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THE COMPLETE WORK
РОДСНЕНКО



ЧЕМПИОНЫ
Англии и Франции

Rodchenko: The Complete Work

by S. O. Khan-Magomedov. Introduced and edited by Vieri Quilici

The Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) cannot be categorized by any one of his remarkable activities. His prodigious career in photography, graphic design, industrial design, painting, stage set and theater design, fashion and costume design, and architecture is at last given its full recognition in this splendidly illustrated and exhaustive study of the complete range of this work.

Rodchenko's artistic production is considered against the complex background of the political, social, personal, and artistic circumstances of the period, from the beginning of his studies at the Art School of Kazan to his encounter with Mayakovsky and the futurists, from the famous Moscow Exhibitions where Rodchenko took part in the founding phase of abstract art to the arguments with Kandinsky over cultural supremacy within the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) and the definitive embracing of Constructivism.

Among the book's unusual contributions is the serious consideration given to Rodchenko's architectural projects and the generous treatment of unknown documents — newspaper reports, commentaries, debates, articles, letters — of the time. These give a lively sense of what was actually happening in Moscow art circles during the crucial formative years of the avant-garde movement.

The visual material is particularly stunning. Five hundred illustrations, many in full color, are taken from Russian archives or from Rodchenko's private archive now owned by his grandson.



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RODCHENKO
THE COMPLETE WORK

SELIM O. KHAN - MAGOMEDOV

RODCHENKO
T H E C O M P L E T E W O R K

introduced and edited by Vieri Quilici

THE MIT PRESS CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

727.7
K 62

Editorial conception: Passigli Progetti
Art Direction: Anthony Mathews
Translated from the Italian by Huw Evans

Acknowledgments

The realization of this volume which, for the first time and thirty years after his death, assembles the published and unpublished works of Alexander Rodchenko, has been made possible thanks to the collaboration of Alexander Lavrentiev and Varvara Rodchenko, who have given us access to the family archives and to other important and previously unknown documents. The Publisher of the English edition is grateful to Dr. Catherine Cooke for her editorial advice on the translation.

Publisher's Note

The work has been organized in two parallel texts: the main text and accompanying notes. The latter, instead of simply fulfilling their usual role as subordinate glosses, also act as a documentary commentary that runs in step with the main essay, providing testimonies, quotations, shorthand reports and other original documents, many of which have never been published. All the measurements are in centimeters. Those given in Chapter 7 refer to the format of the negative.

First MIT Press edition, 1987
© 1986 Idea Books Edizioni

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Khan-Magomedov, S.O. (Selim Omarovich)
Rodchenko: the complete work.
Translation of: Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1891-1956.
1. Rodchenko, Aleksandr Mikhailovich, 1891-1956.
2. Artists-Russian S.F.S.R. - Biography. 3. Rodchenko, Aleksandr Mikhailovich, 1891-1956 - Biography. 4. Rodchenko, Aleksandr Mikhailovich, 1891-1956 - Criticism and interpretation. I. Title. II. Title.
N6999.R62K513 1986 709'.24 [B] 86-19986
ISBN 0-262-11116-0

Printed and bound in Italy

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INTRODUCTION

By now many years of research and study have given us a clear picture of the background against which to set figures like that of Rodchenko. They have allowed us to determine the extent to which particular individuals may have occupied pivotal positions with respect to the interests and creative energies of the avant-garde groups as they have been historically defined.

Our knowledge is by now detailed enough for there to be no longer justification for surrounding this historical period with clouds of mystery. We know enough to reject the notion that Rodchenko — or any of the others — were totally unique figures. Like many who absorbed and represented so much of what was pertinent in their period, he can be described as playing a central role, but this central position was a dynamic one, constantly in movement. Rodchenko was a stimulant beyond the influence of his own specific works because he was constantly driving to get away from all forms of conventionalized creative logic. His work represented a tenacious determination to overthrow any pattern that would tend to stabilize, to become organized, around any of the outstanding personalities of the period — including himself.

He chose to be at the centre of things where he could observe, where he could participate in everything that was going on. That is not to suggest that his own work was in any way 'centrist'. On the contrary, its content was always far in advance, charting out new frontiers. But he placed himself within the artistic trend and mode of thinking that he found most in harmony with the spirit of the times, which was Constructivism in its sense of Production Art.

It is important to understand that involvement in Constructivism did not convey any particularly useful or advantageous position through a natural dominance of the artistic scene. At no stage did the movement hold absolute sway over the artistic and critical scene around it. This fact is hinted at in the controversy between the Lef group and Polonsky, and the criticism which the latter levelled at Rodchenko for his dispatches from Paris in 1925. His letters offered a pretext for attack; they could serve to expose weaknesses in a movement that aspired unilaterally to a leading role.

The editor of *Pechat' i Revolyutsiya*, along with Voronsky and others, defended the need for a tolerant attitude when exercising the critical function. This was in line with the views of Lunacharsky, who was also on the editorial board of the journal, and of Bukharin, as drafter of the famous Central Committee Resolution of 1 July 1925 on that theme. This document emphasized the advantage to be gained from 'leaving as much space as possible to competitiveness' in the cultural field. Thus the representatives of Lef — the Constructivists — who could be recognized by the intransigence, if not downright intolerance, of their attitudes, found themselves in an uncomfortable position, continually poised between investiture with official accolades and demotion to a periphery.

The fact that not everything was so simple and straightforward, in the midst of the extraordinary cultural imbalances of this period, is also demonstrated by the controversies that emerged within the Metalworking Faculty of Vkhutemas. In the middle twenties, the teaching methods advocated by Rodchenko did not receive the support of other members of the teaching staff. Despite outside encouragements to enrol in the production-oriented faculties, the number of students in Metfak gradually declined — having been small enough at the start — till by 1925 they constituted only one percent of the total students in the school, and in 1929 only eight of those who had enrolled in 1921-22 managed to graduate.

Rodchenko consciously accepted his minority role and peripheral position as an appropriate condition — maybe because it gave greater freedom of manoeuvre in his various lines of experimentation. Nor did the other Productivist artists appear to attribute to their works a value that was generalizable, universal or aimed at acquiring political or cultural influence. The critics and theoreticians were quite another matter, interested as they were in the organization and 'political' success of the movement.



The city, 1912.

The Café Pittoresque, 1917.



'Total artist' or artist 'at the crossroads'?



Stepanova. *Self-portrait*. 1920.



A. Rodchenko. *Self-portrait*. 1920.

Rodchenko was a 'total' artist in the sense that painting, architecture, design and photography all fell equally within the compass of his artistic interests. 'His researches complemented and interpenetrated each other', says Khan-Magomedov. If for some reason an idea 'did not find immediate application in one particular art form, it could find it in another'. At the same time he was not disposed to confine the question of aesthetics and creativity within a complete and definitive 'universal' vision. He was an artist who stood 'at the crossroads', but not one tied to a single or exclusive strategic view of cultural development.

In relation to the activities of the early Futurist and Suprematist movements of the avant-garde, Rodchenko arrived on the scene rather late. This induced him to follow a line of conduct characterized by voluntarism and by continual sudden changes of interest that never cancelled each other out, never obliterated his previous concerns, but combined and coexisted. Khan-Magomedov has described this desire to catch up as a literal 'pursuit'. It was the kind of behaviour typical of someone who wishes to make up for lost time and has missed out on the periods of initial experimentation by which ideas were established.

Clear landmarks are undoubtedly valuable in such a situation where one is trying to recover something, to retrace a path at speed. In this respect the leaders of the new non-objective (abstract) forms of representation served as fixed points. They could be used to establish objectives for experimentation, and even subjective goals. But such reference points can also come to represent cosy umbrellas, so broad that they prevent the move on to self-discovery and a completely autonomous identity. Rodchenko's constant shifts forward, his constant deviations from those prevailing trends and his clashes with leading figures of them, are certainly part of a more or less conscious process of establishing his identity. Most conspicuous in the early years were his break with Kandinsky, and the way in which he first drew very close to Malevich's Suprematism — as evidenced in the 'Magazin' exhibition of 1916 — then moved away, and eventually differentiated himself entirely from that whole movement. In the process he had taken much from each of them, if only to reject it.

Kandinsky was interested in a 'monumental' synthesis of aesthetic forms, in a 'total', 'synaesthetic' project, based on a sort of liturgy of the senses, to be dominated by music, dance and colour. Rhythm and the dimension of time constituted the rules and parameters of aesthetic imagination, underlying any artistic composition or performance. Malevich sought to represent a realm of non-objectivity, as a revelation of ultra-sensitive and not immediately perceptible dimensions of 'reality'. He was stimulating the viewer to a sensitivity of a higher order.

Rodchenko, on the other hand, considered himself a realist, in the sense of a total, *immediate* adherence to reality, to the world of representation understood as unitary phenomenology of the materials to be shaped, the means available and his own capacities for work. He rejected the path of introspective psychologism; he did not seek for forms and representations of a 'higher order', but stuck to the everyday, to a totally instinctive, but at the same time rational form of living with and by art. Art to him was an activity to be carried out in the workshop; it was a *will to construction*. By the very generality of its themes, its concern for the aesthetic function in an age of rapid change, the whole artistic debate in which Rodchenko played such an active part offered every opportunity, indeed the constant invitation, for interpersonal demarcation and the independent stand. This is why a man like Rodchenko, an experimenter and controversial *provocateur*, stood at the central crossroads of cultural debate in Russia in those post-Revolutionary years, and not, as might be the case elsewhere, on the sidelines. His concerns were integral with the key questions and contradictions of the period — all of them just as much social and cultural as they were political.

The attention of those actually operating in the artistic field (of whom Rodchenko is an outstanding example) was largely directed towards the definition of a number of key concepts in the artistic process. They were concerned above all to achieve clarity and new definitions for those conceptual categories which regulate the use of languages in figurative art, and which in turn determine the subjective and objective conditions under which they may operate.

The small organization called Inkhuk became the central forum of this debate. Kandinsky represented the fundamental point of reference. During the period when he was director of its Section of Monumental Art there was fertile dialogue between opposing factions, and an atmosphere in which confrontations led to better definitions of arguments and ideas.

Kandinsky himself was initially motivated by the aspiration described earlier: to find a means for the close integration and interrelationship of a range of arts including painting, music, poetry and dance. As Khan-Magomedov records, he even went so far as to establish forms of correspondence between colours and the sounds of particular musical instruments, by means of similarities in the sensation produced. As far as painting was concerned, he concentrated his attention on the symbolic function. Through associative processes of a psychological nature, specific 'logical nexuses' came to be associated with modes of perception, and with non-objective (i.e. abstract) means of representation, that is, with the pure 'elements' of the artistic language. In drawing, in particular, he identified three basic elements: the point, the line and the plane. With reference to the combined use of these elements the key question was posed: can sensations, impressions and emotions be expressed graphically? At this point the reaction of the Productivist faction in Inkhuk was predictable. To them Kandinsky's concerns smacked of subjectivism. Their symbolic content was far from universal, in their view, and the processes of psychological association were not always generally applicable.

But if the critical reaction to this approach was predictable, it was also inevitable that the approach itself should be contagious. It may be presumed that the debate over the interrelationship or 'synthesis' of the arts, and over the link between pure elements and sensations, had a profound influence on Rodchenko, who shared with Kandinsky the synaesthetic experiences of Zhivskulptarkh. He too went on to extol the function fulfilled by the element of line in abstract language, thereby also revealing the importance of the older Modernist painters' legacy within the broader sphere of the post-Revolutionary avant-garde.

At the same time, the stand which Rodchenko took in discussions of the concepts of *faktura* (facture) and *tektonika* (tectonics) was not exactly what one might have expected from a convinced advocate of Production Art. In fact when Rodchenko maintains that *faktura* is connected with the 'unity' of the work, i.e. with its *totality*, and that when it exists, it 'is present in every part of the painting, in its *composition*', then his attitude is little different from Kandinsky's. The latter claimed that *faktura* 'is one of the means for achieving *composition*' (in the field of music this would correspond to the mode in which a passage is executed). And were not both of them arguing against all those who put forward excessively literal, and hence reductive, interpretations of the term? As can be seen from the reports of the debate which Khan-Magomedov reproduces here, if anyone was inclined to idealize the significance and function of *faktura*, it was the realist Rodchenko.

With regard to the relations between Rodchenko and the theoreticians of Production Art, in particular Alexei Gan, one cannot help noticing the extreme difficulty that both sides had in reaching an agreement over the meaning of terms. Over that of *tektonika*, for example (a term that was closely linked to the fundamental one of 'construction'), there was a sharp distinction between the attitudes of the working artists, who were basically interested in clarifying the essential and innermost motives for creative work and therefore gave a great deal of weight to individual and psychological factors, and those of the leader of the theoreticians, who was most concerned with formulating, even, as Khan-Magomedov puts it, by the use of 'verbal acrobatics', definitions that would be 'irreproachable from a logical and formal point of view'.

The debate over the definition of key terms eventually shifted its focus to the relationship between 'construction' and 'composition', thereby moving away from the artistic process towards contemplation of the finished product and the aesthetic qualities with which the process had endowed it.

* * *

Whilst these discussions were going on within the Objective Analysis Group of Inkhuk, during January—April 1921, the term Constructivism came to be adopted as an explicit designation for the tendency which the Group itself represented. Here again, the theorists of Production Art and the working artists of the Group differed sharply in their approach to the problem. The position taken by Rodchenko, in particular, seems to reflect a greater awareness of the complexity and metaphorical value of the concept of 'construction',

rather than a direct and uncritical acceptance of the material aspect of a physical structure. At that time Rodchenko described his own works — which were of course still ‘pictorial’ — as an ‘aspiration towards construction’.

Within the Group it was Ladovsky alone who tried to extend the significance of the two terms ‘construction’ and ‘composition’ beyond the limits of the discipline of painting. He proposed linking the concept of ‘construction’ to a ‘plan’ that would make ‘the whole set of physical elements’ work to produce an ‘effect of force’. It was Ladovsky who established, with supreme clarity, the principle of a ‘hierarchy’ of elements as the distinctive basis of the very idea of ‘construction’, by analogy with principles for the analysis of form and process in figurative languages in general.

The personality of Ladovsky probably exercised some influence on Rodchenko. While he was, in fact, working closely with Ladovsky during Zhivskulptarkh’s ‘synthetic’ phase, Rodchenko may have been trying, in his plans for kiosks and the *Sovdep*, to bridge the gap between the aspiration towards abstraction, towards essential forms, and Tatlin’s culture of materials. He had gained concrete experience of the latter on that exceptional occasion in 1917 when he had worked for Yakulov at Tatlin’s side on the decoration of the Café Pittoresque in Moscow.

The transparent screen

Once stripped of the labels which their contemporaries and less astute historians have applied in order to turn them into ‘figures’, people like Rodchenko remain individuals about whom everything is still to be revealed, above all in relation to their personal histories and the poetic essence of their work.

The lightness of Rodchenko’s forms, the instantaneous and fleeting nature of the moment of invention and construction refer to a universe no longer centred on objects, but one that is individual and subjective. It is a universe made up of intuitions and shifting meanings, fluctuating between a naive, even childish, memory of vivid and pulsating images, as in the circus, where animated ‘things’ ‘were everyday swelling up, doing acrobatics, undergoing transformation’, and a precious but ‘unknown’ future whose forms are therefore not definitive: ‘only true Russians are capable of creating for years... with a simple and pure love for an unknown future’ wrote Rodchenko in connection with Tatlin in the forties. So much for ‘bold and optimistic’ Constructivism! In such reflections there is no trace either of the *tabula rasa* of time and history, or of allusions to the possibility of realizing utopias in the more or less near future. Everything is referred to its own subjective capacity to unite the legacies of memory with a conscious respect for the temporal unknown in the immediacy of the forms and the clarity of the image. Everything comes down to the ability to seize and represent the constantly changing interrelationships of creative work and concrete, everyday life.

In Rodchenko’s works, there is a latent tension, not intellectual in origin but subtly emotional, apparently held in a precarious, instinctive equilibrium, at times revealed by a creativity that could be called ‘gestural’.

Finally, there is a continual shift in meanings, between the realm of professional forms, closely linked to the actual instruments of the artist’s craft, and therefore to the various techniques of his versatile experimental activity, and thematico-figurative constants, deriving from situations experienced, perceptions and historical conditions in which the human figure is either explicit or implied. The best evidence of this comes from Rodchenko’s photographic work and work in related fields (journalism, cinema, theatre literature).

At this point it becomes useful, indeed necessary, to define the characteristics of Rodchenko’s aesthetic language and also to determine the quality of that language, its poetic specificity, in relation to the figurative movements of Suprematism, Rationalism and Production Art. The composite picture of the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century, and of what may be called the post-avant-garde after 1917, can best be described in terms of a constellation of outstanding and contrasting figures — with Tatlin and Malevich at its opposite extremes — rather than of a linear series. As a member of that constellation, Rodchenko experimented with a wide variety of artistic forms, blurring the boundaries between them.

Composition, 1917.



Yet the dual nature of this experimentation needs emphasizing. In some ways it reflects what we may refer to as the 'intersecting symmetry' of Tatlin and Malevich. Tatlin's interest was in the *conventional* elements of language: in his work the perceptible signs of the material world are isolated and rendered conventional, taken out of their natural context, in order to stress their semantic function. In this Tatlin reveals an affinity with the formalist school, whose interpretation of aesthetic activity was essentially based on the assertion that poetic language is by its very nature conventional, contrived and characterized by continual shifts in meaning with respect to normal semantic series, in accordance with the well-known principle of 'estrangement'.

From this perspective, experimentation largely involves the manipulation of materials (and therefore their transformation into significant objects — or into 'living things'). It is carried out by means of the fundamental step of *faktura*, a concept over which, as we have seen, Kandinsky and the Productivists found themselves embroiled in a bitter controversy. The outside world is taken into consideration solely as a source of *materials devoid of materiality*, a discontinuous series of *empty* objects, stripped of meaning. As Shklovsky noted in *The Movement of the Horse* in 1923, 'The external world is outside art — it is perceived as a series of allusions, of algebraic symbols, as a collection of objects with a volume of their own, but devoid of materiality, of *faktura*. *Faktura* is the chief distinguishing mark of that particular world of *intentionally constructed* things which we are accustomed to refer to as art.'

Malevich, at the other extreme, attributed a decisive role to the culture of the image, to the image as a preferred vehicle for meanings and messages linked to the representation and interpretation of natural reality. He saw the latter as the visible, and above all intuitable, world of forms. We know what a fundamental role the image has played in modern Russian culture, whether in the literature of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky and Burlyuk, the theatre of Meyerhold and Tairov, or the cinema of Eisenstein. With Malevich the imagination is an interior world made up of searing tensions, but also of gratifications and 'cosmic' intuitions, to be brought back, always, to 'the Supremacy of pure sensitivity'.

Rodchenko took up a position between Tatlin and Malevich, bearing witness to the constant and variable dialogue taking place between the desire for transformation (as an ideal coincidence between production and perception) and the desire for representation (as an intuitive coincidence between image and perception). This dialogue, based as it was on the requirement of perceptual immediacy, may be seen, on close examination, to represent the central distinctive trait of Rodchenko's individuality. The same contradiction between experimentalism and the need to communicate with the public at large during the early Soviet years was readily perceived and experienced by Rodchenko, but he also came up with a possible solution to it. In fact Rodchenko's 'abstract' language can legitimately be interpreted as the expression of an unusual determination to establish a dialogue with the public, to make each operation undertaken on language itself potentially explicit, by renouncing the mediated representation of reality and by transforming the materials, immediately, into form, into medium of communication. By this means he made the observer a participant in the laboratory work, rendering the procedures of *faktura* obvious and placing more emphasis on them than on the definition of codified iconic structures.

Rodchenko planned to create a genuine 'language of immediacy', through the analytical observation of visual phenomena, in connection with the process of invention. 'The awareness, the experimentation... the existence of objectives, construction, technique, mathematics: these are the brothers and sisters of art in our age', he wrote in his notes on *Construction* and, again, speaking of his method of teaching at Vkhutemas, 'the aim of the method was to get students of all specializations to discover the laws that govern the construction of different forms, to develop in them analytical capacity, artistic intuition, creative initiative, imagination and the concrete ability to put them into practice'. Observation (i.e. analysis) works with the same tools, and the process of construction of form remains inherent in the logic of the material employed, without 'returns to the origins' or intellectualistic projections into the future.

The form derives from the effectiveness of the instruments and from the intrinsic qualities of the material. The 'value' of forms does not lie in principles extraneous to the work itself, but in the 'quality' of the poetic gesture (which was understood in the sense of everyday *poiesis*), and its appropriateness to the 'quality' of the instrument used in the laboratory. From the immanence of working conditions, in the moment and the specific place in which they are made manifest, is born the possibility and the will to shape things, materials: the possibility of new configurations — in the repetition or reproduction of similar or consequent conditions — according to principles of equivalence, availability and

V. Stepanova. *Self-caricature*, 1922



immediate comprehension.

Rodchenko's *Constructions* of the years 1919-20 are not *representations*; rather they are immediately perceptible as the narration of a figurative and formative process. They are anti-contemplative, anti-repetitive, anti-iconic.

* * *

Thus we perceive in Rodchenko's art a progression from a hermetic, implicit communicative function of the image-object (in the 'catching-up' phase) to the increasingly explicit function of construction-narration, realized with the immediacy of meaning proper to the dominant theme which is the historical living conditions of the new Soviet man. It is reasonable to see some parallel here between this evolution within Rodchenko's work and the progress of the larger transformation to which it bore witness, in the building of the new Soviet state.

Such a progression is particularly evident in the field of photography. In Rodchenko's early photographic work, which began in 1923, there is a return to the abstraction, to the style characteristic of his earlier *Compositions* but now left behind in the main body of his work. In this connection his transition from the collage, as a legacy of Cubism, to photomontage is extremely significant. From the vestiges of contemplative symbolization Rodchenko moved on to direct observation of reality, built around a theme. In short, the artist became at one and the same time producer and witness-spectator, the spectator above all of his own work in the laboratory. The idea of composition was shifted from the plane of artistic production as an activity still divorced from everyday life, to the plane of human behaviour, since composition is, as Rodchenko put it, 'any conscious order in the *arrangement* of anything'; 'even the division of a man's day into hours for working, rest and recreation is a composition'.

Here we find ourselves at the opposite extreme to any dogmatic or goal-oriented conception of art, on the verge (but just on this side) of a utopian vision in dynamic equilibrium between the Individual and the Social in art. In any case, in the progression towards the utopian goal of an art that, starting out from the individual sphere, is wholly realized in the social one, with the tendency for representation to be cancelled out (there being no more than an infinitesimal gap between production and perception), where does the action of the actor-producer end and that of the spectator-witness begin? In Meyerhold's plays audience and actors have interchangeable roles, and screen and reality are likewise interchangeable in the films of Dziga Vertov, where the crowd is present in the cinema hall and appears on the screen at the same time. In Rodchenko's work the device is rather different: here the roles of actor (as the producer of a particular work of art) and spectator are superimposed, and a strong element of narcissism is manifest in the actor/producer's observation of his own work in the process of its execution. The construction of form takes place on the transparent screen placed between his function of actor and that of spectator, and the public is involved in this dual, simultaneous adoption of roles.

V. Stepanova. Caricature of Rodchenko: *The constructor*, 1922.



Images and figures versus design

As we have seen, Rodchenko — supported by Ladovsky — was moving in the direction, even if only metaphorically, of a definition of the idea of construction in terms of the project. May we then label the Productivist/Constructivist Rodchenko (and Stepanova with him) as a designer, indeed as a pioneer of the concept of design that appears to be implicit in a culture based on the transformation of the material universe made up of objects of everyday use? This is what the majority of Soviet historians claim today, but such an interpretation seems to derive from too peremptory and schematic a definition of the activity of this great and elusive artist, especially in the light of exhaustive studies like the one presented here.

At the very least, the question must be open to less hasty interpretations, interpretations that are less automatically prone to teleological and simplistic views of the 'modern'. For a Productivist like Rodchenko it is precisely the significance of design that remains ambiguous. It remains ambiguous because the simplicity of the propositions that he makes is wholly apparent. Rodchenko was certainly no prophet. So what could he possibly have meant by wishing to transform the universe (the proposition belongs, in origin, to the

Figurists) by an operation of planned regeneration starting from within the inertia-bound processes of production, of implementation? Would Rodchenko have exposed his own defenceless ingenuity to the risks of too explicit a programming, as one so constrained by reality, who knew all too well the sad fate of unarmed prophets? What can it mean if not a desire to point to the language of images as a vehicle for meaning, and if not the preferred vehicle, at least a primary one, maintaining a 'poetic' analogy with the literal formulation of his propositions?

Khan-Magomedov himself draws a highly relevant parallel, on the one hand, between the entire period in which Rodchenko was experimenting with abstract form (the decade from 1913 to 1922, including the architectural work that he carried out from 1919 onwards) and his desire to 'create a common stylistic and artistic base for all the arts taken as a whole', while on the other he yields to the temptation of describing this experimentation, on the part of the various representatives of 'left-wing' art, as a 'stage in the movement towards architecture and design'.

