fig. 1
Nadezhda Udal'tsova
Self-Portrait, *1923.*
Oil on canvas.
State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

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

Charlotte Douglas

The decline of abstract styles during the 1920s and the emergence of an innovative figurative art had manifold attendant causes and motivations. Russian artists shared in the widespread European rejection of idealism after the Great War and, like artists further West, heard a "call to order." The unique revolutionary conditions in the country also made them eager to maneuver for their own place in the evolving social system, and many sought to redefine their art in Marxist, or at least materialist, terms. "Once purged of aesthetic, philosophical and religious excrescences," the avant-garde artist Varvara Stepanova wrote, "art leaves us its material foundations, which henceforth will be organized by intellectual production."[1] Pressed to define the usefulness of easel painting at a time of extreme physical and social hardship, the avant-garde, while still committed to abstraction in the years after the Revolution, rejected the idealist roots of non-objective art, and could think of no better use for it than the design of objects and theater sets. "There can be no question of painting in Suprematism; painting was done long ago, and the artist himself is a prejudice of the past," Kazimir Malevich wrote in 1920, and Liubov' Popova echoed: "The role of the 'representational arts'—painting, sculpture, and even architecture . . . has ended, as it is no longer necessary for the consciousness of our age, and everything art has to offer can simply be classified as a throwback."[2]

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that those who argued for the cultural viability of painting as a form of art turned to the image. Some made the change relatively early. By 1923 Aleksandr Drevin and Nadezhda Udal'tsova had already abandoned abstraction. Udal'tsova's *Avtoportret* (*Self-Portrait,* fig. no. 1) of that year perfectly expresses the precarious situation of the avant-garde. It shows the artist anxiously clasping her hands before her, a hesitant expression on her face. The painting's surface shimmers with short, stabbing brush strokes that produce a reflecting surface through which the uncertain artist appears an insubstantial and shifting apparition. The young Kliment Red'ko, after listening to Malevich lecture at Vkhutemas (the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops), noted in his diary: "He reduces painting to the level of a secondary means. Malevich and the others seek out extremes because they are not genuine painters."[3]

Red'ko belonged to a group of students at Vkhutemas who refused either to abandon painting or to indulge in a retrospective Naturalism that made its appeal to the masses. All were at some time under the tutelage of the avant-garde, and many were themselves talented abstract artists. In the mid-1920s these young artists turned to figuration in the attempt to go beyond the utilitarian precepts of their mentors and to develop a viable and socially relevant Modernism. For models they turned to contemporaneous trends further West, to late Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) in Germany and to *Valori Plastici* (Plastic Values) and metaphysical artists in Italy. Nourished for years on their professors' tales of Western Europe and isolated by the course of political events from the Western nations of the world, these artists of the younger generation were eager to communicate with their colleagues abroad and to make their mark in the international world of art.

In the spring of 1924, in the wake of Lenin's death, the class warfare waged in the name of the proletariat had begun to heat up. Official and spontaneous committees scoured the cities, hunting down "Nepmen" profiteers and evicting leftover members of the "bourgeoisie" from their apartments, assigning their rooms instead to more deserving "workers." The writer Mikhail Bulgakov noted in his diary, "In Moscow there are

numerous arrests of people with 'good last names.' Again people are being sent away."[4]

It was in this unstable atmosphere in Moscow that on May 11th the *Pervaia diskussionnaia vystavka ob"edinenii aktivnogo revoliutsionnogo iskusstva* (*First Discussional Exhibition of Associations of Active Revolutionary Art*) opened in an exhibition space that belonged to Vkhutemas out on the further reaches of Tsverskaia Street, some two miles from the Kremlin. The show presented paintings, sculpture, constructions, theater maquettes, books, typographical designs, analytical charts and schemes—more than two hundred works by thirty-eight artists, most either faculty, students, or recent graduates of Vkhutemas. Indeed, the exhibition was labeled "discussional" because it did not advance a unified point of view, either as to style or in its approach to the problem—still unresolved—of the social mandate of contemporary art. Rather, it was a public extension of those intense debates that took place continuously wherever artists congregated, but most particularly in the workshops and dormitories of Vkhutemas.

The exhibition gave a rather perfunctory nod to the Constructivists. By 1924 these members of the old avant-garde had backed themselves into an artistic and political corner. Having for four years loudly and insistently rejected the value of easel painting and traditional aesthetic concerns, they now found themselves unwanted by the very "means of production" they had hoped to transform. Geometrical designs were conceived as "classless" at a time when Soviet society was increasingly perceived to be class based. But perhaps more importantly, to be economically viable for the new state, industrial design had to appeal to the taste of the consumer, and Constructivist applied designs had failed utterly to attract the masses.

In the exhibition, two competing groups of Constructivists engaged in a late wrangle over precedence and orthodoxy. Calling themselves Konstruktivisty (Constructivists), Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg and Konstantin Medunetskii condescendingly hung only photographs and plans of previous work. They made no statement of principles; their program had been clearly defined already, they wrote rather grandly in the catalogue, by their exhibitions in Paris, Berlin, Munich, Leipzig, Dresden, Frankfurt, and Amsterdam. The First Working Group of Constructivists, still led by Aleksei Gan, but by this time made up of a new group of younger artists that no longer included Aleksandr Rodchenko and Stepanova, exhibited children's books, work clothes, and designs for tables and kiosks.

The First Working Organization of Artists, recent graduates of Vkhutemas, displayed architectural constructions and theater maquettes. Their catalogue manifesto stressed "organization" and the importance of directing one's consciousness toward the development of new forms in art and society. A group of two—Ivan Papkov and Konstantin Parkhomenko—that called itself Byt (Ordinary Life) showed landscapes and views of interiors. A Union of Three—Andrei Goncharov, Aleksandr Deineka, and Iurii Pimenov—who had all been graphics students under Vladimir Favorskii, showed satirical illustrations and stylized figural canvases. Only the sculptor Iosif Chaikov, who had been educated in Paris and was on the faculty at Vkhutemas, appeared without benefit of any collective. At thirty-six the oldest artist in the exhibit, he showed a collection of Cubist studies and a vaguely Constructivist project for a memorial to Iakov Sverdlov.

Almost half of the exhibition consisted of work by the Proektsionisty (Projectionists)—Sergei Luchishkin, Solomon Nikritin, Mikhail Plaksin, Red'ko, Nikolai Triaskin, and Aleksandr Tyshler. In a striking anticipation of the Conceptual Art of the early 1970s, the Projectionists maintained that artists should produce not objects of art or the things of daily life but their projects or "projections," that is, the ideas, conceptions, plans, and experiments associated with such objects. The inheritors of the analytical studies pursued at Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture), they presented the results of their research and analysis as their art. They saw themselves as creators of a "Method," whereby things might be produced by almost anyone.[5] Nikritin was the guiding inspiration of this group. He took a special interest in theoretical and analytical questions of composition, and in the search for general laws. After his graduation from Vkhutemas he became chairman of the Research Board at the Museum of Painterly Culture, and led his colleagues in its "analytical cabinet" in the exploration of conceptual and formal problems.

At the *First Discussional Exhibition,* Nikritin's work occupied a whole wall; the "tectonic research" that he had done over the last three years—texts, photographs, sketches, reliefs, and a three-dimensional construction—filled a large map case. Nikritin advised his viewers that this display required some two hours of study, and he thoughtfully provided a stepladder for their convenience. In a bravado gesture he also exhibited a naturalistically rendered portrait with the notation: "I am exhibiting this as a demonstration of my professional skill. I reject it because I consider it reactionary."[6]

Red'ko, who for a time had shared a studio with Nikritin, had already been working for two years on a theory of *elektroorganizm* (electroorganism) and searching for ways to depict light as a "unit of electroorganisms' structure" and "the highest expression of matter." The new art would necessarily be based in science, he believed, and he was inclined to depict people and nature in forms drawn from mechanical engineering. At the *First Discussional Exhibition* his works bore such titles as *Periodicheskaia osnova sveto-sinteticheskogo razvitiia (peremeshcheniia)* (*The Periodic Basis of Light-Synthetic Development {Displacement},* 1923) and *Metamorfozy optiki* (*The Metamorphoses of Optics,* 1923), and some displayed slick machinelike forms suggesting psychophysical relationships.

Like Nikritin, Luchishkin had examined dozens of recognized masterpieces in the course of a search for formal regularities. At the *First Discussional Exhibition* he presented large graphic charts illustrating the results of his research on compositional structure, and his statistical conclusions concerning the usual proportions of figure to ground. He classified various standard types of compositional arrangements and their visual forces, and showed that for vertically oriented rectilinear paintings, the proportion of the area of figure to background is normally 1:1.[7]

Plaksin showed brightly colored abstract works, and Triaskin models and sketches of his Constructivist "universal" theatrical sets.[8] Under the general heading "A Methodology of Normalized Perception," Tyshler, who had recently produced some refined and colorful abstract works, contributed to this exhibition black-humored paintings of armless and legless invalids.

Among the Konkretivisty (Concretists) were Petr Vil'iams and Konstantin Vialov. Vialov's *Militsioner* (*Traffic Cop,* 1923, plate no. 368) drew an analogy between the regulation of the speed and course of an automobile and social progress. A single full-length figure of the traffic cop in a long coat raises his baton to direct traffic. At the lower left, a tiny open roadster with a driver and two passengers in touring caps has come to a halt. A schematic clock in the upper right imitates the traffic signals. Vialov's red-and-black color scheme and his flat, decorative style suggests a graphic rather than a painterly resolution of current problems.

The exhibition was the first public demonstration of the new generation's break with their elders. It makes clear two

primary interests on the part of these students: continuing the analyses learned from the Inkhuk studies of the old avant-garde, with the aim of establishing *systems* within which the formal elements of a work of art might be understood, and the search for a contemporary way to continue painting—one that avoided both the dilettantish and reactionary Impressionism of the members of AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia) and the overworked restatements of Cézanne and Matisse favored by Bubnovyi valet (Jack of Diamonds). The former interest resulted in a kind of schematic abstraction, illustrations of the results of analytical studies that had few bases for further development. The latter was the beginning of a road that in just half a dozen years would lead to the new generation's artistic and political downfall.

These young artists had had an exceptionally fine education in art. In many cases they had started their training before the Revolution, and even as teenagers had become familiar with the best of Western contemporary work, particularly through Sergei Shchukin's collection in Moscow.[9] At the State Free Art Workshops and at Vkhutemas they studied Cézanne with the Jack of Diamonds artists (Il'ia Mashkov, Petr Konchalovskii, Robert Fal'k, Aristarkh Lentulov), as well as color and design with Stepanova, Popova, Aleksandr Vesnin, and other Inkhuk artists. But the attraction they felt to painting was then completely at odds with what they were being taught by the avant-garde. It was fostered not only by the Jack of Diamonds contingent of the faculty at Vkhutemas but also by their own involvement with the Museum of Painterly Culture.

