

fig. 1
View of Obmokhu exhibition, Moscow, May-June 1921.

The Transition to Constructivism

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Constructivism is advancing—the slender child of an industrial culture.

For a long time capitalism has let it rot underground.

It has been liberated by—the Proletarian Revolution.

—Alekssei Gan (1922)

From painting to sculpture, from sculpture to construction, from construction to technology and invention—this is my chosen path, and will surely be the ultimate goal of every revolutionary artist.

—Karl Ioganson (1922)

The rediscovery of Russian Constructivism has been a striking phenomenon of the past decade. The movement has acquired a heroic status for certain critics and artists of a Postmodernist persuasion. At the same time, original works and documents have begun to emerge from the former Soviet Union, permitting a more detailed and complex historical understanding of the period. This essay focuses on the initial emergence of a Constructivist position within the Russian avant-garde and, in particular, on the extraordinary exhibition that marked its first public manifestation, the Obmokhu (the Society of Young Artists) show of May 1921.

The idea of Constructivism has become a critical commonplace, variously understood, but at the moment of its invention it clearly carried specific implications and a real polemical edge. The First Working Group of Constructivists, also known as the Working Group of Constructivists, was formed in March 1921, within Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture) in Moscow.¹ The group comprised Alekssei Gan, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetskii, and the brothers Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg.² They seem to have come together during the fascinating theoretical discussions conducted at Inkhuk during the previous three months, discussions which addressed the distinction that artists were starting to make between construction and composition as principles of artistic organization. The self-proclaimed Constructivists were united in their commitment to a viewpoint articulated by Rodchenko in January 1921: "All new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering and move toward organization and construction," and "real construction is utilitarian necessity."³ Such a stance seemed indeed to crystallize their response to the pressing question of how artists could contribute to the new Communist order and celebrate the values inherent in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

In their draft program of April 1, 1921, written by Gan, the group proclaimed a new synthesis of art and industry. They wanted to relegate their purely artistic explorations to the role of "laboratory work," and to extend their experiments with manipulating three-dimensional abstract forms into the real environment by participating in the industrial manufacture 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 according to the three principles of *tektonika* (tectonics, or the socially 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).⁴

The strategies they proposed included investigating the Soviet building industry and establishing links with committees in charge of production. These measures were to be accompanied by a highly organized propaganda campaign of exhibitions and publications that would include a weekly journal, *Vestnik intellektual'nogo proizvodstva* (*The Herald of Intellectual Production*) and a bulletin. Gan explained:

In order to put our work on show, an exhibition of Constructivist spatial works should be staged, as testimony not only to what we are doing today but also to what we are aiming for and the tasks that we have set ourselves.⁵

Accordingly, about two months after the formation of the group, some of the Constructivists showed their current practical work at the *Vtoraia vesenniaia vystavka* (*Second Spring Exhibition*) of Obmokhu, more commonly known as the third

Obmokhu exhibition, which opened on May 22, 1921.⁶ Altogether, fourteen artists participated: Nikolai Denisovskii, Mikhail Eremichev, Aleksandr Zamoshkin, Vasilii Komardentov, Sergei Kostin, Aleksandr Naumov, Aleksandr Perekatov, Nikolai Prusakov, and Sergei Svetlov, as well as the Constructivists Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothers—who were members of Obmokhu—and Ioganson and Rodchenko, who were specially invited to contribute to this one show.⁷

The previous history of Obmokhu reveals a radical political commitment that would also underpin Constructivism. Although the precise chronology of the group is still somewhat unclear, Obmokhu seems to have been set up in the autumn of 1919 by students from the “workshop without a supervisor” at the State Free Art Workshops in Moscow.⁸ The members had also come together through their work on various agitational projects during 1918, particularly the decorations of Moscow’s streets for the revolutionary festivals. Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothers, who were living together by this time, had decorated the Post Office on Miasnitskaia (now Kirov Street) for May Day 1918 with the help of Denisovskii.⁹ Subsequently, it appears, they had worked with the other future members of Obmokhu to decorate the Rogozhsko-Simonovskii district of Moscow for November 1918.¹⁰ The artists later contributed numerous posters to the government’s propaganda programs, such as the Campaign to Abolish Illiteracy, and, according to V. M. Lobanov, Obmokhu’s first exhibition was devoted to such agitational work, which was displayed anonymously to emphasize the collective nature of the group’s production.¹¹ He described the contents of their second exhibition as mainly posters, with a small number of abstract works and *tsvetokonstruksii* (color constructions), presumably paintings. Lobanov’s description corresponds to A. A. Sidorov’s review of the May 1920 show, which suggests that some three-dimensional constructions were shown; Sidorov mentions “a statue . . . by comrade Stenberg made of sheet metal,” alongside paintings by Naumov and others in the style of Boris Grigor’ev and Georgii Iakulov.¹² Lobanov’s account identifies Obmokhu’s *Second Spring Exhibition* as, in fact, their third exhibition overall, and this was confirmed by Vladimir Stenberg many years later.¹³ He recalled that the third Obmokhu exhibition was held “in a kind of salon-café on Bolshaya Dmitrovka Street and Kuznetsky Bridge.”¹⁴

There was no catalogue for the exhibition, although the invitation card survives. Fortunately, two installation photographs were reproduced soon after the event: one view in the spring of 1922 in the journal *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* (*Object*), edited by El Lissitzky and Il’ia Erenburg in Berlin (fig. no. 1),¹⁵ and the other the same year in the Hungarian avant-garde magazine *Egység* (*Unity*), published by Béla Uitz in Vienna (fig. no. 2).¹⁶ The two images show adjacent corners of a large hall, in which constructions by Rodchenko, Ioganson, the Stenbergs, and Medunetskii are visible, as well as abstract paintings, some of which can now be identified as works by the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii. The two photographs are devoted exclusively to the works by the First Working Group of Constructivists and give no indication of what the other nine artists showed. Indeed, *Egység* labeled its photograph of the exhibition “The Constructivists at the Obmokhu Exhibition” and included separate illustrations of work by Vladimir Stenberg and Ioganson (fig. no. 3).¹⁷ The photograph of the Stenberg construction was almost certainly taken at the exhibition, as the molding on the ceiling conforms to that in the two views of the show. *Egység* also printed translations of the program of the Constructivist group (“A Konstruktivisták Csoportjának Programmja”) together with “The Realistic Manifesto” (“Realista Kiáltvány”) produced in August 1920 by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, albeit without mentioning

the authors of either statement.¹⁸ It is possible that the Prusakov picture reproduced in *Egység* was another exhibit, since it is captioned “Gépkonstrukció. Prusakov (‘OBMOHU’). Moszkva. 1921.”¹⁹ If so, this is the only evidence concerning the work of other artists in the exhibition. Although entitled *Machine Construction* in the Hungarian label, this is a schematized figurative image, posterlike in style and apparently evoking the proletariat at work and leisure. It thus serves to underline the essential innovation of the Constructivists—their evocation of a contemporary industrial imagery through the language of materials and abstract form rather than through illustrative subject matter. The show was certainly acclaimed at the time for its highly original explorations of a new kind of constructed sculpture. For instance, Ulen (possibly Lissitzky writing under a pseudonym), in a survey of Russian exhibitions published in *Object* in 1922, emphasized:

The exhibitions of Obmokhu were new in form. There we saw art works not only hanging on the walls but also and most importantly filling the space of the hall.

*These young artists have assimilated the experiences of the former generation, they work well, they have a subtle feeling for the specific qualities of materials and construct spatial works. Moving between the technology of the engineers and the aimless expediency of art, they are trying to progress further.*²⁰

The artistic innovations of the works exhibited are discussed in more detail below, but it should be noted that the attitudes and meanings they embodied were in fact firmly rooted in contemporary Russian culture. At a very general level, industry and the machine were seen in revolutionary Russia as the essential characteristics of the working class and hence of the new Communist order. More practically, industrialization was also regarded by the Party and Lenin as the key to political and social progress and to the consolidation of the Soviet state. Lenin stated in 1918, after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk: “Those who have the best technology, organization, discipline and the best machines emerge on top . . . It is necessary to master the highest technology or be crushed.”²¹ This attitude was epitomized by his dictum “Communism equals Soviet power plus the Electrification of the Entire Country” and by his speech on December 22, 1920, to the Eighth Congress of Soviets (at which Vladimir Tatlin’s Tower was displayed), in which he envisioned the future in the hands of the “engineers and agronomists” rather than of the “politicians.”²² With such official endorsement, the ideas of Henry Ford and Frederick Winslow Taylor concerning efficiency in industrial production attracted considerable interest.²³ In 1921 the first conference on Taylor’s principles of time and motion (Taylorism) established NOT (the Scientific Organization of Work).²⁴ Aleksei Gastev, a poet committed to a utopian vision of the triumph of the machine and mechanization throughout Russian life, ran TsIT (the Central Institute of Labor), which was dedicated to studying the human machine and creating a new man through social engineering.²⁵ Platon Kerzhentsev, who had worked with Gan in Teo Narkompros (the Theatrical Department of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment), wished to “introduce scientific principles not only into man’s economic activity and production but into all organized activity and work.”²⁶ These are merely instances of a prevalent discourse in which the machine was both metaphor for a new culture under construction and the practical means to rebuild the economy for the collective benefit of the people. Nevertheless, Gan—author of the Constructivists’ program and Kerzhentsev’s collaborator—links these ideas directly with the emergence of Constructivism.

