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“The light from the East is not only the liberation of workers,” the Russian Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote in a letter home from Paris in 1925, “the light from the East is in the new relation to the person, to woman, to things. Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades, and not these black and mournful slaves, as they are here.”¹ Rodchenko was in Paris on his first and only trip abroad to arrange the Soviet section of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels, for which he built his most famous Constructivist “thing,” the Workers’ Club interior. His lucidly spare, geometric club embodies the rationalized utilitarian object of everyday life proposed at this time by Russian Constructivist artists and *Lef* theorists such as Boris Arvatov. And Rodchenko’s invocation of the socialist object from the East as a “comrade” corresponds to Arvatov’s theory of the new industrial object as an active “co-worker” in the construction of socialist life, in contrast to the passive capitalist commodity—Rodchenko’s “black and mournful slaves”—oriented toward display and exchange.² Yet there is something uncanny about the stark, constrained order of the Workers’ Club that exceeds Arvatov’s theory, a visual uncanny that corresponds to the curious intensity and pathos of Rodchenko’s verbal plea for “our things in our hands.”

In this essay I want to propose that the language of Rodchenko’s letters and the visual forms of his club elaborate, in a more subjective register, upon the Constructivist theory of the object—an elaboration that endows that object with a body and places it within the field of desire that is organized, under capitalism, by the commodity form. Rodchenko offers this elaboration, on the one hand, precisely as a response to the psychic and sensory overload of the Parisian commodity world;

1. Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Rodchenko v Parizhe. Iz pisem domoi,” *Novyi Lef* 2 (1927), p. 20 (letter of May 4, 1925). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text; the date of the letter and page number from this publication will be given. A substantially different version of the letters, containing less of his personal or subjective commentary, was published in *A. M. Rodchenko: Stat’i, vospominaniia, avtobiograficheskie zapiski, pis’ma*, ed. V. A. Rodchenko (Moscow: Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1982). This and other translations from the Russian are my own.

2. See Boris Arvatov, “Byt i kul’tura veshchi” (Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing), in *Al’manakh Proletkul’ta* (Moscow, 1925), p. 79.



*Aleksandr Rodchenko. Workers' Club
interior. 1925.*

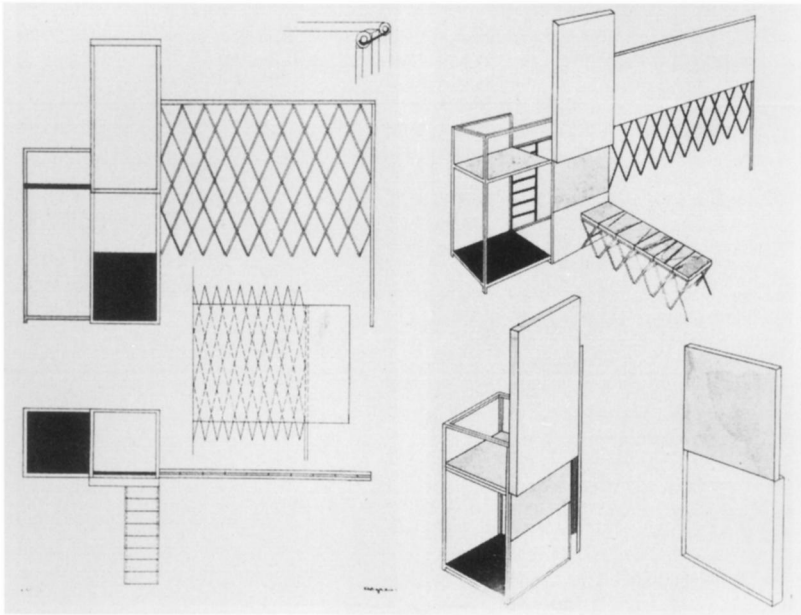
his idea of the object from the East must somehow cogently *respond* to his new, intimate knowledge of the Western commodity and its extraordinary power to organize desire and construct identities. On the other hand, despite the rhetoric of his letters, Rodchenko knew very well that “East” and “West” were not quite so cleanly opposed in 1925. The West had industrial technology, while Russia was only beginning to industrialize, but at the same time Moscow was no haven from the commodity: the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the Soviet Union had unleashed a vital if idiosyncratic commercial culture. The Constructivist theory of the object had been developed within the conflicted context of the mixed Soviet economy, and therefore already encompassed an acknowledgment of the phantasmatic component of consumption and the role of objects in negotiating it. The evidence we have from Rodchenko’s encounter with Parisian consumer culture in 1925 offers an especially vivid articulation of a texture of desire that I want to claim is integral to the conflicted, utopian Constructivist object. It attempts to encompass, rather than repress, the desires organized by the Western commodity fetish, even as its goal is to construct new, transparent relations between subject and object that will lead to the collective ideal of social utopia illuminated by “the light from the East.”

The Transparency of the Constructivist Object

Constructing the modular, movable furnishings of the club interior out of cheap, lightweight wood, and using open-frame construction, Rodchenko was intent on conserving materials and eliminating excess weight or bulk. While the objects in the club have the social function of materially organizing the leisure time in the everyday lives of workers, they are related formally to the nonutilitarian sculptural constructions of early Constructivism, such as Rodchenko’s *Spatial Construction No. 9 (Suspended)* of 1921.³ Made of minimal material elements—plywood painted the color of metal—the *Spatial Construction* begins its life as a flat, two-dimensional circular form with a series of concentric circles carved straight through its surface. Aleksandr Lavrent’ev’s reconstruction of the hexagonal *Spatial Construction No. 10* gives an idea of how the similar circular construction might have looked before it was opened up. When each concentric section is opened out to a different point in space and the structure is suspended from above, it is infinitely transformable within the logic of its own system. Precisely this formal, functional logic reappears in the dismountable orator stand for the Workers’ Club, where these expanding and collapsing elements reappear in the fold-out screen for projecting slides and the contractible bench and speaker’s platform. Other objects in the Workers’ Club also operate like the orator stand: the side flaps of the table can be raised or lowered, depending on the activity of the club member; the chess ensemble in the

3. The term “nonutilitarian” (vneutilitarnyi) is used by Boris Arvatov in *Iskusstvo i klassy* (Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo: Moscow–Petrograd, 1923), p. 40. While descriptively helpful, the term has promoted a certain teleology toward utilitarianism in early Constructivism. See, for example, Christina Lodder’s use of the term in *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

Rodchenko. *Drawings for Workers' Club orator stand*. 1925.



back of the room, under the poster of Lenin, consists of two chairs separated by a nifty revolving chessboard on hinges; above it, the case for the “wall newspaper” allows for daily changes.

Rodchenko’s club may resemble a standard piece of interior design in the utilitarian style of international modernism, but the extravagant premise of Constructivism is that it is not interior design at all, but rather an entirely new kind of *art* object.⁴ Generations of critics have doubted the theoretical feasibility, or even the political integrity, of this Constructivist attempt to take the self-referential, systemic structures that were so revelatory as modern art and harness them for utilitarian tasks in transforming everyday life. The contemporary Soviet version of this critique of Constructivism was made forcefully by the critic Iakov Tugendkhol’d in his review of the Paris Exposition, in which he lumped the “spiritless geometry” of the Russian Constructivist exhibits together with the rationalized geometry of those of the *Esprit Nouveau* group in France, exemplified by Le Corbusier’s exhibit of a starkly furnished house as a “machine for living,” complete with a maid’s room. Tugendkhol’d had little patience for utopian

4. Soviet scholars grouped around Selim O. Khan-Magomedov and the journal *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* have, since the 1960s, defended the significance of Constructivism by insisting precisely that it initiated the modern medium of design (*dizain*). The need to take this approach was partly conditioned by political circumstances in the USSR in the 1960s and '70s that discouraged the study of Russian Constructivism as a viable form of modern art, but the consequence has been an unfortunately narrow view of Constructivism’s ambitions in Soviet and now Russian scholarship.

technicism, whether from the left or the right: “The fetishism of the machine, the worship of industry—here is the pathos of this group of artists, serving in essence as ideologues of the large-scale capitalism flourishing in France.”⁵ He warned the Constructivists against their participation in this “new style,” because helping to align people with the products of modern industry most often simply facilitates their subjection to its (capitalist) logic. This critique reappears in Manfredo Tafuri’s dark vision of modernist utopianism, for example, as well as in Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern critique of modern design.⁶

Most recently, Hubertus Gassner has offered a provocative analysis of Rodchenko’s series of hanging constructions of 1921 as transparent systems that metaphorize and organize both the body and the unconscious—only to claim that the utilitarian turn in Constructivism destroyed the purity (and interest) of these systemic forms by harnessing them to the service of Soviet modernization and industrialization.⁷ According to Gassner, the hanging construction, in allowing for nothing that exceeds determination by the system, permits the Constructivist artist-engineer to achieve organized self-consciousness through the very process of making it. “If the structure is completely systematic in its inner logic and entirely transparent in its making or functional modes, i.e., if the object is ‘constructed throughout,’” Gassner writes, “it appears as a homologous model of the producer’s unconscious of which he has become fully aware. The artistic subject becomes as transparent as his creation. The previously impenetrable dark of his subconscious and body is illuminated and rendered transparent through the exposure of the logic of their functional modes.”⁸

Gassner’s confidence that the conscious subject can become “fully aware” of

5. Iakov Tugendkhol’d, “Stil’ 1925 Goda. (Mezhdunarodnaia Vystavka v Parizhe),” *Pechat’ i Revoliutsiia* 7 (1925), p. 42.

