

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

Vasilii Rakitin

*Which is worth more: wind or stone?
They're both priceless.*

—Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov

The epic literatures of many peoples, in both East and West, feature sagas in which two heroes, equal in prowess, are pitted against each other. Valiant warriors on both sides watch their duel with bated breath . . .

The first of two events that determined the fate of art for a long time to come—and not just in Russia but in many other countries—took place in Moscow in the spring of 1914:

Dear Sirs,

On the 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th of May this year the studio of Vladimir Tatlin (37 Ostozhenka, apartment 3) will be open from 6 to 8 P.M. for a free viewing of his SYNTHETIC-STATIC compositions. In addition, at seven o'clock on the aforementioned days, the Futurist Sergei Podgaevskii will dynamically declaim his latest poetic transrational records.¹

A hand-lettered placard mounted above the entrance to the apartment proclaimed: BEHOLD THE TRICK!

Podgaevskii could not simply read his verses—he had to “dynamically declaim” them. And they were not even verses, either, but “poetic transrational records.” The choice of words is indicative of a change of mood in Moscow artistic circles, of a gravitation toward the transrational and the alogical. Toward Dada in place of Futurism.

Tatlin used metallic netting and smoked glass in one of the compositions on display, which people claimed was a depiction of a “tearoom at night.”² They were, however, hard pressed to say what was represented in the other “synthetic-static” works, which had been hung alongside Tatlin’s beautiful and perfectly legible set and costume designs for Mikhail Glinka’s opera *Zhizn' za tsaria* (*A Life for the Czar*, 1836). (The 1913–14 Mir iskusstva [World of Art] exhibitions at which these designs had been displayed³ coincided with celebrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg of the tricentenary of the Romanov dynasty—celebrations which were themselves operatic in their grandeur.)⁴ Observers today wish to see a connection between Tatlin’s *Les* (*Forest*, 1913) design for Glinka’s opera and his first reliefs. But the break between them is obvious. There is no smooth transition. Tatlin took not a step but a leap into the unknown.

Nonetheless, Tatlin, with childlike cunning, continued to try to convince the public that there was no particular difference between his new work and old—although he did fear he would not be believed. In December 1914, he was invited to contribute as a member of World of Art to the *Khudozhniki Moskvyy—zbertvam voiny* (*Artists of Moscow for the Victims of the War*) exhibition, where again he showed his designs for *A Life for the Czar*. Yet two or three hours prior to the opening, he arrived with his *Zhivopisnyi rel'ef* (*Painterly Relief*, 1914)—a composition of wire, iron, cardboard, and enamel on board—and proceeded to hang it as if that were nothing out of the ordinary. The organizers endeavored to remove the relief from the exhibition—such an eccentric prank, such an aesthetic curiosity, did not suit a flag-waving, patriotic exhibition! Thanks, however, to the insistence of several other artists—and because spectators had already begun to filter into the exhibition halls—Tatlin’s relief was allowed to remain.⁵

The following year, Sergei Shchukin, one of the most significant collectors of the new painting, bought a relief by Tatlin out of the *Tramvai V* (*Tramway V*) exhibition in Petrograd, paying what seemed to Russian artists a fantastic price—three thousand rubles.⁶ For that amount of money one could purchase fifteen to twenty landscapes by the enterprising “father of Russian Futurism,” David Burliuk, or two or three splendid paintings by one of the most popular and prominent

artists of the time, Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin. Amazement bordered on shock. What was the secret of a few boards and pieces of iron and wire, all of which could be found in any barn or garbage dump?

In the late autumn of 1915, another artist in Moscow, Kazimir Malevich, was attempting to convince his colleagues in Futurist and Dada happenings to gather "under a new banner."⁷ He proposed that the poets of yesterday's Futurism "change the means of battle with thought, content, and logic . . . advance Alogism after Futurism"—in essence, that they learn from the example of his Alogist paintings. Malevich even provided examples of his own of the new poetic structures:

*Papuans bored, but
Cottage second-class
Ticket. Park. Arch.*

These lines loosely match his painting *Stantsiia bez ostanovki. Kuntsevo* (*Through Station: Kuntsevo*, 1913, fig. no. 2), while another of Malevich's examples brings to mind his *Korova i skripka* (*Cow and Violin*, 1913), sometimes called *Vid s balkona* (*View from the Balcony*):

*The cow ate a palm
Alma-Tadema
Adam Goat Goose.*⁸

It was evident that all the innovators in painting were "no longer Futurists"⁹ and that "Futurism" had survived only as a general notion useful in dealing with a public accustomed to the labeling of everything new and up to the minute as "Futurist." The participants in the *0.10* exhibition, held in Nadezhda Dobychina's gallery in Petrograd in 1915–16, called the show the "last Futurist exhibition"—the last that the artists striving to attain "zero form" wanted. Yet the *Magazin* (*The Store*) exhibition, organized by Tatlin and held in Moscow in 1916, would be called "Futurist." And during the Civil War years, "Futurism" would once again be a synonym for everything new, leading an exasperated Lenin to cry, "Can we not find any reliable anti-Futurists!"¹⁰

The true manifesto of the new movement in painting—Suprematism—was neither the leaflet with a statement by Malevich distributed at the *0.10* exhibition¹¹ nor the speeches he gave at debates and lectures nor even his polemical treatise *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu* (*From Cubism to Suprematism*),¹² an eccentric experiment in philosophical prose, but Malevich's *Chernyi kvadrat* (*Black Square*, 1915) itself, his "icon."

The icon is a sign of the other world, of sacred harmony, and a witness to higher spiritual values. But the majority of Malevich's followers, raised on the Futurists' irreverent attacks on the old and obsolete, did not immediately comprehend the iconic meaning of the *Black Square*. Malevich's detractors proved to be more insightful. They intuitively understood the historic importance of Malevich's gesture—he hung the *Black Square* at the *0.10* exhibition in the traditional place of the icon—yet, in their holy terror, they confused the new harmony and new artistic idealism with the march of the "oncoming boor."¹³

"We are all primitives of the twentieth century," announced Ivan Kliun.¹⁴ He used the word "primitive" in reference not to Primitivism, the stylistic tendency prevalent in the early 1910s, but to the beginning of a new era in the evolution of art and to vanguard artists as bearers of a new artistic consciousness, powerful and whole. Tatlin's reliefs and Malevich's Suprematism were the most important stimuli in the self-

determination of other avant-garde artists, who were not troubled by the divergence and even the glaring contradiction between Tatlin's and Malevich's paths. In order to clarify their own tasks, it was important that artists define themselves in relation to the new concepts. Formal innovation acted in and of itself, provoking argument, elucidation, and refutation. It was, that is, an aesthetic provocation, a challenge.

Thus Liubov' Popova and Kliun countered Tatlin with their own variations on the relief, admixing Tatlin's experiments and the "sculpto-paintings" of Aleksandr Arkhipenko and, in Popova's case, the work of the Italian Futurists Umberto Boccioni and Ardengo Soffici, as well; in Petrograd, Lev Bruni made reliefs influenced by Tatlin. What was at stake here, of course, was not the affirmation of the spatial relief as a special new genre—the reliefs of Vladimir Burliuk, Kliun, and Vasiliï Ermilov (who produced reliefs in Khar'kov in the early 1920s) were based upon different principles. Rather, Tatlin's reliefs acted as conduits to new spatial concepts and to a gradual recognition of a new attitude toward art in general.

Many artists—such as Ivan Puni, Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Ol'ga Rozanova (whose works were frequently entitled *Suprematizm* [*Suprematism*] in exhibition catalogues)—experienced Malevich's Suprematism as if it were an inoculation against the disease of illusionism and Naturalism, and then quickly went beyond it. After the February Revolution of 1917, the artists of Supremus—a group centered around Malevich in Moscow in 1916–17, which had planned, but was never able, to publish a journal of the same name—joined the so-called young or left federation of the Moscow Professional Union of Artists and Painters. And by 1920, Malevich's solo show at the Sixteenth State Exhibition in Moscow was essentially the exhibition of a living classic.

No one among Suprematism's "fellow travelers" had any desire, as Malevich wished they did, to develop specifically Suprematist principles further. The independence of each artist from the general rubric was clear to all the participants, bar none, in Suprematist ventures. Thus Varvara Stepanova observed bluntly that "Rozanova's Suprematism is contrary to that of Malevich . . . For Malevich, color exists solely to distinguish one plane from another; for Rozanova, the composition serves to reveal all the possibilities of color on a plane." She took particular note of the "minimalism" of Rozanova's most recent work, where "one color [develops] into a self-sufficient painting."¹⁵ Even the seemingly orthodox Suprematist Kliun quickly changed tack, searching out his own concepts of abstract form and constructing his compositions on the interrelation of color and light (on the change in color wrought by light and contrasts, and the influence of adjacent colors on the alteration of form).

Tatlin's reliefs and Malevich's *Black Square* introduced a new artistic yardstick. Competition with the Paris school, which had been the main engine in the evolution of new Russian art circa 1910, lost its meaning.

In about 1920, it would "suddenly" become evident that changes had taken place or were in the offing in many countries—that the scale of artistic values was shifting. Parisian artists would respond to the crisis with Purism and the aesthetics of Le Corbusier, and later with Surrealism. For the time being, however, the signal events were those occurring to the east of Paris. In Moscow and Petrograd, in Holland and Germany, and in Eastern Europe, artists were not only promoting but in their own way transforming new ideas. The Bauhaus, with a minimum of rhetoric, with "workmanlike efficiency," so to speak, for a time resolved all real and imagined conflicts and contradictions—between "free creative work" and society's claim on the artist's work; between logic and rationalism and spontaneity and intuition; between

technology and metaphysics—in its notion of a “total art” in active relation with its surroundings. In the 1920s, the question of “epoch and style” was not merely theoretical. And in the art of this period, Malevich and Tatlin are constantly the twin catalysts.

The world as a sense, independent of the image, of the idea—this is the essence of the content of art. {My} square is not an image, just as a switch or socket are not the current.

