

El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism

Christina Lodder

Where should we place El Lissitzky in the context of constructivism? For several decades, this seemed perfectly straightforward—Lissitzky counted as a fully fledged constructivist; his celebrated *Proun* paintings from the first half of the 1920s were abstract and geometric, and these were qualities that tended to characterize constructivism, both as an artistic style and as a broadly based tradition in twentieth-century art.¹ Now, however, we possess a more complex and nuanced understanding of constructivism and a greater knowledge of the varieties of practices and attitudes that the term encompassed in different geographical and historical contexts. My aim in this essay is to investigate Lissitzky's particular role at the moment when the idea of constructivism first emerged and then again, soon after, when it began to be disseminated, appropriated, and reinterpreted.

It is now known that the term *constructivism* was initially coined in Russia by the Working Group of Constructivists (Rabochaia gruppa konstruktivistov), when the group first came into existence in March 1921 in Moscow.² The founding members were the Russian writer and critic Aleksei Gan, who was also the author of the group's program, and the Russian artists Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetskii, and the brothers Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg. As their declaration made clear, the constructivists rejected the traditional notion of the work of art as a product of individual genius and a marketable commodity. In its stead, they sought to develop a new form of creative activity, one that would fuse utilitarian, ideological, and formal objectives, and would, therefore, be more appropriate to the needs and collective values of the new postrevolutionary order in which the worker theoretically reigned supreme.

Transitional experiments with modern materials and construction methods were undertaken by the artists not as aesthetic ends in themselves but rather as a means to the ultimate goal of designing everyday objects for mass production and use. The group's initial "laboratory works" were displayed in 1921 at the exhibition of the OBMOKhU (Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov; Society of young artists), which opened on 22 May 1921 in Moscow.³ Most remarkably, the works included constructed sculptures, made from wooden rods, glass, wire, and various kinds of metal, which loosely recalled open-worked engineering structures, such as cranes and bridges. By the following year, the constructivist renunciation of conventional artistic formats

had become even more comprehensive; Rodchenko and his colleagues had begun to evolve a design methodology within the framework of VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie gosudarstvennyye khudozhestvennyye tekhnicheskie masterskie; Higher state artistic and technical workshops) in Moscow and had started to move into a range of more directly practical areas of production that embraced agitational projects, typographical layouts, graphic work, three-dimensional design, and architecture.⁴

As early as 1922, constructivism began its migration westward. The term itself, and many of the attitudes with which it was associated, quickly came to be adopted and elaborated by artists in Western Europe. Yet, as it moved across geographical and ideological boundaries, the notion of constructivism underwent subtle but fundamental changes. My argument is that Lissitzky was the key figure in the initial formulation of what is now commonly called *international constructivism*; that is, Western constructivist theory and practice as opposed to that of the original Russian movement.⁵

There is a certain paradox here. In Russia, Lissitzky had been closely associated in 1920 and 1921 with the UNOVIS group (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva; Affirmers of the new art), which was organized by Kazimir Malevich after he moved to Vitebsk in 1919. In its own way, this faction of artists was just as utopian, just as obsessed with the idea of developing a visual culture appropriate to the new ideological conditions in Russia, as were the self-styled constructivists.⁶ According to UNOVIS, however, the abstract artistic language of prerevolutionary suprematism, stripped down to colored planes floating and interacting spatially against pure white grounds, could and should serve as the correct aesthetic correlative of the new social order. The ultimate version of human society, which now appeared to be in the offing, deserved to be matched by the final and supreme manifestation of art, which was precisely what suprematism appeared to be to Malevich and his followers. Such an art was supposed to be universal in its impact on viewers as well as in its potential application beyond the narrow confines of traditional artistic practices to the design of posters, books, items of everyday use, and buildings.

This was, in essence, Lissitzky's outlook in December 1921 when he first moved to Berlin. There he rapidly established himself as the most influential and authoritative spokesman for the new Russian art. He and the Russian writer Il'ia Ehrenburg edited the magazine *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, of which two issues appeared, one in March/April 1922 and the other in May 1922. Their first editorial announced a new internationalism and the opening up of contacts between Russian and Western artists. The authors declared that the time was now past for the "negative tactics of the 'dadaists'": "We hold that the fundamental feature of the present age is the triumph of the constructive method. We find it just as much in the new economics and the development of industry as in the psychology of our contemporaries in the world of art. *Objet* will take the part of constructive art, whose task is not to adorn life but to organize it."⁷

While proclaiming their distance from specific political parties, Lissitzky

and Ehrenburg asserted that “*we are unable to imagine any creation of new forms in art that is not linked to the transformation of social forms.*” They stressed that, within this process of social change, purely artistic activity had a distinct and significant role to play:

We consider that functional objects turned out in factories—airplanes and motor-cars—are also the product of genuine art. Yet we have no wish to confine artistic creation to these functional objects. Every organized work—whether it be a house, a poem, or a picture—is an “object” directed towards a particular end, which is calculated not to turn people away from life, but to summon them to make their contribution toward life’s organization. So we have nothing in common with those... painters who use painting as a means of propaganda for the abandonment of painting. Primitive utilitarianism is far from being our doctrine.⁸

This initial statement of purpose clearly signaled not only Lissitzky’s continuing adherence to the position taken in Russia by Malevich and UNOVIS but also his emphatic opposition to the Moscow constructivists’ stance, which, in its most extreme form, declared “Death to Art.”⁹ Not surprisingly, then, *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet* did not promote its program under the constructivist label, although the terminology of constructive art underscored the broad affinity between the new art and scientific processes associated with engineering and technology.

