

# The Russian Constructivist Flapper Dress

**Christina Kiaer**

A geometric textile design by the Russian Constructivist Liubov' Popova appeared on the cover of an issue of *Lef*, the journal of the Left literary and artistic avant-garde, in 1924 (fig. 1). The issue was dedicated to her; she had died suddenly of scarlet fever at the age of thirty-five in May of that year. In their dedication, the editors wrote,

Popova was a constructivist-productivist not only in words, but in deed. When she and Stepanova were invited to work at [the First State Cotton-Printing] factory, no one was happier than she was. Day and night she sat making her drawings for fabrics, attempting in one

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All translations from the Russian are my own unless otherwise noted.

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creative act to unite the demands of economics, the laws of exterior design and the mysterious taste of the peasant woman from Tula.<sup>1</sup>

Working at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory in Moscow in 1923–24, Popova and her colleague Varvara Stepanova were the only Constructivists to see their designs for everyday, utilitarian things (other than posters and publication graphics) actually mass-produced and distributed in the Soviet economy. They fulfilled the Constructivist brief of abandoning the role of individual artist-craftsman and entering into collective factory production as “artist-productivists” to produce utilitarian things for the socialist collective. Yet textile design, as a traditional practice of applied art associated with the decorative arts and fashion, might not be expected to fulfil the role demanded of the technologically oriented productivist. It would seem, in fact, to lie beneath the technological aspirations—exemplified by the systemic structures of the early sculptural constructions, the photomontage propaganda posters, the mechanical contraptions such as “radio-orator stands,” and so on—that we usually associate with the productivist imperative of Constructivism.

But the language of the *Lef* dedication is instructive because it suggests a previously unexamined Constructivist concern with the problem of forging a new form of socialist *consumption* as an alternative to the consumerism of capitalist modernity. The description of Popova’s “creative act” offers in fact a highly economical explanation of a key term in the Constructivist lexicon: *tselesoobraznost’*, which can be translated literally as “formed in relation to, or conforming to, a goal.”<sup>2</sup> According to the *Lef* editors, Constructivist *tselesoobraznost’* concerned itself with the material form of things not only in relation to technical problems of utilitarian form (“the laws of exterior design”) but also in relation to the new socialist economy (“the demands of economics”) and the need to appeal to consumer desire (“the mysterious taste of the peasant woman from Tula”). Constructivist theorists and artists, then, although famed for their com-

1. The editors, “Pamiati L. S. Popovoi,” *Lef* 2, no. 6 (1924): 4. The text refers to the factory as the “former Tsindel,” which was its prerevolutionary name.

2. *Tselesoobraznost’* is consistently translated as “expediency” in most English-language texts on Constructivism. But I offer my clunkier and more literal translation because current English usage favors the opportunistic or self-interested meaning of “expedient” rather than the primary and neutral meaning of “suitable for achieving a particular end.”

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FIG. 1.—Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover of *Lef*, no. 2 (1924), incorporating Popova fabric design.

mitment to technological *production*, also invented the concept of the everyday material object of socialist *consumption* as a socialist thing. This thing would be an active “co-worker” or “comrade” of the human subject rather than a mere commodity to be possessed.<sup>3</sup> The very mundanity of cheap printed cotton fabric—its absolute usefulness in the “new everyday life” (*novyi byt*) being promoted by the Bolsheviks after the revolution—made it an exemplary Constructivist thing. But it is exemplary only if Constructivism is acknowledged as a practice that sees that the subject is formed as much through the process of *using* objects in everyday life as by *making* them in the sphere of production.

As the celebratory *Lef* dedication makes vivid, Popova and Stepanova were central players in the Constructivist subset of the avant-garde; the Russian avant-garde of the early twentieth century is well-known for the unusual prominence of women artists within it.<sup>4</sup> Yet Popova and Stepanova, not their male counterparts, were the ones who worked in textile design, a traditionally feminine area of artistic endeavor.<sup>5</sup> The story of their textile-design work could therefore be recruited for a history of modernist women artists who have in various ways reclaimed feminized areas of craft for high art—artists such as Anni Albers at the weaving workshop at the Bauhaus (where women were prohibited from participating in the more strenuous wall-painting and furniture workshops and were directed instead to ceramics and weaving); Sonia Delaunay with her cubist-inspired fabric and fashion; Hannah Höch, whose later dada collages critically incorporate fabrics and images of domesticity and fashion; and

3. The productivist theorist Boris Arvatov calls the object a “co-worker” in an important essay from 1925 (Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),” trans. Christina Kiaer, *October*, no. 81 [Summer 1997]: 124; hereafter abbreviated “EL”). Aleksandr Rodchenko calls the object a “comrade” in his letters home from Paris in 1925; see Aleksandr Rodchenko, “Rodchenko v Parizhe: Iz pisem domoi,” *Novyi lef*, no. 2 (1927): 9–21. For an account of Constructivism that develops the model of production, see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer* (forthcoming).

4. This aspect of the Russian avant-garde is often mentioned, although surprisingly little scholarship exists on it; until recently, M. N. Yablonskaya, *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900–1935*, trans. and ed. Anthony Parton (London, 1990) was the only major publication to address the women artists as an entity within the avant-garde. This has changed with the publication of *Amazons of the Russian Avant-garde*, ed. John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt (exhibition catalog, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 14 Sept. 2000–10 Jan. 2001). (The rather unfortunate title of the exhibition stems from a phrase applied to the artists by their contemporary, the poet Benedikt Livshits.) The catalog essays attempt to answer the question why such an unusual number of women reached prominence within the Russian avant-garde (six women artists were represented in the exhibition). Ekaterina Dyogot's excellent catalog essay, “Creative Women, Creative Men, and Paradigms of Creativity: Why Have There Been Great Women Artists?” pp. 109–27, in particular, offers a theoretical, feminist account of the gendered cultural categories that supported the prominence of women artists.

5. On the ties between the decorative arts and femininity in the Russian context, see Briony Fer, “The Language of Construction,” in Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars* (New Haven, Conn., 1993), pp. 87–169.

Meret Oppenheim with her fur-lined surrealist teacup; as well as a whole generation of second-wave-feminism-inspired artists since the 1970s working in “femme” styles. But a conscious retrieval of fabric design as a typically feminine practice was emphatically *not* how Popova and Stepanova themselves articulated their practice. As committed productivists who had foresworn the individual touch of painting and craft, their stated goals at the textile factory were precisely the scientific and technical ones usually associated with Constructivism: the opportunity to develop skills of mechanical drawing, to participate in the factory research laboratory and production decisions, and to see their work enter the process of mass industrial production.

The Constructivist interest in technical and systematic modes of making is most often described as a move toward transparency, to use the productivists’ own term, or indexicality, to use the semiotic term.<sup>6</sup> The productivist critic and theorist Boris Arvatov, whose theory of the socialist thing I will be considering in this essay, describes the development of the ideal form of the modern thing in this way: “the mechanism of a thing, the connection between the elements of a thing and its purpose, were now transparent” (“EL,” p. 126). The transparent or indexical thing demonstrates its *tselesoobraznost’*—the connection between its material form and its purpose—by showing us how it was made. This “rhetoric of indexicality” dominated Constructivist writings, and it has contributed to our usual definition of Constructivism as an avant-garde that embodies the modernist desire for transparency and rationality. But I believe that this rhetoric has been too narrowly interpreted in terms of an instrumental utilitarianism. Instead, the transparency and rationality of the Construc-

6. The efficacy of the index in relation to Constructivism is proposed by Gough in her discussion of Rodchenko’s *Hanging Spatial Constructions* (c. 1920): “Rodchenko elaborates a nascent principle of deductive or indexical structure: the very structure of the work reveals the process of its production” (Gough, “In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl Ioganson’s Cold Structures,” *October*, no. 84 [Spring 1998]: 113). As Gough points out, it was Rosalind Krauss who demonstrated the importance of the index for analyzing modernist art; see Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index,” pts. 1 and 2, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 196–219. While the notion of indexical structure may be a productive heuristic device for analyzing Rodchenko’s systemic *Constructions*, completed just before his shift to the utilitarian-productivist model of Constructivism, it cannot be transferred unchanged to an analysis of his or other Constructivists’ utilitarian things. Gough does not propose such a transfer in her essay, but other scholars, such as Hubertus Gassner, have done so; he claims that once the systemic (or for Gough, indexical) constructions of early Constructivism were harnessed for utilitarian purposes, their forms lost their theoretical clarity, and they became instruments of subjugation. For Gassner, in other words, the indexical model of transparency must be predicated on the refusal of the opacities introduced by the historical situatedness of the thing. My aim is to argue for a model of transparency that does not require such a refusal. See Hubertus Gassner, “The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization,” in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915–1932* (exhibition catalog, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 25 Sept.–15 Dec. 1992), pp. 298–319.

tivist thing does not preclude it from addressing the opacity of commodity desire in the everyday life of modernity. The utilitarian “goal” or “purpose” referenced by *tselesobraznost*’ is not only the mechanical purpose of the thing but the larger purpose of confronting the phantasmatic power of the commodity object and redeeming it for socialism.

Popova and Stepanova acknowledged this phantasmatic power of the object; they knew that the real test of their textile-design work at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory would come in clothing design—in the formation, from their fabrics, of three-dimensional things for use in everyday life. Fashion would therefore be the site of their Constructivist intervention into revolutionary material culture, an area of consumer culture that was undeniably associated with femininity. But then so was *byt* (everyday life) itself—the chosen field of action for the Constructivist thing. In Russian culture, the split between *byt* (everyday life) and *bytie* (higher spiritual or intellectual existence) is arguably even more tenacious than in other cultures. The tenacity of this split paradoxically supported the rise to prominence of women writers and artists in the early twentieth century; in the context of the hypervaluation placed on literary and, to a lesser extent, artistic achievements (Russia is well-known for its cult of literary celebrity), women could “transcend” the usual limitations imposed by their gender. (The ur-example from our period is the revered poet Anna Akhmatova.) It is therefore all the more perverse and challenging that Popova and Stepanova, as women artists, would take their hard-won productivist credentials *back* into *byt*—into its most commercialized and feminized guise of fashion—and aim to make a Constructivist difference there. As Constructivists within the field of fashion they acknowledged the individual desires of the female consumer while remaining critical of them and attempting to steer them in more collective directions. I will establish Popova and Stepanova’s productivist commitment to the project of the transparent or indexical Constructivist thing *as well as* their openness to confronting the desires encompassed by fashion commodities—with an emphasis on the former for Stepanova and her designs for sports clothing and on the latter for Popova and her designs for flapper dresses.

Griselda Pollock has suggested that the historical presence of women artists in a “field of representation so powerfully dominated by the beat of men’s drums . . . offers a shift in the pattern of meanings in a given culture.”<sup>7</sup> But Popova and Stepanova did not simply shift the meanings within an already-defined field; rather, the shifts they introduced through their textile and fashion work were in fact foundational to the very formation of what I am proposing as the most productive version of the Constructivist object as a socialist thing. Tarrying with the feminized

7. Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London, 1999), p. 124.

domains of the everyday and the commodity were part and parcel of this Constructivist art-into-life practice; at this moment, Vladimir Tatlin was designing stoves and pots and pans for proletarian kitchens, and Aleksandr Rodchenko was making cookie advertisements for Mossel'prom, the state-owned agricultural trust.<sup>8</sup>

Constructivist things like pots, cookie ads, and flapper dresses—related as they are to everyday life and commerce—have a distinctly marginal look to them in the context of modern art and in the context of the technological ambitions of the early Constructivist manifestoes. The two main Popova scholars say as much when they write that Popova's fashion experiments, as opposed to her textile designs at the factory, raise the problem of the extent to which her art is Constructivist at all:

If in our analysis of her fabrics we immediately felt the presence of the Constructivist aesthetic (regular geometrism, the use of black and white, the slight graphic tone), then all the phenomena as a whole—clothing and textile design both—clearly exceed the stylistic framework and aesthetic principles of Constructivism.<sup>9</sup>

My argument will be the opposite: Popova's flapper dress exceeds our given definitions of Constructivism only because those definitions are too narrow. Marginal Constructivist things like the flapper dress, as well as the idiosyncratic Constructivist theoretical writings on the thing in everyday life, *are* Constructivism—if we understand the Constructivist project more expansively. Popova and Stepanova's project, as the most successfully realized example of Constructivist theory, is thus front and center in the story of the Constructivist thing. Their things are both indebted to, and deviate from, traditionally feminine forms of artistic practice. They

8. On Tatlin, see Kiaer, "Les Objets quotidiens du constructivisme russe," *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* 64 (Summer 1998): 31–69; on Tatlin and Rodchenko, see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The "Socialist Objects" of Russian Constructivism* (manuscript in preparation), chaps. 1 and 3.

9. Dmitri V. Sarabianov and Natalia L. Adaskina, *Popova*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York, 1990), p. 304; hereafter abbreviated *P*. Christina Lodder in her comprehensive history makes a similar argument: she calls Popova's elegant dress designs a "deviation" from the defined objectives of Constructivism (Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* [New Haven, Conn., 1983], p. 152; hereafter abbreviated *RC*). Lodder also emphasizes the traditional nature of textile design itself, claiming that it should actually be seen as a "pragmatic retreat" from the Constructivist ideal, and argues that it is only through the connection with clothing design projects that it can be understood as part of the larger project, which she defines as "the restructuring of the entire environment in accord with Constructivist principles" (*RC*, p. 151). Lodder judges Constructivist practice very strictly by the standard of whether or not it adhered to the original goals of Constructivism. Her account adheres to the orthodox Marxist perspective that shaped the first Constructivist manifestoes: only production and productive labor hold the keys to social transformation. More traditional practices of applied art, such as fabric or poster design, or the crafting of prototype objects of everyday life, are merely superstructural and cannot be the sites of social change.

demonstrate that Constructivism itself, as theory and practice, can be understood as an avant-garde that unsettles some of the gendered hierarchies of modernist art.

*Into Production!*<sup>10</sup>

Popova and Stepanova began to work for the First State Cotton-Printing Factory sometime in the late fall of 1923.<sup>11</sup> It was a massive and well-known factory on the banks of the Moscow River that had been privately owned before the revolution by Emil Tsindel'; despite its new post-revolutionary name, most people in the early 1920s, including Popova and Stepanova, still referred to it as the Tsindel' factory (fig. 2). After years of world and civil war, revolution, and embargo had cut off contact with other industrialized nations, Soviet textile producers, like most other recently nationalized manufacturers struggling to produce efficiently in the shaky postrevolutionary economy, were burdened by outmoded equipment and designs. In an effort to jump-start the sorry state of the factory's production, the director, Aleksandr Arkhangelskii, took the creative risk of hiring a pair of avant-garde artists as textile designers. He took the unprecedented step—for a Soviet industrial manager—of actually heeding the many Constructivist speeches, articles, and manifestoes that declared that the new “artist-constructors” of the left avant-garde held the key to improving the quality and competitiveness of Soviet industry. The Constructivist women were most likely invited to work there, while their male colleagues were not, because of the feminization of the textile industry; in Russia as in other industrialized countries, textile workers were predominantly women. Yet if Popova and Stepanova's gender may have naturalized them as employees for Arkhangelskii, their avant-garde credentials and notoriety landed them the job. They were well-known in Moscow for their costume and set designs for the avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, which had been widely discussed

10. The title of this section is taken from Osip Brik, “V proizvodstvo!” *Lef* 1, no. 1 (1923): 105–8.

11. No definitive archival evidence of the terms of their employment at the factory, including the starting date, has yet been found. But contemporary accounts suggest that they were invited to work there by the director in the fall of 1923 and that they were certainly working there by January 1924. Popova was still working for the factory at the time of her death in May 1924; according to the art historian Alexander Lavrentiev, who is also Stepanova's grandson, Stepanova continued working there until 1925. For synthetic accounts of the available sources for this history, see Alexander Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*, trans. Wendy Salmond, ed. John E. Bowit (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 79–84; *P*, pp. 299–303; *RC*, pp. 146–52; and Tatiana Strizhenova, *Soviet Costume and Textiles, 1917–1945*, trans. Era Mozolkova (Moscow, 1991), pp. 135–47, hereafter abbreviated *SCT*.





