

21 From the Easel to the Machine

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I The diagnosis

The entire artistic life of Europe for the past ten years has proceeded under the sign of 'the crisis of art'. When Manet's canvases first appeared about sixty years ago at Parisian exhibitions and inspired a complete revolution in the artistic world of Paris of the time, the first stone was removed from the foundation of painting. Until recently, we were still inclined to see the whole subsequent development of painterly forms as a progressive process towards the perfection of those forms. In the light of most recent developments, we now perceive this, on the one hand, as a steady destruction of the integrity of the painterly organism into its constituent elements, and on the other, as a gradual degeneration of painting as the typical art form.

II The emancipation of painting from literariness and illusionism

The French Impressionists were the first revolutionaries in painting, liberating it from the paralysing paths of naturalistic trends and giving it new directions. They were the first to give pre-eminence, among the artist's skills, to work on form. At the same time, their work was directed towards freeing painting from a content dependent upon ideology or subject matter, and from the 'literary story' which usually prevailed over form in traditional canvases. For modern painters, the still-life, which is devoid of this 'literariness' in its subject matter, replaced the complex ideology of the Classicists and the alluring anecdote of the naturalists. It is possible to say that the concentration on painterly content in a canvas was in reverse proportion to the presence of a subject matter.

This trend is not only characteristic of the visual arts, but it is also true for other forms of contemporary artistic creativity. Thus, poetry, moving from the word as meaning to the word as sound, has replaced ideology and mood with an emphasis on the external structure of the poem, beginning first with Symbolism, then Futurism, Acmeism and Imaginism. The theatre has abandoned attempts at realistic and psychological interpretations of real life and concentrates its experiments on the formal laws of the stage. Music, which has essentially never been completely enthralled by naturalism and the predominance of a subject matter (programme), goes further in the exploration of the laws of rhythm and composition.

But the formal tasks, henceforth undertaken by art, were only partially intended to liberate the work of art from a subject matter. They were directed towards the purely professional exploration of the material elements integral to the forms of every artistic genre, in which the contemporary artist saw the only incontestable basis for the work of art, subject to the creative design. As well as the gradual

disappearance of a subject matter and all attendant elements in painting which do not arise from the material structure of the work of art, there was already clearly manifest the painter's struggle against every type of illusionistic element in the construction of the planar forms. Even during the flowering of Impressionism, which was mainly an illusionistic trend, a reaction to it formed from within itself in the person of Cézanne, who gave more importance to colouring than to light illusionism, which was the basic aim of Impressionism. With Cézanne the painter already begins to concentrate his attention on the material and real structure of the canvas, i.e., on colour, texture, construction and on the material itself.

And so in the canvases of contemporary young artists, who have broken away from naturalistic, symbolic, eclectic and similar trends, and who are working primarily on the professional and technical aspect of painting, illusionistic elements such as light, perspective, movement and space begin to disappear or are treated in a completely new way. Thus, for example, the problem of space which in naturalistic painting the artist solved by means of perspectival and light illusion, for the modern artist leads to material and real problems of colour, line, composition and volume, resolved not illusionistically but by means of the planar structure of the surfaces of large and small bodies.

III The path towards realism

Moving from illusionistic representation towards realistic constructiveness and gradually liberating itself from all external elements, not conditioned by the particularities of the plane as the point of departure for the form of a painterly object, Russian painting has gone through a whole series of stages which have been entirely original and, frequently, completely independent of Western European influences. Passing quickly from Cézanne to objective Cubism, Russian painting split into a number of trends, united by a common direction. Amongst these, abstract Cubism, Suprematism and Constructivism should be mentioned. The basic stimulus for the creative aspirations of these trends was realism, which in the period of an upsurge in creative life has always been a healthy kernel which has fertilised artistic life and obstructed eclectic tendencies.

I use the concept of realism in its widest sense and do not by any means identify it with naturalism, which is one of the forms of realism and, at that, one of the most primitive and naïve. Contemporary aesthetic consciousness has transferred the idea of realism from the subject to the form of a work of art. Henceforth the motive of realistic strivings was not the copying of reality (as it had been for the naturalists) but, on the contrary, actuality in whatever respect ceased to be the stimulus for creative work. In the forms of his art the artist creates its actuality, and for him realism is the creation of a genuine object which is self-contained in form and content, an object which does not reproduce the objects of the real world, but which is constructed by the artist from beginning to end, outside any projected lines extending towards it from reality. If we look at the works of contemporary abstract artists from the point of view of this genuine realism, then we will see that in form and material they are just as remote from utilitarian objects as are the works of traditional art. In these works, the materials (the pigments) and the form (the two-dimensional plane of the canvas) inevitably create convention and artificiality, i.e., not authenticity, but only the projectional quality of the forms of a work of art.