The critique of the Moscow constructivists in *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet* was developed further in an article entitled “Die Ausstellungen in Russland,” also published in the first issue of the journal and probably written by Lissitzky. This article was illustrated by an installation photograph of the OBMOKhU exhibition of May 1921.¹⁰ The accompanying text reflected the author’s firsthand experience of the show and his somewhat grudging recognition of its importance: “There we looked not only at the artworks hanging on the walls, but particularly at the ones that filled out the space of the hall. These young artists assimilated the experience of past generations, worked hard, acutely perceived the specific natures of materials and constructed spatial works. They attempted to press forward in between the skill of the engineers and the ‘aimless purposefulness’ [of art], ‘tossing art now here, now there.’”¹¹

It was the constructivists’ crude emphasis on technology and utility that Lissitzky seemed to dislike, not their general ambition to make artistic activity more relevant to the wider social and ideological realm. Indeed, in “Die Ausstellungen in Russland,” Lissitzky proudly claimed that the greatest change after the Russian Revolution of 1917 was that artists had “stepped into the ranks of those organizing life, and not into the ranks of those embellishing it,” with the result that “the art of painting became like a preparatory exercise in the course of organized participation in life.”¹² Not surprisingly, Lissitzky praised the UNOVIS group for achieving “the creation of a new symmetry in the construction of admissible forms, i.e. the basis of a new architecture, in

the widest sense of the word.”¹³ He concluded that “everything achieved here continues in the new Russian advanced art schools. They are the arena of the struggle for the rallying cries: ‘Art into Life’ [*Iskusstvo v zhizn*] (not outside of it), and ‘Art is One with Production’ [*Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*].”¹⁴

In its general outlook *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet* represented not only a continuation of the UNOVIS approach but also a convergence with the wider currents of avant-garde thinking in the West, notably with the nexus of ideas promoted in the journals *L’esprit nouveau* and *De Stijl*. Lissitzky’s awareness that these were kindred spirits is indicated by the inclusion of material from these sources in *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet*. For instance, in the first issue of *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet* the Dutch architect Theo van Doesburg’s essay “Monumental Art” appeared alongside two articles by Le Corbusier — “Contemporary Architecture” and “Serial Houses” — both of which had originally been published in *L’esprit nouveau*.¹⁵ The translation of the majority of these articles into Russian indicates that one aim of *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet* was to inform Russians about recent developments in the West. At the same time, by commissioning and reprinting articles by important figures associated with *De Stijl* and *L’esprit nouveau*, the Russians helped to nurture a spirit of international collaboration. As Lissitzky put it in a letter of March 1922 to Rodchenko, who was in Russia, “we have finally realised an idea that had emerged long ago in Russia — the publication of an international magazine of modern art. It unites all those who want to foster or establish new values.”¹⁶

The evidence assembled thus far would suggest, then, that contrary to previous assumptions about Lissitzky, we should no longer view him as a constructivist, at least not according to the original definition of the term from 1921. It might be more accurate to say instead that Lissitzky and the Moscow constructivists epitomized two parallel but somewhat divergent responses to the crisis of artistic values occasioned by the Russian Revolution. For Lissitzky, the essential task at hand was to use art as a symbolic, ideological vehicle with which to assist in the transformation of consciousness both in communist Russia and in the capitalist West; for the Moscow constructivists, the imperative was to contribute in a direct, hands-on manner to the building of the new society that had actually come into being in Russia, notwithstanding Karl Marx’s celebrated prophecy that the most advanced capitalist societies would be the first to embrace communism.

Yet, to complicate the picture, Lissitzky emerged as a founding member of the Internationale Faktion der Konstruktivisten (International faction of constructivists) when it was formed in late May 1922 at the Kongress der Internationale fortschrittlicher Künstler (International congress of progressive artists) in Düsseldorf. Lissitzky was acting on behalf of *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet*, while his cofounders, van Doesburg and Hans Richter, represented *de Stijl* and “the Constructivist groups of Romania, Switzerland, Scandinavia and Germany,”¹⁷ respectively. The cooperative ideal promoted by *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet* was bearing fruit, and its values were clearly manifest in

the new group's founding declaration published that September in *De Stijl*: "Art is a universal and real expression of creative energy, which can be used to organize the progress of mankind; it is the tool of universal progress."¹⁸ With its suitably vague terms, this statement once again serves to encode the viewpoint that the Russian Revolution was the harbinger of political and social change on an international front.

Why, however, was the term *constructivism* used in this context? In 1924 Richter recalled that the appropriation of the term two years earlier had been motivated by polemical considerations:

The word "Constructivism" emerged in Russia. It describes an art which employs modern construction materials in the place of conventional materials and follows a constructive aim. At the Düsseldorf Congress of May 1920 [*sic*] the name Constructivism was taken up by Doesburg, Lissitzky and me as the Opposition, in a broader sense. Today, what passes by this name has nothing more to do with... elementary formation, our challenge at the Congress. The name Constructivism was in those days borrowed as a slogan which was applied both against the legitimacy of the artistic expressions [present there] and as an efficient temporary communication—against a majority of the individualists at the Congress.¹⁹

The implication here is that Lissitzky, Richter, and van Doesburg correctly associated the constructivist label with the experimentation with new materials exemplified by works such as Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International* of 1920 and the constructions by Rodchenko and his colleagues at the OBMOKhU exhibition in spring 1921. Richter's statement also acknowledges that he and his colleagues subsequently took over the constructivist label somewhat opportunistically in order to promote the ideal of "elementary formation," which they conceived as an impersonal and collectivist antidote to the artistic self-centeredness endemic to dadaism and expressionism. While the concept of "elementary formation" owed more to the Dutch *de Stijl* than to Russian constructivism, the constructivist label managed to transcend narrow national boundaries to produce an effective international rallying cry.

In a lecture on Russian art, given in Berlin in winter 1922–23, Lissitzky went a stage further, asserting that UNOVIS had played a prominent role within the emergence of constructivism:

Two groups claimed constructivism, the Obmokhu... and the Unovis...

The former group worked in material and space, the latter in material and a plane. Both strove to attain the same result, namely the creation of the real object and of architecture. They are opposed to each other in their concepts of the practicality and utility of created things. Some members of the Obmokhu group... went as far as a complete disavowal of art and in their urge to be inventors, devoted their energies to pure technology.

