

Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura*

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Tatlin's life is known to us in barest outline. Although a large body of his works and writings presumably still exists in the Soviet Union, these are for the most part unseen and unknown by Westerners.¹ The bases for study of this artist, considered the founder of constructivism, are therefore sparse: a small number of paintings, drawings, miscellaneous objects and fragments of objects; a few photographs, texts, and eyewitness reports, which are accessible outside Russia. Since no quantity of work ever found its way to the West, far less firsthand documentation is available for Tatlin than for Malevich, say, or Lissitzky. Yet Tatlin is as celebrated as they, as honored as they are for his contributions to the art of the twentieth century. We can only conjecture that the high points of his creative activity are known to us and, although few, they are, like the greater bodies of work by his better known contemporaries, exemplary and a valid point of departure. From these remaining fragments we can draw a profile of Tatlin's achievement and see that it is at one and the same time profoundly Russian and extremely modern. That is to say, Tatlin drew on the peculiarly Russian conceptions of *faktura* and transrational language to envision an art that would consist of a semantic encoding of pure materials.

The biographical framework of Tatlin's life is fairly familiar. Born in Moscow in 1885,² he was fifteen years younger than Malevich, eight years older

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1. In the catalogue of the recent Tatlin exhibition in Moscow, it is noted that aside from the "work which is located in our State Museums—the Tretyakov Gallery, the Russian Museum, the Bakhrushin Museum and the Leningrad Theatrical Museum, among others—a large number of his works, primarily paintings and graphics, were, after his death, given to the Central State Archive of Literature and Art. . . ." (*V. E. Tatlin, Katalog vystavki proizvedenii*, Moscow, 1977, p. 27.) It is thought that a number of reliefs and counter-reliefs are to be found in the museum collections as well. Also, a collection of Tatlin's writings has apparently been published in the Soviet Union.

2. And not in Kharkov, as is sometimes written. Tatlin's family moved to Kharkov when he was two years old, and he spent approximately the next fifteen years there, which accounts for this confusion.

than Mayakovsky, four years younger than Picasso. By the age of seventeen, he had run away from home and joined the Merchant Marine. He would continue to go to sea intermittently until 1914-15. At seventeen, he went to Moscow, where he began painting icons and ultimately entered the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. There he studied under the academic painters K. A. Korovin and V. A. Serov. By 1908, he was friendly with Larionov, the Burliuk brothers, the Vesnin brothers, as well as with the painter Lebedev and the sculptor Lebedeva, who would remain lifelong friends. In 1909-10, he began exhibiting fairly regularly in the principal avant-garde exhibitions in Odessa, Moscow, and Petrograd and was friendly with most of the significant artists of the period.³

Tatlin executed his first stage designs in 1911, for *Czar Maximillian and His Unruly Son Adolf*, presented in Moscow.⁴ In the spring-summer of 1913, he travelled to Berlin, and subsequently to Paris, where he visited Picasso's studio. Upon his return, he began his experimental relief constructions. In 1917, together with Rodchenko, he worked under George Yakulov on the interior decoration of Moscow's Café Pittoresque. After the October Revolution and in the context of Lenin's propaganda program, he received a commission for a monument, for which, in 1919-20, he conceived the celebrated *Monument to the IIIrd International*.

Aside from the *Letatlin*, or glider, on which Tatlin worked between 1930 and '32, the model for the monument was his last major personal work. Beginning in 1918, Tatlin devoted his energies to pedagogy, reorganizing the curriculum of the State Free Art Studios, and teaching "Volume, Material, and Construction," "Culture of Materials," and wood- and metalworking and ceramics during successive phases of his teaching career.⁵ He continued to work on stage decors until his death.

Although Tatlin lived until 1953, the artist we admire as the father of constructivism died many years earlier, despite outward appearances of an active creative life. Indeed, Tatlin, as we choose to remember him, had a creative life span of at most twenty years, from approximately 1912 to 1932.

Although Tatlin is recognized as the initiator of constructivism, he did not invent this concept. His oeuvre, particularly the counter-reliefs and the model for the *Monument*, which is in some ways their logical extension in time and space, is the culmination of an intellectual and aesthetic movement which was beginning to crystallize in Russia as early as 1911. At about that time, artists and writers began to speak out against the aesthetic enterprise dominated by the idea of

3. According to Troels Andersen (in *Vladimir Tatlin*, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 1968, pp. 12-13), Tatlin exhibited with the *League of Youth* in 1911, *The Donkey's Tail* in 1912, joined the *Jack of Diamonds* in 1912, exhibited in the *League of Youth* and *World of Art* exhibitions in 1913, the *Tramway V* and *0.10* exhibitions in 1915, and in his own exhibition *The Shop* in 1916.

4. A set design for this play is reproduced in Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, p. 170.

5. "Volume, Material, and Construction," 1919-24; "Culture of Materials," 1921-25; wood- and metalworking and ceramics, 1927-30; in *V. E. Tatlin*, pp. 6-9.

“beauty.” French painting, represented by prime examples in Russian collections, embodied the conventions they wished to refute: references to nature, illusionistic spatial organization, and, more significantly in this context, what seemed to them a personal, individualistic form of expression in which the arbitrary and the accidental played major roles, and which, therefore, could not be measured or considered useful to the collectivity. In place of these conventions, the poets and painters of this generation in Russia sought to regenerate language itself in order to express the original purity of human experience. Art was to be a self-contained reality, not a reproduction of existing phenomena. Language, be it poetic or pictorial, was to have its own substance which would engender new forms.

In 1912–13, in an attempt to purify the spoken or written word, to strip it of historical connotations, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov invented the *zaum*, or transrational tongue. Malevich’s suprematism can be considered an attempt to create a pure visual idiom, uncontaminated by traditional formal conventions. And Tatlin’s constructivism exemplifies another dimension of this complex movement.

But before attempting an analysis of Tatlin’s particular contribution, it is important to establish a definition of constructivism; for that term, which ironically has its own history, evokes a number of diverse connotations, many of which are far removed from its original meaning.

Tatlin’s own 1932 definition is the clearest and most precise. “‘Constructivism’ in quotation marks,” said Tatlin, by which he acknowledged that the term was already distorted, “has not taken into account the organic connection of its effort, its work, to the materials. In essence, it is only as a result of the dynamics of these interrelationships that a vitally necessary form is born. . . . Meanwhile, the appearance of new cultural-living institutions in which the working masses will live, think, and bring their talents to light will demand from artists not only an external decorativeness, but will demand first of all objects in accordance with the dialectics of the new way of life.”⁶

In other words, the constructivist object must exist as a necessary form in relation to two poles of being: the physical materials which are its substance and for which no other form could be appropriate, on the one hand, and, on the other, the social context within which it serves a need or function. Simple as it may seem, this idea is complex indeed when one considers the notion of “necessary form” in relation to the time and place in history—and in art history—in which Tatlin lived and worked.

Tatlin’s “necessary form” was a compound logic; it was to express truth to materials, mankind’s authentic creative will, the universal laws of human experience, and a social necessity. The idea of truth to materials is fairly obvious. A given physical substance, because of its intrinsic nature, will generate certain kinds of forms and not others. Man’s creative powers are exercised in organizing

6. V. E. Tatlin, p. 26.

the medium without violating its unique characteristics. This respect for a material's identity is an expression of man's relation to the fundamental elements of nature. Finally, the form, through its inner relationships, tensions, contrasts, textures, rhythms is a reflection of natural laws and processes.

This is a metaphysical reading of the original definition of the constructivist object. But its physical existence is equally significant. The constructivist object exists in the viewer's real space, not in the confined and artificial space of the traditional work of art. Its medium is commonplace (wood, glass, metal), a reminder that it is not a representation of something else. Its forms belong to that repertory inherent to each material; its colors are those of each natural substance; the contrasts, rhythms, and tensions which emerge are those generated by particular juxtapositions within the object, and not from extrapictorial situations to which the object might allude.

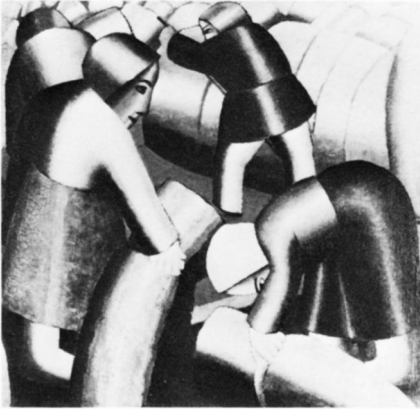
"Social necessity" carried a broad range of implications. It encompassed works of art which, through their own radically innovative aesthetic principles, would break down the barriers between painting, sculpture, and architecture, even between art and life, and would exist as examples of a general creative and useful activity which would educate a mass audience to the meaning of the new social reality. It also was to include productions corresponding to the technology of the new age (thereby reflecting the possibilities and necessities of that age). And finally, it included innovative utilitarian objects serving a precise function in the new society.