6. See Manfredo Tafuri, “USSR—Berlin, 1922: From Populism to ‘Constructivist International,’” in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985), pp. 121–81. Tafuri concludes that the utopian vision of Russian Constructivism led, in both the USSR and in Europe, to an apolitical ideology of technicism and total organization that was completely available to capitalism. For Baudrillard’s critique of the elitism and repressiveness of so-called utilitarian modern design, see *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), especially his critique of the Bauhaus in chapter 10, “Design and Environment.”

7. Hubertus Gassner, “The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization,” in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (New York: The Guggenheim Museum, 1992). Gassner’s reading of the hanging constructions forms part of a larger argument about the change in Rodchenko’s work from an emphasis on *faktura* (in his painting up until around 1920), which Gassner associates with intuition and feeling, to an interest in nonmaterial line and system, associated with logical planning and anti-individualist making. Gassner sees the uniformly smooth, shiny silver paint surface of the hanging constructions as a negation of the materiality of paint and canvas in favor of pure, systemic construction. While this transition does exist in Rodchenko’s work, he also went on to make all kinds of other objects after 1921 that contradict the declared preeminence of line over *faktura*. Gassner’s definition of *faktura* as tied to intuition and feeling is also idiosyncratic; other definitions stress the *antisubjective* nature of an interest in material surface, tying *faktura* to a materialist, workmanlike relation to art making. See, for example, Benjamin Buhloh, “From *Faktura* to Factography,” *October* 30 (Fall 1984).

8. Gassner, “Constructivists,” p. 317.

her unconscious desires in this way may fly in the face of a more sober, psychoanalytically described reality, but precisely this *fantasy* of a transparent relay between the consciousness of the maker and the consciousness of the object fuels the most utopian ideal of the Constructivist object, such as Arvatov's notion of the object as a conscious "co-worker" formed within the active, dynamic, and conscious processes of industrial production. Gassner further identifies a compelling homology between the Constructivist object (the co-worker) and the human *body*:

In the constructivist universe, objects exist solely as organs of human activity. They adjust to people's actions, expand and die with them, while constantly renewing their own shape and function. The constructivist objects are congruent counterparts of the subject. Therein lies their utopian potential. Ideally, they would have transformed material reality into an unrestricted space in which free people could act.⁹

The Constructivist object as a "congruent counterpart" of the human subject, an object that "expands and dies" with the human body, brings us close to what Rodchenko might mean when he calls the object a "comrade." Yet Gassner claims that the displacement of this homology between the body and the object onto utilitarian tasks—the transition, that is, from the *Hanging Construction* to the Workers' Club interior—would lead only to the subjection of human bodies to the forces of industrialism. Gassner thus brings us back to the dystopian conclusions of Tugendkhol'd and Tafuri. The Constructivists failed to transform reality into a space of freedom, he concludes, because the moment of perfect transparency, which is also a fleeting moment of pure autonomy for the art object (it is responsible only to itself, to its own coherent system), is destroyed once it is brought into contact with history—when the self-referential and "non-utilitarian" structures have utilitarian imperatives imposed on them from outside the system.¹⁰

I want to suggest, however, that Gassner's insights into the bodily and unconscious functioning of the nonutilitarian Constructivist object can actually be used, instead, to support a claim for its utopian potential precisely in its utilitarian form. For Gassner offers the first useful analysis we have seen of the uncanny *content* of the Constructivist object: its doubling of the human body. In Marx's definition of commodity fetishism, the system of exchange inverts social relations, resulting in "material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things."¹¹ Hal Foster has recently suggested that in this trading of sem-

9. Ibid., p. 318.

10. Ibid., p. 314. Gassner claims that the Constructivists' decision to throw in their lot with the Soviet campaign for industrialization stemmed not from a genuine commitment to socialism, but from their self-interested struggle to maintain a power base within the Soviet system after their initial success at taking over organizational posts in museums and art education was curtailed around 1920. However, he offers no concrete evidence to support this depoliticized reading. See pp. 315–16.

11. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 166.

blances between producers and products, “the commodity becomes our uncanny double, evermore vital as we are evermore inert.”¹² In contrast to Marx, whose entire critique of political economy is aimed at restoring that lost set of social relations between producers, Arvatov’s theory of the Constructivist object attempts to recuperate for proletarian culture this notion of thing-like relations between producers, and of social relations between newly active and materially appropriate things.¹³ Constructivism aims, in effect, to remake or harness the uncanny of the commodity—its ability to act as the *Doppelgänger* for the human producer—for socialist ends. The uncanny effect of an object stems from its evocation of a repressed desire; the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), Freud says, “can be shown to come from something repressed which *recurs*.”¹⁴ In the uncanny this recurrence provokes anxiety, but the socialist object would make a space within the uncanny (a home within the *Unheimliche*) that could also be the site of release from or acknowledgment of the repressed desire. For the “secret nature” of the uncanny is that this recurrence is “in reality nothing new or foreign” (nothing *unheimlich*), “but something familiar and old-established in the mind” (something *heimlich*), which is why Freud insists that *das Heimliche* cannot be differentiated from *das Unheimliche*.¹⁵ In its uncanny animation, the Constructivist object will be the figure of the automaton, working to align human subjects with the modernizing “light from the East,” but in its very embodiedness it will also mark out a homely space for the potential humanizing of the un-homely products of industrial culture, bringing those products into the human field of desire.

For Gassner, the meeting of the perfect, transparent, systemic Constructivist structure with the material history of the industrial commodity *compromises* the object and obviates its interest, whereas my argument is that precisely this compromise *defines* the Constructivist object. For the material circumstances of Russia in 1925 were not Gassner’s univalent “drive toward industrialization and modernization,” but rather the hybrid situation of NEP, instituted by the Soviet government in 1921 to encourage peasant agricultural production and small-scale capitalist manufacture and trade as a way to revive the devastated economy that resulted from the Civil War. It was in active response to this economy that Constructivism

12. See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 129. My thinking about the Constructivist theory of the object in relation to the commodity is indebted to Foster’s insightful suggestion that the uncanny as a concept may be historically dependent on the rise of the mass-produced “mechanical-commodified” object.

13. Arvatov’s attempted recuperation of the agency of things assumes as a necessary prerequisite the elimination of capitalist exploitation of labor and commodity exchange. I discuss Arvatov’s theory of the object in “Constructivism and Bolshevik Business: Theory and Practice of the Socialist Commodity,” chapter 2 in “The Russian Constructivist ‘Object’ and the Revolutionizing of Everyday Life, 1921–1929” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1995).

14. Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), in *Studies in Parapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 47. While Foster emphasizes the ways that the uncanny recalls infantile anxieties of blindness, castration, and death, for my purposes here I want to underscore that Freud specifies that any kind of emotional affect, once repressed, can be the source of the “uncanny.”

15. Ibid.

developed its theory of the socialist object. According to this theory, the object attempts to negotiate between the present demands of a technologically underdeveloped commodity exchange system and the future goal of efficient industrial production organized according to socialist patterns of distribution—a negotiation carried out in the realm of everyday life, and thus in relation to the human body as a collective and shareable entity. My reading of Rodchenko's letters and objects will suggest that the Constructivist object also necessarily encompasses another set of terms, namely the bodily eruptions and desires that Constructivism—and all the international, rationalizing modernist movements—are usually assumed simply to repress. As an autonomous art object, the transparent Constructivist structure functions as a metaphor of perfection, not as an actor in history; conversely, as an actor in the actual material, historical, and bodily circumstances of NEP Russia, the Constructivist object loses its perfection, and thus a good bit of its transparency, but it gains in its potential ability to organize the object-desires of modernity as an alternative to the commodity form.

Letters from Paris

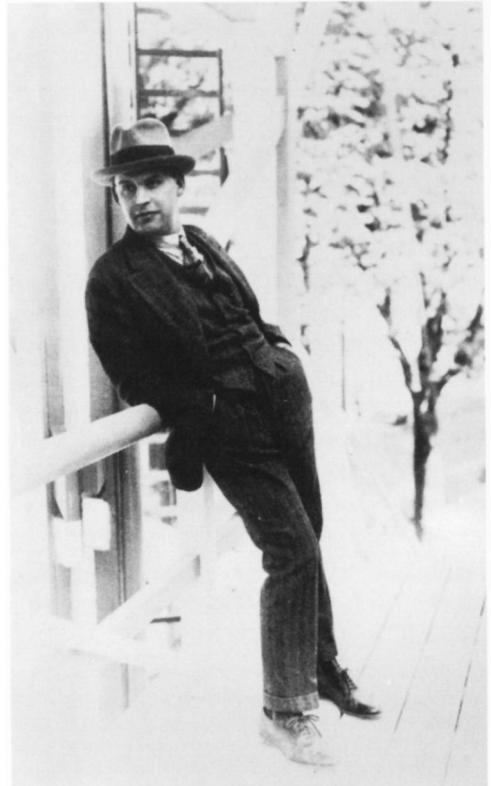
Rodchenko's letters home to his wife, the Constructivist Varvara Stepanova, document the profound shock of the self-proclaimed modernist artist and engineering enthusiast upon encountering the sheer technological and material magnitude of fully developed modernity. (He notes with surprise that there are no horses on the streets at all.) The letters express his experience of Western modernity entirely through his relation to the objects of the Parisian commodity world; for, being in Paris without any knowledge of the French language, its objects spoke to him with that much more resonance. "The first thing that met my eyes in Paris—we arrived at night—was the bidet in the hotel room and in the morning today, a man selling indecent postcards" (Letters, March 23, p. 10). These first objects that he describes are specifically bodily and sexual, and in the letters that follow, he will return repeatedly to the pernicious power of Western commodities to structure bodies and identities. He quickly finds himself transformed by this commodity world.