Unovis distinguished between the concept of functionality, meaning the necessity for the creation of new forms, and the question of direct serviceableness. They represented the view that the new form is the lever which sets life in motion, if it is based on the suitability of the material and on economy. This new form gives birth to other forms which are totally functional.²⁰

There is no evidence whatsoever to substantiate the notion that UNOVIS had also “claimed constructivism.” On the contrary, Lissitzky seems to have been trying to justify his own appropriation of the term by providing it with a UNOVIS lineage in Russia. At the same time, he appears to have been attempting to defend and promote in the West an outlook that was losing ground in Russia itself. There, the approaches underpinning suprematism and the UNOVIS sensibility were being supplanted in advanced artistic circles by the explicitly Marxist and utilitarian orientation of the constructivist group. According to the recollections of the artist Galina Chichagova, by early 1922 virtually all the students at VKhUTEMAS were embracing this, as it were, more authentic version of constructivism.²¹

Lissitzky’s redefinition of the term *constructivism* caught on in the West precisely because there was little evidence that an alternative conception actually existed. For example, the Erste Russische Kunstausstellung, which opened in Berlin on 15 October 1922, did little to contradict Lissitzky’s stance. Although only marginally involved in the organization of the exhibition, Lissitzky was closely associated with the show as the designer of the cover of the exhibition catalog. While the contents of the show emphasized stylistic innovations within conventional artistic media, the catalog did little to clarify the complexities of the situation. Even the introduction failed to present an accurate description of constructivism, although it was written by David Shterenberg, who had been the head of the Department of Fine Arts within the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Otdel izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv pri Narodnom komissariate po prosveshcheniyu) and was, therefore, ideally placed to know all about the new movement. Confusingly, he stated that Rodchenko was represented by his “strong suprematist and constructivist works,” and noted only in passing that the artist was “now moving towards a kind of architectonic utilitarian construction.”²² This phrase hardly conveyed the fact that Rodchenko was now intending to devote himself exclusively to practical design. The potential importance of the phrase was eclipsed by the visual excitement generated by the abstract paintings and sculptures of Malevich, Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Naum Gabo, and others, which caught the attention of artists and public alike.

Western critics frequently acknowledged that the Russians’ work demonstrated “an audacity and freedom, a determination to rethink and re-create all values—such as Europe has not seen for decades” and a “movement towards a greater plasticity and spatial force” than that of either the French or the Germans.²³ One reviewer claimed that the exhibition “brushed aside with a single stroke the previous work of the Expressionists and brought to light the

Abstractionists.”²⁴ The innovative qualities of this art tended to be closely identified with the socialist ideology of postrevolutionary Russia. The German critic Fritz Stahl, for instance, emphasized the connection between the new art in Russia and the Soviets’ ideological commitment to destroy the past and totally restructure society. “There is no doubt,” he wrote, “that there is a distinctive accord between the revolutionary art of these artists and the revolutionary nature of Soviet power.”²⁵ Despite this political element in the German reception of the exhibition, and despite its more advanced artistic manifestations, there was little opportunity to grasp the specific and theoretically sophisticated radicalism of the Russian constructivists.

My interest in Lissitzky’s responsibility for projecting a revised version of constructivism in the West initially grew out of detailed research on Gabo’s art and career.²⁶ There are close artistic and biographical parallels between the two artists, especially after they moved from Russia to Germany within a few months of each other. Gabo and Lissitzky had certainly been acquainted in Moscow and they continued to be friendly to some degree in Berlin, moving in the same artistic circles and evidently visiting the Bauhaus together in 1923.²⁷ Their creative affinities are particularly striking during the first half of the 1920s. A compelling visual juxtaposition is provided by Gabo’s sculpture *Construction in Space with Balance on Two Points* (fig. 1) and Lissitzky’s *Proun 99* (fig. 2), both of which now belong to the Yale University Art Gallery. Both works were completed around 1925 and, notwithstanding the difference in medium, serve to encapsulate the artists’ shared preoccupation with a certain kind of dynamic geometry. In both works, the principal cubic form appears weightlessly suspended, as if sustained by its own rotation in space. In terms of articulated attitudes, the two artists were broadly committed to the distinctive identity and purpose of art, envisaging a more indirect relationship than the Moscow constructivist group had conceived between purely artistic innovation and the refashioning of the collective environment through practical design and architecture.

At the same time, there are some revealing points of contrast between Lissitzky and Gabo. Lissitzky was far more successful than the somewhat reclusive Gabo in terms of developing contacts within the Western avant-garde, and as a result he quickly developed a higher international profile. Lissitzky was also a far more effective polemicist. By 1924 he had published his own magazine and had contributed to other key platforms of avant-garde thinking, such as the journal *De Stijl*. He had also produced his influential *Proun Room* and completed his *Proun* portfolio.²⁸ Such dynamism was undoubtedly part of his creative makeup, but Lissitzky may also have been acting on behalf of the Soviet government. In private, Gabo revealed that he had once visited Lissitzky’s Berlin studio and had been horrified to see a seal of the Cheka (Russian secret police) lying on the desk, identifying Lissitzky as an informer in the employ of this rather morally dubious government agency.²⁹ There is no further evidence to corroborate this, but it seems unlikely that Gabo would have concocted such a story, whatever the state of

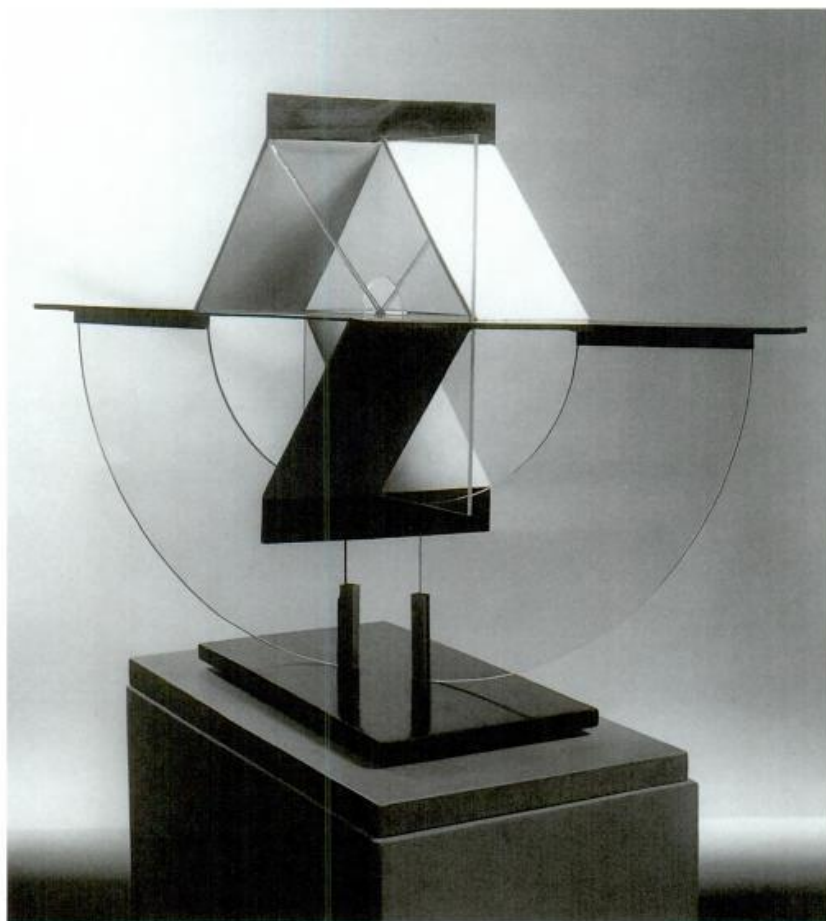


Fig. 1. Naum Gabo

Construction in Space with Balance on Two Points, 1924–25 (altered 1951/53), enameled brass, glass, and plastic on wooden base, 67 × 127.6 cm (26³/₈ × 50³/₈ in.)
New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery

