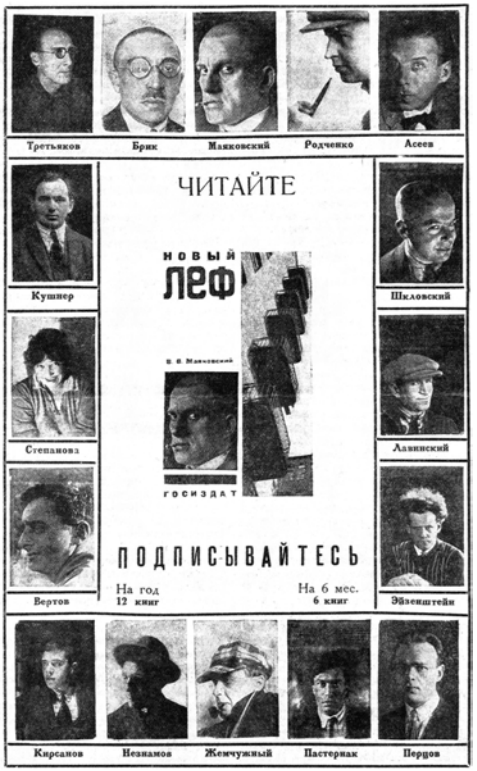


Aleksandr Rodchenko. "Read Novyi lef. *Subscribe." Advertising leaflet for* Novyi lef. *1927. Art © Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York.*

Turning Objects, Toppled Pictures: Give and Take between Vertov's Films and Constructivist Art

YURI TSIVIAN

Before I begin, let me correct one time-honored misnomer. A book[1] and a number of articles (one of them by me[2]) came out in the 1980s whose very titles posed Dziga Vertov as a Constructivist filmmaker. At the time, there seemed to be every reason to do so. Vertov's first manifesto appeared in the Constructivist magazine *Kino-Fot*; film reviews written by Constructivism's ideologue Aleksei Gan presented early issues of *Kino-Pravda* as Constructivist newsreels; Rodchenko-designed intertitles, which these newsreels sported, gave them a distinctly Constructivist look; and, of course, Vertov's name was printed on the back cover of the journal *Lef* (Left Front of Arts)—along with the names of Constructivist artists, Futurist poets, Productionist theorists, and Formalist scholars.

Lately, new evidence has come to light, and we now know better. In Varvara Stepanova's diaries from the 1920, the Kinoks emerge as too much of a sect to hit it off with the Lef set:

> To discuss, to show—this is something that the Kinoks are completely incapable of. Their low level of general social culture prevents closer contact with them and does a lot of harm to their work. . . . The only subject of conversation which livens them up is tales about various troubles and difficulties of a purely bureaucratic nature, the rudeness of administration, and so forth—the kind of thing that members of Lef know how to speak of in a light and semi-anecdotal way, as a jolly break in the conversation, is presented by the Kinoks in the weighty form of a detailed complaint to the RKI [Commissariat for the Worker-Peasant Inspection], and the conversation becomes tedious and you want to escape as quickly as possible. . . . They are difficult people, who don't

1. Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film: The Man with the Movie Camera, A Cinematic Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
2. Yuri Tsivian, "L'Homme a camera de Dziga Vertov en tant que texte constructiviste," *Revue du Cinema (Image et Son)*, no. 351 (June 1980), pp. 109–25.

OCTOBER 121, Summer 2007, pp. 92–110.

> know how to treat other people as work comrades. . . . You can't regard everyone as either a film factory executive or a potential recruit for Kinoks sympathizers![3]

True, the Kinoks' lack of social skills did work against them at times, but this is not the whole story. Elsewhere in her diary, Stepanova calls the Kinoks "too Left-wing a group"[4] for Lef. Conversely, Vertov accused the Left Front of Arts of opportunism. The very phrase "left art" was to him a contradiction in terms: How can one see oneself as "left" and still want to be viewed as an "artist"? We glimpse how matters looked from the Kinoks' side of the fence in an angry letter Vertov sent to a friendly critic in 1926:

> [You write that] the Kinoks struggle against art. This is utterly wrong. The Kinoks do not struggle against "art," but deny the existence of "art." You are mixing us up with the Constructivists. For comparison [atheists] do not fight against "God," "the Devil." You can say that the Kinoks struggle against a belief in the existence of "art." To put it even more clearly, the Kinoks do not divide people into "people of art—makers of art" and "people not of art—craftsmen." The Kinoks refuse to draw up a barrier between "artistic" and "non-artistic" labor.[5]

Vertov clearly has a point here. Contemporary critics and modern film historians alike ought to know the Kinoks program well enough to be able to distinguish it from Constructivism. Still, a question remains—were we as wrong to see Vertov's films as a Constructivist endeavor, as both Vertov's and Stepanova's indications appear to suggest?