In reality, even during the phase of 'abstract' experimentation, the persistence of formal and structural components in Rodchenko's work was already evident. These were based on organic and natural morphologies: the *Spatial constructions* evoked anthropomorphic figures, just as the kiosks or the *Sovdep* designs set on 'pivots', on vertical supporting elements, recalled the organic structures of trees. Moreover it was precisely to Rodchenko's use of the term 'abstract' as an absolute value, as totally separate from the world of 'figures', that the more astute contemporary critics took exception.

Rodchenko's work in the field of graphics was of undoubted importance and originality. In Gan's work the lay-out is dominated by the attempt to make the image of the written word subservient to the physical nature of the material available (type, ink, format, paper, etc.) and the purely typographic effectiveness of the message. With Lissitzky, on the contrary, one witnesses a sort of humanization of geometry, through a wholly intellectual, ironic and literary filter, interposed between the maker-up who selects the shapes and colours and the type-setter who transforms the geometric figures into characters in a narrative. But in Rodchenko's designs the graphic image acquires an extremely emblematic character (one is reminded of the expressive force of his trademarks and logotypes, due to the conciseness and essentiality of their composition). On the other hand, the human figure almost always creeps into his advertising posters, although often in an exaggerated, caricatural form — but then caricature was in itself a language worthy of experimentation, independently of its appearance in advertising and commerce.

The same can be said of Rodchenko's work in the theatre. To describe the latter merely as an outlet for his architectural designs (which, in the opinion of many Western critics, would have run into problems in their practical realization) would seem at the very least simplistic. For Rodchenko, the theatre was undoubtedly, as it was for Arvatov, an 'artistic and figurative laboratory for a new style of living', a laboratory where the presence of the human figure has always played a decisive role and which must surely have influenced Rodchenko's 'abstract' research.

At that time theatrical scenery, like the cinema screens, performed the function of a 'daily bulletin' (Lukhmanov) and had become a vehicle for 'propaganda on behalf of a new way of looking at dwelling and at housing' (Berezark). One must suppose, however, that it was not so much a case of architectural invention spilling over into the theatre, or of set-designs employed as a surrogate for architecture, a 'stage in the development of Soviet design'; rather it was figurative research linked to the dynamics of the Soviet 'new man's' way of life (the theatre was its cultural medium) that provided ideas and indications for design and architecture, not yet 'mature' enough to have reached the stage of production. The set-designs and costumes for the second act of *The Bed Bug* remain an enigma, however, with their irony and scepticism, conveyed by a refusal to attempt a realistic representation of an unpredictable future. In a similar way, the two self-portraits painted by Rodchenko and Stepanova in 1920 will remain an enigma. Their faces, reduced to masks made up of violently stylized features — disquieting 'memories' of human figures — seem to emerge out of mirrors revealing only 'profound realities'.

* * *

In the progression, detectable in Rodchenko's work, from an implicit form to an explicit one — communication, in the transition from a phase in which unspoken meanings prevailed to the arbitrary construction of the image (the 'catching-up' phase) to one in which explicit meanings are disclosed, revealing a clear connection between life and everyday

V. Stepanova. Caricature of L. Popova. The constructor. 1922.



research and experimentation, a number of categories of representation took on increasing importance. These were derived from the process of analysis itself and of the disassembling and reassembling of iconic materials, in accordance with the occurrences and instrumental-material possibilities of work in the laboratory.

The dimension of design was reached by shifting from the plane of inventions and predictions to that of a continuous but unpredictable programming of laboratory work. The result is that in the photographic image are concentrated the categories generated within the sphere of design itself, such as the precariousness and the instability of bonds in the idea of 'construction'. These images are generally devoid of any genuine 'tensions' and are rendered dynamic only by the fluidity with which the elements are assembled. They are assembled in open, exposed patterns: the free distribution of branches round a trunk in his studies of trees are typical. By a process of visual analysis, we discover other categories of bonding between forms that have been found by the searching eye of the photographic viewfinder. But these are not specific constructive principles. They are merely the constants of Rodchenko's point of view, specific traits of his inherently secular thinking which is respectful of the material universe that surrounds him, and which is definitively allied with man. It is a many-sided physical backdrop, continuously changing, always open to investigation and revelation, concerned with everyday human representation: with the ephemeral instantaneousness of life — but it is a calculated one. His work is a precise recording of the dynamic aspects of the relationship between man and his environment, caught always at their critical moments. 'The motive force does not lie in synthesis', he said, 'but in invention, that is, in analysis.' The absence of pathos in images of domesticity or trivial events; the ironic ingenuousness of works concerned with the world of childhood, such as those for Sergei Tretyakov's *Samozvery*; the conceptual levity of images in his work in general: throughout Rodchenko's work one notes the absence of contrived forms of figurative conventionality that have purely intellectual origins.

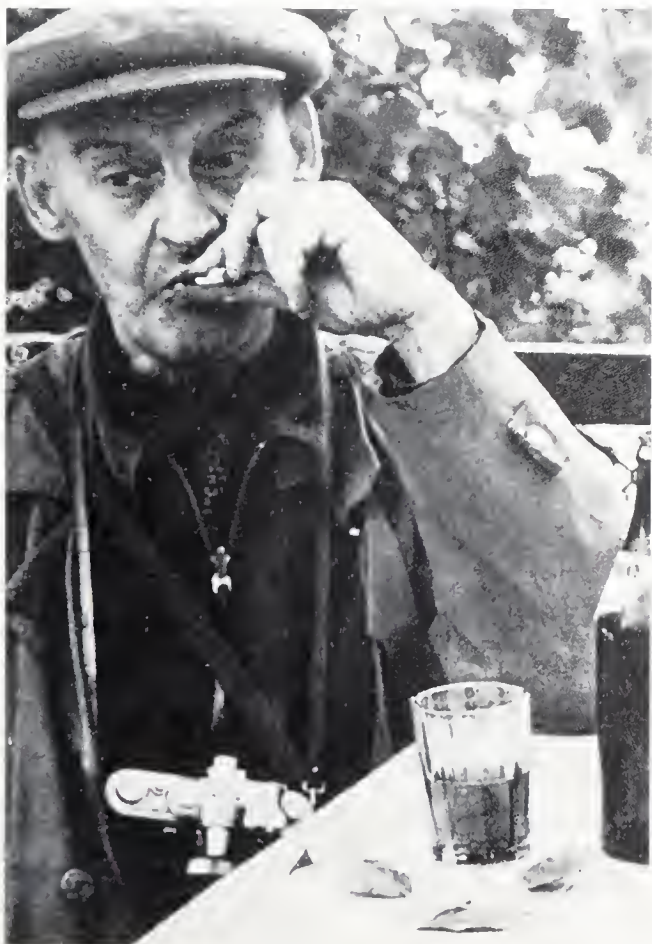
So Rodchenko's 'practical' activity is clearly founded less on the straightforward application of various useful mechanisms picked up in the process of experimentation with language than on a genuine philosophy of the trustful, non-manipulative approach to reality; on an approach genuinely inspired by the desire to know and understand it. It is the philosophy of *Kino-glaz*, of the 'Camera-eye', analogous with Mayakovsky's advice concerning 'the cinema... conception of the world'. Here the observer's point-of-view takes on decisive importance, as the eye of a witness who must be curious and inquisitive in order to discover the new and the unusual in everyday occurrences, rather than merely perceiving them conventionally. In photographic terms, this means not just 'getting one's eye at the level of the navel', but capturing the subject from numerous viewpoints, in a series of 'photo-moments'. Here the outer edge of the picture, the frame, assumes great importance — and not just the material edge.

In Rodchenko's poster for *The Battleship Potemkin* the image appears as if seen through the lenses of a pair of binoculars: the instrument — the lens — contains the event, and two different images appear in the circular frames of the lenses, as if each frame corresponded to a different moment in the flow of time and of the events that take place in it.

Finally, in the photomontage for Mayakovsky's poem *Pro Eto* the photograph becomes the material and instrument of a 'second' operation; superimposed on the natural language of illustrations found and taken from newspapers, posters, postcards, etc. is the 'second' language created by the montage of basic semantic elements, which in this case are already images. The result is a true montage of the perceptions of daily life.

Vieri Quilici

Rodchenko in 1948.





Rodchenko in overalls made up by V. Stepanova, 1922. Photo M. Kaufman.

His childhood in the theatre

Alexander Mikhailovich Rodchenko was born in St Petersburg on 23 November (according to the old calendar) in 1891. On the birth certificate his parents are given as 'Mikhail Mikhailovich Rodchenko, a landless peasant, and his legitimate wife Olga Evdokimovna, both Orthodox and in their first marriage, originally from the province of Smolensk, from the Zhukov area in the district of Vyazemsk.'¹

At the beginning of the 1890s Rodchenko's father was working as a call-boy in a club with its own theatre and gaming room. Here he lived together with his family (*Doc. 1*).

Although Rodchenko was born in the capital of the Russian Empire, if one looks at the cultural environment of his childhood years, he might as well have been living in the provinces. Poverty and semi-illiterate parents certainly did not help to bring the young boy into contact with culture and art. Having grown up in the theatre, he had lived in its illusory atmosphere as if it was the normal everyday world. No one had given him any particular education or instruction, and yet the atmosphere that surrounded him was a mixture of poverty (his mother was a washerwoman) and the fabulous, both of which were assimilated and analysed by the child's extremely sensitive mind. 'I saw my first landscape on the stage,' wrote Rodchenko in his autobiography, 'my first flowers were made for me by my father. I saw everything that is normal and real in life under the cloak of illusion. Everything was artificial.' Naturally all this left its mark on the boy, creating the psychological and emotional soil out of which his ideas would grow. In fact, as he has pointed out himself, 'the tones preferred by an artist go back to his childhood, in accordance with what surrounded or impressed him at the time'.

A.M. Rodchenko as a boy (last on the right), 1904



Notes

¹ In his memoirs, Rodchenko is very miserly with information about his parents and expresses regret that he did not have the chance to spend more time talking to them. His father, the son of a serf, had abandoned the countryside in search of work, leaving the rural environment behind him for good. He found work as a labourer on the railways and, as Rodchenko puts it, 'as he got nearer to St Petersburg, gradually lost his coarseness, even learning somehow or other to write'. Once settled in the capital, he did all kinds of jobs: pastry-cook's assistant, waiter, porter, butler to a count. He also worked as a walk-on actor. In chain mail,

Rodchenko's parents. Photograph from the early 1900s.



with make-up on and carrying shields, lances and swords these extras stood motionless at the entrance to the dress circle an hour before and an hour after the performance.

- 2 The certificate issued on 20 August 1905, runs as follows: 'The Civic School Board of Kazan certifies that the son of a peasant from the rural region of Uvarovo, in the district of Vyazemsk, in the province of Smolensk, Alexander Mikhailovich Rodchenko, has successfully completed the course of study in the parochial elementary school of Kazan of the Ministry of Public Education.'

At the restaurant, 1910. Paper, charcoal, 16.2 x 11.



The art school in Kazan

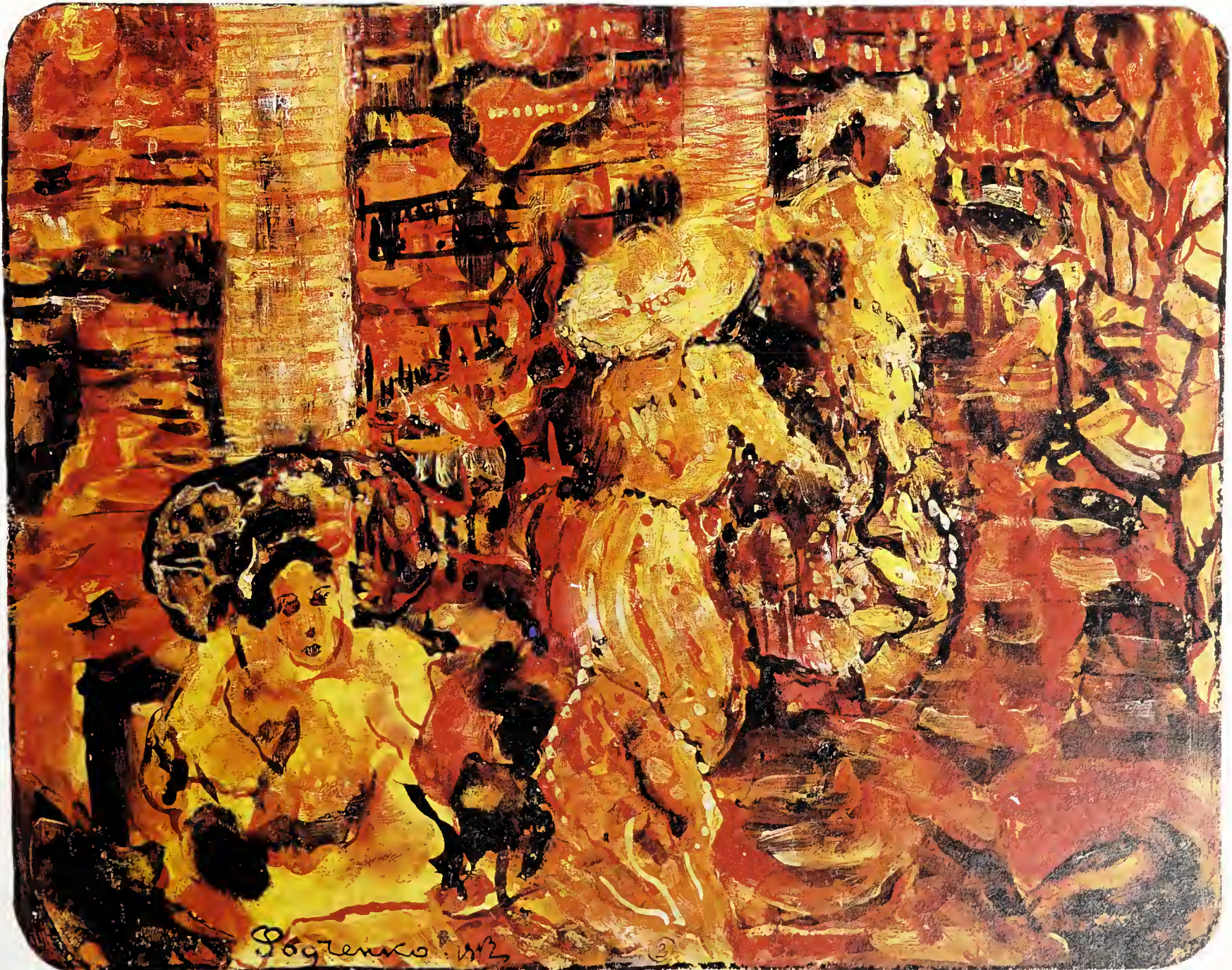
3 In his book on Rodchenko originally published in Hungary, G. Karginov makes a detailed analysis of those of Rodchenko's pictorial and graphic works that date back to the period of the Kazan school (1910-14): 'During the early years of Rodchenko's studies very few traces of Gauguin's influence can be found, while a certain affinity with the graphic lines of Vrubel is clearly visible in a number of sketches for panes and drawings made in 1910-12. The young Rodchenko made an effort to imitate one of the peculiar characteristics of Vrubel's drawings:

It was not until the age of fourteen, when the Rodchenko family moved from St Petersburg to Kazan, that Alexander received a primary education.²

In pre-Revolutionary years the great university city of Kazan was considered an important cultural centre. It possessed one of the few schools of art, and the most gifted pupils regularly continued their studies at the Academy of Art in St Petersburg. There the young Rodchenko got to know the painter Svetozarov — later to become a film director — who had studied at the Kazan school and earned his living by giving lessons. It was he who aroused Rodchenko's passion for painting.

In 1910 Rodchenko entered the art school as a non-examination student in the department of figurative arts. In his memoirs he describes the environment without enthusiasm. He only mentions one of his teachers, N. Feshin, a good

Ball, 1912. Paper, watercolour, Indian ink, enamel, 16.5 x 20.



painter and skilled in drawing. Here it was that he received his artistic training.

At the beginning of the century almost every year saw the birth of new movements in Moscow and St Petersburg, with artists carrying out enthusiastic experiments with colour, form and figure, but the school in Kazan, in spite of the liberal treatment of its students, was about ten years behind the two capitals.

Rodchenko did not take kindly to academic methods of teaching and among the students was considered a 'left-winger'. This attitude was shared by his study-companion Igor Nikitin. But as he wrote later, 'in that remote province our "being on the left" was very relative. Nikitin and I, for instance, despite being the furthest to the left, painted in the manner of Vrubel and Gauguin, and we did not know of any more "left-wing" painters than them.'

In 1913 the artists of Kazan put on an exhibition in which the best students of the school took part. On this occasion Rodchenko exhibited two small compositions on a carnival theme.

Around 1914 the twenty-three-year-old Alexander Rodchenko became a de facto professional painter. His exceptional talent was already plainly revealed in his pictorial and graphic work and now, having fully assimilated the technique of painting, he was drawn towards what was new. Although he had not yet found his own path, he was entering the world of art. To an attentive eye, the germs of his future and original artistic style can be traced even in the works of the Kazan period.

On the opposite page, left: *Figure in kimono*, 1913. Paper, Indian ink, enamel, 25.5 x 9.5. Right: *Portrait of Natasha P.*, 1913. Paper, Indian ink, watercolour, 17.8 x 7.

Japanese motif, 1912. Paper, watercolour, enamel, 16 x 22.5.



"double layer" drawing which involved briefly sketching in the basic forms and then touching up the shape of some details of subjects or figures with heavily marked pencil strokes.

'For a while drawing was of secondary importance for Rodchenko. He greatly preferred painting, a painting that was rich in colours and warm tones, ochre, red and yellow. Just as promising were his experiments with contrasting colours: blue and red, or green and red. From 1912 onwards, Rodchenko started to make regular use in his canvases — and above all in his watercolours — of silver, bronze colour and crimson lakes; his interest in black grew from that moment on...

'The years 1912-1913 were particularly important for the artist's evolution: he began to show an interest in book illustrations in the Art Nouveau [or Moderne] style, oriental motifs and above all the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley... This enthusiasm naturally led him towards stylization, in which he felt more confident, convinced that the world of bizarre arabesques and the harmony of abstract linear patterns were congenial to him.

'...Rodchenko, to judge from his output, painted relatively little from life. In any case, he very soon — during the first few months of his studies — moved on to "invented" compositions. It is enough to take a glance through the numerous studies and sketches of that period. Figurative compositions predominate, with the most common themes being "In the café", "At the restaurant", "At the dance", "At the theatre". Still lifes are practically non-existent and many of the portraits and landscapes are either made up or carried out from memory. It is also evident that the subject and the state of mind of the people represented are relegated to the background. To the anecdotal side of painting Rodchenko preferred the theatrical, spectacular one, with expressive gestures and poses and ladies with magnificent coiffures and elegant costumes. Some of the compositions look like theatrical scenes worked out in the painter's imagination, fascinated as he was by the creative process itself that lies behind the autonomous formation of shape and colour.'

G. Karginov, *Rodchenko*, London 1979.

4 V. Kamensky, *Put' entuziasta* (The path of an enthusiast), Moscow 1931, Perm 1968, pp. 156-57.

5 A. Benois *razmyshlyayet* (A. Benois recollects), Moscow 1968, pp. 115-16.





Rodchenko among the students of the Kazan art school (seated in the second row, third from left), 1912.

Sketch for the scenery of Oscar Wilde's play *The Duchess of Padua*, 1915. Paper, tempera, enamel, 71 x 40.





Portrait of N. Rusakov, 1912. Oil, 34.5 x 26.



Still life with candlestick, 1914. Plywood, oil, 60 x 48.5.

Dance, 1915. Oil, 178 x 107.





Rodchenko, Moscow 1916.

His meeting with Mayakovsky

In February 1914 a Futurist soirée was held in Kazan that was attended by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vasily Kamensky and David Burlyuk (*Doc. 2*). The evening was a highly interesting one, with the hall barely able to contain all those present. The speeches by the Futurists were accompanied by cries of indignation and enthusiasm. Later on Kamensky would recall: 'In the great Assembly Hall the students, blocking all the passages, received us with so much ardour that we were interrupted six times by the police.'⁴ Rodchenko was present at the soirée and it made a great impression on him. While there he bought a photograph of Mayakovsky (the one with top-hat and cane) after bidding him an enthusiastic farewell at the exit, after the meeting.

His first encounter with Mayakovsky marked the beginning of an important phase for Rodchenko, even though he did not get to know him personally until much later. The personality of Mayakovsky exerted a great influence over him. The statements of the Futurists about the problems of the new art and the verses they recited opened up the vista of radically new lines of research, presenting him with perspectives whose existence he had not suspected. In 1914 Rodchenko saw the Futurists as the advocates of a free use of the basic terminology that makes up the language of art. All his previous 'left-wing' experiments in the field of painting had been pure exercises aimed at probing means and external stylistic modes. From that time on he began to concern himself with the deeper elements underlying artistic form.



Model, 1914. Paper, Indian ink, 20.5 x 12.5.

Two figures, 1916. Oil, 84 x 70.



Processes of interrelation between the arts

Having finished his studies at the Kazan art school in 1914, Rodchenko left the city on 22 July of the same year and moved to Moscow, the city where he was to spend the whole of the rest of his life.

Before starting on an analysis of Rodchenko's creative research, it is worth examining a number of processes by which the different forms of art had begun to interrelate during the second two decades of the 20th century. In the arts field the young Soviet state had inherited a highly complex situation from tsarist Russia. In pre-Revolutionary Russian architecture, for instance, the most influential and gifted architects, after a brief period of enthusiasm for the Moderne leading to a sense of disillusionment with its aesthetic principles, had turned back to a vision of architecture as great art, according to the traditions of the past. Spurning eclecticism and the Art Nouveau-like Moderne, architects such as I. Zholtovsky, I. Fomin, V. Shchuko, A. Shchusev, A. Tamanyan and many others looked back once again to the Renaissance, Classicism, the Imperial style and ancient Russian architecture. The majority of architects rejected not just the aesthetics of emergent modernism but all those lines of research that might have indicated new artistic solutions for functional building.

Pre-Revolutionary Russian architecture was dominated by a degree of ambiguity. On the one hand new building materials were being exploited in the planning and construction areas and new types of buildings with more functional criteria were being studied. On the other the aesthetic ideals of architects were more and more influenced by the past.

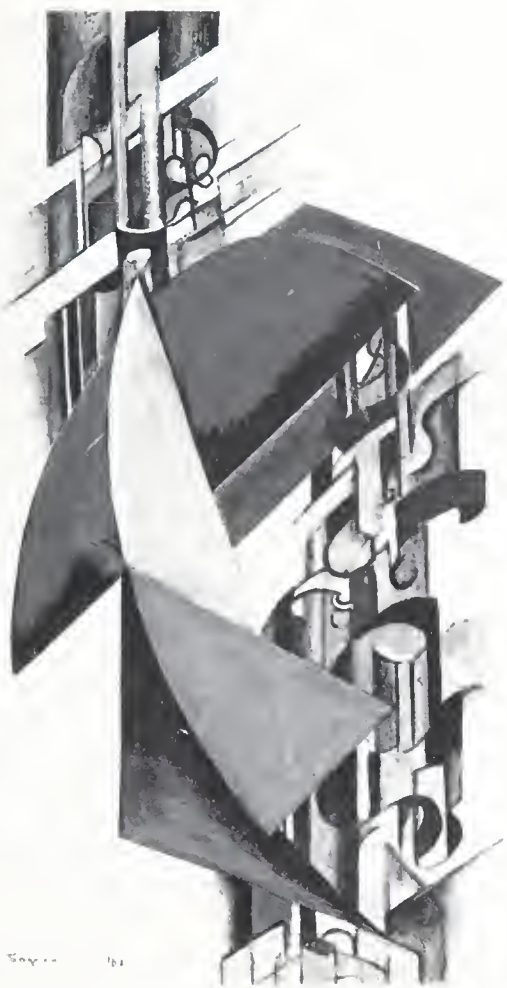
Describing the style of Russian architecture during the years before the Revolution, Aléxandre Benois wrote at the beginning of 1917 that 'that revival of the Classical which can be detected more or less everywhere is assuming larger proportions'.⁵

The passion for the Classical typical of pre-Revolutionary years was inherited by post-Revolutionary architecture. In 1918-19 Soviet architects studied new aesthetic forms almost exclusively on the basis of the possibilities inherent in Classical language.

With the appearance of new non-Classicist trends, even before the Revolution a number of architects had been putting their efforts into the development of a more rational approach to building, by adopting new construction materials. The representatives of this 'rational architecture' did a great deal of work in the fields of planning, building materials and functional organization of space. Nevertheless, developed as it was upon the basis of eclecticism and the Art Nouveau or Moderne, it inevitably retained many of their aesthetic principles. Thus 'rational architecture' did not form the basis of the new artistic trends that appeared after the October Revolution.

Unlike what was going on in other European centres, Soviet architecture, in the interval between the Moderne and the new tendencies of the twenties, had continued to evolve within the compass of Neoclassicism. In the years immediately after the Revolution, Soviet architecture followed a path of its own, conditioned by the new construction materials, which influenced the artistic research carried out by architects. This was due not only to the experience of 'rational architecture' but also to the creative work of those artists (including Rodchenko himself) who saw great aesthetic possibilities for a new style in just these new materials and new geometrical forms, used simply and without decoration.