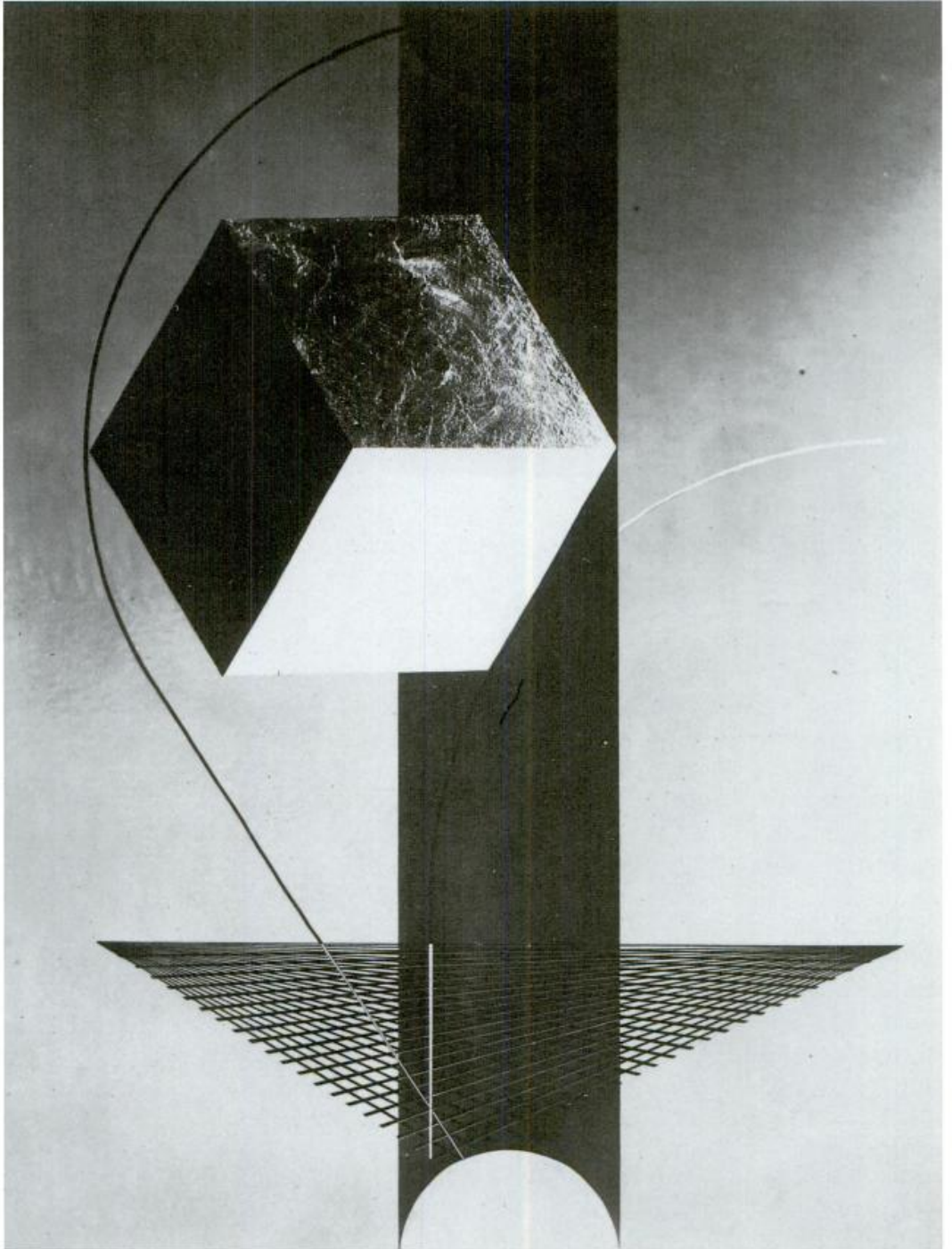


Fig. 2. Satrap

El Lissitzky's *Proun 99*, 1923, cut-down lithographic postcard, 10.3 × 8.8 cm (4 × 3½ in.)
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute

his relations with Lissitzky. Moreover, it is quite possible that Lissitzky (like the Russian writer Osip Brik) expressed his loyalty to the regime in this way and that his activities publicizing Russian art and encouraging radical art in the West had an official dimension. Lissitzky's geographical mobility after his return to Russia in 1925 certainly suggests a privileged status and good contacts with Soviet officialdom, while his prodigious output of state propaganda from the late 1920s until his death in 1941 further indicates a stalwart support for communism and the Soviet system.

It is important to establish Lissitzky's ideological commitment in this context, given the schematic distinction that is frequently drawn between Russian constructivism, on the one hand, with its espousal of Marxist materialism and utilitarian activity, and international constructivism, on the other hand, which is seen as a purely aesthetic enterprise that implicitly involved a depoliticization and hence a "misunderstanding" of the Russian paradigm.³⁰ This misguided formulation of the two movements has in turn led to claims by critics such as Benjamin Buchloh that it was Gabo, a Russian émigré from spring 1922 on, who was the key player in the Western subversion of constructivism.³¹ Such claims conveniently project the blame, however inappropriately given Gabo's political radicalism, onto a figure who ended his career in cold war capitalist America rather than in Soviet Russia.³²

Yet Gabo did not apply the constructivist label to his own work, at least not in a published context, until 1924.³³ Lissitzky is a far more likely candidate for the role of launching a modified concept of constructivism in the West as part of an overall strategy intended to promote a radical, international art movement in Europe. In this respect, he was enacting the Soviet regime's current policy of cultivating sympathetic forces among Western intellectuals in order to create a phalanx of cultural fellow travelers who would ultimately support world revolution. For Lissitzky and his Western supporters, such as Richter, the kind of geometric abstraction that they chose for a time to label "constructivist" served as an emphatically ideological instrument, geared toward fostering a revolutionary consciousness in the capitalist West.