—Malevich¹⁶

By the time Tatlin’s reliefs and Suprematism appeared, a certain stage in the evolution of the new Russian art had come full circle—a stage that, according to Malevich, was initiated by those now seemingly happy and carefree sensualists, the Impressionists. Vanguard Russian artists especially esteemed Claude Monet, whom they perceived—as they did Cézanne and Van Gogh, and later Picasso—as “more Russian than the Russians.” Those in Malevich’s circle were always and unreservedly admirers of Fernand Léger, while Tatlin prized the lyrical Impressionism of Mikhail Larionov, which combined virtuosity with sincere feeling.

Cubism taught discipline of form and fostered a taste for analysis. It was, for Malevich, the pivotal—or, better yet, central—event in painting’s evolution from Impressionism to Suprematism. Among the slogans of Malevich’s students—the members of Unovis (the Affirmers of the New Art)—in Vitebsk were the following:

If you want to study art, study Cubism!

You want to learn painting? Begin with Cubism!

If you don’t want to become a fashionable painter, begin by studying Cubism!

If you are an artist and do not work cubistically, then begin working this way immediately!

You want to experience the beauty of the fourth dimension? Begin studying Cubism!

If you want to become a creator, study Cubism!

Do you want to reign over nature? Study Cubism!

If you don’t want to be ruled by nature, begin studying Cubism!¹⁷

In other words, there was no way to become a contemporary artist without first passing through Cubism.

For Tatlin, Cubism was something worth knowing, yet he evinced no desire to adopt it. Nor, however, did he feel any need to reject it—he was, of course, far from concurring with Félix Vallotton’s celebrated utterance: “Cézanne? I choose, with all due respect, to ignore him.” In the studio on Ostozhenka, which Tatlin rented with the artist Nikolai Rogovin, he drew nudes in the style of Cubism (whenever other artists congregated and they were able to hire a model). Many such studies remain, in albums and even on loose sheets of paper.

But no Cubism was allowed into his painting—no variations on the paintings in Shchukin’s gallery or those illustrated in magazines. Tatlin’s devices for deforming nature (devices as important to Expressionism as to Cubism), his “distortions,” had more in common with the violation of perspective in icons (but not in primitive art) than with the canvases of the Parisian painters. (It was precisely in 1911–12 that the “antiquity” of the vanguard art of Tatlin became manifest.)

And Futurism? For Malevich and Tatlin, its reign was a time when artistic life itself became a work of art.

Malevich entertained long and seriously both the idea of dynamism and the linked notion of art as pure energy. “I paint energy, not the soul.”¹⁸ Energy and the energetics of tension are subjects ever present in his reflections on art—though he

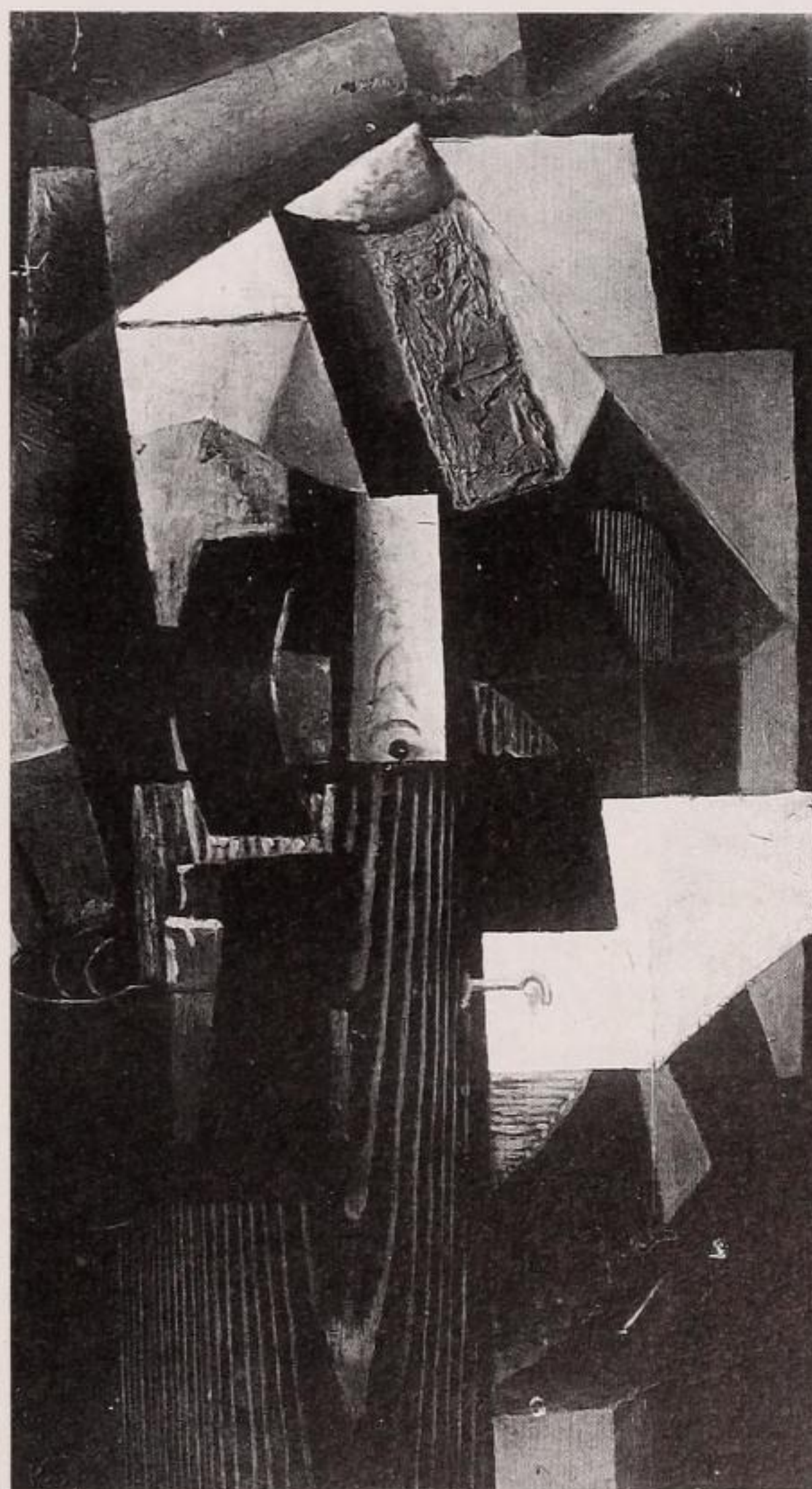
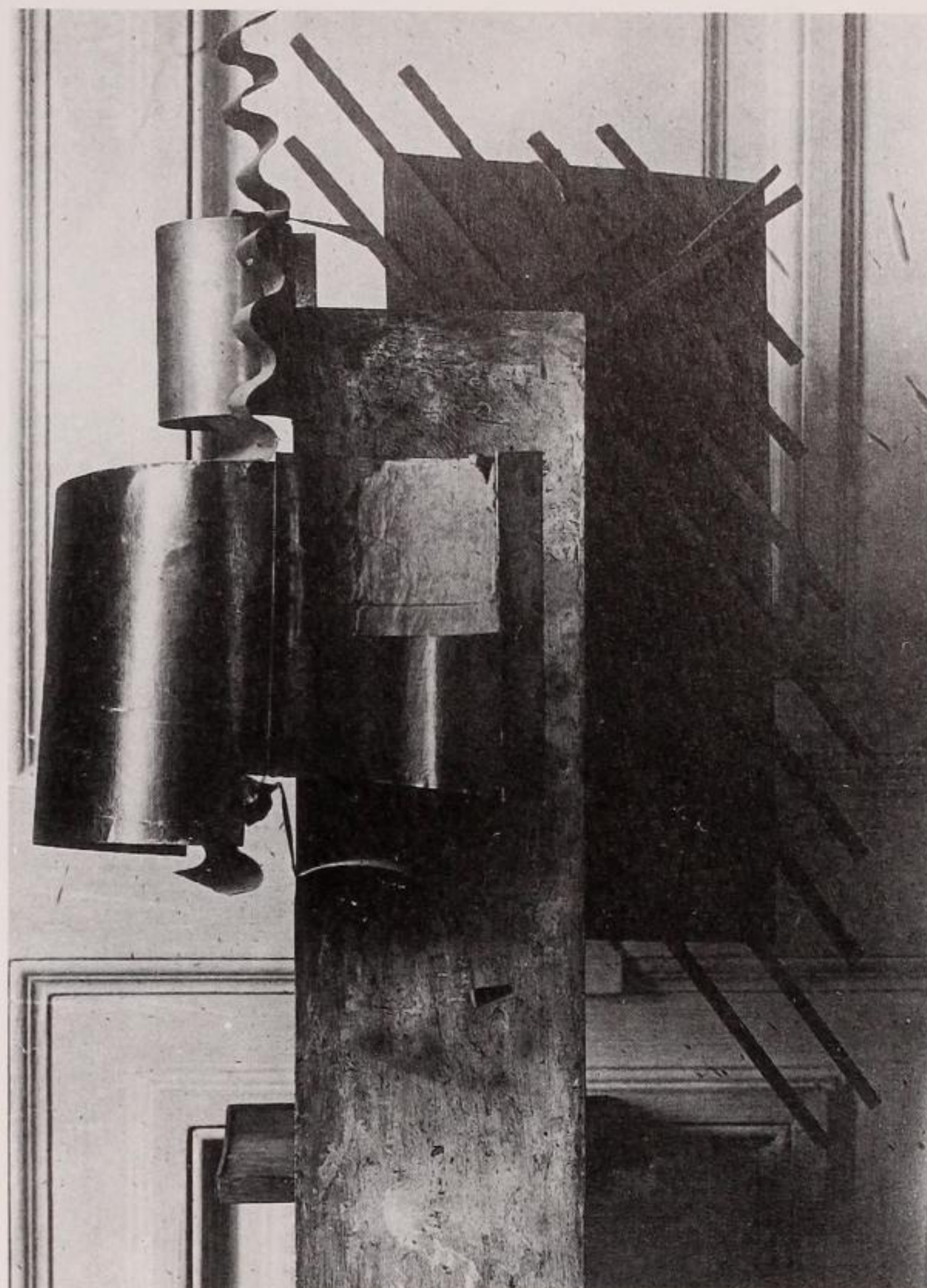


fig. 1
Vladimir Tatlin
Counter-Relief, ca. 1916.

fig. 2
Kazimir Malevich
Through Station: Kuntsevo, 1913.

invests these concepts with his own meaning, viewing both dynamism and energy from the vantage point of absolute art.