Immediately upon arrival he took advantage of the highly favorable ruble exchange rate and bought himself a new suit, shoes, suspenders, collars, socks, and more. Later he notes: "I have to buy myself a damned hat, I can't walk around in my cap because not a single Frenchman wears one, and everyone looks at me disapprovingly, thinking that I'm a German" (Letters, April 1, p. 13). He confides his every purchase to Stepanova, such as the pair of night slippers he had to buy to keep his feet warm at night, having forgotten his *valenki*, the traditional Russian felt boots. He shares his culinary experiences, describing with care what he eats for each meal and how much it costs; he likes the coffee and the Chablis, but dislikes Brie and Roquefort, and oysters make him want to throw up. The very rhythms and bodily sensations of his everyday life are transformed: he now goes to



Above: Rodchenko in Moscow. 1922.

Right: Rodchenko at Soviet Pavilion in Paris. 1925.





Rodchenko. *Self-caricature*. 1925.

bed early and gets up early, like the French and unlike Russian bohemians. He repeatedly mentions the hot running water in the hotel room: “I’ve become a complete Westerner. I walk around clean, shave every day, wash myself all the time” (Letters, April 1, p. 14). He tells Stepanova that “unfortunately, the former ‘I’ has outwardly disappeared” (Letters, March 24, p. 10), and later chides her for expressing curiosity about his new appearance, assuring her that there is nothing interesting about his idiotic new outfits—he feels repulsive in them (Letters, April 5, p. 15). His debonair demeanor in a photograph in which he slouches elegantly against the railing of the outside landing of the Soviet Pavilion suggests, however, that this bodily transformation was not entirely without its pleasures. With his relaxed pose and half smile into the distance, he looks just as at ease lounging here in his buttoned vest and natty little shoes as he does standing purposefully with hand on hip in his heavy work boots and awkwardly homespun *prozodezhda* (production clothing) in the famous 1922 photograph that shows him in his Moscow studio.

A watercolor self-caricature captures his dilemma of identity in Paris, where he is by turns an ascetic Bolshevik, a technology-oriented Constructivist, a provincial, Slavophilic Russian, and a desiring subject of everyday life, subject to having his desire organized by the commodity.¹⁶ Dressed in new clothes, taking

16. Rodchenko’s letters fit the cultural trope of the Russian intellectual’s epistle from Paris. As Svetlana Boym has noted, such travelers’ accounts “combine personal and national self-fashioning”;

pictures with his brand-new Paris-purchased camera, he is interpellated by the Parisian object world; yet his new hat is perched precariously on his trademark shaved head, and he pictures himself observing the city through the distancing eye of the camera, as the critical Constructivist from the USSR. Rodchenko's upright posture, purposeful stride, strong jawline, and mechanically amplified eye wage a winning battle against the trouser cuffs and hat brims and pointy shoes for visual dominance; the overall effect is of the straight-backed Constructivist transcending both costume and surroundings. Rodchenko holds the modern camera firmly before his eyes, his visual acuity amplified and his memory expanded and clarified through the technology of the photograph.¹⁷ In the caricature, Rodchenko playfully acknowledges his vulnerability to the pleasures of Western commodities but also maintains the need for a Constructivist remaking of the commodity into a thing that can be an active, useful comrade to the human subject.

But by responding to and working with the human body, the object as comrade affects not only the physical qualities of that body, but psychic ones as well—extending into the nontransparent reaches of the commodity. When he buys his new ICA brand camera, for example, he transmits its exact measurements, lens size, and speed to Stepanova and calls it “splendid.” His purchase of a Sept brand movie camera merits an even lengthier, technically detailed description, concluding with the phrase “I am terribly happy”; as he describes its technical features, he inserts the phrase “I am sitting and turning it around in my hands,” revealing that of course his delight in the camera exceeds its technological appropriateness and becomes tied up with the sheer sensual pleasure of possession and the fantasies triggered by that possession.¹⁸ Rodchenko interweaves conscious, functional, Constructivist object pleasure with the phantasmatic pleasures of commodity possession, showing the chinks in his consciously expressed confidence in the object “from our point of view.” For as his text reveals, the orchestration of his body by bourgeois clothing and modern hygiene is only the outwardly visible sign of the inevitable orchestration of his desire by the

since Peter the Great “every journey of a Russian nobleman to Europe provokes a reflection on the fate of Russia.” Her paradigmatic example is Dostoyevsky’s “Winter Notes on Summer Impressions,” in which France epitomizes self-interested individualism while Russia represents a higher level of community and spirituality. Rodchenko takes up the Dostoyevskian metaphors, but transfers them from problems of human personality, freedom, and liberty to the liberation of *things*—and the source of object liberty in the East is not Russian spirituality, but the Bolshevik Revolution. See Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 74–75.

17. The camera offers a paradigmatic example of what Elaine Scarry has called the “reciprocation” of objects: human effort is projected into the making of an object, but the object reciprocates that effort thousandfold, by amplifying the qualities of the human body—in this case, sight and memory. See Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

18. The details of his camera purchases were not included in the *Novyi Lef* version of the letters—perhaps because they were deemed too banal in their technicism—but did appear in the version published in A. M. Rodchenko, *Stat'i, vospominaniia, autobiograficheskie zapiski, Pis'ma*, letters of May 2 on the Sept camera (p. 95), and of May 23 on the ICA (p. 97).

commodities around him. The letters are filled with references to things in the abstract, to the ways these things incite his own desire behind the back of his proclaimed disgust for them. "I see masses of things and don't have the possibility of buying them" (Letters, March 27, p. 13). Or again: "I want to buy everything by the wagonload and bring it home" (Letters, May 4, p. 20).

There is a progressing metaphoric collapse between material objects and the unsettling sexuality they organize. He repeatedly mentions not only the bidets, but also the perverse insinuation of the ubiquitous double beds. Moving into a new hotel room, he reports "again a bidet, and a 3- or 8-person bed" (Letters, April 8, p. 16).¹⁹ Noting that all the women wear short, tight skirts, they later become in shorthand "tight women" and finally simply "tight buttocks," linked in metonymic chains of bad objects: "these tight women and hats and endless bidets" (Letters, April 2, p. 14), and again, "all these hats and tight buttocks" (Letters, April 9, p. 16). Further, these bad objects cannot be pried apart from the good ones: "[Westerners] create industry of high quality, and again it is offensive, that on the best ocean liners, airplanes, and so on, there are and will always be again these fox-trots, and powders, and endless bidets" (Letters, March 25, p. 12). The word "endless," the phrase "there are and will always be," the repetition of the word "again"—the language of this verbal image signals Rodchenko's emerging understanding of the inescapable locking together of the desires lodged in commodity fetishes—the fox-trots, powders, and bidets—with the technological promise of industrial production—the ocean liners and airplanes. For Rodchenko, the desires orchestrated by the powders and bidets should have no place in the Constructivist universe of transparent relations between people and new, industrial things.

Rodchenko's despair at the destructive power of the "endless bidets" leads him into a diatribe against the most destructive incarnation of the commodified relation between subject and object that he sees in Paris: the cult of woman as thing. Woman becomes objectified because of her subjection to the whims of fashion, he tells Stepanova, to the point that ugly women are now in fashion, women "with thin and long hips, without chests and without teeth and with disgracefully long hands topped with red stains, women in the style of Picasso, women in the style of 'negroes,' women in the style of 'hospital inmates,' women in the style of 'the dregs of the city'" (Letters, March 25, p. 12).²⁰ In this

19. Double beds were often negatively deployed in early Soviet literature as symbols of bourgeois sexuality. See Olga Matich, "Sueta vokrug krovati: utopicheskaia organizatsiia byta i Russkii avangard," *Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 11 (1991), pp. 80–84 and Birgitta Ingemanson, "The Political Function of Domestic Objects in the Fiction of Aleksandra Kollontai," *Slavic Review*, vol. 48, no. 1 (1989), pp. 71–82.