Indeed, Lissitzky's idea of constructivism found a receptive audience in the West precisely because it associated innovative developments in avant-garde art and design with the wider progress of culture and society. In his survey of constructivism in 1924, the left-wing Hungarian critic Ernst [Ernő] Kállai proceeded from the premise that "constructivism... is the aesthetic paraphrase of the technical, intellectual, precise organizational and production methods of our modern civilization and science."³⁴ Kállai went on to describe the various strands of what he understood as constructivism, covering the Dutch (de Stijl) and Russian founders of the movement, as well as contemporary German and Hungarian practitioners.³⁵ Kállai clearly derived his information and ideas from Lissitzky's writings, quoting extensively from *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* and echoing Lissitzky's description of Malevich's suprematism. Kállai also appropriated Lissitzky's description of Russian construc-

tivism and presented it as encompassing the thinking of both UNOVIS and OBMOKhU. Finally, Kállai reiterated Lissitzky's critique of the simpleminded, utilitarian outlook adopted by the Moscow group.

Kállai's article, however, was symptomatic of the relatively swift descent of constructivism from its radical beginnings to a catch-all stylistic label. Once again, this was not an instance of a straightforward East-West polarity. In Moscow, by 1923 Brik was railing against Russian heretics who had "rapidly adopted the fashionable jargon of constructivism" but had produced entirely conventional artworks.³⁶ Likewise, Lissitzky and his closest associates began to distance themselves from the label once it began to lose its exclusivity and its radical edge in Western Europe. In July 1923, Richter launched the magazine *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, which was advertised in *De Stijl* as "the organ of the constructivists in Europe."³⁷ The presence of Richter, van Doesburg, and Lissitzky on the editorial board indicated the continuities between this project and that of the Internationale Faktion der Konstruktivisten, formed the previous year.³⁸ Lissitzky's general influence is apparent in the design and layout of the magazine. More specifically, he seems to have suggested the title and may have been involved in editing the first issue.³⁹ He also contributed articles to the first and second issues, including an account of the *Proun* idea, accompanied by an image of the *Proun Room* that he had designed for the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung of 1923.⁴⁰ The ideological stance of *G* was clearly expressed in the first issue by a quotation from Marx, placed vertically like a banner along the length of page three: "Art must not explain the world, but change it."⁴¹ It is notable, however, that the term *constructivism* was not used in the title or anywhere in the printed texts. Instead, the title *G* was linked with the word *Gestaltung*, which encompasses both the process of organizing or making forms and the results of that process as manifest in specific items of design, architecture, and art. By 1924, in *G*, Richter was lamenting the debasement of constructivism: "Today what goes by this name has nothing to do with elementary formation, our challenge at the Congress.... Arrangers, oil painters, decorators... are all marching under [the banner of] Constructivism... as long as the catchword is fashionable."⁴²

In 1925, just before he returned to Russia, Lissitzky also sought to distance himself from constructivism. In *Die Kunstisten: Les ismes de l'art: The Isms of Art*, which he and Hans Arp conceived as a primer of contemporary movements and styles, Lissitzky reverted to the same kind of disparaging account of constructivism that he had presented in *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*: "These artists look at the world through the prism of technology. They don't want to convey an illusion by means of color on canvas but work directly in iron, wood, and glass. The shortsighted see therein only the machine. Constructivism proves that the limits between mathematics and art, between a work of art and a technical invention, cannot be fixed."⁴³

The images selected to illustrate the movement linked it firmly with the Russian artists. On one page, a photograph of Tatlin working on his *Model for a Monument to the Third International* was surmounted by a large reproduction

of one of his counter reliefs of 1917 (fig. 3). This was followed by a spread consisting of an installation shot of the constructivists' works at the OBMOKhU exhibition of 1921, an architectural project by Nikolai Ladovskii, and Gabo's sculpture *Construction in Space C* (fig. 4).⁴⁴ No reference was made to the subsequent realization of the constructivist program in functioning designs, such as Rodchenko's design for the interior of a workers' club (*Rabochii klub*), which was completed in May 1925 and exhibited that year in Paris at the prestigious Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. Overall, the entry in *Die Kunstisten* suggested that constructivism entailed a fair amount of unrealistic fantasy and, despite its rhetoric, had achieved nothing of lasting substance or importance.

This bias is particularly evident when the entry on constructivism is compared with Lissitzky's presentation of himself and his *Proun* idea (fig. 5). His definition of the *Proun* as "an interchange station between painting and architecture" was illustrated by a spread comprising an image of a *Proun* painting, a photo of himself, and a reproduction of the Lenin podium inscribed "UNOVIS 1920" and attributed to the "atelier Lissitzky," an implicit acknowledgment of the fact that it was a reworking of the Russian artist Il'ia Chashnik's original speaker's platform.⁴⁵ While the *Proun* asserted the visual and geometric components of the new aesthetic, the podium both emphasized its political affiliations and demonstrated that elements of the *Proun* aesthetic could be used in designs for the real world. In effect, Lissitzky associated himself with a radical abstract art that not only communicated progressive values in metaphorical terms but also could be extended to the design of functional structures that contributed more directly to the creation of the brave new environment of communism.

The net result of Lissitzky's actions and statements is that constructivism in the West came to be associated with a broad notion of artistic activity that encompassed painting, sculpture, and design and became identified with a politically progressive, but not explicitly Marxist, ideological stance. This paradigm was at its most influential in the period from 1922 to around 1927, although it continued to underpin projects such as the publication of *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, with which Gabo was involved in England in 1936 and 1937.⁴⁶ By that time, however, Lissitzky had long since returned to Russia, where his work had developed in response to the very different artistic and ideological climate.