The Museum had begun in 1919 as a government-sponsored collection of paintings bought from a list of approved artists—predominantly the avant-garde. Until June 1921 the works of art had been acquired by a purchasing commission of Narkompros (the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) and came under the supervision of Inkhuk. They were regarded as a treasure of the new nation and, secondarily, as a teaching collection. As part of a program to cultivate the arts in all sections of the country, many of the works assembled were distributed to provincial museums. By the autumn of 1922, however, the artists of Inkhuk, already ambivalent about their own former work and consequently unclear about the function of the museum, found themselves unable to cope with administering the collection, and its day-to-day supervision was temporarily transferred to the energetic Vil'iams, then only twenty years old.[10] With the appointment of Vil'iams, the museum became the center of activity for the new generation of painting students at Vkhutemas, including the Projectionists Nikritin, Luchishkin, Aleksandr Labas, Plaksin, Red'ko, and Tyshler.

The international awareness and the eager ambitions of this group of aspiring artists were clear even while they were still in school. When the decision was made to travel the very successful exhibition of Russian art that had opened in Berlin at the Galerie van Diemen in October 1922 (the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* [*First Russian Art Exhibition*]), David Shterenberg, the head of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) and the organizer of the exhibition, returned from Berlin to Moscow in search of additional work.[11] For his benefit the students quickly arranged a show of their work at the museum. The exhibition was held from December 25th to 27th, and to their delight Shterenberg took most of the work back to Berlin.[12] The young artists expected their work to go on to Paris, the next scheduled stop for the van Diemen show, but just at that time international politics intervened. In January 1923, alleging Germany's default on reparation payments, French and Belgian troops occupied Germany's industrial Ruhr District. In the ensuing controversy, Russia sided with Germany, with whom she was allied, and France thereupon rejected the exhibition's visa applications. For several months Shterenberg sought alternative venues, but Russia's steadily cooling relations with other Western countries made his task difficult. Finally, although Holland had not yet officially recognized the Soviet Union, arrangements were made through preexisting connections to move the show to Amsterdam. There, for the month of May 1923, the Projectionists had their first exposure abroad.

The Museum of Painterly Culture moved again in 1923—this time to one of the buildings at 11 Rozhdestvenka, the former Stroganov School and First Free State Art Workshops, where the Vkhutemas faculty was teaching its Basic Course.[13] Lazar' Vainer, a genteel thirty-eight-year-old sculptor who in the years before World War I had attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, was made director of the museum, and Vil'iams became his deputy. The Vkhutemas students, delighted with the collection's new proximity, took up jobs there, and continued to regard it as their own. The museum's extensive collection of foreign art journals afforded them a window to the contemporary West, and the sympathetic administration made room for their lectures, reports, and a series of small solo exhibitions of their research work. Guest lecturers provided a sense of working in an already established avant-garde tradition. The abstract and analytical work done between 1922 and 1924 by these young people may be regarded as one of the extreme reaches of the Russian avant-garde. These talented and irrepressibly energetic artists for a short time seemed to inherit the legendary creative momentum of the first generation, which was then in the process of self-destructing.

A new artistic organization devoted exclusively to painting was formed in 1925. Most of the members were friends from the Museum of Painterly Culture and their recent student days at Vkhutemas. Many, including Pimenov, Labas, Deineka, Goncharov, Luchishkin, Vil'iams, Tyshler, and Konstantin Vialov had exhibited together just eleven months previously at the *First Discussional Exhibition.* The first exhibition of the new group, Ost (the Society of Easel Painters), opened on April 26, 1925, in the Museum of Painterly Culture. But even a cursory look around would tell a visitor to the show that this was a different kind of exhibition. The Constructivists were nowhere to be seen; Ordinary Life was also absent; and Luchishkin's analytical studies had been replaced by a long horizontal view of striding members of the Young Communists League, led by a brass band.[14] Deineka—a graduate at seventeen from the Khar'kov Art School and then, at age twenty-six, on the verge of finishing Vkhutemas—showed a major work, one of his first in a series of industrial themes. In the dramatic, almost monochromatic *Pered spuskom v shakhtu* (*Before the Descent into the Mines,* 1925, plate no. 378), groups of miners wait before the gridlike structure of a mine-shaft elevator. The figures are squat, the rhythmic undulations of their dark clothing edged precisely. The symbolic, monumental nature of the figures is amplified by an environment given only in fragments—an inclined rectangle indicates the horizontal plane of the floor, an area of open wire mesh frames a pair in profile on the right, a figure on the left stands isolated on empty ground. Deineka, an admirer of Ferdinand Hodler's symbolic figures, here adapts to painting graphic devices used in woodcuts and engraving by his professor at Vkhutemas, Favorskii. The diagonally textured area behind the two figures in the upper right, for example, is remarkably similar to the hatched areas that define the spaces for figures in many of Favorskii's prints.

A new addition to the group was the painter Shterenberg, the former head of Izo Narkompros, who two and a half years earlier had taken the group's first efforts to Berlin and

Amsterdam. Shterenberg's authoritative position, and his ability to cope with the paperwork involved in registering the organization and guiding it through the bureaucratic mazes, made him the logical choice for president of the new organization. The young artists particularly appreciated Shterenberg's international connections, and hoped that his leadership would ensure their exposure in the West.

Shterenberg's early Soviet work focused on the physical qualities of painted texture and collage. His *Prostokvasha* (*Clabber,* 1919), for example, is a daring and idiosyncratic work. The skewed asymmetric composition is simplified to the point of abstraction, but enriched by color and texture. An ascetic small white container of farmer's cheese perches on the edge of a green marbleized table top, its intense orange label punctuating the flat blue background. Typically for Shterenberg, the carton is seen from the side, the scribbled expanse of the table in an elongated view from above; together they form a kind of floating abstraction momentarily snatched from the everyday world. In the second half of the 1920s, Shterenberg's techniques become more restrained, and the optimistic emphasis on texture and sensation disappears.

Ost was to last six years in remarkably stable form. The group held four yearly exhibitions in Moscow from 1925 through 1928. Their initial political stance was simple: they were children of the Revolution. In spite of the fact that many of them came from the middle class, there was never any question about their view of themselves as the promise of a new socialist art, about the responsibility they felt as the artistic strength of the new regime, or about their complete allegiance to it. Their view of art, however, was broad and flexible enough to encompass a variety of approaches. Some emphasized graphic techniques combined with a completely finished surface, as opposed to the sketchiness advocated in by others. Some were emphatically painterly. Ost's treatment of industrial themes tended to be romantic and lyrical or decorative, and not overly tendentious.

The variety of Ost's approaches to the new art was supported by Anatolii Lunacharskii's principle of aesthetic neutrality for Narkompros. Although sympathetic to the notion of a proletarian art, Lunacharskii foresaw a very gradual evolution in this direction, one in which the artistic intelligentsia would participate fully. He attempted to distinguish the government's duty to encourage various artistic approaches from the Party's function in giving preference to a particular artistic direction among its members. Until the mid-1920s the Party resisted the insistent demand from literary and art groups to endorse a genuine official style. In a decree of June 1925, however, it finally capitulated, supporting the goal of a culture that was specifically proletarian. The Party rejected, nonetheless, the growing militancy of the cultural radicals, calling instead for tact and tolerance toward "fellow travelers," and for free competition among the various groups and movements.[15]

In the early years Ost artists avoided the sort of blatant didacticism common among the AKhRR artists. They cautioned Ekaterina Zernova, for example, when her work strayed too far from the usual poetic treatment that she had applied equally to portraits of children and depictions of tanks. She writes in her memoirs, "I was surprised and distressed when once Andrei [Goncharov] came to me with someone else from Ost and they both tried to convince me not to do works such as *Rybokonservnyi zavod* [*The Fish-Canning Factory,* 1927, fig. no. 2] and *Tomat-piure* [*Tomato Puree*]. Goncharov said, 'We took you into Ost, but we can exclude you. Think about it.' But having thought about it, I decided not to change my orientation."[16]

Of particular importance for Ost members, as well as other

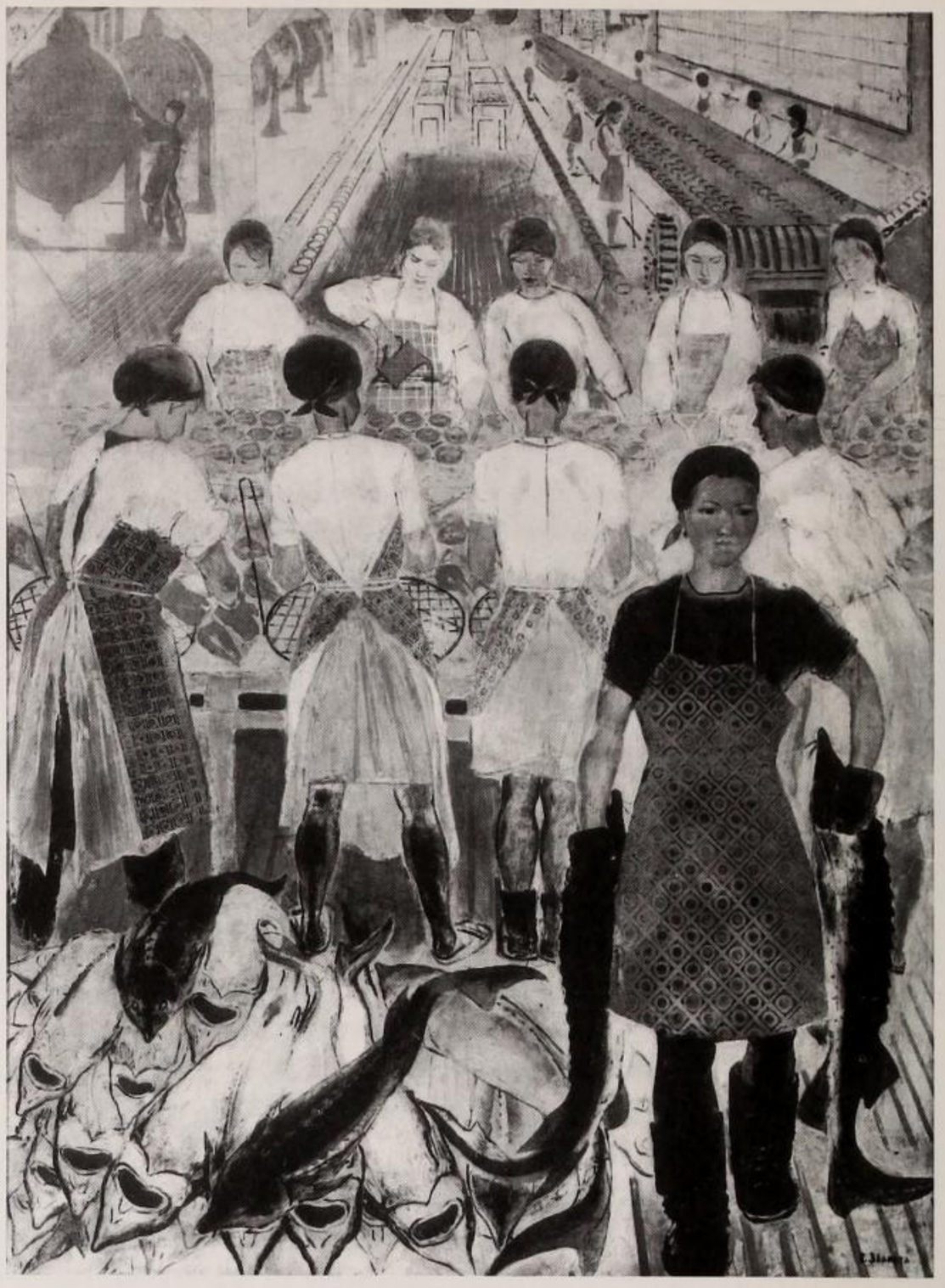

fig. 2
Ekaterina Zernova
The Fish-Canning Factory, *1927.*
Oil on canvas, 85 x 63 cm.
State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