While Soviet power was still in its infancy, new trends in the realm of architecture, and in the realm of applied decorative art out of which the design field would be born, had already emerged as a reaction to conservatism, stylization, eclecticism and the Moderne. These new trends established themselves through an assiduous collaboration between architects and artists belonging to 'left-wing' currents in the figurative arts. In contrast to official academic art, the formation of



Composition, 1916. Paper, tempera, enamel, 30 x 19.

Composition, 1916. Paper, tempera, enamel, 28 x 21.5.



these currents dated back to pre-First-World-War days.

During these years the process of stylistic research already under way in the artistic world of Europe saw a further evolution as a consequence of a sort of fusion between figurative art and architecture. In the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, architecture, which had always been the art form that codified different languages in the past, lost its determinant role to painting, which came to be the main vehicle for the expression of artistic tastes and aesthetic ideals.

In the two decades following 1910, when the premises for a new language were being created, a considerable discrepancy developed between the artistic level of fine art on the one hand and that of architecture and decorative art on the other. Architecture, industrial objects and the applied arts were at a decidedly inferior level. Hence the innovative researches of painters served as a catalyst in the process by which new aesthetic ideas were formed, even in those sectors of artistic creation that concerned the environment.

Right from the start of the 20th century, aesthetico-formal research in painting — under the banners of Cubism, Suprematism, Purism, Neoplasticism and Cubo-Futurism — did not set out solely to experiment with the professional methods proper to fine art, but sought to revise artistic means common to all the arts. The research came, *de facto*, to lose its specifically pictorial character and it managed to create an original patrimony of aesthetico-formal means and methods applicable to architecture and design as well, which were still decidedly backward in their artistic development.

In early 20th-century 'left-wing' painting, aesthetico-formal research followed two trends, one starting out with Van Gogh and Matisse and the other based on Cézanne and Cubism. With the rejection of figurative composition, the stylistic and aesthetical divergency between these two tendencies became evident.⁶

What part did Rodchenko's creative activity in the years 1915-21 play in this so complex, and so little studied, 'sortie' from 'left-wing' painting into the world of architecture and design, and in this transition from the figurative realm to the construction of man's environment?

It would be no exaggeration to state that Rodchenko was one of the central figures in the process of interrelation between 'left-wing' figurative art and architecture, which was to lay the foundations for the new trends in architecture, industrial art and the field of mass propaganda. If one takes into account the role that he played in the interrelationship of the arts and the sector of experimentation with abstract form, Rodchenko should be set on a par with Malevich and Tatlin. Even more so, if we take into account the originality of his artistic principles, the continuity of his aesthetico-formal research and the influence of his works on the general process by which painting ventured into the realm of 'objects'.

Moreover, while Tatlin and Malevich remained on the fringes of the group of 'left-wing' painters, representing two extremes, Rodchenko stuck to the middle of the road in his research. He carried out continual experiments with colour, figure, graphic forms, spatial structures. However his points of view were nearer to those of Malevich than of Tatlin, and this became clear as soon as his 'run-up' period was over.

In this connection the division of 'left-wing' painters into two groups made by B. Arvatov in an article written in 1922 is revealing. In his appraisal of the aesthetico-formal researches of these painters, starting from an orthodox position of the theory of Production Art which he espoused, and basing this division on his own personal criterion for evaluation of the role of pictorial form, Arvatov placed Kandinsky and Malevich in the first group and Rodchenko and Tatlin in the second.

Arvatov's criteria of evaluation cannot be accepted in their entirety and yet the articles he wrote at the time convey the atmosphere of polemics that surrounded the various artistic tendencies with regard to experiments with abstract form.

The basic task set themselves by Suprematists and Expressionists (Kandinsky,

6 *Among Russian artists the best-known representative of the first tendency was Kandinsky, who sought to express, by artistic means, the emotional state of man, bringing out the role of the subconscious in the creative process. Above all he attempted to discover in man's inner world and his subjective feelings some objective laws for the creative process of pictorial composition, and analysed the level of psychological perception of means of expression in different aspects of art. The supporters of the second tendency sought new means of expression not in man's emotional states but in concrete reality, in the objective rather than the subjective world.*

In Russian art there were two theories that, despite being bitterly opposed, had a great influence on the whole of 20th-century architecture and design. The first was linked to Malevich's Suprematism, the second to Tatlin's experiments. Both were engaged in aesthetico-formal research aimed at a fusion between painting and environment, but Malevich was mainly interested in the artistic possibilities of colour, simple geometric form and articulate compositions of spacevolume. Tatlin, on the other hand, looked for aesthetic expressiveness in the material itself, in the contrasting union of different materials and in new forms of construction.

In conclusion, both were working on artistic problems related to 'form', with the difference that Malevich had set himself the task of transforming the world of 'objects', while Tatlin was concerned with drawing attention to the inner essence of the object from an aesthetic point of view, an essence that he saw as pure material form, shifting little by little from representation of the world to construction of man's surroundings.

Like Tatlin, many other artists almost simultaneously chose the path of research, moving from painting to the construction of objects in the environmental sphere: P. Miturich (spatial painting), L. Popova and I. Klyun (pictorial compositions with sculptural and spatial elements), L. Bruni (pictorial working of materials) and others.

After the Revolution a number of artists devoted themselves to laboratory research in fields involving the environment: El Lissitzky ('proun'), N. Gabo (spatial structures), V. and G. Stenberg and Medunetsky (coloured and spatial constructions).

7 B. Arvatov, 'Dve gruppirovki' (Two groups), in *Zrelishcha* (Spectacle), no. 8, 1922, p. 9.



Running figure, 1917. Oil, 30 × 43.

Composition, 1917. Paper, Indian ink, 26.5 × 20



Malevich and others)', wrote Arvatov, 'consists in constructing spectacular forms, in which they see the very essence of art. Their works are ends in themselves in that they lead to metaphysical abstraction, in that they are above and beyond life. These painters wish to dictate their own "laws", laws conceived during their studies. Their aestheticism represents the highest level of any aestheticism.

'The second tendency on the other hand, the one called Constructivism (Cézanne, Picasso, Tatlin, Rodchenko), rejects any notion of form as an end in itself; indeed, it regards form not as an end but a means and, in a precise context, the outcome of creative work. *The task Constructivism sets itself is the real elaboration of real objects. Why? So that art may be something social in actual fact...*

'*Constructivism is useful from the social point of view both when it leads to industrial production (engineer, builder) and when it is applied to propaganda (designer of posters, banners, etc.).*'⁷

It has already been pointed out how the experiments with aesthetics and form of the 'left-wing' painters were a sort of starting point for the formation of new stylistic currents in the 20th century. This raises a question: why in the past had there been no need at the moment of transition from one style to another to arrive at abstract form in the phase of aesthetico-formal research, while in the 20th century these experiments would now seem to have been absolutely necessary? Let us try to answer this, without of course any expectation of reaching incontrovertible conclusions. Stylistic research in the first third of the 20th century was carried out under very special conditions, different from those of the past. The phase had been characterized by a variety of styles that was truly rare in the history of art, given the mingling and interpenetration of different types of tendencies and schools. The tastes of artists and of the public were so confused, and on the other hand the gamut of forms available was so broad, that within architecture and applied decorative art, alongside the Moderne, there existed Classical forms and every other possible stylization of European and Oriental taste.

Each style (and each important creative trend) creates a series of canons, within which professional methods are defined. But in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th it was possible to make one's own and use

Composition, 1917 Paper, tempera, gold, 42 × 29



Composition, 1916 Paper, tempera, 27 × 20



any artistic and compositional system (including forms and details) typical of the past. Architects and decorative artists had no difficulty in shifting from ancient Russian to the Classical, from the Chinese style to the Gothic, and so on. This is why the stylistic research of the first third of the 20th century took place under genuinely new circumstances. The new stylistic movement had to reject not just one particular existing style, but, de facto, all traditional styles, for at that moment they were all in simultaneous use.

And so it was that in a world history of art, design and the new architecture show absolutely no sign, from the aesthetic and formal point of view, of a link with the traditions of the past. Careful analysis of their historical evolution reveals that the rejection of the past was not the refusal of a particular style but of almost all the styles present in eclecticism. It is out of the whole set of these rejections that the aesthetic rigour of design and the new architecture emerged. This rigour, that is, the total absence of any visible mark of the style of the past, could not be attained by means of a gradual 'cleaning up', for example, of the three-dimensional structure of an object or a building. Although Fomin, for example, made an attempt to create a new architectural style by 'cleaning' the Classical style of its decorative elements, more radical measures were required, hence the experiments with abstract form. Painters were the first to sense the importance of these experiments to the process of formation of the new style, followed at a distance by architect, most notably for instance the Rationalists Ladovsky, Krinsky and others.

Rodchenko arrived in Moscow when these experiments were still in their early stages. The aesthetico-formal research embraced a wide range of enquiry (colour, form, composition, and so on) involving, on different levels, even specific elements of a given art form or style. Yet such radical experiments do not always indicate a profound assimilation of new stylistic principles. It is possible then to point to another factor that influenced the artistic researches of 'left-wing' painters and their attitude towards form and towards the scope of the interrelationship between different forms of art.

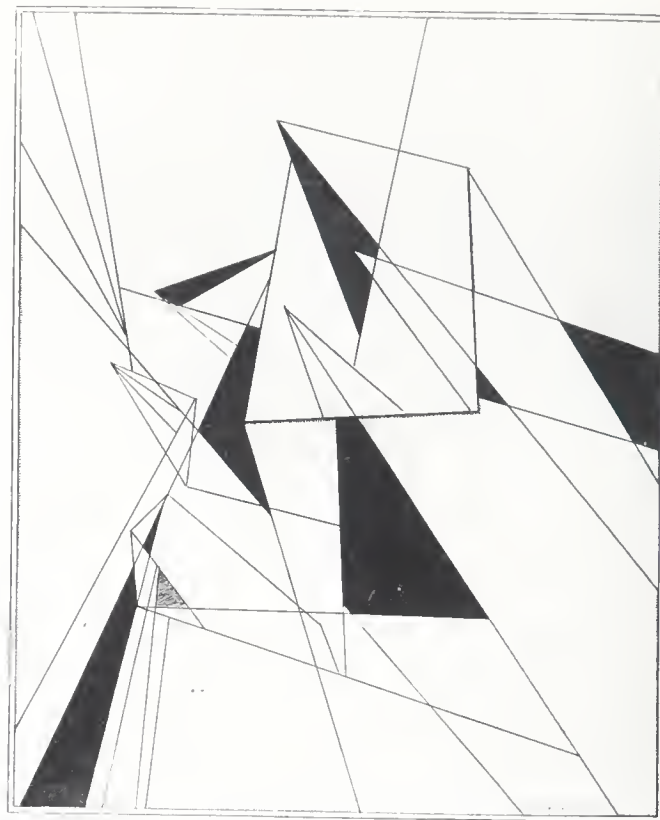
At the beginning of the 20th century all those operating in the realm of art attributed a great deal of importance to the relationship between time and space (whose strict interdependence was then very clear to physicists), casting doubts on the legitimacy of a division between spatial arts and temporal arts. All sorts of hypotheses emerged on the close relation between different forms of temporal and spatial art, on the need to take the time factor into consideration in the spatial arts, on how to create new synthetic arts.

With painting at the centre of these experiments, the different theories sought, of course, to establish what its role and its place were in both the problem of the interrelation of different art forms and that of the definition of the new style. Some painters gave great importance to the relations of painting with other temporal art forms, while others considered experiments with abstract form to be an internal problem of painting itself. Yet others saw in these experiments a way of bringing together painting and applied decorative art, and some went even further to include architecture in this sphere of interest as well. As a result even the experiments with abstract form differed profoundly one from another.

In any case it is certain that even before the Revolution various currents were formed in the course of experiments with abstract form. Among them was the one which led 'left-wing' art to cross the threshold of architecture and design.

Looking for a path of his own

At the time of Rodchenko's arrival in Moscow, the 'left-wing' tendencies in figurative art were just beginning to carry out more advanced experiments on the theme of aesthetics and form. Rodchenko, the man 'of the left' from the province of Kazan, realized with amazement that he had skipped about a decade of ex-



Composition, 1915. Paper, pen and Indian ink, 25.5 × 21.

On opposite page: *Composition*, 1915. Paper, pen and Indian ink, 25.5 × 21.

Composition, 1915. Paper, pen and ink, 25.5 × 21.





periments during which art had made a great deal of progress. Naturally it was too late for him to try and assimilate the whole course of developments which already formed part of history for the various leaders of the left.

To cap it all Rodchenko found himself in a setting that lay right at the heart of laboratory research, where everything went out of date very fast and the novelties of ten years earlier no longer interested anyone. Every exhibition was a new discovery and 'left-wing' painters vied with each other in the invention of new means and modes of expression. Unexpectedly the fact that Rodchenko had missed out on those ten years ended up having a positive influence, in that his own entry into 'left-wing' art was absolutely original.

Rodchenko did not go through all the complexity and contradiction of a gradual rejection of representational art which the majority of leaders of 'left-wing' tendencies had to undergo. Nor did he come to abstraction through simplification and schematization of figurative elements: he came to it directly through the simplest of geometrical forms.

Rodchenko's first experiments with abstract form reveal a clear bias towards an interaction between painting, architecture and the just emerging field of design. From 1915 onwards all his graphic compositions were executed with drawing instruments, the ruler, compass and square. These graphic compositions, put on show at the 'Magazin' exhibition of 1916, stood out for their geometric precision. (The name means literally 'The Shop' but has often been translated as 'The Store'.) At the time, many found it strange and incomprehensible that a painter, over almost the entire range of his work, should not only have spurned the use of colour (he used only white paper and India ink), but not even have drawn a single line freehand. The aesthetic principles used by Rodchenko in this series of abstract compositions are akin to those of technical drawing. All the compositions are flat, with the artist making no attempt to suggest volume or space. The most important feature of these graphical constructions was the extreme precision of



Composition, 1917. Paper, gouache, gold, 64 × 48.

Composition, 1917. Oil, 73 × 32.5.

Composition, 1916. Paper, tempera, enamel, 28 × 21.5.



Composition, 1917. Paper, Indian ink, 27 × 20.5.





Yellow composition, 1920. Oil, 71 x 71.



Composition on black background, 1920. Oil, 41 x 24.



Abstract composition, 1918. Oil, 90 x 57.

Composition, 1920. Oil, 71 x 37.5.



Composition, 1918. Paper, gouache, 19 x 14.



Abstract composition, 1919.



their lines and contours. He used only two types of elementary geometrical shapes: the straight line and the circle (or the arc of a circle). Intersecting each other, these lines break up the surface of the paper into many parts, creating highly complex configurations. By filling some of these parts with India ink, Rodchenko created compositions that stand out for the totally unrestrained dynamism of their lines and planes (without any relationship between them).

Rodchenko himself regarded this 1915 series of graphic compositions as fundamental to his creative work in that they underlined his overriding preference for geometrical shapes traced with drawing instruments.

At that time Rodchenko had made the acquaintance of the architect and set-designer Alexander Vesnin, who had been introduced to the group of 'left-wing' painters by Tatlin. Through Vesnin he got to know and made friends with Tatlin, who personally invited him to take part in the 'Magazin' exhibition and smoothed the young painter's entry into the most avant-garde group of 'left-wing' painters in Moscow. When he met Tatlin in 1915, he had already studied for a few months at the Stroganov Artistic and Industrial Institute in Moscow, in the hope of completing his education. Dissatisfied with the teaching methods practised in the Institute, he had opted to start working on his own account. He was alone and without many friends in painting circles.⁸

The 'Magazin' exhibition was staged in the warehouse of a shop on Petrovka street. As well as the artists mentioned by Tatlin, many others took part. Rodchenko exhibited ten works from 1915, including six compositions from his series of 'drawings'.

These works attracted the attention of Malevich who, as Rodchenko recalls, came up to him and said: "You are unique here, but do you know what you are doing?" I answered him: "No, I don't know." "Everything the others are doing is old and done with. Something new is being born, something that is ours, Russian. I am working in this direction; come and see me, you have already sensed something."

Tatlin warned him against visiting Malevich (they were adversaries at the time) even though, as Rodchenko realized, the works exhibited by Malevich may have pleased him. Later on Malevich's Suprematism was to have a profound influence on Rodchenko's work.

Continuing his experiments with abstract form, Rodchenko's next series of



Composition, 1918. Paper, tempera, 26.5 × 20.5.

Concentration of colour, 1918. Paper, gouache, enamel, 19 × 14

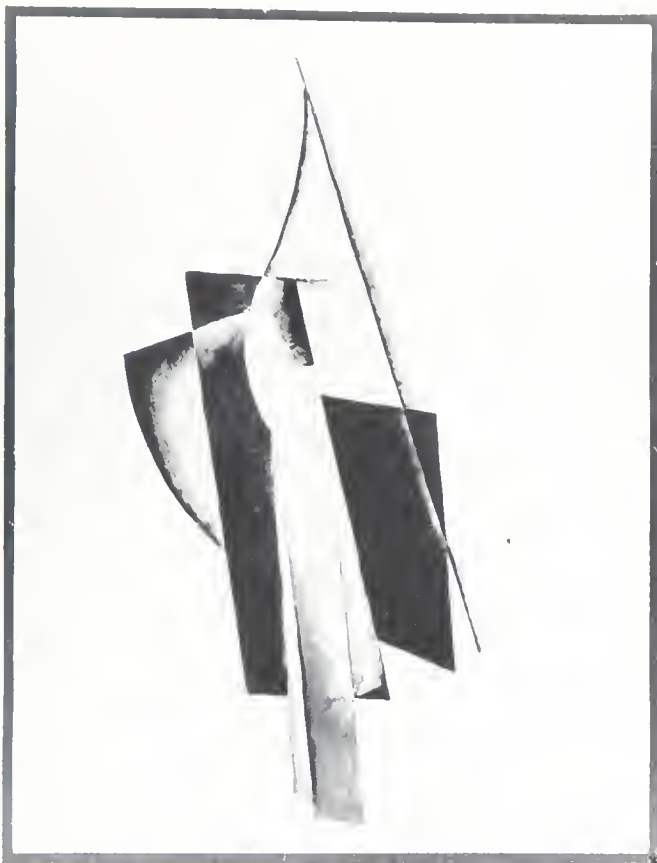


Concentration of colour, 1918. Paper, gouache, 19 × 14



Concentration of colour, 1918. Paper, gouache, 19 × 14.





Composition, 1918. Paper, tempera, 27 × 20.5.

works in 1916-17, unlike the flat compositions of his first graphic series, brought out the shapes of the elements and the spatial depth of the composition.

In 1917 Rodchenko experimented with a different use of colour, setting out to investigate all its properties and making use of mechanical tools to work the surface of the picture. As well as rollers, stamps and compressors, he used a different type of paper.

In 1918 he created abstract compositions in which the dynamic qualities of the colour took priority over form, incorporating it. At the same time he was trying out all the technical possibilities of colour. He prepared colours with different techniques on the same surface, creating a visual effect of fragmentation. By using the same colour in different ways, Rodchenko sought to express all the aesthetic properties of the technical means (black on black). He was attempting to reveal the interdependence of the painter's method of working, the forms and patterns of a work's composition and the characteristics of the material. Using thinned enamel paint, for example, he would apply the brush horizontally and investigate the aesthetic properties of colour, drawing it out into abstract form (circular shapes).

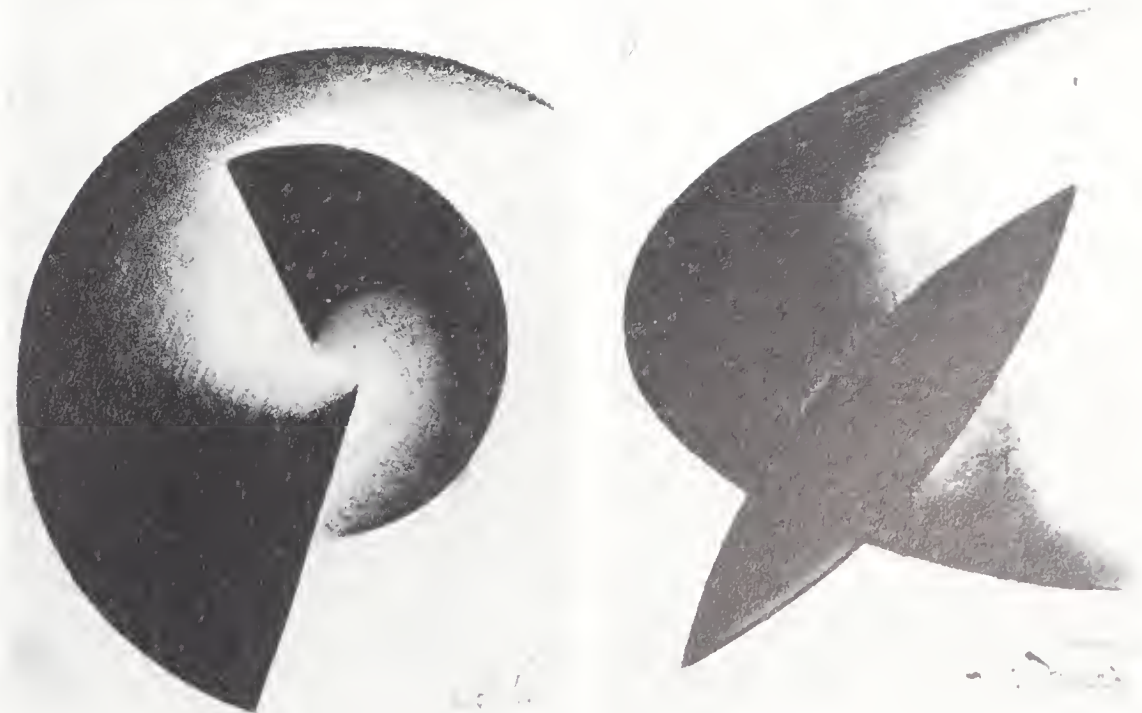
The original character of Rodchenko's period of 'run-up' derived from the fact that he found himself right in the midst of the most radical group of 'left-wing' painters, without a clear understanding of how the earlier experiments with abstract form had led them there. In 1915 he had already produced a series of abstract 'designs' without much idea of what the previous stage of Cubist painting involved. In his memoirs, he himself acknowledges that, when he had been obliged to guide visitors around the 'Magazin' exhibition, he had not understood many of the works on show: 'I explained things, without knowing much about Cubism, which was not entirely comprehensible to me.'

In the series of 'designs', however, it is evident that he was attempting to approach abstract form not through Cubism, but through modernism. The freshness of style, clarity of form and lack of restraint which distinguished them from Cubism was the mark of his originality.

If before 1915, during his stay in Kazan, he had worked in the spirit of left-wing movements from ten or twenty years earlier, he went on following all the most modern 'isms' after 1915, although qualitatively his works were completely

Sketch for a painting, 1918. Paper, gouache, 18.5 × 14.

Sketch for a painting, 1918. Paper, gouache, 18.5 × 14.5.



8 Later on Rodchenko would recall: 'I told him that I had not managed to take part in the exhibition "Mir isskustva" [The World of Art]; Tatlin complained too: "I already have white hair and they go on not taking me into consideration... It does not matter! Soon we will put on a futuristic exhibition. Give me your address, you will take part as well..."'

'Shortly afterwards Tatlin came to see me, looked at my work and said: "We have organized a collective show in which the following will take part: myself, L. Popova, N. Udaltsova, A. Exter, Pestel, I. Klyun, L. Bruni, Malevich and, of course, you, Rodchenko. Everyone has paid a contribution towards the exhibition, but as, I think, you have no money you will have to pay in labour, as I do. I am the organizer of the exhibition and you will be my assistant; you will sell the tickets..."'

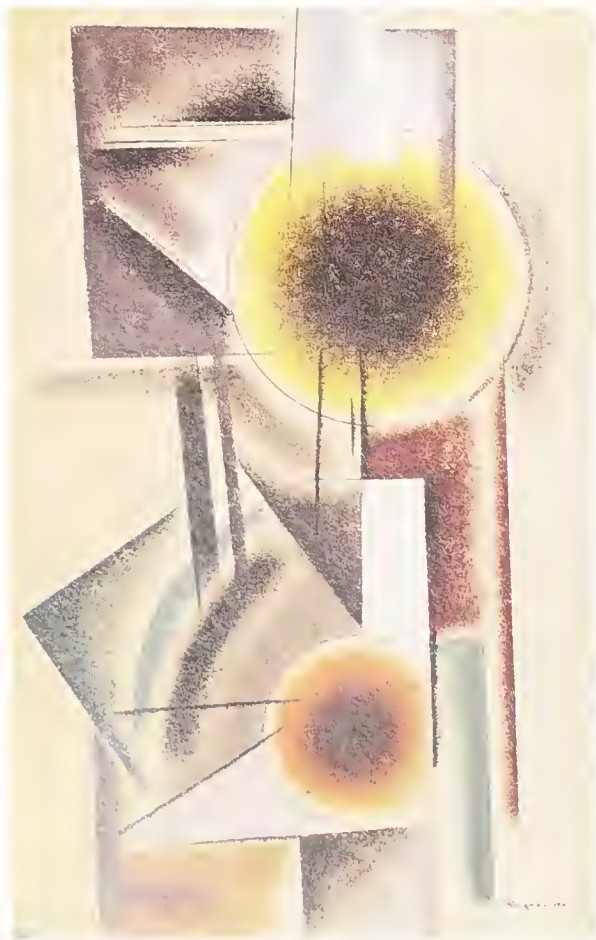
different. The compositions in colour he produced from 1916 to 1918 bear witness to the way in which he had rapidly passed through all the radical tendencies of those years. Yet his was the passage of a painter with his own fixed point of reference, a 'geometrical' theme of his own. And it was just this peculiarity that became part of the new stylistic model. In 1916-18 Rodchenko was regarded as a painter who belonged to all intents and purposes in the vanguard of art.