FIG. 2.—Detail, brochure from the Tsindel' factory.

in the press, and Stepanova had even made a foray into the discourse of clothing production by publishing an article called “Today’s Clothing Is Production Clothing” in *Lef* in early 1923.<sup>12</sup>

When Popova and Stepanova entered the First State Cotton-Printing Factory, they attempted to define their role precisely as that of the productivist artist-engineer. They wrote a high-handed memo to the factory administration with the following demands:

1. Participation in the production sections . . . with the right to vote (on production plans, production models, the acquisition of design drawings and the hiring of workers for artistic work).
2. Participation in the chemistry laboratory to observe the coloring process.
3. The

12. See Varvara Stepanova, “Kostium segodniashnego dnia—prozodezhda,” *Lef* 1, no. 2 (1923): 65–68, which I discuss below. Popova designed the set and costumes for Meierkhol’d’s 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, while Stepanova similarly designed his production of *The Death of Tarelkin* in the same year.

production of designs for block-printed fabrics according to our requirements and proposals.<sup>13</sup>

The third demand was meant to give them the right to determine the types of fabrics printed in relation to their proposed uses—in other words, to connect the “traditional” applied-art aspect of the textile-printing process to the more ambitious one of the shaping or forming of mass-produced objects such as clothing.<sup>14</sup> By voicing their desire to be involved in production decisions and to enter the industrial laboratories of the factory, they attempted to differentiate themselves from traditional applied artists who stayed within the artistic domain of the design departments. They threw themselves into the study of the cotton-printing process, developing an understanding, for example, of the limitations posed by the narrow width of the factory’s print rollers and its outmoded conveyor system.

A skeptic might well ask on what grounds Popova and Stepanova expected that they could possibly be qualified to run technical laboratories in factories. Their qualification (*kvalifikatsiia*, a key buzzword of the time), they would answer, was their training as abstract, modernist artists. They both had participated in the debates leading to the formation of the First Working Group of Constructivists in March of 1921 at the Institute of Artistic Culture (*Institut Khudozhestvennoi Kul'tury*, or Inkhuk) in Moscow. The Inkhuk was an unprecedented institution: an art institute sponsored by the state that was set up solely for the purpose of conducting research on modernism in art. The artists, critics, and historians who were members researched the very building blocks of art making—material, texture (*faktura*), color, space, time, form, and technique (*tekhnika*)—and investigated psychological and physical responses to art through studies and questionnaires.<sup>15</sup> The Inkhuk research program exemplifies the definition of modernism articulated by Clement Greenberg: the self-critical attention given by advanced artists, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, to the materials, processes of making, and structures of reception that are inherent and exclusive to particular art

13. Stepanova and L. S. Popova, “Memo to the Directorate for the First State Cotton-Printing Factory” (1924), manuscript, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow; quoted in A. N. Lavrentiev, “Poeziia graficheskogo dizaina v tvorchestve Varvary Stepanovoi,” *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika* (1980): 25; trans. in *SCT*, p. 136; trans. mod.

14. This interpretation of the memo is offered by Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova*, p. 81.

15. “Polozhenie Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv i khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti NKP po voprosu ‘o khudozhestvennoi kul'ture,’” *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 11 (1919): 4; quoted in *RC*, p. 79. The Inkhuk had been organized in March of 1920, on the initiative and under the leadership of Vasilii Kandinsky, by the Department of Fine Arts of the National Commissariat of Enlightenment. My account of the Inkhuk and the debates within it leading to Constructivism draws primarily on Lodder’s comprehensive study; see *RC*, esp. pp. 78–98. For an in-depth account of the disputed term *faktura*, see Gough, “*Faktura*: The Making of the Russian Avant-garde,” *Res* 36 (Autumn 1999): 32–59; in this essay, she elaborates further on the relevance of the index for an account of Russian avant-garde art.

forms.<sup>16</sup> But in a departure from Greenbergian modernism, the principle of construction as it developed at the Inkhuk debates in 1921 resulted in a critique of the traditional concept of art as individual creation—a critique that led logically, for the productivist theorists at Inkhuk, to the adoption of the highly organized, scientific, and technologically advanced model of collective *industrial* production as the new model for artistic making in Constructivism. It would serve not simply as a model for art making but as art making itself (once it was sufficiently improved by Constructivist principles). Constructivist “artist-productivists” would combine their skills of advanced *artistic* analysis of material, form, and process with these newly learned and newly adopted “scientific” skills, in order to “dynamize” the traditional, backward practices of Soviet industry.

Both Popova and Stepanova started out as painters, but they arrived at their joint stint at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory, and the remarkably similar textile designs they produced there, through different paths of artistic development. Popova was born into a rich and cultured family near Moscow in 1889 and received an excellent art education. She had the opportunity to travel in Russia and Europe to look at art and spent a year in Paris studying at La Palette, the studio of the cubist painters Henri Le Fauconnier and Jean Metzinger. On her return from Paris in 1913, she worked in the studio of Vladimir Tatlin, who was developing his famous *Counter-relief* constructions; during this period she successfully exhibited cubist-style paintings. In 1916 she switched allegiances and joined the suprematist group around Kazimir Malevich and developed her own acclaimed suprematist-inspired language of abstract painting, her *Architectonics* series.

In *Painterly Architectonics with Pink Semicircle* of 1918, vibrantly colored quadrilaterals and a pink circle are layered like so many flat cut-paper collage elements on the surface, invoking suprematist flatness (fig. 3). Yet where Malevich’s flat quadrilaterals can be read in modernist terms as indices of the picture frame, evacuating any possibility of three-dimensional space, Popova here courts its emergence: the explicitly painterly touch of her brushwork blends colors at certain junctures, producing a chiaroscuro shading that gives occasional solidity, even roundness, to the planes. Some of her quadrilaterals, here and elsewhere in the *Architectonics*, graze each other at oblique angles, slicing themselves open to grasp other forms within their openings. This drama of interconnected colored forms unfolds here against a backdrop of looming darkness. Emotion, even illusionism, lurk, despite Popova’s stated intention of achieving a transparency of formal means. In an artist’s statement of 1919, she would graphically divide all of painting up into two categories, one positive and

16. Greenberg lays out this definition of modernism most starkly in Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1986–93), 4:85–93.

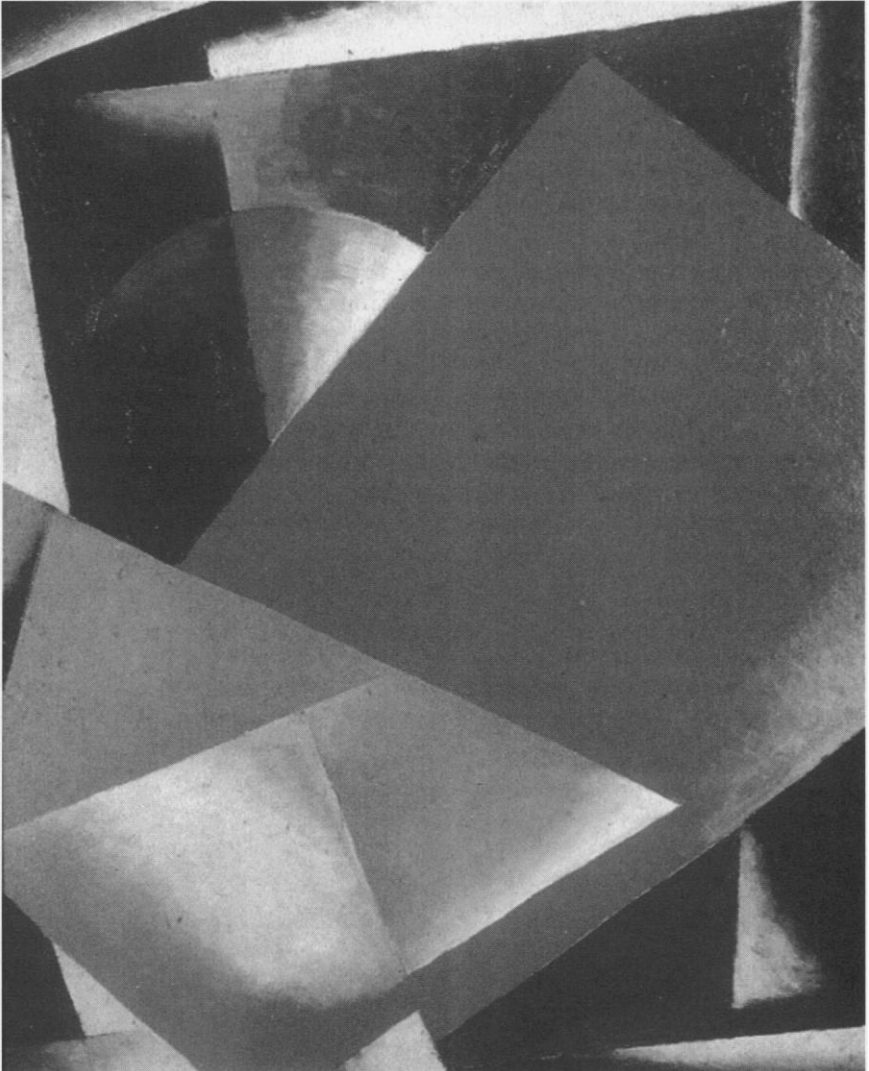


FIG. 3.—Liubov' Popova, *Painterly Architectonics with Pink Semicircle*, 1918.

one negative. She placed *Architectonics* in the positive column under the plus sign, defined in modernist terms by a list of its constituent elements: painterly space, line, color, energetics, *faktura*; in the negative column under the minus sign she placed the term *aconstructiveness*, which she defined by illusionism, literariness, emotion, and recognition (see *P*, pp. 346–47). She soon abandoned the *Architectonics*, as if the solidity and interconnectedness of the architectonic planes still suggested too much sensation or narrative, no matter how nonliterary (although to my mind, the contradiction between her work and her stated intentions gives the *Architectonics* paintings their pictorial force, as it works itself out across their surfaces). She began to make even more rigorously flattened and linear compositions, such as her *Spatial-Force Construction* series of 1921.

We should not be surprised to learn that one of her contemporaries, a student at the state art school Vkhutemas, where she taught the basic course in painting, spoke of Popova's "domestication of her own, to some extent ladylike [*damskoi*], suprematism."<sup>17</sup> Although her young admirer (he also praises her beauty and good taste in clothes) hardly uses the adjective *ladylike* here with any specificity, it is not difficult to guess at what he might have meant by this feminine adjective; today, as in 1920, *touch*, *sensation*, and *interconnectedness* are privileged signifiers of the feminine.<sup>18</sup> In the context of avant-garde painting and the debates at Inkhuk, *ladylike* was not the adjective an ambitious painter like Popova would want attached to her work. The *Spatial-Force Construction* series might be a deliberate rejoinder to this description: mathematical in their vectored linearity; vehemently material in their use of plywood, impasto oils, and marble dust; and modernist in their irreducible flatness. They meet quite precisely the proto-Constructivist criteria for plus painting enumerated by her own statement of 1919.<sup>19</sup>

For most of the period of the debates at Inkhuk, Popova resisted the Constructivist group's demand for utilitarianism; only in November 1921 did she sign a proclamation of artists who renounced easel painting in

17. Boris Rybchenkov, "Rasskazy B. F. Rybchenkova," in *Prostranstvo kartiny: Sbornik statei*, ed. Natalia Tamruchi (Moscow, 1989), p. 294. Rybchenkov wrote these memoirs in 1979; his romanticizing memories of Popova's attractively feminine personal qualities, with the hindsight of almost sixty years, do seem to color his memory of the qualities of her paintings, which he goes on to describe as naive and more suited for printing on children's fabrics than for the development of abstract art. But his memoirs, unreliable as they may be, do signal, I think, the possibility of such a negatively gendered reading at the time.

18. For an evocative theoretical account of touch and femininity within a history of painting, see Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," *Representations*, no. 73 (Winter 2001): 54–88.

19. Fer has discussed Popova's *Spatial Force* paintings in parallel terms, emphasizing that Popova was deliberately renouncing the traditional sense of an artist's self, with its connotations of individual nuances, including masculine and feminine, in favor of a more rational and scientific conception of making. In particular, Fer calls attention to Popova's interest in mechanical drawing. See Fer, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism*, p. 129 and also "What's in a Line? Gender and Modernity," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 1 (1990): 77–88.

favor of productivist work. Comparing the richly gradated shading of her *Painterly Architectonics with Pink Semicircle* with the printed fabric of 1923–24 that had appeared on the cover of *Lef*, the fabric design can be seen as a kind of end point in her consciously Constructivist move away from the individual, sensual touch of painting toward more anonymous, linear forms based on the “industrial” model of mechanical drawing. The earlier painting’s conjuring of spatial illusionism against all odds from the flat suprematist circles and quadrilaterals is retained but graphically simplified and transformed in the fabric design. The ingenious juxtaposition of alternately directed black and white stripes creates the effect of receding black holes, while bright orange targetlike circles hover “above” the background.

Stepanova’s fabric designs created similar optical or “op-art” effects, although their origins cannot be traced to her pre-Constructivist painting practices with the same satisfyingly linear logic. Stepanova was younger than Popova by five years, and her background was less privileged. She had gone to art school in Kazan and did not move to Moscow until 1913. There, she became involved with the avant-garde and continued to study painting, but she also worked as a secretary in a factory. Her only major series of paintings to be exhibited, at the Nineteenth State Exhibition in Moscow in 1920, were influenced, like Popova’s paintings at that time, by the flat, abstract planes of suprematism. But she appropriated them for a more traditional style of figuration, turning the quadrilateral planes into torsos and limbs and giving them round heads and little feet; most of her canvases are comprised of friezelike rows of flattened dancing figures (fig. 4). Stepanova’s visual gifts would emerge far more convincingly in design than in painting. With good reason, I think, these paintings were not as well-received as innovations in abstract painting as Popova’s efforts of the same period. Stepanova recorded in her diary the responses of contemporary artists and critics to the exhibition. Those who wanted to respond encouragingly used open-ended terms such as “rich,” “fresh,” “charming,” and “intriguing” to describe her work, while others more straightforwardly called it “unformed,” “evolving,” “lacking definite values,” “ungovernable,” “unbalanced” (these last two adjectives were offered by Marc Chagall). All these terms stem from the familiar lexicon of male critics confronting women’s art. One critic even told her straight out that her paint was overworked and that this was typical of women’s art.<sup>20</sup> (The Constructivist Konstantin Medunetskii rudely, if not entirely inaccurately, later referred to the figures in these paintings as “tadpoles.”)<sup>21</sup>

20. See the account of her diary entries describing these responses to her paintings in Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova*, pp. 43–44. The critics contrasted her work to the innovative, analytic abstraction of Rodchenko, which was exhibited next to her paintings at the same exhibition.

21. Konstantin Medunetskii et al., “Transcript of the Discussion of Comrade Stepanova’s Paper ‘On Constructivism’” (1921), in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932*,

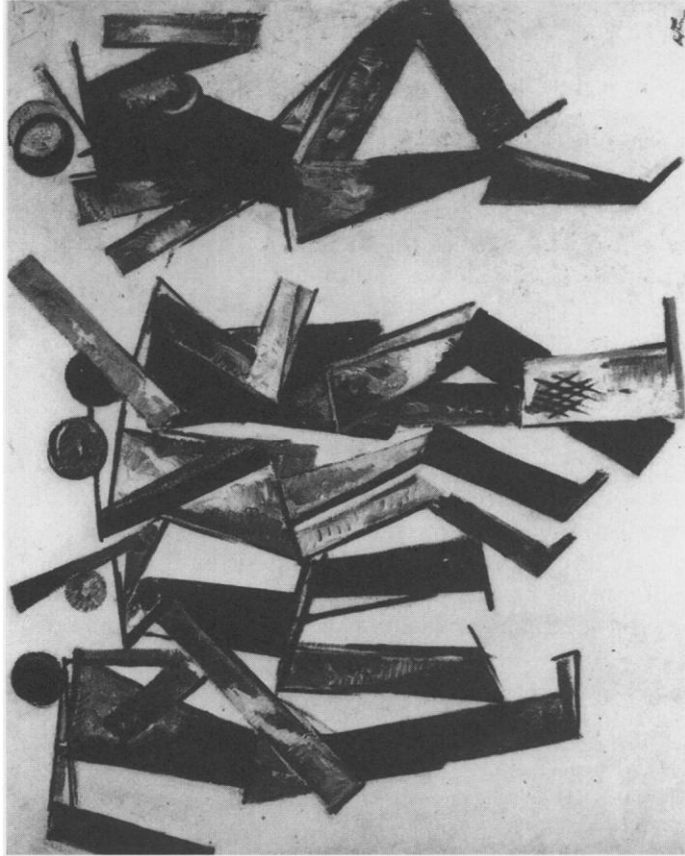


FIG. 4.—Varvara Stepanova, *Five Figures*, 1920. Oil on canvas.