20. Women "in the style of negroes" may refer to the popularity (and commodification) of black entertainers such as Josephine Baker, but it is probably also a jab at the elongated and angular bodies of primitivism, particularly Picasso's. His criticism of "women in the style of Picasso" seems quite clearly not to refer to Picasso's solid, bucolic, and maternal *rappel à l'ordre* women of the early 1920s but rather to the famous pre-Cubist canvases that had been widely studied in Moscow avant-garde circles

metaphoric orgy, Rodchenko's fears about the commodity's assault on the productive, making subject become linked with worries about its effect on *reproduction*; the Paris women are distinctly nonmaternal—sickly and lanky, without womanly chests or hips. Women are not (re)productive subjects who contribute to the organization of modernity, but are instead allied with the system of objects that muddles the conscious relations between men, and between men and objects. In Paris, he writes, "it seems that only a man is a person, and women are not people, and you can do anything with them—that is a thing" (Letters, May 2, p. 19). In response to the objectified women-as-hospital-inmates, Rodchenko writes, "Man, creating and building, is all in a flutter with this '*great fever*,' this *world-wide syphilis of art*" (Letters, March 25, p. 12). That is to say, man should be productive, but the fever of consumption, metaphorized as deviant, nonreproductive sexuality, has ruined him as well. Women, like and as commodities, hinder the conscious process of construction through their fever and syphilis.²¹ Constructivism, as both an art movement and a new philosophy of the relation of people to things, will be the force to liberate both objects and women from their enslaved status under capitalism—both objects and women must become comrades and co-workers in "the new relation to the person, to woman, to things."

His observations of the fox-trotting public make him long for the East: "How simple, how healthy is this East, this you can see clearly only from here" (Letters, March 25, p. 12). He specifies at least one version of the transparent "new relation to woman" that he associates with the nonthreatening, noneroticized East: describing the anti-Bolshevik Russian émigrés who sit in cafés and literally cry when they hear Russian songs, he reflects: "I am sure that if I was told today that I would never return to the USSR, I too would sit in the middle of the road and cry—'I want my mommy.' Of course, these are two different mommies: their mommy is Russia, mine is the USSR" (Letters, March 27, p. 12). The Soviet Union becomes equated with maternal safety and authority, suggesting that the relation of stern mother to good son is a model for the other transparent relations that Rodchenko dreams of (and not so new a relation to woman, after all). Rodchenko addressed his letters to Stepanova, who lived in their Moscow apartment with their newborn baby daughter, Varvara, and his mother, Ol'ga Evdokimovna. The exclusively female and familial nature of his audience made it all the more natural for Rodchenko to act the part of the good Communist son in Paris, dismissive of

during the 1910s. In a letter of April 19, Rodchenko declares that he has discovered that the most beautiful women in Paris are the "negresses" who work as domestic help; he sees them in the cinema, where he likes the way they laugh infectiously at Chaplin films (p. 18). This comment carries its own racist baggage in the form of stereotyping, but it does show that he equates ugliness not with the actual black women he encounters, but with the popular and artistic representational "style of 'negroes.'"

21. He ties this foul feminine fever to "art" (the "world-wide syphilis of art"), indicting French commodity culture and French art in one blow. His letters make several derogatory references to the weakness of French modern art, and by his own account he refused several invitations to meet with Picasso and other avant-garde artists.

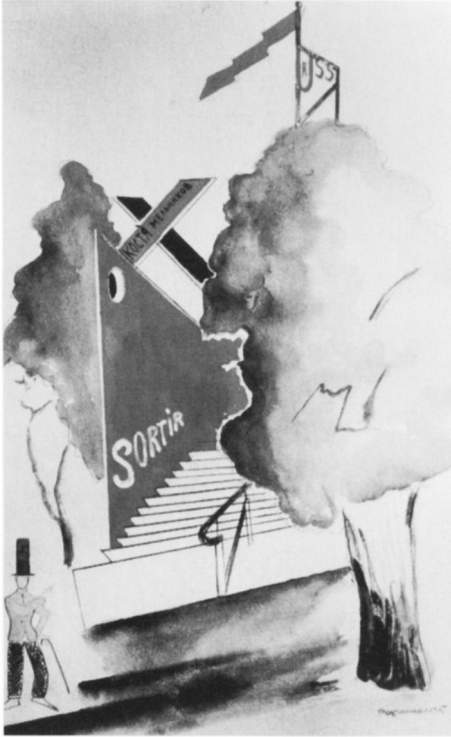
his newfound elegance in bourgeois clothing, horrified by his forays to dance halls and cabarets, seized by a desire to tidy things up: "It is simply necessary to wash everything, clean it all up, and set a goal for it" (Letters, April 2, p. 15). On a visit to the Olympia dance hall, he sees heavily made-up women in skimpy dresses dancing the fox-trot, and calls them "ugly and endlessly terrifying" (Letters, March 25, p. 11). Two sentences later he notes again that "I wash myself endlessly with hot water," suggesting that his new pastime of bathing is a response not only to the availability of modern plumbing, but also an obsessive reaction to the muck of the commodity that surrounds him.

A particularly lurid outburst rails against the "syphilitic fever" of the cult of woman as thing: "We will eat feces in a silver wrapper, hang dirty panties in a golden frame, and copulate with a dead bitch" (Letters, March 25, p. 12). We can turn to Freud here for the most precise interpretation of this outburst: both Rodchenko's fears of Parisian women and objects and his corresponding desire for authoritarian control and rationalization, not to mention his obsession with washing and cleaning, stem, it would seem, from the sublimation of his anal-erotic configuration of fantasy.²² The short skirts on the "tight buttocks," it turns out, conceal soiled underwear, and the bidets are meant for washing bottoms as well as genitals. But to push this analysis further, Rodchenko's sadistic and anal-erotic impulses have not, of course, been fully sublimated into character traits, but are also preserved in their original nature in a state of partial repression; witness his description of the Paris commodities that are "decorated on the outside and coldly decorate Paris, but on the inside, like black slaves, concealing catastrophe, they carry their black labor" (Letters, May 4, p. 20).²³ His desire to pry apart the tightly shut buttocks, to open up the cold Paris objects and shed the light from the East onto the black catastrophe concealed in their interior, is at once a sexual fantasy of nonreproductive anal penetration and a Constructivist fantasy of freeing the "black and mournful slaves" from their commodity labor, in order to transform it into the productive labor of the comrade.

Rodchenko's association of women-as-commodities with disease, putrescence, and the hospital line up on the same metaphoric axis that links bodily wastes with commodities. Ideally, the system of modern production and consumption in the West should function as transparently and effectively as its vast systemic technology of sewage and plumbing (the bidets and hot water), resulting in regulated consumption and clean bodies and streets. But Rodchenko phantasmatically

22. The pertinent Freud texts here are "Character and Anal Erotism" (1908) and "On the Transformation of Instincts with Special Reference to Anal Erotism" (1917), both in *Character and Culture*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963).

23. In a rhetorical move of displacement, Rodchenko makes the slave—whom he, as a Marxist, knows to be a blameless victim of imperialism—into the active agent of catastrophe. The black body of the slave is here a metaphor for the bodily density of the commodity, but for Rodchenko, I believe, the metaphor of the slave's "black labor" is more related to dirt and excrement than to the actual labor of human slaves of African descent.



Rodchenko. Caricature. 1925.

identifies the excessive, irrational desire for the commodity that he witnesses in Paris with excess shit that cannot be contained by the best plumbing in the world. In another caricature from Paris, Rodchenko sketches the entrance to the Soviet pavilion with a small figure of a bourgeois gentleman wearing a top hat that may be a spoof on the pavilion's designer, the architect Konstantin Mel'nikov. Rodchenko has greatly enlarged the exit sign in the stairwell, but the pointing hand of the gentleman and the receding letters of the word seem to indicate that the sign points into the building rather than out of it. He has changed one letter in the French word "exit," so that the sign reads "*sortir*" instead of "*sortie*." In Russian, "*sortir*" means lavatory.

We find ourselves back in the bathroom with Rodchenko, this time inside the light and transparent Soviet pavilion. The joke lies in evoking the opposite of what is true: the pavilion as socialist object conceals no black catastrophe of excess commodity desire within it. Or perhaps the caricature refers to the fantasy of the bodily processes as a regulated system in the East; perhaps the flushing public toilet is an apt metaphor for the logical architectural system of Mel'nikov's pavilion. (A wishful metaphor, because the Russian East was notorious for its primitive plumbing.)

Constructivism imagined a form of modernity that embraced the technology and efficiency of the regulated systems of urban modernity—mass production, motorized transport, plumbing, sewage—but without the commodity form that sullied its transparency with erotic associations and endless fantasies of self-

fashioning. The plumbing without the bidets. “Why did I have to see it, this West,” laments Rodchenko, “I loved it better without having seen it. Take its technology from it, and it remains a rotten pile of manure, helpless and decrepit” (Letters, April 2, pp. 14–15). The pile of stinking manure represents not shit as the regulated product of the body’s system, but as the eroticized excess of the capitalist (economic) system, cropping up in soiled panties and silver bonbon wrappers. While the letters produce a fantasy of the East as the site of regulated systems and transparent desires for both bodies and objects, the unconscious investments revealed in the letters’ textual repetitions and emphases also affect the form of Constructivist objects, texturing their regulation and transparency with desire.

