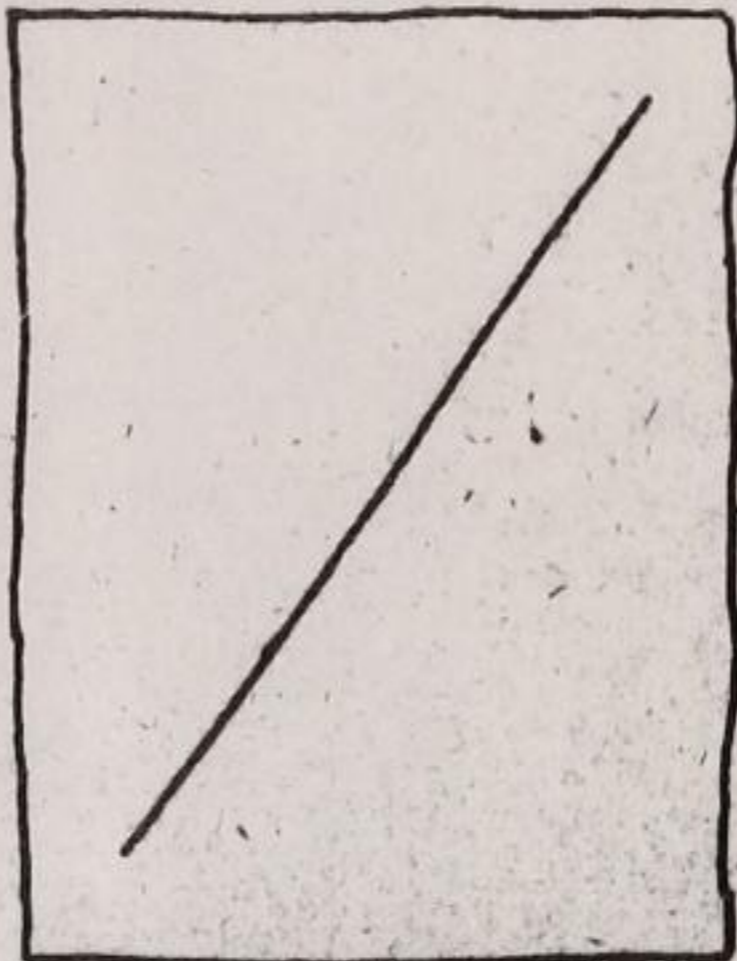


Родченко.

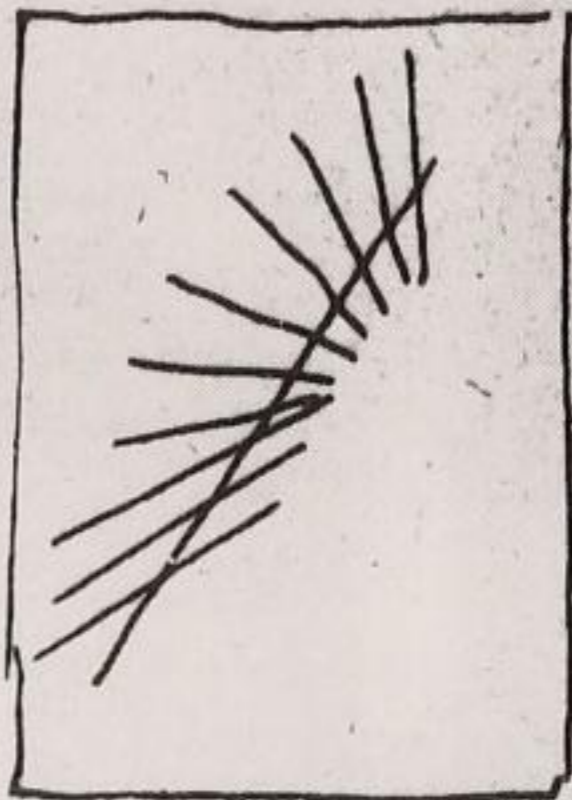
„Линиизм“

новое ~~искусство~~^{форме} безразличное творчество.



Москва.

1920..



Последняя форма линия.

fig. 1

Page from Rodchenko's notebook with sketch for cover for Linearism, 1920.

A. M. Rodchenko and V. F. Stepanova
Archive, Moscow.

What Is Linearism?

Aleksandr Lavrent'ev

The term Linearism (*liniizm*) and the conception of painting it denoted were the invention of Aleksandr Rodchenko, who wrote at the end of 1919:

LINEARISM is a new tendency in non-objective creative work.

The surface plane is, logically, being discarded, and so as to express greater constructedness, architecturalness in compositions—and there being no further need for it—that old favorite of painting's, faktura {density}, is being discarded, too.¹

It is legitimate to wonder to what purpose it behooved him to “discard,” “discover,” and issue declarations if the sole result was a handful of colored or white lines drawn with a brush over a black or colored ground. Rodchenko's own writings will provide the best answer.

