Konstruktivisty*. Although the Stenbergs were members of the group at the time of their exhibition, there may have been subsequent fundamental disagreements, as yet not documented. The tensions between Medunetskii and Stepanova were clearly manifest in the debate that followed Stepanova's paper "On Constructivism" on 22 December 1921, when Medunetskii said "Stepanova should keep drawing tadpoles" (See "Transcript of the Discussion of Comrade Stepanova's paper 'On Constructivism'." December 22, 1921 in Andrews and Kalinovska 1990, 74). This may have resulted in a split even before the January 1922 exhibition and the *Ermitazh* publication of August 1922.

Certainly, the longer title is encountered in subsequent publications. For instance, "Konstruktivisty" in *LEF*, no. 1, 1923, 251-2. This article announced preparations for the group's exhibition, and listed the items by Rodchenko that comprised "socially interpreted artistic work." Gan's book *Constructivism* dated 1922 also refers to "The First Working Group of Constructivists." It is clear that at this time Gan, Rodchenko and Stepanova are still united, as we know from the *Ermitazh* publication. When Gan eventually split with Rodchenko and Stepanova (probably sometime in 1923) Gan took the name with him and gave it to his own group.

15 Documentation published by Khan-Magomedov 1986 makes the development of the group much clearer. According to "The Report No. 1. The Assembly for the Organization of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk" held on 18 March 1921, Gan was president of the group. In the following meeting (28 March 1921) Gan was asked to write a publicity statement for the group.

16 "Programma uchebnoi pod-gruppy."

17 This exhibition used to be known as the Third Obmokhu exhibition.

18 Arvatov, "Proletariat i levoe iskusstvo," 10.

19 Ibid. Of course, Arvatov has his own axe to grind here, and it should be pointed out that "the works are unstable, caught mid-way between different categories, rather than markers on an unproblematic track towards 'art in production'" (Fer, "Metaphor and Modernity," 14).

20 *Izvestiya VTsIK*, 25 December 1920.

21 "Razval Vkhutemasa," 28.

22 Nevertheless, Arvatov and Tatlin were reported to have set up a "production laboratory" at the New Lessner Factory in Petrograd ("Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 2/3, 1923, 88).