In the summer of 1917 the Painters' Union (Professional'ny soyuz khudozhnikov-zhivopistsev) was set up. The Union, as Rodchenko recalls in his memoirs, 'was divided up into three Federations'. 'In May 1918 Rodchenko took part in the first exhibition that the Union organized. Later on, around the beginning of 1919, the 'left-wing' painters put their work on show at the club belonging to the Federation of the Left. Rodchenko's paintings appeared alongside works by Tatlin, Alexander Vesnin, Popova, Drevin, Udaltsova and Exter, among others. A one-man show by Rodchenko was mounted at the same club.

Rodchenko continued to experiment with abstract form, colour, spatial depth, etc.¹⁰ His name began to appear increasingly often in the press and art critics and scholars followed the evolution of his work with interest. Some praised his innovations enthusiastically, others criticized them bitterly. One critic had the following to say about the 'left-wing' painters in 1918: 'A welcome is due to the artist Rozanova for her nimble compositions with their highly luminous tones. A welcome to Udaltsova for her abstract canvases painted in barbarous manner. A welcome to Rodchenko for his colour compositions in three dimensions. A welcome to Vesnin for his compositions on black and for those in colour. A welcome to Drevin for his large free compositions of masses of colour.'¹¹

From the creative point of view Rodchenko was very close to this extreme left-wing group. Rozanova had died in 1918, but at the start of 1919 those remaining tried to set up a group of their own under the name of 'Association of Ultra-Innovators in Painting' (Asskranov Assotsiatsiia krainykh novatorov zhivopisi), of which a document has survived (*Doc. 3*).

Composition, 1919. Paper, tempera, 38 × 23.5.



Composition, 1920. Oil, 71 × 37.5.



- 9 *The Federation of the Young*
The Federation of the Centre
The Federation of the Old
De facto they were known as: Left, Centre and Right

In that of the Young there were the left-wing painters:

Futurists

Cubists

Suprematists

abstract painters.

In that of the Centre there were the painters belonging to the groups:

"The World of Art" [Mir iskusstva]

"Association of Russian Artists"

"The Knave of Diamonds"

"The Ass's Tail" and others.

In that of the Old, painters of the groups:

"The Union of Russian Painters"

"The Itinerants" and others.

President of the Federation of the Young was Tatlin; secretary, myself. The president of that of the Centre was Nivinsky, secretary Keller. The president of that of the Old was Bogatov, secretary Evreinov.'

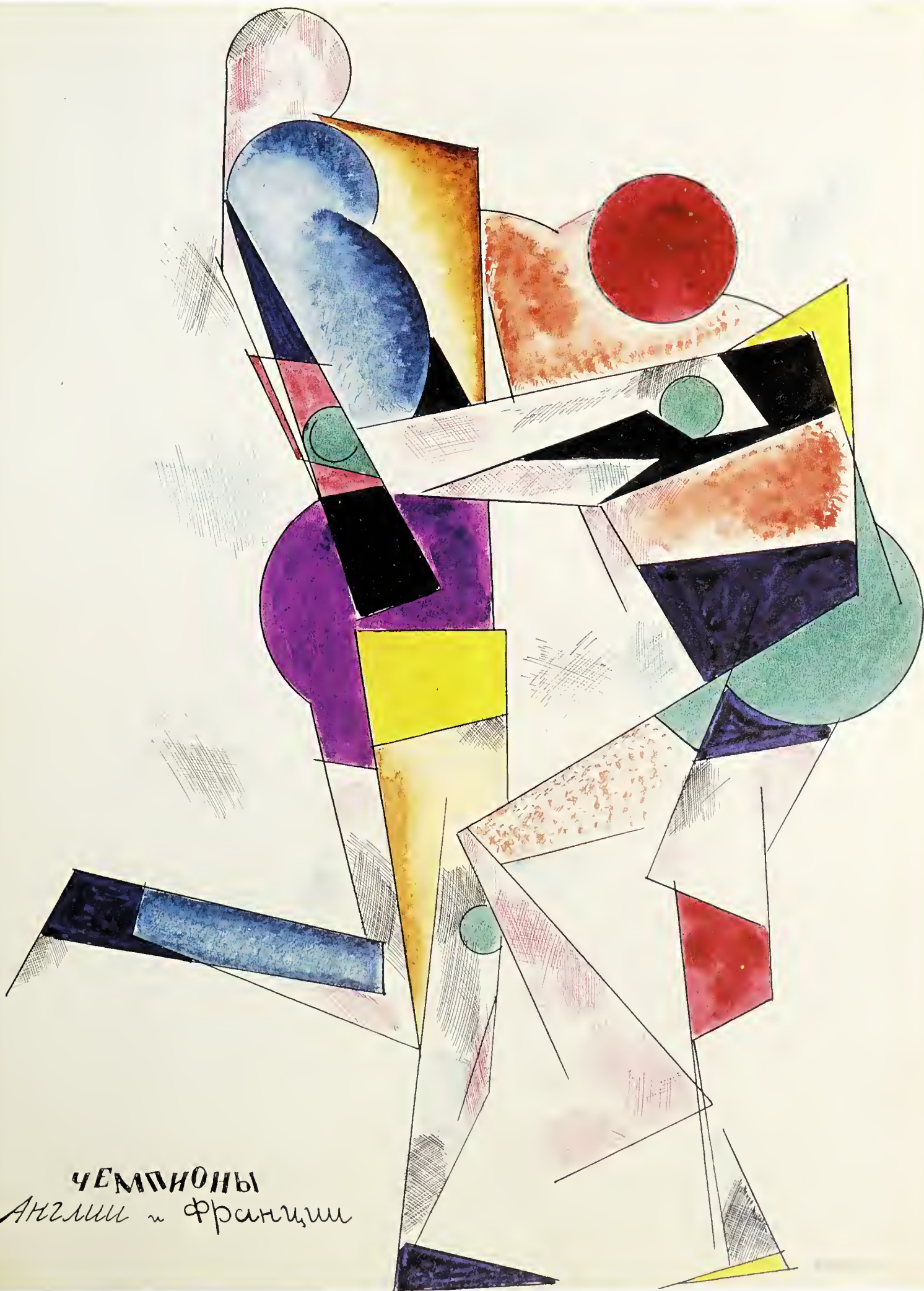
- 10 *On the subject of his artistic research, he wrote in Anarchiya on 28 April 1918: 'Designing vertical plane surfaces, painted a suitable colour, and intersecting them with lines of depth, I discover that colour serves merely as a useful convention for separating one plane from another, and for bringing out those elements which indicate its depth and its intersections...'*

'Taking into consideration only the projections of principal and central lines very different from the parallel peripheral lines or those that enter in depth, I completely neglect both the quality and the combination of colours...'

'Constructing projections on ovals, circles and ellipses, I often distinguish only the extremities of the projections with colour, which gives me the possibility of emphasizing the value of the projections and the colour, used as an auxiliary means and not as an end.'

'By thoroughly studying the projection in depth, height and breadth, I discover an infinite number of possibilities for construction outside the limits of time.'

- 11 *M. Bus and A. Zamoskin, Put' sovetskoi zhivopisi 1917-1933 (The course of Soviet painting 1917-1933), Moscow 1933.*



ЧЕМПИОНЫ
Англии и Франции

The lamps for the Café Pittoresque

From 1917 onwards, Rodchenko attempted to apply his experiments to the construction of new objects for ordinary use. Among other things he designed the wall lamps for the Café Pittoresque in Moscow.¹²

Yakulov had turned to a group of painters for help with this interior design job. 'Tatlin and I', Rodchenko later recalled, 'were engaged to work in the Café Pittoresque under the direction of G.B. Yakulov... The work proceeded as follows: I revised Yakulov's sketches on black (paper) for the craftsmen and workers. Sketches that had been hastily done in pencil...

'Tatlin, Udaltsova and Bruni implemented these sketches directly in the lounge of the café. The daily wage, I think, was three or five roubles; they assigned me a room and I started work.'

As well as redrawing Yakulov's design sketches, Rodchenko worked on a series of sketches for lamps. Although they referred to real objects, these sketches were very similar to the abstract compositions of 1916-17.

Rodchenko himself stressed the close tie that existed between his experiments with abstract form and the design of the lamps for the Café Pittoresque. Out of the abstract compositions were born the lamp designs, initially geometrical constructions almost devoid of volume, but which gradually took on a three-dimensional aspect (despite still being designs on paper), getting closer and closer to a concrete perception of the object.

About ten sketches of different models of lamp exist. Their novel quality lies in their extremely simple and geometrically derived shapes (prisms, cylinders, hemispheres, cones) which stood out against the general background of the café's decoration which was based on dynamically complex and highly disparate forms. Three of the lamp designs were placed on show at the 11th Moscow State Exhibition.

The evolutionary link between these lamps and Rodchenko's early aesthetico-formal experiments is an absolutely direct one; even the material used bears witness to it. These first designs 'reveal' the hand of their author, i.e. one can see that they were executed by a painter accustomed to working on flat surfaces. What is missing, in fact, is the space—volume relationship of real objects, characteristic of the architect and the designer. In his construction of these lamps, Rodchenko started not from volume but from surface. He took simple shapes on the surface and transformed them into such forms as cylinders, cones, spiral bands, and so on.

The lamps are designed in such a way that they are at one and the same time lampshade, reflector and decorative element. One of the sketches is in colour: the reflector in the shape of a half-cone, the outer part of which is coloured a cold bluish grey, covers a prism-shaped lantern of a yellowish orange. In this early phase of Rodchenko's more explorative work, which testifies to his transition from 'left-wing' painting to the production of objects, it is important to emphasize that from a stylistic point of view a number of elements are still present that are redolent of the Moderne.

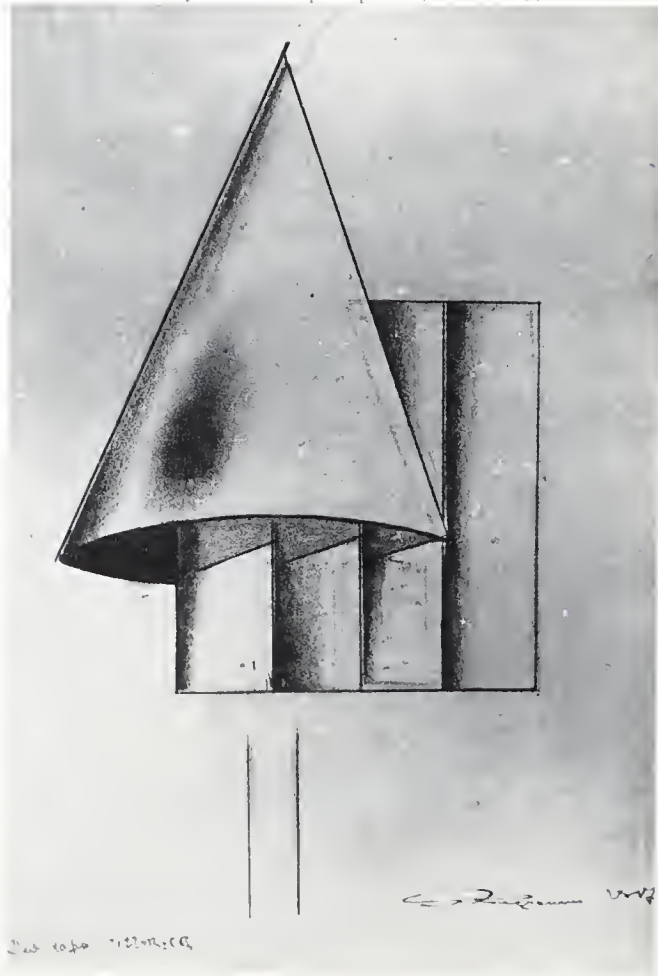
Carrying on with his experiments in the field of painting, Rodchenko introduced the concept of space into his pictorial compositions. In a series of works produced in 1917, for example, while still resorting to the extremely simple and geometric lines and planes that he had used in the graphic series of 1915, he came up with some totally new compositions. He used lines and planes to build up a structure that, although it was merely drawn on canvas, could also be realized in three dimensions. These were not, therefore, mural bas-reliefs (along the formal lines of the Café Pittoresque lamps) but structures surrounded by space.

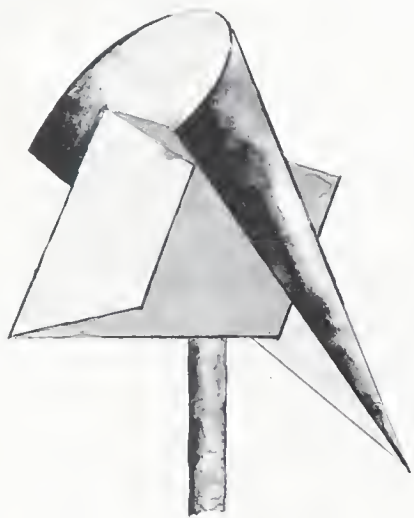
12 In 1918 the painter G. Yakulov wrote: 'At the end of July 1917, Nikolai Dimitrievich Filippov (owner of a large number of bakeries in Moscow) suggested that I take part in a competition for the decoration of his café on the Kuznetsky most (literally: Kuznetsky Bridge, a smart shopping street), at number 5. From an aesthetic and decorative point of view, my project was meant to suggest the idea of something festive, popular, like a village fair, in the manner of the fairs in certain quarters of Paris, so that Filippov accepted my project where it envisaged a sort of fair of contemporary decorative art, of the art of the ballet, stage and music, while for the scenic and organizational part, i.e. for its fitting out, he turned to Vselvolod E. Meyerhold.

'The Café Pittoresque was built exclusively by the hands of artists and painters.'

Agitatsionno-massovoe iskusstvo pervykh let Oktyabrya. Materialy i issledovaniya (Mass-agitational art in the early years of the October Revolution. Materials and essays), Moscow 1971.

Sketch for a lamp, 1917, Paper, pencil, 26.5 x 20.



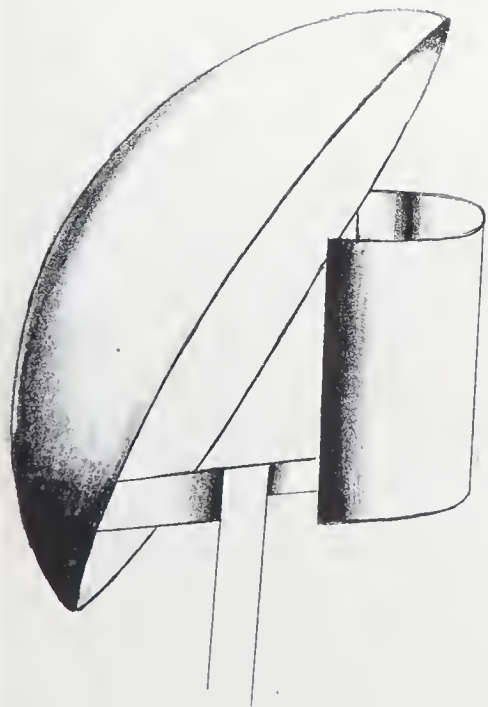


Sketch for a lamp, 1917. Paper, watercolour, pencil, 26.5 · 20.

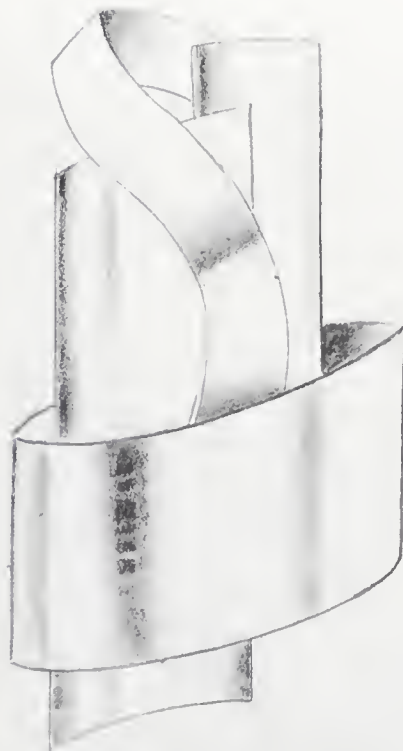


Sketch for a lamp, 1917. Paper, coloured pencil, 28 · 21

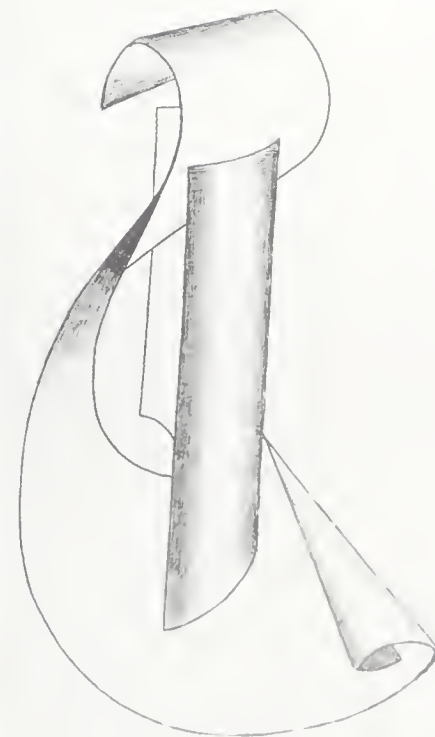
Sketches for a lamp, 1917. Paper, pencil, 26.5 × 20.



2. 1917



2. 1917



2. 1917

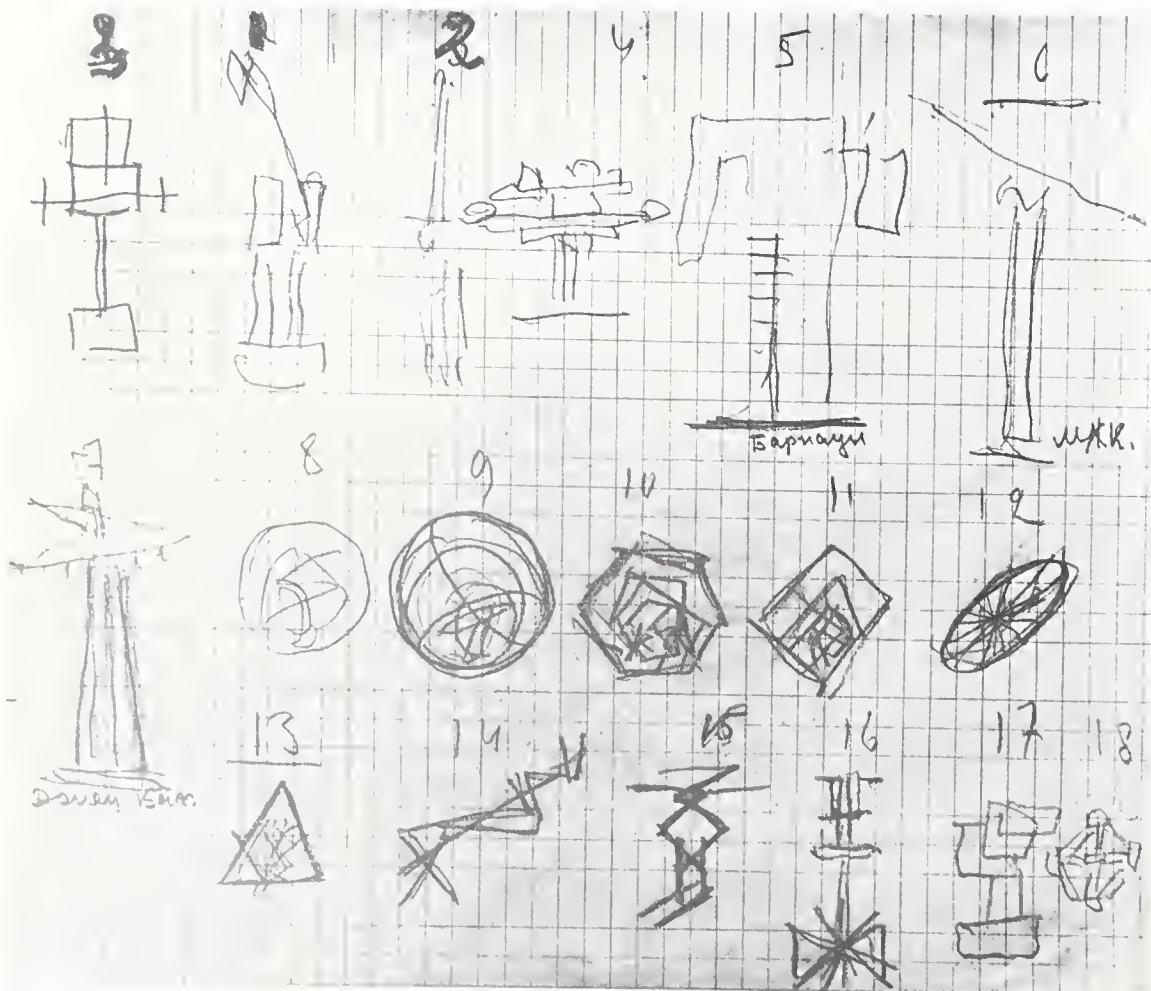
The first series of spatial constructions

Throughout 1918 Rodchenko carried on with the experiments he had begun in 1917: he was trying to produce a construction with elements which, on canvas, seemed to have spatial dimensions, for, as he himself wrote, 'forms combine with one another according to a principle that is not merely pictorial, but also constructive'.¹

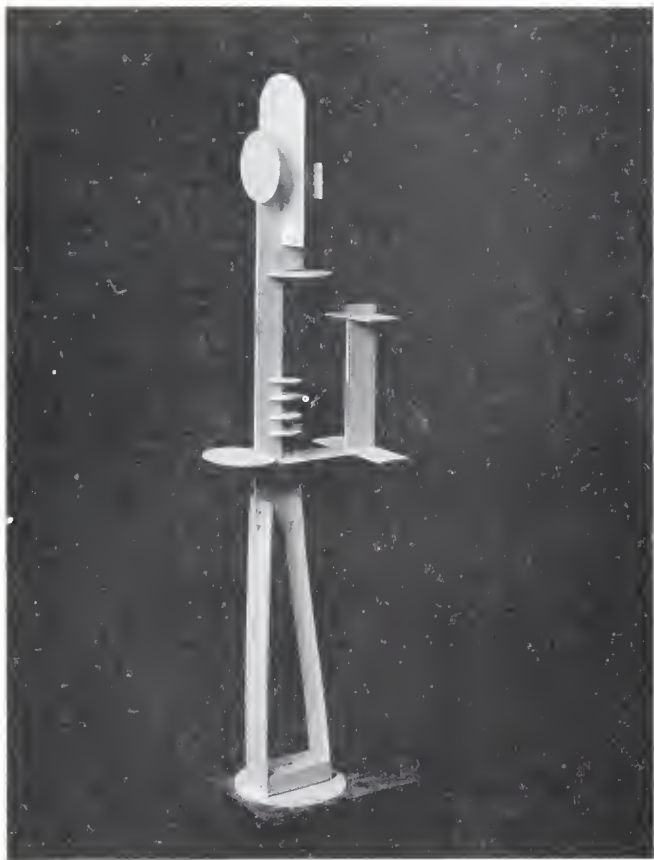
It was in 1918 that Rodchenko created his first set of abstract spatial constructions, which he called 'white (and coloured) sculptures', whose criteria of composition would later, during 1919-20, be adopted in his architectural projects. In these spatial constructions Rodchenko was to some extent modifying and reworking the rules for construction of multistorey structures, variants on which can be found in his architectural sketches. The spatial constructions of this first series are vertical compositions in which diverse materials, circular pivots and curved surfaces are used, all in perfect equilibrium. The last constructions in this series, in which a single material is used (plywood, cardboard), are formed out of different plane surfaces fitted one inside the other, all of them capable of being dismantled, taken apart and easily re-attached.

Like the lamps of the Café Pittoresque, these spatial constructions are made up of flat two-dimensional elements. While in the lamps the flat surface was distorted to create curved, and even twisted surfaces, adhering to each other, here the various flat elements remain so, intersecting and embedded within each other. So the style of these two series turns out to be very different. In the lamps the influence of the Moderne with its unrestrained curves can be detected, while in the 'white sculptures' rigid geometry prevails, with surfaces defined only by straight

Spatial constructions. Page from one of Rodchenko's notebooks.