The social necessity of the constructivist object was idealist but not specifically political. In view of latter-day interpretations, it is important to emphasize that, prior to 1917, and even after the October Revolution, Malevich, Tatlin, and their colleagues were fundamentally apolitical. Their conception of art was comparable to that of laboratory research or experimentation. They sought to break with tradition and hoped for a new society, but for them this society was defined only in terms of a prerevolutionary utopianism. After 1917, there was perhaps a slight shift of focus; certainly much more was said about an art for the collectivity, and that collectivity was more specifically defined. But the major artistic breakthroughs had already been accomplished.

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Tatlin began his career as a painter. His works of the period around 1911-12, of which *The Fish Vendor* is a typical example,⁷ show the impact of Cézanne and cubism, which Tatlin would have known through the Moscow collections of Morosov and Shchukin. Their influence is of less importance to his style, however, than that of icon painting and folk art. Folk art's influence on Larionov, Goncharova, and Malevich has been well documented. It appears in their use of

7. Collection Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Exhibited in *Russian and Soviet Painting*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977; color plate in catalogue, p. 44.



Kasimir Malevich. *Taking In the Rye*. 1912. (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.)



Vladimir Tatlin. *The Model*. 1913. (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.)

vivid hues, heavy outlines like those of popular woodcuts or *lubki*, shallow space, and loose, narrative-like structure. The impact of icon painting, though less thoroughly analyzed, is of no less importance.⁸ Although icons seemed to belong to an anonymous folk-art tradition, they were in fact far more structured, regularized, and sophisticated as a semantic system. Indeed, the icon presented a text of concrete signs connoting an impalpable reality. The visual refinement of the icon and its manner of organizing the viewer's perception and emotions provided these artists with a rich source upon which to draw. More specifically, the charged colors and rhythms, the inverse perspective, the use of rich materials to enhance an otherwise purely spiritual content provided them with pictorial devices that constituted an alternative to the exhausted formulae of Western art.

Like many of his contemporaries, Tatlin had painted icons and copied religious frescoes in his youth. His paintings of 1911-13 betray the importance of this experience to his developing style. The dynamic curves, the luminous and spatially undefined ground, the strongly schematized morphologies, the abrupt change of scale between central and secondary motifs (some of which are inserted in the rhythms of the landscape) are reminiscent of the icon's stylistic conventions.

The Model (collection Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) was presumably Tatlin's last painting before leaving for Berlin and Paris in the spring of 1913. A comparison of this painting with a canvas by Malevich of 1912 (since by 1913 Malevich was a cubist painter) is revealing. The dominant feature of Malevich's

8. See M. Betz, "The Icon and Russian Modernism," in *Artforum*, summer 1977, 38-45.

paintings, such as *Taking in the Rye* or *The Woodcutter*, is color, color which generates both the space and form, thus recalling the celebrated statement by Cézanne: “*Lorsque la couleur est à sa richesse, la forme est à sa plénitude.*” The schematized silhouettes, the saturated hues, and the effect of vaulted planes evoke comparisons with folk art, Goncharova, and Fernand Léger.

The impact of Tatlin's painting is wholly different. Despite its density of hue, it is chromatically restrained, for color was not Tatlin's prime concern. He was much more preoccupied by the rhythmic continuity of an articulated form, suggestive of an organic function. This accent on a dynamic articulation through line-drawn curves is found in icon painting as well. Malevich's figures are assemblages of separate and discrete planes, whereas Tatlin's, no matter how schematized, retain a fluid continuity. This distinction is equally eloquent in drawings. Malevich's drawn silhouettes are the rapid summary of a visual impression, whereas Tatlin indicates how the different parts of the body are linked together in order to serve a function. The distinction will be significant.

In the spring of 1913, Tatlin travelled briefly to Berlin as a bandore player, after which he continued to Paris, where he visited Picasso in his studio at 242 boulevard Raspail.⁹ According to Edward Fry, who interviewed Lipchitz in the 1960s, the latter served as an interpreter. It is generally assumed that Tatlin received such a shock from the constructions he saw in Picasso's studio, that, upon his return to Russia, he began to make the counter-reliefs which have since become legendary, though, to our knowledge, few of them have survived. Yet, as seductive and credible as this sequence of events may appear, one wonders if it is not a gross oversimplification. For if one examines the background, context, intentions, and results of these two artists, one discovers that they are radically antithetical.

Picasso's constructions are less familiar to us than the rest of his oeuvre, since they remained in the artist's possession all his life. But a few examples were photographed by Kahnweiler and reproduced by Apollinaire in *Les Soirées de Paris* as early as the autumn of 1913. What is singular about them is that Picasso was, until then, essentially a painter and these works, despite a real extension into space, reflect a painter's vision. Whereas the analytical cubist painter sought to eliminate illusions of depth, to split open the volume of a given object and align

9. There is some question as to when Tatlin visited Picasso in Paris. Troels Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p. 12, and the chronology in *V. E. Tatlin*, p. 3, indicate that it was in spring-summer 1913. Camilla Gray and Pierre Daix (in *La Vie de peintre de Pablo Picasso*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1977, p. 136 and p. 141, fn. 5) believe it was after the summer, in which case Picasso would already have moved to the rue Schoelcher. Since the former opinions are based on Soviet written documents, the latter on oral reports from contemporaries such as Larionov, the former position appears more justified. Furthermore, photographs exist showing elaborate installations of the constructions in Picasso's boulevard Raspail studio (the guitar surrounded by drawings; a large relief of a woman playing a guitar strung up with string; see “Oeuvres et images inédites de la jeunesse de Picasso” in *Cahiers d'Art*, II, 1950, 281-2); this seems a more impressive context for Tatlin's visit. There are no indications that the constructions were reinstalled in such a manner after Picasso's move to the rue Schoelcher studio.

its different faces parallel to the surface of the canvas, Picasso attempted, in these constructions, to detach the picture planes from the surface of the canvas and reassemble them in front of the wall. Although the organization by planar components is essentially the same, that is to say, pictorial, their posture and presence are different, established in a new relationship to the wall, the ambient space, and the viewer. They are no longer virtually or truly constricted by the conventional spatial limitations of the two-dimensional surface.

Although pictorially conceived, the first objects have no ground or background; the motifs are silhouetted against the wall. This is a logical progression from the shattered and blurred analytical cubist ground; moreover, it is thought that Picasso's interest in African sculpture was crucial to this development.¹⁰ The African masks which so appealed to Picasso, Braque, Derain, and Vlaminck were hung directly on their walls. Despite the transfer of these masks to a context where they were stripped of their specific ritual functions, they maintained a magical, not to say iconic, power which did not escape the European artists' understanding. The spiritual content and functional autonomy of these objects was manifest in their formal stylization, defined as an architectonic, frontal, hieratic organization. The initiated tribal member does not confuse the sacred reality of the mask with human reality, nor is the one meant to refer directly to the other. He therefore does not seek to recognize a familiar face. On the contrary, he deciphers a repertory of signs which constitute a coded text.

Thus, in the Ivory Coast masks which European artists favored, there is no modeled imitation of the continuous volumes of the human face. The mask exists as a flat or concave plane, bounded by a crudely cut contour. The nose may be a noninflected triangular or rectangular plane, the eyes projected cylinders, the mouth a projecting ridge. Placement, height of relief, and shape are important to the legibility of these ciphers of predetermined meaning.

Picasso's metal *Guitar* of 1912 evokes the same compelling presence as the African mask through a strict nonimitative formal logic.¹¹ The dark sheet metal recalls the patinated dark wood; a projected cylinder signifies the hollowed mouth of the guitar, whereas a length of concave pipe reads as the neck and an open hollow box shape as its body. The instrument's characteristic curves exist here and there, not in relation to a functional structure but as rhythmic reminders. The viewer is not called upon to recognize a guitar but to read its emblem, an emblem which has an expanded significance precisely because it is not a literal image. Reduced to a frontal organization of architectonic planes, it exists as a somewhat enigmatic, autonomous statement.

In thinking of the relationship between the iconic presence of the *Guitar* and

10. Of course, guitars are hung on the wall. So that these first cut-out constructions are entirely logical. It may even have been an effect of artistic accident that Picasso hung his first guitar, once made, on the wall.