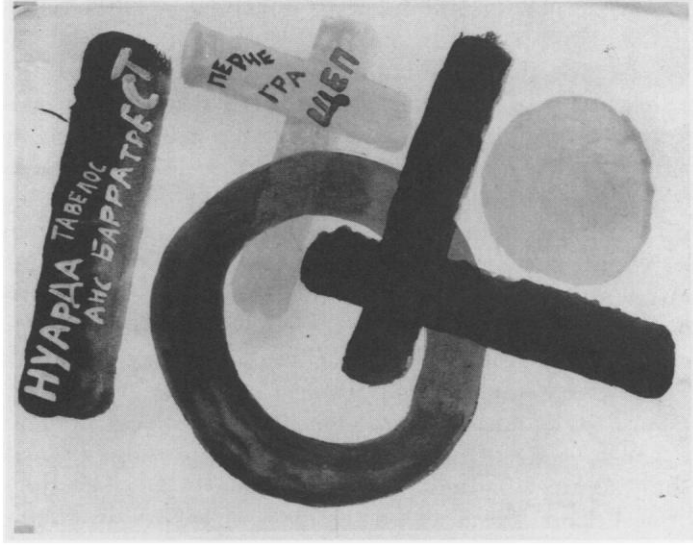


FIG. 5.—Varvara Stepanova, Illustration for *Rtzy Khomle*, 1918. Tempera on paper.

Her considerable graphic talent, in contrast, had emerged in 1918–19 when she produced nonobjective sound poems for which she handwrote the evocative-sounding nonsense words, surrounding and enveloping them with bright, almost translucent rectangles, circles, thick lines, and grids—simple graphic forms rendered in brushy freehand tempera (fig. 5). These works are more modest in scale and finish than her paintings, but more visually forceful and inventive. Yet clearly she wanted to produce work at a higher level of permanence and finish than these experiments on paper, which is why she turned to producing the less well-received oil paintings of 1920. In the context of her own artistic history, then, it is not so surprising that Stepanova was a founding member of the First Working Group of Constructivists at Inkhuk—the group that definitively rejected easel painting in favor of utilitarian work. Stepanova’s allegiance to the antisubjective, mechanistic aspects of Constructivism may well have been more vehement and consistent than Popova’s because her paintings had not received the same kind of erudite critical acclaim. She became the research secretary of Inkhuk in 1920–21 and would continue to function as an archivist and theorist of Constructivism throughout the 1920s, keeping careful records of avant-garde exhibitions, delivering theoretical papers, and publishing essays (she was a far more prolific writer than Popova).

We can see her at work with a compass in a famous photograph taken by her life partner, the Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko, in 1924 (fig. 6). The photograph has come to function as a sign for Constructivism’s rejection of the individual touch of the artist’s hand—here reduced to an amorphous blob—in favor of the mechanical precision of the compass. In a notebook entry, Stepanova notes that the factory council at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory criticized her and Popova for drawing with compass and ruler, assuming that they did so because they could not draw.<sup>22</sup> The implication, of course, is that factory councils have no comprehension of the Constructivist view that artistic drawing in the context of industry is obsolete. But perhaps for Stepanova there is also a recognition that her talent *does* lie with simplified graphic forms, with the ruler and the compass. In a paper on their work at the textile factory delivered at Inkhuk in January 1924, she enumerated her and Popova’s goals as precisely the eradication of “the high artistic value [placed on] a handdrawn design” and the elimination of “naturalistic design”—she has in mind the traditional Russian floral patterns—in favor of exclusively geometric forms.<sup>23</sup>

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trans. James West, ed. Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska (exhibition catalog, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, 4 July–2 Sept. 1990), p. 74.

22. See Stepanova, “Registration of Textile Samples” (c. 1924), notebook, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow; quoted in *SCT*, p. 147.

23. Stepanova, “O polozhenii i zadachakh khudozhnika-konstruktivista v shtsenabivnoi promyshlennosti v sviazi s rabotami na shtsenabivnoi fabrike,” paper delivered at Inkhuk, 5 Jan. 1924; quoted in *RC*, p. 151.



Yet despite the anti-authorial anonymity associated with mechanical drawing and factory labor, Stepanova's public performance of her artist-productivist role suggests that it was not, in fact, anti-individual or antisubjective; she developed a strong artistic identity as a productivist, an identity that would prove enabling to her as a woman artist in a way that her identity as a painter had not. The photograph both produces and corroborates her productivist identity; her hand may be out of focus, but her blurry forefinger is paralleled by her intensely chewed cigarette, and the two parallel lines of finger and cigarette dramatically bisect the central vertical rectangle, the four corners of which are fixed by her intently gazing eyes above and the sharp points of the compass below. The photograph produces her as individual creator as romantically as any painted portrait of the artist at work, but the model of creation is transformed from mystifying inspiration to useful invention.

Popova and Stepanova may have arrived at the textile factory from different artistic origins, but both artists seem to have agreed that their mandate there was to produce geometric designs with consistently vibrating effects—even though such specifically “op-art” effects, as opposed to merely geometric forms, were nowhere articulated as particularly Constructivist. For Stepanova we have direct evidence that these effects were an explicit goal of her designs; her 1925 course plan for the Textile Faculty at Vkhutemas, where she taught, asks students to “plan a bichromatic design in order to create a multi-colored effect” and “compose a design which creates chromatic effects (such as iridescence).”<sup>24</sup> We even have a series of images, from an early sketch to a finished fabric, that demon-

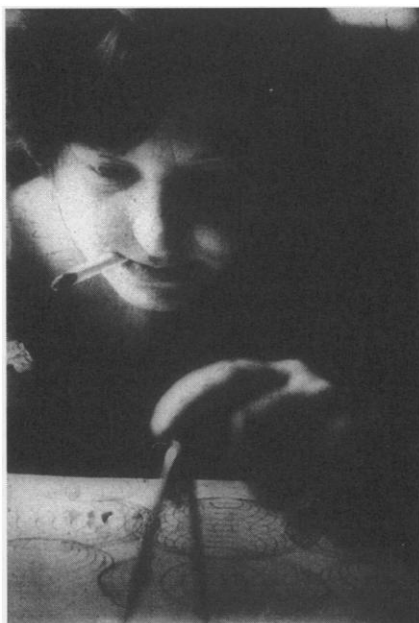


FIG. 6.—Aleksandr Rodchenko, photograph of Varvara Stepanova holding a compass, 1924.

24. Stepanova, “Organizational Plan of the Programme for a Course in Artistic Composition at the Faculty of Textile of the Vkhutemas, 1925,” in Lidya Zaletova et al., *Costume Revolution: Textiles, Clothing, and Costume of the Soviet Union in the Twenties*, trans. Elizabeth Dafinone (London, 1989), p. 178. These two points of the teaching program (the final two points of section 1, parts L and M), cited here from the English translation, are curiously omitted from this document in the more recent publication of Stepanova's writings in Russian. See Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda: pis'ma, poeticheskie otryty, zapiski khudozhnitsy* (Moscow, 1994), p. 184; hereafter abbreviated *CNM*.

strate her deliberate process of working toward the most optical variation of a given design. In the final variant, which was mass-produced at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory, circles with alternating white and red stripes appear to float against a recessed lattice of white and yellow stripes (fig. 7). All the stripes move in the same direction, but this logical continuity of vertical stripes is dislocated by the simple shift from white to colored band within the circles to create an optical effect. With the slight irregularities that result from the weave and stretch of the fabric, on printed cloth the design seems to shift and move.

But if it can be demonstrated that optical patterns were the explicit goal of Stepanova and Popova's textile designs, it still does not answer the question, What makes these optical patterns *Constructivist*? The answer, I will propose—neither artist ever spoke to this directly—is that in its dynamic, optical quality, this piece of cotton fabric, destined for women's dresses, embodies the Constructivist ideal of a mass-produced object of everyday life that has been penetrated and transformed by the processes of production. The fabric is a specifically industrial object because its vibrant colors were perfected in the factory's chemistry laboratory, and its small, repeating pattern of balls on stripes responds to the limitations imposed by the narrow printing presses at the factory. According to Arvatov, the dynamism of the socialist thing results from its condition of industrial production—for Marx, the most powerful unleashing of human energy and imagination in history—and its purpose is to import this dynamism into the stagnant, passive, consumerist lethargy of everyday life (*byt*) (see "EL," p. 121). The vibrating opticality of the pattern, while not integral to the structure or production of the cotton cloth itself, points

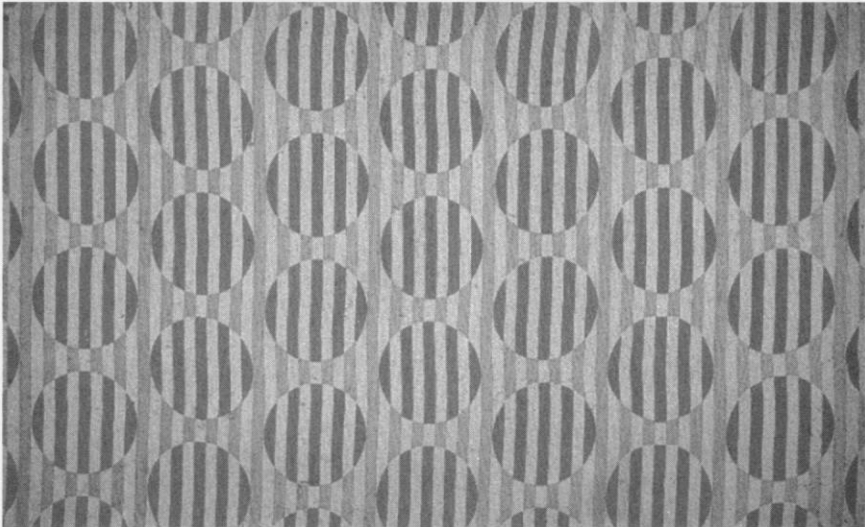


FIG. 7.—Varvara Stepanova, weaving sample of fabric, 1923–24.

to—or to use the semiotic term, indexes—the invention and creativity of the industrial production process. The skilled human labor that produced the fabric is rendered transparent in its very material form, lending the fabric itself the animation of its makers. These claims for the fabric designs as socialist things may seem, at least on the face of it, farfetched, and require explanation. The writings of Arvatov offer such an explanation, and his account speaks so directly to both the successes and failures of the Constructivist experiment at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory that I feel certain he had Popova and Stepanova in mind as he wrote it.<sup>25</sup>

### *Boris Arvatov's Socialist Things*

Arvatov's essay "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing" (1925) attempts to imagine how socialism will transform passive capitalist commodities into active socialist things. These things, connected like "co-workers" with human practice, will produce new relations of consumption, new experiences of everyday life, and new human subjects of modernity (see "EL," p. 124). Although integral to Arvatov's theory of Soviet production art, this essay does not mention art at all; it takes as its subject matter the industrial thing in Western modernity, not in Russia. His homeland is still too industrially backward to provide evidence for his grand thesis, which is that industrial production is a source of human creativity that, when liberated from the oppressive labor and class conditions of capitalism and reimagined in socialist culture, "will directly form all aspects of human activity" ("EL," p. 121). Already in America, Arvatov imagines, despite the harmful effects of capitalism, this industrial creativity is beginning to transform human beings through the agency of the innumerable new things that it mass produces: "The new world of Things, which gave rise to a new image of a person as a psycho-physiological individual, dictated forms of gesticulation, movement, and activity. It created a particular regimen of physical culture. The psyche also evolved, becoming more and more thinglike in its associative structure" ("EL," p. 126).<sup>26</sup> In Arvatov's theory, then, the industrial thing—in Marx's terms, the commodity fetish—has an agency that is potentially beneficial to the human subject, which is itself rendered more active and "evolved" through interaction with this thing.

25. There is a transcript of a public discussion between Stepanova and Arvatov on the subject of the artist's role in industry, from the Inkhuk session in which she presented the paper "On Constructivism," and he chaired the discussion that followed. See Medunetskii et al., "Transcript of the Discussion of Comrade Stepanova's Paper, 'On Constructivism,'" esp. p. 78.

26. Arvatov could only fantasize about the American city because he never travelled to the West. For more on his biography, see Kiaer, "Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects," *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 105–18.

But the potentially dynamizing effects of the “new world of things” are stymied by the commodity relation, which prevents things from acting on consciousness. Grounded in exchange-value, the commodity form isolates production from consumption and promotes private-property relations to things; it entails “the maximum isolation of the system of production, as a machine-collective system, from the system of consumption, as a system of individual appropriation” (“EL,” p. 122). The bourgeois has no direct physical contact with the technological creativity of things in production. His interaction with things is limited to his narrow, private-property form of everyday life (*byt*), which takes place in the spaces of private apartments and offices. Bourgeois *byt* is a passive sphere of experience diametrically opposed to the active creation associated with production; the thing in bourgeois material culture exists “outside its creative genesis” and therefore as “something completed, fixed, static and, consequently, dead” (“EL,” p. 122).

Arvatov’s emphasis on the *passivity* of the commodity constitutes a novel reworking of Marx’s theory of the commodity. For Marx, the commodity is a fetish because people project value onto it, a value that is arbitrary because it exists only as a consequence of practices of exchange on the market.<sup>27</sup> The real value of the thing, its labor value, is constituted by the labor power that produced it, but this is suppressed by the commodity form. The commodity has agency only in the negative sense of leeching that agency away from the human producers to whom it rightly belongs; its agency is negative and antisocial. It “reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers” (*C*, 1:165).<sup>28</sup> This shift in agency from producers to objects renders the human producers passive, while exchange-value confers on commodities the role of active agents of social relations.<sup>29</sup> For Arvatov, on the other hand, the commodity form renders the *things* passive—uncreative, fixed, dead. They may serve as substitutes for relations between producers, but this is an inherently static and formal function, governed by the spontaneous forces of the market: “The Thing as the fulfillment of the organism’s physical capacity for labor, as a force for social labor, as an instrument and as a co-worker, does not exist in the everyday life of

27. In chapter 1 of *Capital*, Marx famously makes the analogy to fetishism “in the misty realm of religion,” where “the products of the human brain” are projected onto wooden idols (Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. [New York, 1977], 1:165; hereafter abbreviated *C*). On the origins of Marx’s use of the concept of the fetish, see W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm: Marxism, Ideology, and Fetishism,” *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 160–208.

28. Arvatov cites this passage in his discussion of the aesthetics of easel art in Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i klassy* (Moscow, 1923), p. 52.

29. Hal Foster offers a pithy formulation of this idea: “the commodity becomes our uncanny double, evermore vital as we are evermore inert” (Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* [Cambridge, Mass., 1993], p. 129).

the bourgeoisie" ("EL," p. 124). This list of qualities that commodities lack enumerates, of course, precisely what will be desirable in the socialist thing. While Marx lamented that the commodity fetish resulted in "material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things" (C, 1:166), Arvatov wants to recuperate thinglike (*dinglich*) relations between persons and social relations between things for proletarian culture. Instead of wishing for a lost set of "direct social relations between persons in their work," Arvatov claims that industrial society has infinitely more and better things than humanity has ever known, and therefore it makes sense that relations between people should be more thinglike. The problem is not just with the commodity as a social form—as Marx sees it—but with the actual material, formal qualities of the things produced under the capitalist system of production. Thus what separates Arvatov from Marx is his conviction that the elimination of the rupture between things and people will be achieved not only through the socialist transformation of relations of production but by Constructivist transformations of *the things themselves*. It is this obsessive, even unseemly emphasis on the things themselves that characterizes the particular Constructivist version of materialism.

By imagining an object that is differently animated than the commodity, Arvatov attempts to bestow a different kind of social agency on the thing that is not immediately reducible to the structure of the fetish. Only socialist revolution can achieve this, by freeing the creative forces of production from capitalist structures. But certain conditions that lessen the power of the commodity already exist in embryo, Arvatov contends, in the everyday life of the technical intelligentsia of the industrial city in far-away America.<sup>30</sup> He imagines that the American city boasts an "everyday life of enormous offices, department stores, factory laboratories, research institutes, and so on" as well as "the collectivization of transport and . . . heating, lighting, plumbing" ("EL," p. 125). The reactionary financial bourgeoisie may continue, obviously, to live its commodified everyday life of private consumption, but the everyday life of the technical

30. "Technical intelligentsia" translates *tekhnicheskaia intelligentsiia*, a specific and highly motivated class term. Historically, the "intelligentsia" was the intellectual or educated sector of the bourgeoisie in Russia, a social group that arose in the second half of the nineteenth century. Bolshevism aimed to eradicate the bourgeoisie as a class, but it recognized the need for preserving the technical skills of the bourgeois engineers, scientists, and administrators who were needed for the practical tasks of building socialism. By referring to this same group of people in America as the "technical intelligentsia," Arvatov offers them social legitimation in Soviet terms: they are partially exonerated for their bourgeois class status. The members of the *artistic* intelligentsia in Arvatov's *Lef* circle, by stressing their role as technicians (of texts or art objects), attempted to identify themselves with the *technical* intelligentsia—the one group of the bourgeoisie recognized as useful to the Bolshevik state. On the complex history of the Russian intelligentsia's relation to the Western technical intelligentsia and to Bolshevism in the context of the avant-garde, see Gassner, "The Constructivists," p. 306.

intelligentsia has been completely penetrated by these collectivizing forces originating in production. The technical intelligentsia is in the unique position of organizing the advanced technological things of industry through its work, without forming an ownership attachment to those things, because it is only “a group of hired organizers” (“EL,” pp. 125–26). It lives “in a world of things that it organizes but does not possess, things that condition its labor” (“EL,” p. 125). The technical intelligentsia is *structurally* less affected by the commodity form.