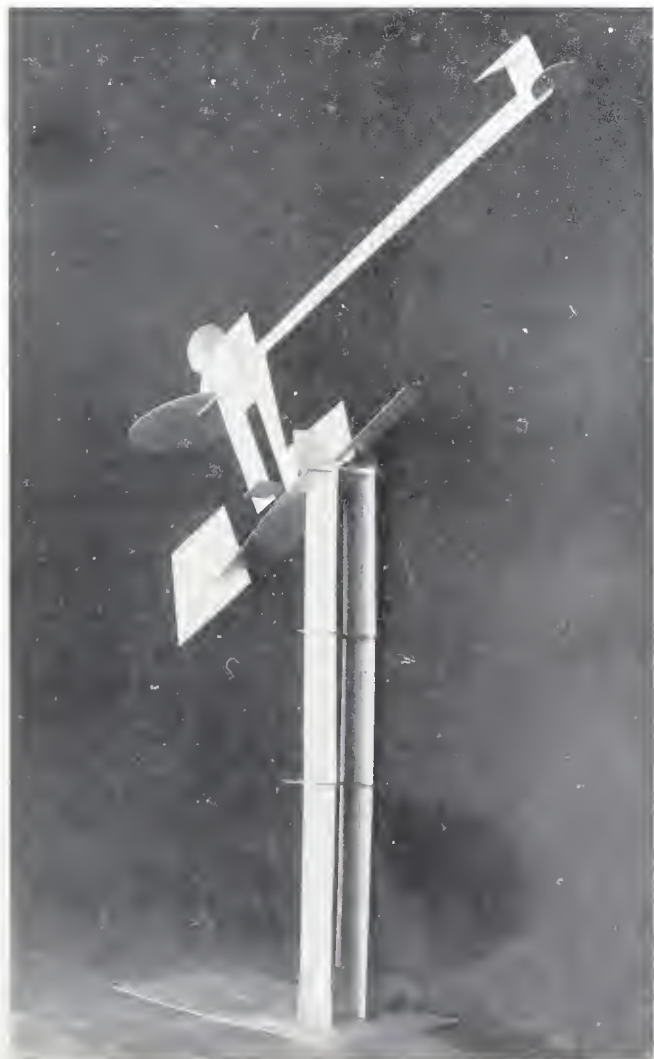


2: IN SEARCH OF A NEW ARCHITECTURE

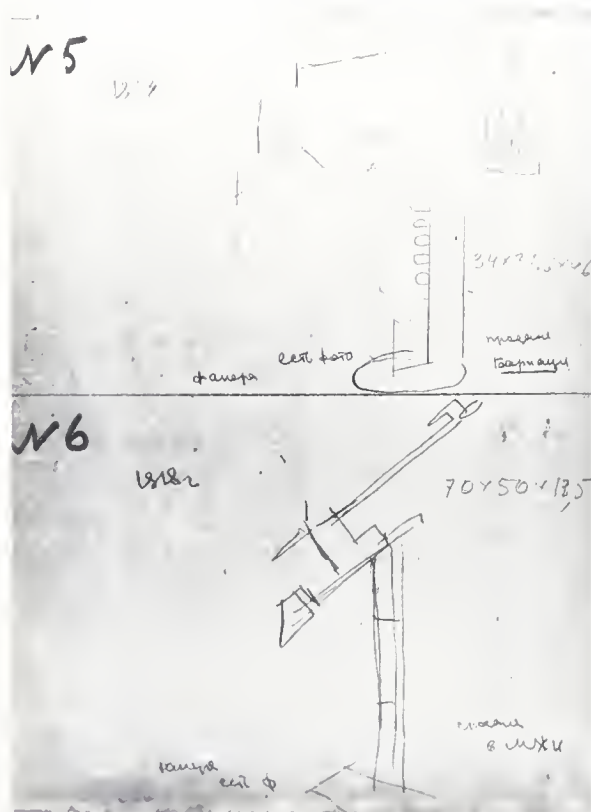


Spatial construction no. 3, 1918: Abstract sculpture in colour.

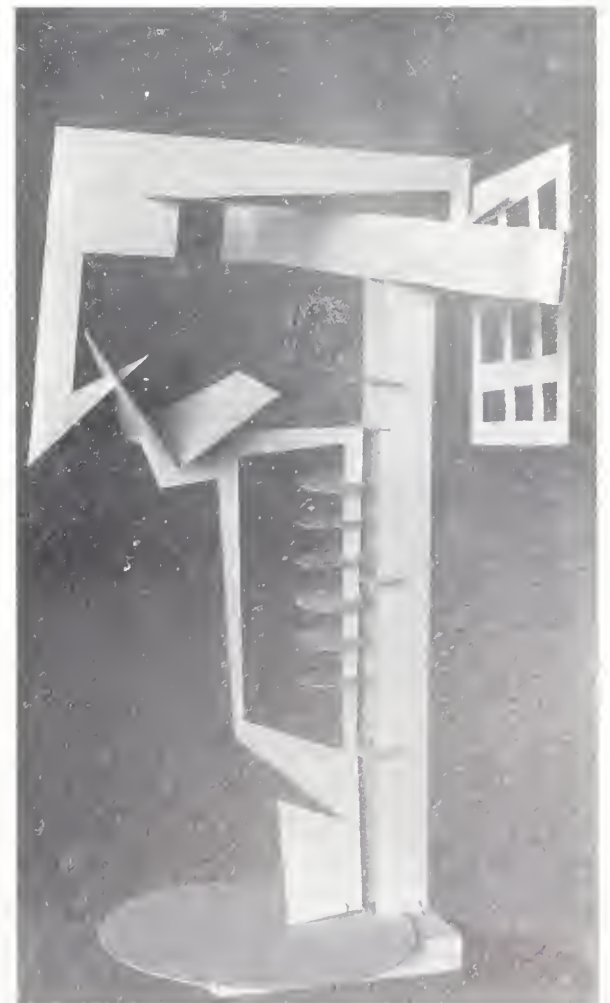
Spatial construction no. 6, 1918. Board, 70 × 50 × 13.5.



Sketches for the *White sculptures* nos. 5 and 6 (from Rodchenko's notebook), 1918



Spatial construction no. 5, 1918



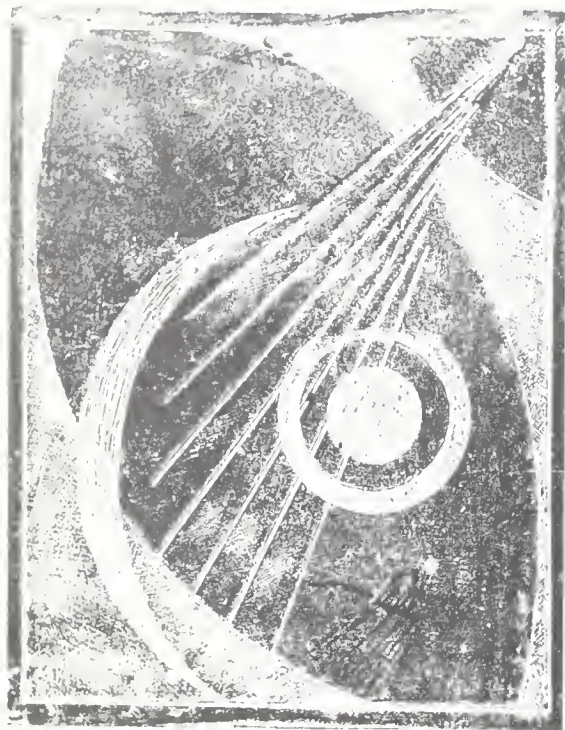
lines and circles and the flat elements cut by right angles. Moreover the lamps are wall fittings, whereas the designs of the first spatial series are autonomous compositions, i.e. fixed to the ground.

These compositions make one think of a tree, with a trunk and leafy branches, whose lower part forms the vertical support holding up the 'fronds' made up of complex 'branches' in equilibrium. Such a method of architectural construction was unusual in those years and designs for constructions with a central pivot would not appear until later.

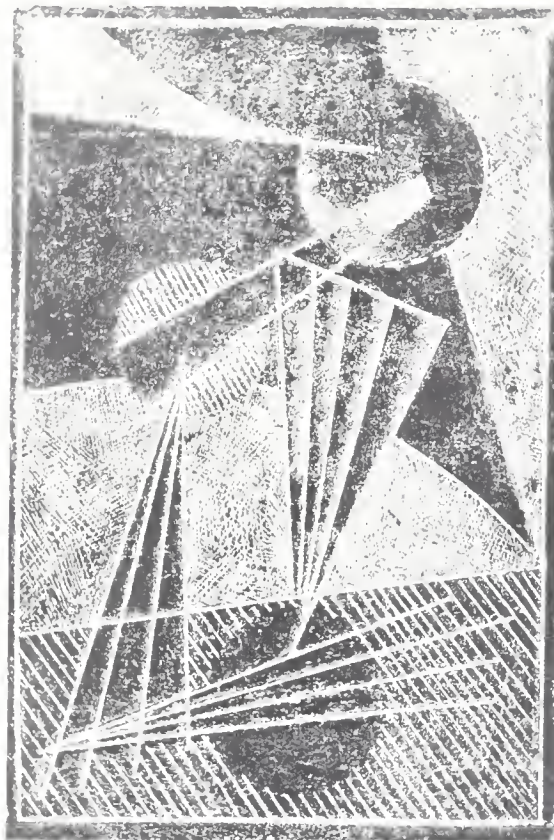
While in the lamp designs for the Café Pittoresque the transition from painting to real space was conditioned by real objects, the 'white sculptures' represent a move towards real space according to the single-minded logic of the experiments with abstract form.²

In April 1919, thirty-eight of Rodchenko's works, all produced in 1918, were put on show at the 10th State Exhibition in Moscow.³ The catalogue of the exhibition included brief statements by all the participants (*Doc. 4*), preceded by six epigraphs from M. Stirner, A. Kruchenykh, U. Uitmen and O. Veningerkh.⁴

During those years the aesthetico-formal experiments of Rodchenko were increasingly attracting the attention of young architects dissatisfied with the predominance of Neoclassicism and in search of creative innovation. In Rodchenko they saw not only a painter who had looked for a way out of 'left-wing' painting into the world of objects, but also someone who had moved on to design of the surrounding habitat with all its real objects. By the end of 1919 this mutual attraction led Rodchenko to start working with a group of architects belonging to Zhivskulptarkh.⁵ Before moving on to an analysis of this period in Rodchenko's career, it is worth taking a brief look at the situation in the field of architecture before the formation of Zhivskulptarkh.



Linoleum no. 36



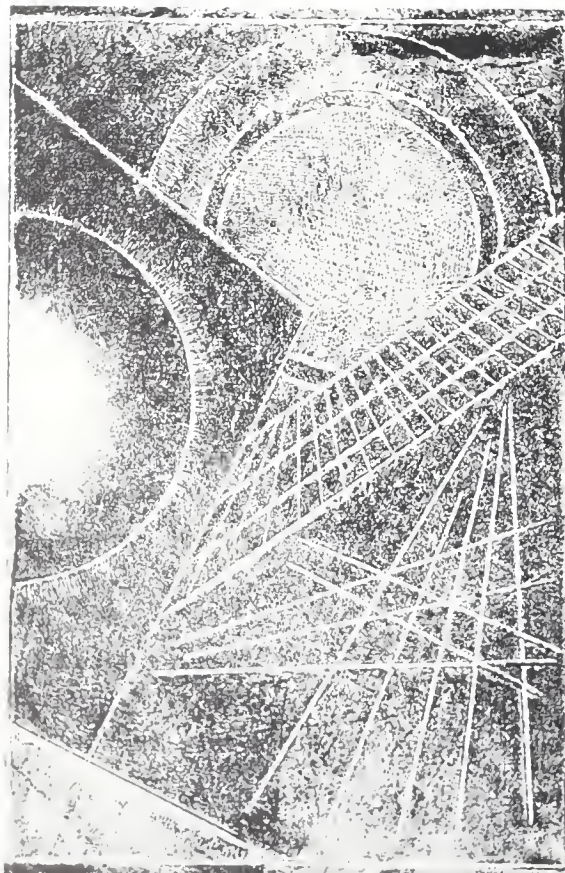
Linoleum no. 33.

Series of engravings on linoleum, 1919. 16.5 x 22.5.

Frontispiece for a series of engravings. Linoleum no. 32. Artist's proof.



Linoleum no. 29.



Notes

1 A. Rodchenko, *Laboratornoe prokhozhenie cherez iskusstvo zhivopisi i konstruktivno—prostranstvennye formy k industrial'noi initsiative* (The experimental route towards industrial initiative, through pictorial art and constructive—spatial forms), 1917-22. Manuscript. V.A. Rodchenko Archives.

2 In 1922, referring to the period of his 'preparation', Rodchenko spoke of his series of 'white sculptures' as follows: 'In the first place they signified the abandonment of painting for the move towards real space. Tatlin had not yet made up his mind to take this step and had constructed counter-reliefs which were still attached to walls and like paintings could not be looked at from all sides.'

Ibid.

3 In the exhibition catalogue, Rodchenko's works were divided into two groups: the works from the first and those from the second half of 1918.

The first comprised:

— four works: 'Rigid fixed construction of areas of colour. Simple construction of colour. Technique.'

— two works: 'Separation of colour from form. (For the first time colour is freed from form.)'

— three works: 'Colour on ovals. The colour is applied independently not to the surfaces but to the ovals. The colour slides onto the ovals. Varieties of technique and of colour on the same surfaces.'

The second group comprised:

— thirteen works: 'Concentration of colour — The finally free colour is an end in itself. Luminescence of colour. The light of colour. Technique of colour.'

— ten works: 'Abstraction of colour. Fading (without object, without colour, without light).'

— two works: 'Abstract white sculpture.'

— four works: 'Abstract coloured sculpture.'

— 'Design for the monument to Olga Rozanova.'

Catalogue of the 10th State Exhibition: *Bespredmetnoe iskusstvo i suprematizm* (Non-objective art and Suprematism), Moscow 1919, pp. 26-28.

4 Ibid., pp. 28-30.

5 In English the abbreviation would correspond to 'Pictsculptarch'.

Romanticist-symbolist researches in architecture



Project for airport, 1918.

In 1918, two subsections of architecture were opened within the Izo section of Narkompros, the Commissariat of Enlightenment, that of Moscow and that of St Petersburg, with I. Zholtovsky and L. Ilin (and later on A. Belograd) in charge respectively. Gradually serious disputes arose within the Izo section between the artists 'of the left' and traditionalist architects (the 'Classicists') belonging to the subsections of architecture. As a result the Commissar of Narkompros, Lunacharsky, decided in the spring of 1919 to set up an autonomous section of architecture (the Artistic Section of Architecture) with Zholtovsky at its head. An architectural studio was set up within the section, which Zholtovsky saw as an important tool for the forging of an architectural policy that could be extended to the whole of the republic.

In this way a state of conflict grew up between the various people responsible for artistic policy within Narkompros in different sectors of the art.

Lunacharsky wanted to entrust direction of the artistic centre of architecture to the Classicists, convinced that the future of architecture lay in that direction.⁶ In the years immediately following the Revolution, then, the Classicists assumed a guiding role in the sector of architecture and attempted to exercise control over the researches of various architects.

In 1919 the Artistic Section of Architecture of Narkompros held a series of competitions — for a crematorium, a Communist Party headquarters, a school and several fountains — that were won almost exclusively by projects that conformed to Neoclassical taste.

As well as the initiatives by the Section of Architecture, competitions were held and schemes drawn up for small-scale architectural forms — cloisters, rostrums, etc. — by the Subsection of Artistic Work in the Izo section of Narkompros, in which Rodchenko also took part. These competitions tended to pick out the projects which presented the most innovative features.

However, innovative research in the field of architecture was almost exclusively under the control of the Izo section of Narkompros. It was within this section that groups (such as Zhivskulptarkh, Inkhuk and others) were formed and began to operate along the lines of the new architectural tendency that had evolved out of collaboration with 'left-wing' artists.

During the immediate post-Revolutionary period, Soviet architects were faced with formidable building problems. The new patterns of living had to find suitable expression in new types of housing such as shared houses, condominiums and centres of collective housing. The political struggle being carried out by the working class to build a new machinery of state and reconstruct the entire social and administrative system extended to the building sector as well. On the whole, the early projects were fairly well handled, in that they gave the right amount of weight to different functions of the new system of public services for workers. In the same structure, space was set aside for social events, centres for cultural and educational activity and mobilization of the masses. Apart from providing a variety of spaces and functions in a single complex, the new community building also had to be grandiose. Its architectural structure had to reflect to some extent the actual model of living in those heroic years, had to suggest the active participation of the Revolutionary masses. Man came to form a part of a collective organism that was always in movement, advancing, meeting, marching in columns. The projects of the first social bodies, such as large open spaces for demonstrations, huge halls, broad squares, stages and platforms for mass meetings, gigantic flights of steps, and so on, were all inspired by these ideals.

The lack of any genuine building activity in the years immediately after the Revolution favoured the sector of experimental design and competitions. This

⁶ Explaining his attitude with regard to this section, he wrote in 1920 that he had broken with the Izo section 'where a tense atmosphere of left-wing research and artistic aspirations predominated, the sector of architecture' because in his opinion 'architecture does not stand up to advanced research. Where architecture is concerned, the basis should lie essentially in a correct interpretation of the Classical tradition.' In *Novyi mir* (New World), no. 9, 1966, p. 239.

lack of building work meant that the development which was taking place within architecture had virtually no external expression.

A highly important role was played in this early phase by the researches on symbolic dynamism, which did not involve the adoption of precise criteria of construction and artistic forms, but merely a new road of development for Soviet architecture as an alternative to Neoclassical traditionalism. In their search for new forms and structures which would mirror different modes of being, such as calm, movement, surging forward, and so on, the Symbolists exploited all the possibilities of the new technology with great creative freedom.

Symbolic dynamism, thanks to intense labours of research, was to a large extent responsible for the formulation of the two most important currents of innovation in the Soviet architecture of the twenties: Rationalism and Constructivism. The advocates of these currents had understood that it was impossible to solve strictly functional as well as artistic problems without having first devised a new form.

Among all the problems of building, be they functional foundations, construction materials, artistic models, that of architectural form, whose elaboration lay at the base of the entire creative process, remained the most critical.

The Neoclassicists did their best to analyse the most advanced attainments of the great architects of the past. In this way they assimilated and expressed the old methods of composition, but even the most gifted, such as Zholtovsky, did no more than study the laws of artistic construction laid down by Classicism.

Yet in the formative period of the new architectural current, such an attitude towards form was inadmissible and other research opened up new roads. In the opinion of many, the element of greatest novelty lay in a dynamism of composition in the building and in the suppression of decorative features (as advocated in the constructive theory of I. Golosov), while preserving the fundamentals of Neoclassical 'grammar'.

But the most advanced artistic trends, including Rationalism and Constructivism, overcame the limits of the old-fashioned 'grammar' of composition in just this question of form.

The years between 1910 and 1920 saw a great surge in experimental laboratory research aimed at developing a new architecture. And it was in just this period that Rodchenko produced his architectural compositions and projects. Where did Rodchenko stand during this phase of transition from Neoclassicism to the new architecture? In their search for a new architectural form, the majority of architects who would later contribute to this renewal had first to set aside the notions they had assimilated at school, where they had learned to work 'in styles'. But as a painter Rodchenko had not had this experience; the fact that he moved on to architecture at a time when he had already completed the phase of graphical and pictorial research and was ready to experiment with spatial constructions should not be underestimated. It explains the artistic and compositional originality of his architectural designs and the total lack of any stylization according to the tastes of the past, as is evident from his very first project.

The first architectural project

In the 1919 competition for a kiosk for the distribution of newspapers and propaganda publications, held by the Subsection of Artistic Work in the Izo section of Narkompros, the first prizes were awarded to designs by Rodchenko and Krinsky. These designs were completely different from the ones by Neoclassicists that had won a competition held by the Artistic Section of Architecture.

Rodchenko's kiosk (in three variants) was one of the earliest projects in which, on top of a total rejection of eclecticism and stylization, the aesthetico-formal researches of 'left-wing' painting were applied to a new architectural model.

Rodchenko's design for the kiosk involved a composition on three storeys struc-

- 7 'Flat' symbolic dynamism (composition formed out of flat intersecting surfaces) was applied in the designs for the staging of festivals (N. Altman) and theatrical scenery (A. Vesnin). In the architectural field the most revealing designs and sketches were those by Rodchenko and Krinsky.



Design for a newspaper kiosk and (above) variant, 1919. Paper, coloured Indian ink, 51 x 35.



8 *The project influenced a whole range of architectural research as well as designs for architectural structures on a small scale that were eventually realized, such as the kiosk—pavilion of the Izvestiya Tsik displayed at the Moscow agricultural show in 1923 (by A. Exter, B. Gladkov and V. Mukhina): a kiosk with a platform on the roof and a vertical column, on which slogans were inscribed.*

Many years later Ilya Ehrenburg wrote: 'Rodchenko had made Cubist designs of kiosks for the sale of newspapers. At a distance of forty years and in different countries I have seen kiosks, exhibition stands, even houses, that recall, naturally on a smaller scale and handled with undue attention to aesthetics, those old designs of his.' L. Volkov-Lannit, Alexander Rodchenko, Moscow 1968, p. 184.

9 *In the works of this period the influence of 'left-wing' painting and above all of Rodchenko's aesthetico-formal experiments is evident. Krinsky himself, in conversation with the*

Variant of the design for a kiosk.



tured around a central pivot. At the bottom, the upper part of the kiosk proper can be transformed into a speaker's platform, while the intermediate section is used for the display of propaganda posters; the upper part is also designed to house a clock with a dial on three faces. The composition (unlike the rest of the first spatial series) becomes lighter towards the top and is made up of free flat surfaces (for bill-posting) that succeed one another, or intersect. The composition of the kiosk has an internal dynamism of its own. Traditional architectural forms are completely absent, with 'decorative' features being supplied instead by the posters, the clock and the colour.⁷

Rodchenko's kiosk did not pass unobserved. The variants of the project were put on show in two exhibitions, in 1919 and 1920, and were later published in the magazine *Kino-fot* (*Cinema photography*) in 1922.⁸

Synthesis of painting, sculpture and architecture (Zhivskulptarkh)

In the early years after the Revolution, a centre of innovative artistic research came into existence under the aegis of the Izo section of Narkompros, completely independent of the Artistic Section of Architecture. In May 1919 a commission was set up in the Izo section (initially together with the Subsection of Sculpture and then with the Subsection of Artistic Work) to deal with problems of synthesis between painting, sculpture and architecture.

In the beginning the Commission was made up of one sculptor (B. Korolev) and seven architects (N. Ladovsky, V. Krinsky, V. Fidman, A. Rukhlyadev, Ya. Raikh, N. Istselenov and S. Dombrovsky). This was in fact the first artistic collective of innovative architects, formed outside the Artistic Section of Architecture directed by the confirmed 'Classicist' Zholtovsky. Young architects, dissatisfied with the approach prescribed at that time by Zholtovsky, were looking for new stylistic channels, trying to smuggle the aesthetic and formal break-throughs of 'left-wing' figurative painting into architecture.

The long-term aim of the Commission was that of creating a synthesis between painting, sculpture and architecture, combining the attainments of these arts in the fields of colour, plasticism and construction. The creative work of the Commission, at this early stage, consisted in devising an experimental project for a new type of building to be used for mass events (Temple of Communion between Nations). No precise programme was laid down and each member of the Commission was free to experiment both with the form and the type of building. A variety of solutions were put forward: tall buildings, structures with huge rooms, stages with open-air amphitheatres, terraces, covered galleries, etc.

During the early phase of the Commission's work, Korolev, a representative of the Cubist tendency in sculpture, had a great deal of influence on the creative work of architects.

A decision was taken to include painters on the Commission as well, and one of the first to be invited by unanimous accord was Rodchenko. His works, on show in the 1919 exhibitions, were familiar to all the young architects on the Commission. His experiments with abstract form were in any case very close to their own aesthetico-formal research.

At the end of 1919, when the Commission was enlarged to include the painters Rodchenko and Shevchenko (and later on the architect G. Mapu as well), it assumed the name Zhivskulptarkh, meaning 'Synthesis between painting, sculpture and architecture'. In this second phase of the Commission's activity, during the first half of 1920, experimental designs were studied for buildings with new social functions: communal houses (*Kommunal'nye doma*), Soviet head quarters (*Sovdep*) and others.

The experiments with abstract form and the new architecture

It is important to emphasize the influence of Rodchenko's experiments on the architectural research carried out by members of Zhivskulptarkh, for several architects from this group would later create one of the most prestigious trends of Soviet architecture: Rationalism.

It will also be necessary to speak of the direct influence exerted by the experiments of 'left-wing' painters, and therefore of Rodchenko too, over the Rationalists' attitude towards creativity and above all over the psychological method of teaching worked out by Ladovsky, a method that was applied up until the end of the twenties in the faculty of architecture of Vkhutemas.

In Ladovsky's view it was important that students should devote themselves, right from the start, to the study of composition on the basis of psycho-physiological perception. Students had to study the geometrical properties of the volumetric form, the physio-mechanical properties of the form in terms of the concepts of mass and weight and mass and equilibrium, the elements of construction, dynamics, rhythm and vertical and horizontal relations and proportions. They also had to study how to construct in space, analyse the relationship between volume and space and understand the laws of equilibrium. The elaboration of each theme provided for the subsequent carrying out of two tasks: one abstract (a scheme of abstract composition) and one productive (solution of the same problems of composition in the design of a concrete object). So we see that, as part of the process of their research, these architects-cum-innovators were attempting in their aesthetico-formal experiments to abandon not only the forms of the past but also the traditional professional criteria. All this was only possible at an initial stage, when the architectural form was still seen as an abstract one. Only on this level of abstraction was it possible to carry on research into the realm of form without fear of any stylistic influence or association.