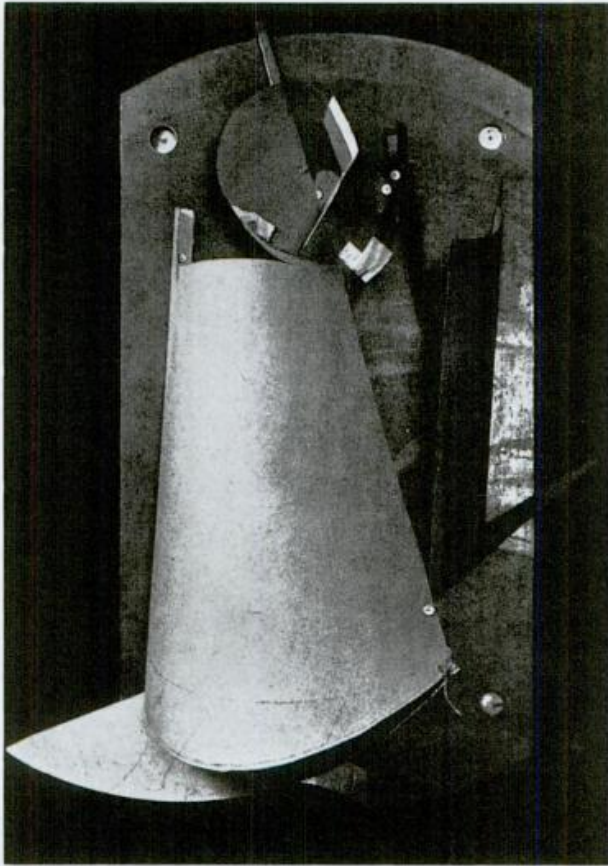
Notes

1. See, for instance, George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (New York: George Braziller, 1967).

2. See Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, ed. Vieri Quilici, trans. Huw Evans (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), 289–90; and Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), 94–101.

The group has been named variously the Working Group of Constructivists and

73

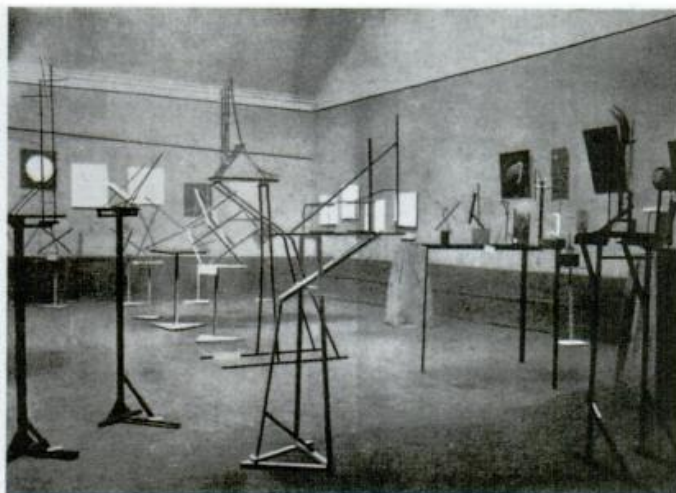
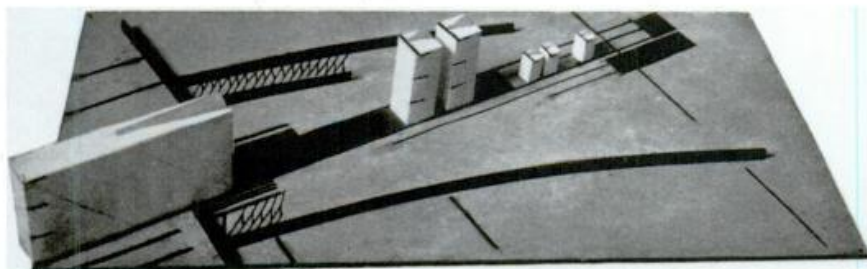


1917



TATLIN

Fig. 3. Page on constructivism: Vladimir Tatlin and his *Konterrelief*
From El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, eds., *Die Kunstisten: Les ismes de l'art: The Isms of Art*
(Erlenbach, Switzerland: Eugen Rentsch, 1925), 3