The less commodified everyday life of the technical intelligentsia leads it to demand new values of activity and flexibility from things—values that will eventually, under socialism, become the values of socialist things. In contrast to the display or status value of bourgeois things, or to the decorative forms of the privately owned home (the weighty furniture, heavy draperies, and endless coverings of the bourgeois interior), the new criteria of value are “convenience, portability, comfort, flexibility, expedience [*tselesoobraznost'*], hygiene, and so on—in a word, everything that they call the adaptability of the thing, its suitability in terms of positioning and assembling for the needs of social practice” (“EL,” p. 126).<sup>31</sup> Portable and flexible, ready to be assembled or disassembled on short notice, these things respond *formally* to the newly collectivized everyday life of the technical intelligentsia by rendering themselves *transparent*: “Glass, steel, concrete, artificial materials, and so on were no longer covered over with a ‘decorative’ casing, but spoke for themselves. The mechanism of a thing, the connection between the elements of a thing and its purpose, were now transparent, compelling people practically, and thus also psychologically, to reckon with them, and only with them” (“EL,” p. 126). The newly transparent thing logically embodies and demonstrates the labor power—the technical intelligence—of the technical intelligentsia. Arvatov endows modernism with Marxist credentials; the transparent modernist object that displays its mode of construction and its function is already, it turns out, by virtue of its form, on the way toward engendering socialist culture, because it contests the secrecy of the commodity fetish.

Yet Arvatov’s theory is not a simplistic technological one, all breathless wonder at modern machines and contraptions. There is an aspect of that, certainly, but to claim that as the core of his thesis would be to miss the more interesting claim he is making about people’s relation to objects. In a key passage, he writes that even the most mundane, low-tech, everyday objects can engender socialist culture: “The ability to pick up a cigarette-case, to smoke a cigarette, to put on an overcoat, to wear a cap,

31. For an excellent analysis of the key Constructivist term *ustanovka* (“positioning”), see Gough, “Switched On: Notes on Radio, Automata, and the Bright Red Star,” in *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917–1937*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York, 1996), pp. 39–55.

to open a door, all these 'trivialities' acquire their qualification, their not unimportant 'culture'" ("EL," p. 126). As the forms of such simple, everyday objects of consumption begin to approach the more advanced technical forms that already exist in the objects of production that have entered everyday life (he cites revolving doors and escalators, among other things), they will become better qualified as active agents of socialist culture. Arvatov's attention to the transformative potential of everyday life (*byt*) differentiates him from other early Soviet Marxists who, he claims, were obsessed with production and ignored the world of everyday things (see "EL," p. 119). They neglected to analyze everyday consumption as a site for the realization of human consciousness *through the thing*. Arvatov's theory of the socialist thing is therefore especially useful to feminist analyses of early Soviet culture, where women were firmly equated with *byt*.<sup>32</sup>

On the basis of this analysis of Arvatov's theory, Popova and Stepanova at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory—as designers fulfilling the role of the technical intelligentsia, and as women with a more practical and experiential investment in *byt*—were uniquely well placed to fulfil this vision of the culture of the thing. As self-consciously revolutionary artists, they had already begun to renounce bourgeois forms of *byt* in their own lives (helped along, of course, by the appalling living conditions in Russia during the civil war); now, as technical design workers in the factory, they were in a position consciously to imbue these everyday objects with the dynamic qualities derived from technological modes of making. Their vibrating fabric designs can be seen to embody precisely the "physiological-laboring capacities of the organism." The set of demands they had addressed to the factory managers in their memo, demanding participation in the chemistry laboratories and production decisions, was their passport to becoming full-fledged members of a new, socialist technical intelligentsia. They would unite the advanced experience already available to this class in the West with the socialist economy of the USSR—the step that was missing in the West. "I suppose we have a proletariat in the West and an ideology of proletarian culture in Russia," Arvatov had said after hearing Stepanova's paper on Constructivism at Inkhuk. "We have Constructivist ideologists in Russia, and technological industry in the West. This is the real tragedy."<sup>33</sup>

Corroborating Arvatov's pessimism, and perhaps predictably, Popova and Stepanova's Constructivist requests to be more than traditional designers were largely refused by factory management. They were not invited to work in the factory's research laboratory; in fact, they did not even work in the factory's design atelier but rather at home in their stu-

32. See Kiaer, "Objets Quotidiennes" and *Imagine No Possessions*, chap. 1, "Everyday Objects."

33. Medunetskii et al., "Transcript of the Discussion of Comrade Stepanova's Paper 'On Constructivism,'" p. 76.



FIG. 8.—Varvara Stepanova, caricature of Popova and Stepanova. From the homemade newspaper by Stepanova and Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Nash Gaz*, 1924.



FIG. 9.—Advertisement for the “Mos-sukno” state textile trust, 1923.

dios. They went to the factory only to drop off their designs, as depicted in a caricature by Stepanova that shows Popova on her way to the factory pushing a wheelbarrow filled with designs (“I’m taking my weekly production of designs to Tsindel!” she says), while Stepanova herself is hand carrying two new designs to the same destination (fig. 8).<sup>34</sup> They were prevented from fulfilling the role of the technical intelligentsia by conservative industrial management, which was too pressured by the financial problems of running a newly nationalized factory to have the luxury of experimenting with left avant-garde schemes for industrial improvement.

34. The caricature stems from a home-made newspaper produced by Rodchenko and Stepanova for their friends in 1924, entitled *Nash Gaz*, short for “*nasha gazeta*” (“our newspaper”). Like the English word, “gas” here can also be read in the senses of joking and of farting. The newspaper is in the collection of the Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow. The full text and images of the newspaper have not been published; the most complete publication of it to date appeared, in English translation only, in a small, limited-edition catalogue: *Ornament and Textile Design*, ed. Katerina Drevina, Varvara Rodchenko, and Lavrentiev (Manege Gallery, Moscow, 1990). The tone of this particular caricature is jocular, but it seems, once again, that Popova is depicted as more successful than Stepanova, with her massive output of fabrics.



Arvatov's dream of a technical intelligentsia transformed by the collectivizing forces originating in production was paradoxically *further* from being realized in socialist Moscow than in capitalist Chicago.

### *The Socialist Thing in the Capitalist (NEP) Marketplace*

Soviet industry was caught between socialism and capitalism in 1923 because it was operating under the semicapitalist and market-based New Economic Policy (NEP, which effectively lasted from its inception in 1921 until approximately 1928). NEP was instituted by Lenin in order to revive the economy after the devastation of the civil war. The policy permitted limited private enterprise to coexist with newly nationalized state concerns, which meant that Soviet state-owned enterprises competed on the NEP market with private ones. Many of them advertised to solicit consumers. A 1923 advertisement for fabrics from the Mossukno state textile trust in Moscow conveys the inherent contradictions of Bolshevik capitalism; it shows turbaned black boys unfurling bolts of cloth from above, while a female figure modelling fabrics on a stage is ogled from below (fig. 9). These familiar orientalizing and sexualizing strategies from bourgeois visual culture are here deployed, however, to address putatively proletarian consumers: the onlookers include a Red Army soldier with a red star on his cap on the lower left and a red-kerchiefed woman worker on the right. Kerchiefed women were familiar fixtures from propaganda posters. The text of a huge poster from 1923, for example, proclaims that "the new everyday life [*novyi byt*] is the child of October," while the graphics show a kerchiefed woman worker who emancipates herself by kicking out her domestic stove and washboard—signs of primitive Russian *byt*—and striding into factory production with the help of new collective services such as public dining rooms and nurseries, pictured on the upper right (fig. 10). The transposition of this giant red woman from the poster into a docile member of a fashion show audience in the Mossukno advertisement is exactly the kind of contradiction that defined NEP. It was within this contradictory, hybrid context—part flag-waving socialism, part business-as-usual market economy—that Popova and Stepanova became textile designers.

In militaristic language paralleling the visual language of the striding, kicking woman of the propaganda poster, the Bolshevik art critic Iakov Tugendkhol'd wrote that with her textile design work Popova had made "a breach in the Bastille of our factory conservatism."<sup>35</sup> Most critical rhetoric cast Popova and Stepanova as pioneers; the Bolshevik rhetoric of the liberation of woman under socialism permeated public language,

35. Quoted in Adaskina, "Constructivist Fabrics and Dress Design," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 5 (Summer 1987): 157; hereafter abbreviated "CF."



FIG. 10.—“The New Everyday Life Is the Child of October,” propaganda poster, 1923.

even if no one actually analyzed the role of women artists in the avant-garde with any seriousness.<sup>36</sup> But the “heroic” aspect of their entry into the factory as artist-productivists was tempered by the prosaic economic fact that they had been hired to help boost sales. The Russian Republic may have been socialist, but during NEP the First State Cotton-Printing Factory had to balance its budget and turn a profit. Hiring the Constructivists proved moderately successful in this regard; although they worked at the factory for less than a year, several dozen of their fabrics were printed and distributed throughout the Soviet Union and were seen widely on the streets of Moscow. Tugendkhof, who was by no means a constant supporter of Constructivism, also wrote, “Last spring, without even knowing it, all of Moscow was wearing fabrics which Popova had designed” (quoted in “CF,” p. 157).

Popova and Stepanova were fully aware that their work at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory had to respond to the market; in the same memo to factory management in which they demanded participation in production, they also enumerated two final demands: “4. Contact with tailors, fashion ateliers and magazines. 5. Work on promoting the products of the factory in the press, advertising and magazines. Our participation could also take the form of work on designs for window displays.”<sup>37</sup> They understood their productivist work in fabric design to be inseparable from broader questions of the market—and in the case of fabric designs, these questions specifically meant fashion.

Soviet women were routinely assailed with enormous images of emancipated women on propaganda posters, at the same time that Soviet publishing houses printed advertisements like the one for Mossukno fabrics and resumed the publication of prerevolutionary women’s fashion magazines. *The Housewives’ Magazine* (*Zhurnal dlia Khoziaek*), for example, had been started in 1913, combining practical and fashion advice for women with more weighty literary and political issues, including women’s rights and the legalization of abortion; the magazine exemplified the tra-

36. There is a commonplace assumption among non-Soviet specialists that the early years of the Soviet Union were an unprecedented period of women’s liberation and sexual emancipation. Sweeping legal reforms instituted by the Soviets immediately after the revolution did in fact accord women a level of equality before the law unrivalled in any country, and there was lively public debate in the 1920s about the possible forms of a new, communist sexuality. But recent scholarship in Soviet history is bursting this utopian bubble, demonstrating that actual sexual or women’s liberation was very limited in the 1920s and was in many ways eliminated by the 1930s. See Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton, N.J., 1997); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–36* (Cambridge, 1993); and Frances Lee Bernstein, “‘What Everyone Should Know about Sex’: Gender, Sexual Enlightenment, and the Politics of Health in Revolutionary Russia, 1918–1931” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1998).

37. Quoted in Lavrentiev, “Poeziia graficheskogo dizaina v tvorchestve Varvary Stepanovoi,” p. 25; trans. in *SCT*, p. 136; trans. mod. and expanded.

dition of bourgeois liberalism, clearly oriented toward the relatively small demographic group of literate, middle-class urban women. It ceased publication in 1917 due to the upheaval of the revolution but returned in 1922 as a publication of the State Publishing House. How did the Bolshevik press reconcile egalitarian socialist ideals with Parisian fashion trends? After all, Walter Benjamin, preeminent theorist of mass culture and socialism, would ask optimistically in his *Arcades Project*: “Does fashion die (as in Russia, for example) because it can no longer keep up the tempo?”<sup>38</sup> His question implies that only the tempo of actual social change brought about by revolution can obliterate finally the lure of fashion’s endless cycle of novelty. Yet an editorial in the first postrevolutionary issue of *The Housewives’ Magazine* in 1922 put the lie to his optimism, answering his question in a resounding negative: “our readers may think that fashion has died out . . . but our old friend fashion, powerfully ruling the female half of the human species, had no intention of dying!”<sup>39</sup> The editorial goes on to describe the length and pleating of the season’s skirts, while other articles in the same issue offer serious discussion of the new Soviet laws on women’s rights and the development of communal kitchens. This and all issues of the magazine carried several double-spread pages of Parisian fashion patterns, which were clearly its main selling point. The content of the magazine encompasses both socialist enlightenment and fashion, without attempting to theorize how the one might transform the other—how socialism might transform fashion. This was the question that preoccupied Popova and Stepanova.

The question of how socialism might transform consumer culture *in the context of NEP Russia* also preoccupied Arvatov. His essay “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing” had imagined industrial things in faraway America, but in 1925 he also wrote another essay, “Art and the Quality of Industrial Production,” which was deeply embedded in the present conditions of the Soviet economy and therefore far more open to questions of actual consumer desire.<sup>40</sup> Soviet industry, he warns in this essay, is currently in a dismal state, lagging far behind the advances of Western industry. Factory design departments, when they exist, are staffed with old-fashioned, academic graphic artists who tend simply to replicate existing patterns, some ten or twenty years old. Before World War I, textile factories had relied primarily on patterns imported from Paris. With most trade agreements with the West nullified by the Bolshevik victory in the civil war, no new patterns were arriving from Paris in the early 1920s. For these reasons, Soviet mass-produced things lack the “‘ele-

38. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 71; hereafter abbreviated *AP*.

39. Anon., “Modnaia khronika,” *Zhurnal dlia Khoziaek*, no. 1 (1922): 3.

40. See Arvatov, “Iskusstvo i kachestvo promyshlennoi produktsii,” *Sovetskoe Iskusstvo*, no. 7 (1925): 39–43; hereafter abbreviated “I.”

gance,' 'fashion,' 'originality,' 'stylishness,' 'contemporaneity' (for example, in the English spirit, Americanized, etc.), 'chicness,' 'pleasantness,' and even 'opulence'" that consumers seek ("I," p. 40). Arvatov admits that satisfying consumers with the qualities they desire "is undoubtedly a question of the quality of production" ("I," p. 40). Therefore, even though it goes against his own theoretical convictions, Arvatov reluctantly endorses enlisting the help of applied artists—especially the new, left applied artist-Constructivists (and here he seems to have in mind Stepanova and Popova at the First State Factory), even if they are not yet functioning fully as Constructivist artist-engineers—to add the missing sense of "style" to Soviet commodities, raising their market value.

In this essay, then, Arvatov makes it clear that a *tselesoobraznyi* thing is one that succeeds in its purpose of satisfying consumer desires for fashion and stylishness as well as in the more standard Constructivist purpose of efficiently (transparently) performing its technical function. While some of the terms on his list of current Soviet consumer desires are negative for Arvatov—"elegant" and "chic" and "opulent" are unequivocally the adjectives of wealth—the other terms are not so distant from the supposedly more "rationalized" consumer desires that he associates with contemporary industrial development in America and Britain. Industrial production there, he claims, is represented by "the most convenient, comfortable, dynamic, everyday-economic, machinized thing" ("I," p. 41). Even if the Soviet-desired qualities are not yet quite as fully rational as these, they are clearly legitimate enough for Arvatov to harangue his imagined readers (managers of Soviet trusts or other government planners—unlikely readers, unfortunately for Arvatov, of the magazine *Soviet Art* in which he published this essay) to hire applied artist-constructivists in order to begin to satisfy them.

But this solution can only be temporary, he cautions, because using applied artists to beautify products is a "market oriented" approach that "indulg[es] the subjectively taste-determined, individualistic demands of the consumer" ("I," p. 41). He pulls back from fully endorsing the more open-ended understanding of the "purpose" served by *tselesoobraznost'*, calling for the eventual entry of true artist-productivists into industry in order to combat this "subjectively taste-determined" approach, which is causing Soviet industry to lag behind the more fully rationalized industry of the West. The artist must use her creativity not for "fantasizing," not for "decoration from without," but for "real technical construction" ("I," p. 41). These are of course the same terms that he uses in "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing"; the thing must be fully transparent in its construction rather than covered over by fantasy. He may point, in this essay, to the special circumstances of the present NEP economy, but he holds fast to his assertion that in the West, as in the Soviet Union, the future will lead "to the mass, collectivized calculation of the needs of soci-

ety and their rational satisfaction, and thus to planned productive invention" ("I," p. 41). In my reading, the Constructivist thing falls somewhere between these two poles: acknowledging and aiming to satisfy the human desires of modernity, but committed to the belief that eventually, in some fully achieved socialist, industrial utopia, these desires can be fully rationalized to the benefit of all.