This was the very road that Rodchenko chose to take in his aesthetical and formal research. His experiments with abstract form influenced not only the projects of innovative architects but also the method by which they carried out their experiments.

At that time there were few who understood that, in order to create a new language in architecture, it was absolutely necessary to set aside traditional means and methods in art and to carry aesthetico-formal research onto the level of abstract form. Hence the absolute necessity of such a criterion of choice had to be demonstrated.¹⁰

If one analyses the experiments with abstract form carried out by architects (especially in the years 1919-23) and compares them with the same experiments made by painters (above all with those of Rodchenko), it is impossible not to notice a fundamental difference in the sweep of their respective researches into aesthetics and form. The architects, however hard they tried to get away from concrete and technical problems, always stayed within the limits of the creative sphere typical of architecture, whereas many painters broke out of the confines of their own profession, shifting their attention at times towards architecture and the applied decorative arts (the then infant field of design), at times towards the arts of a temporal dimension.

The problem, today, is to make a correct evaluation of the experiments with abstract form conducted over this period. It would be naive to try and explain the creative work of experimental painters in those years as an effort to create a common 'ceiling' for the aesthetics and form of the new stylistic trend in general. It is well known that when innovative experiments in the field of art get

author in 1970-71, recalled Rodchenko's influence on a whole series of his works that date back to the years 1920-21.

¹⁰ In May 1921, one of the leaders of Rationalism, Krinsky (who had personally and positively assimilated Rodchenko's experiments with abstract form), spoke of just this necessity: 'Usually a form is defined on the basis of its utility, if that is, it is intended for a precise and concrete use...

'We cannot imagine any functional form if it has not first been defined as form... In other words any definition of functionality is at the same time a definition of form...

'We give a form to everything that we make. Thanks to form we find our bearings in the "outside" world. If we do not first define the form we cannot create any object, for we will never be able to understand it.

'But our concept of form depends on a number of precise qualities... The line, the plane, the geometrical shape (sphere, cylinder, cone) are eternal elements. They are the laws of our way of thinking and perceiving. Means of orientation in the world, rules of perception laid down by us...

'...The problem leads us to the abstract form, to a form that has no precise function. We define this form on the basis of its sole purpose, that of interacting with man. We have seen, however, that the real form also interacts, otherwise we would have no idea of it. But the abstract form interacts and nothing else. We know too that as art it interacts only with its "content", i.e. through a process of thought that leads to particular conclusions. But which ones? Its purpose in architecture, sculpture and painting is to lead to the problem of perception of space. The purpose of the abstract form is a purely theoretical one. That is, a theory of form in general. A scientific discipline of the process of thought in space. To apply, or adapt the abstract form to reality is impossible. The cube, the cylinder, the cone are not forms but concepts, by whose help we arrive at a given concrete form.

It is not an idea given a priori... It is our way of thinking in real space. Any abstract form resolved is our attempt to resolve space.'

V. Krinsky, from his Inkhuk report, 'Put arkhitektury' (The path of architecture), in *Mastera sovetskoi arkhitektury ob arkhitekturye* (Masters of Soviet architecture on architecture), Moscow 1975, vol. 2, pp. 116-17.

taken over by fashion, their original purpose is often changed, at least in the eyes of the ordinary observer, and they end up a long way away from the initial creative ideal. This was the fate of the aesthetico-formal experiments carried out by those painters 'of the left' who had turned to architecture and design, in the attempt to create a common stylistic and artistic basis for art as a whole.

Some art scholars and critics view the historical process of 'left-wing' art as a single line of development, from Cubism to the various trends in modern abstract art, and therefore see the experiments with abstract form undertaken by painters in the second two decades of the century as a stage in the development of abstract art itself. Such an attitude, however, does not take into consideration the contribution made by these experiments to the formation of the new architecture, of design and of all the stylistic trends of the 20th century. It also remains to be explained why, after the brief period between 1921 and 1923, many of the painters involved in this experimentation moved away from painting to devote themselves entirely to industrial art, the art of propaganda and architecture.

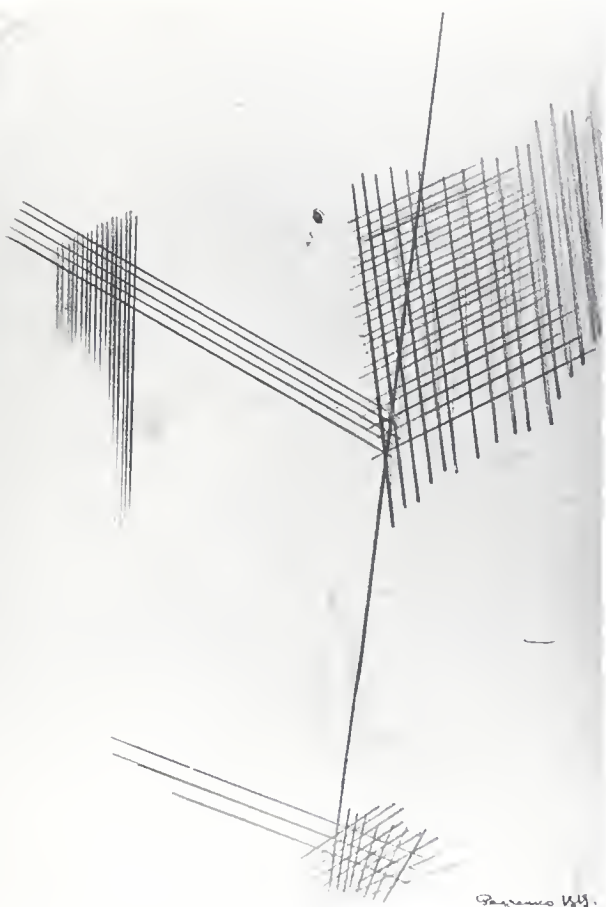
The facts indicate that for this group of artists experiments with abstract form were not so much a stage in the development of contemporary abstract art as a step in the direction of architecture and design. The period of experiments with abstract form was concluded for these artists over the decade from 1913 to 1922.

Of course many artists considered the transition from figurative Cubism to abstract compositions to be the logical *conclusion* of a phase in painting: figurative Cubism was merely an *analytical* stage in preparation for the abstract, which was taken to be the conclusive *synthetic* stage in the development of 'left-wing' figurative art.

But for another group of 'left-wing' painters, abstract compositions represented not a conclusive *synthetic* stage in the development of figurative art, but a step taken during the preliminary experiments on abstract form in the move from painting to architecture. This is the attitude which characterizes the creative work and theoretical declarations of Rodchenko. Throughout the whole of his 'preparatory' period, Rodchenko took pains to stress that he saw his experiments as an *analysis* of aesthetico-formal laws and not as a *synthesis* of some new art or the establishment of artistic trends within figurative art.

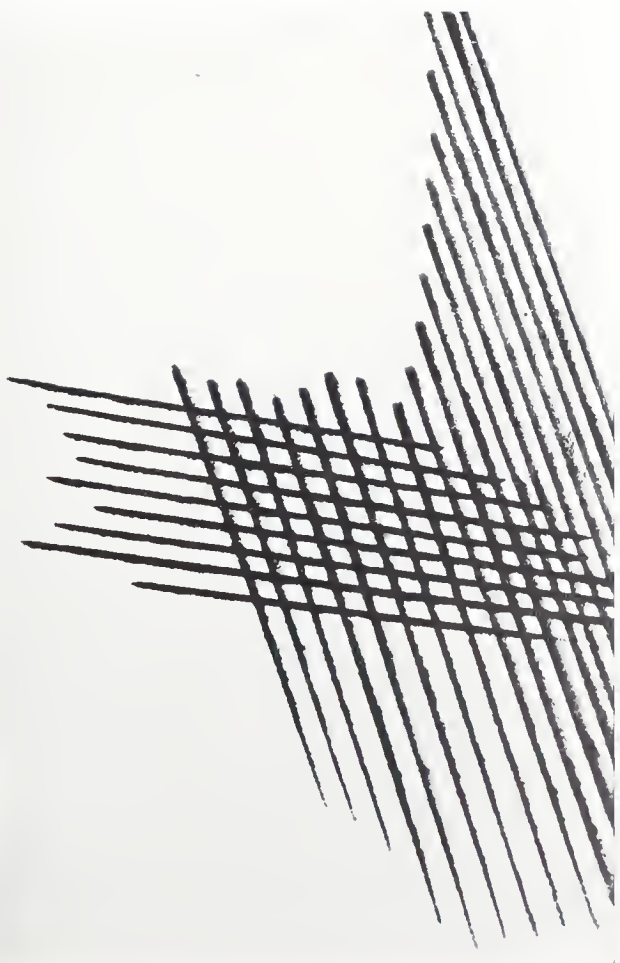
As far back as April 1919, he wrote in the catalogue to the 10th State Exhibition, where his pictorial and spatial abstract compositions were on show: 'The motive force is not synthesis, but analysis.'

At a meeting of Zhivskulptarkh in October of the same year (at which he was accepted as a member of the Commission for *synthesis* between painting, sculpture and architecture), he came to the conclusion, once he had been apprised of the Commission's methods and aims, that 'the work of the Commission is not so much one of synthesis as of analysis'.



Composition, 1919. Paper, pencil, 29 x 23.

Linear construction, 1919. Oil, 67.5 x 45.



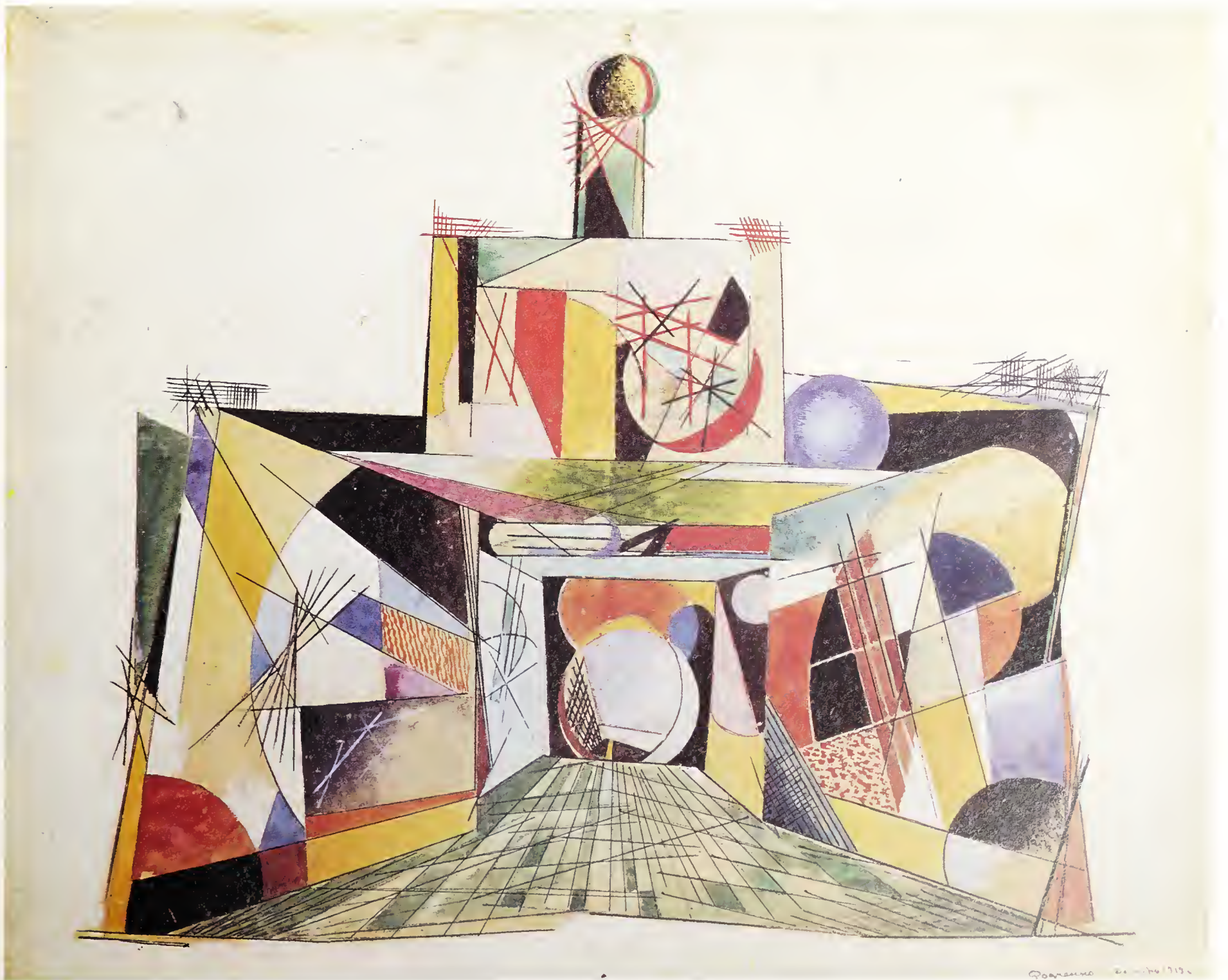


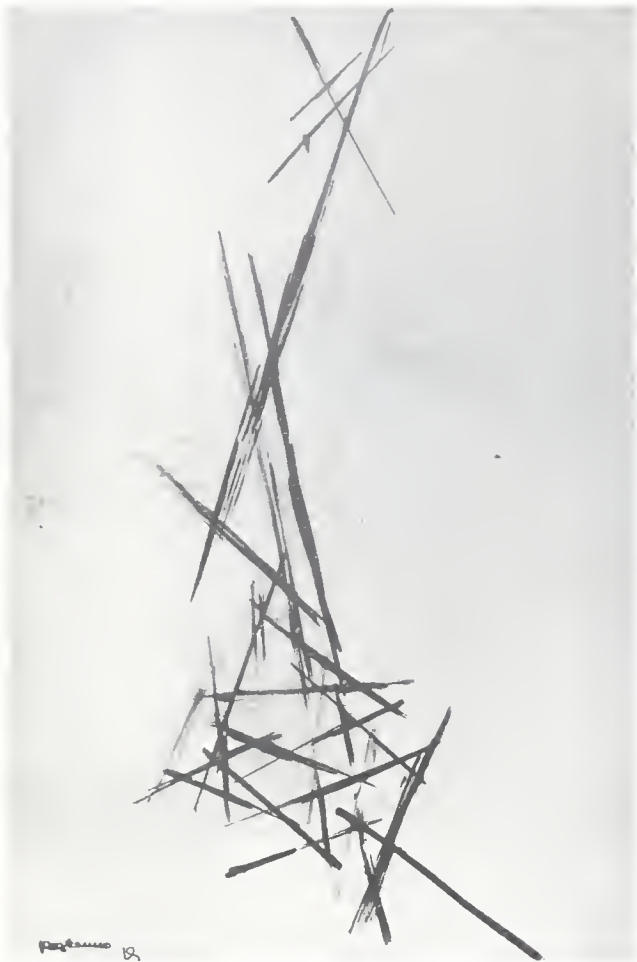
Sketches for the Temple of Communion between Nations

On previous page, to the left: *Linear construction*, 1920. Plywood, oil, 67 × 44.5. Above: *Architectonic composition*, 1919. Paper, Indian ink, 36 × 22. Below: *Linoleum no. 1*, 1919. 14 × 9.5. Bottom: *Variety*, 1919. Paper, Indian ink, gouache 37 × 46.

In 1919-20 Rodchenko repeated his early experiment, the one he had made while designing the lamps for the Café Pittoresque, of abandoning 'left-wing' painting for intermediate compositions, although this time he was not designing an object, but a project of architecture. He first prepared a whole series of abstract architectural constructions, on the basis of which he then drew up concrete designs.

When he became a member of Zhivskulptarkh on 18 November 1919, Rodchenko immediately started to work on experimental architectural designs, in

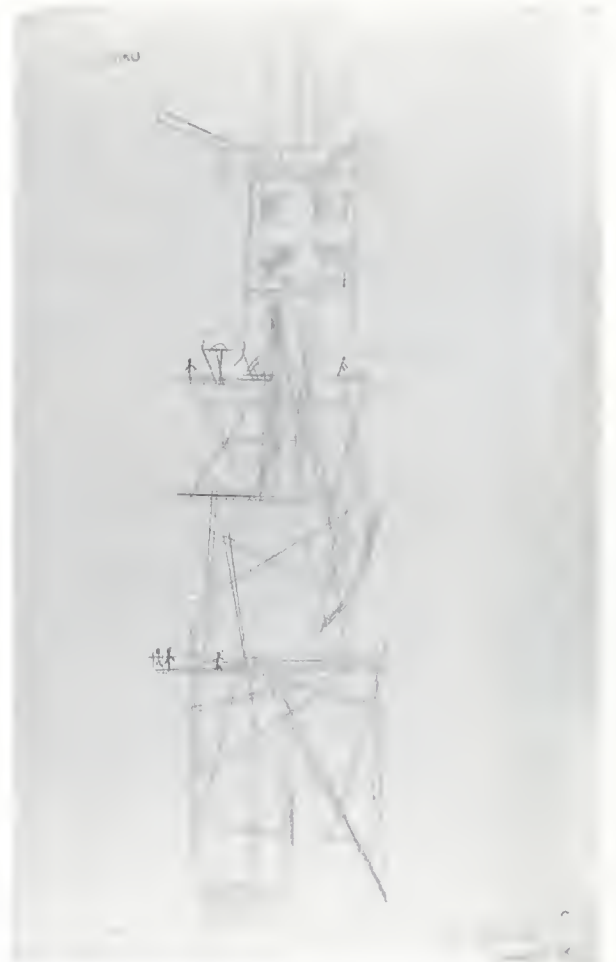




Architectonic composition with linear hinges, 1919. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 x 22.

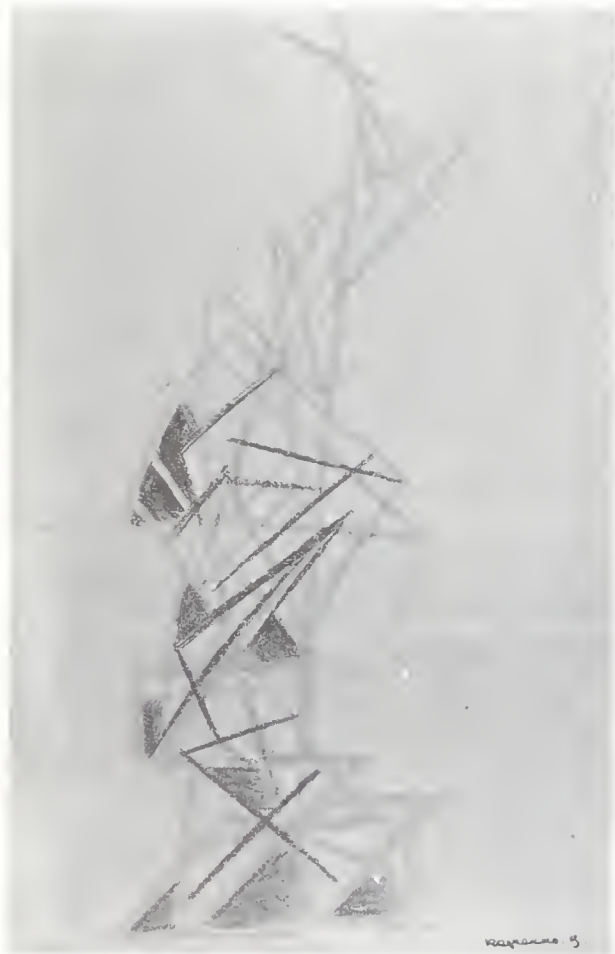


Project for a building with observatory, 1919. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 x 22.

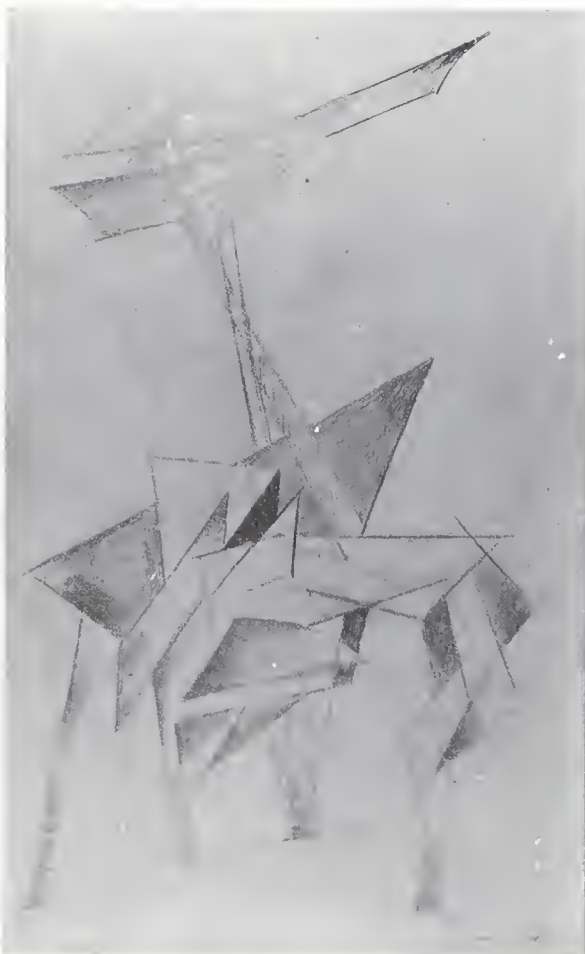


Plan for a multistorey building, 1919. Paper, pencil, 36 x 22.

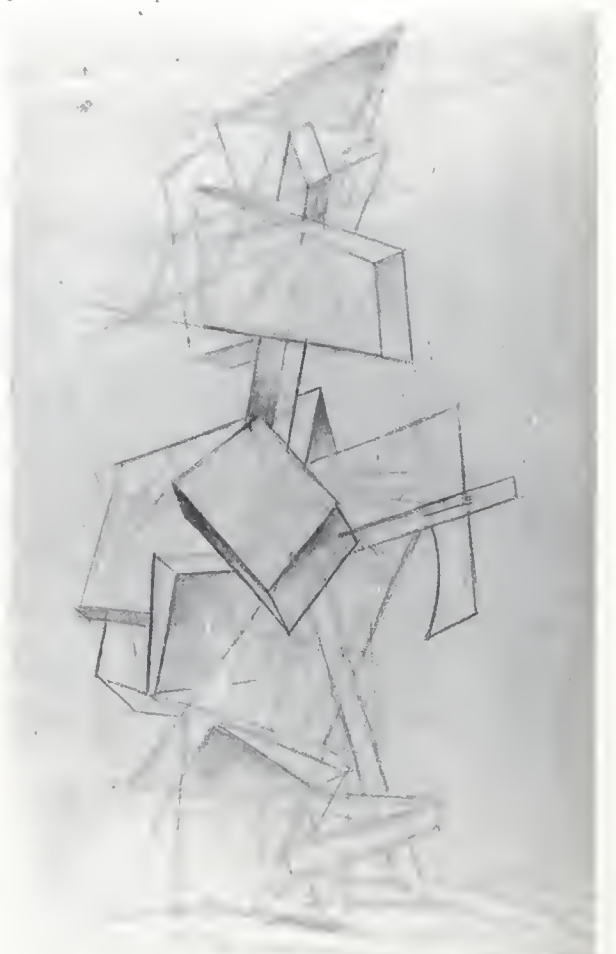
Architectonic composition with closed hinges, 1919. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 x 22.



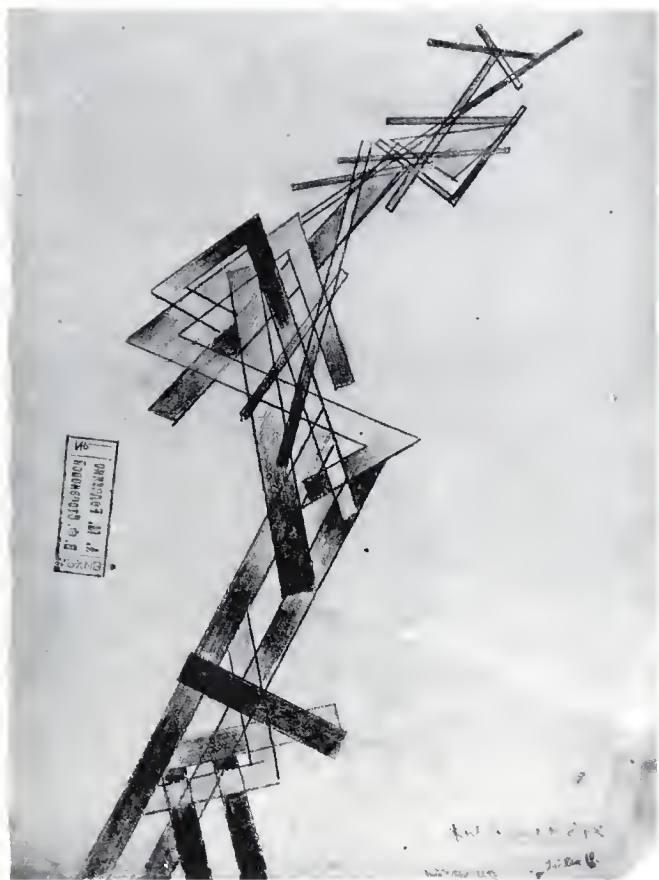
Architectonic composition with interlocking surfaces, 1920. Paper, pencil, 36 x 22.