In first describing his reliefs as “synthetic-static compositions,” Tatlin emphasized their non-Futurist character.

Alogism formed a sort of neutral zone between the trends of the early 1910s and non-objective art and Constructivism. Tatlin contented himself with hanging the BEHOLD THE TRICK! placard, while Malevich (if one isn't blindly accepting the suggestions embedded in his own writings) found himself at a turning point. A turning point to nowhere, and then to “his” Suprematism, of far greater importance than Cubism. Irony for a time allowed the question, Where next? to remain unanswered; it permitted a second's breathing space in the uninterrupted pursuit of new forms. Alogism offered everything—Cubism's geometric planes, Futurism's strangeness and urban kitsch (lettering from advertisements and signboards)—immediately and simultaneously. It was harmony in disharmony. Not synthesis, not the birth pangs of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* but a backed-up stream of artistic reflexes and utterances vis-à-vis contemporary devices and concepts in art. Today we can trace an entirely logical path from Alogism to the montage of the 1920s.

In Malevich's case it was also significant that the Alogist estrangement of meaning encouraged scrutiny of the structure of the painting; it revealed the “pure element” of form: the surface plane.

Of course, Malevich, in passionately absorbing each *ism*, failed to notice that he was parodying them. The parody evolved from his desire to do everything not only better but absolutely right. He was a born systematist; he had to model everything into his own—and, in his opinion, faultlessly exact—world of Impressionism, Cézannism, and Cubism. And if everything was to be exact and complete, he had to circle back and to reexamine himself again and again. Hence it seemed to him, after he had completed his own series of Cubist experiments, that no one in Russia had yet created a truly Cubist work. But, had he worked in France, would he have found a Parisian artist who had?

Malevich's Alogist works, like things *an sich*, are products of the disengagement of form from the objects of perception. These works operate on two levels, that of abstract planes concealing some unknown world and that of irony vis-à-vis the subject that is possibly depicted.

Suprematism liberated these disengaged planes and endowed them with new meaning. New form engendered, or predetermined, new meaning.

This was the winding-up of the old (although the “old” was not very long out of its infancy) and the beginning of the new.

Tatlin navigated among the various *isms* in art like an icebreaker threading a path among floes that threaten to crush it. His was the most logical and the most unforeseen solution—to make not life but the materials existing in life both the subject of art and art itself.

He saw no need to repudiate anything. The polemical debates about art were of no special interest to Tatlin, and not because he wasn't one for talking—he was, in fact, a first-rate raconteur—but because he discerned no particular sense in them. Tatlin was a naturalist, the keenest of observers, who did reject willful intervention. He proceeded “from the bottom up,” not from a general idea—the fourth, fifth, sixth, or whatever dimension—but from the life of materials. From the life of materials, and not from materials as such.

Materials have properties such as elasticity, weight, and tension. Line, tone, and color. Old photographs of the reliefs—without the retouching that each time cancels a little more of the complexity of their structure—reveal a subtlety of *faktura* (density or manipulation of material) and light and shade. The

attainments of painting have not been lost. The refinement and intricacy of the linear-rhythmical relationships of painting are, rather, preserved. The riddle of Tatlin's reliefs, unsolved by those in both East and West who have reconstructed them, is how emptiness became an artistic space, how it acquired a subtle poetic meaning.

Tatlin's reliefs embodied a new artistic methodology: the aesthetics of real materials in real space (naturally, both these concepts change, and constantly, over time and space). Tatlin's conversations with young artists from the Apartment No. 5 studio on Vasil'evskii Island in Petrograd, and with the critics Sergei Isakov and Nikolai Punin, led to the following, entirely logical, formulae:¹⁹

	<i>spectrum</i>
<i>Impressionism</i>	————— <i>power of color</i>
	<i>quality of color</i>
<i>Cézannism</i>	————— <i>composition of form</i>
	<i>faktura</i>
<i>Cubism</i>	————— <i>consistent composition</i>
	<i>material</i>
<i>Tatlin (and Tatlinism)</i>	————— <i>real space</i>

And so, a new sign and a new reality.
Two faces of the age.

More accurately, a new life in art for the real. At the beginning, even Tatlin, it appears, did not fully grasp the significance of what he had discovered. It was no big deal. Every artist loves his material. No mere board but “a lovely little one,” Tatlin would say. What unusual discoveries were there here? What art? Even in the booklet *Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin*, published at the height of art-world polemicizing, we find no theories—not even their facsimile—no manifesto, no ripostes. Only a decidedly straightforward biographical note and reproductions of his works.²⁰ An account of work produced between this date and that. Look for yourself and draw your own conclusions. Just as El Lissitzky said later in his *Suprematicheskii skaz pro dva kvadrata* (*A Suprematist Tale about Two Squares*, 1922): “Construct yourselves.”

Vera Pestel', who dedicated her painting *Tatlin s banduroi* (*Tatlin with Bandura*)²¹ to Tatlin, writes ingenuously in her memoirs about how much she, Sof'ia Karetnikova, Popova, and Nadezhda Udal'tsova liked Malevich's bright and cheerful geometric paintings. Pestel' and the others made decorative sketches in the Suprematist style for the Verbovka collective, whose peasant women embroidered scarves, handbags, muffs, and carpets with these designs.²² And the four artists even decorated the club of the left federation of the Moscow Professional Union of Artists and Painters with Suprematist designs.²³

Malevich's formation of the Supremus group, which good friends of Tatlin's and former admirers of his art (Udal'tsova and Pestel' again) either joined or associated with, was, of course, a blow to Tatlin's pride as an artist. This despite the fact that both Malevich's formal investigations and his strategems to inaugurate a movement were foreign to Tatlin, as if from another planet.

The stories recounted by Pestel', Valentina Khodasevich,²⁴

and Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaia,²⁵ who knew Tatlin well (but not each other), paint a picture—full of sympathy—of a “holy fool of Futurism,” a man suspicious to the point of absurdity, to the brink of phobia. He openly suspected Malevich of artistic espionage, though it is difficult today to detect the traces of any crime. Tatlin erected something like a tent, but one that could be locked, in the middle of his studio on Staro-Basmannaia Street in the Nemetskaia sloboda region of Moscow. God forbid Malevich should see what he was up to and get ahead of him.

This is a continuation, as it were, of the old “futurization” of artistic life. What happens in art and the stories told about it are artistic facts of identical interest. History immediately decks itself out as myth.

Tatlin’s “phobia” was clearly provoked by Malevich, who derived satisfaction from mystifications and practical jokes. Tatlin, of course, also liked to tell tales. They always contained, it’s true, a kernel of truth, yet the accounts of his journeys and adventures changed and were embroidered with each retelling. Did he, pretending to be a blind man, play his bandura at an exhibition of Russian art and handicrafts in Berlin in the winter of 1914? He did. And did he speak with and kiss the hand of the Kaiser’s wife? Those who heard his captivating tales did not much care whether, in fact, he had. Had he been in Paris? He had. The sculptor and later art historian Boris Ternovets,²⁶ the sculptor Vera Mukhina,²⁷ and Jacques Lipchitz²⁸ all recalled Tatlin’s traveling to France after his “stint” playing the bandura in Berlin. In her diary, Popova recorded Tatlin’s story about how, right before his departure from Paris for Moscow, he visited “Pavel” Picasso himself (Russians liked to switch from the Spanish name to its Slavic equivalent).²⁹ After seeing Picasso’s Cubist constructions, Tatlin said, he began to work according to other principles.

Malevich’s mystifications were of a different variety. He matched Baron Munchausen in flights of fantasy and inspiration. A simple photograph. The artist with a Polish acquaintance in Germany.³⁰ Two figures. On the back is the inscription: “Le Corbusier and me in Dessau.” Malevich was certainly in danger of being found out, yet the very act of rewriting the history of contemporary art afforded so much pleasure. And why wouldn’t Le Corbusier have come and offered a salute to the renowned Kazimir from the city of Petrograd?

As a polemicist, Malevich remained a man of the Futurist era and its romantic mythology. In one of his letters from Vitebsk to David Shterenberg in Moscow—a letter written in 1921, when the organization of the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* (*First Russian Art Exhibition*, Berlin, 1922) was only beginning to be discussed—Malevich took pains to emphasize that he was an ideological worker in art. And that the Berlin exhibition would be of interest to him only if his “icons”—the *Black Square*, *Chernyi krug* (*Black Circle*), and *Chernyi krest* (*Black Cross*)—were exhibited. And exhibited only, moreover, under the rubric *Suprematizm. Rossiia. 1913* (*Suprematism: Russia, 1913*).³¹

Nineteen thirteen? By now this date has been quoted any number of times.³² As if Suprematism’s having in fact emerged somewhat later than 1913 could diminish its significance in the history of twentieth-century art and discredit it in its own eyes. To be sure, many such “improved chronologies” have been discovered and will continue to be discovered in accounts of the art of this century. Yet Malevich, who was a genius at hypnosis, convinced not only everyone else but even himself that he had inaugurated Suprematism in 1913—and not in any other year. His account of his own career is full of datings of works according not to the year in which they were produced but the year in which they were conceived.³³