### *Stepanova and the Limits of Production Clothing*

Stepanova's brief article "Today's Clothing Is Production Clothing," published in *Lef* in 1923, takes a typically hard Constructivist line against fashion; written by a woman artist, it serves as a powerful rebuttal to the return of NEP fashion magazines and their claims about the fashion desires of "the female half of the species." Store-window displays with their wax mannequins, Stepanova writes, will become a thing of the past because contemporary clothing can only be understood in action: "Fashion, which psychologically reflects our everyday life [*byt*], habits and aesthetic taste, is giving way to clothing organized for working in various branches of labor" (*CNM*, p. 181). This kind of utilitarian work clothing was called *prozodezhda* (production clothing), and it could be broken down into even more specialized categories, called *spetsodezhda* (special clothing). The form of this clothing should be determined exclusively by the "more precise and specific demands" posed by its function, with no decoration or ornamentation; to use Arvatov's term, the function and mode of making of this clothing will be transparent in its form. Stepanova names as examples "the clothing worn by surgeons, pilots, workers in acid factories, firemen and members of arctic expeditions" (*CNM*, p. 182).<sup>41</sup> With the exception of surgeons, all of these professions were exclusively male at that time. These examples buttress the strong antifeminine rhetoric of the entire article, as Stepanova scrambles to dissociate herself from anything culturally related to femininity—*byt*, the decorative, the store window, even the wax mannequin.

Stepanova's rhetoric mimes, in the avant-garde context of *Lef*, the language of Bolshevik economic planners and clothing industry specialists. Her terms appeared in the proclamation "On the Provision with *Prozodezhda* and *Spetsodezhda* of Workers in Coal Mines" of October 1920, signed by no less of a Bolshevik official than Lenin himself (see *SCT*, p. 53). Her essay has much in common with the technical publications of the textile and clothing industries of the time, which similarly promoted

41. In another section of the article she also lists the following kinds of specialized, primarily masculine clothing: "pilot's uniform, chauffeur's uniform, protective aprons for workers, football shoes, waterproof coat, military service jacket" (*CNM*, p. 181).

the eradication of handicraft production in favor of industrial mass production and the rationalization of clothing designs.<sup>42</sup> By allying her text rhetorically with the technical language of the garment industry, Stepanova asserts the distance of her own artistic project from fashion. Here as elsewhere in her practice, her vehement commitment to the engineering and production model of art, which was generally associated with masculine areas of experience, signals her desire to distance herself from the usual expectations of her gender—expectations that we have already seen revealed in the criticism her paintings suffered in 1920.<sup>43</sup>

Stepanova's article on production clothing was published before she began to work at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory. She had not, at that point, had any practical experience with mass-producing things to be sold in the NEP marketplace nor with the possibility that her Constructivist designs would be used by consumers in their everyday lives in non-Constructivist ways. A few years later, however, Stepanova wrote an important text that takes up the question that the fashion magazines, and she herself, had refused: how might socialism transform fashion? The magazines had naively assumed that the two could coexist; she herself, in 1923, had claimed that socialism would obviously destroy fashion. This 1928 essay, "The Tasks of the Artist in the Textile Industry," conveys both her continued commitment to the model of the artist-productivist and, more surprisingly, a new understanding of fashion as an emblem of modernity and an object of socially meaningful consumer desire.<sup>44</sup> Stepanova's clothing designs maintain allegiance to the standard Constructivist model of transparency; in this respect, she functions for me in this essay as something of a foil to Popova, whose direct forays into fashion design strain more fully, I will suggest, against the limits of that model. But in her writings and her teaching Stepanova would manifest signs of acceptance of the broader understanding of the socialist thing as an object of

42. On the imperative within the garment industry to convince workers to give up their handicraft mentality, see, for example, *Tekhnika i iskusstvo shveinoi promyshlennosti* [Technology and Art of the Garment Industry], no. 2 (1925).

43. In a diary entry from 1927, Stepanova reports on a meeting of the editorial board of the journal *Novyi Lef*, in which the board attacks Dziga Vertov, and she comes to his defense. The other board members accuse her of defending him for personal reasons and laugh at her even as she protests loudly. She writes that "they say I am 'that kind of woman'—I drink vodka, I play mah-jong" (CNM, p. 206). This anecdote goes some way toward explaining why a woman artist would try to avoid calling attention to her gender, because it could so easily be used against her.

44. See Stepanova, "Zadachi khudozhnika v tekstil'nom proizvodstve," in *Rodchenko-Stepanova: Budushchee—Edinstvennaia Nasha Tsel'*, ed. Peter Noever (Munich, 1991), pp. 190–93; hereafter abbreviated "Z." The manuscript is in the Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow. A significantly shortened version of the essay, with a different title, was published in the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* on 28 February 1928; an English translation of this shortened version was published in Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova*, p. 180.

individual, opaque desires as well as collective, transparent ones—the kind of understanding that would come to the forefront in Popova’s work.

Aside from a few garments that she made for her own use, Stepanova did not design clothes incorporating her mass-produced fabrics. This points to the contradictory nature of the fabric-design work for her. At the factory she was designing thin, printed cotton calicoes destined primarily for traditional women’s garments such as dresses, skirts, and scarves, or for domestic objects like curtains and table cloths, but these were exactly the kinds of traditional objects of *byt* that she had criticized in 1923 because they “psychologically reflect” our “habits and aesthetic taste.” In her 1928 article, she notes that printed cotton fabrics are already becoming obsolete and that the artist in the textile industry must concentrate on developing new kinds of fabrics, such as the knitted fabrics (*trikotazh*) that have already begun to proliferate in the West. She acknowledges, in effect, that even her own greatest Constructivist triumph, her work at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory, had been doomed from the perspective of her own larger goals of replacing traditional fashion with rationalized clothing. Her attempt to use optical designs to infuse calico cloth with the dynamism of production was therefore in retrospect merely a partial, applied-art contribution to improving the quality of Soviet fabric production rather than a total transformation of the object.

Stepanova’s many clothing designs of the early 1920s did not, then, incorporate the draping effect of soft calico fabrics. They rather inclined toward stiff, even boxy, forms in simple geometric designs that stemmed from appliquéd fabrics rather than printed ones. They were for the most part not everyday clothes but rather clothes designed for specific utilitarian functions: sports costumes (through her involvement in staging agitational performances at the pedagogical faculty of the Academy of Social Education in Moscow); *prozodezhda* for actors in theatrical productions; and a few designs for women’s “professional suits.” Unlike her fabric designs, which were mass-produced in the here-and-now of Moscow in 1924, her clothing designs seemed to be destined for a different, Constructivist world. They do not address specific, historically experienced bodies, structured within deeply ingrained gender hierarchies; they rather bypass contemporary *byt* completely in favor of public spaces for the staging of an egalitarian, androgynous order.

Her designs for sports clothes that illustrated her 1923 article in *Lef* exemplify this imagined order (fig. 11). Their form was determined by function. Their bold graphic patterning was not decorative, she claimed, but was justified by the need to differentiate teams on the playing field; she classified them as a form of *spetsodezhda*. The drawings consist of flat planes of circles, triangles, and rectangles from the pictorial lexicon of suprematism. And, as in suprematism, these designs participate in the indexical rhetoric of modernism, reducing the visual image to the most



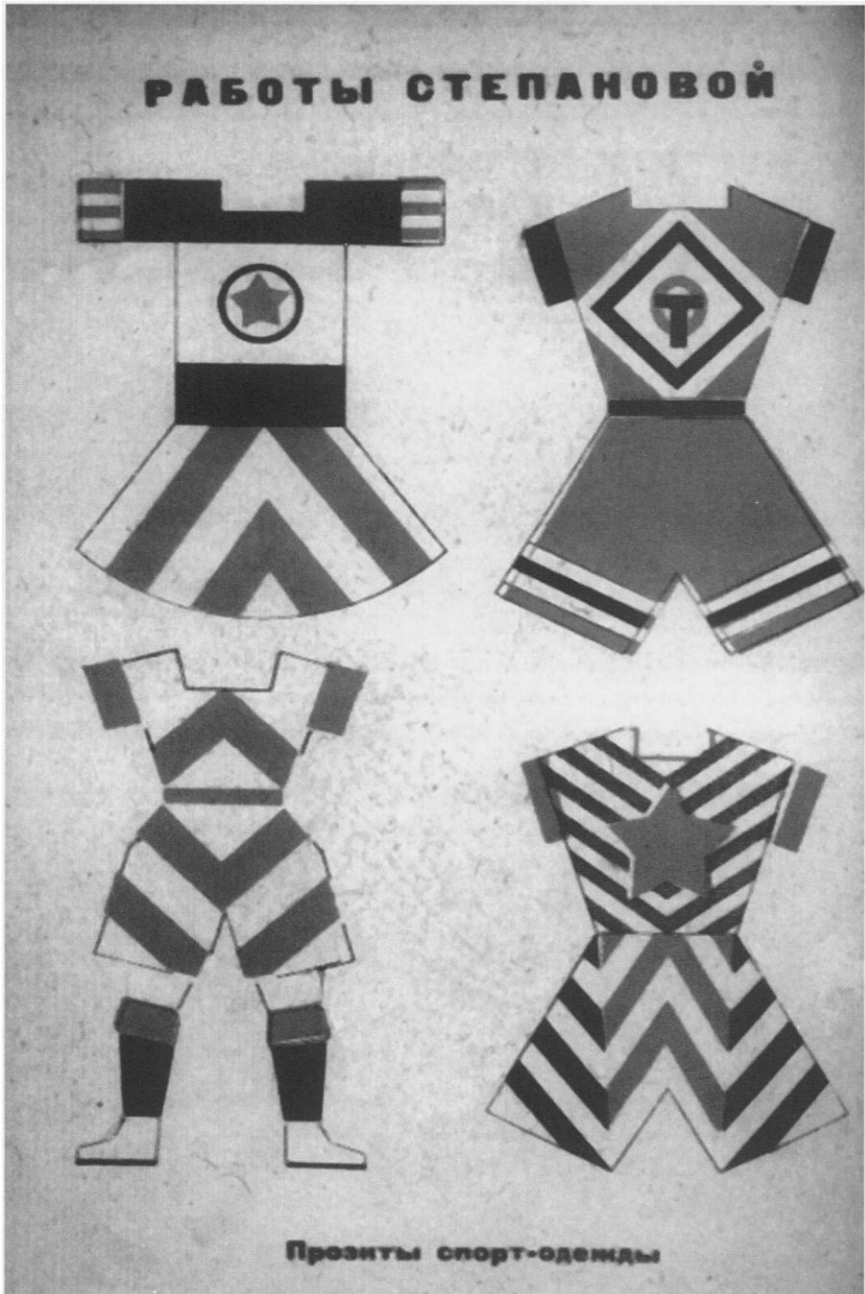


FIG. 11.—Varvara Stepanova, designs for sports clothes published in *Lef*, 1923.



FIG. 12.—Aleksandr Rodchenko, photograph of Zhemchuzhnaia in a Stepanova sports costume, 1924.

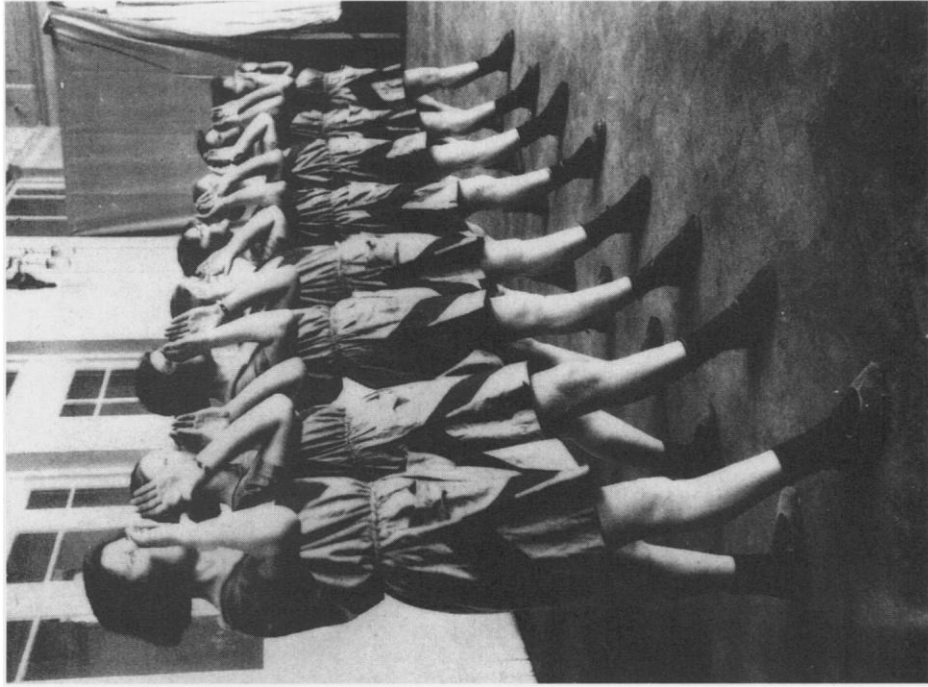


FIG. 13.—Students in Stepanova sports costumes, in performance of *An Evening of the Book*, 1924.



FIG. 14.—Students at the Academy of Social Education dressed in Stepanova sports costumes, 1924.

basic geometric shapes inherent in representation, so we can see how it is made. The drawings do not portray the body in action, which, according to her text, was the only way that production clothing could be seen. They rather evoke human bodies conforming to a geometric order—an appropriate visual metaphor for athletic bodies disciplined by the emerging ideology of proletarian *fizkul'tura* (physical culture). A photograph of Stepanova's friend Evgeniia Zhemchuzhnaia modelling a version of one of these costumes in Stepanova's studio attests to the ruin of these androgynous geometric lines when they enter into contact with a real body that gives off heat and has rounded limbs (fig. 12). Yet in photographs from the performance of *An Evening of the Book*, an agitational student theater piece promoting literacy designed by Stepanova in 1924 at the Academy of Communist Education, the multiplication of this same costume on a whole row of young female bodies of uniform height and size suddenly enables it to live up to the dynamism of the drawings (fig. 13). The costumes create a continuous geometric pattern from body to body, like a fabric design, suggesting a direct connection between Stepanova's optical designs and the futurist, mechanistic vision of the human body as a disciplined collective machine that is so often attributed to Constructivism.

This collective of young girls in Stepanova's sports costumes demonstrates a version of the body possible in performance, but not experienced in the everyday life of Moscow in 1924, in which females always wore skirts. Stepanova's androgynous vision is most evident in an evocative photograph of male and female students of the Academy of Social

Education in Moscow, all dressed in the same sports costume of her design.<sup>45</sup> (fig. 14). The dark striped pattern of the pants, in particular, seems designed to override the conventional signs of gender difference. The illusion of a diamond-within-a-diamond design when the legs of the pants are pressed together makes the lower half of the students' bodies look like some completely third, hermaphroditic appendage—phallic in its form but distinctly vaginal in its patterning, with the lines emanating out from the “central core” of the diamond shape.<sup>46</sup> Throwing open the windows and filling them, their androgynous costumes minimizing natural differences between bodies, the young students proclaim a hybrid, new constructed order against the naturalism of the ornate ironwork vegetation of the window frames on the prerevolutionary building. It may be a coincidence that the students were photographed posing in the upper-storey windows of the school, of all places (it is an odd site for a group photograph), but this photograph might also stage Stepanova's explicit rebuttal of the class and gender hierarchies of the fashion displays of the contemporary store window.

Critical as Stepanova may have been of the store window, her mass-produced fabrics, like the others produced by the factory, necessarily entered the commercial spaces of NEP Moscow. A photograph by Rodchenko shows bolts of her optical fabric—the striped balls floating on a recessed lattice of stripes examined above—on display in a fabric store window in 1924 (fig. 15). Framed sketches of women's fashions are placed on top of the fabric, suggesting its availability for being sewn up into fashionable dresses rather than rational *prozodezhda*. Bunched together

45. Though there is no record of Stepanova's view of how gender difference would be affected by socialism, she does seem to suggest that the socialist future will be more androgynous, and more egalitarian, in a set of images from a poster that she made to advertise yet another agitational play performed at the Academy of Socialist Education: *Through Red and White Glasses*, 1923. On the lower left of the poster, under the phrase “through red glasses,” she has drawn three fairly schematic red figures, two males and a female, dressed in three varieties of boxy “production clothing.” The female figure is just as straight-edged and rectangular as her male counterparts; her gender is discernible only by the rounded line of her jaw and the slight fullness of the style of her short hair. The counterparts to these figures on the right side of the poster appear under the phrase “through white glasses.” Here there are four white figures dressed in conventional, upper-class clothes, and again there is one female, but she is strongly differentiated from the male figures, drawn with a caricatured feminine body: she has enormous round breasts, a tiny waist, wide hips, and full thighs.