Therefore the painter's move from the plane of the canvas to the contre-relief was quite logically based on the search for realistic forms in art.

IV Leaving the plane

The artist rejects the brush and palette of artificial colours and begins to work with genuine materials (glass, wood, metals). As far as I know the contre-relief, as an artistic form, first appeared in Russian art. Although Braque and Picasso were the first to use labels, papers, letters as well as sawdust and plaster, etc., as a means of varying texture and intensifying its expressivity, Tatlin went further and created his contre-reliefs from genuine materials. But in the contre-reliefs the artist was not freed from conventional form and the artificiality of composition. In the corner contre-reliefs, which also like painting can only be viewed from one position, i.e., frontally, the composition is structured basically according to the same principles as it would be on the plane of the canvas. In this way, the problem of space is not *really* solved because the forms in it are not three-dimensional in volume.

The next step in this direction of the evolution of artistic forms was the central contre-relief, which was also created by Tatlin and which broke not only with the plane but also with the wall to which the corner contre-relief had been attached. Works of this type include the spatially constructive works by the OBMOKhU, the volumetric, non-planar constructions of Rodchenko and the 'spatial paintings' of Miturich. The term 'spatial painting' can hardly be called suitable or expressive; I would have used the term 'volumetric' because a painting on a flat surface is as spatial as any other form.

If traditional visual art was sharply differentiated into three typical forms: painting, sculpture and architecture, then in the central contre-relief, the volumetric constructions and the 'spatial paintings', we have an attempt to synthesise these forms. In these the artist combines the architectonics of the construction of material masses (architecture) with the volumetric constructiveness of these masses (sculpture) and their colour, textural and compositional expressivity (painting). In these constructions it seemed as though the artist considered himself completely liberated from the illusionism of representation, because he is not reproducing reality but affirming the object as a completely self-contained value. In the spatial and volumetric constructions the artist, using wood, iron, glass, etc., is working with genuine and not artificial materials. In these the problem of space is given a three-dimensional construction and consequently a real and not a conventional solution as on the two-dimensional plane. In a word, in its forms, as in its construction and material, the artist creates a *genuinely real object*.

V The crisis of 'pure' form

But here the most bitter disillusionment and the most hopeless impasse awaited the artist and that fatal word for modern art, 'crisis', has never perhaps sounded so tragically as it does now. If contemporary aesthetic consciousness is not profoundly satisfied by naturalism with its anecdotes in paint, Impressionism with its attempts to create through colour the illusion of an airy atmosphere, light and shade, Futurism with its fruitless striving, a *contradictio in adjecto*, to convey a cinematic impression of life's dynamic forms on the static canvas, then not more satisfying for that

consciousness are the Suprematists with their impenetrable black square on a white background, the non-figurative texturists with their endless laboratory experiments on the surface of the canvas, the Constructivists naïvely imitating technical constructions without that utilitarian expediency which justifies them, and finally all those working on materials for the sake of the material itself, creating aimless forms divorced from the life of creation. Contemporary art, in its extreme 'leftist' expression, has reached an impasse. The artist working on pure form and on form alone has ultimately deprived his creation of all meaning because an unadorned, empty form can never satisfy us, who seek always for a content in it. A work created by a traditional artist had its meaning in its aesthetic effect, on which its author counted. A construction made by a contemporary artist has lost this last meaning because the 'aesthetic' was consciously rejected from the very first step which determined the path of the new art.

VI The contradictions of Constructivism

Shunning aesthetics, the Constructivists should have given themselves a new aim which logically arose from the very idea of Constructivism, i.e., a utilitarian aim. By construction we normally understand a definite type of structure having some sort of utilitarian character deprived of which it loses its meaning.

But consciously ignoring themselves as painters, the Russian Constructivists have declared their approach 'against art' in its typical museum forms and have collaborated with technology, engineering and industry without, however, possessing any specialised knowledge for this and remaining artists *par excellence* in all their essential characteristics. This idea of Constructivism and the form of imitating technical and engineering structures which they adopted is dilettante and naïve, inspired only by our age's increasingly pious attitude towards industrialism.

Such types of construction should never have been called models because they do not represent projects for buildings – they are only self-contained objects, tolerant only of artistic criteria. Their creators are quintessentially aesthetes and champions of pure art, however fastidiously they wriggle away from such epithets.

Talking of Constructivism in this case, I mean constructions which are made from materials and are three-dimensional in volume. The planar solutions of the ideas of Constructivism are a still more absurd form. Having fought against representation, the Constructivists have remained figurative artists to a far greater degree than their predecessors – the Suprematists – because their structure of a construction on the plane of the canvas was nothing other than the representation of a constructive system or building that could be really built. Every painterly form is essentially figurative whether it is objective, as for the naturalists and the Impressionists, or non-objective, as for the Cubists and Futurists. Consequently, when we draw a decisive distinction between 'old' and 'new' art, it is not representation which is the defining feature but the non-objectivity or the objectivity of this representation. In this respect, the Suprematists, who mainly posed and solved colour problems, went further away from representation than all other artistic movements because the basic element with which they were working – colour – by itself is not enclosed in any representational form and like a sound is formless. The structures of sound and colour (light) have much in common.