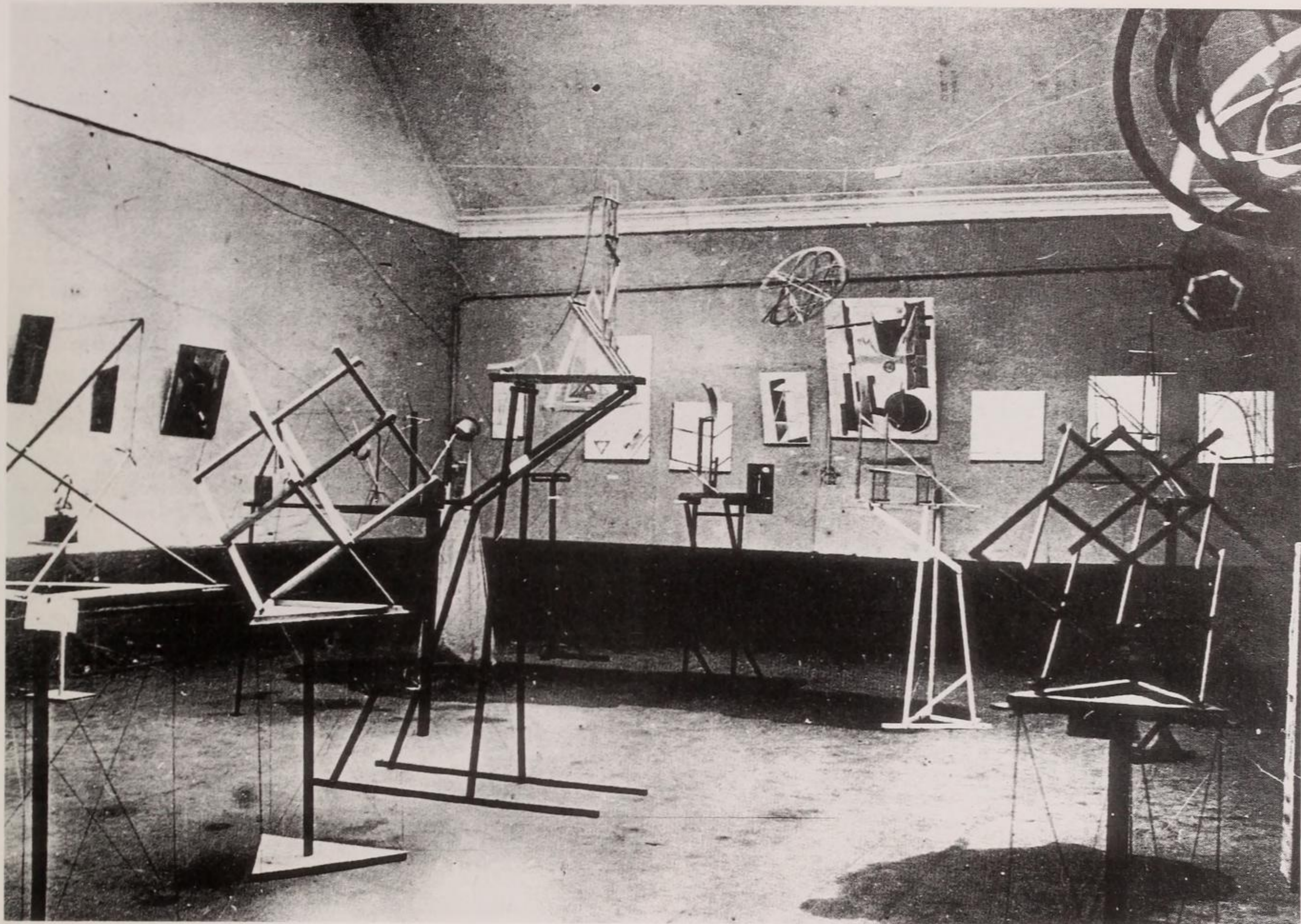


fig. 2
View of Obmokhu exhibition, Moscow, May–June 1921.

The same fusion of ideological and practical imperatives underlay the growing idealization of the machine and the worker by some factions within the artistic community. In November 1918 a debate was held in the Winter Palace over the question of whether art was "A Temple or a Factory."²⁷ Nikolai Punin, the principal speaker, argued that bourgeois art with its sacramental character was no longer relevant and that a proletarian culture would generate a completely new kind of art: "It is not a matter of decoration but of the creation of new artistic objects. Art for the proletariat is not a sacred temple for lazy contemplation but work, a factory, producing artistic objects for everyone."²⁸ Later, the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny* (*Art of the Commune*) argued that the existing division between art and industry was itself "a survival of bourgeois structures,"²⁹ and Osip Brik announced that "art is like any other means of production . . . not ideas but a real object is the aim of all true creativity."³⁰ Such attitudes were reinforced by official policy. Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), committed to "art's penetration into industrial production,"³¹ organized a conference in August 1919, where the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii, pronounced that "there is no doubt that production art is closer to human life than is pure art."³² Subsequently, an Art and Industry Commission was set up under the Council of People's Commissars to examine how art could be harnessed to improve the quality of industrial products.³³

Since the Revolution, the avant-garde had, with some success, sought to establish itself as the representative expression of the new order. Developments after 1919, however, increasingly involved the accommodation of the new values and expectations outlined above, prompting a radical reevaluation of attitudes toward abstraction and traditional artistic media. Already in February 1919 Punin had declared:

Suprematism has blossomed out in splendid colour all over Moscow. Posters, exhibitions, cafés—all is Suprematism. And this is extraordinarily significant. One can confidently assert that the day of Suprematism is nigh, and on that very day Suprematism must lose its significance in creative terms.

*What was Suprematism? A creative invention without a doubt but an invention strictly confined to painting.*³⁴

Kazimir Malevich's departure from Moscow in the autumn of 1919 has indeed been attributed to his "creative isolation,"³⁵ and he later conceded that Suprematism had reached the climax of its influence that year.³⁶ Subsequent developments within Suprematism suggest the wider currency of the impulses manifest at the Obmokhu exhibition. Significantly, in Vitebsk Malevich began to adapt the Suprematist vocabulary to suit the creation of hypothetical architectural complexes.³⁷ Likewise, his follower Lissitzky evolved the pronoun as "an interchange station between painting and architecture";³⁸ and, lecturing in Berlin in 1922, he even declared:

Two groups claimed constructivism, the Obmokhu . . . and the Unovis (the Affirmers of the New Art) . . .

*The former group worked in material and space, the latter in material and a plane. Both strove to attain the same result, namely the creation of the real object and of architecture. They are opposed to each other in their concepts of the practicality and utility of created things. Some members of the Obmokhu group . . . went as far as a complete disavowal of art and in their urge to be inventors, devoted their energies to pure technology. Unovis distinguished between the concept of functionality, meaning the necessity for the creation of new forms, and the question of direct serviceableness.*³⁹

Lissitzky's distinction was clearly valid by 1922, when positions had consolidated, although earlier there had perhaps been a broader consensus in the two groups' explorations of a machine-age aesthetic. On the one hand, as the Obmokhu exhibition demonstrates, the Constructivists did not immediately abandon the making of art objects. On the other, the Unovis group centered around Malevich also produced directly functional designs. In November 1920, the group's magazine published Il'ia Chashnik's project for a speaker's rostrum (later reworked by Lissitzky and known as the *Leninskaia tribuna* [*Lenin Tribune*, 1924, plate no. 142]), where the girder construction creates an emphatic aura of industrial utility.⁴⁰ Architectural and engineering projects were also apparently included in the 1920 and 1921 Unovis exhibitions in Moscow,⁴¹ and by early 1921 Unovis had organized an architectural and technical faculty.⁴²

In the gradual evolution toward a Constructivist stance within the Moscow avant-garde, particular attention should be paid to the role of Rodchenko as both artist and polemicist. In the spring of 1921 he was clearly the leading figure among the Constructivist contingent at the Obmokhu show. Whereas the others were still students, Rodchenko was one of the most progressive teachers at Vkhutemas (the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops) set up in December 1920.⁴³

In January 1919, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Aleksandr Vesnin, and other members of Askranov (the Association of Extreme Innovators) had demanded an exhibition space from Izo Narkompros because of "the sudden death of Suprbez [Suprematism and Non-Objectivity], its vitality pouring into the Association of Extreme Innovators."⁴⁴ Although a cogent chronology of Rodchenko's evolution is still needed, it is clear that in general terms he was seeking to move beyond Malevich's more "metaphysical" aesthetic. He came to regard the creative act less as an expression of personal inspiration and more as a quasi-scientific investigation into the inherent properties of painting, such as tone, color, line, texture, and organization. Far from being a Modernist assertion of the "autonomy" of art, such a standpoint represented an attempt, akin to that of the Russian literary Formalists at precisely this time, to reconceive art as a specialized, quasi-scientific activity and the artist himself as a species of worker.

An aspiration to establish a science of art also inspired the foundation of Inkhuk in early 1920.⁴⁵ Rodchenko was among the original members and was in fact commissioned by the Institute to write his statement entitled "Liniiia" ("The Line," 1921). In this important text, while discussing new approaches to the application of paint, to color, and especially to line as the dominant element in pictorial organization, he declared:

The imprecise, broken line that the hand draws cannot compete with the straight, accurate ruled line, which gives precision to the structure.

The craft of painting is striving to become more industrial.

Drawing in the old sense is losing its value and giving way to the diagram or the engineering drawing.

*Faktura in painting . . . is being forced out by mechanical techniques . . . which make it possible to analyze color, form, and material scientifically.*⁴⁶

The document is a precise evocation of the paintings Rodchenko was creating around 1919 and 1920, such as *Konstruktsiia No. 97* (*Construction No. 97*, 1919), in which a machine-like precision in the articulation of the surface and the linear construction emphasizes the impersonal and analytical quality of the painting process. The titles that Rodchenko was now giving his paintings are expressive of these concerns and also, of course, interesting in light of the subsequent coining of

the term Constructivism.