The history of the Russian avant-garde in the 1910s and 1920s witnessed several fundamental discoveries about form in painting: the intersecting non-objective brush strokes, resembling the patterns of frost on glass, of Mikhail Larionov, promulgator of Rayism; the *Chernyi kvadrat* (*Black Square*, 1915) of Kazimir Malevich, inaugurator of Suprematism; the counter-reliefs of Vladimir Tatlin, fashioned from real rather than trompe l'oeil fragments of iron, wood, glass, and wire. One might say that the last links in this chain, in which Liubov' Popova's “painterly architectonics” also figured, were the inventive semi-engineered constructions of Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg and of Karl Ioganson—and two cycles by Rodchenko: the first, his paintings and graphic works composed of lines and points, and the second, three monochromatic canvases in which the surface of the painting had already crossed into the category of object. “Everything is finished. Primary colors. Each plane is a plane and there need be no representations.”² A red, a yellow, and a blue canvas—these are no longer constructions, not compositions; they are the end stage of the experimentation of an extreme innovator.

Who saw a WALL . . .

Who saw JUST A SURFACE PLANE—

EVERYONE . . . AND NO ONE.

*One who had truly seen came and simply SHOWED
the square*

This means opening eyes to the surface plane.³

Thus is Malevich described in “Kto my?” (“Who Are We?”), the manifesto of the Constructivists written by Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova in 1921–22. With his *Black Square*, Malevich showed the surface plane to be a reality in painting and a category of visual thinking.

*And when in his laboratory one person set up
the square,*

His radio reached all whom it behooved and whom it did not, then soon, on all the “ships of left art” sailing under white, black, and red flags . . . everything utterly, utterly everything was covered with squares.⁴

Rodchenko's investigations into and analyses of non-objective creation brought him to this necessity: the declaration of the line as the basis for modeling. “A new apprehension of the world,” he noted, “has been elucidated in the line.”⁵

Who saw an ANGLE,

Who saw a FRAMEWORK, a PLAN?

EVERYONE . . . AND NO ONE.

*One who had truly seen came and simply SHOWED
the line*

And when yesterday in his laboratory one person set up the line, the grid, and the point, His radio reached all whom it behooved and whom it did not, then soon, and especially on all the "ships of left art" newly christened "Constructivist," sailing under diverse flags . . . everything utterly . . . utterly is being constructed of lines and grids.

OF COURSE, the square existed even previously, the line and the grid existed previously.

Which is the crux.

Just this—THEY POINTED THEM OUT

THEY PROCLAIMED THEM.

The square—1915, Malevich's laboratory.

The line, the grid, the point—1919, Rodchenko's laboratory.⁶

No one, it may be, wrote about experimentation and the laboratories of art with as much ardor as Rodchenko. And his attitude toward art always embraced a desire to affirm his pride of place, to "patent" the uniqueness and innovation of his every new series. In a draft "auto-monograph," Rodchenko enumerated the innovatory services he had rendered, among them that "I introduced and proclaimed the line as an element of construction and as an independent form in painting."⁷

As a painter, Rodchenko existed within the philosophical space of "left" painting and was connected to other artists by numerous personal and creative threads. His work is, in addition to all else, a reaction to what had happened and was happening in painting during 1917–21. Yet, as an extreme innovator and inventor, Rodchenko was *sui generis*, and his work should be appraised according to his own criteria of innovation, originality, technical mastery, and economy of expressive means. He himself was cognizant of the obstacles should his work be viewed from the vantage of different requirements, criteria, or positions. By the very existence of all those lines and circles painted on canvas, he laid down a new criterion of judgment.

It should be recalled that Rodchenko had announced two previous conceptions of painting—"dynamism of the plane" (constructed conjunctions of planes intersecting in space) and "concentration of color and form" (compositions of floating, gleaming colored spheres)—in works he displayed at his first solo exhibition (Moscow, 1918), the Fifth State Exhibition (Moscow, 1919), and the Tenth State Exhibition, *Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (*Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism*, Moscow, 1919). Rodchenko conceived his new series, consisting solely of lines, in August 1919, in advance of the Tenth State Exhibition. Yet, though he had completed a number of the new works, Rodchenko did not exhibit them. In order to proclaim a new movement in non-objective painting, one or two works would not suffice; an entire cycle was needed, whose size and compositional variety would confirm the movement as a new artistic program.

"I revealed the composition and the tying-together of the canvas by means of it," Rodchenko wrote in his working notes.⁸ By the "tying-together of the canvas" he meant the filling-up of the surface plane, of space. In each work, lines—on one or another colored ground; wide, with shaded edges, or crisp and narrow—form one or another configuration, representing, as it were, some event in the life of lines. Now they meet and intersect like two streaks of cloud; now, at the point of intersection, one line suddenly shoots upward and blossoms into filaments; now the lines turn on a central pivot and expand into space according to the principle of a hyperbolically contracted surface plane. Straight lines create a stable framework; concentric closed curves recall the trajectory of points. Ordinary lines, it turns out, can be animated just like any other form—and no less than the point.

I am thinking of painting several circles for Linearism and also of making a linear sculpture.