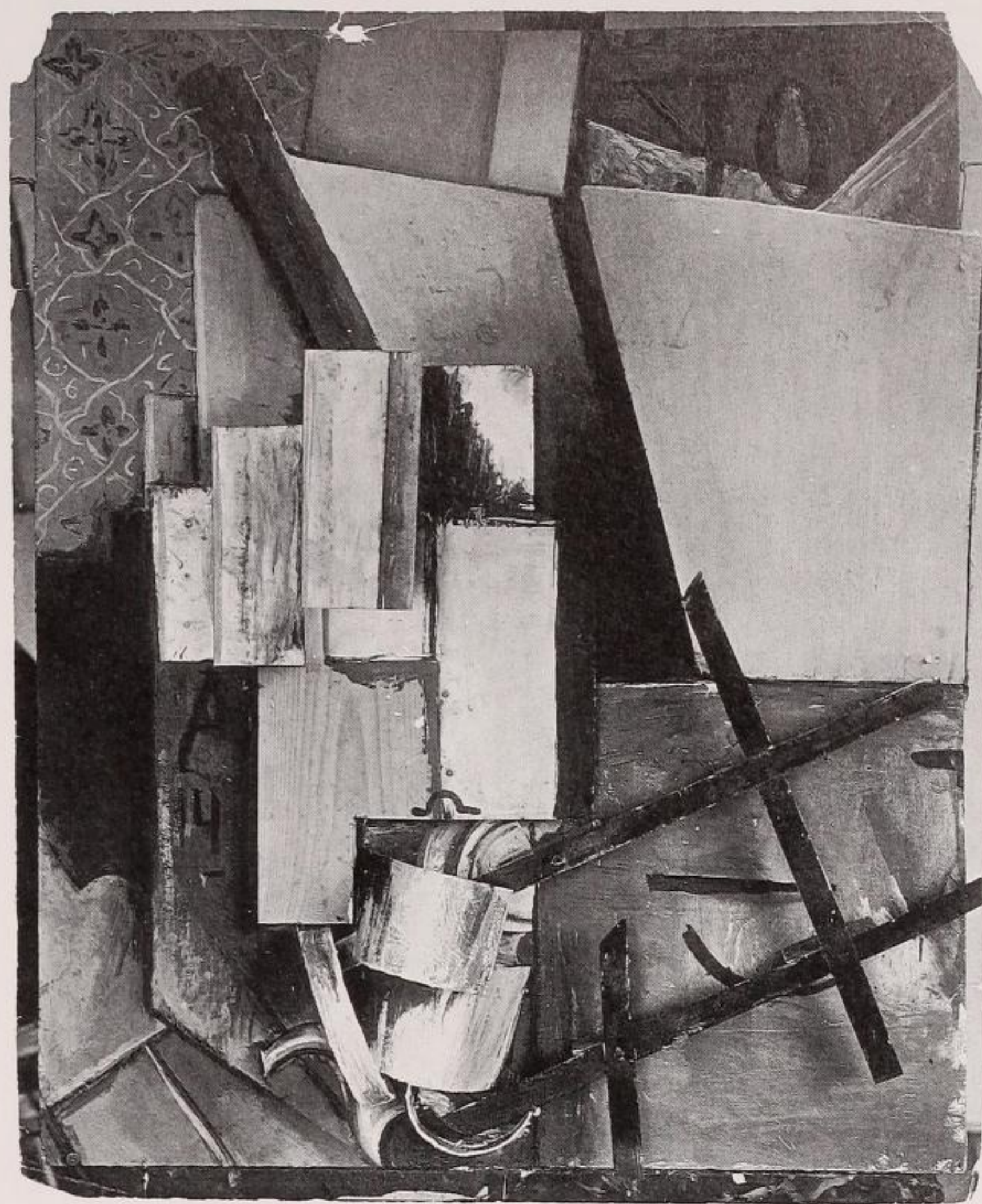


fig. 3
Vera Pestel'
Composition, 1915–16.

The opera *Pobeda nad solntsem* (*Victory over the Sun*, 1913) was, of course, a major event in the history of Russian Dadaism. But in the history of Suprematism? All attempts to read the origins of Suprematism in Malevich's fortuitous and rather banal set design for the opera (the square in his sketch of the curtain was a form virtually foreordained by the box shape of the stage) reiterate Malevich's own carefully planted suggestion. He caught a lot of fish with this line. Though that certainly casts no shadow on the historic importance of Suprematism.

Malevich's mystifications not infrequently force one to scrutinize his works and principles more closely.

The young artists in Vitebsk and Smolensk, at the most fifteen to eighteen years old, asked Malevich about the origins of the first Suprematist works and of the *Black Square*. Malevich improvised brilliantly. Using the principle of analogy. According to a famous anecdote in the history of nineteenth-century Russian art, the prominent historical painter Vasilii Surikov could not, no matter how he tried, get the coloring he wanted in his painting *The Boyarina Morozova* (1887) until he saw the solution in life: a black crow on white snow. Thus Malevich told his students this story: one day, following a spate of inclement weather—at the time he was living in Moscow, in the Sokol'niki district, in a house rented by Kliun—he went to the window and was stunned by the contrast between the freshly fallen, blindingly white snow and the black knapsack on the back of a boy leaving the house for school. Even if the story was a complete fabrication, it was spectacularly convincing.³⁴ Malevich wrote to Mikhail Matiushin to announce his *fevralizm* (Februaryism) in painting.³⁵ So what if the absurdly (like so many other of his works shown at the *0.10* exhibition) entitled *Zhivopisnyi realizm mal'chika s rantsem* (*Painterly Realism of a Boy with Knapsack*, 1915) is not a black square but a composition of two squares—one large and one small?³⁶

Such anecdotes, worthy of Vasari, only confirm the role played by emotional impulse.

Iron, glass, and marble. Malevich, as a man with a refined artistic sensibility, could not have remained oblivious to the originality of Tatlin's works. Yet if Suprematism was the end-all and be-all of contemporary painting's evolution from Impressionism, if it was the single truth, the existence of Tatlin put the problem on a different plane, namely: where is the truth?

Tatlin? It was impossible not to notice him. Just as it was impossible not to recognize his talent. And Malevich—the polemicist and “solipsist” of innovation—asked his students and followers to repeat after him: Tatlin does not transcend the confines of Cubism.³⁷ He represents only a stage in the evolution of Cubism. Variations rather than repetition, maybe, still not true innovation. You must go forward—follow me—onward to the new harmony. One of Malevich's students in Vitebsk, marching in step with the cult of the great leader promoted from above, even thought up a slogan: “Long live Unovis—the path to a Suprematist future—and long live Kazimir Malevich, the true guide along this path!”³⁸

For Tatlin, however, “iron blocked the horizon.”³⁹ And his task was to “rupture the ring of the horizon.”

Malevich was born a prophet, mystifier, leader, and artistic dictator. And he was very human; he often endured humiliations⁴⁰ and had learned how to find his way out of any situation. In Petrograd in the 1920s, for example, confronted by complete repudiation of his art, he conceived a kind of applied research, the “science of art,” to which he summoned vanguard artists now bereft of social standing.

For Tatlin, being an artist was never too complicated. He was not the leader of any movement or group, nor did he yearn

to be such, even if he did enjoy indisputable authority among art professionals, both vanguard and not.⁴¹ He was not overly impressed by the fine artistic intuition that nature had given him. It seemed a given, like a good ear for a musician. And others had the same gift. The sharpness and precision of the eye was the most important thing. Absolutely no approximations or imitations of artistic impression. Visual perception meant the eye's tactile sensation of every portion of a work. Sight, therefore, had to be put under the control of touch.⁴²

The eye both sees and touches the work. It sees and feels the painting-like warmth of tone of the wood, the elasticity and tension of the iron, the cable giving under the iron's weight. Every rhythm of form. The light and shadows of every facet of the relief. Aesthetics resides in the “selection of materials,” in the fit of their contradictions. Precious mahogany and palisander, for example, are conjoined with an ordinary piece of iron used for roofing and drainpipes. The relief—to quote Vladimir Maiakovskii's verse—is “a nocturne on a drainpipe flute.”

In Tatlin's *Doska No. 1* (*Board No. 1*) of the winter of 1916–17, wood and paint combine to create a play of color halftones, interstices, and transitions. In its power and subtlety, this work is comparable to the masterpieces of icon painting.

Tatlin was born to make plastic art, nature, and technology into one great new whole. He was not a man of particularly wide intellectual interests. Malevich's philosophical prose summons numerous associations with the philosophy of writers whom he not only had not read (though he had, for example, read Schopenhauer) but of whom he had not even heard. Tatlin didn't provide such a goldmine of self-sufficient intellectual constructs. But he did have a broad grasp of the problem. In his work, material and space strove to become absolutely perfect categories. Material lives a profoundly organic life, it embraces life in its entirety as a new system of the senses. Everything is perfected. But Tatlin's was not the notion—which had given academic painters no peace—of the masterpiece as such. It was, rather, the idea of absolute plastic harmony, in which artisanry and the senses are inseparable. In this regard, Tatlin—poorly educated, lacking any desire to assert himself through polemical jousting, a classic outsider—had more in common with the brilliant Renaissance intellectual, Leonardo da Vinci, than with any artist of his own time . . .

And yet, why did the outsider Tatlin enter the legendary battle with Malevich? What was at stake?

Let us note: Tatlin, speaking about his Tower—his “dynamo-form”—declared iron and glass the “materials of the new Classicism.”⁴³

On the one hand, he proceeded, as always, from the nature of materials. And here his reasoning dovetailed with the logic of architects designing industrial structures: “In reinforced concrete we have not only a new material but, of far greater consequence, new constructions and a new method for designing buildings. Therefore, in using [reinforced concrete], we have to renounce the old traditions and concern ourselves with meeting new tasks.”⁴⁴ Let us also note that Tatlin began to work on his Tower at the same time as construction commenced on the engineer Vladimir Shukhov's radio tower in Moscow. (The radio tower, as originally envisioned, was to reach a height of 350 meters.)⁴⁵

On the other hand, Tatlin invested the phrase “materials of the new Classicism” with an artistic significance. A definition of new canons of form with the aid of new materials.

In Petrograd in 1923, Malevich's student, Il'ia Chashnik, completed a study for the cover of the never-published *Suprematizm kak novyi klassitsizm* (*Suprematism as the New Classicism*).⁴⁶ Slogans like “Back to Ingres!” weren't at issue, but

rather, once again, a definition of new long-term laws for the construction of form.