Walter Benjamin in Moscow

Walter Benjamin’s essay “Moscow,” based on his brief stay there in the winter of 1926–27, offers a vivid description of the space of the Moscow street with its overflow of goods:

In Moscow goods burst everywhere from the houses, they hang on fences, lean against railings, lie on pavements. Every fifty steps stand women with cigarettes, women with fruit, women with sweets. They have their wares in a laundry basket next to them, sometimes a little sleigh as well. A brightly colored woolen cloth protects apples or oranges from the cold, with two prize examples lying on top. Next to them are sugar figures, nuts, candy. One thinks: before leaving her house a grandmother must have looked around to see what she could take to surprise her grandchildren.²⁴

This passage appears already on the second page of his essay, signaling Benjamin’s conviction that the petty consumer-object-world of Moscow would have as much to tell about revolutionary life as literary debates or organized political meetings held in workers’ clubs. The exquisite, unruly dream-objects of individual encounters with the object-world—shiny apples and spun-sugar figures—must *add up to* the collective utopia adumbrated by more public monuments such as the workers’ clubs. Benjamin juxtaposes lyrical depictions of Moscow’s primitive street trade of petty commodities and preindustrial objects with his descriptions of the radically changed lives of the members of the intelligentsia, which are ascetic and politicized to a degree unknown in Berlin or Paris. “[W]hat distinguishes the Bolshevik, the Russian Communist, from his Western comrade,” Benjamin writes, “is [h]is unconditional readiness for mobilization. The material basis of his existence is so slender that he is prepared, year in, year out, to decamp” (107).

24. Walter Benjamin, “Moscow,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 98. Future references will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text.

In his analysis of industrial modernity, Benjamin discovers a potential political force in the way that the fragile and fleeting formations of individual fantasy congeal into, or are centered upon, objects that individuals share—objects that are all alike, and whose very sameness and reproducibility inspire the dream of a collective wish-image. But Benjamin compares the “wild variety” of the Moscow street trade to “the South,” referring to Capri and Naples—the sites, in his personal spatial history, of the “mythological,” premodern childhood of industrial culture.²⁵ Benjamin in this way recognizes the political implications of the hybrid object world of NEP Moscow, which can be described as a confrontation between three cultures: feudal agrarian culture, industrial capitalism (however small-scale and underdeveloped), and monumental industrial socialism (however tentative and incomplete its forms in the USSR in 1926). “Shoe polish and writing materials, handkerchiefs, dolls’ sleighs, swings for children, ladies’ underwear, stuffed birds, clothes hangers,” he enumerates “—all this sprawls on the open street, as if it were not twenty-five degrees below zero but high Neapolitan summer” (101). In this list, most of the objects are probably handmade, though it is entirely likely that some of them—perhaps the clothes hangers, the shoe polish, the ladies’ underwear—have bolted from factory assembly lines directly into the snow, bypassing the store windows and fixed price labels that constitute such a crucial site in modern consumption, and thus signaling the disorganization and incompleteness of the Soviet system of production and distribution. The primitive and temporary structure of exchange in Moscow is figured by the rickety kiosks of the Sukharevskii market, in which “cloth and fabric form buttresses and columns; shoes, *valenki*, hanging threaded on strings across the counters, become the roof of the booth” (102). The “Moscow” essay goes far beyond the conventional wisdom of historians that the Russian Revolution was doomed because it took place in an underindustrialized nation. Benjamin identifies the problem in the disjunction between the utopian potential of the collective fantasies located in the profusion of objects and the different utopia enacted in the asceticism and monumental aspirations of the official forms of Bolshevik collectivity. These two utopias must be brought into congruence. The second utopia can only succeed if it is made to confront and harness the first.

Rodchenko, the Constructivist, might seem to be allied exclusively with Benjamin’s ascetic Communist, insisting on camping within a “slender” material existence (we think of the spare, modular, movable furniture of his Workers’ Club). But I want to propose that Rodchenko’s intense reaction to the object-world of the West, which caused him to refer repeatedly, in his letters, to his fantasy of objects in the East, participates in Benjamin’s certainty about the utopian political promise of the mass commodity. The comparison with Benjamin’s essay forces the question of the status of Rodchenko’s letters as a contribution to the *theory* of the Constructivist

25. See Susan Buck-Morss, “Spatial Origins,” chapter 2 in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 25–43.

object. Benjamin had written to Martin Buber, the publisher who commissioned the Moscow essay: “my presentation will be devoid of all theory. . . . I want to write a description of Moscow at the present moment in which ‘all factuality is already theory.’”²⁶ What if we were to agree, like Buber, to read Rodchenko’s anecdotal and everyday description of the Paris object-world as struggling to express the profound structural differences between capitalism and socialism, at the level of the commodity and bodily experience? Rodchenko’s less consciously articulated insights into the workings of desire in the Western system of consumption, and his use of these insights to fuel his fantasy construction of a model of socialist consumption (the light from the East), can then provide, as I suggested above, a texture of desire that elaborates upon the theory of the Constructivist object.

Most historians have assumed that Constructivism celebrated technology and organization as somehow necessarily communist (an assumption based quite fairly on many Constructivist statements), but the Constructivist theory of the object actually shares Benjamin’s doubt in the implicit Marxist faith that once socialist relations of production have been achieved, industry and technology will automatically generate a socialist imagination capable of producing a new culture. Rather, as Susan Buck-Morss writes in her study of Benjamin’s Arcades project, “Progressive cultural practice [for Benjamin] entails bringing both technology and imagination out of their mythic dream states, through making conscious the collective’s desire for social utopia, and the potential of the new nature to achieve it by translating that desire into the ‘new language’ of its material forms.”²⁷

The “new nature”—that is, the man-made object world of modernity—has the potential to foster the flowering of collective desire through a “new language” of objects. Benjamin focuses his text on the object-world of Moscow because the past and present desires lodged in the chaotic realm of objects in the mixed NEP economy will have to become the source of the collective fantasy that will sustain the *future* of the Soviet experiment. Benjamin’s conception of the commodity’s dream-power—of the individual consumer’s shifting, mobile, unruly fantasy relations to modern commodities—departs from the model of the commodity fetish, both in Marx’s sense (because for Benjamin the relations *between* commodities are always infected with individual desires) and in the popular-Freudian sense (because the Benjaminian consumer doesn’t *fixate* on the object). Constructivist theory, on the other hand, is deeply immersed in a fetishistic conception of the object, although its goal is to harness the fetish relation and return to it a kind of

26. The letter, dated February 23, 1927, is published in *Walter Benjamin: Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 132. The phrase “everything factual is already theory” was taken from Goethe’s writing on the “ur-phenomenon.” See Susan Buck-Morss’s discussion of Georg Simmel’s study of Goethe and its influence on Benjamin in *Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 71–77. I do not mean to suggest a literal equivalence between the philosophical sophistication of Benjamin’s writerly experiment in the Moscow essay and Rodchenko’s far more informal texts.

27. Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 125.

social agency.²⁸ The “new language” of the forms of the “new nature” will organize and fix the individual desires of the new Soviet consumer in a particular collective direction. For Benjamin, this fixation of the object’s dream-power compromises its utopian potential, even though, in the Soviet case, he is in conflicted agreement with the political goals of such a fixation. By suggesting that the Constructivist object also makes a place for the less fixed workings of desire, I am claiming that Constructivism included aspects of Benjamin’s hope that a progressive political relation between private fantasies and collective goals could be articulated through the object.²⁹

Benjamin strikes a note of optimism in his assessment of Bolshevik commodity politics. Noting that “people here have not yet developed European consumer concepts and consumer needs” (117), he suggests that there may be a strategic reason for this lack: “It is possible that . . . an astute Party stratagem is involved: to equal the level of consumption in Western Europe, the trial by fire of the Bolshevik democracy, at a freely chosen moment, steeled and with the absolute certainty of victory” (117). The promise of modernity, of the industrial revolution, is “a humane society of material abundance,” undistorted by the myths of capitalism.³⁰ This is, then, the ultimate test of Bolshevism: to provide the level of consumer abundance known in the West, but democratically (humanely), in a way that will foster the individual desires lodged in material objects for the benefit of the collective. The moment can be freely chosen, but victory must be certain, because its failure will signal the failure of the Revolution. Benjamin hopes that this is indeed a Party stratagem, and not merely the result of temporary economic scarcity, because he sees clearly that the Party could outgrow its asceticism and begin to pursue privatized consumption for its members without ensuring a democratic consumption for the collective: “Should the European correlation of power and money penetrate Russia, too, then perhaps not the country, perhaps not even the Party, but Communism in Russia would be lost” (117).

28. William Pietz discusses the social agency of the fetish in his historical study of the origins of the fetish as a term in Western thought. The material fetish, he writes, is “an object established in an intense relation to and with power over the desires, actions, health, and self-identity of individuals whose personhood is conceived as inseparable from their bodies.” Historically, the notion of the fetish originated from “the problematic of the social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems.” The USSR during NEP can be seen as the site of such an encounter, and the Constructivist thing can be seen as a fetish—an object endowed with social agency—that negotiates between these heterogeneous social systems. See Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *Res*, vol. 9 (Spring 1985), pp. 10 and 7, respectively.

29. My reading of Constructivism in relation to Benjamin suggests that there are certain similarities between the Surrealist and Constructivist approaches to objects, contradicting the usual assumption that Surrealism explored the dream-relation to modern objects as a way to critique capitalist reification, while Constructivism simply repressed desire and the dream in favor of constructing a new, reified socialist-industrial object.