fig. 3
Petr Vil'iams
Autorace, *1930.*
Oil on canvas, 151 x 213 cm.
State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

young Soviet artists, were the exhibitions of contemporary German art held in Russia in the mid-1920s. In October 1924, the *Pervaia vseobshchaia germanskaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka* (*First German Survey Exhibition*), the return show of the 1922 Russian exhibition in Berlin, opened in Moscow at the Historical Museum.[17] A year later Moscow's Museum of New Western Art organized *Nemetskoe iskusstvo poslednego piatidesiatiletiia* (*The Last Fifty Years of German Art*), composed of works from their own collection, and in the spring of 1926, it devoted a section of the exhibition *Revoliutsionnoe iskusstvo zapada* (*Revolutionary Art of the West*) to postwar German art. These three exhibitions made available to Russian artists a wide variety of German artistic alliances, including the Red Group and the November Group, and in particular, work by Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Nagel, Max Pechstein, Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and George Grosz, among others. They also engendered an almost unanimous condemnation of Expressionism by the critics; in spite of the progressive political stance of the Germans and the oppositional nature of their images, reviewers found little to like. Opinions in the press varied from a reserved understanding to outright rejection and disgust. Most reviewers argued that Expressionism's emotional distortions, its display of neuroses and cynicism, together with its lack of an alternative positive vision, offered little to Russian artists searching for a new art. Lunacharskii, who was very familiar with Western art currents, took one of the most positive views. He approved of the German work that had socially propagandistic aims more than of the domestic "gallicizing Formalists" (Lef, or the Left Front of the Arts) and the "simplifying Naturalists" (AKhRR), but nevertheless concluded that the 1924 exhibition gave "very few models" to the Russians. By 1926 he was less restrained: "The German intelligentsia working under the flag of Expressionism has intensified those already extreme illnesses that traumatize us with the poisonous compositions expounded by half-Realists, half-Expressionists like Dix and Grosz. Beyond a certain line there simply begins incomprehensibility and mannerism." Lunacharskii advises Western artists to learn a "high form of expressiveness."[18]

While the critic Nikolai Tarabukin also approved of the fact that German artists did not simply illustrate events as did the AKhRR artists, he maintained that the "anarchic ideology, the purely individualistic protest against bourgeois society, leads to naked nihilism, to 'protest for the sake of protest.'"[19] The most vigorous in his condemnation of Expressionism was the influential twenty-four-year-old Marxist critic Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov. The Soviet viewer is "*stunned,*" he exclaimed, "by the hopelessness and the 'general negation,' even in the canvases of Communist artists from the Red Group and the November Group. Two-thirds of the artists 'consider their task the destruction of the bourgeois layer of society by the means available to art.' [But this revolutionary] destruction [has to] take place 'in the name of something,' that is, from a definite positive ideal . . . There is no general fighting position. From here the unavoidable path is to mysticism . . . The workers are . . . depicted as 'dumb, faceless monsters' . . . Instead of faces you see only ciphers or question marks."[20] Fedorov-Davydov repeated these observations in 1926, characterizing Western socialist art as "an art of a proletarianizing intelligentsia crushed by the horrors of war and poverty, an intelligentsia that is oriented now toward the proletariat and world revolution because of their economic and social position."[21]

Many *artists,* however, felt quite differently from the critics, and found significant inspiration in the German work. Even in AKhRR, artists such as Fedor Bogorodskii responded to the 1924 exhibition with a greater expressiveness. Luchishkin

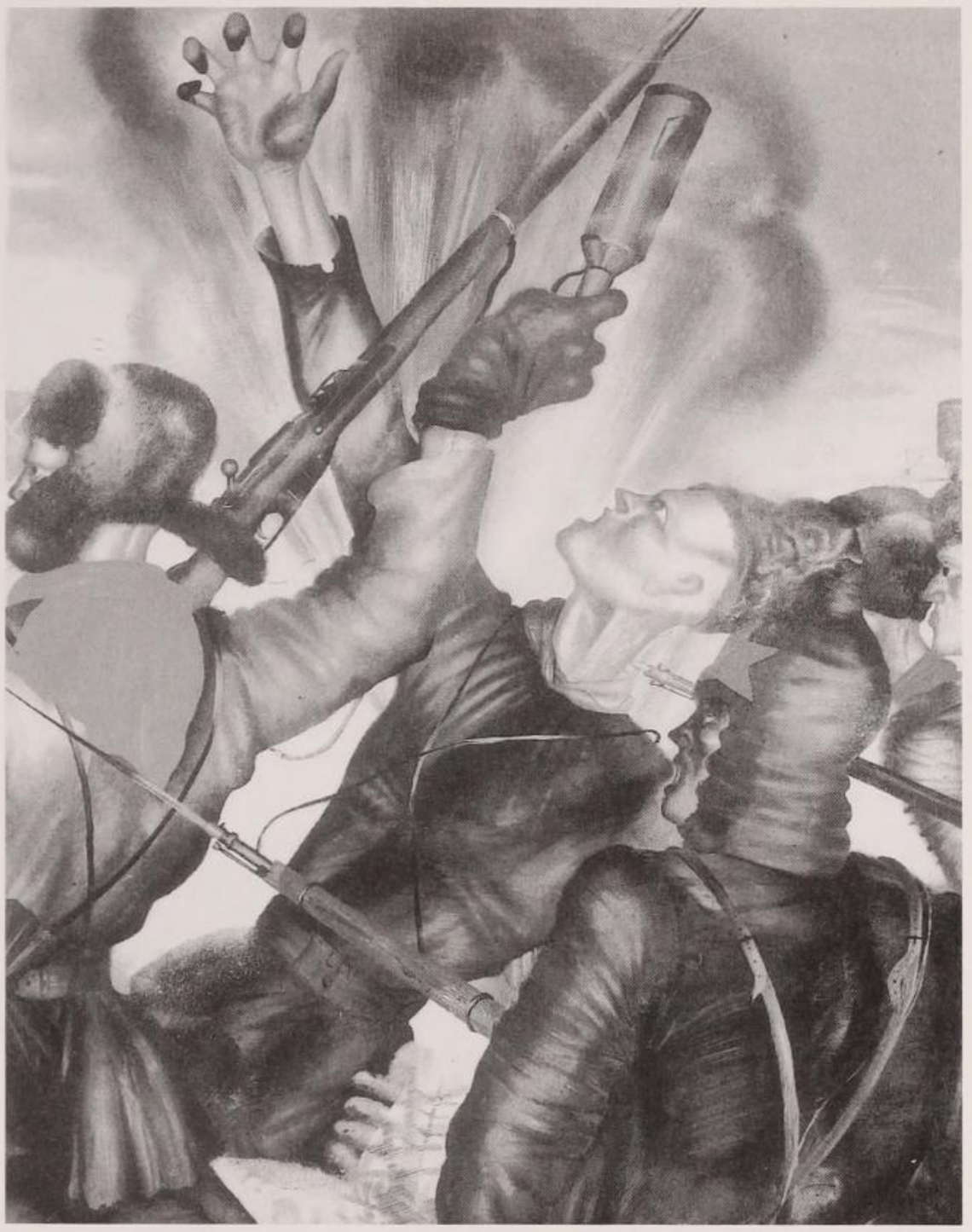

fig. 4
Iurii Pimenov
The Seizing of an English Blockhouse (The Northern Front), *1928 (detail).*
Oil on canvas, 199 x 289.5 cm.
L'vov Picture Gallery.