We must conclude, returning to the rivalry between Malevich and Tatlin, that theirs was a contest not over leadership but over truth—over which path in contemporary art was the true one. Malevich, otherwise a diplomat and pragmatist, was in no mood for conciliation on this score. While Tatlin, according to the memoirs of Punin (who endeavored in a variety of circumstances to reconcile Tatlin to reality), was incapable of compromise in almost any situation.⁴⁷ Tatlin's entire life, as a matter of fact, confirms this assertion.

History does not wait. It lays down an ultimatum.

—Pitirim Sorokin⁴⁸

The Civil War presented both vanguard artists with a dramatic dilemma.

The new art had been born of the struggle for a self-sufficient artistic language and a non-objective artistic world. Now the state wanted to make art a mere vehicle for agitprop,⁴⁹ to limit it to an educational function—to illustration of the requisite slogans and notions. What was important to the new state was “not to carry out a revolution in art (which is impossible) but to put art at the service of the revolution.”⁵⁰ These words were repeated by Party cultural functionaries from one year to the next, and almost verbatim.

Malevich and Tatlin had different—yet, in some sense, similar—reactions to this development.

“Decoration of the city for revolutionary festivities”—this neutral bookkeeper's formulation on an invoice fit the superrevolutionary decoration of Vitebsk to a tee, until the authorities understood that the propaganda effect of this work was nonexistent, if not negative. In all honesty, who, finding himself in a strange and joyous world of particolored planes, was about to mull over revolution and counterrevolution? These decorations were experiments in a new mural painting, experiments in Suprematist design, yet the words and agitprop phrases incorporated in them were incidental and ineffective. Why is the beautiful composition of colored planes on Nikolai Suetin's panel accompanied by the slogan “Religion is the opium of the people”? Which religion? What opium? And what people—drug addicts, perhaps? The man on the street could hardly have cared less. Some people were stopped by the vividness of the colors. Others jumped back from the strange combinations of geometric forms out of a textbook. Did people stand before Lissitzky's poster *Klinom krasnym bei belykh* (*Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1920, plate no. 138) and decipher its symbolism? Only the dynamics of its composition made any impression.

Examining agitprop art from such a “bourgeois,” consumerist vantage helps one comprehend the “aesthetic scissors,” that is, the divergent blades of the artist's interest in working in an urban space and his obvious (in many cases) indifference to the tasks of abstract propaganda.

As one of the leaders at the Moscow Art Board of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), Tatlin was privy to efforts to carry out the so-called Plan for Monumental Propaganda—monuments to progressive revolutionary and cultural figures of the past. Several of the names on the list of candidates drawn up by the intellectuals were crossed out “at the top.” Without discussion. Case closed. The philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev, for instance, and Cézanne, a classic in the eyes of new artists in Moscow. Documents that might reveal how the Art Board reacted to Cézanne's removal from the list have not, it seems, survived. (In 1920, the art club at Vkhutemas [the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops] would be named the Cézanne

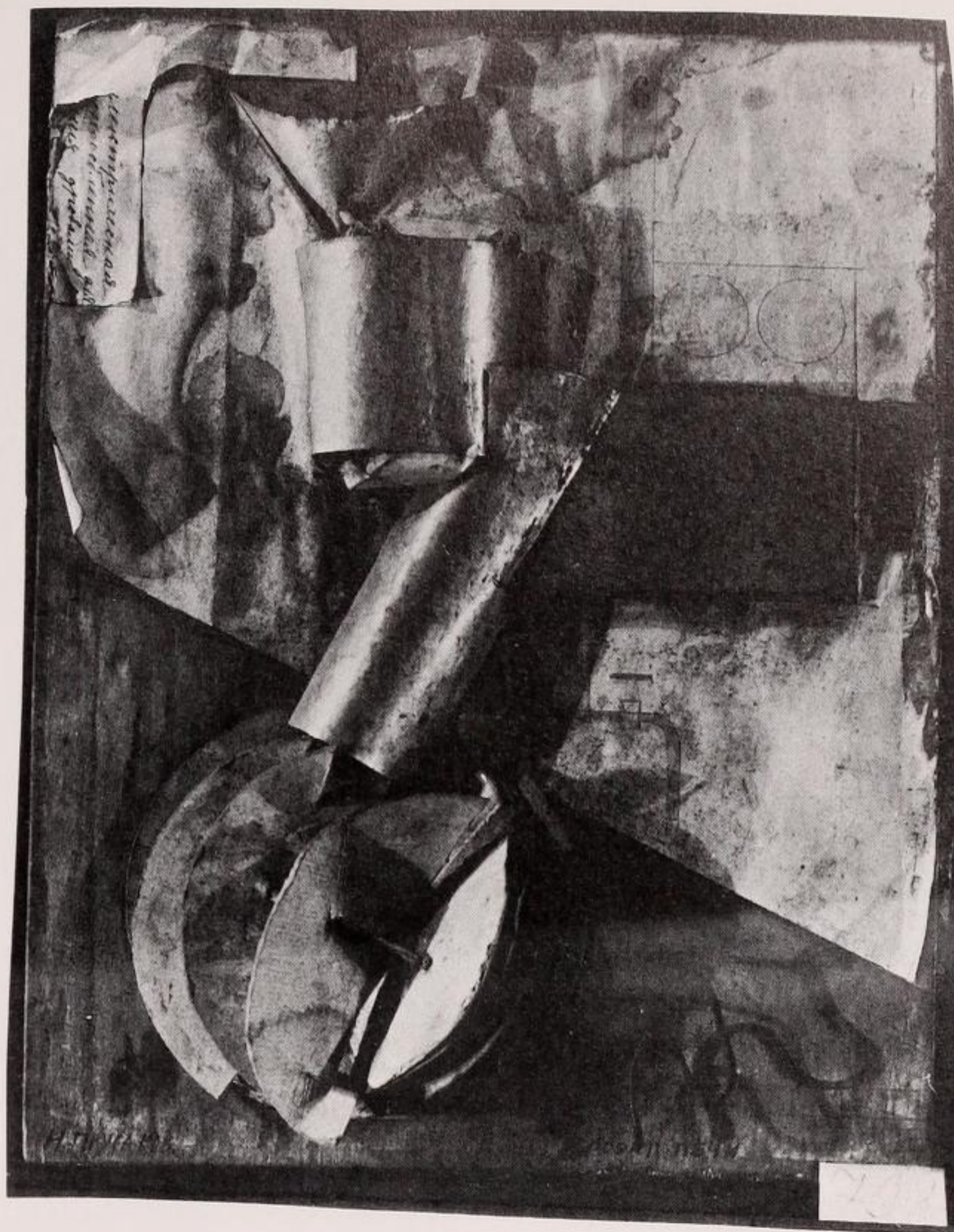


fig. 4
Nikolai Prusakov
Study for a Stove, 1920.

Club.) Yet it is clear that this mechanical approach to the task at hand and treatment of monuments as illustrations on an assigned theme did not suit Tatlin at all. "Monumental propaganda" might just as well have been called "sculptural propaganda."⁵¹

Tatlin's Tower was conceived in direct argument with the Plan for Monumental Propaganda and the manner in which it was slated to be implemented. In order to work on his project, Tatlin had to leave Moscow in 1919 for Petrograd, where, with Punin's help, he managed to get a modest subsidy, materials, and a place to work: the former mosaics workshop of the Academy of Fine Arts. The workshop's former director, the ceramicist Petr Vaulin, protested. Now was the very time to be thinking about "erecting houses and temples of the people, decorated with mosaics."⁵² He had no idea that Tatlin was occupied with a similarly impractical project. The Tower was one in a series, stretching far back in history and culture, of architectural constructions that were monuments and icons of their age. A series that began with the legendary Tower of Babel and included, in Russia, the church in the village of Kolomenskoe outside Moscow and (a later addition) the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, erected to mark the defeat of Napoleon.⁵³

The spirals of the Tower, like serpentine mountain roads, energetically wound their way up into "Malevich's heavens."

The Tower's abstract, cosmic symbolizing of perception lent its functional intentions a particular cast. It was made "from iron, glass, and revolution," but also from reverie, hunger, and isolation. The Tower might possibly house a cafeteria—a dream in a time when food was scarce—and studios for artists, too. In it, the dynamism of life acquired the solemnity of a chorale. A monument in half-frozen and half-deserted Petrograd, a monument on the banks of the Lethe—built for no specific city, for no specific country. A monument to the ruin of the times and a monument to the spirit of absolute freedom.

The world had collapsed and the world lived.

It was both the creation of the artist and the voice of history.

"An absurd and naïve, monstrous beast with a radio-telegraph horn on its head and the legislative assembly of the Third International in its belly?"⁵⁴

"The Council of People's Commissars would flee from such a building on the first sunny day and, camped out nearby on the grass, would immediately issue a decree that Tatlin's tower is for rent, at public auction, to horticulturists wishing to grow pineapples."⁵⁵

The Tower was a sign and symbol not of revolutionary Russia but of the new era in its entirety.

Tatlin's Tower was immediately perceived and adopted by artists in the 1920s as the sign of a new artistic consciousness, not as a monument to the Third International. What was the connotation of "Third International" for Tatlin? A common phrase of the Civil War period. At the time, Izo Narkompros, for example, was planning to publish (but never did) a multilingual journal entitled *Internatsional iskusstva* (*Art International*). Both Tatlin and Malevich prepared texts for it, Tatlin's contribution consisting of clear, extremely brief "theses."⁵⁶ The artists' International denoted not establishment of a Bolshevik dictatorship all over the globe but lifting of the curse of disunion from humanity.

There were few who found the Tower to produce an agitprop effect any more persuasive than of the Suprematist panels. This was no targeted attack of the sort found in Sergei Eizenshtein's films.