KONSTRUKTIVISMUS**OBMOCHU
1921****55****ATELIER LADOWSKI
1923****37**

24

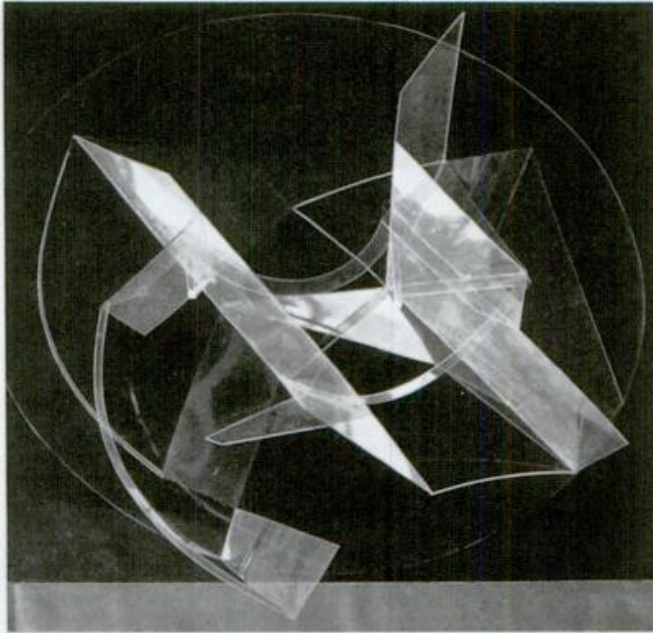
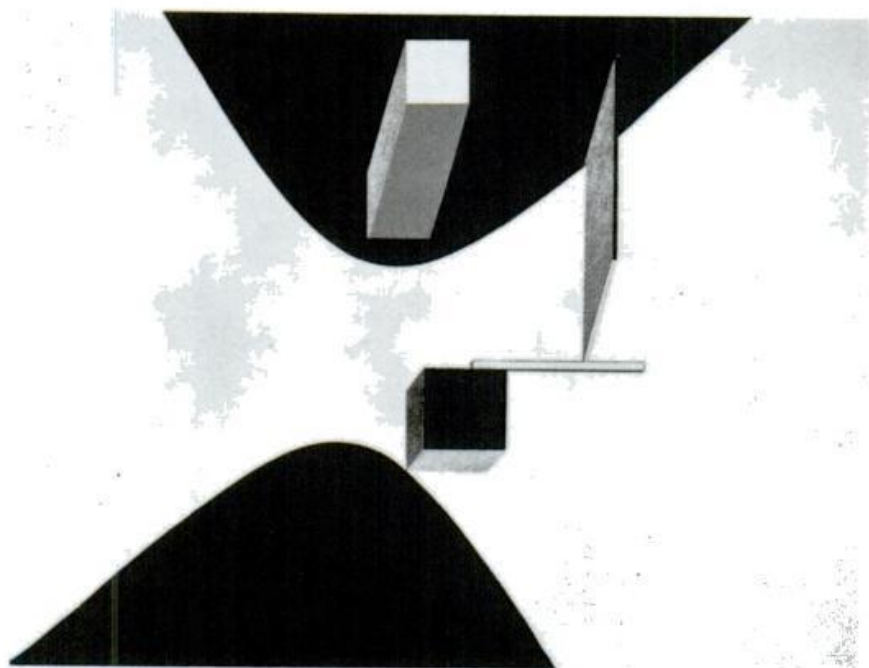
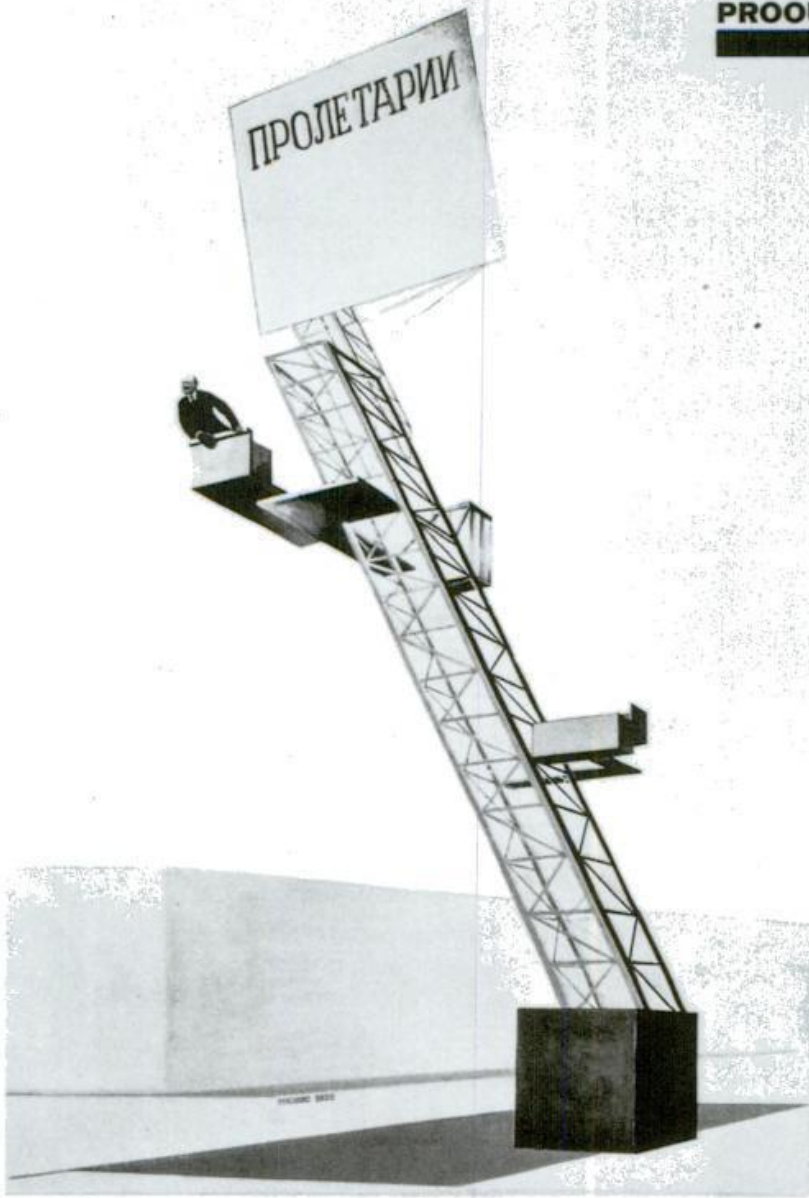
GABO
1922

Fig. 4. Page spread on constructivism: exhibition by OBMOkHU (Society of Young Artists), Moscow; design for an airport by the Nikolai Ladovskii Atelier; glass construction by Naum Gabo
From El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, eds., *Die Kunstismen: Les ismes de l'art: The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach, Switzerland: Eugen Rentsch, 1925), 4–5

**41****LISSITZKY
1919**



42

ATELIER LISSITZKY
1920

Fig. 5. Page spread on El Lissitzky and his Prouns
From El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, eds., *Die Kunstismen: Les ismes de l'art: The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach, Switzerland: Eugen Rentsch, 1925), 8-9

the First Working Group of Constructivists. Archival material usually omits the word *First*, but the group's first public pronouncement, published in August 1922 in the Moscow magazine *Ermitazh* (Heritage), used both names; see "Front khudozhestvennogo truda. Materialy k vsrossiiskoi konferentsii levykh v iskusstve. Konstruktivisty. Pervaia programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov" (The front of artistic work. Material for the All-Russia Conference of the Left in Art. The constructivists: The first program of the working group of constructivists), *Ermitazh* 13 (1922): 3–4. The introduction gave the group its full title, declaring that "On 13 December 1920 the First Working Group of Constructivists was formed" (3). The presence of both names in this publication suggests that they were used concurrently, at least by mid-1922. It is possible that the group had split by January 1922 when the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii held a separate exhibition, and that Gan was distinguishing himself from these artists while asserting the priority of his own grouping, especially as he emphasized that he, Rodchenko, and Stepanova were the founders (3).

3. The exhibition was held in the prestigious former galleries of the dealer Klavdiia Mikhailova at 11 Bol'shaia Dmitrovka Street in the center of Moscow; see Alma Law, "A Conversation with Vladimir Stenberg," *Art Journal* (1981): 224; and Maria Gough, "In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl Ioganson's Cold Structures," *October*, no. 84 (1998): 98.

4. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (note 2), chaps. 4–6.

5. The term was coined by Stephen Bann; see Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), xxvii.

6. For a recent reading that emphasizes the ideological commitments and contradictions within the UNOVIS milieu, see T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), chap. 5.

7. El Lissitzky and Il'ia Ehrenburg, "Die Blockade Russlands geht ihrem Ende entgegen," *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, no. 1–2 (1922): 1–2; translated as El Lissitzky and Il'ia Ehrenburg, "The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End" (1922), trans. Stephen Bann, in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 55–56.

8. Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, "The Blockade of Russia" (note 7), 56 (emphasis in original).

9. Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver': Tverskoe izd-vo, 1922), 18.