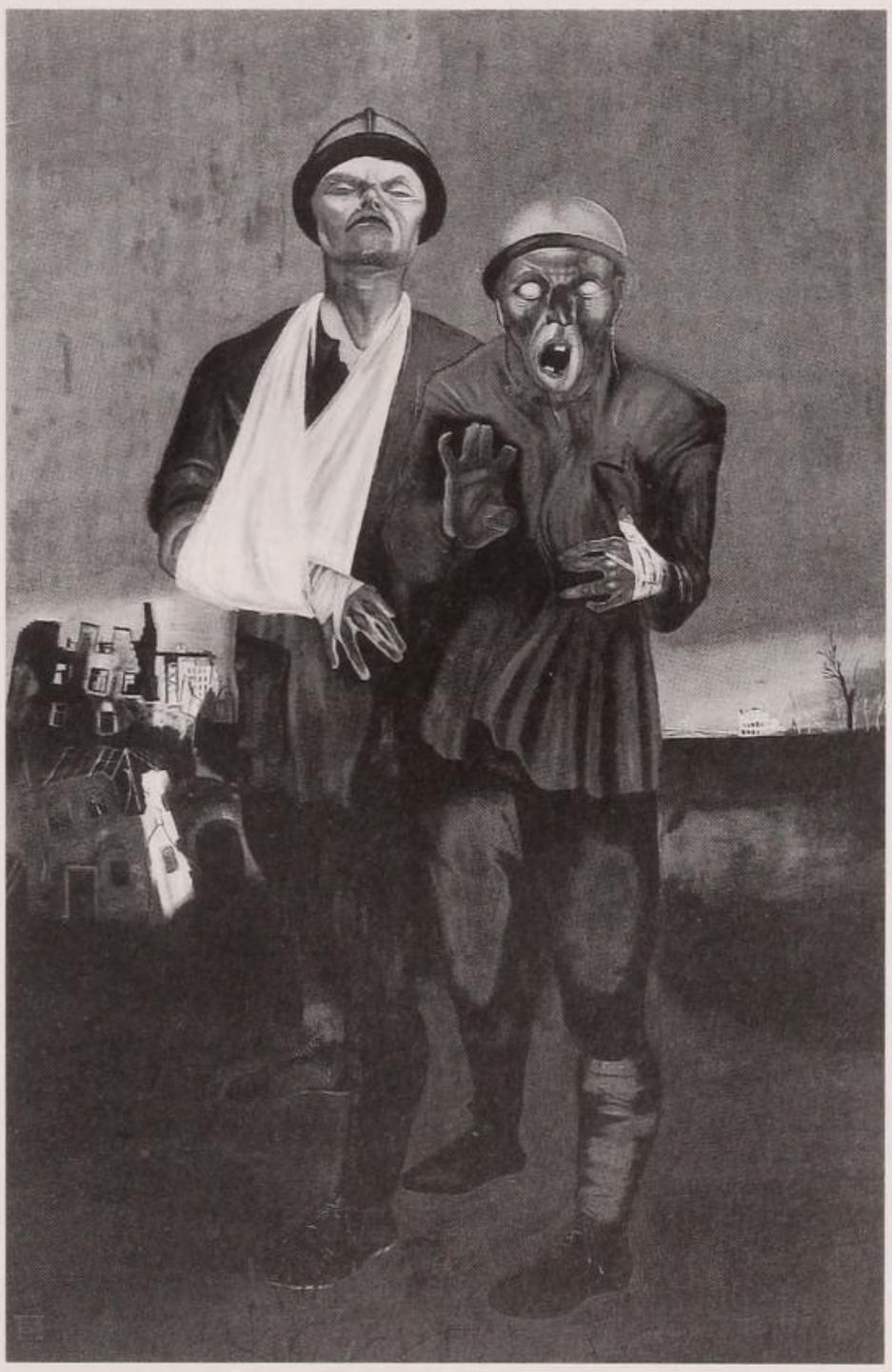

fig. 5
Iurii Pimenov
Disabled Veterans, *1926.*
Oil on canvas, 104 x 70 cm.
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

emphasized the importance of the 1924 exhibition for the members of Ost: "We took Expressionism—clearly visible in the artworks exhibited, especially in the works of G. Grosz and O. Dix—as a set of devices that emphasized the social essence of the works. It seemed to us that expressiveness helped to accent the revolutionary direction."[22] And Pimenov wrote, "I was attracted by Expressionism, by George Grosz and Dix; their corrosive and bizarre precision interested me."[23]

Russian artists were particularly attracted by the graphic qualities of German art. Pimenov's works such as *Tennis* (1927) and *Beg* (*Race,* 1928) adopt the mannered stylization characteristic of 1920s advertising graphics throughout Europe and the United States. The elegant elongated figures engaging in vigorous exercise against backgrounds composed of Bauhaus architecture and steel girders produce a kind of sanitized Art Deco. In Vil'iams's *Avtoprobeg* (*Autorace,* 1930, fig. no. 3), sleek-lined touring cars race down a dirt road carved out of newly industrialized land. The race is observed by groups of tiny figures, presumably employees who manufacture the cars in the low Bauhaus-design factories in the background. The dust, the wide sky, and expanse of horizon give a sense of raw land and the endless possibilities of the new country. On a building in the distance a red sign proclaims RIGHT OF WAY TO THE AUTOMOBILE! in an unsubtle reference to the newly constructed society.

But in such works as Pimenov's *Invalidy voiny* (*Disabled Veterans,* 1926, fig. no. 5) and *Vziatie angliiskogo blokgauza (Severnyi front)* (*The Seizing of an English Blockhouse {The Northern Front},* 1928, fig. no. 4) the distortions learned from Expressionism are more evident. In *Disabled Veterans* two blind and bandaged men confront the viewer full-length against a poisonous green sky and the charred rubble of burned-out buildings. The face of the right-hand figure, his white eyes open but unseeing, is contorted into a scream, and has been directly modeled on Edvard Munch's famous image. In *The Seizing of an English Blockhouse,* a subject drawn from the English, French, and American invasion of northern Russia in 1918–19, a group of irregulars advance on a fort at the very moment that one of their group is struck and falls backward, his blue hand raised high, clutching the empty air. Fedorov-Davydov could approve of such works because of their abstraction, the stylized distance from the subject, and the artist's intention to convey his horror and repudiation of war.[24]

As the 1920s progressed, several of the Ost artists took advantage of Expressionism's capacity for more caustic social and political commentary. This potential was most brilliantly exploited by Nikritin in his series of menacing occluded figures and screaming women (fig. nos. 6–7). But by the time these works were painted the anguish they expressed was looked upon as disloyal and so kept them from being exhibited. By the end of the decade Nikritin was reduced to composing inspirational panels for public spaces, such as *Kapitalisticheskii rai* (*Capitalist Heaven,* ca. 1929) for the Central Museum of Labor and *Prosveshchenie u iakutov* (*Education among the Yakuts,* ca. 1929) for the Museum of Public Education.[25]

The increasingly inflexible insistence of the authorities on artistic optimism in the face of any calamity was made clear to the artists by the time of the *Vystavka khudozhestvennykh proizvedenii k desiatiletnemu iubileiu Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* (*Art Exhibition on the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution*), which opened in January 1928. The grisly 1921 famine in southern Russia had troubled Luchishkin and he chose it as a subject worthy of Expressionism's emotional power. When he presented his initial sketch of a grieving mother and her starving family for approval for the exhibition, however, Lunacharskii refused to allow it. "Famine in the Volga region was a difficult experience," he told the young artist, "but we

fig. 6
Solomon Nikritin
Screaming Woman, *1928.*
Oil on canvas, 60.7 x 51.8 cm.
Collection George Costakis, Germany.

fig. 7
Solomon Nikritin
Man with a Top Hat, *1927.*
Oil on canvas, 68.4 x 28.2 cm.
Collection George Costakis, Germany.

are celebrating our grand holiday, why cloud it with these memories?" Luchishkin painted another subject for the anniversary exhibition, but stubbornly completed the offending work and hung it at the next (and last) Ost exhibition. Reaction was so severe that he subsequently destroyed the work (fig. no. 8).[26] In *Starik* (*The Old Man,* 1925–26)[27] Shterenberg addresses a similar theme, but with his typical restraint. A single full-length figure of an elderly peasant faces the viewer from a monochromatic, snowy field. The undulating outlines of the figure are reminiscent of Deineka's stolid miners, but the unrelieved isolation of the peasant, his setting completely barren save for the wisps of dry grass at his feet, conveys the terrible quandary of the peasantry. Destitute, in a community that had turned chaotic and sinister, the peasants found themselves cut off from the soil and hungry for its comforting spirit as well as for the food it might have produced.

Many of the Ost artists cultivated an estranged and melancholic Surrealism. In their work, themes ostensibly concerned with revolutionary social reality often are suffused with ambiguities of meaning that reflect the moral dilemmas of the time. Red'ko, Luchishkin, Labas, and Tyshler, while pursuing subjects that exalted technology, communality, and Party leadership, developed highly personal styles that conveyed a fantastic and dehumanized threat within these hypnotic ideas. The inclination to Surrealism derived not from its French exponents, whose associations in Russia were with the Lef group, but from the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists, well known through the German exhibitions and cultural associations, and from the Italian *Novecento* (Twentieth Century) and the artists associated with *Valori Plastici.*

Beginning with Russian participation in the 1924 Venice Biennale, artistic connections between Russia and Italy were extensive. The most important role in this association was played by the Museum of New Western Art. Here in the late 1920s, thanks to its director's special interest in contemporary Italian art, Ost artists could see recent work by Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, Filippo de Pisis, Felice Casorati, Massimo Campigli, Mario Tozzi, Giorgio Morandi, Gino Severini, Piero Marussig, and many others.[28] These artists' approaches to painting, which tended to submerge individual emotions, were especially suited to the Russian inclination to visual archetypes and hesitancy before obvious demonstrations of personal feelings. Surrealism's mixed messages and double entendre precisely reflected the odd social juxtapositions and alienations that characterized Russia in the 1920s.

Red'ko and Nikritin, leading participants in the *First Discussional Exhibition,* had refused to join Ost or to send any work to the first Ost exhibition. Nikritin considered the organization "inferior" (*nepolnotsennyi*) from the point of view of theory, and Red'ko traveled instead and worked on organizing his own exhibition, which opened just before the second Ost exhibition in the spring of 1926.[29] In his diary he noted, "They [Shterenberg, Labas, Vil'iams, Deineka, Pimenov, and Vialov] came around from Ost. They looked at my work stiffly. [But] I didn't agree to pull out my best canvases for the Ost exhibition."[30]

Yet although he did not participate directly in Ost, Red'ko abandoned his electroorganisms in the name of a similar socially tendentious art. Just before the *First Discussional Exhibition* closed he wrote in his diary, "I am thinking about a plan for future work. In painting we have arrived at the creation of a social theme. This is the demand of our worldwide contemporaneity, and the requirement of our class as the Communist builder. We will make new works of art in which there will be an epic severity of construction and a strict reckoning. In direct connection with this I want to do a picture