VII The last 'picture'

And so the Constructivists working with the surface plane, despite themselves, confirmed the representational, of which their constructions were an element. And when the artist really wanted to get rid of representation, he achieved this only at the cost of destroying painting and only at the cost of destroying himself as a painter. I am referring to the canvas which Rodchenko offered to the attention of an astonished public at one of this season's exhibitions [$5 \times 5 = 25$, 1921]. This was a smallish, almost square canvas painted entirely in a single red colour. This canvas is extremely significant for the evolution of artistic forms which art has undergone in the last ten years. It is not merely a stage which can be followed by new ones but it represents the last and final step of a long journey, the last word, after which painting must become silent, the last 'picture' made by an artist. This canvas eloquently demonstrates that painting as a figurative art – which it has always been – is outdated. If Malevich's *Black Square on a White Background*, despite the poverty of its artistic meaning, did contain some painterly idea which the author called 'economy', 'the fifth dimension', then Rodchenko's canvas, which is devoid of any content, is a meaningless, dumb and blind wall. However, as a link in the chain of development, viewed not as a self-contained value (which it isn't) but as a stage in evolution, it is historically significant and 'marks an epoch'.

This, once again, confirms that usually the works which acquire historical importance are those which, at the same time, do not possess any great 'specific weight' artistically; and it is precisely on these that art historians base their conclusions. The objection which could be raised by a zealous adherent of historical chronology (for which art historians have a weakness), that Malevich had exhibited a similar canvas several years before, is not, I consider, vital to my argument, because my task is to establish not the historical and chronological landmarks of Russian art but the theoretical basis of a logically developing process. And if Malevich's canvas is chronologically the earlier work, Rodchenko's similar canvas is logically more symptomatic and historically more opportune. The Tretyakov Gallery, which jealously takes care that there should be no gap in the historical course of painterly trends displayed on its walls, must certainly acquire this canvas. And it will acquire it (or a similar work: this is not so important) when, 'through the pressure of events', the aesthetic critics see it as occupying a definite place in the 'historical perspective'. Similarly, 'with time' (when they were recognised by the newspapers) the gallery acquired canvases by Larionov, Tatlin and others, about whom 'at the time' they did not want to hear, considering these canvases to be 'profanations of art'. Suffering from a sight defect which could be described as 'historicity' in their approach to art, these eclectics in charge of the gallery (and those who aren't) are completely unable to gain an understanding of the phenomena of current artistic life and its immediate influence. They only begin to see, and even then weakly, when a definite 'touch of time', 'a patina', appears on the work of art (it is not insignificant that the eclectics so adore green mould). The 'historical perspective' and a more or less prolonged period of time are the invariable concomitants of their aesthetic appreciation and 'recognition'.

This example of Rodchenko's canvas convinces us that painting was, and remains, a representational art and that it cannot escape from these limits of the representational. In traditional art the representation was its content. Ceasing to be

representational, painting lost its inner meaning. Laboratory work on bare form enclosed art in a narrow circle, stopped its progress and led it to become impoverished.

VIII The painterly meaning of the concept of construction

But in surface plane and in spatial and volumetric painting the idea of Constructivism found a solution which arose from the precise meaning of the very idea, understood not technically but in a painterly way, as it has to be understood in painting. The painter could only adopt the general structure of the concept from technology, and not by any means all its elements. The concept of construction in painting is composed of entirely different elements from the same concept in technology. By the general concept of construction, independent of its form and purpose, we mean the whole complex of elements which are united into one whole by a certain kind of principle and which, in its unity, represents a system. Applying this general definition to painting, we should consider the elements of the painterly construction to be the material and real elements of the canvas, i.e., the pigments or other material, the surface texture, the structure of the colour, the technique for working the material, etc., united by the composition (the principle) and, as a whole, forming the work of art (the system).

Clearly, these elements are not dependent on the representational aspect of the work of art but constitute a category *sui generis* inherent in the artistic object, as the product of a definite kind of professional skill.

Cézanne was the first consciously to represent the problem of Constructivism as a purely painterly concept in his works. Cézanne was a prophetic master in many respects and in this instance, as in many others, anticipated an idea which he realized empirically and then threw out to the future. In Cézanne's canvases we see the well-knit surface, the paint applied with a firm hand, the beautifully worked surface texture, the strict structuring of the coloured whole, the absence of dilettantism and, on the contrary, the highest professional skill, behind which we perceive a substantial culture. All these indications provide a basis for considering his canvases to be painterly and constructive, i.e., they are well structured from the point of view of the organisation of the material elements in them.