11. For a full analysis of this work, see William Rubin, *Picasso in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, MOMA, 1972, p. 74.

the African mask as a formal precedent, one is reminded of the connection between Tatlin's painting and the Russian icon. In parallel cases both artists are attracted to an art which has no connection to their aesthetic formation, which is thought to be primal, and is constituted as a coded text. To analyze the *Guitar* solely in terms of its references to African art would, of course, be inadequate. The cutting away of planes, the transparency or invisibility of certain components of the original instrument, the layering and superimposition of others derive from Picasso's own painting.

This emblem or system of signs is of Picasso's own making, inspired by his transposed vision of the subject. And Picasso chose his materials to facilitate this vision. The first requisite was that the material adapt itself to the intricacies of a layered syntax. Flexibility and malleability were his fundamental priorities, for, like Matisse at a later period, Picasso was drawing with scissors. And, in order to embody his ideas as quickly as they arose, he worked with extremely pliable materials: paper, cardboard, string, sheet metal, wood. He was indifferent to the intrinsic properties of each medium. All were treated in a similar manner. They were cut, folded, bent, punctured, and pinned into different shapes.

Around 1914, painted surfaces became more common in Picasso's constructions, which employed them towards various ends: an allusion to diverse substances and textures (such as fabric, bread, sausage); the dynamic orientation of planes; chromatic passages and contrasts, transitions, tensions, harmonies, and dissonances within a single work. Yet despite their growing complexity, these works remain the embodiment of a pictorial idea, the result of a painter's vision rather than a sculptor's. The medium is subordinated to the image, stripped of its specificity and autonomy.

Finally, and as a confirmation that Picasso's goal was not sculpture in any conventional sense, he did not seek perfection in the execution of these constructions. The notion of a well-crafted or well-finished object was definitely not a priority. On the contrary, the artist was preoccupied by a spatial rendering of his vision. A later text by Gonzalez which discusses Picasso's own feelings (probably about his synthetic cubist paintings) is significant in this respect: "With these paintings, Picasso told me, it is only necessary to cut them out—the colors are only the indications of different perspectives, of planes inclined from one side or the other—then assemble them according to the indications given by the color, in order to find oneself in the presence of a 'sculpture.'"¹² In view of their crudeness (André Salmon speaks of Picasso's lack of technical skill in making these constructions),¹³ these constructions perhaps were a means, not an end, like Braque's paper and cardboard models of the summer of 1912, "investigations for

12. J. Gonzalez, "Picasso sculpteur," in *Cahiers d'Art*, nos. 6-7 (1936), 189. English translation by Ron Johnson, in *The Early Sculpture of Picasso, 1901-14*, New York, Garland Press, 1976, p. 100. Picasso is probably referring here to paintings which do not precede but were done simultaneously with the constructions.

13. André Salmon, *Souvenirs sans fin; Deuxième époque 1908-1920*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, p. 240.

form and volume," aids for painting, so to speak, and not finished sculptural works.¹⁴

Like his contemporaries, Tatlin, at the time of his visit to Picasso, was preoccupied by problems of the form and meaning of the work of art, but in relation to a radically different context. A text by Nicolai Tarabukin makes this abundantly clear:

The form of a work of art derives from two fundamental premises: the *material* or medium (colors, sounds, words) and the *construction*, through which the material is organized in a coherent whole, acquiring its artistic logic and its profound meaning. Consequently, the notion of form should be understood as the real structure of the work, its structural or compositional unity. . . . The form of objects from the outside world often serves as a stimulus to artistic creation, but form in this sense . . . must be excluded from the number of real pictorial components of the work of art. . . .¹⁵

So that, whereas the French school accepted the object in the outside world as a given, the Russians did not; their focus was, rather, on medium and technique as the true constituents of the work of art.

Medium, as used in this text, implies a specific substance or texture, specified by the Russian term *faktura*. Tarabukin develops this concept in a later passage:

In painting, and in art in general, the problem of materials must be considered separately, in that the painter must acquire a developed sense of materials, he must feel the inherent characteristics of each material which of themselves condition the construction of the object. The material dictates the forms, and not the opposite. Wood, metal, glass, etc., impose different constructions. Consequently, the constructivist organization of an object depends on the materials used: the study of diverse materials constitutes an important and autonomous consideration.¹⁶

Thus, for these artists, the layer of paint itself could be considered as a texture or fabric which generates form. For example, Cézanne's singular brushstroke was a *faktura* which articulated the organization of his surface. Malevich showed his admiration for Cézanne's technique in paintings such as the *Argentine Polka* of 1911. A more eloquent manipulation of surface texture is seen in Larionov's work

14. See Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, London, Phaidon, 1971, p. 234. This conjecture does not invalidate the "immense impact [of Picasso's constructions] on twentieth-century sculpture" (W. Rubin, *Picasso*, p. 208, fn. 2). That impact was possible through the simple fact that they survived and were made known through exhibitions and reproductions.

15. Nikolai Tarabukin, *Le Dernier tableau*, Paris, Editions Champ Libre, 1972, p. 104. The original text was apparently written in 1916 and published in 1923.

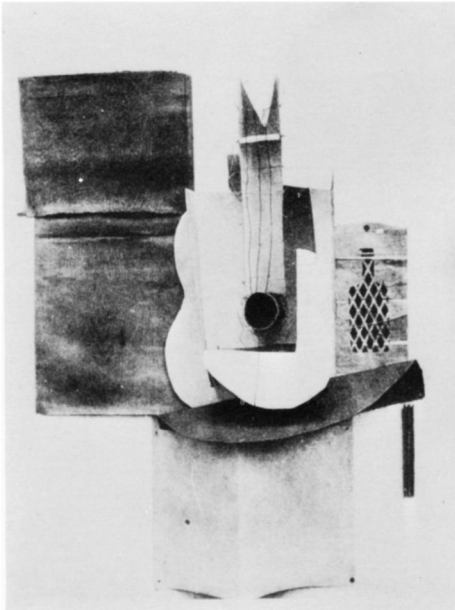
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24. Note the use of "constructivist" here, which preceded (and of course influenced) the invention of the specific term.

of 1912–13. The consistency of the paint and the orientation of the brushwork create the “reality” of Larionov’s “rayism.”

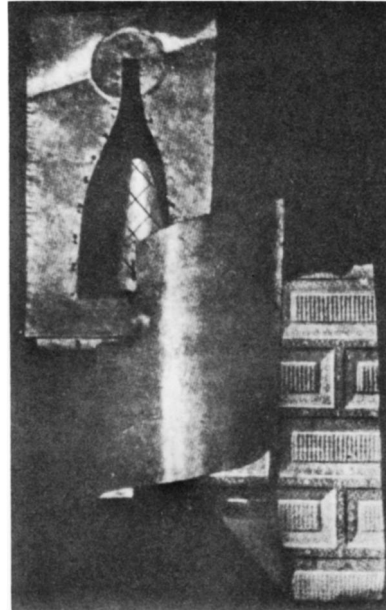
In short, each material—be it paint, wood, glass, metal, etc.—by its very nature, generates specific forms; and Tarabukin’s texts indicate that the “culture of materials” which is attributed to Tatlin belongs to the broader framework of the whole of Russian art.

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The first known relief from Tatlin’s hand (and his only documented figurative relief) appears to have been inspired by a construction he may have seen in Picasso’s studio. The visual analogies between these two objects are obvious (insofar as we may judge from photographs and descriptions, since both are presumably destroyed). Picasso’s assemblage is thought to have been made of paper imitating wood (on the left), cardboard and wire (in the central portion), and sheet metal stencil with grillwork (on the right). Tatlin’s relief is also conceived in three parts: the element on the left appears to be a tin plate laced with a wire mesh over the opening; the central element is a piece of curved sheet metal; on the right is a piece of wallpaper (such as he may have seen in other assemblages in Picasso’s studio). Yet despite these and other superficial similarities, the artist’s intentions are demonstrably different.



Pablo Picasso. Still Life. 1913. (Destroyed.)



Vladimir Tatlin. The Bottle. 1913. (Destroyed.)

In Tatlin's relief, the element on the left was a sign meant to signify transparency itself, evoked by the shape of a bottle, enhanced by wire filigree, and reinforced by the curve of the smaller reflective surface placed beneath the wire web.¹⁷ Presumably Tatlin sought to capture the essential ambiguity of a volume in glass: both concave and convex, filling space and filled by space, and consisting of a nearly invisible structure.