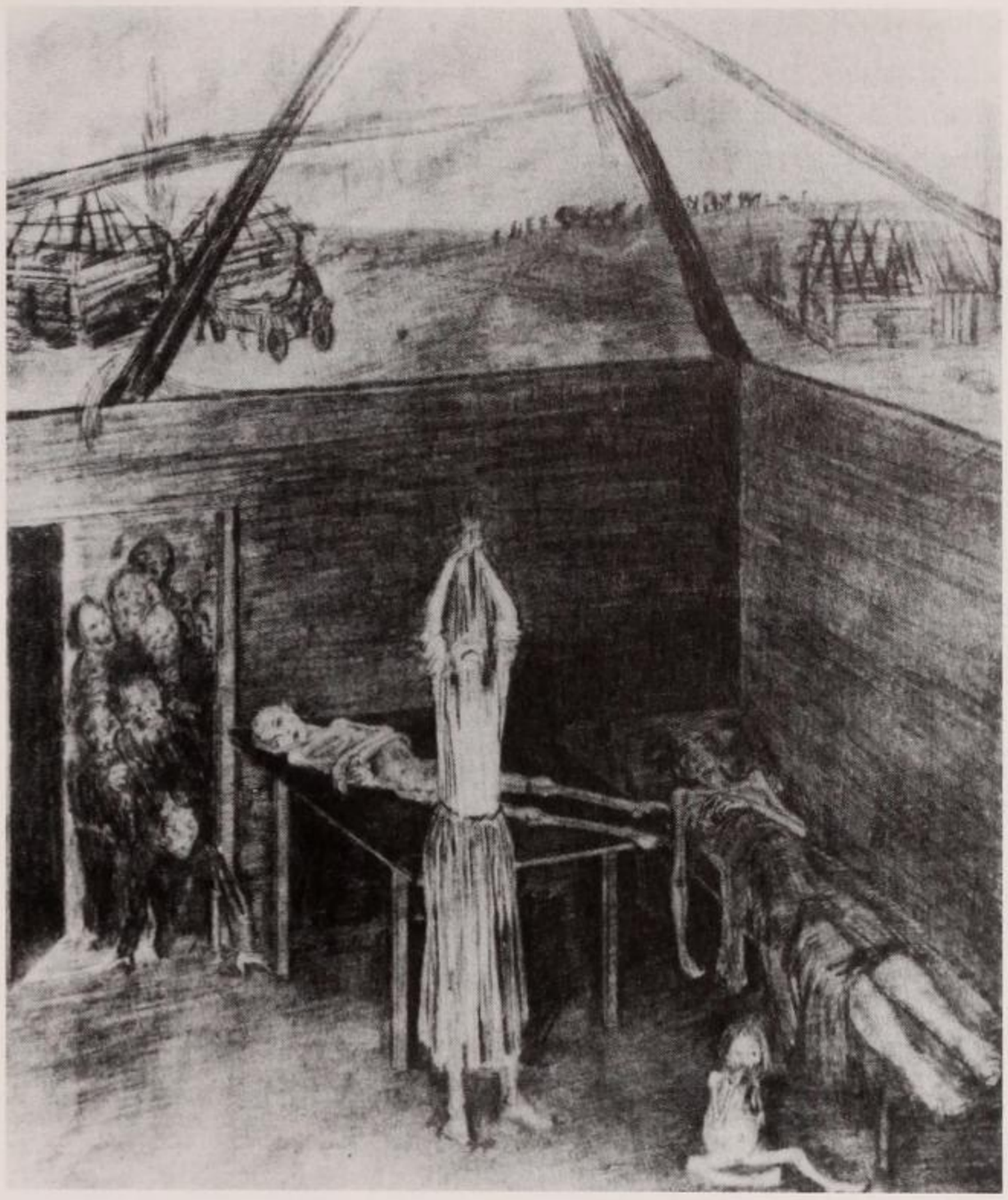

fig. 8
Sergei Luchishkin
Hunger in the Volga Region, *ca. 1927.*
Destroyed.

called *RKP [The Russian Communist Party]*."[31] But even this straightforward subject ended in a picture that is far from unambiguous. Retitled *Revoliutsiia* (*Revolution*) and then *Vosstanie* (*Uprising,* 1924–25) in the course of two years, the painting is a large geometric cityscape that depicts the leaders of the Revolution arranged inside a tilted square and surrounded by ranks of workers parading like so many small tin soldiers. Lenin occupies the geometric center of the canvas, waving his arms as if conducting the assembly in a mass performance or as if directing traffic, and the whole scene is bathed in a Surrealistic red glow (plate no. 352). In time this unnatural wash of color became dominant in Red'ko's work, producing, in works such as *Portret I. V. Stalina* (*Portrait of Iosif Stalin,* 1940), an eerie and haunting double message.

There is nothing ambiguous about Nikritin's *Sud naroda* (*People's Court,* 1933–34, fig. no. 9). The dark faceless figures around the table covered in official red, the room empty of objects and people, the ominous step spotlit at the lower left, and the carafe and glass at the nearest edge of the table all give evidence of extinguished life, of an event too dreadful to depict. The invisible threat in Nikritin's work can be made clear by comparing it with a similar scene as rendered by the AKhR (the Association of Artists of the Revolution) artist Boris Ioganson. *Sovetskii sud* (*A Soviet Court,* 1928, fig. no. 10) also depicts judges seated behind a table draped in red, the carafe and water glass are there, but Ioganson is still concerned with social justice—here between a former landowner and a peasant woman with a baby. In Nikritin's picture all such ritual would be pointless.

Labas's art combines a genuine appreciation of transportation technology with a clear realization of the consequent subordinate position of simple two-legged human beings. In his work from about 1927, people are reduced to ephemera by the technological power of engines and aircraft. Later his trains, escalators, and rockets become even more dominant and people disappear. Labas's aviation themes coincided with one of the main goals of the First Five-Year Plan: the development of a self-reliant Soviet aviation industry. The defense effort was led by Kliment Voroshilov, then Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, and the population was bombarded with the slogan "Proletariat! To the Airplane!" *V kabine* (*In the Airplane Cabin,* 1928, plate no. 371), however, gives quite a different image of air travel, imparting an existential complex of emotions by the most economical means. The viewer looks down the aisle from the front of the plane as passengers sit bolt upright, their arms drawn close to their bodies. Beneath and around them is empty space; they sit suspended in an airy nothing. There is no sense of motion, no motor or any other indication of modern technology. The presence of the winged plane is given by the barest suggestion of a few gray lines in the white expanse. The passengers' hanging weight and tension are emphasized by a mindless frolicking dog, who is unaware of the complexities of this strange and fearful experience.

In *Pervyi sovetskii dirizhabl'* (*The First Soviet Dirigible,* 1931), three-quarters of the width of the canvas is dominated by an enormous dirigible, a red star scratched across its upper surface, emerging from a hangar that seems much too small to contain it. Below and to either side groups of people grasp frail tether lines. Labas's figures are bodiless, and dwarfed by the giant airship that they hold but in no way control. They themselves are identifiable only in the aggregate, and by the occasional tiny red flags rising from their midst. The dirigible, a flurry of soft grays, is the only real flesh-and-blood subject of the work.

Luchishkin's *Shar uletel* (*The Balloon Has Flown,* 1926, fig. no. 11), shown at the third Ost exhibition, is unambiguously pessimistic. The diminutive figure of a child dressed in blue stares straight ahead from between two apartment buildings that are so tall that the space between them narrows as they ascend to the top of the canvas. The viewer is led into the depth of the picture by a line of six leafless trees planted behind the buildings in uniform round holes, but is then abruptly halted by a blank wooden fence. High in the sky at the top center of the canvas is a small bright-red balloon, its short string dangling as it is carried aloft into a bleak sky by an unseen wind. Small scenes of daily life are discernible through the windows of the buildings: a woman looking out, a man with his arms raised, and the body of a suicide hanging from the ceiling. In Luchishkin's *Vytianuv sheiu, storozhit kolkhoznuiu noch'* (*With Neck Held High It Guards the Kolkhoz Night,* 1930, fig. no. 12), the unmoving presence of a towering anthropomorphic piece of machinery threatens, while purporting to protect, people so tiny and fragile that they are scarcely distinguishable from the hay in which they sleep.

Tyshler could be straightforwardly horrific, as in his *Boinia* (*Slaughterhouse,* 1925), or charmingly funny as we see him in *Direktor pogody* (*The Director of the Weather,* 1926, plate no. 376). But in the late 1920s in works such as *Liricheskii tsikl, No. 4* (*Lyrical Cycle, No. 4,* 1928, fig. no. 13), he typically employs an eccentric, seriocomic imagery that finds refuge from reality in absurdity. In Tyshler, Ost's anti-Realist tendencies reach their culmination.

The Ost artists were followed in Vkhutemas/Vkhutein by a group of militant young believers in a purely proletarian art. Their graduation in the years 1927 to 1930 coincided with Stalin's encouragement of the class war, and with the forced industrialization and collectivization of the First Five-Year Plan. Even before graduation, these neophyte artists preached strict sociopolitical tests for content and style in the arts, and with fundamentalist fervor threw themselves into political and organizational maneuvering for power in the art world. Within a remarkably short time they had taken over the leadership of AKhR and OMAKhR (the Young People's Section of AKhR),[32] conducted a purge of some of the older members of these organizations, and proceeded to attack other art groups, prominent critics, and government-run museums for their lack of proletarian orthodoxy.

Not content with OMAKhR and AKhR as platforms, militant proletarians were the driving force in organizing a centralized umbrella organization—FOSKh (the Federation of Associations of Soviet Artists)—and in 1931 they established their own Russian Association of Proletarian Artists (RAPKh). RAPKh artists lectured their colleagues on the dangers posed by ideologically dubious "fellow travelers" in the arts and on the evils of "bourgeois" artistic styles. In a campaign for "differentiation," they identified and publicized "nonproletarian" class elements in other artistic groups in an attempt to create "pure" class-based organizations. By the end of the decade they had become the de facto instrument of political oversight in the arts.

The proletarianization of art was put into practice most efficiently through an artists' cooperative, Vsekokhudozhnik (the All-Russian Cooperative Association "Artist"), organized in 1929. It bought and sold members' paintings, arranged local and traveling exhibitions, and distributed monthly salaries based on potential sales. Vsekokhudozhnik was an outgrowth of Vserabis (the All-Russian Union of Workers in the Arts), and was headed by its former president, Iuvenalii Slavinskii.[33] Vsekokhudozhnik acquired political power through its close connections to the Party and vast economic power as it came to represent increasing numbers of artists.

In the late 1920s the Ost artists, so recently the vanguard of

revolutionary art, found themselves open to the dangerous charge of opposing the Revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and were increasingly on the defensive. At a general conference called in 1928 to discuss yet again the validity of easel painting, Shterenberg defended the "great cultural value" of painting and reminded the audience of the Party resolution three years previously which affirmed that aesthetic questions were not yet at the stage where an official proletarian art could be defined.[34] But among themselves the Ost artists, too, argued about the role of studio painting under such extreme social conditions and differed heatedly as to the extent and manner of their involvement with collectivization and industrialization.

The question of the membership of Ost itself became a public topic of debate. The fundamentalists of AKhRR and RAPKh harped on the "bourgeois tendencies" of Labas, Shterenberg, Tyshler, and others, and demanded that if artists such as Vil'iams, Luchishkin, and Pimenov aspired to the status of "fellow travelers"—they had no hope of being transformed into proletarians—they separate themselves from the others in the group. Lev Viaz'menskii, a founder of RAPKh, in print accused Ost work of being "reactionary," "anti-Semitic," and "Fascist."[35]

At the end of January 1931, Ost split in two, a victim of the "process of differentiation." Vil'iams, Pimenov, Luchishkin, Zernova, and a group of younger members left to form the Brigade of Artists, while Shterenberg, Labas, Tyshler, Goncharov, and twenty-three others remained in Ost. The Brigade of Artists lost no time in rejecting its past and aligning itself with the most rabid elements of the art world. Their first official meeting on February 3, 1931, was a model of their new political expediency and an effort to make up for lost time:

In the name of those gathered, greetings were sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, to Comrades Voroshilov and Maksim Gor'kii, and to foreign revolutionary artists. The meeting recognized the necessity of publishing a special album entitled The Five-Year Plan in Four Years, *dedicated to Gor'kii.*

It was resolved to confer upon Comrade Voroshilov the title Honored Worker in the Visual Arts. In order to raise the defense capabilities of the country it was resolved to work a day for the fund to build the dirigible Klim Voroshilov.[36]

The aesthetic platform of the new organization was no less zealous:

We are for a collective and planned purposefulness in the creative process . . .