When the model of the Tower was first exhibited, in Petrograd in November 1920, the opening—which was called,

as the idiom of the time dictated, a meeting—was attended by stunned representatives of the Petrograd art world, astonished at what they beheld, and—for form's sake; after all, it was a meeting—by a handful of sailors and Red Army soldiers. In December the model was exhibited in Moscow at the Eighth Congress of Soviets; it was displayed among diagrams, posters, and other types of agitprop and didactic production at the former Association of the Nobility. Pavel Mansurov, the young non-objective artist from Petrograd who designed the exhibition, did a good job of "serving up" Tatlin. But the delegates didn't bite. The Tower unleashed a storm at a discussion of the model at Vkhutemas's Cézanne Club. There both Naum Gabo and Lissitzky argued for it as the most concrete of architectural projects, which needed to be realized not so much today as tomorrow.⁵⁷ Both would eventually do a great deal to popularize the Tower in the West.

A version of the model was displayed—as if it were a standard agitprop object, like the inevitable bust of Lenin—at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* (*International Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative and Industrial Art*) in Paris in 1925. And at the *Voyna v iskusstve* (*War in Art*) exhibition in Leningrad in 1930. After which the model was dismantled and stored away somewhere. With time, all of its parts were lost. A section of one of its spirals was used for a brief period as a ladder.

Balanced, "middle-of-the-road" opinions were virtually absent in the first debates about the Tower. Either a work of genius or a nonentity. The years of engagé Realism, it would seem, resolved the impasse in favor of nonentity.

One modest informant about the debate over the Tower reported: "If the idea of the monument is truly new and valuable, then it will never die. Prophets have not always been stoned and imposters have not always succeeded."⁵⁸

Others left (Russia), but as it turned out, those who stayed on had also left.

—Vladimir Veidle⁵⁹

Neither Tatlin nor Malevich was deceived by the turn of phrase. *They* did not believe that "revolution and 'revolution in art' are the same thing."⁶⁰ They had an opportunity to join forces, if not in the struggle for the new art, then at least in resisting the advent of engagé art. Punin arranged a temporary truce between the warring sides. He facilitated Tatlin's invitation to Ginkhuk (the State Institute of Artistic Culture). Students held meetings to demand that Malevich and Tatlin teach at the Academy of Fine Arts.⁶¹ At the *Petrogradskie khudozhniki vsekhnapravlenii* (*Petrograd Artists of All Trends*) exhibition in Petrograd in 1923, work both by Tatlin and by Malevich's school was displayed. Hardly anyone realized that this was not the beginning but the end of the era of artistic freedom.

Tatlin, as he said, was "bored." He loved his work and materials and did not like to give the impression that he was occupied with anything other than his own work.

Malevich was diverted by the game of art as science. He was living, as it were, a second life in art, from Impressionism to Suprematism, and often appeared already to have gone beyond the boundaries of Suprematism. Where?

The analytical investigations of the Suprematists of Unovis in Vitebsk and at Ginkhuk stimulated new types of creative work: Suprematist architecture, on the one hand (it would be more correct to say three-dimensional Suprematist architectonics), and "painterly-plastic realism," on the other. The latter was no repetition of the Impressionism of Monet or the painting of Léger, of the flickering metallic *faktura* of the Cubism of their teacher, or of exercises on the magnetism of

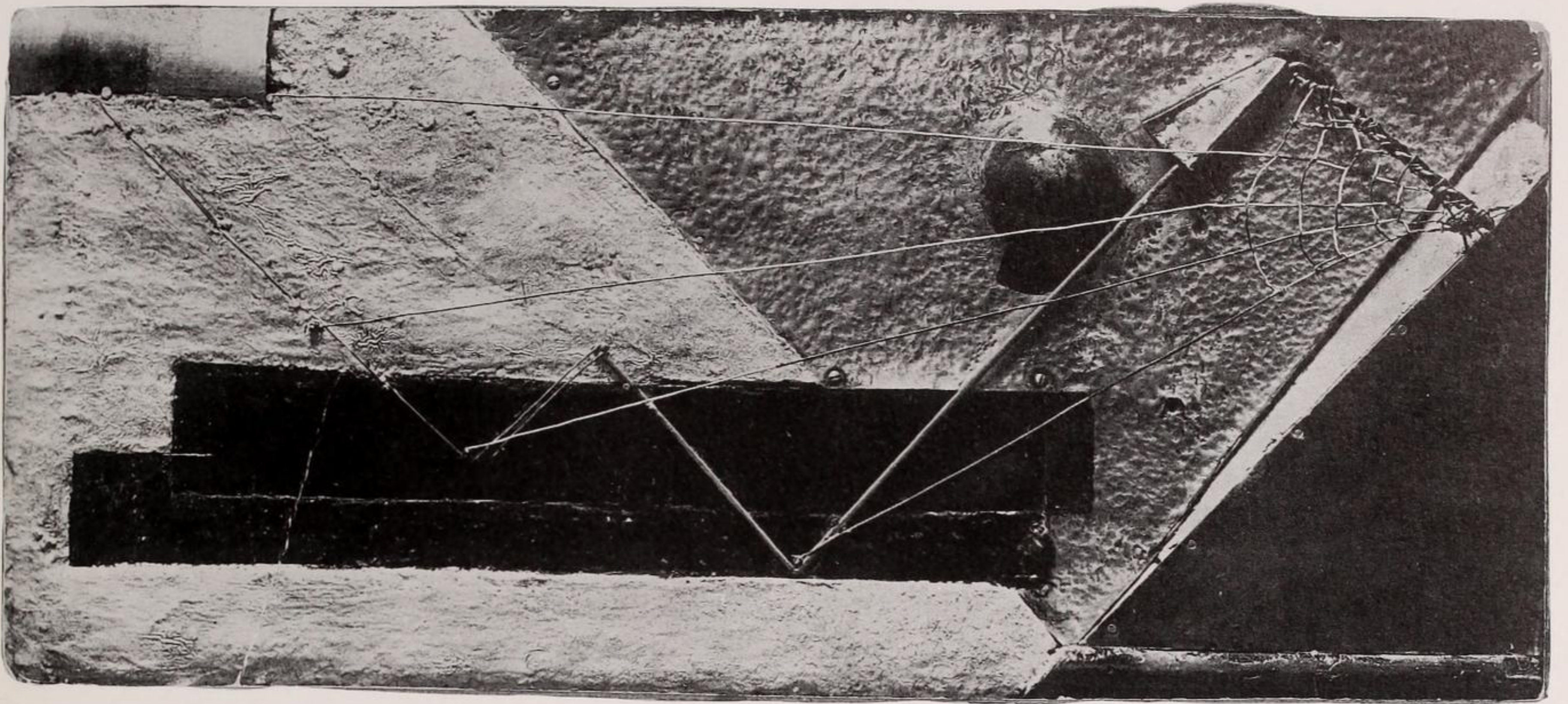


fig. 5
Konstantin Vialov
Relief, 1919.

the interrelations of Suprematist forms. The individuality of each person was expressed in the process of experiencing the world in painting. Here there was a certain merger of artists who had been members of Malevich's circle and artists who had passed through Matiushin's school. A preference for the universal gave way to the private. Suetin's paintings juxtaposed the traditions of Suprematism with the mysticism of old Russian art. In his own works, Malevich was not infrequently the exponent of the group's ideas rather than the initiator of the new. At times this led to conflicts, yet his students' respect for their teacher remained unchanged.⁶²

Tatlin did not support the beautiful mystification of Malevich. He was "hounded out" of Ginkhuk and left for Kiev. There he worked for two years in the Department of Dramatic, Cinematic, and Photographic Arts of the Kiev Art Institute. His students constructed complicated interiors on the principle of his counter-relief. (This is somewhat reminiscent of Kurt Schwitters.) Clashes among groups and movements in Ukraine? Nothing of the sort interested him.⁶³

The rector of Vkhutein (the Higher Artistic-Technical Institute), the sociologizing Pavel Novitskii, invited him back to Moscow to teach. A small circle of attentive students quickly formed around him in Vkhutein's Ceramics Faculty.⁶⁴ But in the more "visible" Wood- and Metalworking Faculty, Tatlin was clearly not understood—even though his colleagues there included Gustav Klutssis, Lissitzky, and Rodchenko.⁶⁵ Tatlin spoke of his work in the same words as they, yet was plainly unable to draw up a teaching program. That his students produced work not at all similar to that of students in the other workshops went unnoticed.

Tatlin proposed bionic principles for constructing artistic form . . .

The influence of my art is expressed in the movement of the Constructivists, of which I am the founder.

—Tatlin⁶⁶

Tatlin's path and that of Suprematism in the 1920s are shaded by their attitude toward Moscow Constructivism—the central phenomenon of Russian art of that decade.

Constructivism attempted to answer all the questions posed by the era. It took into account Tatlin's experience, as well as the Suprematism fiercely rejected by the theorists close to him. It even answered the hopelessly difficult question of how art can function amid the collapse of normal human society by advancing an art that participated directly in the process of building life—that is, production art. The term "production art" was then applied in, as it were, two dimensions: art for life (excluding easel painting and sculpture "needed by no one") and new constructive approaches to the solution of the tasks of this art (or these arts).⁶⁷

Malevich placed an equals sign between Constructivism as a new method in art and the ideas of utilitarianism, which he disparaged as "subsistence art." Constructivism thus meant service—by new devices, in a new style—of the agitprop and utilitarian needs of society.

Rodchenko? Long after Rodchenko had countered Malevich's spiritual meditations in *Beloe na belom* (*White on White*, 1918) with his art of the abyss, of the void—*Chernoe na chernom* (*Black on Black*, 1918, plate no. 240)—Malevich still, among his circle of followers, spoke Rodchenko's name as something absolutely negative.

A certain movement emerged within Unovis. A movement that did not renounce the language of Suprematism, yet worked with the new constructive forms. Lissitzky and Klutssis; Chashnik's tribune and Suetin's architectural designs of 1921. This trend contributed a great deal to the art of the 1920s. In it

we find the working out of, or demand for a solution to, problems of new architectural form, design, and book art. Lissitzky, who thought in categories of an epoch's single style, considered this trend and the activities of Obmokhu (the Society of Young Artists) in Moscow to be the sources of a new international constructive style.