Architectonic composition with solid elements, 1919. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 x 22.



- 11 This sketch by Rodchenko undoubtedly influenced Krinsky's famous skyscraper project (1922-23).



Architectural composition with flat hinges, 1919. Paper, pencil, 36 × 22.

search of a new architectural form. He put a great deal of effort into reviewing what had already been done by the other members of the Commission (before Rodchenko joined, the Commission had met some fifteen times). In November 1919 he presented a series of sketches of the experimental project for the Temple of Communion between Nations.

To start with he drew his sketches according to the principle of the dynamic treatment of surfaces, characteristic of his design for the kiosk as well. On one sketch he drew a stage, on another a tall construction terminating in a gallery that resembled an observatory with a cupola and open dais. His effort to avoid any association whatsoever with traditional architectural forms is obvious. Many features of the construction are clearly derived from the design for the kiosk. The artist conceived a building with a high and complex structure, whose supporting element was a central vertical axis. This type of construction seemed totally new for those years, presupposing an unusual external façade made up of volumes, platforms and flat surfaces set into the vertical pivot.

In another sketch Rodchenko, while retaining the structure of the large edifice, replaced the flat surfaces with vertical elements arranged in such a way as to give prominence to the different storeys of the building.

The third sketch, again dated November 1919, indicates a further development of the same theme. The principle of construction is still based on determination of a single vertical support, but greater accent is placed on the external treatment of surfaces, with vertical, horizontal and diagonal load-bearing elements. The vertical structure (taller than a ten-storey house) is formed out of three upward-sloping galleries, each of which ends in an open space. The top two galleries house astronomical instruments.¹¹

Another sketch made by Rodchenko in November 1919 is that of the 'station': a perspective view of the lower part of a gallery whose roofing rests on elegant supports. (It was probably intended as a detail for the Temple of Communion between Nations.)

In the same year, whilst still active in Zhivskulptarkh, Rodchenko made a second group of studies for architectonic compositions that were more dynamic in nature. The design of the kiosk and the sketches of large-scale constructions, despite the outer dynamism of their forms, convey an impression of stability; their dynamism derives from the vertical support which is strengthened and lengthened towards the top.

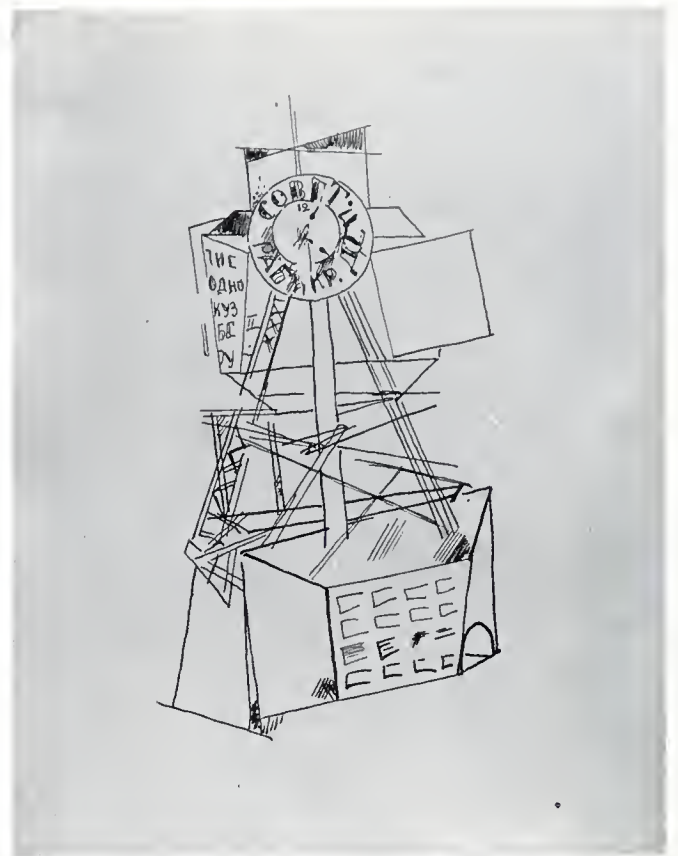
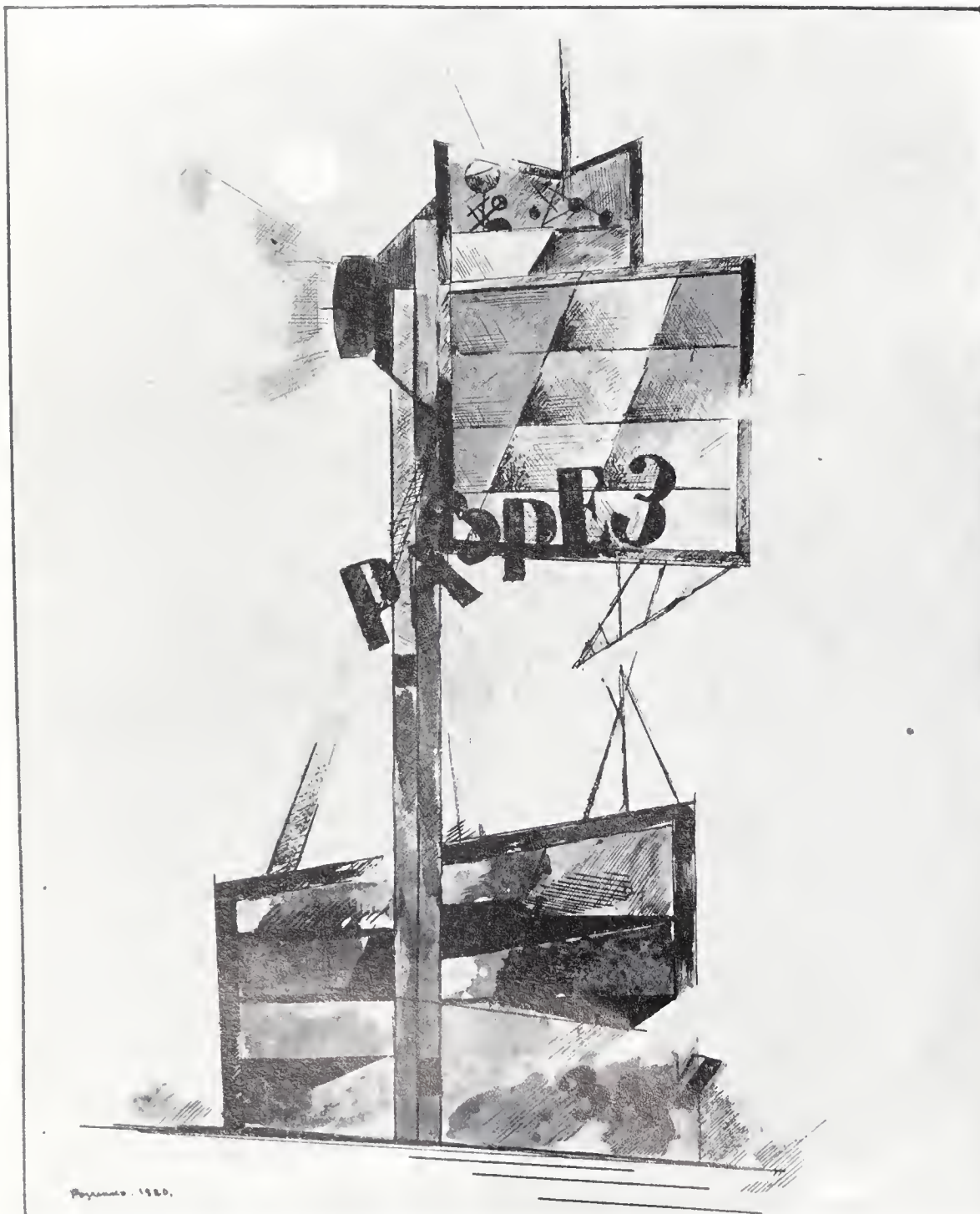
The second group of sketches (one of which bears the date 20 December 1919) is completely different. The dynamics of their composition are rendered in a more straightforward manner and are thrust in an upwards direction by means of diagonal buttresses. Taken overall they are experimental architectonic compositions in which Rodchenko was looking at both the comprehensive structure of the building and new forms of architecture. He intersects flat surfaces, utilizes linear and plane supports and inserts vertical structures. One of the sketches depicts a large building in which the 'dynamism' of the multistorey structure harmonizes diagonally with massive protruding planes. It should be stressed that all the sketches in this group, in spite of the extreme complexity of the architectonic structures, display a remarkable harmony of composition.

The House of Soviets project

In 1920 in Zhivskulptarkh Rodchenko drew up his project for the *Sovdep*, the public building for the new organs of power. For some time after the Revolution all designs for a House of Soviets attempted to create a new kind of building that would represent the power of the workers. It had to be the most important building in the city (set at its geometric centre) and have a very different appearance from public buildings of the past.

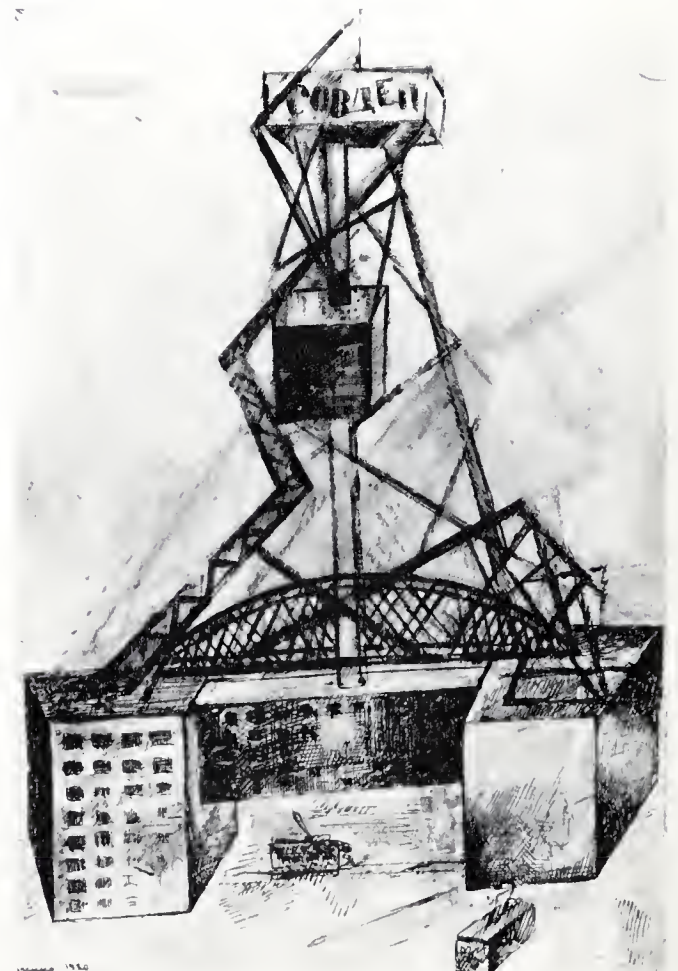
In his sketches Rodchenko tried to find new criteria of construction and to avoid any reference to traditional models. Three variants of the project exist, but without any progressive order in their execution. This is an important fact, since

Sovdep project. Section, 1920. Paper, watercolour, Indian ink, 26 x 21. Tretvakov State Gallery, Moscow



Sovdep project. Façade, 1920. Carbon paper, Indian ink, 32.5 x 26.

Sovdep project. Variant with lattice in segments, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, white lead, 26 x 21.



12 In the first variant of the project, the building is very similar, both from the point of view of composition and from that of technical solutions, to the kiosk design: a lower, compact section, of four storeys, above which rises on a square base a six-storey structure divided in two, on top of which is set a large clock. The two structures are linked by various kinds of lattices, buttresses and braces. The lower section houses a hall, while the second part of the upper structure is situated beneath the observatory. The lifts, which link the two structures, are housed in the vertical elements.

In the second variant of the project, the structure of the lower part of the building is much more complex. It is composed of two eight-storey blocks between which projects, at the level of the upper floors, a third four-storey block, supported by a lattice. This mass raised above the earth rests on a vertical support, into which are 'grafted' two blocks that rise above the city: a four-storey one, cubic in shape, in the middle and another higher one, of one or two storeys. The lower parts of the building are linked to the central and upper sections by supports of various kinds, diagonal and zig-zag, as well as by the lift.

The third variant of the project is very similar to the second. In the lower part of the building another four- to five-storey structure rises from the ground between the two large blocks, supported by lattices. Above the lower sections, two areas are 'grafted' onto the lift shaft: thus the central part turns out to be directly connected with the transverse block of the lower section, while the upper one is joined to the lower lateral blocks by inclined lattices.

13 While making an overall evaluation of his research into a new form of architecture at an

Sovdep project. Variant, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, gouache, 21 x 26.

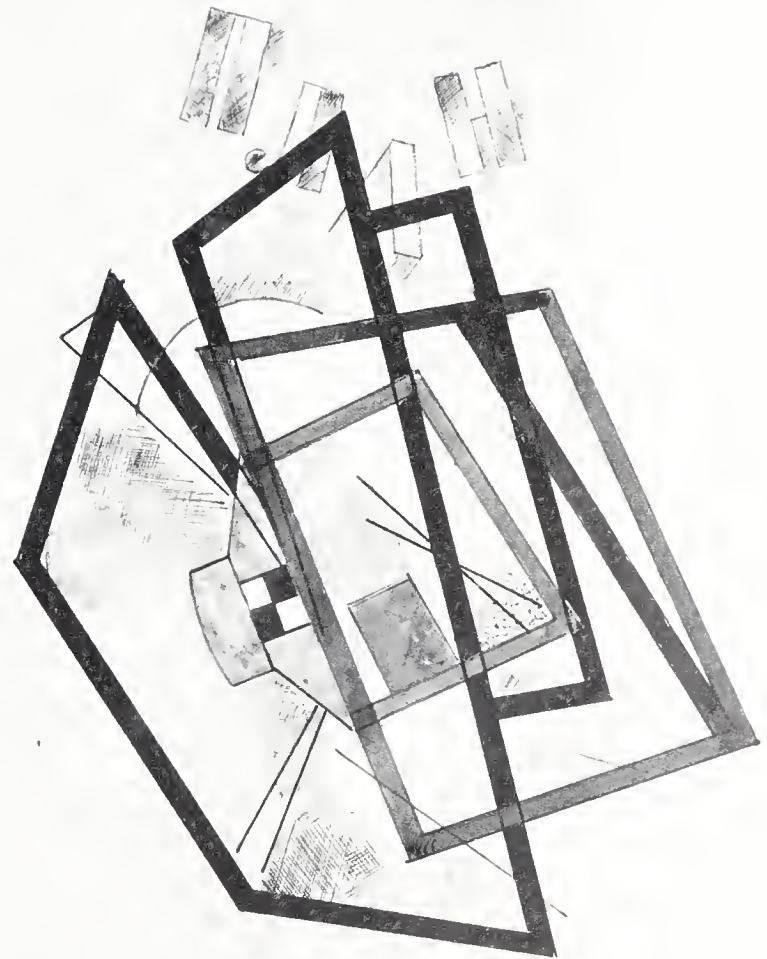
it was while he was working on this project that Rodchenko began to outline the concept of the 'top elevation' of the city.¹²

All three variants show how the artist, evincing little interest in the spaces and façades of the lower part of the building, which he dealt with in a functional manner by laying out rooms on an orthogonal grid, concentrated all his attention on an original handling of the upper part, which rose above the whole city.

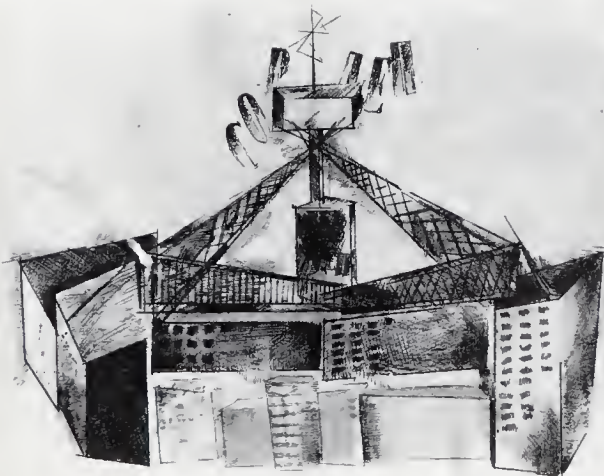
The idea of the 'top elevation' of the city

While he was working on the *Sovdep* design, Rodchenko began to interest himself in the much vaster project of a 'new city', starting out from the assumption that

Sovdep project. Plan, 1920. Paper, watercolour, Indian ink. Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow.



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'future architects would be looking upwards with greater and greater interest'.

In the past, according to Rodchenko, the structure of a city with its spaces and volumes was reminiscent of a pyramid with its point uppermost, set freely in the open. Later, in the modern city, came a predominance of regular volumes set alongside each other, while in the future buildings, in order to save space at their base, would resemble pyramids turned upside down. Only a minimal part of the building would be attached to the ground, with all the rest extending out into space. The city would be able to grow without altering its own planimetric structure, for the buildings set on the ground would serve as a base for architectural forms suspended and constructed in space. There would be an increase in usable areas above the city with masses slung between two buildings, held up by cantilevers or raised on slender vertical supports.

The upper level of the city, in Rodchenko's view, was bound to become the main object of interest for both architects and artists. The buildings, constructed on top of simple rectangular prisms ('boxes') resting on the ground, would become elements of an upper level of the city, a level characterized by complex forms and structures, a 'top elevation' where it would be necessary to provide a new series of towers, supporting frameworks and aerial means of transport.

This choice was confirmed, not only by the variants of the *Sovdep* project, but also by the sketches for reconstruction of the new city and by another two series of sketches completed in 1920.

In the first series of sketches, the upper level is examined as an integral part of the system of reconstruction of the city: linking elements suspended from lattices are slung as bridges between tower blocks; other slanting structures support, above the city, a zone that is reached by a spiral staircase.

The second series of sketches depicts some details of the upper level of the city. The buildings located on the lower level are merely represented as solid plinths for the light constructions above: resting on trestles and other basic structures, platforms, complex surfaces and transparent elements rise above the city.

The appearance of lattice structures in Rodchenko's designs is closely connected with the abstract compositions in the pictorial and graphic field that he produced in 1919. It was in just this period that Rodchenko was experimenting with the contrast between lines and planes, as can be seen from his 1919 album of engravings, in which the line is studied as element of construction and as autonomous form.

Rodchenko and the new architecture

Rodchenko was actively at work on architectural projects only during the two years 1919 and 1920. Over this short period he produced about a hundred works, including both designs and sketches. The contribution he made to the search for a new architectural form fell almost exclusively within the compass of Zhivskulptarkh.

The range of aesthetico-formal research carried out by members of Zhivskulptarkh, especially in the first ('sculptural') phase of the Commission's activity, was very broad. The Commission was influenced right from the beginning not only by the new aspirations of its members but also by the rejection of all aesthetical categories, including that of Neoclassicism. Their search for new means of expression was founded on a number of factors, including the legacy of the past (the Gothic for example), the rule of using different geometric volumes in composition, and associations with natural forms (rocks, vegetation). It was thought, in fact, that one of the distinguishing features of the new architectural model ought to be the introduction of as much dynamism as possible into its composition. The



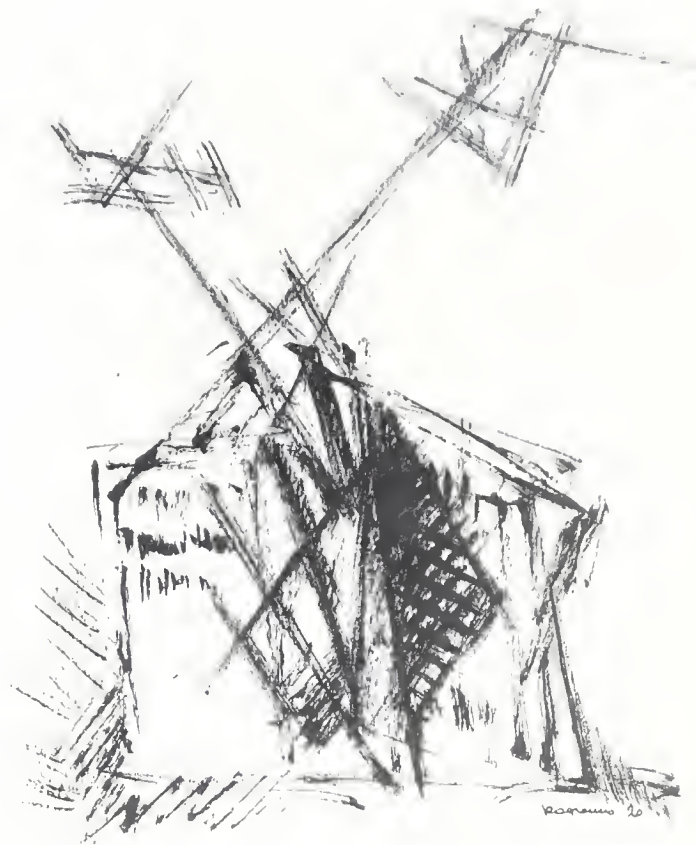
Project for the 'top elevation' of the city, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, dry brush, 40 × 32.

Project for the 'top elevation' of the city, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, dry brush, 26 × 21.



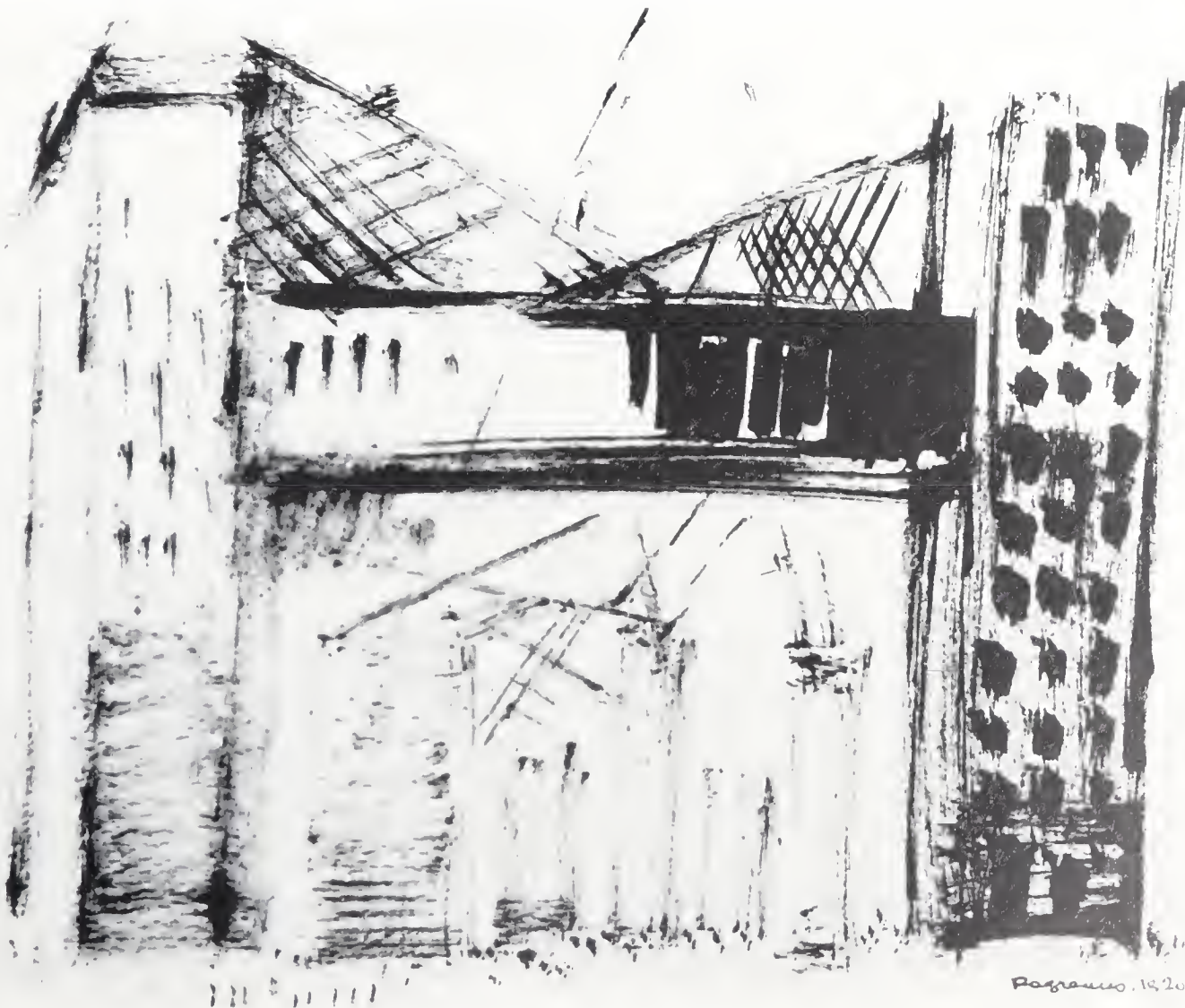


Project for the 'top elevation' of the city, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, dry brush, 26 x 21.