30. The phrase is from Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 274.

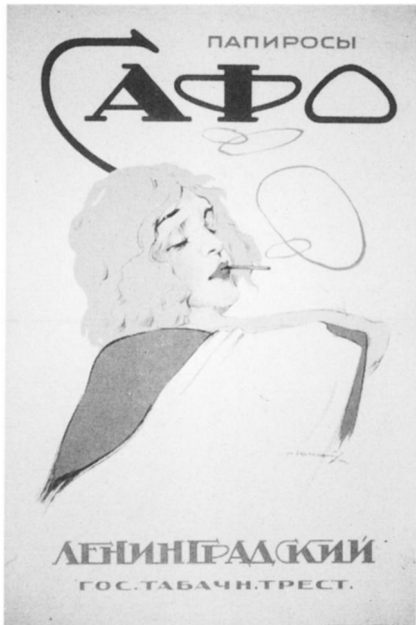
Passazh Arcade. Leningrad. 1924.



This prescient statement signals exactly the course of events in the Soviet Union: the country survived, the Party survived, but the dream of Communism was certainly lost. My point is that the Constructivists, alone among left cultural radicals in Russia in the mid-1920s, shared Benjamin's certainty about the link between daily practices of consumption and power, between material objects and the survival of the Revolution.

Rodchenko and NEP

A photograph of the old Passazh arcade in Leningrad, taken on July 5, 1924, on the occasion of "International Cooperatives' Day," illustrates the unresolved relation between the old world of bourgeois consumption in the late-nineteenth-century shopping arcades and the new world of state-regulated cooperative trade at the actual site of NEP consumption. A far cry from the dingy forgotten passageways that caught Benjamin's imagination in his *Arcades* project, the Passazh arcades have been restored to their original nineteenth-century splendor: stucco and cornices repaired, floors retiled, fresh paint applied, new signs painted above doors (no longer the names of private owners of shops, but only announcements of the category of goods for sale). Yet socialist consumption offers, as of yet, only a confused cocktail of white tablecloths and potted palms competing for attention with the crossed hammer and sheaf of wheat on the flag above, signifying the alliance of workers and peasants. Due to the forces of NEP, in



Aleksandr Zelenskii. Advertisement for Sappho cigarettes. Circa 1925.



Rodchenko and Maiakovskii. GUM advertisement. 1923.

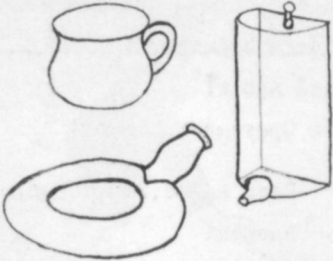
which state stores had to operate at a profit, the new holiday of International Cooperatives' Day celebrates a mode of consumption that continues the class reification and commodity display of capitalism, in spite of the propaganda displays. The ideological conflict reveals itself in state advertising as well. A poster advertisement from around 1925 offers a regressive sales pitch for cigarettes produced by the Leningrad State Tobacco Trust: the product is "Sappho" brand cigarettes, and the image of the red-lipped woman with eyes closed in a transport of oral pleasure evinces a traditional fascination with the lesbian as unnatural femme fatale.³¹ Even the cheap, everyday products of factories owned by the Workers' and Peasants' Government were sold to workers using visual images of the standard erotic fantasies of Western culture. It was in the face of these kinds of advertisements that Rodchenko and the left avant-garde poet Vladimir Maiakovskii conceived of their work designing advertisements for state-produced goods as a socialist propaganda intervention into the public sphere.

The very first commission of Rodchenko and Maiakovskii's collaborative advertising business (called *reklam-konstruktor*) was an advertisement for the state store GUM, the grand arcade of Moscow, located directly on Red Square. As the ad makes abundantly clear, GUM catered to the NEP consumer public by selling privately manufactured and imported goods, as well as the products of state factories. The hyperbole of Maiakovskii's text knowingly plays on the perception that the spiritual identity of the bourgeois is only ever the sum total of his possessions: "Everything that the heart, body, or mind requires—everything for the person is available at GUM." The objects depicted by Rodchenko are clearly the commodities that constitute masculine bourgeois identity: bow tie, collar, bowler hat, pipe, a watch, a book of Pushkin, a fountain pen, boots, shirts, a briefcase, and, explicitly from the West, a "Big Ben" brand folding set of nail clippers, and in the man's right hand, a box of "Pony Post" brand cigars. The cartoonish man attempts to *juggle* all the commodities, to *control* them by keeping them circulating in some kind of orderly circular trajectory rather than succumb to the total structuring of his identity by the commodity. Amusing and highly successful in its evocation of the fantastic abundance to be found at GUM, Rodchenko's poster-size advertisement took up one entire page in the Sunday edition of the Party newspaper *Izvestiia* on July 1, 1923. It is as if Maiakovskii and Rodchenko—ardent opponents of NEP consumerism—simply decided to go for broke in this advertisement and have a good joke at the expense of the acquisitive Nepman. Ideologically, it was justified if the joke would have the effect of bringing Nepmen into GUM to spend money in a state-owned store.


The GUM ad demonstrates that through his experience of the disorganization of consumption under NEP, Rodchenko was well aware of the structuring effects of commodities on human subjects long before he saw Paris—and that he had already

31. This advertisement, by poster artist Aleksandr Zelenskii, is located in the Russian State Library, Department of Graphics, Moscow, number R2 II9i/2s.

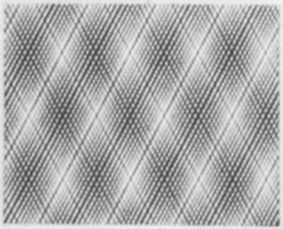
где ПРЕДМЕТЫ ДОМАШНЕЙ ГИГИЕНЫ:



Горячо могу recom ендовать
для украшения ситчиков КРАСНЫЕ
ПЯТИКОНЕЧНЫЕ ЗВЕЗДУ, а также
СЕРП И МОЛОТ, что может быть
весьма оригинальным:







Великолепные узоры для сит-
чиков могут быть сделаны из РУ-
БАШКИ ИГРАЛЬНОЙ КАРТЫ:



Приложу еще несколько при-
меров весьма хороших проектов

рисунков для ситчиков:

1. ТВЕРДАЯ ВАЛКА

2. ТРЕХГОРНЫЙ

3. НАШ ГАЗ

4. ЗИПНИЙ


attempted to represent both the structuring and the disorder visually. In the wake of his GUM advertisement, Rodchenko was absorbed with the problem of finding a way out of the morass of NEP commodity culture through the Constructivist object. We have an image he made in 1924 that attempts such an ordering through a spatial mapping of the regulated system of the human body onto the object system. A page from a homemade newspaper produced by Rodchenko and Stepanova for their friends in 1924, entitled *Nash Gaz*, short for *nasha gazeta* (our newspaper), essentially maps the elements of the Constructivist object. In the typed text, Rodchenko jokingly offers unsolicited advice to young Constructivist textile designers about appropriate subject matter. On the upper left, above the drawings of toilet parts, the visible line of text completes the sentence: "It is indecent to draw . . . objects of domestic hygiene."³² He suggests that the red star or hammer and sickle (by then already banal elements of Soviet iconology) would provide highly original fabric motifs, as would the backs of playing cards. (And the card on the lower left actually does resemble some of Stepanova's "optical" fabric designs, which he was spoofing.) He then presents four more ideas for fabric patterns: number one, on the top right, "hard currency"; number two, "Triple Peaks," the name of a brand of state-produced Mossel'prom beer; number three, "Nash Gaz," which can also be read as "our gas" and has the same connotations as in English; and number four, "winter," with a picture of *valenki*, the traditional felt boots. For all its playfulness, the page as a whole sets up a complex resonance between production and consumption, and between economic and bodily systems of exchange.

The page attempts to organize the pathological excess of the commodity system by mapping it onto a grid. The overarching structure of the grid is provided by the concerns of *production*: the need to develop patterns for Constructivist textile designs. The four sets of pattern possibilities on the right all represent objects that can be exchanged on the market, broadly speaking. Presented as relatively the same size, in identical boxes, in the same repeating format, they appear as objects of consumption organized on an assembly line. All four pictures suggest by their uneven edges that they have been cut out from a larger sheet of the same design, setting up the sensation that if not for Rodchenko's cutting and ordering, the coins and beer bottles and bare bottoms and *valenki* would continue on in endless horizontal and vertical rows, just as the system of commodity exchange is seemingly limitless.

But the ordered grid is actually a figure for the human body as a microcosm of the NEP economy. Read vertically, the four pictures evoke the human subject in shorthand terms: money as the structuring abstraction; beer as a mass commodity to be ingested; the anus as site of excretion and sexual part-object; and the boot as

32. The full text of the newspaper is reproduced in a rough English translation in a limited-edition catalogue from an exhibition entitled *Ornament and Textile Design* at the Manege Gallery, Moscow, in 1990, from which I reproduce the illustration here. The illustration of this page is misidentified in the catalogue caption.



Above: Rodchenko. Advertisement for Red October cookies on Moscow kiosk. 1924.