I think I'll exhibit Linearism in June or July, when there'll be no fewer than 30 works in oil, and maybe even 50, for I've got 13. I must also write and print up 500 copies of a booklet on Linearism.⁹

Rodchenko indeed intended to construct a linear sculpture from wire, and had even accumulated a store of small steel rods. But he was forced to abandon the venture, inasmuch as it would have been a technically more demanding undertaking than was his work with cardboard, paper, or oils (which were always close at hand). Welding, or at the very least soldering, would have been entailed. At the time, not only the technical wherewithal but even space in which to work was hard to come by (Rodchenko and Stepanova were then living in the quarters of the Museum of Painterly Culture, where Rodchenko served as director).

A mountain of work, but I'm quite drained by my duties and the exertion it now takes to feed ourselves.

I'm resting my hopes on summer and the warmth of the Sun.¹⁰

It was only at the Nineteenth State Exhibition (Moscow, 1920) that Rodchenko's "lines" were exhibited. The series included paintings (some twenty of them) and graphic works, as well as the text "Vse—opyty" ("Everything Is Experiment"), whose typewritten pages were mounted on a wall. The text explained why Rodchenko did not repeat his previous experiments, why each time he fashioned an ever newer series from new formal elements. His every cycle constituted a certain new possibility, a certain new world, albeit one consisting of planes, colored spheres, or lines. Rodchenko would later effect the same admixture of means, devices, and formal elements (circles, planes, and lines) in other areas—in architecture, design, graphics, and advertising.

It is useful to view Rodchenko in the company of other avant-garde artists, that is, in the same context in which his works were displayed at the celebrated Tenth State Exhibition, the Nineteenth State Exhibition, and $5 \times 5 = 25$ (Moscow, 1921), at which last Rodchenko's three monochromatic canvases were shown. When Rodchenko is thus positioned amid his colleagues, the principal elements of his system and his uniqueness are thrown into sharper relief. One can profit anew from the bit of advice offered by Rodchenko in "Everything Is Experiment":

In each work, I conduct a new experiment without the advantage of my past, and in each work I set a different task. If you survey my entire output over all this time, you will find one enormous and completely new work. If you want to tack the past on to it, get yourself to a museum and contemplate that.¹¹

—Translated, from the Russian, by Jane Bobko

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7. A. M. Rodchenko, "Laboratornoe prokhozhdenie cherez iskusstvo zhivopisi i konstruktivno-prostranstvennye formy k industrial'noi initsiative konstruktivizma," 1921–22, A. M. Rodchenko and V. F. Stepanova Archive, Moscow.
8. Rodchenko, notebook, 1917–20.
9. Ibid. The text of "Liniiia" ("The Line") was completed in 1921 and reproduced by hectograph at Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture) in a small number of copies. Published in S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, ed. Vieri Quilici, trans. Huw Evans (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 292–94; in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the State Tret'yakov Gallery, Moscow (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), pp. 71–73; and in *Aleksandr M. Rodchenko–Varvara F. Stepanova: The Future Is Our Only Goal*, pp. 133–35.
10. Rodchenko, notebook, 1917–20.
11. A. M. Rodchenko, "Vse–opyty," 1921, A. M. Rodchenko and V. F. Stepanova Archive, Moscow. Published in *Aleksandr M. Rodchenko–Varvara F. Stepanova: The Future Is Our Only Goal*, pp. 130–32.

The Great Utopia

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

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

State Tret'iakov Gallery

State Russian Museum

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M

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*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman
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State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
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Prefaces

Thomas Krens, Michael Govan

x

Vladimir Gusev, Evgeniia Petrova, Iurii Korolev

xiii

Jürgen Weber

xiv

Contents

The Politics of the Avant-Garde

Paul Wood

1

The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers

Vasilii Rakitin

25

The Critical Reception of the 0.10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua

Jane A. Sharp

38

Unovis: Epicenter of a New World

Aleksandra Shatskikh

53

COLOR PLATES 1-318

A Brief History of Obmokhu

Aleksandra Shatskikh

257

The Transition to Constructivism

Christina Lodder

266

The Place of Vkhutemas in the Russian Avant-Garde

Natal'ia Adaskina

282

What Is Linearism?

Aleksandr Lavrent'ev

294

The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization

Hubertus Gassner

298

The Third Path to Non-Objectivity

Evgenii Kovtun

320

COLOR PLATES 319-482

The Poetry of Science: Projectionism and Electroorganism

Irina Lebedeva

441

Terms of Transition: The First Discussional Exhibition and the Society of Easel Painters

Charlotte Douglas

450

The Russian Presence in the 1924 Venice Biennale

Vivian Endicott Barnett

466

The Creation of the Museum of Painterly Culture

Svetlana Dzhafarova

474

Fragmentation versus Totality: The Politics of (De)framing

Margarita Tupitsyn

482

COLOR PLATES 483-733

The Art of the Soviet Book, 1922-32

Susan Compton

609

Soviet Porcelain of the 1920s: Propaganda Tool

Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky

622

Russian Fabric Design, 1928-32

Charlotte Douglas

634

How Meierkhof'd Never Worked with Tatlin, and What Happened as a Result

Elena Rakitin

649

Nonarchitects in Architecture

Anatolii Strigalev

665

Mediating Creativity and Politics: Sixty Years of Architectural Competitions in Russia

Catherine Cooke

680

Index of Artists and Works

716