46. “Central core” imagery was the term invented by Judy Chicago to describe what she called the essentially female image of the vaginal form, and which she claimed to see in the work of most women artists. See Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977). As further evidence that Stepanova was aware of the genital signification of the abstract patterning of her costume designs, see her double design for male and female costumes for *The Death of Tarelkin* that are identical except for a geometric form at crotch level on the male costume that points upward, suggesting a phallic shape, while the same form on the female costume is placed pointing downwards, suggesting a vaginal shape.

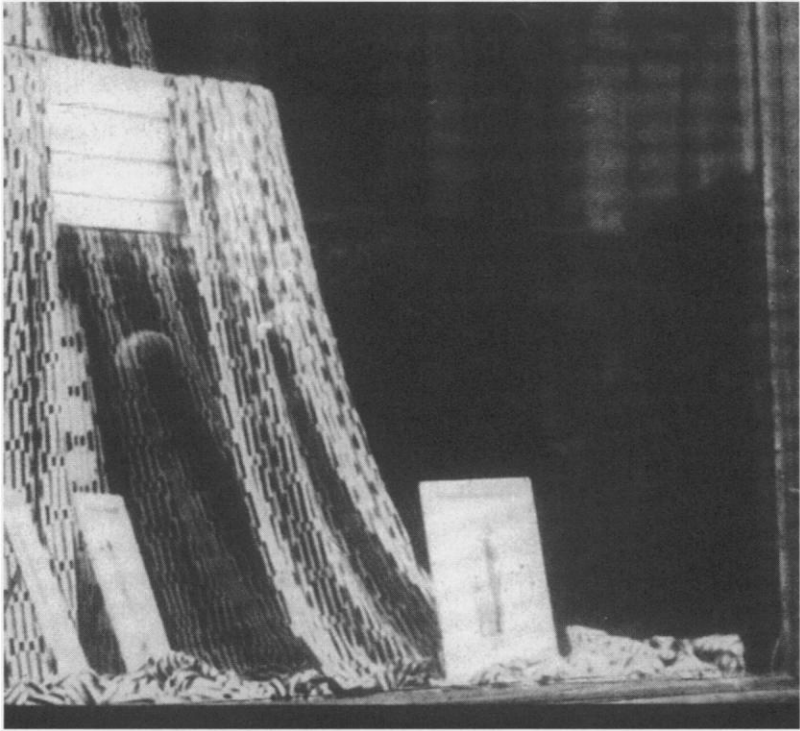


FIG. 15.—Aleksandr Rodchenko, photograph of Stepanova's fabric in a store window, Moscow, 1924.

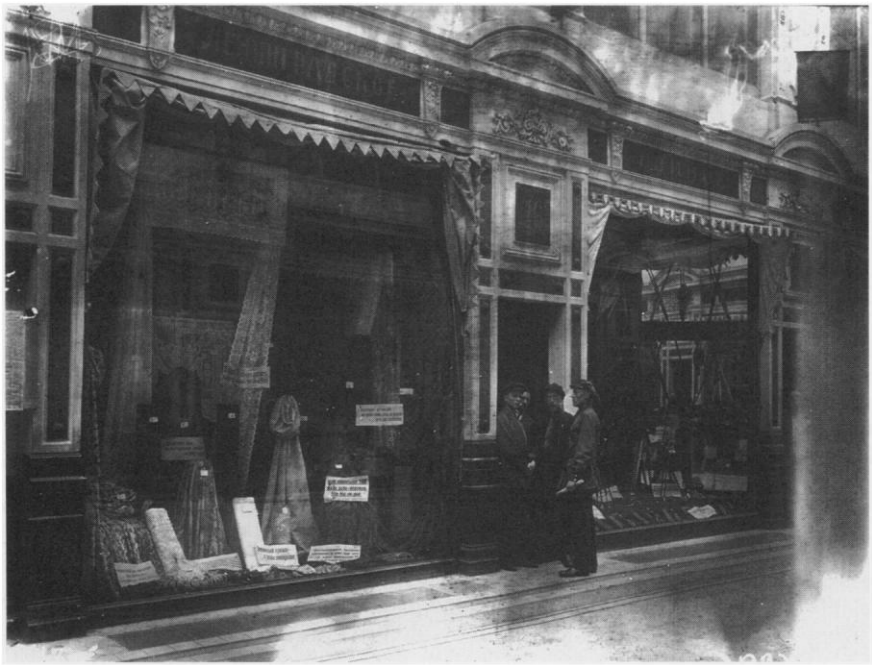


FIG. 16.—Fabric store window display, Passazh Arcade, Leningrad, 1924. Central State Archive of Film and Photographic Documents, St. Petersburg.

and softly draped in the typical style of Russian commercial displays of the time, the thin calico fabric loses some of its modernist optical effect. Compared, however, to another fabric store window display in the newly renovated Passazh Arcade in Leningrad in 1924—the kind of arcade that was the subject of Benjamin’s opus—the geometries of Stepanova’s pattern look markedly different from the formal and highly ornamental lace patterns and the array of old-fashioned floral prints on offer there, destined for the overcrowded bourgeois interiors that survived during the period of NEP (fig. 16).

A Soviet film from late 1924 provides some backhanded evidence that this contrast between Stepanova’s fabric and its visual surroundings was recognized, that its offer of a visual sign of rationality, and even of modernity itself, was taken up by cultural producers beyond the confines of the *Lef* group. A film still from the comedy *The Cigarette Girl from Mossel’prom*, a big hit for the Soviet film industry, shows a female character wearing a dress made from the same Stepanova fabric in the store window, here with the light and dark colors reversed (fig. 17). In the main narrative of the movie, a young and pretty cigarette girl from the state-owned Mossel’prom company temporarily becomes the mistress of an evil visiting American capitalist, but she is thankfully brought back into the Bolshevik fold by the end through the intervention of the bumbling comic hero who adores her. He is shown kneeling before the woman wearing the Stepanova fabric, who is attempting to snag him for herself. The film gets exactly right the way that the fabric’s bright optics rebel against the faded florals of the outdated wallpaper, against the impossibly primitive gas burner and bucket that announce the pathos of Russian *byt* and against the actresses’s own full body, which is not conventionally flattered by the busy pattern. The film designers recognize that Stepanova’s fabric is meant to signify dynamism, rationality, mechanization—even as these meanings are used to poke mean-spirited fun at this ungainly woman clutching her pot lid, the futuristic fabric rendering her almost clownish. By placing the fabric in a context that points up its clownishness, and by domesticating it into a fashionable flapper-style dress with a decorative white collar, the film designers most likely also got a chance to mock the productivist pretensions of the zany Constructivists. But they nonetheless utilized the dynamic meaning that the optical design was meant to offer, even if only in lampooning it.

While Stepanova’s own utilitarian clothing designs signalled her desire to move toward a strictly rational form of clothing, there are other signs of her willingness to work within the market structures of fashion during NEP. Her work designing calico prints, despite her misgivings, emblemizes that willingness, and there are indications that she welcomed or even anticipated the uses to which her fabrics were put once they entered the NEP market. Her obvious pleasure in wearing a traditionally feminine dress made from her optical fabric—not a sports cos-



FIG. 17.—Film still from *The Cigarette Girl from Mossel'prom*, 1924. Courtesy British Film Institute.

tume or production suit—as she poses dreamily for a photograph by Rodchenko in 1924 might offer one indication (fig. 18). So does her interest in having Rodchenko *document* the presence of her fabric in a store window, as we saw above. In her 1928 article, she concludes that the fundamental task of the artist-textile worker is to stop making textile drawings as an abstraction and to take an active part in forming them into clothing—“to force his way into the *byt* and life of the consumer and find out what gets done with the fabric after it leaves the factory” (“Z,” p. 192). This conclusion was based on a more elaborate plan from her teaching methods at Vkhutemas in 1925. She had students keep a notebook on them at all times for recording the fabrics and clothes that they observed on the streets. These were her requirements:

- (a) direct observation of the current designs for fabrics produced by the Soviet textile industry, with sketches
- (b) study of the evolution of changes in so-called “fashion” and analysis of it
- (c) observation of the current situation, with the goal of devising methods for a conscious awareness of the demands imposed on us by new social conditions. [CNM, p. 185]

She acknowledges that the “current situation” of fashion must be studied, understood, and, to an extent, designed for. But she urges her students



FIG. 18.—Aleksandr Rodchenko, photograph of Stepanova in a dress of her own fabric, 1924.

ultimately to move toward projects that will depart from the conventions of fashion and respond to the “new social condition” of an egalitarian socialist economy.

I emphasize Stepanova’s conscious, if guarded, openness to exploring consumer desire in everyday life because Constructivism, and Leninism for that matter, are often criticized for replacing one harmful entity—the



commodity fetish—with another one—the technological fetish—imposing a kind of enforced technological uniformity onto social life. I want to understand Constructivism, instead, as a practice that willingly adapted itself to the needs of everyday life, such as they were in the hybrid context of NEP Russia in the early 1920s, and I want to claim that this was a source of its strength as an avant-garde art-into-life practice rather than a sign of its failure. My argument is specifically meant to challenge Boris Groys's accusations that the Constructivists aimed for a "total work of art," a total restructuring of the lived environment according to avant-garde ideals of rationalization and utilitarianism, thus paving the way for the genocidal Stalinist *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>47</sup>

Stepanova's guarded openness to fashion was only acceptable to her, however, as a part of the Constructivist insistence on the exalted role of the artist in improving Soviet industrial production, which she reiterated in her 1928 essay. She complains that the artist in the textile industry has been forced to remain a mere applied artist, a handicraft decorator, rather than an independent participant in production—someone who invents new dyes, for example, or new structures and materials for cloth. This complaint was fully justified, we know, by her own disappointing experience in the First State Cotton-Printing Factory. A reference to the automobile industry in her opening paragraph suggests just how industrial, and non-craft-oriented, her ambitions for artists in the textile industry are: "How many textile drawings of the last decade do we know," she asks, "that could be favorably compared to the exterior design of even only the latest model of the Ford automobile?" ("Z," p. 190).

This comparative lack of achievement on the part of the textile artist resulted not only from the applied-art tradition of the textile industry but also from the very character of textile production as an industrial form. The textile is a flat plane that resembles the surface of drawing or painting, trapping the textile artist within traditional artistic practices rather than encouraging her to develop the principle of *tselesoobraznost'* ("Z," p. 191)—to invent new ways of projecting the textiles into three-dimensional forms, as artists can do in other industries. The Soviet artist-textile worker must take an active part in this purposive forming of textiles into clothing, which will result in a new form of socialist fashion: "Fashion in a planned socialist economy will take a completely different form and will depend, not on competition in the market, but on the improvement and rationalization of the textile and garment industry" ("Z," pp. 191–92). Clothing under socialism will be responsive to history, not the market. Clothes will still fall out of use, not because they start to look funny when the market generates novel fashions, but rather because con-

47. See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, N.J., 1992).

ditions of *byt* will have changed, necessitating new forms of clothing (“Z,” p. 192). Yet the socialist rationalization of fashion will not mean the end of fashion:

It would be a mistake to think that fashion can be eliminated, or that it is only an unnecessary appendage of a speculative character. Fashion accessibly offers a set of the predominant lines and forms of a given slice of time—the outer signs of an epoch. It never repeats the forms it has already found, but steadily and consistently takes the path of rationalization, just as, step by step, our *byt* is becoming increasingly rationalized. [“Z,” p. 191]

She has not completely changed her hard-line view of 1923; the market structures that organize fashion must eventually cede to a more rational organization of clothing. But she acknowledges fashion as a valuable expression of the experience of modernity, and, in an even more surprising departure from the rigorously antifeminine as well as antifashion rhetoric of her earlier essay, she goes on to suggest that fashion is valuable because it both expresses and produces liberation from gender hierarchies.

Stepanova compares the development of men’s and women’s clothing over the past decade, in the West as well as in Russia. The influence of the uniform from World War I had temporarily rationalized men’s clothing, she claims, but this tendency did not last, and it reverted to more traditional forms. In contrast, women’s clothing changed dramatically; she does not have to remind her readers that, in the same ten years, short skirts and loose, long-waisted dresses replaced the long skirts, fitted waists, and even corsets that persisted through the 1910s. These empirical observations then lead her to make a statement that is extraordinary for a woman artist who never otherwise publicly expressed any views on gender: “The appearance of woman over the last decade exhibits an exceptional picture of her emancipation. In these ten years women’s dress has been rationalized to such an extent that it has come to represent in and of itself almost the greatest achievement of contemporary urban *byt*” (“Z,” p. 191). The unexpected passion with which she announces the importance of the changes in women’s fashion that she has experienced in her own adult life (from age twenty-four to thirty-four) demonstrates her understanding of the significance of clothing for the individual female wearer as well as for the collective.

### *Popova’s Flapper Dress*

If Stepanova acknowledged the importance of fashion in her writings, if not directly in her practice, Popova’s interest in fashion was more straightforward; she designed many fashionable dresses and even two

window displays for a fashion store in Moscow. Unlike Stepanova, whose interest in designing stiff, androgynous clothing, primarily in the vein of sports and production clothing, precluded making designs that utilized the softer, more traditional cotton calico fabric that she designed at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory, Popova took up the role of the artist-productivist that Stepanova would recommend in her 1928 article. She took her two-dimensional fabric-design work to the next level of *tselesoobraznost'* by shaping it into three-dimensional objects to be used in everyday life. She attempted to intervene directly into the Soviet fashion industry in order to improve it (though unlike her fabrics, her dress designs were never mass-produced).

Popova's clothing designs based on her own fabrics aimed for the "chicness" that Soviet consumers wanted and that Soviet products lacked, according to the list of desirable consumer qualities that Arvatov had enumerated in his essay "Art and the Quality of Industrial Production." In Arvatov's terms, she would fall squarely into the category of the temporary fix offered by the left applied artist: improving the quality of backward Soviet production, first, by making dynamic designs for the already outmoded cotton calico fabrics and, second, by making these mass-produced Soviet fabrics appeal to consumers by projecting them into designs for "elegant" coats and "stylish" flapper dresses. (*Flapper dress* is my term, not Popova's; I use it to evoke the familiar vision of the loose-fitting, drop-waisted style of dresses from the 1920s rather than the figure of the flapper herself.)<sup>48</sup> I would like to propose that the "current" and ostensibly temporary interest in consumer desires that Arvatov allows for in his essay is not only a temporal condition of Popova's objects but a structural one. Popova's work shows Constructivism to be a practice that is as much about meeting the needs of consumption as about a fantasy of production.

Popova did not write about her fashion designs, so we can only analyze her theory of the Constructivist thing from the things themselves. These things do seem to set up a deliberate confrontation between the rational product of socialist industry and the commodity fetish. They point, in effect, to a fundamental problem in Marxist thought: how will our desire for the mass-produced objects of industry be organized under socialism? What happens to the individual fantasies and desires organized under capitalism by the commodity fetish and the market after the socialist revolution? How will consumers suddenly forget all of their fetishistic

48. Sarabianov and Adaskina claim that Popova's dress designs were oriented not toward the working woman (the office worker, teacher, sales clerk), and certainly not toward the proletarian woman worker, but rather toward "a more artistic type" from the "'gay twenties' . . . the artist, the film star" (*P* p. 303)—in other words, the flapper. But there is much evidence to suggest that this style of dress was worn by a range of urban, working women in Russia, including proletarian women on special occasions. My claim, as will become clear, is that Popova was working against just such class hierarchies within fashion.

desires, inculcated by the capitalist market, and relate to objects in a purely rational way (Arvatov's "rational satisfaction")? The very idea of a Constructivist flapper dress addresses this question by proposing an object that would attempt to harness the power of the commodity fetish—its ability to solicit individual desires—for socialism. In this final portion of my essay, I will argue that Popova's flapper dresses are not merely routine commercial designs that are marginal to her "real" practice as a Constructivist but are important contributions to an expanded understanding of the Constructivist theory of the socialist thing, which takes seriously the desire of the consumer and realizes that capitalism, with its honing of the commodity form that endlessly organizes and gives form to this desire, has a profound weapon that socialism cannot simply cede to it.<sup>49</sup>

The Soviet garment industry was one of the most backward of Russian industries; in 1917, only three percent of all clothing was industrially produced, with the rest made in small artisanal workshops or at home (see *SCT*, p. 9). The many foreign dress patterns published in magazines like *The Housewives' Magazine* were directed at women sewing at home or ordering dresses from workshops; the idea of fashionable clothing available to everyone at mass-market prices was still largely utopian. Left artists like Popova were not alone in confronting the problem; the state-owned Moscow Garment-Producing Trust, for example, established an Atelier of Fashions to improve Soviet clothing production. In 1923 it briefly published a journal, *Atelier*, which illustrated sketches of Western European fashions (fig. 19). The magazine was discontinued after one issue for its elitist bias; the recommended textiles for the kinds of dresses it published—crepe de chine, cheviot, and cashmere—were available in Russia only to the well-connected few, and the complicated fluted and accordion-pleated skirts were beyond the skills of women at home or the capabilities of Soviet mass production.