I don't think this question can be answered without stepping back and seeing a larger picture. Letters and diaries offer the avant-garde's historians the advantage of two complementary views—from within and from without. Viewed from within, Kinoks and Constructivists were two different groups; from without, they were easy to mix up—as they had been by Vertov's unfortunate addressee. Each of the views tells its own truth—first, because the point of view of a group member will always differ from that of an outside observer; second, because what these views show are two different faces of the avant-garde. When we listen to Constructivists or Vertov and read their letters and manifestos, we are faced with their doctrines; but when we watch Vertov's films or visit Rodchenko's exhibition what we come in touch with are artistic practices—that is, with art movements proper.

A peculiar thing about both Vertov's Kinoks and the first-generation Constructivists, however, was that neither of the two groups was willing to acknowledge their identities. The first point in Stepanova's 1921 lecture "Constructivism" says

3. Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, trans. Julian Graffy (Sacile/Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), p. 390.
4. Ibid., p. 281.
5. Ibid., p. 135.

clearly: "Constructivism is an ideology and not an artistic movement."[6] It would not be hard to find a similar line from one of Vertov's manifestos, if proof were needed that this was how the Kinoks saw themselves as well.

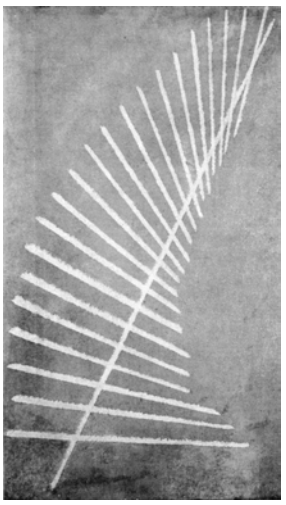
In this paper I proceed from the assumption that Constructivists and Kinoks were art movements in denial. Their self-images were austere and isolationist; their practices, flexible and open. As students of the avant-garde we are sometimes too mesmerized by the former to pay enough attention to the latter.[7] When we speak about Constructivists and Kinoks we must respect their self-given names and keep track of differences in their platforms; at the same time, we must not lose sight of their overlapping practices, for entrenched as they were in their beliefs or denials, in real life Kinoks and Constructivists mixed, and techniques, ideas, and objects easily changed hands.

Turning Objects

I begin, as Annette Michelson did in her memorable introduction to Vertov's writings,[8] with a look at an old photographic portrait. We are in Moscow in 1922. The young lady who tries to keep her face straight as she looks off left is Varvara Stepanova—the artist whose 1928 diary entry and 1921 lecture on Constructivism I quoted above. The man, the top of whose well-rounded head we see her tap proudly, is her husband, Aleksandr Rodchenko. Both belong to the core of the First Working Group of Constructivists of the RSFSR. The photographer is unknown, but more likely than not was Vertov's brother Mikhail Kaufman.[9]

6. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, *The Future Is Our Only Goal*, ed. Peter Noever (Munich: Prestel, 1991), p. 174.
7. As was, for example, Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
8. Annette Michelson, introduction to Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xv—xviii.
9. Angela Voelker attributes to Kaufman Rodchenko's photo in front of the latter's collapsed spatial constructions in 1922. It stands to reason that other photographs of Rodchenko made in 1922 were

Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova at their studio with Stepanova-designed Kino-Fot *covers in the background. 1922. Courtesy Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive.*



Left: Rodchenko and Stepanova posing as wandering musicians at their studio with paintings in the background. 1921. Above: Rodchenko. Linear Construction No. 89 (on light yellow). *1919. Both courtesy Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive. Art © Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York.*

Mock as it may rigid poses in old family photos, this photograph is also a visual statement. To see what it says, put this double portrait next to an earlier picture that captured Stepanova and Rodchenko in their shared studio in 1921, him holding a plank in his hand, her a sizeable paintbrush. The wall behind the couple is covered with their paintings. Intended or not, this photograph looks like a farewell card, for it was in 1921 that Rodchenko announced they were done with brushes and canvases and were on their way to doing something else.

This something else turned out to be two practices: building and design. Building came first. Having stripped the medium of painting down to colored surfaces and bare lines called *Linear Constructions*, in 1921 Rodchenko went on to explore how lines and surfaces combined in real space.

To glimpse what this decision came to in practice we need to look at yet another photograph, which shows six wooden objects of modest sizes (the tallest of them the size of a bottle) placed on a table in Rodchenko's workshop. These are Rodchenko's *Spatial Constructions*—part of a langer series of experiments whose purpose, Rodchenko claimed, was to find out how many different forms

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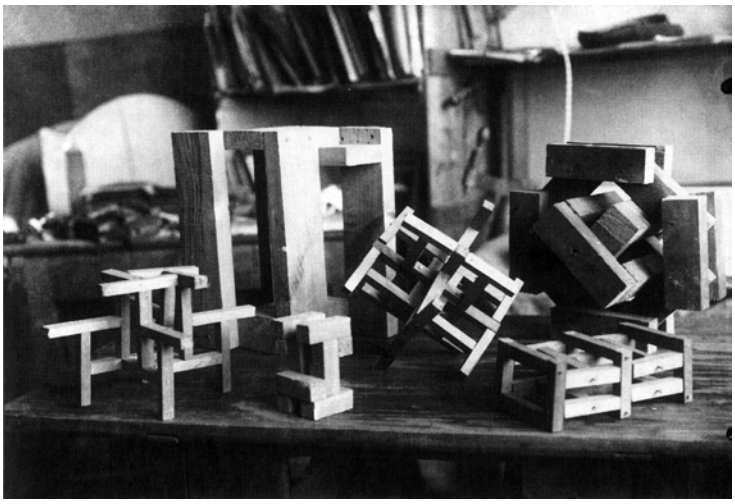
by Kaufman, too. Angela Voelker, "Is the Future a Goal? Notes on Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova," in Rodchenko and Stepanova, *The Future Is Our Only Goal*, p. 24.