The central motif is a rolled sheet of polished metal. The form itself is emphasized by the reflective attributes of metal. Whereas the element on the left is open, empty, and receptive to light, the central motif is closed, convex, and rejects the light that falls upon it. The third substance, a piece of wallpaper with a trompe-l'oeil pattern, exhibits both intaglio and cameo effects, depth and relief, shadow and reflection. The wallpaper is torn at the upper edge, and the lower left corner is folded over, pointing to the friable substance of paper.

This first relief shows a tentative expression of the true nature of each material. In the structures that follow, the expression of substance is more direct.¹⁸ In fact, through the constancy of forms for a given material, one can speak of a distinct repertory of signs. It would seem, moreover, that Tatlin already wanted a systematized lexicon of forms by which to order content and avoid the pitfalls of subjective, individualistic, arbitrary expression. He believed in "a combination of the simplest rectilinear and the simplest curvilinear forms." For it is precisely this that brings about "a uniformity of technico-constructive solutions and confines the artist to research on the most usual materials, those which are commonly accepted."¹⁹

Wood is the material most often found in the later reliefs. As prepared for everyday use, the usual form of wood is that of a plank or rectangular plane. Adhering to Tatlin's logic, wood's inherent form is the geometric plane: flat on both sides, cut in a triangular, square, or rectangular silhouette. Technically, wood is shaped with a saw, producing clean edges; it can be perforated with a drill. The simple wooden plane may be positioned parallel, perpendicular, or at a slant to the wall. It has its own natural color which must be respected.

The formal possibilities of metal are quite different. Manufactured in thin sheets, its purest form in the urban environment is the cylinder or cone, produced by cutting, bending, or folding. Archipenko pointed this out in reference to his 1912-14 constructions: "The cone and the cylinder are the only shapes one can make with a sheet of metal without submitting it to the forge."²⁰ If metal is

17. According to Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment*, pp. 178-179, who studied this work from photographs, this component was a piece of "curved polished metal." According to Ivan Puni, in *Sovremennaia zhivopis (Contemporary Painting)*, Berlin, Frenkel Verlag, 1923, p. 30, it was a shard of glass. We would prefer the second reading.

18. These reliefs unfortunately are known only from photographs. See Gray, *The Russian Experiment*, pp. 176-9, for reproductions.

19. Tatlin, quoted in A. Abramavo, "Tatlin," *Rassegna Sovietica*, July-September 1966, 138.

20. Archipenko, in Yvon Taillandier, "Conversation avec Archipenko," *Vingtième Siècle*, XXXVII, supplement to no. 22, Noël, n.p.

polished, the surface reflects light, thereby accentuating its shape. And by its thinness, flexibility, malleability, it lends itself to a broader range of variants. But its basic form is that of a container or sheath.

Finally, glass is suitable for two kinds of formal manipulation: it exists as a rectangular pane, or it can be shaped into a cylinder or cone. Transparent, it stands at the edge of invisibility. It provides a transition between inner and outer space, the space of the work of art and the viewer's space. In one of the few documented reliefs in which Tatlin used glass in its curved form, he cut the conic shape in half, thereby emphasizing the equivocal nature of his medium: the transparent shell dissolves into invisibility; contained space opens into ambient space.

The combination of diverse materials into a single heterogeneous object illustrates one other aspect of *faktura*. In a 1914 text by Vladimir Markov, written in defense of the new sculpture, the author identifies the icon as a precedent:

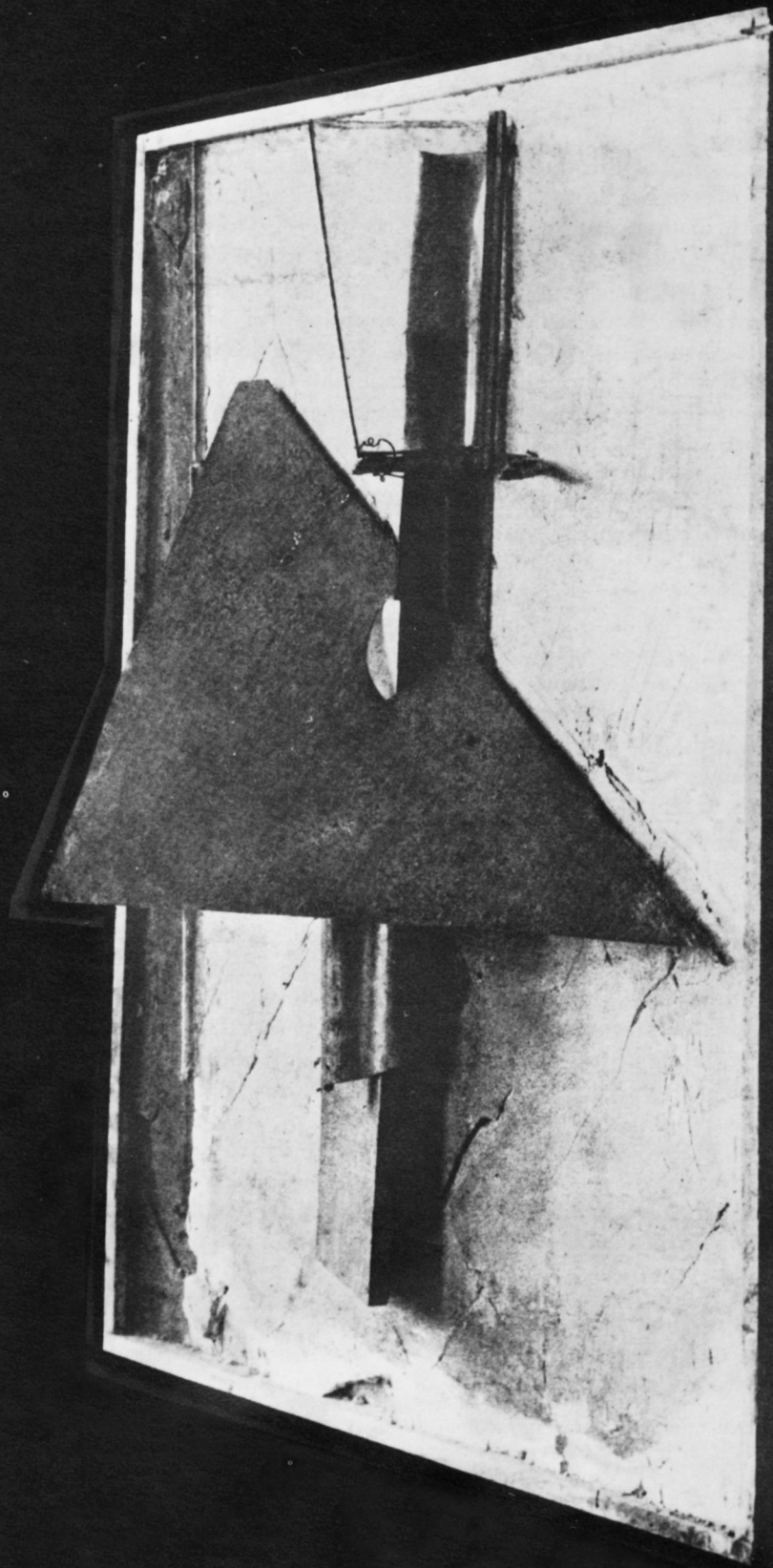
Let us look back to our icons. They were embellished with metal halos in the form of crowns, metal casings on the shoulders, fringes, incrustations. Even paintings were enhanced with precious stones, metals, etc. . . . Through the noise of colors, the sound of materials, the assemblage of *faktura*, the people are called to beauty, to religion, to God. . . . [The icon is] a nonreal image. The real world is introduced into its essence through the assemblage and the incrustation of real tangible objects. One could say that this produces a combat between two worlds.²¹

Thus, Tatlin referred to a tradition in which the assemblage of disparate materials and the respect for each was of real significance. If Tatlin received a shock upon entering Picasso's studio, how can that shock be measured? Certainly he recognized that the Spaniard used nonartistic materials with an uncommon freshness and freedom. But just as surely, he must have disapproved of the manner in which Picasso deflected his mediums from their original sense, neither respecting their specific attributes nor seeking to draw upon the new realities which they might generate. Picasso admitted the importance of "displacement" to his work: "The sheet of newspaper was never used in order to make a newspaper. It was used to become a bottle or something like that. It was never used literally but always as an element displaced from its habitual meaning into another meaning. . . ."²²

This difference of approach to materials is crucial for an understanding of Tatlin's reliefs as well as all his subsequent activity. Deeply bound up in a native

21. V. Markov (pseudonym for the sculptor Valdemar Matvejs), *Printsiipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskussvakh. Faktura (Principles of Creation in the Visual Arts. Faktura.)*, St. Petersburg, Union of Youth, 1914. The author is grateful to Jean-Claude Marcadé for bringing this passage to her attention and for its translation from the Russian.