23 Gan, *Konstruktivism*, 15.

24 Neznamov, "Proz-raboty A. Lavinskogo," 77.
25 One was erected outside the hotel on Tverskoi Boulevard in Moscow in which the delegates were staying (Oginskaya 1981, 26). Fourteen of these designs were exhibited in Riga in 1970. See *Katalog vystavki proizvedenii Gustava Klutsisa* . One was made in 1925 for the exhibition accompanying the Fifth Congress of the Comintern (Ibid., no. 26, 44). Apparently, Klutsis was active in organizing this exhibition (Eght, "Khudozhnik G. Klutsis," 8).
26 Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniya," 32.
27 Popova, "Vstuplenie k diskussii Inkhuka o 'Velikodushnom rogonostse'."
28 Vesnin's project was cramped by the proscenium arch. In its full glory it clearly alludes to mines, factory chimneys, as well as industrial and urban complexes.
29 This, of course, excludes the type of poster and typographical work being undertaken by Rodchenko, Lavinskii and Gan for State enterprises and for publishers.
30 Varvara Stepanova, "O polozhenii i zadachakh khudozhnika-konstruktivista v sittsenabivnoi promyshlennosti v svyazi s rabotami na sittsenabivnoi fabrike" in Minutes of Inkhuk's meeting on 5 January 1924. For details concerning the date when Stepanova and Popova entered the factory see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 291-92, n. 6.
31 Brik, "Ot kartiny k sittsu," 34.
32 Gan, *Konstruktivism*, 5.
33 *Konstruktivisty. K. K. Medunetskii, V. A. Stenberg, G. A. Stenberg*.
34 "Front khudozhestvennogo truda. Materialy k Vserossiiskii konferentsii levykh v iskusstve. Konstruktivisty. Pervaya programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov", *Ermitazh*, (Moscow), no. 13, 1922, 3-4.
35 "1-ya diskussionnaya vystavka ob'edinenii aktivnogo revolutsionnogo iskusstva 1924g." in Matsa 1933, 314.
36 Ibid. The catalogue contained information relating to the activities of the group and a statement of its theoretical position which, of course, closely echoed the precepts of Gan's *Konstrnktivizm*. The members of the group seem to have mainly been students from the Vkhutemas. The group was apparently organized into different sections, dealing respectively with furniture and equipment needed in everyday life (Gan, Miller and Sanina), children's books (the Chichagova sisters and Smirnov), special clothing (Mirolyubova, Sanina and Miller), and typographical production (Gan and Miller). Their exhibits at the show included designs for typographical layouts, items of everyday use including furniture and equipment, industrial clothing (production clothing), specialized clothing, and children's books (ibid., 316-17).
37 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 56. Writing in 1925, Pertsov clearly differentiated between the group led by Gan and the other Constructivists. He called Gan's group "The First Working Group of Constructivists" and listed its members.
38 "1ya diskussionnaya vystavka" in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, 314.
39 Ultimately, the antagonism between these two major groupings became such that in an article of 1928 Gan rewrote the history of Constructivism completely, and pre-dated the split between the "Constructivists" and the artists whom he now referred to as "the productivists of LEF" to 1920! See Gan, "Chto takoe konstruktivism?" 79-81.
40 *LEF*, No. 2, 1923, 9.
41 Arvatov, "Oveshchestvelennaya utopiya," 61.
42 "Pervoe soveshchnie rabotnikov *Lefa*" in Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 135.
43 The discussions and conclusions of the January and July meetings were published in Pertsov 1925.

44 Arvatov was unable to attend the conference because he was ill. Brik participated and so did Gan.
45 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 136.
46 Ibid., 137.
47 Ibid., 79.
48 Ibid., 76.
49 Ibid.
50 The disagreements between different members were far more wide-reaching and numerous than the specific elements of the debate that I have chosen to highlight here.
51 Ibid., 143.
52 Ibid., 145.
53 Tugendkhol'd, "SSSR na parizhskoi vystavke," 932.
54 See Kopp, *Constructivist Architecture in the USSR*, 112.
55 In this way the Bolsheviks had learnt from the practice of the Christian church, which had itself taken over rituals and locations from from paganism, adapted them, and thus supplanted the previous religion effectively.
56 Varst, "Rabochii klyub," 36.
57 Lavrentiev, "Experimental Furniture Design in the 1920s," 151-2.
58 "Rodchenko v Parizhe."
59 Lavrentiev, "Experimental Furniture Design in the 1920s," 151.
60 A. Rodchenko "Diskussii o novoi odezhde i mebeli—zadacha oformleniya" in Glebov, *Inga*, 12.
61 Berezark, "Veshch' na stene," 10.
62 Lukhmanov, "Bez slov," 4.
63 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 79.
64 Nikolai Chuzhak, "Ot illyuzii k materii (po povody 'Revizii Lefa')" in Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 113-4.
65 Although the apparatus seems to be very convincing, it is based on unscientific principles. In his unpublished note "The Miturich idea of *volnovoe dvizhenie* (wavelike motion)," George Gerstein explained that "The principle in no way depends on wave-like motion, although it does involve a descent and possibly much later a rise of the moving object . . . the usual explanation of such things is in terms of potential and kinetic energy. The tracks start at the same height, therefore both balls have the same amount of initial potential energy and no kinetic energy. Total energy, i.e., the sum of potential and kinetic energy of each ball, is always constant. The lower a ball gets on its trajectory, the less potential energy and hence the more kinetic energy (and hence velocity) it will have." Miturich's apparatus works because the curved path goes lower than the straight path, and the ball that travels along it will go faster than along the straight path.
66 Begicheva, "Vospominaniya o Tatline," 18.