It is important to be precise about the emergence of a new critical vocabulary. The noun *konstruksiia* (construction), from the Latin *constructio*, was well established in Russian usage by the end of the nineteenth century. Like its English equivalent, it acquired clear connotations of engineering, referring to the construction of buildings, technological structures, or machines.⁴⁷ In 1912, the theorist Vladimir Markov had adopted the term *konstruktivnost'* (constructiveness) to denote the rational, logical aspect of art.⁴⁸ In early 1919, in the radical *Art of the Commune*, Ivan Puni used *konstruksiia* in its strictly technical sense when he argued against the idea of production art and contrasted aesthetic criteria with the demands of *konstruksiia*:

What are the principles of a contemporary industrial construction? Its principle is maximum utility . . . an artist does not have the right to interfere with the construction of an object, because an object simply will not be constructive {konstruktivnyi} if it is built according to the two principles of utility and aesthetics.⁴⁹

Indeed, it was precisely because *konstruksiia* carried these connotations that the terms *konstruktor* (constructor) or *khudozhnik-konstruktor* (artist-constructor) first appeared in an artistic context to equate the maker of art with a worker in industry. Thus in December 1918 V. Dmitriev emphasized that the artist is "now only a constructor and technician."⁵⁰ Harnessing this technological emphasis to his own artistic techniques, Tatlin called his workshop at the State Free Art Workshops in Petrograd (where he started teaching in the spring of 1919) the Workshop of Material, Volume, and Construction.⁵¹ Certainly, by early 1920, the idea of construction that underpinned the Constructivists' approach seems to have emerged sufficiently for Vasiliï Kandinskii to issue a warning in his *Inkhuk* program:

Without any doubt, positive science can provide the Institute with extremely valuable material . . . Even though art workers right now may be working on problems of construction {konstruksiia} (art still has virtually no precise rules), they might try to find a positive solution too easily and too ardently from the engineer. And they might accept the engineer's answer as the solution for art—quite erroneously. This is a very real danger.⁵²

The adoption of the term *konstruksiia* to describe the works of art themselves may have been preceded, in fact, by the coining of *postroenie*, from the old Russian root *stroï* (a building, structure, or construct). This had a broad range of reference in general usage, embracing building structures, the construction of geometrical figures, structures of language and thought, and even the construction of a socialist society.⁵³ In the catalogue of the Tenth State Exhibition, *Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism), which opened in Moscow on April 27, 1919, Liubov' Popova referred to pictorial structure as *postroenie*, although she alluded to the strengths of the pictorial construction as "*sily konstruksii*."⁵⁴ At the same show, Rodchenko's titling of his 1918 paintings likewise employed *postroenie*, as in the groups of works under the headings of *Strogoe, nepodvizhnoe postroenie tsvetovykh ploskosteï* (Severe, Static Structure of Colored Planes) and *Prostoe postroenie tsveta* (Simple Structure of Color).⁵⁵ The emerging artistic paradigm is epitomized by Gabo's statement in "The Realistic Manifesto" of August 1920, where he uses the verb *stroit'* (to construct) to emphasize the identification between art and scientific activities: "The plumb-line in our hand, eyes as precise as a ruler, in a spirit as taut as a compass—we construct our work as the universe constructs its own, as the engineer

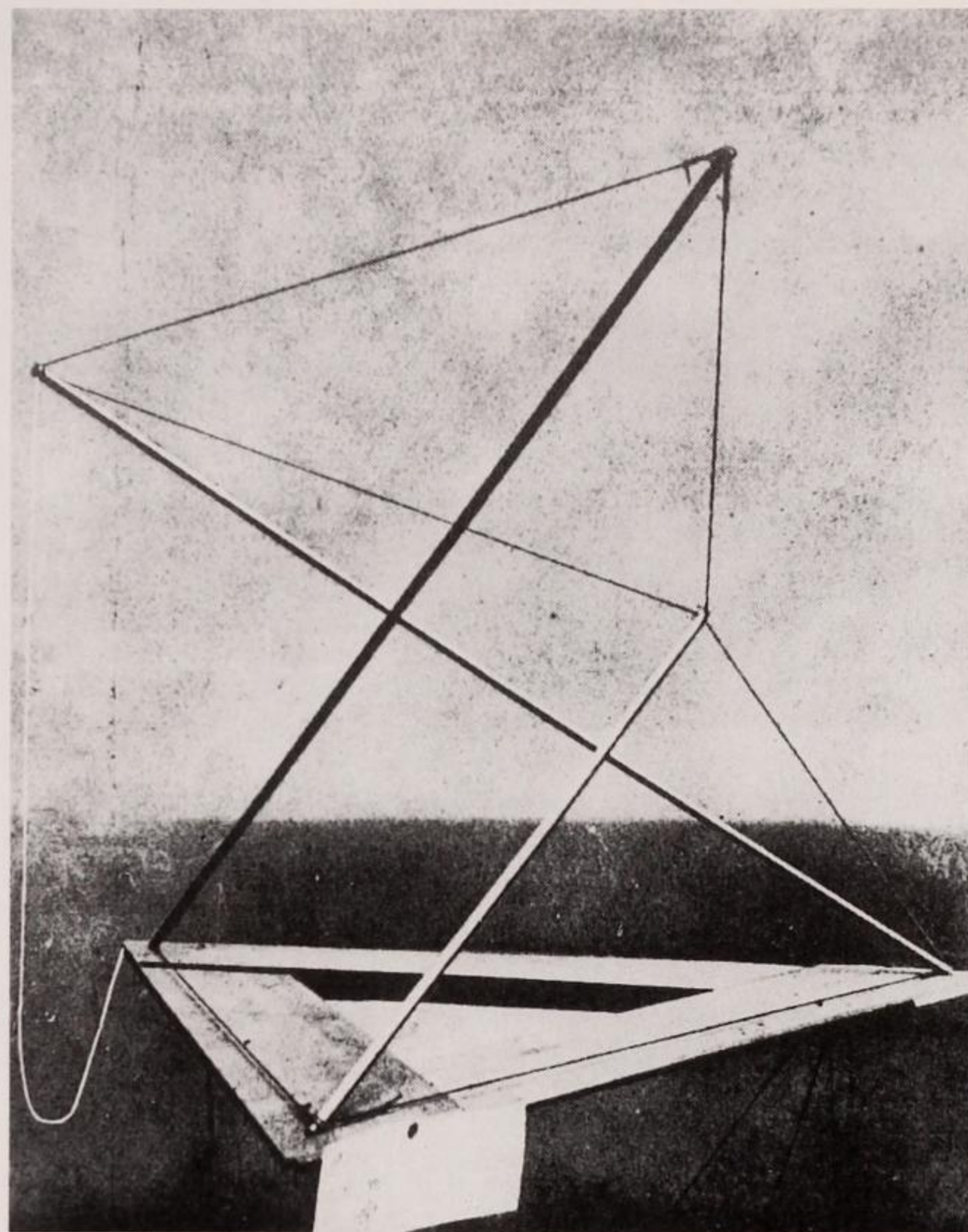


fig. 3
Karl Ioganson
Study in Balance, ca. 1920.
Whereabouts unknown.

constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits."⁵⁶

Within a few months, however, *konstruktsiia* was evidently replacing *postroenie* in avant-garde discourse and acquiring a more specific ideological context. At the Nineteenth State Exhibition in Moscow in the autumn of 1920, Rodchenko exhibited sixteen works with the title *Konstruktsiia*, all but five dated 1919, alongside other works, of 1918–20, that he called *Kompozitsiia* (Composition).⁵⁷ The former were clearly paintings; the catalogue entry for no. 102 reads *Konstruktsiia No. 97 (na kornichevom)* (Construction No. 97 {On Brown}), and for no. 117 *Konstruktsiia, Maslo, No. 11 (na chernom)* (Construction, Oil, No. 11 {On Black}, 1920).⁵⁸ More research is needed to clarify the distinction and correlate the surviving works with the two categories. It appears that the constructions were more linear and flatly painted, as in *Construction No. 97*, whereas the compositions seem to have been more planar and spatial, and more modulated in texture and tone; an entry such as no. 90, *Kompozitsiia No. 78 (chernoe na chernom)* (Composition No. 78 {Black on Black}, 1918), recalls such paintings as *Chernoe na chernom* (Black on Black, 1918, plate no. 240). At the exhibition Rodchenko also showed ten *proekty konstruktsii* (projects for constructions) of 1920.⁵⁹ These were probably his designs for Zhivskul'ptarkh (the Synthesis of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture Commission), whose display apparently formed part of the exhibition.⁶⁰ Nikolai Khardzhiev later recalled seeing some of Rodchenko's "pseudo-architectural, dilettantish projects for buildings and a 'kiosk for the sale of literature.'"⁶¹ In this instance, Rodchenko was using *konstruktsiia* in accordance with its established engineering usage. However, the polemical force of this new terminology, with its still more emphatic implications of a range of experience outside bourgeois categories of art, was most fully evident in Rodchenko's more metaphorical appropriation of *konstruktsiia* in the context of painting.