10. Ulen [El Lissitzky], "Die Ausstellungen in Russland," *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, no. 1–2 (1922): 19; translated as Ulen [El Lissitzky], "The Exhibitions in Russia," trans. Kestutis Paul Zygas, *Oppositions* 5 (1976): 125–27.

11. Ulen [El Lissitzky], "Die Ausstellungen in Russland" (note 10), 127.

12. Ulen [El Lissitzky], "Die Ausstellungen in Russland" (note 10), 125, 127.

13. Ulen [El Lissitzky], "Die Ausstellungen in Russland" (note 10), 127.

14. Ulen [El Lissitzky], "Die Ausstellungen in Russland" (note 10), 127.

15. Theo van Doesburg, "Monumental'noe iskusstvo" (Monumental art), *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, no. 1–2 (1922): 14–15; Le Corbusier, "Sovremennaia arkhitektura" (Contemporary architecture), *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, no. 1–2 (1922): 20–21; and Le Corbusier, "Doma seriayami" (Serial housing) *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, no. 1–2 (1922): 22–23.

16. Cited by Roland Nachtigaller and Hubertus Gassner, “ $3 \times 1 = 1$: Vesc’, Objet, Gegenstand,” in *Vesc’, Objet, Gegenstand... Kommentar und Übertragungen = Commentary and Translations* (Baden: Verlag Lars Müller, 1994), 32. The long-standing project to which Lissitzky was referring was perhaps the magazine *Internatsional iskusstv* (Arts international). This was organized by the International Bureau (Mezhdunarodnoe biuro), set up in December 1918 by IZO (Otdel izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv pri Narodnom komissariate po prosveshcheniyu; Department of fine arts within the people’s commissariat for enlightenment). The publication of the magazine was announced in September 1919, and an issue with articles by Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Anatolii Lunacharskii, Velimir Khlebnikov, and others was prepared for press but never published.

17. Their manifesto of September 1922, “Konstruktivistische Internationale schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft” (also known as Manifesto of International Constructivism)—signed by Max Burchartz and Karel Maes as well as Lissitzky, van Doesburg, and Richter—was published in *De Stijl* 5, no. 8 (1922): 113–19, where it appears in French and Dutch as well as German.

18. The faction’s declaration, first published in *De Stijl* 5, no. 4 (1922), is translated as “Statement by the International Faction of Constructivists,” trans. Nicholas Bullock, in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 68–69.

19. H.R. [Hans Richter], “An den Konstruktivismus,” *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, no. 3 (1924): 72.

20. El Lissitzky, “The New Russian Art: A Lecture (1922),” in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 340.

21. G.D. Chichagova, “Gody Vkhutemasa. Pervyye vpechatleniia” (The Vkhutemasa years. First impressions), in Varvara A. Stepanova, ed., *A.M. Rodchenko: Stat’i. Vospominaniia. Autobiograficheskie zapiski. Pis’ma* (A.M. Rodchenko: Articles, reminiscences, autobiographical writings, letters) (Moscow: Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1982), 141.

22. [David Shterenberg], “Introduction,” trans. Nicholas Bullock, in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 75.

23. Cited from Iakov Tugendkhol’d, “Russkoe iskusstvo za granitsei: Russkaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka v Berline” (Russian art abroad: The Russian art exhibition in Berlin), *Russkoe iskusstvo* (Moscow), no. 1 (1923): 101, 102.

24. Cited by Eckhard Neumann, “Russia’s ‘Leftist Art’ in Berlin, 1922,” *Art Journal* 27 (1967): 22.

25. Fritz Stahl, “Russische Kunstausstellung Galerie van Diemen,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, 18 October 1922, evening edition, 2.

26. See Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernity: The Art and Career of Naum Gabo* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), esp. chaps. 5–6.

27. Walter Gropius recalled that they had visited Weimar together in summer 1923 to see the Bauhaus exhibition; see Gropius’s letter to George Rickey, 1 August 1966; cited in Rickey, *Constructivism* (note 1), 85 n. 49.

28. See El Lissitzky, “Proun. Nicht Weltvisionen, sondern—Weltrealität,” *De Stijl* 5, no. 6 (1922): 81–85; see also El Lissitzky, *Figurinen, die plastische Gestaltung der*

elektro-mechanischen Schau "Sieg über die Sonne": Oper gedichtet von A. Krutschonjch, Moskau 1913 (Hannover: Rob. Leunis & Chapman, 1923).

29. Miriam Gabo, personal communication, April 1985.

30. This perspective was partly the result of the interpretation of both movements that I put forward in 1983; see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (note 2), chap. 6.

31. See Benjamin Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 85–112.

32. Gabo's continuing engagement with anarchist and Trotskyist thinking is extensively discussed in Hammer and Lodder, *Constructing Modernity* (note 26).

33. See *Constructivistes Russes: Gabo et Pevsner: Peintures, constructions*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Percier, 1924).

34. Ernst [Ernő] Kállai, "Konstruktivismus," in Georg Biermann, ed., *Jahrbuch der jungen Kunst 1924* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1924), 374.

35. Kállai, "Konstruktivismus" (note 34), 374–84.

36. O. B. [Osip Brik], "V proizvodstvo!" *LEF: Zhurnal levogo fronta iskusstva* (Moscow and Petrograd) 1 (1923): 105; translated as "Into Production," trans. Richard Sherwood, in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 84.

37. Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (note 5), xxxiii.

38. *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, no. 1 (1923): 1.

39. Hans Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe* (Zurich: Verlag der Arche, 1967), 69.

40. El Lissitzky, "Prounenraum: Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung," *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, no. 1 (1923): 4.

41. *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, no. 1 (1923): 3.

42. H. R., "An den Konstruktivismus" (note 19), 72 (my translation). He stated, "By the way, it appears that the sprinter Moholy-Nagy, who at least has a fine nose for certain things in *Kunstblatt*, has already for a long time allowed himself to be proclaimed a Suprematist; perhaps he will have more luck with it than with the late Constructivists."

43. El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, eds., *Die Kunstismen: Les ismes de l'art: The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach, Switzerland: Eugen Rentsch, 1925), xi.

44. Lissitzky and Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (note 43), 3–5.

45. Lissitzky and Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (note 43), 8–9. Chashnik's project was published in *UNOVIS: Listok* (UNOVIS: Broadsheet) (Vitebsk), no. 1 (1920): 1.

46. J. L. Martin, Ben Nicholson, and Naum Gabo, eds., *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937).