22. Picasso, quoted in Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1964, p. 77.



Russian tradition, this attitude extends to much more than visual art; it is to be found, for example, in the literature of the avant-garde.

It is, in this context, important that one of Tatlin's friends was the poet Khlebnikov. Although Tatlin did not meet Khlebnikov until 1916, he had illustrated some of his verse in 1912-13. Seeking to invent a universal language based on the texture and possible meanings of isolated linguistic units, Khlebnikov used the phonetic sound, the syllable, divested of historical or contextual connotation, as his raw material. New sounds in unprecedented juxtapositions were to engender new forms and inspire new meanings. Accordingly, two of Khlebnikov's working principles were the isolation of the basic unit of the signifier, or phoneme, and the destruction of conventional syntax in favor of a phonetic sequence which creates a phonetic texture. Khlebnikov's verses confound psychological, symbolic, or descriptive reading; their impact derives from the intricate functioning of vocal sounds.

Tatlin's manner of composing the counter-reliefs relates to these procedures. The artist assembled pieces of glass, wood, plaster, metal, each for its particular texture and formal possibilities, and divested of former connotations. Each element exists for what it is: the word as such, the material as such, a pure presence, an immediate sensory stimulus that triggers unpredictable impressions. For each artist, the ultimate aim was a return to primary experience, the eliciting of instinctual sensation which would induce a new emotional experience and hence a new reality.

In May 1923, Tatlin directed, designed, and appeared in the posthumous production of Khlebnikov's *Zangezi*. It is obvious that the poet's verbal experiments corresponded more than superficially to Tatlin's own preoccupations. In reference to this production Tatlin wrote:

The *Zangezi* production is to be staged on the principle that "the word is a building unit, the material a unit of organized volumes." Khlebnikov himself . . . regards the word as plastic material. The properties of this material make it possible to operate with it to build up "the linguistic state." . . . Parallel to his word-constructions, I decided to make a material construction. . . . Khlebnikov took sounds as elements. . . . The hard C sound, for instance, gives birth to cup, cranium, container. All these words have to do with the concept of a sheath. One body enclosed in another. The sound P has to do with a diminishing of energy which stands in relationship to the area in which it is used: as in paddle, position, palm, porringer. . . .²³

This text encourages the conjecture that Tatlin's conception of the form of metal as a cone or a sheath corresponds to the hard C sound for Khlebnikov; and that the form of wood—as a plinth, a plank, or a plane—may correspond to the sound P. It

23. Tatlin, quoted in Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p. 69.

is worth mentioning in this context that Khlebnikov dreamed of an alphabet in which the consonants would be of metal and the vowels of glass!²⁴

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As we have seen, Tatlin's counter-reliefs are the fruit of complex historical circumstances and imperatives. There is, in addition, one biographical factor which may have contributed to the formulation of their specific images and inventions: namely, his activity as a sailor. Although it is almost impossible to confirm, several indications suggest that Tatlin was a marine carpenter. According to most contemporary reports, Tatlin had considerable manual skill. He probably made all his reliefs himself, which indicates experience in working with materials such as metal and wood; also "glass, plaster, cardboard, gesso, tar . . . putty, paints."²⁵

Moreover, photographs from the period indicate that Tatlin, with three assistants, built the model for the *Monument to the IIIrd International* himself. Except for a few metal fittings visible in photographs, this model was built entirely of wood. T. M. Shapiro, the only surviving assistant on the project, relates that, due to the penury of metal, they carved 2000 wooden pegs by hand in order to assemble the model.²⁶ A marine carpenter, after looking at these photographs, remarked that only a professional carpenter could have conceived and mounted the model; more specifically, a carpenter specialized in making staircases and knowledgeable enough to make a plan.²⁷

In 1922, Tatlin was appointed the head of the woodworking studio at the Moscow Vkhutein.²⁸ Since artists were appointed to functions in a rather haphazard way, this is not necessarily meaningful. But the beechwood prototype of a chair, executed under his direction in 1926, is once again, according to professional standards, the work of someone with intimate knowledge of his medium and its tensile possibilities.

Tatlin's famous glider *Letatlin*, a work of incomparable technical complexity, was executed in the tower of the Novodevichy Monastery in Moscow with students from the Vkhutein. There is no mention of a professional carpenter among them, although we know that Tatlin sought advice from a surgeon and a pilot instructor in designing this work.²⁹ No matter what assistance he received, we may assume that the conception was his own, a design derived from an intimate knowledge of a diversity of materials and their structural possibilities.³⁰

24. See Andrei B. Nakov, *2 Stenberg*, Paris, Galerie Chauvelin, 1975, p. 44, and p. 56, fn. 33.

25. Tatlin listed these materials in a leaflet on his reliefs and counter-reliefs published December 17, 1915.

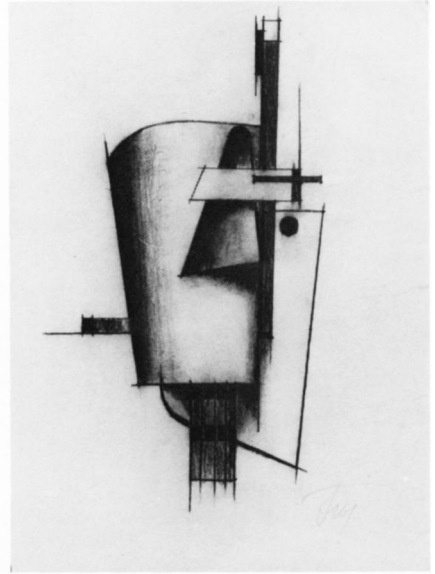
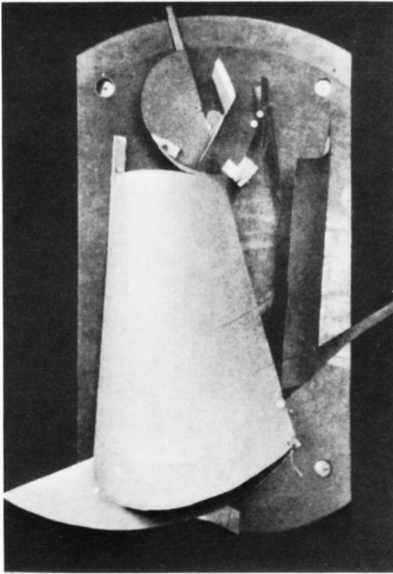
26. Interview with the author in Moscow, May 25, 1977.

27. This, despite Shapiro's statement that there were no "detailed working drawings" (in Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p. 23).

28. Higher Art Technical Institute.

29. Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p. 76.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 75 ff.



Vladimir Tatlin. Counter-relief. 1916. (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.) Drawing for Counter-relief. 1916. (Courtesy Jean Chauvelin, Paris.)

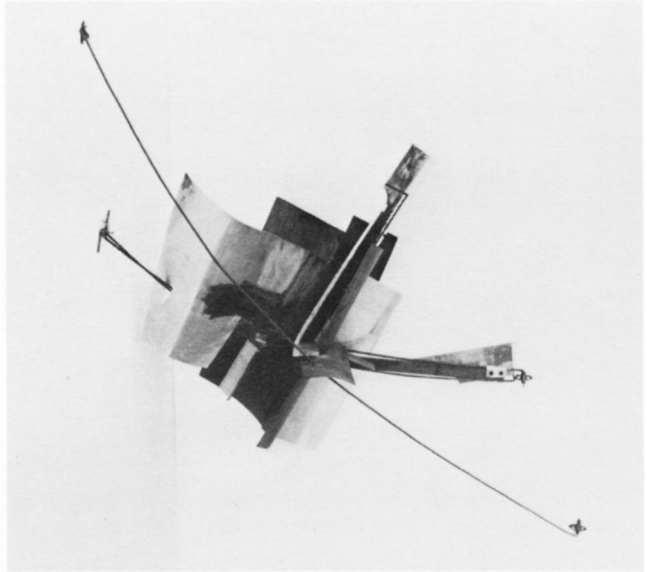
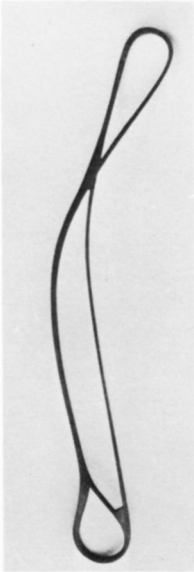
Finally, Tatlin made stringed musical instruments throughout his lifetime, one of which (a bandore) appears in a late photograph of the artist, and several of which are conserved at the Glinka Museum of Music in Moscow. The fabrication of musical instruments goes beyond carpentry; it is highly skilled cabinetwork.