The immediate backdrop to the Obmokhu show was the artists' debates about the distinction between composition and construction that had been implicit in Rodchenko's contributions to the Nineteenth State Exhibition. These took place within the General Working Group of Objective Analysis at Inkhuk, which was opposed, as its name suggests, to the more subjective methods for analyzing works of art favored by Kandinskii, the founder and first director of the organization.⁶² The oppositional faction included not only the future Constructivists but also painters such as Aleksandr Drevin, Popova, Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udal'tsova, the architects Vladimir Krinskii and Nikolai Ladovskii, and sculptors like Aleksei Babichev and Anton Lavinskii. After four months of discussion, between January and April 1921, the group gave rise to four distinct Working Groups, of which the first to be established was the Constructivists'.⁶³

The participants discussed the issues both in general terms and in relation to analyses of specific works. They also produced pairs of drawings illustrating their personal understanding of what composition and construction entailed. In their statements, construction was generally conceived in terms of economy of materials, precision, clarity, and integration of overall organization, and conversely the absence of anything decorative, superfluous, or self-consciously aesthetic. The divergences revolved around certain fundamental problems. What were the relationships and the distinctions between construction in art and construction in the real world of structural design? How far was the concept of construction compatible with the medium of painting? In the evaluations of specific paintings, there was widespread agreement that Rodchenko's paintings alone authentically possessed the property of "construction."⁶⁴ Yet Rodchenko himself, like

Ioganson, Medunetskii, and the Stenberg brothers, was increasingly taking the view that construction and painting were incompatible:

In structures executed on a surface, the "construction" is only the projection of a potentially real structure, which in its surface form is merely a particular type of sketch or design, and not a construction as such.

*A construction, which in the strict and pure meaning of the word is the organization of an actual object, can only be realized as material.*⁶⁵

The most powerful catalyst to the emergence of three-dimensional Constructivism was undoubtedly the exhibition in Moscow, in December 1920, of Tatlin's model for the *Pamiatnik III-emu Internatsionalu* (Monument to the Third International, 1919–20, fig. no. 4), greeted by Vladimir Maiakovskii as "the first object of October."⁶⁶ Tatlin declared that in this work he was restoring the essential unity of painting, sculpture, and architecture, "[combining] purely artistic forms with utilitarian intentions": "The results of this are models which stimulate us to inventions in our work of creating a new world and which call upon producers to exercise control over the forms encountered in our new everyday life."⁶⁷ His monument was intended, in its ultimate realization, to be a functioning building, a third higher than the Eiffel Tower, that would act as an administrative and propaganda center for the Communist Third International, an organization devoted to fostering world revolution. Within its open structure of iron beams, four glazed volumes, rotating at different speeds, were to house the various executive, legislative, and propaganda offices of the Comintern. The structural components of contemporary engineering, iron and glass—for Tatlin, the "materials of the new Classicism"—were clearly intended to express the new social order; as Lissitzky later wrote: "Iron is strong, like the will of the proletariat, glass is clear, like its conscience."⁶⁸ Likewise the form Tatlin devised, the strong diagonal in conjunction with the two encircling spirals, expressed in symbolic terms the soaring utopian aspirations of Communism and the dynamic forces of historical progress.⁶⁹ The skeletal apparatus represented a distillation of new technology, evoking the girder construction of the Eiffel Tower itself, oil derricks, skeleton masts on ships, cranes, and mine shafts. The rotating transparent volumes within this structure summoned up the image of an enormous machine with gears and moving parts, a machine designed to generate world revolution. Appropriately, Tatlin's Tower was exhibited in the building where the delegates to the Eighth Congress of Soviets were meeting to discuss such issues as the electrification of Russia. The emphasis on utility, along with the scientific and industrial resonances of Tatlin's simple mathematical forms and contemporary materials, made the Tower a paradigm of new artistic possibilities for the avant-garde. The influence of the project is very apparent in the constructions shown at the third Obmokhu exhibition a few months later.

The Obmokhu exhibition included both spatial works and paintings conceived as "constructions." The installation photographs do not reveal whether Rodchenko exhibited any paintings. His most recent hanging constructions, however, clearly visible in fig. no. 2, show a marked change of emphasis in Rodchenko's three-dimensional work. In his *Belaia bespredmetnaia skul'ptura* (White Non-Objective Sculptures), which had been exhibited in 1919 (plate no. 290), the focus had been on building up flat geometric elements, probably made from card, to create quite complex configurations with overtones of urban architecture.⁷⁰ In contrast, the hanging spatial constructions examined the basic forms of Euclidean geometry in a more analytical way, investigating their internal spatial



fig. 4
Tatlin's model for the Monument to the Third International on exhibition in Petrograd, November 1920.

structure and dynamic potential.

The series seems to have been begun in late 1920; the square construction was illustrated as *Prostranstvennaia veshch'* (*Spatial Object*) and dated 1920 in *Kino-fot* (*Cinema-Photo*) 2 (1922), while the hexagonal work (plate no. 296) was subsequently reproduced as *Prostranstvennaia konstruktsiia* (*Spatial Construction*) and dated 1921 (*Cinema-Photo* 4 [1922]). This dating suggests that Rodchenko explored the simpler geometrical forms (such as the square) before moving to more complex forms such as the hexagon and ellipse. At the exhibition, these hanging works were suspended from a series of wires attached to the cornices and apparently spanning three corners of the hall. Only the triangle, ellipse, hexagon, and a portion of the circle are visible in fig. no. 2, although it is possible that more were displayed than the photograph suggests. The existence of at least five of these constructions is documented: the four works at the Obmokhu exhibition and the square construction reproduced in *Cinema-Photo*. Of these, only one survives: the ellipse (fig. no. 5; compare plate no. 294). All of the works share a common method of construction. Concentric geometrical shapes were cut from a single flat piece of plywood. These essentially two-dimensional elements were then rotated within each other to form a three-dimensional construction, with each element held in place by the wire and the outer element acting as a framework for the whole. After exhibition, the wires could be removed and the sculptures collapsed back into a series of flat elements for storage. Indeed, the various components of the triangle, square, and circle constructions are visible in the background of the well-known photograph of Rodchenko in his specially designed work-suit.⁷¹ The constructions explored the growth of a single geometric form from the plane into three dimensions. The mathematical emphasis clearly reflects the Constructivists' scientific orientation. At their inaugural meeting in March 1921 they had decided to invite a "mathematics expert" as well as an "engineer-technician" to work in the group, and they later produced slogans such as "Art is a branch of mathematics, like all sciences."⁷² It is probably no coincidence that the closest visual parallels to Rodchenko's hanging constructions are found in modern scientific instruments such as gyroscopes.

The effect of Rodchenko's suspending the works was to further deny the sensations of mass and materiality. The dynamic potential was also intensified by the free movement of the construction on its wire. According to Vladimir Stenberg, Rodchenko shined lights onto the constructions at the exhibition to enhance the reflective qualities of the silver-painted surfaces.⁷³ This suggests that Rodchenko would have used metal had it been available, and it recalls Tatlin's model for the Tower, which was also made in wood and painted silver, although intended ultimately to be constructed in iron. The simple mathematical forms and the sense of rotation and movement may likewise have been responses to the rotating glazed elements within the Tower.

For the younger artists, the three-dimensional work of Tatlin and Rodchenko demonstrated how a work of art might embody rather than merely illustrate a machine-age sensibility. Previously, contemporary technological themes had, indeed, comprised the subject matter of paintings by the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii. Some of these have come to light in recent years, permitting at least a schematic reconstruction of these artists' early development. As might be expected, their work at this time was fairly eclectic. Both Vladimir Stenberg's *Worker by the Car* (ca. 1920?)⁷⁴ and Georgii Stenberg's *Crane* (1920) celebrate an industrial imagery appropriate to the new proletarian society, and their treatment suggests a degree of fusion between men and machinery. Georgii's painting is less descriptive, the composition flatter and more dispersed, and

the use of color highly abstract. Such simplifications may have been a consequence of their concurrent work in poster design. The linear fluidity of *Crane* is developed further by Vladimir in his *Tsvetokonstruktsiia No. 4* (*Color Construction No. 4*, 1920, plate no. 286), where shapes and lines are disposed within a white ground, clearly indicating a new awareness of more abstract developments. In his *Tsvetokonstruktsiia No. 13* (*Color Construction No. 13*, 1919–20, plate no. 284), the central motif of four elongated red and black rectangles on a white ground is almost a direct quotation from Suprematism.⁷⁵

Among the paintings in the Obmokhu exhibition were Vladimir's *Tsvetokonstruktsiia No. 10* (*Color Construction No. 10*, 1920–21, plate no. 285),⁷⁶ and *Tsvetokonstruktsiia No. 12* (*Color Construction No. 12*, 1920–21, plate no. 283), which are clearly discernible on the far wall in one view of the installation (fig. no. 1). The titles recall Rodchenko, as does the uncompromising austerity of the approach to color and design in these new works. It is interesting to compare Vladimir's *Color Construction No. 10* with his demonstration of "composition" (plate no. 244) from the pair of drawings he made for the Inkhuk debate. The painting is far more reductive, eliminating tonal modulation and artistic "touch" as well as rhythmical correspondences in the organization, while the elements are also less varied and autonomous. By taking certain lines right out to the frame and by running them parallel to the edges rather than at a tasteful diagonal, Stenberg ensured greater integration in the painting between the internal configuration and the painted object as a whole; whereas in the drawing, the design is a conventional "vignette" within a fictive aesthetic space. The painting evokes the impersonal graphic language of a diagram or some kind of mathematical illustration and as such it probably corresponds to Stenberg's idea of how a painting might be informed with the quality of "construction." Significantly, however, the drawing of a "construction" (plate no. 245) produced for the discussions is a study for a three-dimensional construction.⁷⁷ *Konstruktsiia prostranstvennogo sooruzheniia No. IV* (*zhelezo*) (*Construction of a Spatial Structure No. IV (Iron)*, 1921, plate no. 292 [*Spatial Construction KPS 42 N IV*]),⁷⁸ shown at the Obmokhu exhibition, is evidently an elaboration of the same conception; the curved diagonal is identical, while the vertical support in the sketch has been developed into a more complex diagonal and vertical component (each comprising three bars) and some of the crossbars have been omitted.