Right: Rodchenko and Maiakovskii. Advertisement for Triple Peaks beer. 1923.



base. The *valenki* refer to the lowest level of the Soviet economy: most often hand-made, for sale on the street as well as in stores, they are preindustrial objects of the peasant economy. The fuzzy *valenki* are also associated with Russian traditions of home, hearth, and family; we need only recall Rodchenko lamenting to Stepanova from his lonely hotel room in Paris that he remembered his forgotten *valenki* with fondness. The currency and mass-produced beer bottles, on the other hand, represent the financial and productive institutions of the Soviet state. Finally, the bare bottoms figure the body as a system of ingestion and excretion. In the deficit-ridden and inflationary economy of NEP, oral ingestion becomes a kind of lowest-denominator metaphor for the complex processes of consumption, as in Rodchenko's 1923 advertisement for Red October brand Mossel'prom cookies: a photomontage in which a parade of ten large cookies jostle their way directly into a girl's mouth, framed by Rodchenko's hortatory Constructivist graphics. The picture of the bare buttocks on the *Nash Gaz* page invokes the other half, as it were, of this bodily process of consumption-as-ingestion, linking up with the toilet seat and chamber pot to form the other term of the overtly excretory axis on the page. This image prepares us for one of the forms that Rodchenko's anal-erotic interest will take in his letters from Paris, namely, a fantasy of control and regulation. In Freud's account of infantile sexuality, for example, the infant withholds her feces not only to increase her erotic pleasure, but also in order to assert control over her environment by disobeying its requirements.³³ For Rodchenko, the fantasy of the regulated system of bodily processes—what goes in gets processed, with the waste efficiently eliminated—contrasts comfortingly with the pathology of the system of capitalist exchange, in which surplus value feeds endlessly into a monstrously expanding system. The bodily map provided by the *Nash Gaz* page is the equivalent of the pointing figure in his caricature of Mel'nikov from Paris, which identifies the Soviet pavilion as the site of the regulated body and the efficiently flushing toilet.

But this reading of the image is nothing if not a standard Constructivist reading, which attempts to fix and regulate the meanings of the body, the better to align it with the requirements of socialist production (of textiles, in this case). But the image also speaks to the uncontrollability of the body, which will always be the wild card in any attempt to regulate human actions and desires. For the bare buttocks labeled "our gas" also invoke the opposite of bodily control and obedience: the involuntary fart as the other to efficiently regulated bodily processes. The rows of little figures bent over and baring their vulnerable bottoms, when analyzed in combination with the references in Rodchenko's letters to "tight buttocks" and to objects concealing black catastrophe in their interior, also refer us to another level of erotic fantasy at work in Rodchenko's Constructivist object. The buttocks in the picture are open and pink, rather than "tight" and "black"; one could

33. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 52.

almost say that the drawing attempts to penetrate the inside of the body and render it transparent. The proximity of the phallic shapes of the beer bottles, in picture two, and of the columnar shapes of the *valenki*, in picture four, emphasize the vulnerability of the buttocks in picture three. In a visual intermingling of the two registers of the body and the commodity, the labels on the beer bottles mimic the shapes of the buttocks below. Rodchenko's 1923 advertisement for Triple Peaks beer shows the double label that was a feature of the bottle design. These innocent double labels became linked in Rodchenko's fantasy with the image of the buttocks, as they had been already even within the context of his own advertisement's visual and verbal language of conscious, rationally motivated consumption (Maiakovskii's slogan proclaims: "Triple Peaks beer drives out hypocrisy and moonshine"). The large, central bottle of Triple Peaks beer sends out graphic red lightning bolts that appear to painfully burst the sides of the smaller bottles of moonshine, thus causing the coils from the still that emerge from the small bottles to resemble, instead, streams of gaily curlicued white liquid spewing from the bottle tops. Even the yellow quadrilateral that forms the background to the drama of the beer bottles has a distinctly phallic connotation in the Constructivist repertoire of forms: in Stepanova's 1922 costume designs for *The Death of Tarelkin*, a male costume is drawn with this quadrilateral form between his legs, at crotch level, pointing upward, while an adjacent female costume has the same form between her legs, but upside down and pointing downward. This reading of Rodchenko's state beer advertisement as a fantasy of anal rape confirms, on one level, the most dystopian account of Constructivism as a rationalizing movement that supports the Soviet state in its authoritarian assault on the individual consumer. And yet, Freud's insistence on the inherent reversibility of the sexual instincts is relevant here.³⁴ The playful representation of the exhibitionist bare bottoms in the *Nash Gaz* image, seemingly inviting inspection or erotic caress, indicates that Rodchenko's anal erotism is not purely sadistic but reversible into its opposite, lending a doubleness to the beer ad's intervention into the erotics of Soviet consumption during NEP. Rodchenko's images show us a body that is potentially explosive and obscene (farting) and pervaded with non(re)productive desires, elaborating upon the Constructivist metaphor of the body as a regulated system that can be aligned with the industrial system of objects.

Constructivist Objects in Paris

In Paris, however, the straight-backed chairs of Rodchenko's club, with their rigid encircling arms that contain the sitter, seem to insist upon the modernizing version of Constructivism that aims to organize and rationalize the lives of the

34. See Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" (1915), in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963).

subjects of the modern productive system—the version elaborated by Tafuri and Tugendkhol'd, Baudrillard and Gassner.³⁵ But it is my contention that the club also participates, as much as the page from *Nash Gaz*, in the Constructivist object's attempt to negotiate the commodity relations of NEP Moscow and of Paris in terms of both the body and individual fantasy. The club was not simply a show design, dreamt up by Rodchenko to impress Parisian viewers with communist asceticism. At home he was employed by the Moscow Proletkul't, where he taught a furniture production workshop that carried out modest commissions for outfitting Moscow workers' clubs, always on tight budgets in the strapped NEP economy. He also could not have avoided participating in the lively (but endless) debates about the efficacy of the workers' clubs, which included theoretical questions of the role of clubs in the formation of the “new everyday life” (*novyi byt*), the role of women in clubs, the use of art and drama circles and of cultural films (*kul'turfil'ma*), the appropriateness of dancing, as well as material questions of hygiene and decor.³⁶ And as his letters put it, the Parisian public that he was most interested in addressing was the proletariat—the only people in Paris who were producers like him, and therefore, in his imagination, less vulnerable to the diverting pleasures of consumerism. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity when he notes with delight that workers in Asnières have access to all kinds of inexpensive amusements, such as restaurants and cafés, that Russian workers do not have. He sentimentalizes the innocent, authentic pleasures of workers' culture: after a pleasant stroll in the suburbs of Paris he reports that “the workers play football, walk around with their arms around each other, lounge in their kitchen-gardens, and dance in cafés” (Letters, March 28, p. 13). The fact that he sees no contradiction between his pristine workers' club and the French workers lounging comfortably in their small gardens, between his club's promotion of relentlessly sober leisure activities and the workers dancing in cafés, indicates the warmth of his own conception of his club as a Constructivist object. In his vision, the thing as “comrade” will participate in this kind of spontaneous everyday life, helping to organize it, certainly, but not to dehumanize it.

In the face of the real-life camaraderie of workers strolling with their arms around one another in the suburbs of Paris, just how did Rodchenko imagine the inanimate objects in his club to be “comrades”? Rodchenko begins to offer an answer when he expands on his notion of the thing as comrade: “Things become comprehending, become friends and comrades of the person, and the person learns how to laugh and be happy and converse with things” (Letters, May 4, p. 20).

35. Tugendkhol'd calls Rodchenko's club “dry and hard” and complains that the chairs are uncomfortable to sit in. See Tugendkhol'd, “Stil' 1925 Goda,” p. 65, n. 2. The reconstruction of the club at the exhibition “Art into Life” at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1990 confirmed his criticism of the chairs; they were terribly uncomfortable, irrespective of the size and shape of the sitter.

36. See the magazine *Rabochii Klub* and, inter alia, *Pochemu vzroslyi rabochii ne idet v klub?* (Moscow: Proletkul't, 1926); *Iskusstvo v rabochem klube* (Moscow: Vserossiiskii Proletkul't, 1924); *Zhenshchina i byt: kabinet klubnogo rabotnika Moskovskogo Proletkul'ta* (Moscow: Proletkul't, 1926).

Presumably, things can “converse with” people only through bodily sensations or through fantasy. The club as a Constructivist object cooperates with the body’s movements, certainly, but its system seems to be too fully regulated and transparent to allow a space for individual fantasy. It therefore works to make its human counterparts more uniform and regulated, like itself. Although the social content of this uniformity is the progressive Marxist ideal of a collectivity of workers enjoying nonalienated leisure, this definition of the Constructivist object is that of the cold, rationalizing “modernist nightmare.” And the definition is to a great extent a valid one. But the Constructivist object in Rodchenko’s hands will not, or will not only, be cold or removed in its transparency, will not be *against* the body. Expanding and collapsing, encircling and extensive, folded in and disappearing, it is like the human body in its vulnerability. It offers its modern technological forms up to us, inviting us to project our human wishes and fantasies onto it and thus suggesting an alternative definition of the Constructivist object as the “modernist dream” of the new forms of industrial modernity brought down to human scale.³⁷