We are for publicistic art as a means of intensifying art's language of images in the struggle for the urgent tasks of the working class.

Our former practice under the conditions of the old Ost contained elements of petit-bourgeois and bourgeois influences. This was expressed in the closed cliquishness of the group, in aesthetic Formalism, and in its distance from the tasks of socialist construction. Now that we have recognized our mistakes and have broken off from the other part of Ost, the task of eliminating our own shortcomings stands before us.

As to creative discipline, we are against exhibitions spontaneously presenting the uncoordinated production of individual artists . . .

We are for exhibitions with a single creative and production plan that is obligatory for each member of the brigade, for the collective working out and fulfilling of this plan, for involving the public at large in the process of affirmation and verification of the work being done.[37]

The Brigade of Artists did not hesitate to accuse their former friends of "Formalism," a charge that carried with it

fig. 9
Solomon Nikritin
The People's Court, *1933–34.*
Oil on canvas.
State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow. Gift George Costakis.

fig. 10
Karl Ioganson
A Soviet Court, *1928.*
Oil on canvas, 80 x 108 cm.
State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

dangerous counterrevolutionary overtones. Labas's *Soviet Dirigible,* they wrote, is a "typical Formalist work. The artist was interested not in the real depiction of a dirigible and the relationship of the people in the picture to it but in a self-sufficient play of colors."[38]

In their anxiety to prove their zeal and rectify past mistakes, the Brigade also subjected their own previous work to public criticism. Vil'iams's *Autorace* was berated for its departure from the realistic depiction of a contemporary manufacturing plant: "Neither the strict geometricity of the architectural outlines nor the autos rented from foreign advertising posters nor the presence of the 'masses' eliminates the unfortunate impression that before us is a virgin provincial landscape bearing no resemblance to the panorama of the Nizhne-Novgorod automobile plant."[39] Pimenov's *Seizing of an English Blockhouse* was criticized for its elongation of the figures and their high cheekbones, but most crucially for "THE SYMBOLIZED DISPLAY OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES (the partisans with their fingers torn off)."[40] Nor was even Deineka's *Oborona Petrograda* (*Defense of Petrograd,* 1928), the most popularly successful work in the Ost genre and a work destined to become an icon of the Revolution, immune from attack: "The graphic quality and the linear precision that are its distinguishing features . . . cross over into SCHEMATIZATION AND RATIONALISM."[41]

To the relief of many people who hoped it would put an end to the ominous threats implicit in such denunciations, on April 23, 1932, the Central Committee of the Communist Party abolished all artists' and writers' groups. Citing the narrowness of existing organizations in the country, it ordered single national unions for artists, writers, and those in other creative disciplines.[42] Two months later the Moscow section of the Union of Soviet Artists held its first meeting.[43] Yet the new organization did not eliminate the Vsekokhudozhnik cooperative but, rather, attached itself to it, especially in the selection of the board that passed on works of art. Not only did Vsekokhudozhnik now control, through the sale and exhibition of works, much of the art seen in the country, but its committees of artists exercised the power to enforce the lowest-common-denominator interpretation of Socialist Realism through public slander and intimidation of their fellow artists.

The first major exhibition in Moscow under the new administrative arrangements was the local showing of the jubilee exhibition, *Khudozhniki RSFSR za 15 let* (*Artists of the RSFSR over the Past Fifteen Years*), organized in 1932 in Leningrad to commemorate fifteen years of Soviet rule. A massive exhibition of over two thousand works of art, including 950 paintings done since 1917, it opened at its Moscow venue in June 1933. But here the works were hung not with their respective artistic organizations, as they had been in Leningrad, but rather according to their assessed contribution to a proletarian aesthetic. The paintings were divided into three general groups: those that were regarded as clear contributions to proletarian art, works by "fellow travelers," and works by artists who had been "'infected with all kinds of Formalist diseases and influenced by their bourgeois experiences.'"[44] These contaminated works—by Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Natan Al'tman, Ivan Kliun, Popova, Rodchenko, Pavel Filonov, and Nikolai Suetin—were crowded into one small room, in numbers greatly reduced from the Leningrad show.[45] Shterenberg, Udal'tsova, and Drevin, figurative but still suspect, were isolated in another small room of their own. The Ost artists were relegated to the section of "fellow travelers"; through a concerted effort by his colleagues, Tyshler, who had been excluded from the Leningrad show, was permitted to exhibit with them. The Brigade artists generally made it into the first division of genuinely Soviet art.[46]

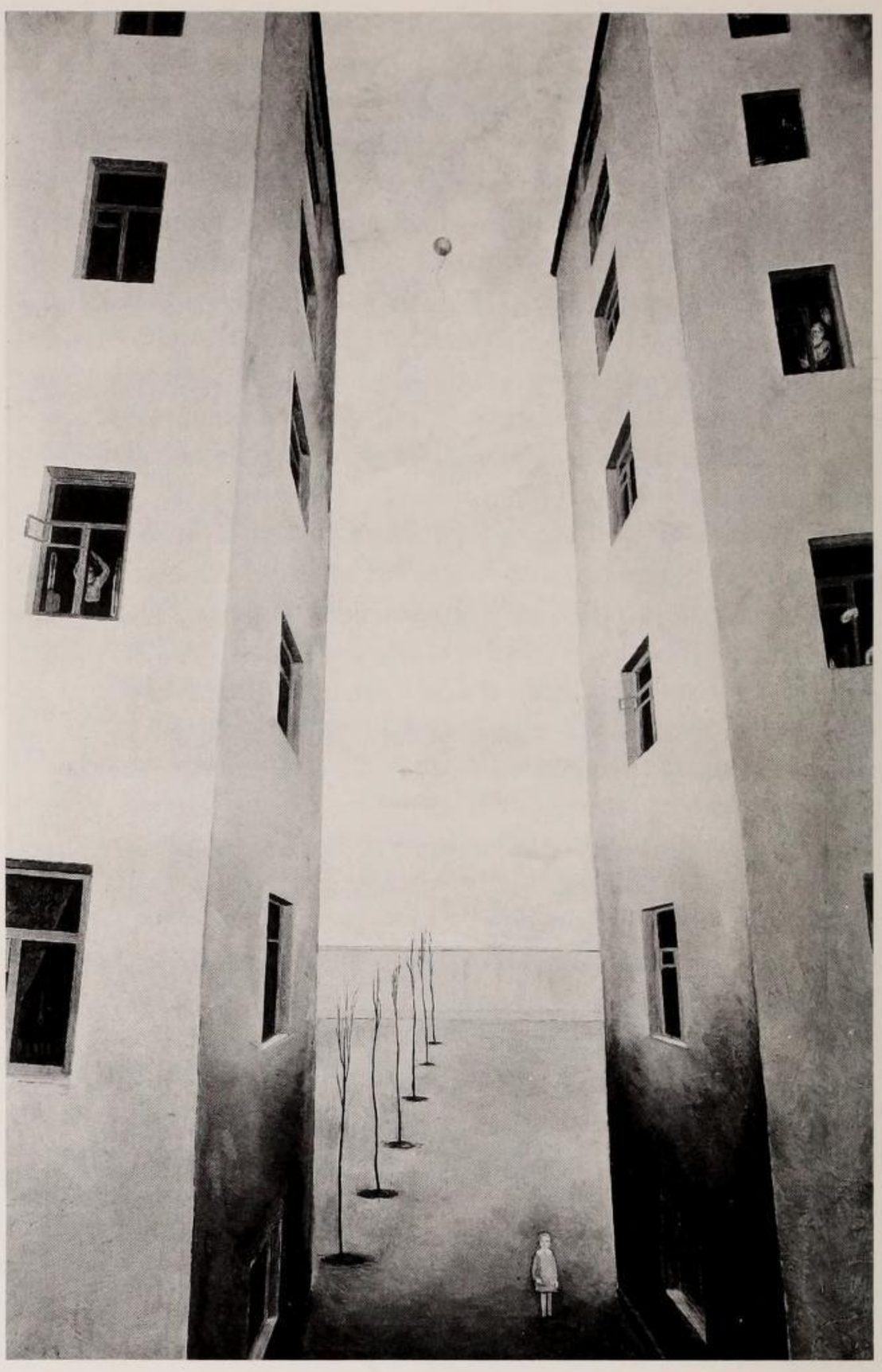

fig. 11
Sergei Luchishkin
The Balloon Has Flown, *1926.*
Oil on canvas, 106 x 69 cm.
State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