Obmokhu remains one of the myths in the history of Constructivism. It hindered both Gabo, the romantic of a new technological art, and Lissitzky. For a very simple reason. Rarely in the works of Obmokhu do we encounter new methods of strictly artistic thinking—methods that, for example, are obvious in Lissitzky (who, given his striking receptivity to "outside influences," might easily seem on the surface an eternal "eclectic"). Rather, in many works by the members of Obmokhu (Karl Ioganson's simple structuralist constructions are one exception), "engineerism" is advanced as the new, topical, up-to-the-minute theme of art. Not infrequently a construction is not truly constructed but merely depicted. A similar phenomenon can be observed among Obmokhu's contemporaries, the painters of the Electroorganism group.⁶⁸

Tatlin? Well, of course, his Tower did initiate Constructivism as a special trend in Moscow. The Tower was one of the indispensable icons of the international style of the 1920s, figuring in publications on painting and sculpture, on design and architecture. It was as essential to them as it was virtually useless in the concrete context of Moscow artistic life. Of course, the Tower's unseen presence was a very important factor. Yet the Moscow Constructivists invented their own history. Tatlin was not excluded from it, but he was not granted any advantages, either.⁶⁹

The impulse provided by Tatlin and the actual evolution of the idea of Constructivism in Moscow during the 1920s diverged objectively and decisively.

Organic artistic culture, toward which Tatlin was moving during these years, and Constructivism were no less opposed than were Suprematism and Constructivism. (Although many Constructivist projects—at least outwardly, on a stylistic level—preserved an echo of Suprematism.)⁷⁰

The Constructivists recklessly spoke of replacing art with life and wanted to make the object of production the object of art.⁷¹ Tatlin built a stove in his room to keep from freezing, sewed a specially tailored coat to keep from shivering in the wind, and cut himself a comfortable work suit.

Playing with the industrial production of an object was not the last motivation of the design solutions of the Moscow Constructivists. Tatlin's designs are those of a Robinson Crusoe who finds himself on an uninhabited island. And in this sense—given the actual conditions in Russia at the beginning of the 1920s—he was more of a realist than were the Moscow Constructivists creating lovely designs disengaged from real life. This was no utopia, not fantasies of the unrealizable, but the fashion of the day, full of life and energy—had life been normal. Tatlin's designs are the designs of a hunter wintering in the taiga and not counting on any help from anywhere.

The Constructivists affirmed the model of a life which could be—for them, the form of art determined new forms of life. Tatlin criticized the Constructivists—the "so-called Constructivists"—for their imitation, as it appeared to him, of contemporary style.⁷²

Letatlin (1929–32) is a flying bird, Tatlin's bicycle, on which one can "sail" through the air.

In artistic circles reactions varied yet all struck basically the same chord: "he's flown out of art," "a move into technology," "an amazing character, but absolutely no artist."⁷³

And in nonartistic circles: "a work of art."⁷⁵

The causes and effects were confused.

Tatlin: "Nature is more clever than mechanics."

His speculative and sincere critics:

In the depths of that worldview, out of which Letatlin wishes to fly, the heavy reactionary biases of the departing class are thickening. (The accusatory tone of the prosecutor is heard.) And what are they? Worship of nature, hostility to the machine, an adjustment of technology to the feelings of the individual person, naïve faith in the "wisdom" of organic forms, withdrawal from the industrial world.⁷⁶

This is indeed hard to square with the popular saying of the Stalinist era: "You can't wait for charity from nature! Our task is to take it from her."

It was a true perversion that unwashed and illiterate Russia, the Rus' of Chekhov and Bunin, allowed itself the luxury of Chekhov and Bunin, and, moreover, of Skriabin, Vrubel', and Blok.

—Mikhail Levidov⁷⁷

It is not at all surprising that the art of the 1930s ignored both Tatlin and Malevich.

In Moscow's strange and Disneylandish Central Park of Culture and Rest, people jumped from a parachute tower reminiscent of Tatlin's monument.⁷⁸

Suetin created a pylon with the text of the Soviet constitution for the *Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques* (International Exhibition of Art and Technology, Paris, 1937) in the shape of an arkhitekton—and no one even noticed.⁷⁹

Tatlin painted landscapes, still lifes, and portraits, but did not exhibit them.

Malevich, with his strikingly developed social instinct, once again attempted to outdo everyone upon his release from jail (after having been arrested in Kiev in 1930). In an ordinary composition of colored stripes he included a row of galloping cavalymen (plate no. 397). You want a "Soviet" picture—here, take it! Many artists, incidentally, made similar gestures during these years when the "Soviet theme painting" was affirmed as the basis of Soviet art. Malevich did not gain much by such a strategy and he resorted to it extremely rarely. It didn't help at all. One of his students still has a letter to Malevich (it arrived one day after his death) notifying him that his request for a pension had been turned down.⁸⁰

The first steps of Pop Art, the art of *assemblage*, the flying apparatus of Ponamarenko, Joseph Beuys's felt suits . . . Lucio Fontana, Mark Rothko, Minimalism—in which Suprematism and Constructivism were finally reconciled—the Zero group.

Marcel Duchamp, Kazimir Malevich, Kurt Schwitters, Vladimir Tatlin.

—Translated, from the Russian, by Todd Bludeau

Notes

The quotation in the initial epigraph is taken from A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, *Slovo kak takovoe* (Moscow: EUY, 1913), p. 3.

1. A copy of this announcement of the exhibition in Tatlin's studio is in the Manuscript Division, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, f. 121, d. 117, l. 61.
2. This relief was reproduced in Ivan Puni, *Sovremennaia zhivopis'* (Berlin: Frenkel', 1923), p. 30.
3. The exhibitions were held not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg but in Kiev as well.
4. The festivities—which included fireworks and floats along the Neva River in St. Petersburg and a procession of "boyars" in Red Square in Moscow—were matched in scale only by such mass spectacles as *The Storming of the Winter Palace* in Petrograd in 1919–20.
5. The episode was reported in the Moscow press. See, for example, "Dve vystavki," *Nov'* 152 (December 23, 1914), and "Khudozhniki—zhertvam voiny," *Rannee utro* 232 (December 7, 1914). Malevich was among the "victims" whose works were removed by the jury prior to the opening of the exhibition.
6. Shchukin's "coup" was reported in the morning edition of *Birzhevye vedomosti* 14706 (March 4, 1915).
7. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, September 24, 1915, Manuscript Division, Pushkin House, St. Petersburg, quoted from E. F. Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," *Ezhegodnik Rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1974 god* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), p. 187.
8. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, January 1916, private archive, Frankfurt.
9. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, September 24, 1915, in Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," p. 188.
10. Quoted in V. Lenin i izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo. *Dokumenty. Pis'ma. Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1977), p. 445.
11. Two leaflets were distributed at the exhibition, one with statements by Malevich, Ivan Kliun, and Mikhail Men'kov, the other with statements by Ivan Puni and Kseniia Boguslavskaiia. A small booklet containing both leaflets was also published.
12. K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* (Petrograd, 1916). The brochure was in fact printed in December 1915, in time for the opening of the *0.10* exhibition.
13. See, for example, Aleksandr Benua, "Posledniaia futuristicheskaia vystavka," *Rech'*, January 9, 1916. The expression "oncoming boor" was Dmitrii Merezhkovskii's (see his "Eshche odin shag griadushchego khama," *Russkoe slovo*, June 29, 1914). See also Jane A. Sharp, "The Critical Reception of the *0.10* Exhibition: Malevich and Benua," in this volume.
14. A. Kruchenykh, I. Kliun, and K. Malevich, *Tainye poroki akademikov* (Moscow, 1916), p. 30.
15. Varst [Varvara Stepanova], "Vystavka Ol'gi Rozanovoi," *Iskusstvo* 4 (February 22, 1919), p. 3.
16. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii, April 21, 1927, private archive, Moscow.
17. Unovis slogans, 1920, private archive, St. Petersburg: GIZ.