The few works accessible to Western viewers speak for themselves. One relief of 1916, stored in the reserves of Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery, is a masterpiece of craftsmanship. The ground is palisander wood, a type of rosewood which is extremely difficult to work, yet here it is cut and shaped to perfection. The conic relief is made of zinc, as are the linings of the four corner perforations. Since one of the basic attributes of zinc is its unique oxidation process, it is commonly used on sailing vessels.

A wing strut from *Letatlin*, made of cork and a flexible wood (probably ash or willow) and measuring 2.4 meters, is another eloquent example of Tatlin's technical sophistication.³¹ The organic fluidity of this structure (in the form of a figure 8) seems to defy, but in truth is natural to, its very substance. In building it, Tatlin followed a shipbuilding principle of keeping the wood, and therefore the fibers, whole. The wood is not sawed but cloven and compressed to the desired thickness.³² Although built according to functional prerequisites, this object is a

31. Exhibited in *Sammlung Costakis*, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, 1977. Reproduced in catalogue, p. 95.

32. See Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p. 76.



Vladimir Tatlin. Letatlin Wing Strut. 1930–32.
(Collection George Costakis.) Corner Relief. 1915.
(Probably destroyed.)

revelation of the artist's sensitive relation to his materials. Indeed it is the constructivist object incarnate.

Drawings of the same period confirm the artist's technical frame of reference. Tatlin drew with a ruler; he had little consideration for style. If the lines extended into space, beyond the contours of a given configuration, this was unimportant; formal construction and spatial organization were his primary concerns. And once he had established his repertory of signs, textural indications were unnecessary. A bowed or arched plane signified metal. A flat rectilinear shape (or even one with slightly curving edges) indicated wood. These drawings, sketches for constructions, are predominantly functional and look anonymous.

The foregoing observations suggest that Tatlin's "culture of materials," despite the historical tradition of *faktura*, may have been generated by a more immediate and empirical source. For a knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity in regard to materials is the fundamental training of the marine carpenter. His expertise in the specifications of every material and in each state is crucial to survival at sea. Tatlin liked to define the culture of materials as born of "the culture of the man of the sea."³³ It seems clear that this remark is a key to the fundamental premise of his art.

33. Tatlin, quoted in Vieri Quilici, *L'Architettura del Costruttivismo*, Bari, Editori Laterza, 1969, p. 308.

Tatlin's naval experience and its influence on his oeuvre is not limited to mere technical training. One may also conjecture that his images arose from his seagoing experiences, a hypothesis to which we shall return in reference to the *Monument to the IIIrd International*. But this is also true in relation to the counter-reliefs.

Tatlin's forms and their spatial articulation derived from an organic vision. A comparison of his drawings and constructions to those of Rodchenko, which stem from an analogous constructivist aesthetic, show Rodchenko's to be rigorously geometric, or based on purely visual (as opposed to functional) formal considerations. Tatlin's drawings and constructions, on the other hand, were designed in accordance with functional articulations, whether or not the object was conceived for functional use. For example, the relief of 1914 is mounted like a triangular sail pinned to a mast and connoting a certain flexibility of movement or relativity of position. The corner reliefs of 1915 consist of thin metal plates in sail-like shapes, bent or curved in a lightly billowing effect, rigged as overlapping planes on guy-wires which, while stretching tautly to the wall, once again imply movement or flexibility. These "reliefs" are not pinned to the wall; rather they are anchored at some distance. They exist in indeterminate space, like sails on the sea.

It is worth noting, in relating to Tatlin's reliefs, that there are no absolute right angles aboard a seagoing vessel, no strictly geometric planes, no tightly fitted joints which would run the risk of splitting or breaking open under stress. Everything is designed to absorb the unpredictable play of the sea.

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Tatlin's model for the *Monument to the IIIrd International*, executed in 1919-20, was the celebration of a specific ideology. For Tatlin, this was not so much a radical departure as a focusing of his aims, both aesthetic and social. Although Russian artists had been essentially apolitical prior to 1917, they nonetheless sought a substantive modification of the conception of the work of art, traditionally bourgeois in its origins and functions. The new art would be an active transformational force in the mass revolution. The inaccessibility to the proletariat of Tatlin's art, like that of Malevich, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, made for its utopian character. Tatlin was quick to perceive this and, in 1922, he repudiated his reliefs and counter-reliefs, declaring them useless objects.³⁴

In a text published in 1923,³⁵ the painter Ivan Puni arrived at the same conclusion, using, however, a different logic. Although his own relief constructions of 1915-17 were probably influenced by both Malevich and Tatlin, Puni had, by 1923, revised his aesthetic criteria, and his text of that year is highly critical of

34. Recorded (by the Secretary N. Tarabukin) in the minutes of the INCHUK Scientific Council meeting, March 23, 1922. Reprinted (in Italian) in Quilici, *ibid.*, p. 494.

35. Ivan Puni, *Contemporary Painting*, pp. 29-32.

both artists. For Puni, the relief is the logical extension of cubism. But whereas Picasso maintained the "subject" which generated its own particular space, Tatlin, in seeking to substitute a reality without images, suppressed the spatial exigencies and formal possibilities of the subject motif. As a result, Tatlin ran the risk of purely decorative craftsmanship, devoid of mystery, ambiguity, or real meaning.

Moreover, continued Puni, Picasso's reliefs are part of an intuitive dialectical development which allows for the unpredictable, whereas Tatlin's counter-reliefs partake of a linear progression in which there can be no intuitive leaps. A sculpture of planes leads to a form of architecture. Abstraction leads to the absolute, to an impalpable, unattainable ideology. To Puni's eyes, this was characteristically Russian. And this aspiration towards the absolute leads inevitably to the absurd. Since the *Monument to the IIIrd International* is the culmination of this progression, it is therefore, in Puni's view, an ideological absurdity.

Puni's preferences and prejudices are not central to our concerns at this moment. Unquestionably the *Monument to the IIIrd International* grew out of certain notions which existed in embryonic stage in the reliefs and counter-reliefs. Two notions in particular are peculiar to the time and place in which Tatlin worked: the importance of materials that generate specific forms, and the understanding that this new kind of construction embodies a new language which is ideologically significant.

These two notions, of course, derive from the concepts of *faktura* and *tektionika*. But with the October Revolution, they take on new meaning. *Faktura* will henceforth denote the introduction of modern materials representing the new age; *tektionika* will encompass both industrial technology and the ideal of communism.

Tatlin was commissioned under Lenin's program for monumental propaganda, a program designed to disseminate heroic images for a largely illiterate audience. However, according to his biographer, N. Punin, Tatlin disagreed with the program's basic tenets. How could the conventional figurative monument, built to the glory of the individual hero, correspond to the new conception of history, the new society? How could the individualistic portrait represent the dynamic, diversified face of the new masses? To Tatlin's mind it could not. He would depict no human figures. He would erect a monument to an abstract ideal.

Several factors influenced the form his vision would take. According to a recent Soviet argument,³⁶ his resistance to the sculptural monument was grounded in Russian tradition, in which such monuments were virtually nonexistent. In Russia, the ultimate monumental enterprise was the building-monument, the church, as both place of worship (and thereby reserved for a specified collective activity) and a sacred image, embodying a precise ideology in every detail: the cruciform plan, the elevation, and the decorative program. Thus, through its

36. See A. Strigalev, "Proekt pamiatnika III Internatsionala," (Project for the Monument to the IIIrd International in *V. E. Tatlin*, p. 16 ff.

collective function and its universal symbolism, it was immediately legible to a wide audience. And the beauty and mystery of these edifices made them (and makes them still) monuments not only to the sacred spirit but to the human spirit, to the vision and hands which built them. (From his travels as a seaman, Tatlin was probably familiar with the great cathedrals of Europe as well.)

Like his Bauhaus contemporaries, Tatlin surely perceived the medieval cathedral as the product of a collective vision and collective realization. And in its embodiment of the most sophisticated vision and advanced technology of its time, it must have corresponded to his own aspiration to reform society through the union of art and technics. The *Monument to the IIIrd International* was to be Tatlin's cathedral to socialism.