In contrast to *Atelier*, Popova designed *tselesoobraznye* Constructivist dresses, the forms of which fully and appropriately respond to the limits imposed by the Soviet conditions of mass production. For example, she designed a dress out of the optical fabric that we examined above, on the

49. In its proximity to the commodity, this Constructivist object is closer to the products of mass culture than to art objects. Constructivism broke with the traditional model of autonomous avant-garde art not in order to establish a more effective space for art to resist the dominant institutions of society, but in order, on the contrary, to participate more fully in the political project of the Bolshevik state—including its commodity economy, mass culture, and propaganda. This gives Constructivism its strange, partially repressed status in Peter Bürger's theory of the avant-garde because while it is clearly a "historical avant-garde" that attempts to bring art into the praxis of life, it does so by turning art into a (new, Soviet) form of mass culture. For Bürger, under the influence of Adorno, when it does this "art becomes practical but it is an art that enthralls"—it enthralls and subjugates rather than emancipates (Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw [Minneapolis, 1984], p. 54). On Bürger in relation to Constructivism, see Kiaer, introduction, *Imagined No Possessions*.

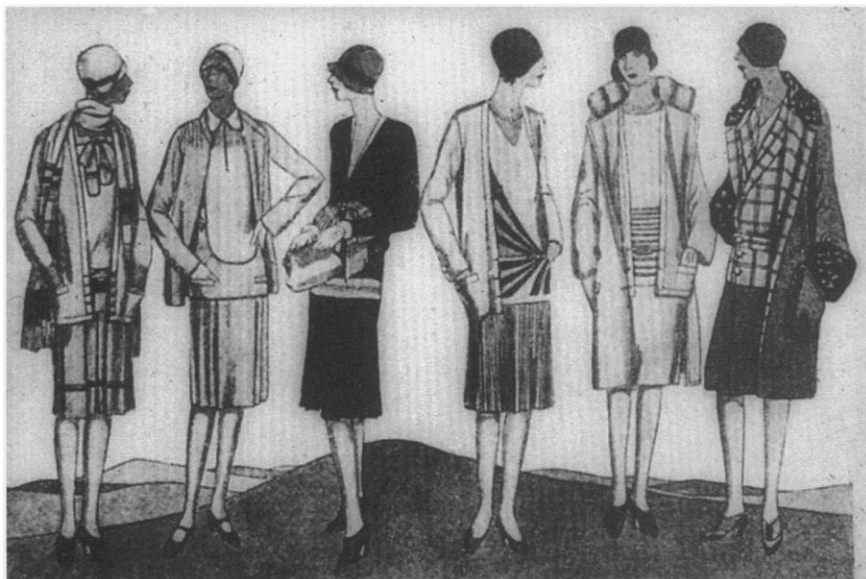


FIG. 19.—Sketches of Western European dresses in the journal *Atelier*, 1923.

cover of *Lef* (here in blue on black, rather than orange on black) (fig. 20). Its main visual interest stems not from the expensive fabrics and complex cuts of the fancy *Atelier* designs but from the bold geometric graphics of Popova's own fabric design based on her formal experience as an abstract painter. The dress has an elongated silhouette and a decorative collar, much like the dress made from Stepanova's fabric in the movie *The Cigarette Girl from Mossel'prom*, but Popova re-creates the stylish effects of Western fashion through highly simplified means. The dress is plainly and fully cut and is given its shape by being tied with a large simple sash rather than by tailoring; it is ornamented by an oversized collar that is attached to the top of the dress in a rudimentary way; and it is made from available, affordable, mass-produced printed cotton from the First State Cotton-Printing Factory. It is ready for mass production.

But Popova's flapper dress could also be described, in less flattering terms, as *clumsily* simple. The collar resembles a large bunched napkin, and the voluminous cheap printed cotton fabric does not drape as gracefully as the flapper style demands. Compare it, for example, to a very similar dress toward the right of a spread of foreign fashions illustrated in *The Housewives' Magazine* in 1925, which has a more carefully measured and sewn collar, a more tailored cut, and a more discreet geometric print (fig. 21). The clumsiness of Popova's dress is even more painfully apparent in an extraordinary reconstruction of the design made in 1985 by Elena Khudiakova, an architecture student in Moscow who faithfully recreated a number of Popova and Stepanova designs (fig. 22).



FIG. 20.—Liubov' Popova, design for a dress, 1923–24.

adds a layer of meaning to Arvatov's description of the ideal transparency of the industrial thing: "the mechanism of a thing, the connection between the elements of a thing and its purpose, were now transparent, compelling people practically, and thus also psychologically, to reckon with them" ("EL," p. 126). Popova's flapper dress project acknowledges addressing consumer fantasy as a necessary purpose of the socialist ob-

My proposal is not, however, that Popova's design is a failure, a sign that she had ventured, in her Constructivist fervor, into an area of practice for which she was not trained—a criticism levelled frequently at the Constructivists.<sup>50</sup> I want to propose, instead, that this dress is an object that indexically shows us how it is made; it hides nothing, but rather renders its mode of production *transparent*. It wants to wear its Constructivist heart on its fashionable sleeve, as it were; it wants to incorporate the consumer fantasy of fashion into the Constructivist rhetoric of transparency or indexicality. The purpose or use-value of this flapper dress is not only to clothe a female body efficiently but to elicit the belief that, in wearing this dress instead of a Western or NEP-produced one, the woman who wears it is more rational and more emancipated (to use Stepanova's term) than nonsocialist wearers of flapper dresses. This belief is elicited *through*—and will eventually take the place of—the fantasies of femininity that normally function to give such a dress its exchange-value on the market. This understanding of Popova's dress design

50. See, for example, Miklashevskii's criticism of Tatlin's attempt to design a winter coat, despite the fact that he possessed none of the qualifications of a professional coat-maker, in Konstantin Miklashevskii, *Gipertrofiia Iskusstva* (Petrograd, 1924), p. 61.



FIG. 21.—Foreign fashion patterns illustrated in *The Housewives' Magazine*, 1925.

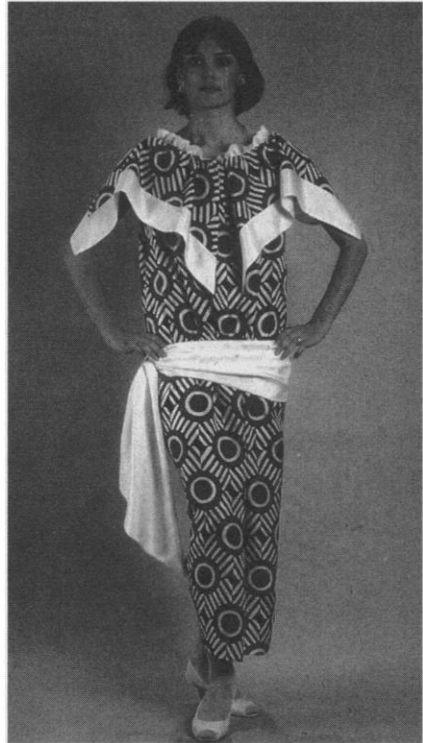


FIG. 22.—Elena Khudiakova, reconstruction of Popova dress design, 1985. Modeled by Khudiakova.

ject, even if the goal is to direct the fantasy of the consumer (to “compel her psychologically”) away from purposeless decoration and ornament and toward more *tselesobraznye* and transparent objects that embody the creativity of industrial production.

Despite its obviously feminine and fashionable aspects, in its indexicality this flapper dress bears a surprising resemblance to Popova’s most famous clothing designs, which are usually considered to be more properly Constructivist than her dresses: her *prozodezhda* costumes designed for Meierkhol’d’s production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in 1922 (fig. 23). The flattened, highly simplified, and perfectly symmetrical drawing of an outfit of shirt, skirt, and apron for a female character called Actor No. 5, for example, is largely composed of the floating quadrilaterals that had made up Popova’s suprematist paintings, rendering the construction of the clothing as transparent as the truth-to-materials ethos rendered her abstract paintings understandable as modernist works that were about the process of painting. The flat black rectangles of the apron have



FIG. 23.—Liubov' Popova, design for *prozodezhda* for actor no. 5, 1921.



been replaced, in the flapper dress, by the softer forms of the enormous sash and handkerchief collar, but the design is still an indexical one in which materials and parts speak for themselves and nothing is hidden.

For Marx, the industrially produced object becomes a commodity fetish when the real value of the object is replaced by its exchange-value on the market. Laura Mulvey clarifies this in semiotic terms when she writes that Marx's fetish derives from a failure of inscription; the sign of (labor) value should leave an indexical trace on the object, but the commodity's success depends on the erasure of the marks of production. The object must enter the market with a seductive sheen.<sup>51</sup> If the desirability of the capitalist commodity on the market is based on the *invisibility* of the industrial labor process, then by refusing to pull off the slickly accomplished sheen of fashion, Popova's dress "breaks the spell of the commodity," to use a Benjaminian phrase. Through its very material forms, the dress reveals its own recent birth as a hybrid socialist object in the conditions of the semisocialist, semimarket economy of the New Economic Policy.

Popova's dress challenges the usual function of the fashion commodity not only by succeeding in preserving the traces of labor but also by refusing to produce the seamless sheen of femininity—the glossy surface that, in the psychoanalytic scenario, covers over and disavows the fantasy of the lack of the female body.<sup>52</sup> Not just labor value, but the labored production of femininity, is made visible in the bunched-napkin collar of her dress. Unlike the similar collar on the dress in the fashion drawing in *The Housewives' Magazine*, which drapes delicately over the model's shoulders, calling attention to her throat and breastplate, Popova's massive collar broadens the model's shoulders and obliterates her chest; it becomes a sign for the failed attempt to produce an appropriately feminine surface armor. In this willful androgyny, the dress unexpectedly resembles the *prozodezhda* costumes for the *Magnanimous Cuckold* because we know that Popova considered her designs for these costumes to be androgynous. The men's and women's costumes were identical, except that women were given skirts instead of pants, and a text by Popova reveals that for her this distinction was so natural that she did not even notice it: "there was a fundamental disinclination to making any distinction between the men's and women's costumes; it just came down to changing the pants to a skirt."<sup>53</sup> Combined with Popova's embrace of mechanical drawing, mathematics, and industrialism, this interest in androgyny does

51. See Laura Mulvey, "Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture," *October*, no. 65 (Summer 1993): 3–20, esp. pp. 9–11.

52. Mulvey makes this connection between the sheen of the commodity fetish and the glossy surface of the filmic or photographic image of the female movie icon, which covers over the threat of castration posed by the female body that "lacks" the phallus. See *ibid.*

53. Popova, "Introduction to the INKHUK Discussion of the *Magnanimous Cuckold*," in *P*, p. 379.

suggest a conscious will on her part to resist the conventional signs of sexual difference in her Constructivist things. Her flapper dress is best understood as a design that continues this utopian resistance to conventional gender hierarchies rather than temporarily deviating from it into conventional, commercialized femininity.

On the level of the unconscious, it is possible to read the optical pattern of the fabric itself as a refusal to make the female body cover over the fantasy of its lack, a refusal of the veil of femininity as Freudian fetish, as well as a refusal of the commodity fetish. Sewn up into this bizarre dress, the op-art design of receding black holes and protruding blue targets, which seems so abstract and anonymous when viewed as a flat image, begins to resemble an apotropaic proliferation of vaginal “central core” forms across the model’s body, as if the dress deliberately fails to perform its role as the feminine fetish that allays male fears of castration. If we recall Stepanova’s clownish sports costumes for the students at the Academy of Social Education, with the suggestively vaginal form created by the pattern on the pants, we find ourselves with examples in the work of both artists of the repressed sign of femininity bubbling up in the context of purportedly androgynous, Constructivist clothing designs. In the case of Stepanova, this eruption, along with the suggestively phallic shape of the pants design, might be read as a sign of the sexuality repressed from her clothing designs more generally. But, in the case of Popova, the errant sign of the repressed female body that surfaces here stands for the contradictions entailed in trying to combine a feminine fashion form with Constructivist transparency. The pressure of the attempt to hold both aspects in solution is made visible in the clumsy forms of the dress itself, which would most likely have been too antifetishistic to function as a commercially successful feminine commodity had it reached the NEP market in 1924. The dress addresses and resists that market, pushing at the limits of Constructivist transparency or truth-to-materials or indexicality, but also, like Stepanova’s designs, upholding them.

What happens when the Constructivist flapper dress pushes so hard at the limits of transparency that it almost achieves the sheen of the commodity? I want to turn, finally, to Popova’s most overtly commercial fashion imagery: a window display design of 1924 (fig. 24). It presents summer clothing in the window of a Moscow fashion studio in 1924; as in the fashion sketch from *The Housewives’ Magazine*, the Cyrillic word is *leto*, or summer. The earnest indexicality of the previous dress, and the demands of the strapped Soviet economy, seem long-forgotten, replaced by a stroke of montage, with a sinuous model, an elegant, flowing frock, and an ostentatious motorcar that appears to be speeding toward us. The patterned fabric of the dress is not one of Popova’s more complex optical designs but a slightly more conventional horizontal stripe pattern contrasted with a decorative piping of vertical stripes. We seem to be far from



FIG. 24.—Liubov' Popova, design for a window display, 1924.

the young students dressed in Stepanova's androgynous sports costumes filling the windows of the Academy of Socialist Education, far from Stepanova's cautious relation to fashion as something to be studied and negotiated, but ultimately transcended. We seem to be, in fact, squarely inside what Benjamin called the "commodity phantasmagoria." How might this image be redeemed for socialism? Can there be such a thing as a Constructivist flapper dress?

For Benjamin, fashion was one of the dominant wish-images of modernity, occupying the entire Konvolut B of his *Arcades Project*.<sup>54</sup> This project attempted to imagine not just a Marxist revolution but the transition to socialism that would follow it, to imagine a form of socialist culture that would reactivate the original promise of the creativity of industrialism while delivering it from the commodity phantasmagoria of capitalism that prevented its realization.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the Constructivists and Benjamin share not only the core Marxist belief that a socialist future—once freed from the commodity phantasmagoria—would embrace the creative material abundance made possible by industrial modernity but the more specific, and stranger, belief that the success of this socialist culture would depend on the very *material forms* of modern things. Benjamin theorized the dialectical moment that would break the spell of the commodity; this break with the past will come when the presence of mythic wish-images of the ur-past—the myth of "a humane society of material abundance"—are made visible to the dreaming collective *in the newest technological forms*.<sup>56</sup>

Benjamin critiques the endless novelty of fashion as an instrument of capital that makes the subject—particularly the female subject—forgetful of history and so prevents historical change.<sup>57</sup> This forgetful subject, lulled by the phantasmagoria of capitalism, is precisely the subject of "the dreaming collective." Fashion reifies the human capacity for change into the inorganic commodity, the "realm of dead things," replacing the natural engendering of human life (the natural condition of birth) with novelty's inescapable cycle of eternal recurrence (*AP*, p. 70; trans. mod.).<sup>58</sup>

54. On the wish image, see *AP*, p. 4; on Marx and the "commodity phantasmagoria," see pp. 181–82, where Benjamin quotes Otto Rühle.

55. Susan Buck-Morss writes that the *Arcades Project* "put forth the notion that socialist culture would need to be constructed out of the embryonic, still-inadequate forms that preexisted in capitalism" (Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* [Cambridge, Mass., 1989], p. 123). Buck-Morss's synthesis and interpretation of the *Arcades Project* has been an invaluable guide for me to Benjamin's text, and it stands as a major contribution to the theory of modernity in its own right.

56. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 274. See also pp. 146, 116–17.

57. "Fashions are a collective medicament for the ravages of oblivion. The more short-lived a period, the more susceptible it is to fashion" (*AP*, p. 80).

58. I have used Buck-Morss's translation here (see Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 101) in place of Eiland and McLaughlin's "world of the inorganic"; on the "overcoming" of birth and death, see *AP*, p. 79; on "the ridiculous superstition of novelty," see Paul Valéry, quoted in *AP*, p. 74.