In their textured canvases the Russian Cubists, Suprematists, Objectivists and Constructivists whom I have already mentioned worked in the same elements which I have included as the constituents of painterly construction. Consequently, they worked, and worked a lot, on the constructive aspect of painting in the sense in which I have tried to clarify this concept. Their working on this professional and technical aspect of painting represents the great service which Russian artists have rendered to art. We can assert with confidence that in the statement and solution of many artistic problems we have, in our purely professional approach, outstripped Western European art both in theory and in practice [. . .]

IX The social basis of the crisis of art

But the problem of the crisis of art which I have presented in this essay does not lie only in this professional and narrowly technical painterly aspect of the question. It has wider horizons and roots not only of a formal character but also of an ideological and social nature.

Abstracted from all content, the pure form around which art has evolved during the last decade has ultimately revealed its insubstantiality; it has exposed the fruitlessness of an art divorced from life and the inability of the typical forms of creativity, suitable only for the graveyard of the museum, to survive in contemporary conditions. In the past, 'the picture' was figurative and had its aesthetic and meaning in the milieu of a particular class or social group, as an individualistic expression of the aesthetic consciousness of a class or group. Now, when class and related divisions lose their foundation in all essential characteristics, making aesthetic epicurism fruitless, the 'picture' as the typical form of visual art also loses its meaning as a social phenomenon. The confirmation of this idea can be found in facts which cannot be denied. Despite the calm of the last four to five years, the exhibitions of the last winter seasons (1919-1921) were not what could be called successful. They went by completely unnoticed. From being 'events' in artistic life they are becoming phenomena which no longer arouse any interest, are not visited, are not talked about and to which people are indifferent.

The democratisation of the social structure and social relationships in Russia has fatally affected the forms of creativity and the masses appreciating art. In our eyes the psychology of aesthetic perception is radically changing its structure. In the period of class groups, the form of easel painting naturally permits endless variation, fragmentation and individualisation, responding to those varied requirements of a differentiated social milieu. In contrast, during a period of social democratisation, the mass viewer who demands from art forms which will express the idea of the mass, of society and the people as a whole, replaces the class consumer and patron of aesthetic values. Influenced by the requirements of this new mass consumer, art has adopted a democratic form.

X Easel painting is inevitably a museum art form

Whether the figurativeness of easel painting and sculpture is naturalistic as in Courbet and Repin, allegorical and symbolic as in Böcklin, Stück and Rerikh, or breaking with the objectivity of the concrete image and acquiring a non-objective character as in the majority of contemporary young Russian artists, it is, all the same, museum art and the museum remains the formative influence dictating the form, the reason and the special purpose of the creation. I also relate spatial painting and the contre-relief to the category of museum objects which have no living or practical purpose. All contemporary art created by the 'left' wing finds its justification only on museum walls, and all the revolutionary storm they stirred up finds its final repose in the quiet of the museum graveyard.

Museum workers are confronted with the task of sorting this material which was revolutionary in its time into an historical order and to bury it 'beneath numbers' on inventory lists of the 'artistic storehouses'. And for the art historians, those inexhaustible, dry as dust archaeologists, there awaits a new work in the writing of explanatory texts for this sepulchral crypt so that the descendant, if only he doesn't forget the way to them, can worthily evaluate the past and not confuse the landmarks of 'historical perspectives'. Despite their Futurism these artists do not forget to occupy their proper place in the cemeteries of the past.

XI The account presented to contemporaneity

Contemporaneity makes completely new demands on the artist. It wants not museum 'pictures' and 'sculptures' from him but objects which are socially justified in form and purpose. The museums are sufficiently full not to require new variations on the old themes. Life no longer justifies art objects which are solely dependent on their form and content. The new democratic art is social in essence, just as individualistic art is anarchic and finds its justification among separate individuals or groups. If the teleological art of the past found its meaning in recognition by the individual, then the art of the future will find such meaning in recognition by society. In a democratic art all form must be socially justified. So, looking at contemporary art from a sociological standpoint, we have arrived at the conclusion that easel painting as a museum art form is outdated socially as well as creatively. Both analyses led to one and the same result.

XII The rejection of easel painting and the orientation towards production

[. . .] But the death of painting, the death of easel painting as a form, does not yet mean the death of art in general. Art continues to live not as a definite form but as a creative substance. Moreover, at the very moment of the burial of its typical forms, the funeral of which we have attended in the course of the preceding account, unusually wide horizons are now opening out in front of visual art [. . .] presenting art with new forms and a new content. These new forms are called 'production skills'.

In 'production skill', 'the content' is the utility and expediency of the object, its tectonism which conditions its form and construction, and which justifies its social purpose and function.