Rodchenko. Spatial Constructions. *ca. 1921. No longer extant. Photograph: Rodchenko, 1924. Courtesy Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive. Art © Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York.*

could be produced using a simple set of identical wooden bars. (People interested in film history might find it rewarding to take a closer look at this particular moment in Rodchenko's search—for, *mutatis mutandis*, the laws of form he was trying to discover find a parallel in what Lev Kuleshov was after in the series of montage experiments he and his students conducted at the State Kino Institute around the same time.)[10]

I hope it will not be dismissed as a pun if I venture to call Rodchenko's spatial constructions "nonobjective objects," by analogy with the nonobjective paintings they had grown out of, to accept Rodchenko's version of events. Nonobjective, because none of these objects was made to serve any practical objective, and also because none of them was meant to depict any object known to exist in the actual world.

It was this nonobjective—nonutilitarian, nonmimetic—period of the Constructivist experiment in art that Rodchenko declared closed in 1922. The new road, he said, led him and his fellow-Constructivists away from the nonobjective to what they called "socially meaningful artistic labor,"[11] from experiments in pure form to experiments in utilitarian design.

This brings me back to the 1922 photograph that started this discussion—the one in which Rodchenko and Stepanova wear similar sweaters. The pictures displayed on the wall behind Stepanova's head are not paintings but cover pages for *Kino-Fot*. They betoken Stepanova's move from painting into design—her first step on the new Constructivist path toward making useful and functional things.

10. Ekaterina Khokhlova, Kristin Thompson, and Yuri Tsivian, "The Rediscovery of a Kuleshov Experiment: A Dossier," *Film History* 8, no. 3 (1996), pp. 357–67.
11. Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, p. 57.

From then on printing matter and textile would become the two main media in which Stepanova would work.

Once we enter upon the path of ekphrasis, it is never easy to stop. That, interlocked as they are in the photograph, Rodchenko and Stepanova look in two different directions appears—if only by the wisdom of hindsight—to hint at two different fields they were looking toward in 1922. Knowing Rodchenko's appetite for new media and techniques, it seems only logical that his first foray into design was for cinema, not for posters or books,[12] since cinema was the medium that offered the graphic designer the advantage of light, movement, and size. While Stepanova started with journal covers, Rodchenko's first attempt at design was to make intertitles for Vertov's films.

An innovator in everything he touched, Rodchenko treated the cinema screen as a proving ground for Constructivist ideas. His first set of title cards was made for the tenth issue of Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* (this issue survives without intertitles, alas), which came out in September 1922. Six months later an unsigned report, "The Constructivists," printed in *Lef*, no. 1 (1923), proudly listed Rodchenko's main inventions in this new field:

> [Constructivist Rodchenko] has produced three new types of cinema intertitles: a garish [*broskii*] intertitle in large letters filling up the whole screen; three-dimensional intertitles; and intertitles which move through space. The intertitle has changed from being a dead point in a film to an organic part of it.[13]

That Rodchenko's experiments in film titling dovetailed with his Constructivist agenda does not imply that they owed nothing to Vertov. They did—so much so that the opening credits of a number of *Kino-Pravda* issues present Rodchenko's intertitles as a constituent part of Vertov's "experiment in newsreel."

12. Aleksandr Lavrentiev, *Laboratoriia konstruktivizma: opyt graficheskogo modelirovaniia* [The Laboratory of Constructivism: An Experiment in Graphic Modeling] (Moscow: Grant, 2000), p. 53.
13. Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, p. 57.

Rodchenko. Introductory credits for Kino-Pravda *14: "Experiment in newsreel by Dziga Vertov. Intertitles designed by Rodchenko. The Profintern footage shot by cameraman Bystrov. Editor Svilova." 1922. Author's collection.*