The artists' exploration of new materials encompassed works which occupied an intermediate position between pure painting and sculpture. Thus another exhibit was Georgii Stenberg's relief, *Tsvetokonstruktsiia iz materialov No. 7* (*Color Construction of Materials No. 7*, 1920, plate no. 289), just visible behind his constructions in fig. no. 2. This utilized a variety of materials including sand, paper, wire, circular and cylindrical metal elements, and a glass tube containing ground blue pigment—an exploration of the diversity of tone and texture recalling Tatlin's counter-reliefs of 1914–16. Vladimir later recalled:

They weren't simple color constructions like other artists made. We saw what other artists were doing and then tried to do it differently.

. . . we had color constructions of four types: one, simple color constructions; two, color constructions involving texture; three, color constructions that were like bas-reliefs; and four, color constructions that involved perspective, that is they were spatial. These were all lost in a fire.⁷⁹

A very different approach is evident in Georgii Stenberg's freestanding works such as *Konstruktsiia prostranstvennogo sooruzheniia No. II* (*Construction of a Spatial Structure No. II*, 1921,

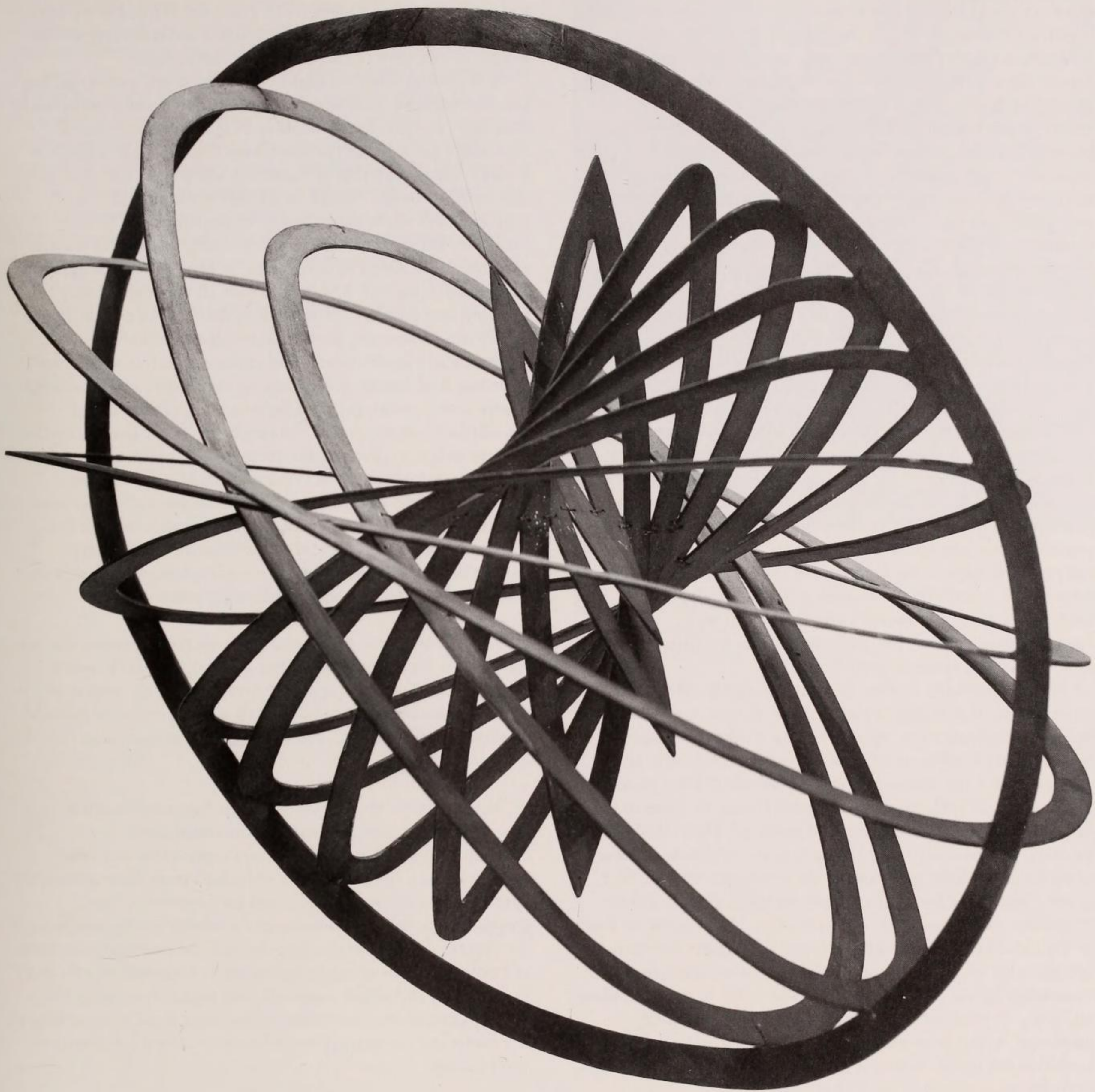


fig. 5
Aleksandr Rodchenko
Oval Hanging Construction Number 12, *ca.* 1920.
Plywood, open construction partially painted with aluminum paint,
and wire, 61 x 83.7 x 47 cm.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquisition made possible
through the extraordinary efforts of George and Zinaida Costakis,
and through the Nate B. and Frances Spingold, Matthew H. and
Erna Futter, and Enid A. Haupt Funds.

plate no. 293 [*Spatial Construction KPS 51 N XI*]), which is built up with a variety of small I- and T-beam metal elements enclosing a piece of glass. This work was probably executed in the spring of 1921 during the composition-versus-construction debates at Inkhuk and not long before the Obmokhu exhibition opened. A drawing entitled *Proekt konstruksii* (*Project for a Construction*, signed and dated 1921) depicts a structure which is very close to this particular sculpture.⁸⁰ It demonstrates the same impulse to invest art with the materials and the impersonal finish of machine technology that is manifest in Vladimir Stenberg's *Construction of a Spatial Structure No. 4*, which is captioned *Hídrészlet-Konstrukció* (*Bridge Fragment Construction*) and dated 1921 in *Egység*.⁸¹ The materials used, more uniform beam elements, evoke the prefabricated components of engineering construction and the entire conception here alludes, even more strongly, to a specific functional structure, or a fragment of one, such as a bridge or crane. The implied monumentality echoes Tatlin's Tower, as, of course, does the skeletal structure of standardized components and the general shift toward a machine aesthetic. Vladimir Stenberg later stressed that his constructions at this time were actually conceived as explorations that would eventually lead to projects for actual buildings.⁸² Despite this assertion, the construction seems to have no direct technological application, but rather to exploit the language of technology to create an art work. It could even be argued, as Babichev did in 1922, that such works were "not rooted in any technical work" and were "in no way utilitarian" but represented "the confirmation of a new mechanical aestheticism."⁸³

Not surprisingly, in view of their friendship, Medunetskii's artistic formation seems to closely parallel that of the Stenberg brothers. *Celebration* (ca. 1919), showing workers attending a revolutionary festival, recalls their work both formally and thematically.⁸⁴ His painted *Tsvetokonstruktsiia* (*Color Construction*, 1920, plate no. 278), has affinities with Georgii's *Crane* in its fluid handling and vivid color, and although Medunetskii's painting is ostensibly more abstract, it too evokes an imagery of metallic machine components. In *Tsvetokonstruktsiia No. 7* (*Color Construction No. 7*, 1921, plate no. 280), shown at the Obmokhu exhibition, the linear precision is analogous to that of Vladimir's *Color Construction No. 10*, and clearly the dominant influence on his work is Rodchenko. Likewise, Medunetskii's *Tsvetokonstruktsiia No. 9* (*Color Construction No. 9*, 1920–21, plate no. 279),⁸⁵ is reminiscent of Rodchenko's *Black on Black* paintings, which were exhibited at the Tenth State Exhibition, as well as his linear "constructions" of 1920. At the same time, it evokes an imagery of light projection.

Medunetskii's three-dimensional works (visible in fig. nos. 1–2) seem more purely abstract, less suggestive of functional forms than the Stenbergs' sculptures. They do, however, use industrially produced materials and elements. Thus in the one extant work, *Konstruksiiia prostranstvennogo sooruzheniia* (*Construction of a Spatial Structure*, usually known as *Spatial Construction*, 1920–21, plate no. 282), the metal circle has ridges on the inside and was evidently some type of coupling ring.⁸⁶ Yet the relationships between the components are far removed from those of any engineering structure. The shapes thread through each other with the minimum of contact, creating a very open, dematerialized form. Within this unifying configuration, the bent iron rod, painted red, is visually contrasted with the yellow sheen of the brass triangle, the more matte quality of the zinc ring, the S-shaped tin strip, and the painted marbling on the hollow cuboid, metal base. The construction is clearly an attempt to develop into three dimensions the type of linear spatial structure implied fictively in paintings such as *Color Construction No. 9*. This was equally true of the linear "drawing in space" of Medunetskii's lost iron

and tin *Spatial Construction* (1921, plate no. 281.1), known from a photograph and also visible, alongside a series of comparable works, in one view of the Obmokhu installation.