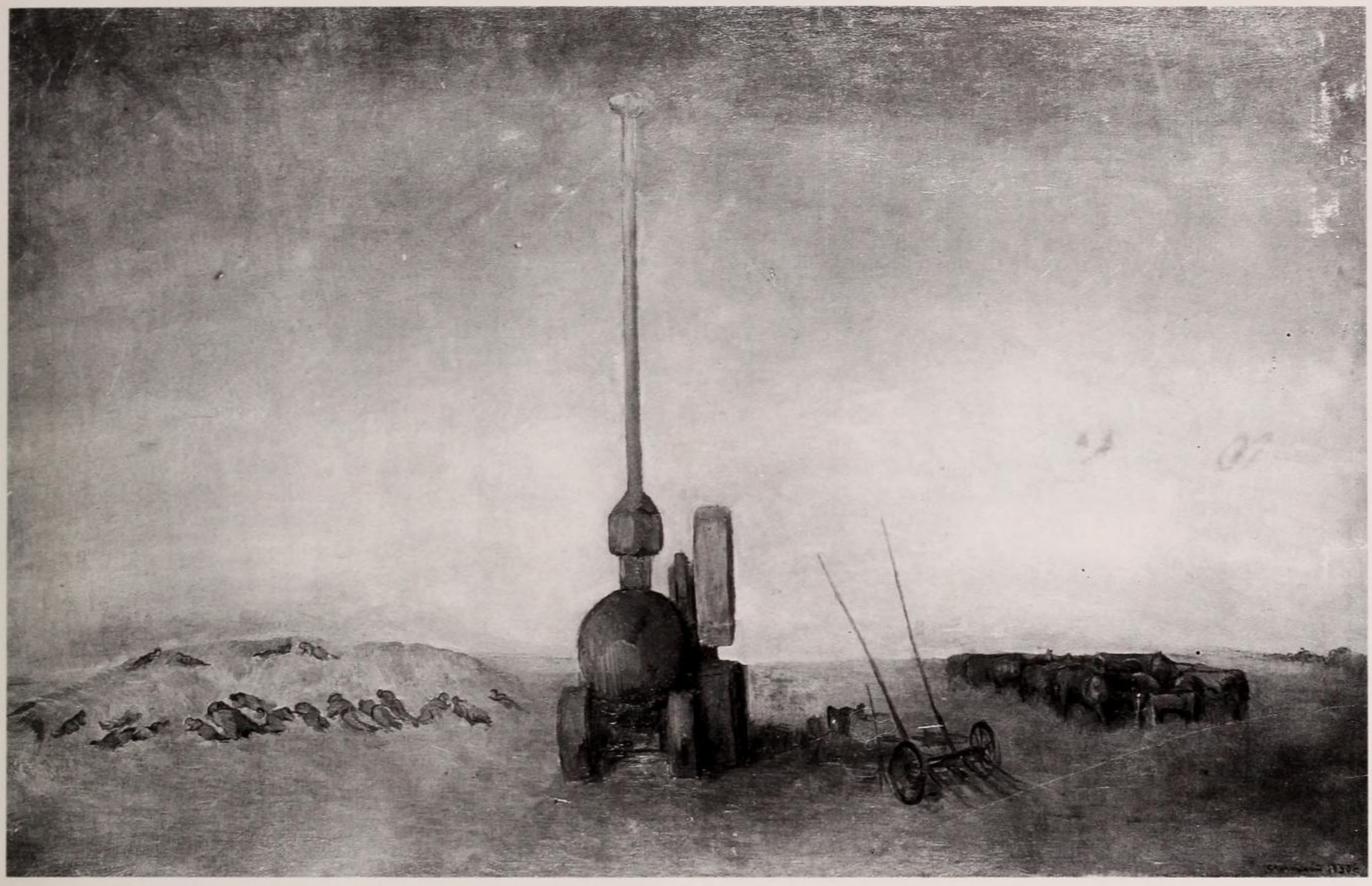

fig. 12
Sergei Luchishkin
With Neck Held High, It Guards the Kolkhoz Night, *1930.*
Oil on canvas, 77 x 117 cm.
State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

Nikritin was, of course, absent. The star of the show was clearly Deineka's *Mat'* (*Mother*), an unsentimental portrait of a woman in robust health with an overly sweet child in her arms. The Ost artists fared badly when compared to this model: "The personages of the young 'Westerners'—the Ost artists—often looked too schematic and seemed a soulless appendage to an urbanized civilization. Contrasting the 'machine-ized' person in the works of Vialov at the end of the twenties or Zernova's *Peredachi tankov* [*Transfer of Tanks*] (1931) with Deineka's *Mother,* [one reviewer] wrote, 'Instead of dry thematic structures, here before us is a lyrical image of a mother with baby in her arms . . . but what a mother! This is no pathetic bourgeois female . . . not a mother married to a tyrant husband . . . this is a strong image of an energetic, independent, free woman . . .'"[47] Deineka's one-time colleague in Ost, Luchishkin, did not fare as well. The current head of Narkompros, Andrei Bubnov, spied the small hanging figure of the suicide in one of the windows of *The Balloon Has Flown* and had the painting summarily removed from the exhibition.[48]

By now the complete collapse of any hope for a new figurative art was at hand. As the 1930s progressed, Vsekokhudozhnik, in the form of its Art Board, wielded almost unlimited power over the lives of the artists. Discussions of works of art submitted to it took on the aspect of criminal trials. When Nikritin submitted his canvas *Staroe i novoe* (*The Old and the New,* ca. 1930–35, fig. no. 14) for consideration, he faced a panel chaired by Slavinskii and composed of the artists Bogorodskii, Aleksandr Gerasimov, Pavel Sokolov-Skalia, Nikolai Mashkovtsev, Deineka, Fridrikh Lekht, Aleksandr Grigor'ev, and the critics Osip Beskin and Ol'ga Bubnova.[49] As was typically the case, the work was used as a pretext for destroying the painting career of this independent-minded artist.

The "old and the new" was a popular subject in the 1920s as artists tried to define the change in society and to work out an image of the future. Nikritin's painting is a monumental and symbolic work; he probably hoped it would prove a suitable composition for another of his murals. It consists of a group of just four figures. The "old" is represented by the two outside figures, a nude and a beggar: the "Venus" on the left, rendered in a neoacademic style, covers herself with her hands and shyly draws her knees together, while the legless beggar on the right, the figure of a contemporary Buddha, displays a round tin, empty except for a mysterious tiny sphere. The two central figures, a young man and woman, are set counter to these images of false bourgeois idealization and cruel economic reality. The woman, in a worker's coverall, stands boldly with legs apart, one hand on her hip and the other pointing off to the right in a gesture of command. The young man lunges across the left foreground, staring fixedly at an unmarked globe in his hands. The sphere of the globe covers the pubic area of the female worker and rhymes visually with the empty tin and small sphere of the invalid. The entire work is bathed in a golden patina which distances it still further from reality and emphasizes its mytho-symbolic nature. We may guess that, on the most obvious level of the work, the artist is opposing the contemporary position of women to that of the past, and the bleak life of a veteran of imperialist wars to the global interests and peaceful intentions of contemporary youth. The enigmatic spheres point to the possibility of a more metaphysical interpretation.

At the outset of Vsekokhudozhnik's inquisition into this painting, Nikritin defended his work by describing the preparatory sketches he made for it, emphasizing that they were done from life; he named the place where he had seen the worker and vouched for the existence of the friend whom he

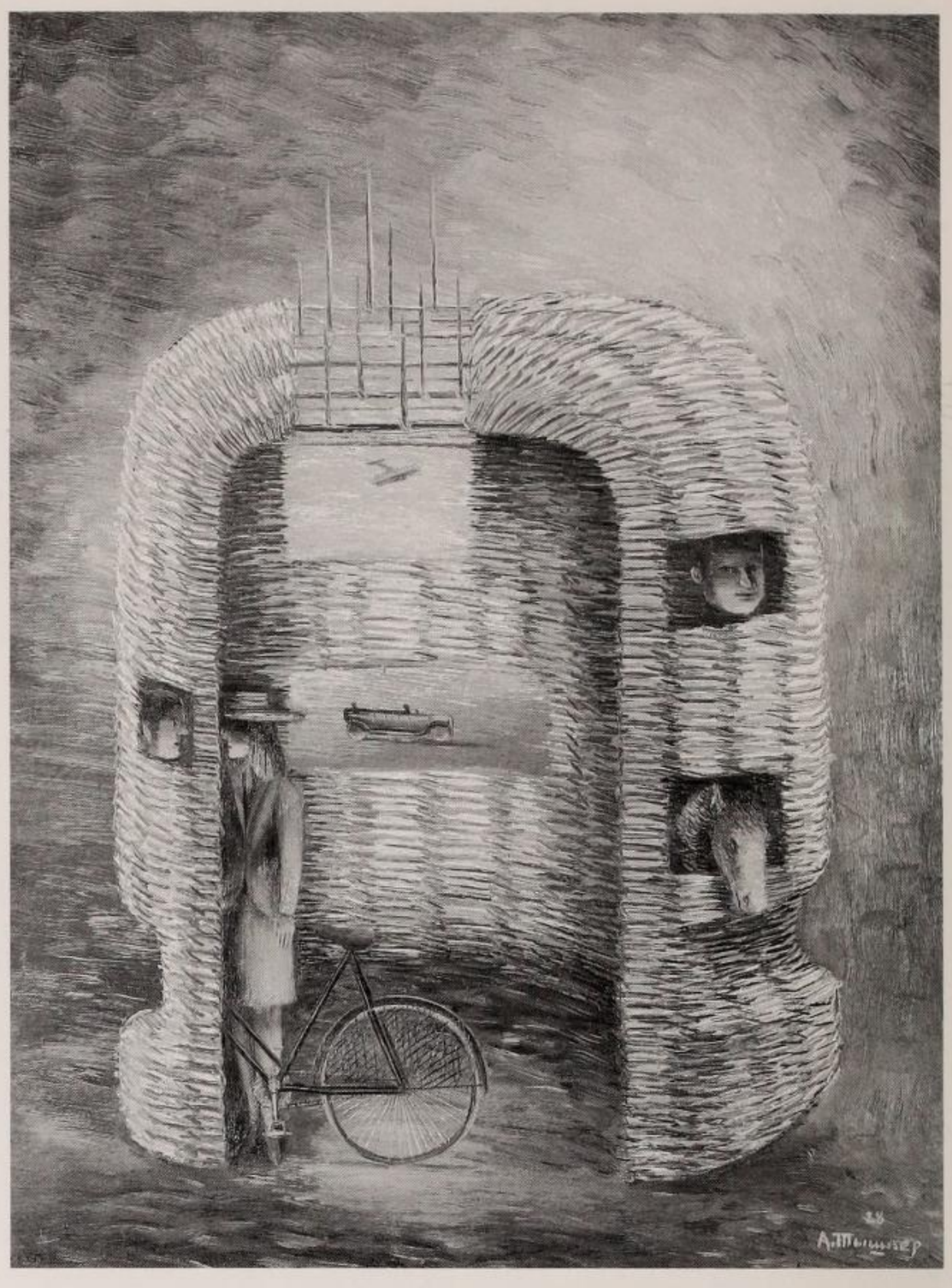

fig. 13
Aleksandr Tyshler
Lyrical Cycle, No. 4, *1928.*
Oil on canvas, 73.4 x 55.6 cm.
Museum Ludwig (Collection Ludwig, Cologne).

had noted in the act of looking for a town on a globe. But the initial hostility of the committee was not to be assuaged. Lekht objected to the unrealistic posture of the young man, Deineka to the "odd" position of the ball; Grigor'ev called the picture a "defamation"; Gerasimov said it did not merit their attention. But instead of simply dismissing the work as unacceptable, the committee proceeded to a vicious attack on Nikritin himself. Gerasimov called him "undesirable" and said, "This type of artist was once very common. He is one of those people who want to talk at all costs about themselves." Sokolov-Skalia insidiously linked him to the enemy abroad: "Such a peculiar man! And so terribly individualistic! Comrades, we sometimes read catalogues of foreign exhibitions, especially from Italy; there are things such as this . . . I regard it as an eclectic work derived from other sources, namely, it is adopted from the eclectic Italian Fascists." Mashkovtsev posed the rhetorical question of whether a Communist could have created such a picture, and piously answered it himself: "I cannot recollect that a single shadow of this tendency would ever have occurred in the case of comrades of the Party." And Lekht delivered the coup de grace: "What we see here is a calumny . . . It is a class attack, inimical to the Soviet power." In response to this assault, Nikritin abandoned any attempt to appease his accusers and, with an eye on history, characterized the type of paintings that had, in fact, met with Vsekokhudozhnik's approval: "[They stand] in no relation whatever to Soviet painting. These works follow the line of least intellectual resistance. (I am confessing what I think—perhaps to-day I am speaking for the last time.) What I am looking for is a great socialist style, versatile, philosophical. I am convinced that I am on the right track. Time will be our judge."