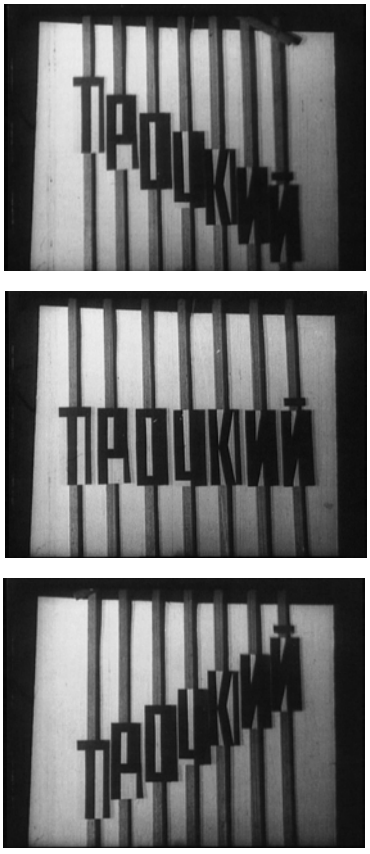
To comprehend Vertov's need for garish intertitles we need only to recall that the material these titles served to cement and comment on was anything but garish. For the most part these were speeches and openings, celebrations and demonstrations. However dynamic Vertov's eccentric editing made it, *Kino-Pravda* was, after all, a political newsreel made to showcase political figures and cover political events.

Significant or exciting as such events and figures may have been, captured on film they looked as uneventful as only day-to-day politics could. It should not therefore be too surprising that Rodchenko's most radical experiments in titling are found in *Kino-Pravda* 14 (1922), an issue fully devoted to the Fourth Congress of Comintern (or Communist International, also known as the Third International) taking place in Moscow in November–December of that year.

Speeches do not come across too well in silent films, and the Congress of Comintern was all speeches. Take Trotsky, perhaps the most popular figure in Soviet politics after Lenin. The cameraman assigned to report from the Congress had captured Trotsky in two views—sitting and reading, and standing at the rostrum delivering a speech. All a newsreel editor can do with footage like this is to

Leon Trotsky at the Fourth Congress of Comintern as shown in Kino-Pravda *14. 1922. Author's collection.*

furnish it with two intertitles: one telling who the speaker is, the other, what his speech is about. This is where Rodchenko comes in. If there was not much to be done with the shot of Trotsky reading (he moves once, but only to turn a page), he could do things with his name. With childish ingenuity characteristic of them both, Vertov and Rodchenko affixed each of its seven letters to a collapsible armature made of planks and pivots. As these are moved, the screen-size word "Trotsky" comes to life—as we read it, its characters shift around.



Rodchenko. Intertitle "Trotsky" moving on a collapsible frame in Kino-Pravda *14. 1922. Author's collection.*

As with the name, so with the speech. In his speech at the Fourth Congress of Comintern (shown in profile, the speaker keeps poking the air), Trotsky attacked Western governments for their attempts to thwart the world revolution by using moderate democratic reforms of the kind Kerensky had used in Russia in his futile attempt to avert the October Revolution. Accordingly, Trotsky's speech was entitled "On worldwide Kerenskytis and [our] political perspectives." To add more life to this phrase, Vertov and Rodchenko did not move its letters—they simply cut the

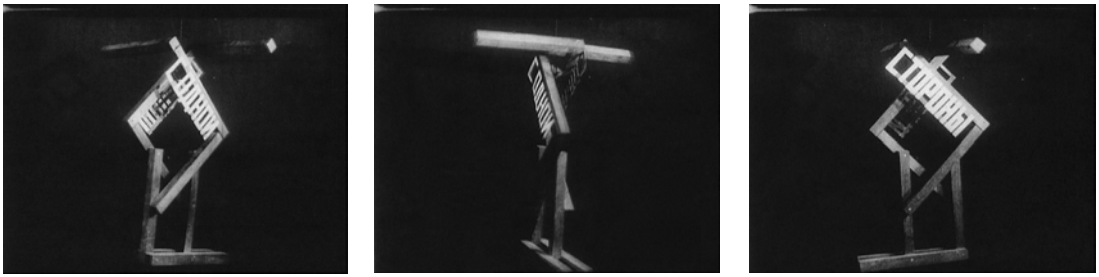
Rodchenko. Two caligram-intertitles conveying the title of Trotsky's speech "On worldwide Kerenskytis and [our] political perspectives." The first presents "worldwide Kerenskytis" as a rickety hut with a chimney; in the second, the words "political perspectives" form a wedge or a spearhead. Kino-Pravda *14. 1922. Author's collection.*

phrase in two and inserted the speaking Trotsky in between. The first half, ON WORLDWIDE KERENSKYTIS, is a calligram: its three words form a chimney-crowned hut, which leans sideways and looks as rickety as the political edifice to which Trotsky refers. Conversely, the words AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES, which we read on the second intertitle, are aligned along a spearhead wedge, which leaves no doubt as to the fate of Kerenskytis and about the perspectives of the world revolution. See how well Rodchenko's tapered title matches Trotsky's pointing finger. If Rodchenko ever came close to what E. H. Gombrich has called "graphological gesture,"[14] it was in his intertitles for Vertov's films.

So much for Rodchenko's "garish" intertitles. As for "three-dimensional intertitles and intertitles which move through space," three magnificent specimens of both are preserved in the same fourteenth issue of *Kino-Pravda,* in Vertov's global political prologue about "them" and "us," in which Moscow—the capital of Communism, the city where the Fourth Congress of Comintern is taking place—is contrasted with the capital of Capital, New York.