It is unclear whether Ioganson included any paintings, but his constructions, too, demonstrate a preoccupation with linear structure. In 1929, László Moholy-Nagy illustrated one of Ioganson's works from the exhibition (fig. no. 3) as a *Study in Balance*, explaining that if the string was pulled the composition would change to another position and configuration while maintaining its equilibrium.⁸⁷ The similarity between the manner of jointing in *Study in Balance* and that of the other constructions by Ioganson on display (for example, fig. no. 6) suggests that all the works could be adjusted and possibly collapsed and that he was exploring the movement of skeletal, geometric structures in a more pragmatically experimental and explicitly technical manner than was Rodchenko in his hanging constructions. Ioganson's works do not evoke any specific structure, yet the use of standardized elements and the emphasis on the transformation of form might appear to have more direct application to utilitarian structures such as portable, fold-up kiosks or collapsible items of furniture. These "laboratory" works seem to have been made from wood, which probably reflects the shortage of alternative materials at this time. Ioganson's particularly rigorous antiaestheticism expressed in these works was forcefully articulated the following year:

Artists who used to paint pictures are rejecting the picture and are going over to the construction or "into industry," as the customary expression has it. But this approach to the construction employs the devices, the method, and the tools of "the old art" without a practical objective or a definite goal, such as is required for mechanical construction.⁸⁸

In early 1922, Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothers also presented a paper entitled "Konstruktivizm" ("Constructivism") at Inkhuk. They argued that the new approach was a response to the enfeebled state of contemporary "production culture," conditioned by "aesthetics," an inappropriate use of materials, and a wholly inadequate design methodology. In contrast, they defined the essential principles of Constructivism as spatial economy, functionalism, efficiency in the use of industrial materials, and rhythm resulting from the application of engineering technology. Finally, according to the surviving summary, they defined their own achievements and mission:

The first experimental works and their significance as propaganda. The abstract solution of the basic problems of Constructivism. The experimental design of the material spatial construction, and its interrelation with utility. Achievements in space, form, and rhythm. The communist expression of material spatial constructions. Russian industry under the banner of Constructivism and its significance in the world market.⁸⁹

This makes it clear that, from the start, the Constructivists were concerned not merely to promote a new aesthetic but to demonstrate their potential capabilities as designers of real objects and structures. "The first experimental works and their significance as propaganda" is presumably a reference to the 1921 Obmokhu exhibition, where they had sought to display their understanding of the essential principles of engineering construction, and their formal inventiveness within that framework, for the benefit of any manufacturers, administrators, or politicians who might care to observe and to give the artists a concrete role in building the new socialist

environment. Theirs was an immensely ambitious and idealistic outlook, perhaps conceivable only at a time when, in practice, almost nothing was being made or built in Russia. However, 1921, which witnessed the birth of the Constructivist movement in art, also saw the implementation of the New Economic Policy and the first stirrings of a revival of industrial production. By the following year the Constructivist ethos was gaining increased currency among the avant-garde, and many Russian artists had, in a more wholesale fashion, renounced the making of paintings and sculptures in favor of immersing themselves in the design of buildings and propaganda stands, furniture and textiles, posters, advertisements, and books. The Obmokhu exhibition in the spring of 1921 marked a key moment in the transition toward an authentically Constructivist practice.

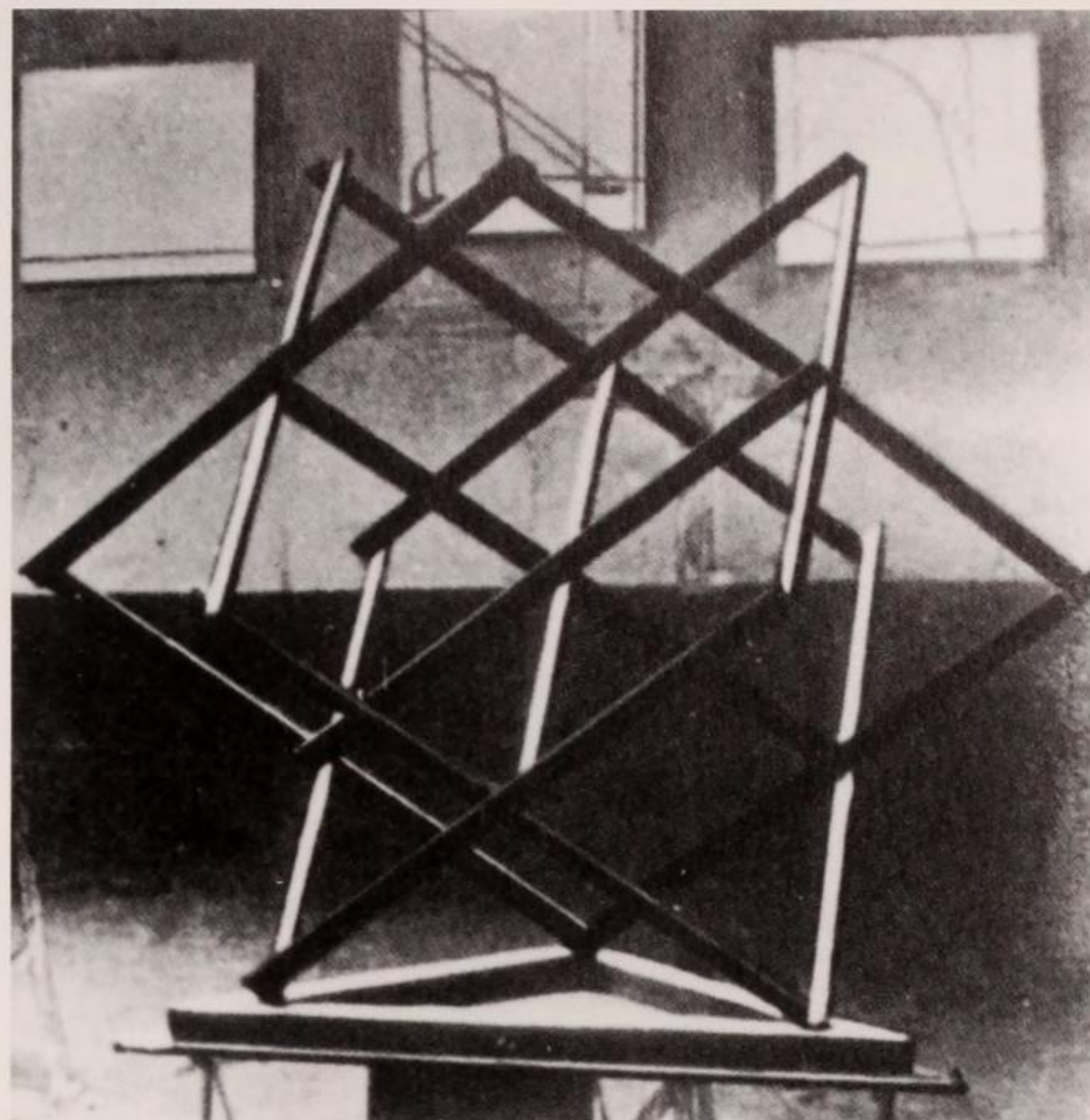


fig. 6
Karl Ioganson
Spatial Construction, ca. 1921.
Wood and metal wire.
Whereabouts unknown.

Notes

I should like to express my profound gratitude to my husband Martin Hammer for his invaluable contribution to both the content and form of this essay.

The epigraphs are from Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver': Tverskoe izdatel'stvo, 1922), p. 19, as translated in John E. Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 222, and Karl Ioganson, "From Construction to Technology and Invention," trans. James West, in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the State Tret'yakov Gallery, Moscow (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 70.

1. See "Programma uchebnoi podgruppy konstruktivistov INKhUKa," 1921, private archive, Moscow, and "Report No. 1. The Assembly for the Organisation of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk" held on March 18, 1921, in S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, ed. Vieri Quilici, trans. Huw Evans (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), pp. 289–90.

For details concerning Inkhuk, see Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 78ff. and Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, pp. 55ff.

The name of the group has been given variously as the Working Group of Constructivists and the First Working Group of Constructivists. Archival material usually omits "First," but the group's first public pronouncement, published in August 1922 in the Moscow journal *Ermitazh* (*Hermitage*), used both names. See "Front khudozhestvennogo truda. Materialy k Vserossiiskoi konferentsii levykh v iskusstve. Konstruktivisty. Pervaia programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov," *Ermitazh* 13 (1922), pp. 3–4. The introduction in *Ermitazh* gave the group its full title, declaring that: "On December 13, 1920, the First Working Group of Constructivists was formed" (*ibid.*, p. 3). 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." These remarks were 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 interchangeably.

There is no archival evidence to support the assertion made in the *Ermitazh* announcement that the group was founded in December 1920. Gan repeated this elsewhere, notably in "Chto takoe konstruktivizm?" *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 3 (1928), p. 79, and in *Konstruktivizm*, p. 3, where he also dates the group to 1920. Gan joined Inkhuk in 1920 (see Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 57), and although his participation in the debates is not documented fully, it is possible that the crystallization of the group's ideas and membership may have begun informally toward the end of 1920. The archives, however, suggest that the group's inaugural meeting was held on March 18, 1921 (see "Report No. 1," in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 289). Although Gan was not present, he was chosen to be a member of the organizing group and it was decided to invite him to work in the group (*ibid.*, items 2 and 7). Ten days later, he presented his report on the program and work plan ("Report No. 2. Meeting of the Plenum of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk," *ibid.*, p. 290). It is clear from the transcription of the ensuing discussion that Gan was responsible for the terms *tektonika*, *faktura*, and

"construction," as well as for the attempt to create a coherent theory from the artists' rather vague ideas and aspirations (*ibid.*, pp. 92–93 n. 14). It is also evident that although his program was ultimately accepted on April 1, 1921, there was a great deal of divergence among the members over precise meanings and specific details (*ibid.*, p. 92).

2. All are listed in "Report No. 2," in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 290.

3. See "Protokol zasedaniia INKhUKa," January 1, 1921 and January 21, 1921, private archive, Moscow.

4. "Programma uchebnoi podgruppy" and Gan's draft program of the group that was approved on April 1, 1921 (reprinted as "Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk," in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 290). The draft program, with few alterations, was published in August 1922 in *Ermitazh* under "Front khudozhestvennogo truda." These ideas were further elaborated in Gan's treatise *Konstruktivizm*, which had appeared by the summer of 1922, when it was reviewed. See V. Zhemchuzhnyi, "Aleksei Gan 'Konstruktivizm,'" *Ermitazh* 9 (1922), p. 8.