The dismountable orator stand offers an especially poignant example of Gassner’s “expanding and dying” capacity of the object. The orthogonal view, on the left, illustrates the ways that the orator stand extends horizontally, with special attention to the flexible wooden lattices that can be expanded to form the backbone of the screen, and to the little pulley system, illustrated at the top right, that guarantees the smooth functioning of the system. The axonometric view, on the right, shows how the stand can extend out into space—from the short, flat rectangle on the lower right, it expands upward and outward on all sides, asserting itself several meters into the surrounding room. There is an uncanny pathos in this object, as if it knows its own potential for grandeur, but is always ready to fold itself down and in and away when it is not wanted, aware of its own mortality. In its closed form, it is a mere blank surface, with no signifying markers—like a person with eyes and mouth closed. But when it opens itself up, it fully reveals the inner logic of its system—we see and understand every joint, every crossed wooden lattice, every step and board that flips up and around and over to form the orator platform, the bench, the screen. The uncanny of this object is the return of the same repressed desire that manifested itself in Rodchenko’s letters and the *Nash Gaz* page. His urge, with the orator stand, is the same as with his verbal fantasies of Parisian objects and his rows of pink buttocks: to pry open the “tight buttocks,” to flip the body forward and over and shed light on the opening that conceals the tightness and interior blackness of those buttocks. The material form of his club thus responds to the repressed desires called up by his encounter with the Parisian commodity world, even as it also responds as a

37. While here, in the Workers’ Club, the multifunctional, collapsible object works *with* the human body, it took a different form in earlier Constructivist stage design. Stepanova’s sets for *The Death of Tarelkin* in 1922, for example, included transformable objects that demanded an acrobatic response from actors.

socialist rejection of those desires. Rodchenko writes tenderly of the cleanliness and illumination of his club, the way that its very material forms repulse the Paris manure, symbol of the eroticized excess of the commodity system: “It’s true that it’s so simple and clean and light that you would never willingly track dirt into it” (Letters, June 1, pp. 20–21).³⁸ Although the unconscious desire of the maker has not been rendered *transparent* in the object, as Gassner would have it, Rodchenko’s individual, unconscious desire is projected onto his technological forms, sparking them, even though the content of this projection is not rendered fully conscious in the final material incarnation of the object.

In the sense that his club responds to both socioeconomic demands and the demands of the human body, including unconscious ones, I believe that it offers one possible answer to Benjamin’s question:

When and how will the worlds of form that have arisen in mechanics, in film, machine construction and the new physics, and that have overpowered us without our being aware of it, make what is natural in them clear to us? When will the condition of society be reached in which these forms or those that have arisen from them open themselves up to us as natural forms?³⁹

The Constructivist object would ideally utilize only the most modern technology, the “newest nature,” and work to “make it clear” and “open it up” to the human subject as a comrade would in conversation. (“Things become comprehending, become friends and comrades of the person, and the person learns how to laugh and be happy and converse with things.”) Yet Rodchenko’s club interior, while ingeniously designed in the geometric, functionalist forms of the international modern movement, is in fact handcrafted out of wood—hardly a bona fide example of mass-produced “new nature.” His highly economical use of the wood was necessitated by the budgetary restraints on the exhibition, but also represented Constructivism’s overall commitment to coping with the material scarcity of the NEP economy by eliminating waste and excess. The use of painted wood for building his club, as for Mel’nikov’s pavilion—both were painted red, gray, and white to Rodchenko’s specification—called to mind traditional Russian craft.⁴⁰ In

38. To be fair, I should note that Rodchenko was not alone in his obsession with club cleanliness—it was considered essential to the successful functioning of clubs. Valerii Pletnev, president of the Federal Council of Proletkul’t and expert on workers’ clubs, worries about the dirt and excrement that he finds in the typical Moscow workers’ club with the same energy as Rodchenko in Paris: “Dirt, smoke, soot, peeling walls . . . The buffet, in which you will always find cloudy tea resembling castor oil, and always in a dirty glass . . . All of this on a dirty counter, with dirty chairs . . . from the toilet comes a breeze of poisonous air for breathing, the floors are full of holes” (Pletnev, *Rabochii Klub: Printsipy i Metody Raboty* [Moscow: Vserossiiskii proletkul’t, 1923], p. 7).

39. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 5, pp. 500–501, translated and cited in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 123.

40. Rodchenko claimed that the color scheme used in Mel’nikov’s pavilion was *his* design but that no one gave him credit for it. See the Letters, April 17, p. 17.

Benjamin's very brief article "Russian Toys," published soon after his return from Moscow, he praises the primitive, artisanal forms of wooden Russian toys: "The spirit from which these products emanate—the entire process of their production and not merely its result—is alive for the child in the toy, and he naturally understands a primitively produced object much better than one deriving from a complicated industrial process."⁴¹ With his orator stand, Rodchenko seems to assert that the object can best be a comrade to human beings when its mode of making and functioning is rendered transparent to the user, and when the object mimics the movements of the human body. As opposed to the hyperstimulation of the endless commodities produced by industrial culture, the single orator stand attempts to provide, within its flexible and transparent forms, an alternative kind of variety. The Constructivist object attempts to negotiate among the different economies of the object—the traditional, often wooden, peasant object of the past, the meager NEP commodity of the present, and the technologically advanced, mass-produced industrial object of the socialist future. The very fragility of the wooden forms of the club—the delicate vertical beams of the chairs, the openwork sides to the bookcases, the latticework of the folding screen—contribute to an appealing, antimonumental element in its vision of the future. The club objects are not only eternal, frozen monuments to industrial progress, but also flexible, movable, and temporary, like human beings.

This is the uncanny doubleness of Rodchenko's club: under its carapace of simplicity and lucidity lies an intense conflictedness about the object. The object will be flexible and open like the orator stand, the site of erotic fancy and mobile embodiment, but it will also be austere and hyper-rationalized, like the constraining, straight-backed chairs. The tension between these two versions of utopia gives the Constructivist object its pathos, and its historicity. Buck-Morss writes about Benjamin's Arcades project: "A materialist history that disenchants the new nature in order to free it from the spell of capitalism, and yet rescues all the power of enchantment for the purpose of social transformation: this was to have been the goal of Benjamin's fairy tale."⁴² If we substitute "materialist practice" for "materialist history," we get an excellent definition of utopian Constructivism: a materialist practice that frees the new technical and industrial forms from the spell of the commodity in Marx's sense (reification and exploitation), but without depriving those mass-produced forms of their ability to become the shared, collective sites of individual formations of fantasy. On one level, Constructivism diverged from Benjamin's fairy tale by attempting to bring the body and its desires fully into alignment with the new material forms of the socialist object, to fix the mobile and unruly formations of individual fantasy with the organizing power of the new, socialist fetish object that would replace the commodity fetish. But on another level, the level that I have been exploring in this essay, the Constructivist object

41. This article is published as an appendix in the *Moscow Diary*, pp. 123–24.

42. Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 275.



made a home for the “enchanted” workings of an unfixed fantasy and a desiring embodiedness. In the end, my claim is a difficult and fragile one, as fragile as the latticework screen of the orator stand: even if this second level elaboration of Constructivist theory was not explicitly stated and can only be uncovered through a critical reading of images, texts, and objects, its status is not simply that of the repressed underside of the conscious theory of Constructivism—the repressed bodiliness that would haunt all of the rationalist utopian projects of the 1920s—but rather a component part of the texture of the theory itself. Rodchenko’s Workers’ Club is a space in which the subject will, certainly, be lined up with the light, but he will also, crucially, be encouraged to acknowledge and experience, like Rodchenko himself, his unfixed desires. This “acknowledgment” may not be fully conscious, but neither will it be repressed.

As partial evidence for my fragile claim, I offer a review article of the Paris Exposition in the Soviet journal *Rabochii Klub* (Workers’ Club), in which the author reports that large groups of admiring French workers visited Rodchenko’s club. “Now this—this is our club,” exclaimed one French worker, as he “lovingly stroked with his hand the case for the wall newspaper.” (The case is visible on the back wall of the club, to the left of the portrait of Lenin.) Indeed, the author continues, “almost every worker . . . was drawn precisely to stroke one or another of the things in the club, and to stroke it lovingly.”⁴³ The club, then, provoked a sensuous response that

43. Neznamov, N., “Na parizhskoi vystavke,” *Rabochii Klub* 8–9 (1925), p. 82.

was an extension of the transparent relay of appropriate movements and activities that it consciously solicited as a Constructivist object. This sensuous response can be read, I believe, precisely as an expression of an unfixed phantasmatic response. The report of the ideologically motivated Bolshevik author may be exaggerated, and the response of the Parisian workers themselves may be untrustworthy evidence, and yet this anecdote provides a nostalgic image for the Constructivist dream: the austere, *unheimliche* forms of the club invite the workers oppressed by capitalist industry to enter into the unsparing ideological light of the visiting Bolsheviks, and once there they find not only order and bracing constraint, but a home for the play of fantasy.

The image is nostalgic, and any account of Constructivist utopianism offered today will be valedictory, as we inevitably look back at it from our post-Communist perspective of 1995. The Constructivist theory of the socialist object was an attempt to imagine, from the context of the hybrid consumer culture of NEP, a utopian model of socialist consumption to accompany the process of industrialization that was only then beginning in Russia—to preempt the development of the alienated, consumerist form of modernity that already existed in the industrialized West, as well as the differently alienating, production-oriented form that had the potential to arise in the Soviet Union. But as it turned out, technological modernization would only come to Russia at the expense of an advanced consumer culture; the two halves of modernity would not meet in the lifetime of the USSR. The socialist object did not emerge even, or perhaps especially, after the final failure of the long Soviet experiment in controlled consumption. Instead, the impoverished post-Soviet population of Moscow is now inundated with the cheapest commodities of international corporate capitalism. Rodchenko's attempt to rescue the enchantment of the commodity for socialist ends still stands in stark and instructive contrast.