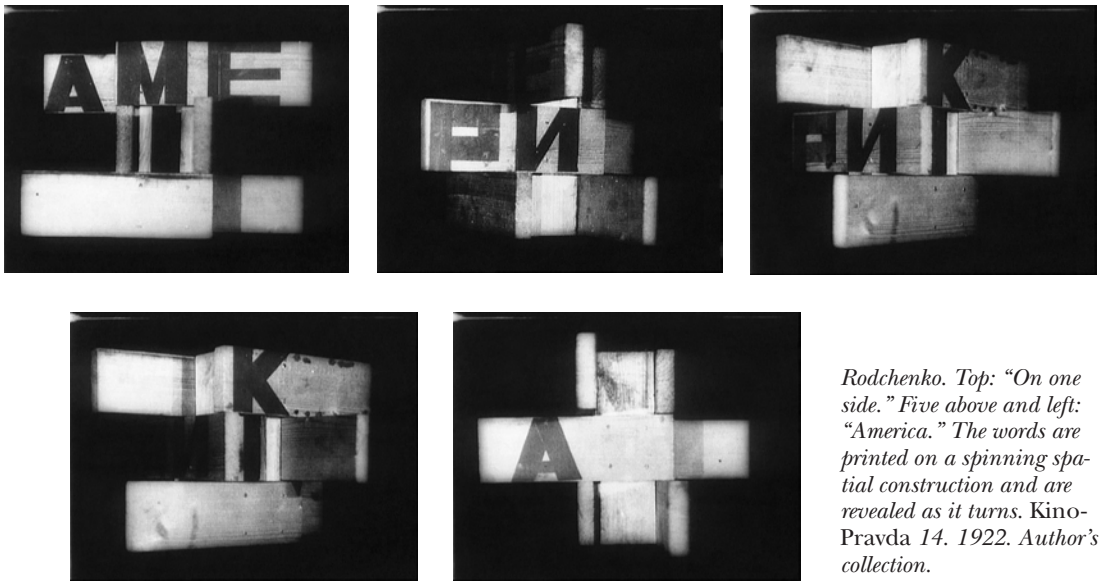
The prologue starts with an image of the spinning globe, soon replaced by a spinning wooden construction. As it revolves, the phrase ON ONE SIDE is revealed, formed by cut-out characters fastened to each of the construction's two sides—with the words ON ONE on the first side, followed by the word SIDE on the other.

14. Ernst Hans Gombrich, "Ritualized Gesture and Expression in Art," in *The Image and the Eye* (London: Phaidon Press, 1982), p. 77.

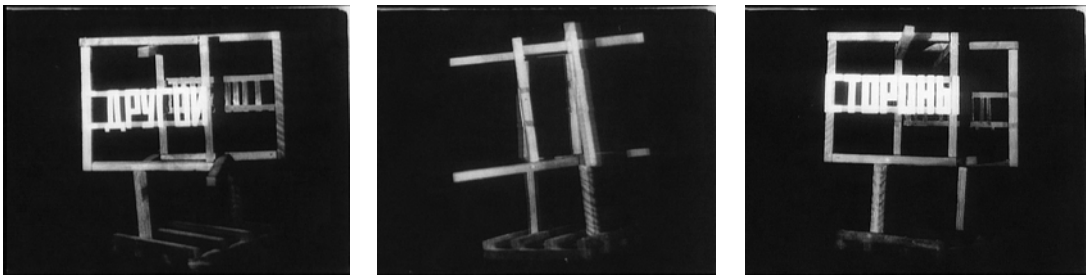


This neat verbal-visual game—the words "on one" written on one side, the word "side" on the other—gives way to another. A second wooden construction is now shown spinning in the same direction and with the same speed. This one is a more complex affair, built of many planks, their flat sides facing us by turn. Large dark letters printed on these planks—one or two per plank—unfold the word AMERICA for us. This, of course, is followed by found footage of the New York docks and skyscrapers, street crowds, underground trains, and scenes of nightlife in expensive restaurants. When it finally comes time to return to Moscow, a third spinning three-dimensional intertitle makes it clear that what we are going to see now is taking place ON THE OTHER SIDE.

People familiar with Rodchenko's earlier works will recognize one of them in the first of these turning intertitles—stripped of the appended characters, of course. It is *Spatial Construction No. 15*, one of Rodchenko's series of nonobjective