Secondly, Tatlin's work in the theater probably contributed to the development of his concept. The theater is the vehicle par excellence for disseminating popular culture. Furthermore, the Soviet theater designs, both pre- and postrevolutionary, were extremely abstract, audacious, and inventive in their forms, materials, lighting effects, and technical (kinetic) machinery. The October Revolution brought theater into the streets. Artists were engaged to shape the vision, understanding, and emotions of the masses. Tatlin's task implied the creation of a visual experience of such spectacular proportions that it would satisfy and transform—both visually and ideologically—the expectations of the audience to which it was addressed.

Once Tatlin had conceived the shape of his monument, he returned to his study of materials, materials that would engender an emblem for the new society. According to Shapiro, only glass and steel appeared appropriate to the task. Petrograd was under reconstruction. The sky was filled with moving cranes, lightweight, openwork, kinetic, functional structures operating from a precarious point of balance. "We behaved like monks with a dogma," stated Shapiro. "We would have nothing to do with old materials. New content must have new form. We must abandon the static forms of the age of the pyramids. With the word 'dynamic' everything begins to turn; it engenders the idea of slanting form, energetic turning, two spirals which follow each other."³⁷

As the son of a railroad engineer who had travelled to the United States and written a book about American railroad engineering, Tatlin was surely familiar with a broad range of structural experiments in iron or steel. He surely knew of the Eiffel Tower, probably having seen it in Paris during his 1913 visit. Closer to his own experience, were the skeleton masts seen on battleships prior to 1914, when he was often at sea.³⁸ The armature of such masts had the form of a latticework cone, constructed on the principle of the "rotational hyperboloid." The interior of these slatted "chimneys" was rigged so that equipment could be hoisted or lowered onto the deck or into the hold. Signal lights and radio transmitters were rigged to the top. In visual and functional terms, these masts present a credible point of

37. Author's interview, cf. note 26. Also see *V. E. Tatlin*, p. 24.

38. This is one thesis of K. P. Zygas, in "Tatlin's Tower Reconsidered," in *Architectural Association Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 2 (London, 1976), 15-27.

departure for Tatlin's construction. K. Simenov makes a general reference to Tatlin's seaman's experience when he writes:

... his putting to sea ... was connected not only with a romantic attraction to the sea, but also with an interest in such a well-engineered structure as a steamship, or in such a marvel of beauty combined with effectiveness as the rigging of a sailing vessel. ... The form itself of an openwork metal tower inside of which are inserted the volumes of several halls and rooms, is connected in the mind with the sensation of the sea and the wide sky against which is cast something of ship-like height, powerful and simple, populated with people, and raised aloft by human hands.³⁹

Thus, the general silhouette of the monument, including its heeling to one side, may well have had a nautical inspiration, an inspiration found also in some of the artist's theater designs. In 1916, while working with Meyerhold on the film *Spirit Magic*, Tatlin proposed to replace the director's idea for a "mystical tree" with "a great ship's mast with all the proper naval attributes—the rigging and the observation turrets. You can clamber all over the mast, that is, all over the tree. ... " Apparently Meyerhold was "horrified."⁴⁰

This inspiration may also have carried over to some of the engineering aspects of the monument. Photographs and Shapiro's accounts⁴¹ indicate that the four-meter model was erected on a stand, about one and one-quarter meters high, which housed (and hid) the supports and the mechanisms for turning the four glass chambers. This relationship between super- and substructure recalls the sailboat's light, open, evanescent silhouette and the heavy machinery, keel, and ballast below deck.

At least three models for the monument were built.⁴² Its essential form was that of a gigantic iron spiral wrapped around a cone and inclined at a 45-degree angle. Vertically aligned within it were four glass enclosures, each a different shape, serving a different governmental activity, and revolving at a different speed.⁴³ The lowest, a broad-based cylinder,⁴⁴ was designed for annual meetings of

39. *V. E. Tatlin*, pp. 23–24.

40. Tatlin, quoted in *V. E. Tatlin*, p. 46.

41. See Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p. 23.

42. It is thought that there were probably three models. The original model was built in the mosaics workshop of the Academy of Arts in Petrograd in 1920. The second is a "re-erection" (which seems to imply the building of a new model) in Moscow, in December 1920, for the 8th Soviet Congress. The third model was exhibited at the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels.

43. The earliest descriptions of the monument indicate that there were four inner chambers. However subsequent descriptions vary, some of them mentioning only three (deleting the upper hemisphere). It is possible that the number of glass volumes varied from one model to another.

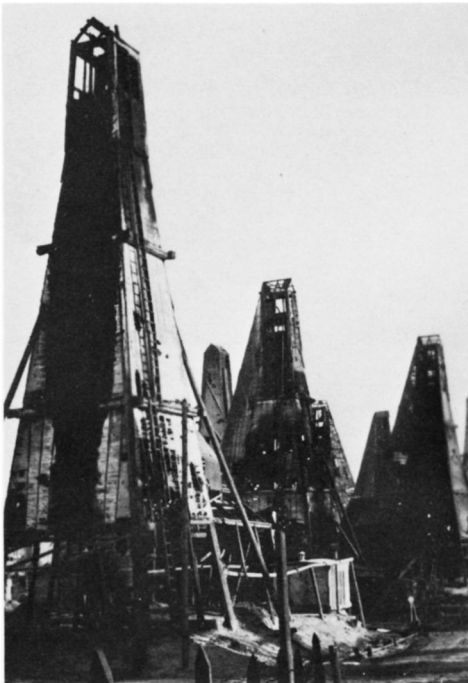
44. Most early descriptions (including that of N. Punin) describe the lowest glass enclosure as a cube, and a number of interpretations have been based on this assumption. However, this is difficult to justify in that the earliest photographs of the model and of its drawings clearly show the lowest volume to be a broad-based cylinder. Furthermore, T. Shapiro's recent reconstruction of the model (seen in Moscow in May 1977), despite certain structural discrepancies, contained four volumes, the lowest of which was a cylinder.

the legislative body and was to revolve once a year. The second, a pyramid, would house monthly executive meetings and revolve once a month. The two uppermost chambers, a narrow cylinder and a hemisphere, would serve respectively as an information bureau and to emit propaganda to the street. The cylinder was to revolve once a day, the hemisphere, hourly. Radio antennae and film projectors were to be rigged to the top.

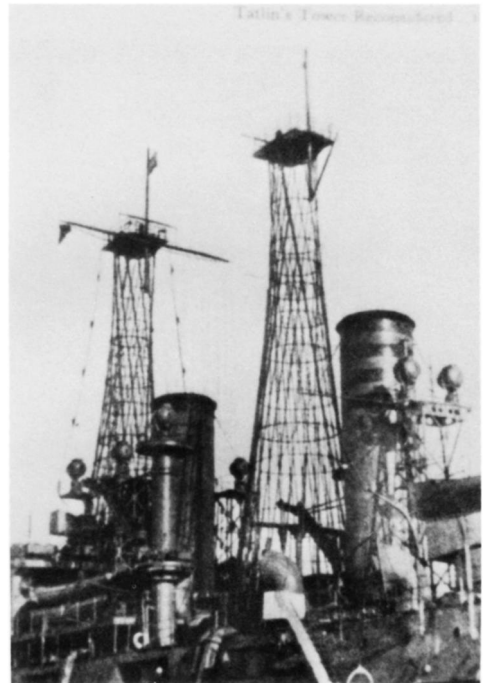
There is, at first glance, no precedent for such a revolutionary formal and functional concept. Although upon careful consideration precedents abound, none is totally convincing. Among those proposed are the Eiffel Tower, Boccioni's 1912 *Development of a Bottle in Space*, Breughel's *Tower of Babel*, Rodin's project for a *Tour du Travail* of 1894-97, Hermann Obrist's 1902 project for a socialist monument, the chimneys of Gaudí's Casa Milá in Barcelona, the Great Mosque at Samarra, Borromini's Sant'Ivo della Sapienza, oil wells at Baku.⁴⁵

Another hypothesis, more closely derived from Tatlin's own experience and sensibility, suggests itself. The constructivist ideal was the only aesthetic which would embody the abstract and dynamic dimensions of communist ideology. To

45. See John Elderfield, "The line of free men: Tatlin's 'towers' and the age of invention," in *Studio International*, November, 1969, pp. 163-65; also K. P. Zygas, "Tatlin's Tower."



Still from Eisenstein's *The General Line* showing oil wells at Baku.



Skeleton masts of a pre-World War II warship.