5. See "Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk," in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 290, and the discussion of the March 28, 1921 meeting, *ibid.*, p. 92 n. 14.

6. Date of opening from invitation card reproduced in Szymon Bojko, "Rodchenko's Early Spatial Constructions," in *Von der Fläche zum Raum/From Surface to Space: Russia, 1916–24*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1974), p. 18.

The invitation card referred to the show as the group's *Second Spring Exhibition*. According to V. M. Lobanov, the earliest chronicler of Obmokhu (writing in 1930), the 1921 show was the group's third exhibition. He listed four exhibitions organized by Obmokhu between its founding in 1919 and its dissolution in 1923. According to him, these shows took place in 1919, 1920, 1921, and 1922, the last in conjunction with the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in the summer of that year. (See V. M. Lobanov, *Khudozhestvennyye gruppировки za poslednie 25 let* [Moscow: Obshchestvo AKhR, 1930], pp. 104–5). Lobanov's account has formed the basis for work by other scholars (see *Vystavki sovetskogo izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva. Spravochnik* [Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1965], vol. 1, pp. 37, 59, 74). Lobanov's labeling of the 1921 exhibition as the group's third show was also confirmed by Vladimir Stenberg (conversation with author, April 1974).

However, Aleksandra Shatskikh argues, on the basis of the correspondence between Georgii Echeistov and Georgii Shchetinin, that the group acquired its name only after September 1919, being initially called Obmolkhud, and that its first exhibition was held in May 1920, not in 1919 (see Aleksandra Shatskikh, "A Brief History of Obmokhu," in this volume). A contemporary review of the May 1920 exhibition, which explains the group's acronym, confirms this (A. A. Sidorov, "Khudozhestvennyye vystavki," *Tvorchestvo* 2–4 [1920], p. 34). Although Lobanov gave the wrong year, the details of the show, as listed on the poster (reproduced by Shatskikh), correspond with Lobanov's account of the first exhibition, i.e., that it was held in the spring (opening on May 2nd) at the First State Free Art Workshops on Rozhdestvenka, and that Anatolii Lunacharskii and Lev Kamenev spoke at the opening. However, Lobanov's assertion that the first exhibition consisted entirely of agitational work does not accord with Sidorov's review, which described paintings and even a sculpture. Lobanov stated that the first exhibition (exclusively agitational work) was held on Rozhdestvenka, while the second (posters plus more formal investigations) was held in the

- group's studio in the former Fabergé shop on the corner of Neglinnaia Street and Kuznetskii most. Although this indeed was the location of their studio, his account is somewhat confused. Certainly there seems to be no reason for Lobanov to have exaggerated Obmokhu's importance by adding another exhibition; although Obmokhu was an agitational and collective organization, its interest in formal experimentation was far removed from the Realist cause Lobanov espoused. In view of this—and given Vladimir Stenberg's assertions—it is possible that there were four shows in all and that there was another exhibition devoted entirely to agitational work. It is possible, moreover, that such an exhibition took place prior to the May 1920 exhibition, and this would explain why the opening of the May 1920 show—a show, after all, by a new group of young artists—had such a lineup of eminent speakers (Lunacharskii, Kamenev, Ol'ga Kameneva, David Shterenberg, Osip Brik, and Georgii Iakulov). Likewise, it is possible that there was another exhibition, perhaps more informal, in Obmokhu's studio at some time after the May 1920 show and before the end of the year. As the first exhibition opened in the spring, the 1921 show could still have been the group's *Second Spring Exhibition* as well as its third show overall. Certainly the inclusion of "spring" in the title is puzzling, particularly since it is more reminiscent of the salons of czarist Russia than of the postrevolutionary avant-garde.
7. The contributors are listed on the invitation card, reproduced in Bojko, "Rodchenko's Early Spatial Constructions," p. 18.
 8. Shatskikh, "Brief History of Obmokhu." It was registered within the Subsection for Artistic Work of Izo Narkompros before May 1920. "Iz deiatel'nosti IZO," *IZO. Vestnik Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv N.K.P.* 1 (March 10, 1921), p. 4.
 9. See Alma Law, "A Conversation with Vladimir Stenberg," *Art Journal*, Fall 1981, p. 223 and E. A. Speranskaia, ed., *Agitatsionno-massovoe iskusstvo pervykh let Oktiabria. Materialy i issledovaniia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), p. 70.
 10. Speranskaia, *Agitatsionno-massovoe iskusstvo*, pp. 92, 125 n. 167.
 11. Lobanov, *Khudozhestvennye gruppirovki*, pp. 104–5. It also contained "levye iskaniiia" (left-wing or avant-garde explorations) which are not described. Clearly, for Lobanov the importance of Obmokhu lay in the fact that the "Productionist aspirations of the participants dominated over easel painting." *Ibid.*, p. 106.
 12. Sidorov, "Khudozhestvennye vystavki." He also suggests that this statue is well riveted.
 13. Vladimir Stenberg, conversation with author, November 1974. See note 6 above.
 14. Law, "Conversation with Vladimir Stenberg," p. 224. The invitation gave the address as 11 Bol'shaia Dmitrovka (reproduced in Bojko, "Rodchenko's Early Spatial Constructions," p. 18).
 15. See Ulen, "Die Ausstellungen in Russland," *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* 1–2 (1922), p. 19, reprinted in I. Matsa, ed., *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let. Materialy i dokumentatsiia* (Moscow and Leningrad: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1933), p. 138, where it is dated 1920.
 16. See *Egység* 2 (1922), p. 9.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 7. The issue also contained photographs of a Gabo relief (p. 8) and an Unovis composition exhibited in Moscow in 1921 (p. 10).
 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
 20. Ulen, "Die Ausstellungen in Russland," p. 19.
 21. Quoted in Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 147.
 22. V. I. Lenin, "Iz doklada Vserossiiskogo tsentral'nogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta i Soveta narodnykh komissarov o vneshnei i vnutrennei politike 22 dekabria," in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (1919), reprinted in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, pp. 63–64.
 23. See Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, pp. 145–64. For contemporary enthusiasm about Ford's ideas, see I. M. Burdianskii, *Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1925), pp. 23–25.
 24. See L. Pamilla and V. Chukovich, *NOT—velenie vremeni* (Minsk: Belarus, 1973).
 25. See E. H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country, 1924–1926* (London: Penguin, 1970), pp. 409–11.
 26. P. M. Kerzhentsev, *Printsiipy organizatsii. Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 1968), p. 275, quoted in Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 156.
 27. M. L-in, "Miting ob iskusstve," *Iskusstvo kommuny* 1 (December 7, 1918), pp. 3–4, reprinted as "Miting ob iskusstve (24 XI 1918 g. v Petrograde)," in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, pp. 173–76.
 28. Nikolai Punin, quoted in "Miting ob iskusstve," in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, pp. 175–76.
 29. "Primechanie redaktsii," *Iskusstvo kommuny* 8 (January 26, 1919), p. 2.
 30. Osip Brik "Drenazh iskusstvu," *Iskusstvo kommuny* 1 (December 7, 1918), p. 1.
 31. David Shterenberg, "Pora poniat'," *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve* (Moscow: IZO Narkompros, 1921), p. 5.
 32. "Rech' Narodnogo kommissara po prosveshcheniiu A. V. Lunarcharskogo," in *Pervaia vserossiiskaia konferentsiia po khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti. Avgust 1919* (Moscow: Podotdel khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv NKP, 1920), pp. 63–64.
 33. See N. Kol'tsova, "Programma-deklaratsiia khudozhestvenno-proizvodstvennoi komissi," *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika* 10 (1967), pp. 14–15.
 34. Nikolai Punin, "O novykh gruppirovkakh," *Iskusstvo kommuny* 10 (February 9, 1919), as translated in Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910–1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 322.
 35. Anatolii Strigalev, "The Art of the Constructivists: From Exhibition to Exhibition, 1914–1932," trans. James West, in *Art Into Life*, p. 29.
 36. K. Malevich, "Sorok piat'. Vvedenie v teoriu o pribavochnom elemente v zhivopise," 1925, private archive, Moscow, p. 81, quoted in Zhadova, *Malevich*, pp. 81, 130 n. 32.
 37. See Zhadova, *Malevich*, pp. 96ff.
 38. El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen, 1914–1924* (Zurich–Munich–Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925), p. xi. Architectural titles for Lissitzky's prouns abound, e.g., *Proun*