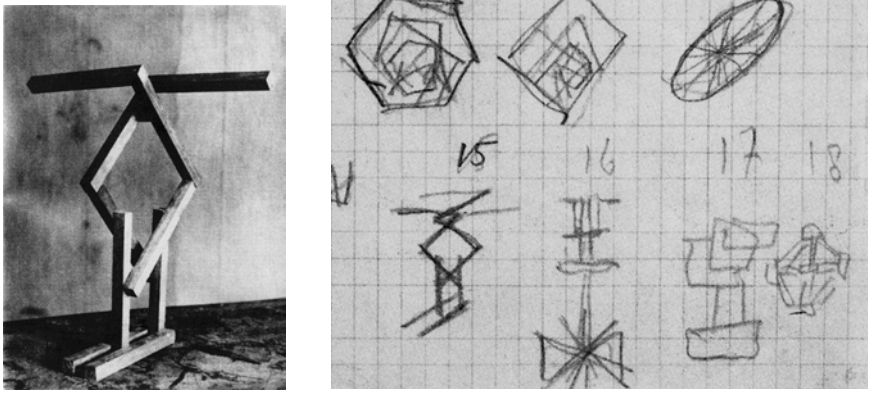
Rodchenko. Top: "On one side." Five above and left: "America." The words are printed on a spinning spatial construction and are revealed as it turns. Kino-Pravda *14. 1922. Author's collection.*



studies. As a spatial object, the Construction is no longer extant, but we have a good idea of what it looked like from a sketch Rodchenko had penciled in 1921 before building it, and from a snapshot he made in 1924 before consigning the model to the flames. Under 15 inches high, this standing construction is knocked together out of ten identical 9-inch-long square-profile wooden bars extending in three dimensions at right or 45-degree angles to each other. Though rather narrow at the foot, *Spatial Construction No. 15* stands on its own, as its side-spread arms are of equal length.

It was this object that Rodchenko used as an armature for his ON ONE SIDE intertitle, and although I have never happened to come across them in any published works on Rodchenko's art, it stands to reason that the constructions used to support the AMERICA and ON THE OTHER SIDE intertitles originally belonged to the nonobjective series of 1921 as well.

This comeback raises a question. As we know, in 1922 the nonobjective period in the Constructivist pursuit was declared bygone. Did Rodchenko use his



Rodchenko. Top: "On the other side." These words are attached to a spinning spatial construction and are revealed as it turns. Kino-Pravda *14. 1922. Author's collection. Above left:* Spatial Construction No. 15. *1921. No longer extant. Courtesy Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive. Above right: Sketch for* Spatial Constructions *(detail). 1921. Courtesy Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive. Art © Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York.*

1921 spatial constructions in Vertov's 1922 film simply because he had a stock of them on hand, or did he perhaps feel that the medium of film gave them a second life? I find the latter more likely for the following reasons. Cinema does not merely reproduce objects, it transforms them. First, cinema is a medium that makes small things look larger than life. Piled on a table, Rodchenko's spatial constructions look like wooden toys; thrown onto the screen, they become instantly monumental. Second, the screen made standing objects into turning ones. Early on, Rodchenko made a point that his spatial constructions must be experienced in the round[15]—and he did make them go round in *Kino-Pravda*.

Nor did this revival of Rodchenko's past work contradict the latest tack in the Constructivist course, which led, we recall, toward socially meaningful work. Originally, Rodchenko's *Spatial Construction No. 15* was an experiment in form. Dressed in words and cast in *Kino-Pravda*, it became an experiment in ideology.

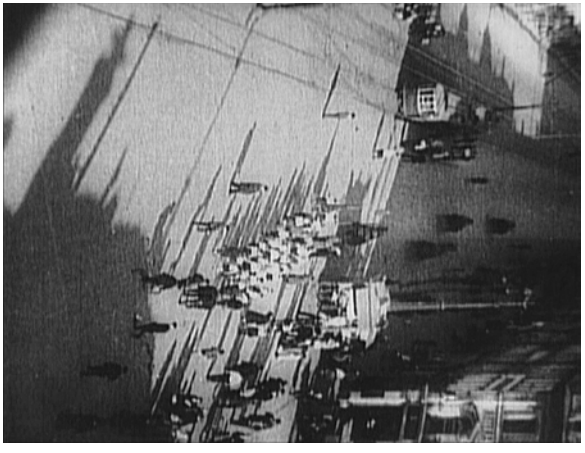
Toppled Pictures

When watching Vertov's films, always look out for a surprise. At one point in his 1924 *Kino-Eye* we see a long shot of a Moscow street on a sunny day teeming with streetcars, people, and cars followed by an intertitle announcing what we are going to see next: "The same street viewed from a different camera setup." We might expect something like a reverse view or an upper angle—instead, we are shown the same street, cars, people and all, lying on its side. Nothing shown before prepares the viewer for this turn, nor is it related to anything that happens next.

How can we explain this puzzling and inconsequential shot? First, we can dismiss it as a trick for trick's sake, which would be perfectly justified. After all, Vertov was a confirmed trickomaniac. Second, we can try to account for Vertov's toppled street using a) Russian Formalist poetics, and b) turn-of-the-century avant-garde art theory as a context. Third, we can connect this odd shot to Constructivist photography—to see if something in Rodchenko's snapshots explains Kaufman's odd ways with the movie camera.

Let us, for argument's sake, dismiss the first option, the dismissal. This leaves us with two explanatory scenarios: Formalist poetics and avant-garde art on the one hand, and Constructivist photography on the other. Let us explore the former avenue first. I can think of three cases (each of which could easily reach Vertov's ears) in which the gesture of rotating a picture—putting it on its side or turning it upside down—was recognized and interpreted as an act quintessential to art.