But, in other entries in Konvolut B, Benjamin calls attention to the utopian promise of fashion. The mass-production of clothing beginning in the nineteenth century led to a democratization of style; the new industrial abundance of fashion challenges the “natural” social hierarchies of class based on the accidents of birth, making visible the mythic wish-image of, precisely, “a humane society of material abundance.”<sup>59</sup> This is why Benjamin’s question about fashion in Soviet Russia, which we have already considered, is phrased so uncertainly: “Does fashion die (as in Russia, for example)?” Perhaps it should not die, after all, because it is the locus of the wish-image that must be redeemed in the new material forms of modernity in order to engender a utopian future. Could the conditions of *actual* social change brought about in Russia by the defeat of capital and the “birth” of the revolution stop fashion’s eternal cycle of repetition and reawaken its utopian promise as a force of social change?

The Constructivist thing is born from the rhetoric of transparency or indexicality, but it points, not just to its mode of making, but also to its historical situatedness, to its place within the wish-images of modernity. Popova’s photomontage window display design could, for example, be analyzed within the standard rhetoric of transparency as a typically leftist avant-garde image that aims for a disruption or laying bare of the device of consumer fantasy. The argument that the pictorial technique of montage disrupts the sheen of the bourgeois spectacle, calling attention to the construction of ideology within it, is a familiar one from modernist art history. The obvious fragmentation of the woman’s body in the window display—the way that it is cobbled together pictorially, its parts out of proportion—could serve well to illustrate Benjamin’s critique of fashion as an inorganic commodity, the falsely animated dead forms of which turn the real, living woman into a “gaily decked-out corpse” (*AP*, p. 63; trans. mod.).<sup>60</sup> But I don’t think, in the end, that it does so. It is, rather, an image that engages with the wish-image as something that must be redeemed by the form of the Constructivist dress. The dislocations of this montage work to make the body of the female figure more, rather than less, vital. Her elongated silhouette mimics those of the figures in the insipid fashion drawings of the time, such as the ones in *The Housewives’ Magazine*, but she goes them one better. She has the same ridiculously tiny, pointed feet below and small head above, but, in between, a massive,

59. On the “revolution” in cotton prints and the changing dress of the lower classes: “Every woman used to wear a blue or black dress that she kept for ten years without washing, for fear it might tear to pieces. But now her husband, a poor worker, covers her with a robe of flowers for the price of a day’s labor” (Jules Michelet [1846], quoted in *AP*, p. 78; see also p. 75). Buck-Morss cautions that the entries describing fashion as an indicator of social change are more predominant earlier on and that in the 1930s the entries on fashion become increasingly critical. See Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 98, 403 n. 97.

60. I have used Buck-Morss’s translation of this phrase; see Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 101.

sensual body explodes out of the picture, with immense rosy arms, one of them lifted in an autoerotic gesture to touch the bare flesh of the exposed pink shoulders. The dress swirls around her body, clinging to reveal its contours, and Popova has brushed in a ruddy, reddish glow to liven up the black-and-white cheeks of her cut-out photographic face. Through her sheer size and pictorial force, this vital figure broadcasts not only the dynamic qualities of the contrasting stripes of the Constructivist dress but the powerful wish-image of the bodily freedom and confidence of an urban woman in 1924, only recently freed from the tightly fitted waists and full-length skirts that Popova wore as a young woman.

Popova's window display can serve as an illustration of Stepanova's exhilarated statement that contemporary fashion represents the emancipation of woman, that it "represent[s] in and of itself almost the greatest achievement of contemporary urban *byt*." Although the elegantly subdued figures in the fashion spread in *The Housewives' Magazine* are technically wearing similarly comfortable clothing, Popova's giant, unfettered, collaged woman, disproportionate and bursting out of the frame, insists pictorially on her emancipation. As Benjamin wrote in "One-Way Street," the modern advertisement "all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen."<sup>61</sup> The juxtaposition of the female figure with the speeding car is almost ham-handedly insistent on the dynamism, activity, and contemporaneity of the woman and the dress. Like Stepanova, who invoked the artist-constructors at the Ford Motor Company as models for Constructivist textile worker-constructors, Popova's design syntagmatically borrows the veneer of industrial achievement of the motorcar to promote the modernity of her dress. (It is a more standard symbol of the "greatest achievement of contemporary urban *byt*" than Stepanova's—and Popova's—proposed symbol of women's fashion.) And while it might surprise us to see an expensive status commodity like a fancy car in a Constructivist image, even more than seeing a flapper dress, the motorcar at that time in the Soviet Union symbolized modernity and progress as much as wealth; Moscow in 1924 was, we should recall, still primarily a city of horse-drawn carriages.

For the Constructivists, who unbeknownst to Benjamin went further than any of his contemporaries toward realizing his theory, the mass-production of cheap, high-quality Constructivist textiles was meant to democratize fashion and disseminate the creative technological forms of modernist art throughout everyday life.<sup>62</sup> There is no shortage of proof

61. Benjamin, "One-Way Street," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1978), p. 85.

62. I say "unbeknownst" to him because Benjamin, in his relationship with Asja Lacis and on his visit to Moscow, clearly became acquainted with the more straightforwardly agitational and ascetic practices of the literary and artistic avant-garde, yet does not seem to

to back up this claim about the Constructivist dedication to egalitarianism. The critic Ivan Aksenov, for example, reported that two days before her own death from scarlet fever, and deep in grief over the death of her child who had just succumbed to the same illness, Popova still “experienced great happiness upon ascertaining . . . that fabrics covered with her designs were selling widely in the countryside and in working-class neighborhoods.”<sup>63</sup> According to Tugendkhol’d, Popova had said that “not one of her artistic successes ever gave her such deep satisfaction as the sight of a peasant woman and a worker buying lengths of her material” (quoted in “CF” p. 157). In the obituary he wrote for her, he noted that her fabrics were transforming the taste of working-class women: “This spring, the women of Moscow—not the Nepmankas, but the workers, the cooks, the service workers—began dressing themselves up. Instead of the former petite bourgeois little flowers, there appeared on the fabrics new and unexpectedly strong and clear patterns.”<sup>64</sup>

In this window display, then, Popova deliberately invoked the capitalist language of fashion advertising in order to take up its wish-imagery of abundance and redeem it for socialism. Its redemptive quality stems from Popova’s deeply personal investment in it. Montage, which Popova otherwise rarely used, is not deployed critically or disruptively, but, rather, parodically to emphasize the sheer overload of images available for the (her) investment of desire. Note the long cut-out rectangle of shiny green paper along the left border that picks up the green of the pom-pom on the hat and the numbers on the lower right; the curl of the sash that fits just so within the space framed by the car wheel and the vertical text; or the way that the tiny photograph of the model’s face—the only element literally cut out from commercial advertising—is dwarfed by the freakish enormity of the shoulders and arms. Popova’s choice to play with the montage technique can help us to understand the personal meaning of her Constructivist flapper dress. She has borrowed the montage technique here as a visual strategy—from Stepanova, as far as I can surmise—precisely for its personally parodic effect.

Popova seemed to be looking specifically at Stepanova’s photomontage caricatures of herself and Rodchenko of 1924, which parody the kind of gender and class divisions that Constructivism tried to break down (fig. 25). On the right side of the image, Stepanova gives Rodchenko’s bespectacled photographic head a massive boxer’s body and a pair of boxing shorts spoofing the Constructivist as working-class strongman—a spoof sharpened by the conspicuous absence of male genitals

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have been aware of the more commercial or everyday practices of the Constructivists, such as dress designs or advertisements, that I emphasize in my project.

63. I. A. Aksenov, “Posmertnaia vystavka L. S. Popovoi,” *Zhizn’ Iskusstva*, 3 Feb. 1925, p. 5.

64. Iakov Tugendkhol’d, “Pamiati L. Popovoi,” *Khudozhnik i zritel’* 6, no. 7 (1924): 77.

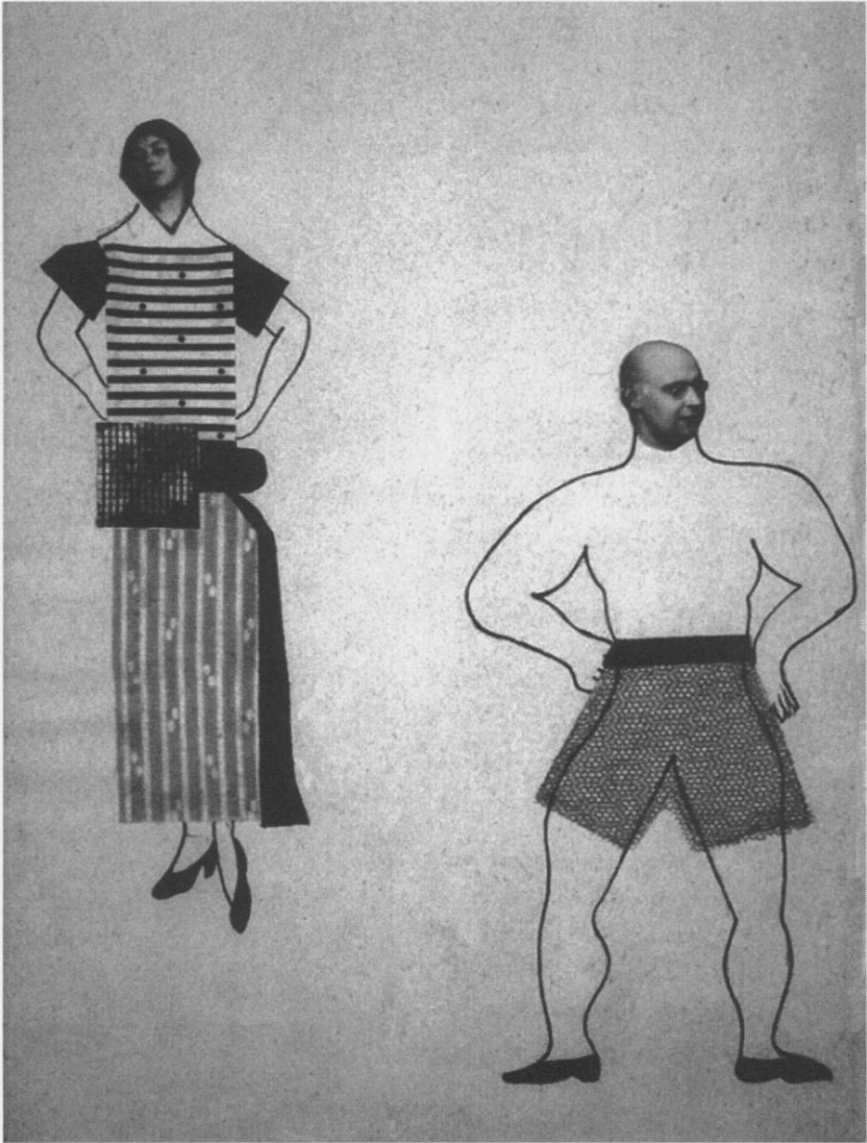


FIG. 25.—Varvara Stepanova, photomontage caricature of Popova and Rodchenko in *Nash gaz*, 1924.

revealed by the absurdly lacy boxer shorts, and the oddly geometric, upward-pointing phallic shape formed by the space between his legs. On the left side of the image, and on the other side of a parodic gender divide, she has outfitted Popova with a haughty pose and an elaborate flapper dress, complete with jumbo belt buckle and preposterously long



sash—the female artist-Constructivist tricked out as bourgeois fashion plate. That the caricature took this particular form suggests that Popova was used to being teased by her colleagues for her style of dress and upper-class ways.<sup>65</sup>

Listen to Rodchenko, reminiscing about first meeting Popova in 1915 when they participated in an exhibition together:

Popova, who was one of the rich, related to us with condescension and scorn, because she considered us to be unsuitable company, a class that she wanted nothing to do with. . . . She almost never talked with me, and came by only rarely, leaving behind her in the gallery the scent of expensive perfume and the memory of beautiful clothing.<sup>66</sup>

This is the Popova who emerges from Stepanova's caricature, certainly, appropriately juxtaposed with a proletarian-boxer Rodchenko. But the crucial point is that Popova had a change of heart and committed herself to socialist goals and therefore began to disassociate herself from her previous self-presentation; as Rodchenko himself added at the conclusion of the above passage in his memoirs: "later, after the revolution, she changed a lot and became a real comrade."<sup>67</sup> The figure in Popova's window display design mimics almost exactly Stepanova's caricature of her—right down to the position of the feet, the right arm on the hip, and the angle of the tilted head—suggesting that Popova's window display is shot through with a self-aware and self-mocking humor at her own investment in fashion, the unpreventable bubbling up of her haute-bourgeois feminine upbringing that marks her difference from colleagues like Stepanova and Rodchenko.

Popova's ironic identification with the figure in the window design expands the Constructivist rhetoric of transparency, as it is usually understood. Popova's investment of personal desire in the thing does not immediately return it, however, to the structure of the fetish, which names the "incomprehensible mystery of the power of material things," according to William Pietz.<sup>68</sup> Constructivism insists, rather, that the power of material

65. In another caricature from this series—the one discussed above showing Popova and Stepanova taking their fabric designs to the factory—Popova is again depicted as fashionably dressed in a short, swiny skirt, angular jacket, tiny high-heeled black boots, and an elegant hat, an amusing getup for someone pushing a wheelbarrow down the street but, again, one that suggests that fashionable feminine attire was a reliable source of Popova jokes.

66. Rodchenko, *Opyty dlia budushchego: Dnevnik, stat'i, pisma, zapiski* (Moscow, 1996), p. 60.

67. *Ibid.*

68. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *Res* 9 (Spring 1985): 14. In Pietz's important material and historical account of the fetish, it is a material object that is both deeply personal and collective. But I have attempted here to support the Constructivists' own assertions that their things, in their transparency, should no longer be understood in terms of the structure of the fetish.



FIG. 26.—Group photograph of Popova with her students at Vkhutemas, 1922.

things *can* be rendered comprehensible, to the benefit of makers and users alike, without diminishing it. It is of course always risky to exploit the recourse we have to biography, and I do not mean to imply that Popova's upper-class feminine identity *can explain* her Constructivist things.<sup>69</sup> But I do think that it gave her particular knowledge and experience that allowed her to produce the window display as such an extreme, but therefore also effective, example of the Constructivist thing as a transparent socialist counterpart to the commodity fetish. The *tselesoobraznost'* of Popova's window design is that it is formed in relation to the goal of confronting consumer desire. It gives form to consumer desire through forms gleaned from her own desires—which, as Rodchenko's memoirs show, are perhaps imperfectly socialist but are changing in a socialist direction—in order to encourage a similar socialist change in the desires of the mass of female consumers. The window design offers the mythic wish-images represented by the motorcar and the model, but it redeems them through the Constructivist dress, which is not mythic, but actually obtainable, because it is mass-produced by Soviet industry for the purpose of being affordable and easily available to working women. Possession is no longer exclusive.

As women Constructivists, Popova and Stepanova took different

69. On the uses and abuses of biography for reading the work of women artists, see the recent work of Anne Wagner, particularly *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley, 1996). As she writes there, an artist's "position as a woman does not have fixed, predictable consequences" (p. 6).

paths with their Constructivist things. Stepanova's artistic successes derived from her embrace of the antisubjective language of technology, an embrace that was conditioned by her negative experiences as a woman painter. She upheld the standard Constructivist rhetoric of transparency, pushing at its limits only in her writings; her clothing designs stick tenaciously, and to my mind exhilaratingly, to a model of transparency and egalitarian androgyny that has no truck with commercial feminine fashions. Popova's willingness to risk experimenting in the feminized area of the fashion commodity led, by contrast, to the more surprising and densely layered meanings of the Constructivist flapper dresses. This willingness most likely resulted from her more secure artistic identity; she was less in need than Stepanova of the authority conferred by the technological model of artistic making. Her flapper dresses refute the parodic gender polarization of Stepanova's caricatures, suggesting that androgynous sports costumes are not the only alternative to the clothing of bourgeois femininity or proletarian masculinity.

I conclude with a photograph of Popova with her students at Vkhutemas in 1922 (fig. 26). She sits in the middle of the group, wearing a white pom-pom on her hat. This pom-pom, standing out defiantly from the drabness of a sea of Muscovites bundled against the indoor winter cold, functions for me as a *punctum*, reaching across a gulf to join with the green pom-pom perched on the hat of the female figure in her window display. We need both these images, I think, to make sense of the Constructivist project: the grim determination, out of the impossible material privations of the postrevolutionary years, to mass-produce transparent utilitarian things for use in everyday life—and the dream of creating a socialist form of modernity in which the phantasmatic power of things would be redeemed for the benefit of everyone.