- 1E. Gorod. *Eskiz (Sketch for Proun 1E: Town, 1919–20, plate no. 206)*. See Peter Nisbet, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky," in *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Busch–Reisinger Museum, the Sprengel Museum Hanover, and the Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), pp. 20–21.
39. El Lissitzky, "New Russian Art: A Lecture," in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), p. 340.
40. Chashnik's project was published in *UNOVIS. Listok 1* (November 20, 1920).
41. Zhadova, *Malevich*, pp. 87ff.
42. Il. Chashnik, "Arkhitekturno-tekhnicheskii fakul'tet," *UNOVIS 2* (January 1921), pp. 12–15.
43. See *Izvestiia VTsIK*, December 25, 1920.
44. Quoted in German Karginov, *Rodchenko*, trans. Elisabeth Hoch (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 60.
45. Of course, artists and writers such as David Burliuk and Vladimir Markov had begun the process of establishing a more scientific basis for artistic analysis before the Revolution. Indeed, it was Burliuk who had introduced the French term for the texture of the painted surface, *facture*, into Russian as *faktura* in 1912. (See his articles "Kubizm" and "Faktura" in *Poshchechina obshestvennomu vkusu*, December 1912 or January 1913, pp. 95–101 and 102–10; the former is translated in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 70–77). By 1914 Markov had explored in minute detail the practical and philosophical ramifications of the term *faktura* in relation to various arts and crafts (including sculpture, architecture, and icon painting), nature, and the machine. (See Vladimir Markov, *Printsiipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh. Faktura* [St. Petersburg: Souiz molodezhi, 1914]). The importance of this process of analysis was endorsed by Izo Narkompros in February 1919 in its statement concerning "artistic culture," which emphasized the need to create precise definitions of "the elements of artistic activity" and to establish "objective criteria of artistic value." See "Polozhenie Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv i khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti NKP po voprosu 'o khudozhestvennoi kul'tury,'" *Iskusstvo kommuny 11* (February 16, 1919), reprinted in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, pp. 63–64.
46. A. M. Rodchenko, "The Line," trans. James West, in *Art Into Life*, p. 73.
47. See V. I. Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka*, vol. 2 (Moscow and St. Petersburg, 1881), p. 152, where *konstruktsiia* is applied to buildings as well as to the structure of language; and the more detailed later definition in D. N. Ushakov, *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1935), p. 1443.
48. See Vladimir Markov, "Printsiipy novogo iskusstva," *Soiuz molodezhi 1* (April 1912), pp. 5–14, and *Soiuz molodezhi 2* (June 1912), pp. 5–18, translated in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 25–38.
49. Ivan Puni, "Tvorchestvo zhizni," *Iskusstvo kommuny 5* (January 5, 1919), p. 1.
50. See V. Dmitriev, "Pervyi itog," *Iskusstvo kommuny 15* (March 16, 1919), p. 3.
51. See Anatolii Strigalev, "From Painting to the Construction of Matter," in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, p. 24.
52. Vasily Kandinsky, "Program for the Institute of Artistic Culture," in Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 471.
53. See D. N. Ushakov, *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1939), p. 648.
54. See "Liubov' Popova," in *Desiataia gosudarstvennaia vystavka. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow: Otdel IZO Narkomprosa, 1919), reprinted in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, p. 112. In the same statement, she also used the term *akonstruktivnost'* (nonconstructiveness) to denote the absence of construction and hence the antithesis of *arkhitektonika* (architectonics). The date of the opening of this show is given in Strigalev, "Art of the Constructivists," p. 28. *Zhivopisnoe postroenie* (painterly structure) or *zhivopisnoi stroi* (painterly construct) were also used by other artists to denote pictorial structure. See statements such as those by Aleksandr Shevchenko and Aleksei Grishchenko in the catalogue of the *Dvenadsataia gosudarstvennaia vystavka. Tsvetodinos i tektonicheskii primitivizm* (Moscow: Otdel IZO Narkomprosa, 1919), reprinted in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, pp. 117–20. Occasionally *struktura* (structure) was also used.
55. See *Desiataia gosudarstvennaia vystavka*, in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, p. 113.
56. Naum Gabo and Noton Pevzner [Antoine Pevsner], "Realisticheskii manifest," August 1920, original and translation reprinted in *Gabo: Constructions, Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings, Engravings* (London: Lund Humphries, 1957), p. 152.
57. *XIX vystavka VTsVB* (Moscow: Otdel IZO Narkomprosa, 1920), nos. 93–107 and 117. According to Rodchenko, this exhibition opened on October 2nd (see his recollections quoted in Karginov, *Rodchenko*, p. 86).
58. *XIX vystavka VTsVB*, pp. 8–9.
59. *XIX vystavka VTsVB*, nos. 125–34.
60. Strigalev, "Art of the Constructivists," p. 31.
61. Nikolai Khardzhiev, *K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm: Hylaea Prints, 1976), p. 124 n. 2.
- Khan-Magomedov stated that Rodchenko exhibited the kiosk and Sovdep (Soviet of Deputies building) designs along with twenty other sketches at this show (Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 54).
62. For more details on the debates, see Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, pp. 83–89 and Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, pp. 83–89.
63. See Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, pp. 83–89 and Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, pp. 83–89.
64. See Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 84 and the transcription of the discussion of Rodchenko's *Dva kruga* (*Two Circles*, ca. 1920), *ibid.*, pp. 87–88 n. 5.
65. Rodchenko, "Line," p. 73.
66. Nikolai Khardzhiev, "Maiakovskii i Tatlin. K 90-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia khudozhnika," reprinted in *Neue russische Literatur. Almanach* (Salzburg, 1978), p. 90.
67. See V. Tatlin, T. Shapiro, I. Meerzon, and P. Vinogradov, "Nasha predstoiashchaia rabota," *VIII s"ezd sovetov. Ezhednevnyi biulleten' s"ezda 13* (January 1, 1921), p. 11. Translation adapted from "The Work Ahead of Us," in *Vladimir Tatlin* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1968), p. 51.

68. See Tatlin et al., "Nasha predstoiashchaia rabota," p. 11, and Lissitzky, "New Russian Art," p. 337.
69. See Christina Lodder, "Tatlin's Monument to the Third International as a Symbol of Revolution," in Gabriel P. Weisberg and Laurinda S. Dixon, eds., *The Documented Image: Visions in Art History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), pp. 275–88.
70. These works were dated 1918 when they were reproduced in 1922 in *Kino-fot 5* (1922). They were, however, exhibited at the Tenth State Exhibition in 1919 under the title of *White Non-Objective Sculptures*.
71. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, plate 1.33.
72. See "Report No. 1," March 18, 1921, and the list of slogans in "Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk," in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, pp. 289, 291.
73. Vladimir Stenberg, conversation with author, November 1974.
74. *Worker by the Car*, oil on canvas, 71 x 89 cm, State Architecture and Art Museum, Rostov-Iaroslavskii, reproduced in *Avantgarde, 1910–1930: Russian and Soviet Art* (Turku: Turku Art Museum, 1989), p. 54, details on p. 63.
75. The title is inscribed on the verso with the date 1918 (Giovanni Carandente, ed., *Arte russa e sovietica, 1870–1930* [Milan: Fabbri, 1989], p. 387). The date is more likely to be ca. 1920; the inscription is of questionable value since it could have been made any time before the work was acquired by the Tret'iakov in 1984.
76. Andrei Nakov, however, identifies *Color Construction No. 10* as a *Proekt prostranstvenno-konstruktivnogo sooruzheniia* (Project for a Spatial-Constructive Structure). See A. B. Nakov, *2 Stenberg 2*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Annely Juda Gallery, London (London: Annely Juda Gallery, 1975), p. 42. He asserts that works with such titles were "two-dimensional projects for three-dimensional works" (ibid., p. 71). Such a description could be applied to *Color Construction No. 10*, which has a stronger sculptural emphasis than the other paintings given this title (e.g., *Color Construction No. 12*). There is no *Project for a Spatial-Constructive Structure No. 10* listed in the January 1922 exhibition catalogue, the highest number in that series of works shown being no. 6 (see *Konstruktivisty. K. K. Medunetskii, V. A. Stenberg, G. A. Stenberg* [Moscow: Kafe poetov, 1922], no. 41). Nevertheless, it is possible that *Color Construction No. 10* has been mistitled and that Nakov's title is correct.
77. The drawing was probably executed in late 1920 or early 1921, while its *Composition* counterpart is dated 1920. Other drawings in the Inkhuk portfolio of the Costakis Collection are dated 1920 or April 1921, when the debate was concluded. For instance, Ioganson's pair of *Composition* and *Construction* drawings are dated April 7, 1921, Ladovskii's April 15, 1921, while Medunetskii's *Construction* is dated 1920. See Angelica Zander Rudenstine, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde Art: The George Costakis Collection* (New York: Abrams, 1981), pp. 110–27.
78. Title taken from *Konstruktivisty*, no. 42. It was identified by the artist in a conversation with the author, April 1974.
79. Law, "Conversation with Vladimir Stenberg," p. 225.
80. State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, Soviet Graphics Inventory no. 13045, reproduced in *Art Into Life*, p. 95.
81. See *Egység 2* (1922), p. 7. The title for these works employed by the Stenbergs in January 1922 in their exhibition catalogue *Konstruktivisty* was *Konstruktsiia prostranstvennogo sooruzheniia*. Andrei Nakov identified this particular work as *Konstruktsiia prostranstvennogo sooruzheniia IV*, catalogue no. 4 (see Nakov, *2 Stenberg 2*, p. 72).
82. Vladimir Stenberg, conversation with author, November 1974.
83. Aleksei Babichev, untitled notes, private archive, Moscow. The full quotation is cited in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 97. Similar observations were made by Lissitzky in "New Russian Art," p. 337.
84. Konstantin Medunetskii, *Celebration*, undated, ca. 1919, oil on canvas, measurements unknown, Museum of Fine Arts, Syktyvkar. Reproduced in *Avantgarde, 1910–1930*, p. 45, details on p. 62.
85. The signature and date of 1921 on *Color Construction No. 7* suggest that *Color Construction No. 9* was also produced in 1921, although it is dated 1920 in *Art Into Life*, p. 46.
86. It was illustrated in the catalogue of the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung (First Russian Art Exhibition)* under the title *Raumkonstruktion (Spatial Construction)*. See *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* (Berlin: Galerie van Diemen, 1922).
87. L. Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture* (New York: Brener, Warren and Putnam, 1930), p. 109.
88. Karl Ioganson, "From Construction to Technology and Invention," p. 70.
89. K. Medunetskii, V. Stenberg, and G. Stenberg, "Outline of the Report on 'Constructivism,'" trans. James West, in *Art Into Life*, p. 82.

The Great Utopia

*The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,
1915–1932*

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

State Tret'iakov Gallery

State Russian Museum

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

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Kazimir Malevich
*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman
in Two Dimensions)*, 1915
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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