Slavinskii, in the last word of the meeting, disavowed the panel's personal responsibility for the opinions expressed: "The description which has been given here by all the members of the commission is to be regarded as the opinion of our artistic public. I should like to express the deepest regret that these views have not penetrated the consciousness of a stubborn painter."[50]

Tyshler and many other Ost painters suffered the same sort of humiliation and intimidation at the hands of Vsekokhudozhnik and the Moscow section of the Union of Soviet Artists. Labas and Shterenberg were suppressed as Formalists; as late as 1947, Red'ko was expelled from the Union for the same disease. Other members of the original group were led by their fundamental belief in the Revolution step by step into an aesthetic position from which there was no escape. With each increase in artistic limitations, with each quantum jump into personal vilification and conformity, some dropped out. But many never found a place to draw the line, and although this allowed them to continue working and even to become part of the artistic administration, they ended mired in the aesthetic bog to which they had contributed.

The first generation of the Moscow avant-garde had similarly failed to respond to the spiritual needs of its time. When abstract artists abandoned painting and their interest in the nature of humanity and the universe in favor of publicistic propaganda and objects of daily use, they renounced the role of artists as prophets and seekers of a high truth. At a crucial time in history they remained silent about the complexities of the human situation, about people's hopes, doubts, fears, and ambiguities. They failed to offer guidance, insight, or understanding to a public caught in events that were destroying the old certainties. For a time it seemed possible that the resulting artistic vacuum might indeed be filled by a new generation, possessed of a new artistic vision. But they, too, were overtaken by a militant fundamentalism, partly of their own making, that through increasing intimidation reduced most of Russian art to a shadow of its former self.

fig. 14
Solomon Nikritin
The Old and the New, *ca. 1930–35 (detail).*
Oil on canvas, 100 x 120 cm.
State Savitskii Museum of Art, Nukus.

Notes

1. Varvara Stepanova, "On Constructivism," in Alexander Lavrentiev, *Stepanova,* trans. Wendy Salmond (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 175.

2. K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* (Vitebsk: Unovis), p. 3, as translated in K. S. Malevich, "Suprematism. 34 Drawings," in his *Essays on Art,* ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), vol. 1, p. 127; Lyubov' Popova, "Commentary on Drawings," trans. James West, in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932,* catalogue for exhibition organized by the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the State Tret'yakov Gallery, Moscow (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 69. Popova's original text is in the Manuscript Division, State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, f. 148, ed. khr. 17, l. 4.

3. V. I. Kostin, comp., *Kliment Red'ko: Dnevniki, vospominaniia, stat'i* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1974), p. 63. Entry for November 18, 1920.

4. M. A. Bulgakov, "Pod piatoi. Moi dnevnik," *Ogonek* 51 (December 1989), p. 17. Entry for April 15, 1924.

5. V. Kostin, *OST* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1976), p. 19.

6. The painting was his *Portret L. Ia. Reznikova* (*Portrait of L. Ia. Reznikov*). *Katalog. I-aia diskussionnaia vystavka ob"edinenii aktivnogo revoliutsionnogo iskusstva* (Moscow, 1924), p. 11.

7. In addition to their kinship with the widespread efforts at classification taking place at this time in many fields, Luchishkin's analytical work and formal studies generally associated with the Museum of Painterly Culture overlap considerably with early-twentieth-century perceptual studies and with Gestalt psychology.

8. Nikritin, Luchishkin, and Triaskin invented a Projectionist Theater, which utilized mobile abstract sets and "pure" speech sounds similar to *zaum'* (transrational language). Performances were given in 1923 and 1924.

9. Luchishkin and Zernova both mention the importance to them of Shchukin's collection, to which they had been given access even as secondary-school students.

10. At that time the paintings which had been in storage were reassembled as a museum at 52 Povarskaia Street.

11. At the time of the Revolution, Lenin appointed Anatolii Lunacharskii, a writer and critic and an old friend from his years of exile, Commissar of Enlightenment. David Shterenberg, an artist whom Lunacharskii had known and reviewed when both lived in Paris, became head of Izo Narkompros.

12. The Projectionists were not the only additions to the Berlin exhibition. At the beginning of 1923, Shterenberg took to Berlin more work by Popova, Udal'tsova, Kudriashev, and others, as well as a quantity of porcelain and other decorative art. According to Shterenberg's records, 19 artists and 193 works of art were added to the show at this time. V. P. Lapshin, "Pervaia vystavka russkogo iskusstva. Berlin. 1922 god. Materialy k istorii sovetsko-germanskikh khudozhestvennykh sviazei," *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 1 (1982), pp. 349, 360.

13. The Museum of Painterly Culture was opened to the public at this venue on October 15, 1924. Its holdings eventually went to the State Tret'iakov Gallery.

14. *Truby (Komsomol'skoe shestvie)* (*Horns {Young Communists League Parade},* 1925), State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

15. *Kul'turnaia zhizn' v SSSR. Khronika 1917–1927* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), p. 571.

16. E. S. Zernova, *Vospominaniia monumentalista* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1985), p. 61. *The Fish-Canning Factory* is now in the State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, and *Tomato Puree* in the Astrakhan Kustodiev Picture Gallery.

17. The exhibition was in Moscow from October 18th to November 30, 1924. From there it traveled to Saratov and Leningrad.

18. G. Zumpf, "Vystavki nemetskogo iskusstva v Sovetskom soiuze v seredine 20–kh godov i ikh otsenka sovetskoi kritiki," in *Vzaimosviazi russkogo i sovetskogo iskusstva i nemetskoi khudozhestvennoi kul'tury* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), p. 191. The author is quoting from A. V. Lunacharskii, "Vystavka revoliutsionnogo iskusstva zapada," in *A. V. Lunacharskii ob izobrazitel'nom iskusstve* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 319–20.

19. Zumpf, "Vystavki nemetskogo iskusstva," p. 186.

20. Ibid., pp. 186–87. Zumpf is summarizing Fedorov-Davydov's article, "O nekotorykh kharakternykh chertakh nemetskoi vystavki," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 6 (1924).

21. A. A. Fedorov-Davydov, "Po vystavkam," *Russkaia sovetskaia khudozhestvennaia kritika. 1917–1941* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo/Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1982), p. 262.

22. S. A. Luchishkin, *Ia ochen' liubliu zhizn'. Stranitsy vospominanii* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1988), p. 103.

23. *N. N. Kupreianov. Literaturno-khudozhestvennoe nasledie* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1973), p. 27.

24. Fedorov-Davydov, "Po vystavkam," p. 258.

25. V. I. Kostin, "Poiski i eksperimenty Solomona Nikritina," in *Sredi khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1986), p. 63.

26. Luchishkin, *Ia ochen' liubliu zhizn',* pp. 116–17.

27. This picture is also called *Edinolichnik* (*Loner*).

28. Boris Ternovets, the director of the Museum of New Western Art, was particularly close to the Italians. He wrote one of the first books on de Chirico, and made extensive trades of Russian work—including that of Ost—for contemporary Italian art.

29. Kostin, *Kliment Red'ko,* p. 16. Red'ko showed some two hundred works at this solo exhibition. His relations with Ost became strained to some extent because the Museum of Painterly Culture had refused him space for his exhibition.

30. Ibid., p. 73. Entry for March 21, 1926.

31. Ibid., p. 67. Entry for June 10, 1924.

32. AKhRR was forced to reorganize early in 1928, and at that time it changed its name to AKhR.

33. Slavinskii was a former orchestra conductor at the Bol'shoi Theater, a Party activist, and had been a union organizer since 1916.

34. "Vystuplenie khud. D. Shterenberg," in *Iskusstvo v SSSR i zadachi khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Izd. kommunisticheskoi akademii, 1928), pp. 93–94.

35. I. Matsa, ed., *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let. Materialy i dokumentatsiia* (Moscow and Leningrad: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1933), p. 576.

36. *Izogazeta brigada khudozhnikov* 1 (1931), p. 1.

37. The signatories included Vil'iams, Vialov, Zernova, Luchishkin, Pimenov, and, oddly, Nikritin, who at this late hour seems to have made an attempt to rehabilitate himself. Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let,* p. 579.

38. *Izogazeta brigada khudozhnikov* 5–6 (1931), p. 41.

39. *Izogazeta brigada khudozhnikov* 1 (1931), p. 5.

40. *Izogazeta brigada khudozhnikov* 2–3 (1931), p. 8.

41. Ibid., p. 9.

42. The Decree on the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations said in part: "At the present time, when cadres of proletarian literature and art have managed to develop and new writers and artists have come forward in factories, plants, and collective farms, the frameworks of the existing proletarian literary and art organizations . . . are already too narrow and are impeding a serious range of artistic work. This situation creates a danger of transforming these organizations from the means of the greatest mobilization of Soviet writers and artists for the tasks of socialist construction into a means of cultivating closed groups isolated from the political tasks of contemporaneity and from significant groups of writers and artists sympathetic to socialist construction." "O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii," in *Vo glave kul'turnogo stroitel'stva* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 350-51.

43. A national Union of Artists of the USSR was not established until 1957.

44. Luchishkin, *Ia ochen' liubliu zhizn',* p. 134. Luchishkin is here quoting from an unattributed source.

45. A. I. Morozov, "K istorii vystavki 'Khudozhniki RSFSR za 15 let' (Leningrad-Moskva, 1932–35)," *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 1 (1982), p. 132.

46. Vil'iams, a member of the Brigade of Artists, was initially included in the first division, but his works were ignominiously removed to the Ost room the day after he joined Goncharov, Labas, and Nisson Shifrin in their request that Tyshler be allowed to exhibit. Luchishkin, *Ia ochen' liubliu zhizn',* p. 134.

47. Morozov, "K istorii vystavki 'Khudozhniki RSFSR za 15 let,'" p. 154.

48. Luchishkin, *Ia ochen' liubliu zhizn',* p. 134.

49. Kurt London, *The Seven Soviet Arts* (London: Faber, 1937; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970). Artists formerly associated with a wide variety of groups participated in the work of Vsekokhudozhnik. Many, but far from all, were previously members of AKhRR and RAPKh. Beskin, who wrote catalogues for the Soviet export exhibitions, is best known for a fiendish book on "Formalism."

50. Transcript of the Art Board of Vsekokhudozhnik from April 10, 1935, as translated in London, *The Seven Soviet Arts,* pp. 223–29.

The Great Utopia

The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,

1915–1932

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
State Tret'iakov Gallery
State Russian Museum
Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

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Prefaces

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