18. "Khudozhniki na dispute ob AKhRR," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 6 (1924).
19. N. Punin, *Tatlin (protiv kubizma)* (St. Petersburg: GIZ, 1921), pp. 17–18. Lev Bruni devised these formulae in 1916.
20. The booklet, like Malevich's *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu*, was published in time for the opening of the *0.10* exhibition. Sergei Isakov's article "K kontr-rel'efam Tatlina" appeared simultaneously in *Novyi zhurnal dlia vsekh* 12, pp. 46–50; *Novyi zhurnal dlia vsekh* was also the publisher of *Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin*.
21. This work is known only from old photographs. Pestel's family also retains letters of hers from the early 1950s in which she mentions Tatlin.
22. One of the most recent publications on the Verbovka collective is *Ornament and Design. Nadezhda Udaltsowa. Varvara Stepanova. Alexandr Rodchenko* (Moscow and Frankfurt am Main: Gallery Manege, 1991).
23. This according to Pestel's memoirs.
24. V. Khodasevich, *Portrety slovami* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), p. 106. In this publication, her reminiscences about Tatlin have, unfortunately, been severely abridged.
25. S. Dymshits-Tolstaia, "Vospominaniia," 1939–40, Manuscript Division, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, f. 700, ed. khr. 249.
26. L. S. Aleshina and N. V. Iavorskaia, comp., *B. N. Ternovets. Pis'ma. Dnevnik. Stat'i* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), p. 242.
27. In Paris, Mukhina saw Popova often, and it is likely that she met Tatlin through Popova.
28. Lipchitz, who had been living in Paris for some time, acted as a translator for Tatlin.
29. See A. Strigalev, "O poezdke Tatlina v Berlin i Parizh," *Iskusstvo* 2 (1989), pp. 39–43, and *Iskusstvo* 3 (1989), pp. 26–30.
30. The photograph has been published in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), vol. 1, ill. 5.
31. Kazimir Malevich, letter to David Shterenberg, February 16, 1921, private archive, Moscow.
32. The date 1913 appears without caveat in the catalogue, *Desiataia gosudarstvennaia vystavka. Suprematizm i bespredmetnoe tvorcestvo* (Moscow: Otdel IZO Narkomprosa, 1919)—both in Malevich's statement (p. 16) and in Stepanova's (p. 7).
33. This was owing, in part, to Malevich's desire to "improve" his old works in advance of his trip to the West in 1927 and his solo show at the State Tret'iakov Gallery in 1929. The resulting confusion in dating was particularly apparent at the Malevich exhibition held at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1989.
34. This story evidently had its origins in conversations with his followers in Vitebsk and Smolensk in 1920.
35. The term *fevralizm* is, nonetheless, likely tied to the white, "snowlike" backgrounds of the paintings.
36. A postcard reproducing the painting, with a contemporary inscription on the reverse identifying the work, is reproduced in Angelica Zander Rudenstine, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde Art: The George Costakis Collection* (New York: Abrams, 1981), p. 57. The inscription is in fact Malevich's own.
37. Malevich gave his view of the history of Russian Cubism in the context of European Cubism—and of Tatlin's place in the historical process—in articles published in Ukrainian in the Khar'kov journal, *Nova heneratsiia (New Generation)*, in 1928. Both have been published in English; see "The Constructive Painting of Russian Artists and Constructivism," in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), vol. 2, pp. 74–84.
38. Unovis slogans, 1920, private archive, St. Petersburg.
39. Quoted in Dymshits-Tolstaia, "Vospominaniia."
40. Malevich was threatened with arrest toward the end of his stay in Vitebsk, but was spared, thanks to the help of Robert Fal'k. In 1927 and in 1930, however, he was arrested.
41. It was owing to his stature that Tatlin became a leading figure in the reform of artistic life after the February Revolution.
42. Tatlin, who attached little importance to dates, gave 1912—and sometimes 1913 and 1914—as the year in which he advanced this slogan.
43. V. Tatlin, T. Shapiro, I. Meerzon, and P. Vinogradov, "Nasha predstoiashchaia rabota," *VIII s'ezd sovetov. Ezbednevnyi biulleten' s'ezda* 13 (January 1, 1921), p. 11.
44. *Zodchii* 19 (1915), p. 198.
45. The Eiffel Tower, by comparison, is 300 meters tall.
46. Private archive, United States.
47. On the relations between Punin and Tatlin, see I. Punina, "N. Punin. Kvartira No. 5," *Panorama iskusstv* 12 (1989), pp. 162–98.
48. P. Sorokin, "Otpravliaias' v dorogu," *Utrenniki* 1 (1922), p. 11.
49. Viktor Shklovskii appealed: "In the name of agitation, remove agitation from art," in his *Khod konia. Sbornik statei* (Moscow and Berlin: Gelikon, 1923), p. 45.
50. These are the words of A. Skachko, one of the most prominent cultural officials of the period, in *Vestnik iskusstv* 5 (1922), pp. 2–3.
51. The monuments erected were chiefly of a traditional variety, with little that was innovative about them. Although the "Anketa profsoiuzna skulpturov-khudozhnikov" ("Questionnaire of the Professional Union of Sculptors") did attempt to draw attention to contemporary forms: "Does the monument meet the requirements of plastic culture? Does it express the law of the deformation of forms?"
52. Quoted from a document in the Izo Narkompros archives.
53. See A. Strigalev, "O proekte pamiatnika III Internatsionala khudozhnika V. Tatlina," in *Voprosy sovetskogo iskusstva i arkhitektury* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1973), pp. 408–52.
54. N. Radlov, *O futurizme* (St. Petersburg: "Akvilon," 1923), p. 48.
55. K. Miklashevskii, *Gipertrofiia iskusstva* (Petrograd, 1924), p. 59.
56. Typescripts of Tatlin's theses and some of the other articles prepared for the journal are held in both state and private archives in Russia.
57. The discussion is mentioned in N. Khardzhiev, "Pervyi illiustrator Maiakovskogo. K 90-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia

- V. Tatlina," *Moskovskii khudozhnik*, December 18, 1975. Since Maiakovskii—who was present—returned from Petrograd on December 11th and appeared at the Polytechnic Museum on the 12th, the discussion evidently took place on December 13th.
58. *Petrogradskaia Pravda*, December 1920, quoted from an undated newspaper clipping in the collection of A. Korsakova, Moscow.
59. V. Veidle, "Iskusstvo pri sovetskoi vlasti," in *Mosty. Sbornik statei k 50-letiiu russkoi revoliutsii* (Munich: Tovarishchestvo zarubezhnykh pisatelei, 1967), p. 44.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
61. Such a resolution was passed, for instance, at a meeting of Unovis in Petrograd on October 14, 1922.
62. See, for example, Il'ia Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin, letter to Kazimir Malevich, October 4, 1924, published in *Suprematismus* (Zurich: Galerie Schlegel, 1989), pp. 50–51.
63. I. Vrona, "O Tatline," 1967, private archive.
64. Tatlin considered Aleksei Sotnikov exceptional among his students in Moscow, and Moris Umanskii and Iakov Shtoffer among those in Kiev.
65. Central State Archive for Literature and Art, Moscow, f. 680, op. 3, ed. khr. 208, l. 238.
66. Quoted from a biographical note written by Tatlin in 1929, published in *Tatlin* (Weingarten: Kunstverlag Weingarten, 1987), p. 328.
67. Production art is widely discussed in the publications of VNIITE, Moscow, in the 1970s. For a different view, see A. Mazaeva, *Kontseptsiiia "proizvodstvennogo iskusstva" 20-kh godov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975).
68. On Obmokhu, see Aleksandra Shatskikh, "A Brief History of Obmokhu" and Christina Lodder, "The Transition to Constructivism," and on the Electroorganism group, Irina Lebedeva, "The Poetry of Science: Projectionism and Electroorganism," in this volume.
69. Constructivism began in approximately 1920, with the activities of the group for "mass action" whose members included both Aleksei Gan and Rodchenko.
70. Aleksei Gan's typographical layout of *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* (*Contemporary Architecture*)—the journal of Constructivism in architecture—is one example.
71. In an effort to reconcile abstraction and production art, Boris Kushner advanced the term *bespredmetnaia khudozbestvennaia kul'tura* (non-objective artistic culture) in a lecture at the House of Publishing, Moscow, on March 20, 1922.
72. Tatlin's text in the catalogue for the exhibition of his *Letatlin* sketches at the Museum of Fine Arts (Moscow, 1932) is particularly contentious vis-à-vis the Moscow Constructivists.
73. E. Kronman, "Ukhod v tekhniku. Tatlin i 'Letatlin,'" *Brigada khudozhnikov* 6 (1932), pp. 19–23.
74. Quoted in A. Efros, *Mastera raznykh epokh* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1979), p. 547.
75. *Letatlin* was described as "not so much . . . an invention as . . . a sui-generis work of art" in N. Frausek, "Iskusstvo v tekhniku," *Tekhnika*, April 9, 1932, p. 4.
76. K. Zelinskii, "Letatlin," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, April 6, 1932, p. 2.
77. M. Levidov, *Prostye istiny. O chitatele i pisatele* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1927), pp. 154–55.
78. A. Voegeli, *Sowiet-Russland* (Bern: Verlag Hans Huber, 1936), Tafel 3.
79. Nikolai Suetin, letter to Anna Leporskaia, 1937, Collection N. N. Suetina, St. Petersburg.
80. Rozhdestvenskii Archive, Moscow.

The Great Utopia

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

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

State Tret'iakov Gallery

State Russian Museum

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

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

©The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1992
©State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, 1992
©State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, 1992
©Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 1992
All rights reserved

ISBN: 0-89207-095-1

Published by the Guggenheim Museum
1071 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10128

Distributed by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.
300 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10010

Printed in Japan by Toppan Printing Co., Inc.

Jacket:

Kazimir Malevich
*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman
in Two Dimensions)*, 1915
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Photo credits: Michael Agee, Jorg P. Anders,
Vladimir Babailov, Jacques Befank, Valerii Evstigneev,
Aleksandr Galkin, David Heald, Mariusz Lukawski,
Philippe Migeat, Piermarco Menini, Rudolf Nagel,
Otto E. Nelson, Ivan Nenec, *Sovetskoe foto*, Jim Strong,
Joseph Szaszfai, Sergei Tartakovskii, Vitalii Teplov,
Paolo Vandrash, Igor' Voronov, John Webb

The Great Utopia

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

Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt
March 1-May 10, 1992

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
June 5-August 23, 1992

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
September 25-December 15, 1992

Lufthansa German Airlines is
the major sponsor of this exhibition

 **Lufthansa**

Prefaces

Thomas Krens, Michael Govan

x

Vladimir Gusev, Evgeniia Petrova, Iurii Korolev

xiii

Jürgen Weber

xiv

Contents

The Politics of the Avant-Garde

Paul Wood

1

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

Vasilii Rakitin

25

The Critical Reception of the 0.10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua

Jane A. Sharp

38

Unovis: Epicenter of a New World

Aleksandra Shatskikh

53

COLOR PLATES 1-318

A Brief History of Obmokhu

Aleksandra Shatskikh

257

The Transition to Constructivism

Christina Lodder

266

The Place of Vkhutemas in the Russian Avant-Garde

Natal'ia Adaskina

282

What Is Linearism?

Aleksandr Lavrent'ev

294

The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization

Hubertus Gassner

298

The Third Path to Non-Objectivity

Evgenii Kovtun

320

COLOR PLATES 319-482

The Poetry of Science: Projectionism and Electroorganism

Irina Lebedeva

441

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

Charlotte Douglas

450

The Russian Presence in the 1924 Venice Biennale

Vivian Endicott Barnett

466

The Creation of the Museum of Painterly Culture

Svetlana Dzhafarova

474

Fragmentation versus Totality: The Politics of (De)framing

Margarita Tupitsyn

482

COLOR PLATES 483-733

The Art of the Soviet Book, 1922-32

Susan Compton

609

Soviet Porcelain of the 1920s: Propaganda Tool

Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky

622

Russian Fabric Design, 1928-32

Charlotte Douglas

634

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

Elena Rakitin

649

Nonarchitects in Architecture

Anatolii Strigalev

665

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

Catherine Cooke

680

Index of Artists and Works

716