15. Magdalena Dabrowski, "Aleksandr Rodchenko: Innovation and Experiment," in *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Painting, Drawing, Collage, Design, Photography*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 32; for Rodchenko's words to this effect, see Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 130.



Three images from Vertov's Kino-Eye *(1924): Moscow street; intertitle "The same street viewed from a different camera setup"; the same street turned sideways. Author's collection.*

One such case was cited by Viktor Shklovsky—as a proof of how little value to the artist is what art critics call the "content" of art. In one of his books Shklovsky quotes Anton Chekhov's letter to his cousin who, like himself, was a friend and admirer of that extraordinary Russian landscape painter Isaak Levitan. Written in a spell of depression, Chekhov's letter (dated 1887) complains:

> I am sick. Life is dull, and my writing gets worse, for I am too tired to act as Levitan does when he turns his paintings upside down to keep his critical eye from getting accustomed to them.[16]

I know too little about Levitan to be able to judge what picture-turning could have meant for this artist (known, by the way, for his well-nigh religious attachment to motif) and even less how Chekhov would have incorporated it into his practice (it is hard to imagine that, following Levitan's example, Chekhov literally turned his notebooks upside down or read his short stories backward), but it is quite clear what the twentieth-century theorist Shklovsky makes of it. Levitan turned his pictures, Shklovky says, to remove meaning from them and to be able to view the painting as a sheer correlation of color spots.[17]

It hardly needs observing that this conclusion was reached in the epoch that succeeded Levitan's, when Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky were advocating nonobjective painting. As it happened, it was exactly Chekhov and Levitan whom Kandinsky reproached in his 1911 manifesto "Whither the 'New' Art?" for having stopped short at the frontier of so-called reality—their attachment to objects, he said, put their art under lock and key:

> Ladies fainted and men felt sick in front of [Ilya] Repin's picture *Ivan the Terrible and his Son Ivan*—the blood flowing and clotting in lumps was so well done, so real. . . . More refined painting was merely "mood," the incantation of melancholy and inconsolable grief. It was precisely this kind of painting (like great Russian literature) that reflected the despair before the locked doors. Both in Chekhov's works and in Levitan's landscapes a perpetual atmosphere of terror existed and was conveyed by them as a cold, clammy, slippery, stifling fog. In works such as these art fulfills only half of its mission.[18]

In his 1912 book *Reminiscences* Kandinsky remembered exactly when and how he had discovered a key to the doors that led to object-free art. It was, once again, the familiar story about an upside-down picture, presented this time not as a

16. Viktor Shklovsky, *On the Theory of Prose* [late revision] (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1983), pp. 73–74.
17. Ibid., p. 74.
18. Wassily Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 99.

painter's trick of the trade, but as the moment of truth, or, as a cultural anthropologist would have it, a myth of origin:

> [A]fter my arrival in Munich, I was enchanted on one occasion by an unexpected spectacle that confronted me in my studio. It was the hour when dusk draws in. I returned home with my painting box having finished a study, still dreamy and absorbed in the work I had completed, and suddenly saw an indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow. At first, I stopped short and then quickly approached this mysterious picture, on which I could discern only forms and colors and whose content was incomprehensible. At once, I discovered the key to the puzzle: it was a picture I had painted, standing on its side against the wall. . . . Now I could see clearly that objects harmed my pictures.[19]

We now turn to Shklovsky again, and through Shklovsky to Chekhov. Literary theorists will recall another turning story from Chekhov that Shklovsky cites in the early edition of his *Theory of Prose* (1921)—though this time the thing turned on its side is not a visual image, but a written text.

The main tenet of Shklovsky's prose theory is the effect of defamiliarization [*ostrannenie*]—making familiar objects look strange and simple things difficult to understand—which is, according to Shklovsky, the master effect of all art. Unlike Kandinsky, who saw it as his mission to rid art of material objects, Shklovsky claimed that objects are always in art, though sometimes changed beyond recognition:

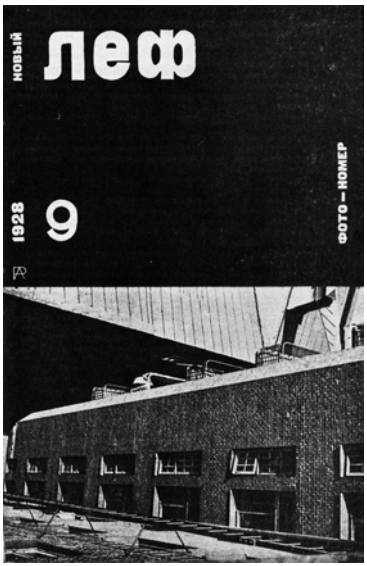
> In order to transform an object into a fact of art it is necessary to detach it from the domain of life, to wrest it out from the web of familiar associations, to turn over the object as one would turn a log in the fire.[20]

To illustrate how defamiliarization works, Shklovsky quotes a draft for a short story from one of Chekhov's sketchbooks:

> Someone walks along a certain street for fifteen years or maybe thirty years. Each day he reads the sign that hangs above a certain shop: "Nectars of varied colors" and each time he passes it he asks himself: "Who needs nectars of varied colors?" Well, one day the shop sign is taken down and put on its side against the wall. It is then that he reads for the first time: "Neckties of varied colors."[21]

Here, Shklovsky explains that this is exactly the way prose and poetry works:

19. Ibid., pp. 369–70.
20. Viktor Shklovsky, *O teorii prozy* [Theory of Prose] (Moscow: Krug, 1925), p. 61; in my quotations from this book I made use of Benjamin Sher's, Richard Sheldon's, and Robert Sherwood's competent translations, which I afforded to modify but slightly.
21. Ibid.