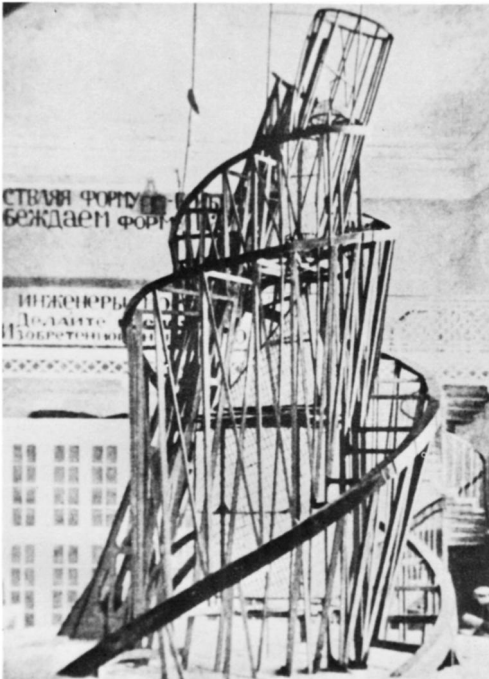
translate this ideal into a public architecture, Tatlin took the underlying principles of the counter-reliefs one step further.

Tatlin's observation of advanced constructions merely served to substantiate his claims as set forth in the counter-reliefs: that each material elicits one or two specific forms. Metal postulates the cone-shape, encompassing or enclosing a space; this is the shape of the armature. Glass, as a cylinder or a pane, inscribes or defines without closing off, thus allowing interaction between inner and outer spaces (in this case between the representatives of the people and the people themselves).

And finally, the building's formulation was to be not only a synthesis of art and technology, heralding a new society, but a symbol of the unification of all men under communism. As such an ideal configuration, its physical presence should be dematerialized, a disembodied representation or cipher of pure forms in space.

There are as many interpretations of the tower's symbolic form as there are of its possible sources. According to one,⁴⁶ the diagonal axis is parallel to the polar axis, a reminder that the IIIrd International was to encompass the globe. The same

46. Adolf Max Vogt, *Russische und französische Revolutions-Architektur 1917/1789*, Köln, Verlag M. DuMont Schanberg, 1974, pp. 209-13.



Vladimir Tatlin. Model for the Monument to the IIIrd International. 1919-20.

author notes that the speed of rotation of each inner chamber corresponds to well-known cosmic movements: of the earth, sun, and moon. And the form of each glass enclosure is inspired by the fundamental geometrical bodies found in Johannes Kepler's World Model (*Machina mundi artificialis*) of 1596.⁴⁷ Aside from the fact that geometry and astronomy were very much in fashion at that time, Tatlin's nautical background would have acquainted him with these disciplines. Moreover, the precarious balance of the cantilevered structure expresses the uncertainty and dynamism of the new society. And of course such a structure could be conceived only in an industrial era. Contemporaneous and equally dramatic projects by Lissitzky, Ladowski, the Vesnin brothers support this premise.⁴⁸

The interpretations of the period are simpler. Nikolai Punin, Tatlin's first biographer, probably expressed the view closest to the artist's own. The vertical axis manifests classical stability, the functional, the gravitational, the postulates of human logic. The double spiral reflects the dynamic spirit of the new age, creative imagination, mankind's desire to rise above earthly materialism and pursue a new ideal. The spiral curve intersects the vertical axis and harnesses it to its ascent. These two historical forces stand, consequently, in a relation of symbiosis, not of conflict, and the tower's structure synthesizes utilitarian and aesthetic form, organized content and art.⁴⁹

Lissitzky liked to compare steel to the proletarian will, and the transparency of glass to its conscience. And, as Punin noted, the tensions created by this juxtaposition of mediums, so substantially and technically different, create fundamental and contrasting rhythms, the rhythms of creative intuition, the rhythms of life itself.⁵⁰

Tatlin believed that "invention is the reflection of the desires and impulses of the collectivity and not of a single individual." The artist is "a unit rich with the initiatives . . . the energy . . . the vitality of the collectivity."⁵¹ This then was what his monument was to express. Or, as Punin put it, "We assert that only the strength of the myriad proletarian consciousness could project into the world the idea of this monument-form. The realization of this idea requires that muscular strength, for we possess an ideal, living, and classical expression, in pure and creative form, of the international union of the workers of the world."⁵²

The monument, Tatlin's first attempt at a social work of art, was doomed to failure. A form so abstract, so subtle in its expression of political thought was simply unacceptable. As Trotsky stated in 1923:

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-4.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

49. Nikolai Punin, *Pamiatrik III Internatsionala. Proekt V. E. Tatlina. (Monument to the IIIrd International. A Project by V. E. Tatlin)*, Petersburg, July 1920.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Tatlin, quoted by Abramova, "Tatlin," p. 137.

52. Punin, *Monument to the IIIrd International*.

I remember seeing once when a child, a wooden temple built in a beer bottle. This fired my imagination, but I did not ask myself at that time what it was for. Tatlin proceeds by a reverse method; he wants to construct a beer bottle for the World Council of People's Commissars which would sit in a spiral concrete temple. But for the moment, I cannot refrain from the question: What is it for?⁵³

Tatlin's project could not convince those who were in a position to see it realized. Apart from the usual conceptual discrepancies between an artist and governmental authorities, it is understandable that in a country ravaged by famine, civil war, and revolution, such a plan could not be considered a priority. All the more so in this particular instance, where the materials and techniques were sorely lacking. In a text of 1922, Ilya Ehrenburg described the paradox of the situation:

It was all very moving. Soviet office workers were moving off with their rations of horse meat. A boy was selling cake crumbs, and in the middle of the square . . . I stood with two artists, giving our fantasy free rein on the subject of metal. . . . We were absorbed in our fantasy after making the acquaintance of Tatlin's project for a monument to the IIIrd International, and we had every reason to be absorbed. For a self-taught white-eyebrowed prophet (resembling an artisan) had placed on the ruins of imperial St. Petersburg a clear sign: the beginning of the new architecture. . . .

In the midst of an epidemic of plaster idiots, quartered in our squares by the cunning of superior powers . . . came suddenly something simple and clear . . . these men have no right of domicile in modern towns. Secondly: the new SCULPTURE = ARCHITECTURE. Thirdly . . . : the personal is dying out, a monument should represent the age, the movement, and not any man. Fourthly, our slogan is utilitarianism—if we are to build, then let us build not in the blue but for a useful purpose.

Then we have the question of forms. The dynamism of the present age has found expression in the amazing spiral. Finally: the material—the bold glass that, together with iron, has already become an everyday architectural commodity. . . .

Sorrowfully we looked at the dilapidated buildings, blackened from stoves reeking like swarms of bees, at the tram painstakingly catching up the sleds of the office workers, at the "cake crumbs." . . . Where are we to find the iron and other metal . . . , so that the model can be a monument?⁵⁴

53. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (1923), Ann Arbor, 1971, pp. 247-8.

54. Ilya Ehrenburg, quoted (in English) in Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p. 58.

Tatlin's monument, which, according to Mayakovsky, was the first work truly to express the October Revolution, set forth the basic tenets of constructivism. It marks the passage from the "laboratory period" to the productivist era, formulated as such in November 1921. Beginning in 1922-23, artistic creation and industrial production would be synonymous. The artist was truly to serve the revolution; art was to be integrated into the life of the masses.

In the reformed, government-controlled studios, Tatlin taught the creation of utilitarian objects which were not only functional but formally expressed the needs and ideals of the new society. In productivist art properly speaking, new functions require new materials and the materials determine the parameters of formal invention.

Tatlin aspired to create new forms for the life he saw ahead. Although his voice was barely heard, he opened the way to a new conception of the work of art and of the everyday object. The theory and practice of the "culture of materials" have irreversibly modified our outlook in regard to the objects of our environment. Tatlin was among the first to understand that an object may be beautiful, functional, and illustrate the social and aesthetic values of a given time and place as well. Or, closer to his own terminology, the constructivist form is organized content, a term which embraced aesthetic, utilitarian, and social imperatives.⁵⁵

Tatlin's life and work were comparable to those of his friend Khlebnikov, of whom a critic once said that his poetry was awkward, nonpoetic, useless. Khlebnikov, pleading for the poet's freedom with respect to the canons of intelligibility, cites the invocation which resists the demand: "Be easy to understand, like a sign. The speech of higher reason, even incomprehensible speech, falls by some kind of seed into the black earth of the spirit, and later, in puzzling ways, it puts forth upshoots."⁵⁶

55. Obviously Tatlin's ideas are extremely close to the thought and instruction at the Bauhaus during the same period. However, this appears to be less a matter of influence than of parallel development.

56. Velimir Khlebnikov, "About Verses," in *Snake Train: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Gary Kern, Ann Arbor, Ardis, 1976, p. 228.