Rodchenko. Cover for Novyi lef, *no. 9. 1928. Courtesy Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive. Art © Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York.*

> The poet removes all signs from their habitual places, the artist always incites insurrections among things. With poets, objects are always in revolt, they cast off their old names and adopt new names and new faces.[22]

Such was the general intellectual climate in Russia around the time when *Kino-Eye* was made. I do not think more parallels are needed to show that the street Vertov felled on its side in this film was not without precedent in Russian art and art theory in general. We may now go on to look for such parallels in Constructivist photography—a field adjacent to the Kinoks' film practice.

Among advocates of defamiliarization in the art of photography, Rodchenko was by far the loudest. He learned to use the camera rather late, in 1924, and having done so never used it the way most people did. He photographed views, things, and people from above and from below, shunning what he called with a touch of slight "the belly-button level" (the default point of view of amateur photographers at the time), so much so that one of his *Lef* comrades, poet Boris Kushnir, felt obliged to enquire if indeed Rodchenko thought there existed no objects in this world that deserved to be represented frontally—as we see them every day.

It is exactly because we see them thus every day that we cannot say we really see them, Rodchenko answered in his open letter to Kushnir, and explained, much in the spirit of the defamiliarization theory,

22. Ibid.

Rodchenko. Pedestrians (Street). *1928. Courtesy Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive. Art © Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York.*

> [I]n order to teach man to see from all viewpoints, it is necessary to photograph ordinary, well-known objects from completely unexpected viewpoints and in unexpected positions, and photograph new objects from various viewpoints, thereby giving a full impression of the object. . . .
>
> We don't see what we are looking at. We don't see marvelous perspectives—foreshortening and the positioning of objects.
>
> We who have been taught to see the inculcated, must discover the world of the visible. . . . We must revolutionize our visual thinking.[23]

Written in August 1928, Rodchenko's letter was published that year in *Novyi lef,* some of whose Rodchenko-designed covers included his own photographs as an element. His cover for *Novyi lef,* no. 9—the issue in which the above open letter was published—is of special interest: under its vertically oriented title and issue number the subscriber recognized, not without some cognitive strain, a multistoried building photographed at a top-down angle and turned on its side—turn this illustration counterclockwise to see it for yourself. A tension is thus created between the vertical and horizontal elements of the cover—of the kind that Sergei Eisenstein, speaking of film montage, might have categorized as the "conflict of directions."

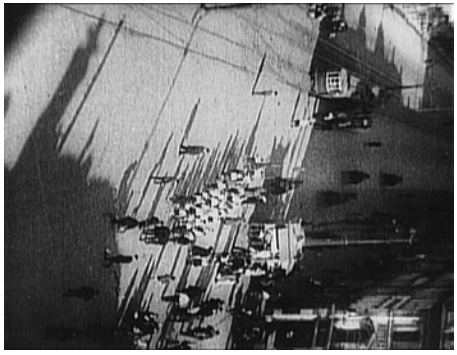
Occasionally, a "Rodchenko angle" (a common term used by people involved in film and photography) came capped with a visual pun. Such is the case with his 1928 photograph *Pedestrians (Street)* taken at an angle that turns shadows into

23. Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future,* pp. 211–12.

pedestrians and reduces pedestrians to tiny pedestals at the shadows' feet. As high-rise dwellers could observe such scenes every sunny afternoon, it was only to be expected that the idea might occur to more photographers than one—and indeed, it so happened that in the same year, a former Bauhaus student, Umbo (Otto Umbehr), made two pictures using this techinique. Apparently the sight of shadows that appeared to be walking all by themselves reminded the German photographer of the fantastic worlds imagined by Freud or Adelbert von Chamisso, for he named one "Uncanny [*Unheimliche*] Street" and the other "Mystery of the Street."

Umbo (Otto Umbehr). Mystery of the Street. *1928. Courtesy Phyllis Umbehr/Gallery Kicken, Berlin.*

Yet if there was a photographer who could have claimed to be the first to discover this visual trick (or sight gag, as such tricks are sometimes called in films), it was Mikhail Kaufman. Look again at the toppled street from Vertov's 1924 *Kino-Eye*—



here, too, shadows walk erect with pedestrians prostrate at their feet. There was nothing uncanny or unreal about Kaufman's or Rodchenko's walking shadows, however: for a true Kinok, as for a Constructivist, to see a street in a strange—defamiliarized—way was tantamount to making it more real.