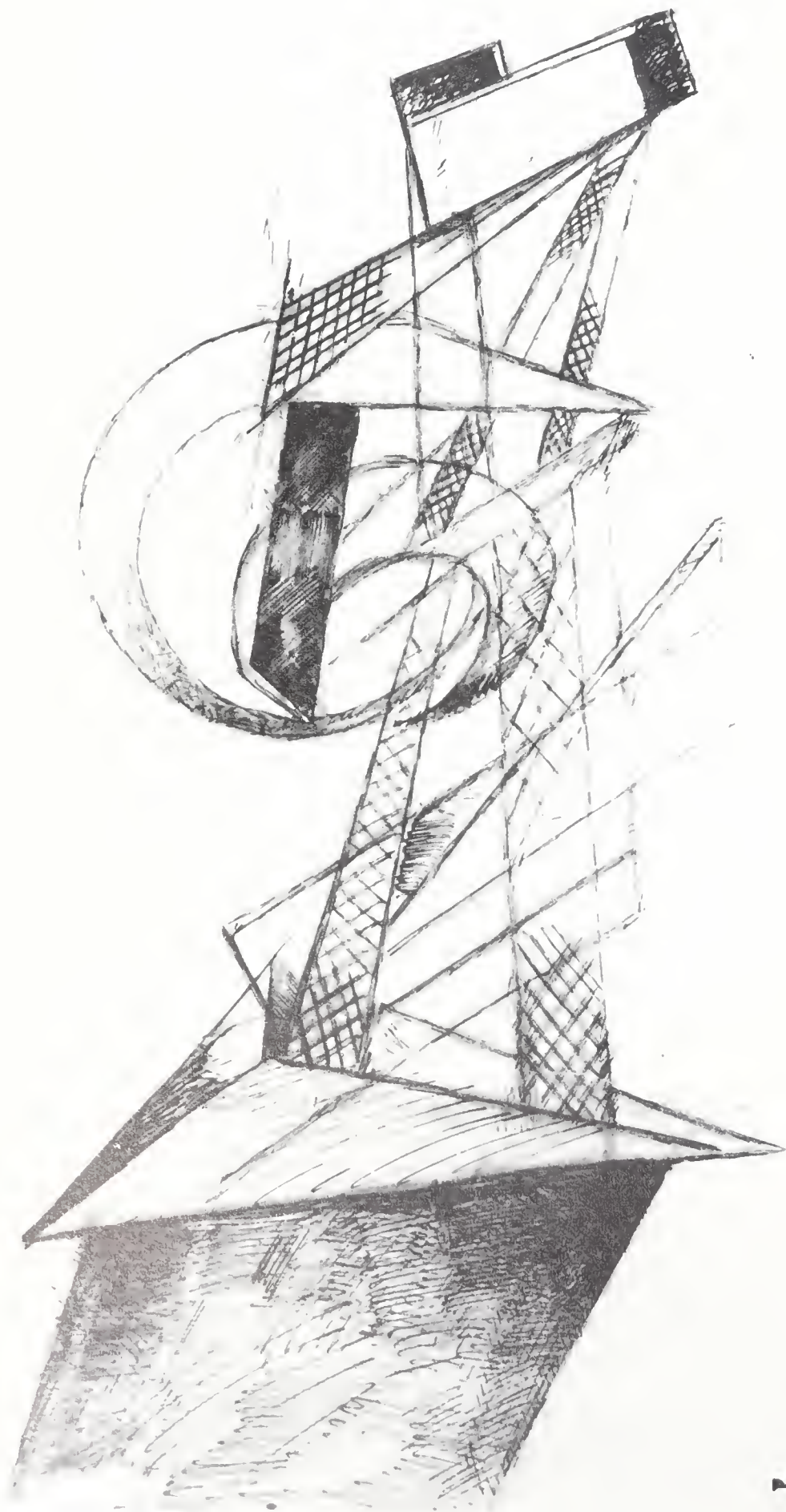


Project for the 'top elevation' of the city, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, dry brush, 26 x 21.

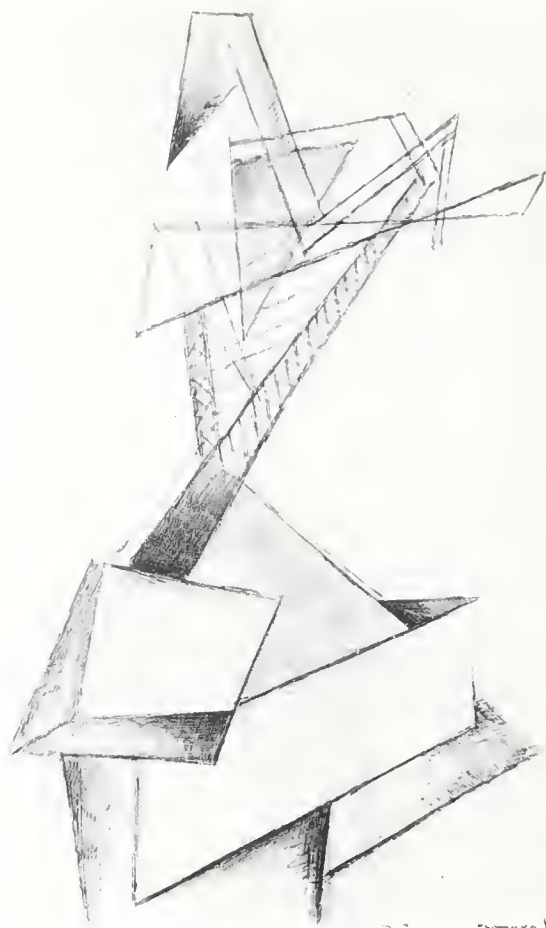
The upper level in the system for reconstruction of the city, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, dry brush, 21 x 26.



The upper level of the new city, 1920. Paper, pencil, Indian ink, 36 x 22

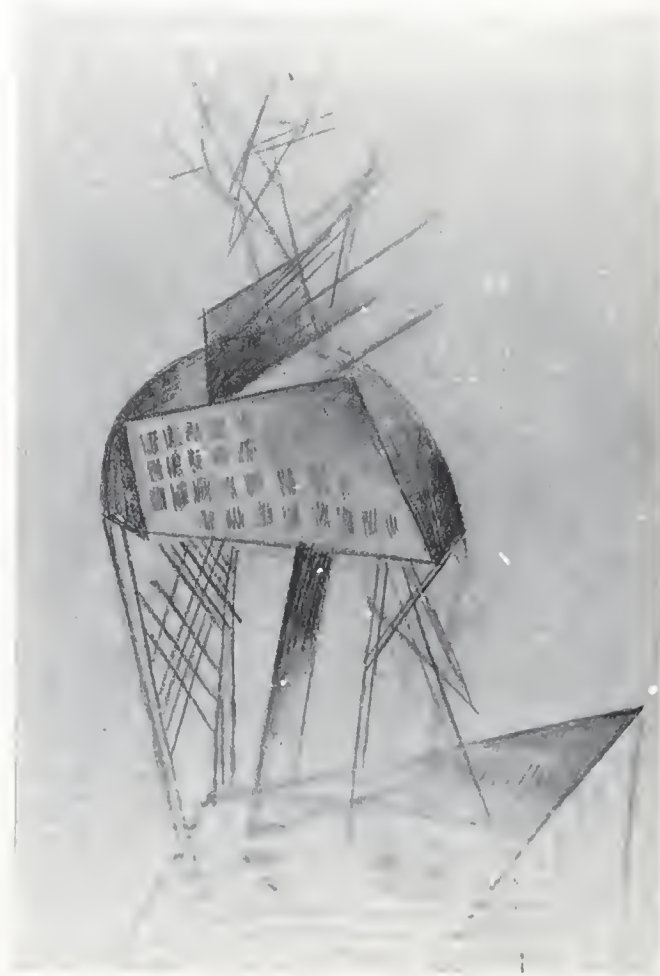


Rayenko 470



Fragment of an upper level of the city, 1920. Paper, pencil, Indian ink, 36 x 22.

The upper level of the new city, 1920. 36 x 22.





Plan for the 'top elevation' of the city, 1920. Paper, Indian ink, dry brush. 26 x 21

placing of manifestly deconstructed rectangular forms together with projections, diagonals and spirals and the apparent instability of buildings that did not look as if they could hold up against the tension of their buttresses, constituted one of many criteria of expression. And yet all this did not set into a fixed and fundamental aesthetic form. Such methods of dynamic construction could be (and were) applied to designs using different kinds of language.

When, and this happened very quickly, interest in dynamic constructions faded, this difference in style became very obvious. Then it became clear that it was just those architects who had rejected all stylization who had given the greatest impetus to the new architecture. Among the projects by members of Zhivskulptarkh it is worth singling out, apart from those by Rodchenko himself, the work of the architects who headed the group of Rationalists, Ladovsky and Krinsky. The stylistic purity of forms in these architects' designs points to the direct influence of their experiments with abstract form, carried out in the compass of their work with 'left-wing' painters. But if this influence was secondary for Ladovsky and Krinsky, for Rodchenko, on the other hand, the relationship between aesthetico-formal research in the field of painting and in that of architecture was immediate and precise.

Moreover, although one notes in the sketches by Ladovsky and Krinsky, both professional architects, a total mastery of form and of the combination of space and volume, there is a greater aesthetico-formal variety in Rodchenko's architectural designs and compositions. His projects were not only carried out according to the criteria of architectural Rationalism, but in some respects indicated the influence of another innovative architectural trend: Constructivism.

If in Ladovsky and Krinsky's designs, for instance, the composition was derived from the relationship between different geometrical spaces of an elementary shape, in Rodchenko's projects the stylistic model emerged out of the contrast between the solid and geometrical masses of the lower part of the building and the airy elements of the upper part. This was a genuinely new and original solution and anticipated by several years the designs of the Constructivists, and those of the Vesnin brothers in particular.

It should be pointed out that Rodchenko also anticipated the use of exposed structures in architecture: his sketches from the end of 1919 were completed at the same time as Tatlin's design for his Monument to the 3rd International.

It was Rodchenko's conviction that, to find a new architectural form, it was first of all necessary to free the façade from all kinds of eclectic decorations.¹³

Rodchenko's architectural designs were on show for a long time in the exhibitions of 1919-22 and many of them, including the kiosk and the *Sovdep* project, were also published in periodicals. Hence these designs were familiar to architects who, without yet having worked out an idea in detail, were quick to pick up anything new.

The designs for the kiosk and the *Sovdep*, along with twenty other sketches, were displayed at the 19th Moscow State Exhibition in the autumn of 1920, together with projects by other members of Zhivskulptarkh. Also on show were Rodchenko's abstract, pictorial and graphic compositions. In the same exhibition he presented himself in the twin guise of 'left-wing' painter and architect (indeed he seemed to be abandoning the painting 'of the left' for architecture).

So it should be made clear that Rodchenko himself made no distinction between his experiments with abstract form and his architectural designs, but on the contrary was trying to transfer all the aesthetico-formal discoveries of 'left-wing' painting into the realm of objects.¹⁴

Besides, in the first exhibition of Russian art, held in Berlin in 1922, the new architecture was represented by two painters, Rodchenko and Shevchenko, three sculptors, Korolev, Lavinsky and Gabo, and three architects, Ladovsky, Krinsky and Mapu. Six of them were members of Zhivskulptarkh. Alexander Vesnin and Lissitzky appeared as painters. At that time they had not yet passed from the painting 'of the left' to architecture.

Inkhuk meeting held at the start of 1921, he said: 'Architecture is in the hands of engineers and architects. To dream of putting them together is futile, the old architecture will not be reborn. It is dead. Before, engineer and architect were a single person, with the architect compensating for technical deficiencies. With the passing of time, this has led to the decorated form...'

'The perfect technique of architects has produced the superfluous in architecture and, today, we are only concerned with external construction...'

'Nothing original can be created if one sticks to old traditions. There has been superfluity in architecture, which does not mean that there will continue to be.' (Private meeting)

Inkhuk Archives.

- 14 *On the occasion of the 19th State Exhibition he wrote as follows: 'Non-objective painting has emerged from the museums, it represents a road, a square, the whole world. The art of the future will not be a comfortable decoration for private apartments. It will be the same, according to need, for forty-eight-storey buildings, great bridges, for the radio telegraph, for the air force, for ships...'*

Vasily Kandinsky with his wife, in the Moscow house.



3: THE DISCUSSIONS AT INKHUK

Notes

¹ The following names appeared in the list of artists belonging to the Council of Masters (Sovet Masterov), drawn up by the organizing group: A.K. Arkhipov, M. Ch. Aladzhalov, V.N. Baksheev, V.G. Bechteev, S.A. Vinogradov, I.E. Grabar, S. Ju. Zhukovsky, K.A. Korovin, N.P. Krymov, P.P. Konchalovsky, P.V. Kuznetsov, A.V. Kuprin, V.V. Kan-

Birth and formation of Inkhuk

Inkhuk, the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow (Moskovskii Institut Khudozhestvennoi Kultury) existed and operated from 1920 to 1924. It was a special kind of workers' association in the sector of art, comprising painters, sculptors, architects, critics and theoreticians of Production Art, and it was an important centre for development of the theoretical principles that underpinned innovative tendencies in art.

Inkhuk was composed of a few dozen active members with an elected Praesidium at their head. In order, the chairmen of the Inkhuk Praesidium were successively: Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Brik, Arvatov and Brik again. At plenary sessions of Inkhuk, problems of a general character were discussed, while investigation of specific theoretical subjects was left to the sections and working groups. During the brief span of its existence Inkhuk developed unevenly. Used as a forum for inflamed polemics, it ended up being dominated by fixed factional positions, while opposing viewpoints were abandoned. This brought about a change in the overall approach and tasks of the Institute and a modification of its structure and activity; the collective was replaced and control passed into the hands of others.

Rodchenko was one of Inkhuk's founding and most active members; hence the process by which it was formed repays brief examination.

A very large number of changes of an organizational nature had taken place in the field of figurative art during the early years of Soviet power: new groups had been formed, old ones broken up and some groups with different approaches had even joined forces. The form of these organizations not only indicates an attempt at unification on the part of those who had the same ideas on the artistic plane, but also a desire to defend the professional interests of all artists, to protect their creative work and to find forms of material assistance.

In February 1919 the Union of Professional Artists and Painters of the New Art was transformed into the All-Russian Union of Painters and Artists of the New Art. It was commonly known as the Council of Masters, or *Sovet Masterov*. Members of the new body included: Drevin, Kandinsky, P. Kuznetsov, A. Lentulov, N. Pevsner, Rodchenko, V. Rozhdestvensky, Rozenfeld, Udaltsova and V. Franketti.

According to the organizing group, the Council of Masters was supposed to include all artists whatever tendency they belonged to, as long as they were true professionals and not mere amateurs.¹ The group's slogan was 'down with barriers'.

'... When the list of the Council of Masters had finally been compiled, I sent out the summonses to the first organizational meeting, which was held on 17 January 1920... Not all those who had been summoned turned up for the meeting. Among right-wing artists, many did not attend and many were not traced, being out of Moscow; many from the Centre group, "Bubnovyi valet" [The Knave of Diamonds], did not turn up either.'²

Before it was turned into Inkhuk, the Council of Masters held four general assemblies (on 17 and 29 January, 28 February and 6 March 1920), all four of which were attended by the following: Kandinsky, Rodchenko and Shestakov. Bechteev, Lentulov, Stepanova, Shterenberg and Yuon went to three of them, and Kuprin, Falk and Shevchenko went to two. Konchalovsky, Malyutin, Mashkov, Nivinsky, Osmerkin, Sinezubov and Franketti were present at only one.

At the first session a board of management made up of ten people was elected (president, Malyutin; vice presidents, Shestakov and Lentulov; secretaries, Rodchenko and Nivinsky, members, Kandinsky, Konchalovsky, Shevchenko, Paster-nak and Vaznetsov). The task of the board was to draw up a new statute for the organization.

The first official document produced by the Council of Masters was an appeal,

approved at the second session, to the People's Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky (*Doc. 5*). Its contents help to clarify the real situation of those years and explain why artists with different theoretical viewpoints also joined the Council of Masters. The records of the meetings bear witness to the profound contradictions in which such a heterogeneous organization found itself embroiled. Only the text of the appeal to Lunacharsky met with no obstacles. All other problems were accompanied by discord and arguments. At the third session approval was given to the provisional statute for the Council, drawn up by a committee composed of Rodchenko, Kandinsky, Yuon and Shestakov (*Doc. 6*).

The fourth general assembly of the Council, held on 6 March, marked a turning point in the history of the organization. Those present at the meeting, Rodchenko, Kandinsky, Shestakov, Stepanova, Falk, Shterenberg, Yuon and Sinezubov (the first four of whom were founding members) were forced to admit that the new organization, as it had been conceived at previous meetings, did not have the full support of artists. It was necessary to make profound changes in the entire programme of work. Shterenberg took the initiative by suggesting that the Council of Masters should be changed into an Institute of Artistic Culture. At Inkhuk's first assembly on 13 March a Collective Praesidium, without a president, was unanimously elected (Kandinsky, Lentulov, Rodchenko, Falk, Shestakov) and a committee was set up to devise a new work programme (Shestakov, Kandinsky, Kuprin, Yuon).

Two different orientations emerged in the very first meetings of the committee. The question lay in whether the Institute was to become a theoretical and scientific institution or be turned into a practical and creative organization.

At the time Inkhuk was set up it had been agreed that the basic work should be entrusted to the sections, while the general assembly and the Praesidium would play an organizational role. However, given the special circumstances of the period when Inkhuk was formed, there was a delay in setting up the various sections. This was not so much the result of organizational difficulties as a deliberate policy on the part of the founding group, which did not want the Institute to be infiltrated by different ideas. They held that it was necessary to decide on the Institute's general methods of work before proceeding with the formation of sections.

At the second general assembly, on 3 April, Kandinsky read his report on the work of the committee. Two work programmes were approved: one of theoretical activity (devised by himself) and another of practical activity (drawn up by Yuon). These became the programmes of two autonomous sections, one theoretical and the other practical. However, although no one had any doubts about the need to set up a theoretical section, the idea of creating a practical one caused a great deal of perplexity.

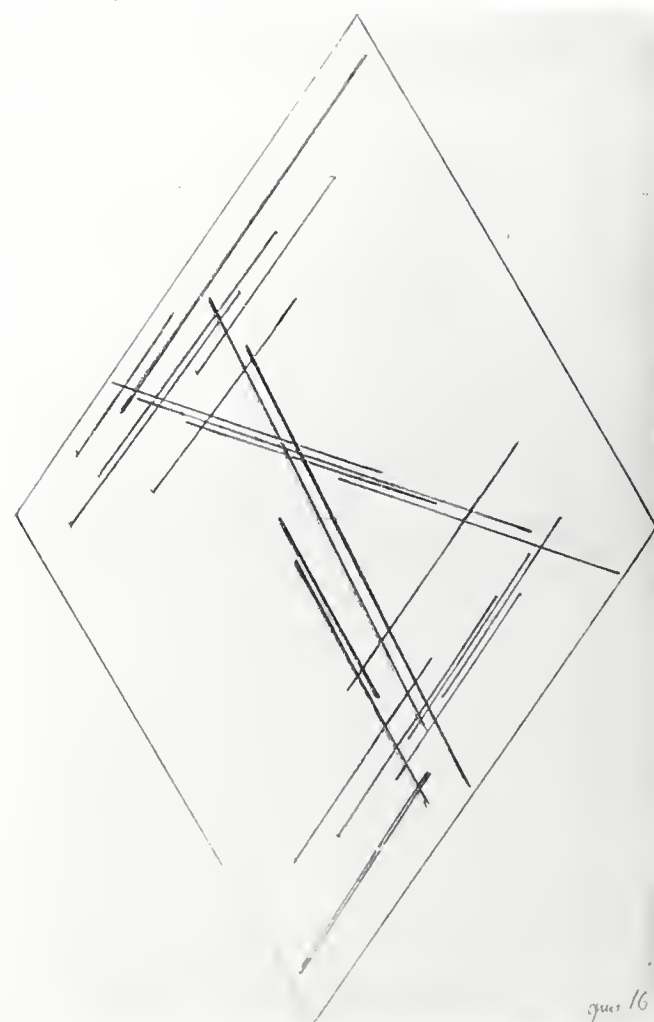
In fact, at Inkhuk's second general assembly, held on 26 April, the decision was taken not to organize a practical section as part of the Institute. After a series of sessions during the early stages of its formation, the point of view gradually prevailed in which the Institute was seen as an organization of scientific character. Neither merely theoretical, nor educational, but a blend of science and theory. The supporters of this view did not consider it possible to set up new sections (and even less a practical section) until the basic direction of the Institute had been defined, counting on a change in the collective, a change that began to take shape right from the earliest sessions.

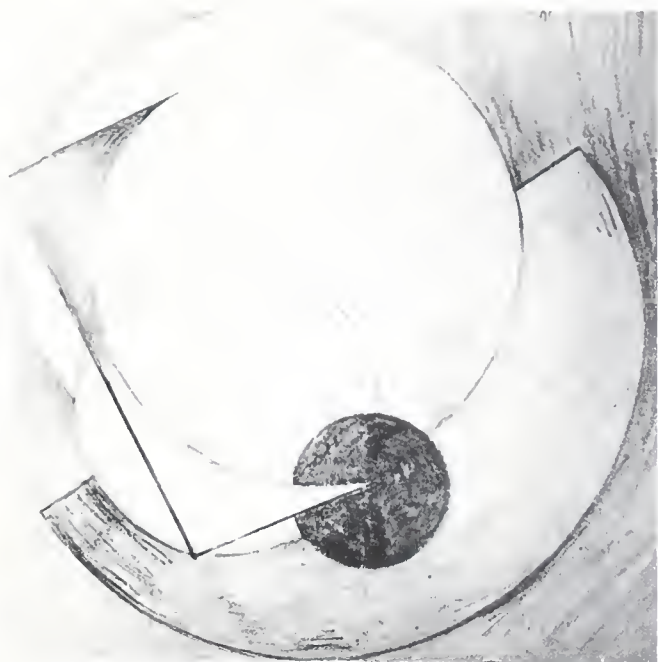
Between March and May of 1920 six general assemblies of the Institute were held (on 2 March, 3 and 26 April, 5, 22 and 26 May) which were wholly given over to organizational problems. This initial period in the formation of Inkhuk, while programme and statute were being drawn up, was to be used to define its make-up from a professional point of view and to make clear the personal standing of all its permanent members. At the fourth general assembly (5 May) a decision was taken to abbreviate the name of the Institute, which henceforth appeared in documents under the acronym of Inkhuk.

dinsky, I.V. Klyun, A.V. Lentulov, S.V. Malyutin, F. Ya. Malyavin, I.I. Mashkov, K.S. Malevich, I.I. Nivinsky, N.I. Nesterov, A.A. Osmerkin, P.I. Petrovichev, L.O. Pasternak, V.D. Polenov, M.S. Pyrin, N.A. Pevsner, L.S. Popova, A.M. Rodchenko, V.V. Rozhdestvensky, A.V. Sredin, I.V. Sinezubov, V.F. Stepanova, N.A. Udaltsova, R.R. Falk, V.D. Franketti, D.P. Shterenberg, A.V. Shevchenko, N.I. Shestakov, K.F. Yuon, G.B. Yakulov.

- 2 *Inkhuk, Izo section of Narkompros, Istoriya vzniknoveniya i rabota ego s 1919 g. po mai 1921 g. (History of its formation and work from 1919 to May 1921). Report by the secretary of Inkhuk, V. Stepanova. V.A. Rodchenko Archives.*
- 3 *The programme was published as an abstract in 1920 under the title Institut Khudozhestvennoi Kul'tury v Moskve (Inkhuk) pri otdel Izo N.K.P. Skhematicheskaya programma rabot Instituta Khudozhestvennoi Kul'tury po planu V.V. Kandinskogo (Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture, Inkhuk, under the Izo section of Narkompros. Schematic pro-*

A. Achtyrko. Drawing with straight lines circumscribed by a given shape, 1921.





E. Melnikova. *Still life*, 1921.

gramme of the work of the Institute of Artistic Culture drawn up by V.V. Kandinsky). It was later published in its entirety in the book *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let* (Soviet art over the last 15 years) edited by I. Matsa, Moscow—Leningrad 1933, pp. 126-39.

Kandinsky took the role of chairman at five of the six assemblies (one was held without a chairman, with the minutes of all six being drawn up by Rodchenko). The role of secretary was taken by Stepanova, who was appointed head of the Institute's administrative services at the fifth assembly.

The number of people who attended these meetings ranged from six to thirteen, so that the composition of the Institute continued to change in the interval between one assembly and the next. From an organization of a corporative nature (the Council of Masters was made up solely of artists and painters), Inkhuk moved more and more in the direction of a 'collective' of people with similar ideas on the creative plane and who were looking for new paths of development for artistic activity. Among others, the art historian A. Gan, the musicologist N. Bryusova, the painter Drevin and the composer A. Shenshin were all accepted as members of the Institute. Those members of the Council of Masters who failed to attend Inkhuk meetings were considered to have resigned.

The changes in membership of Inkhuk also reflected a slow but definite change in the orientation of its activity. The theoretical bias to the Institute's work was becoming more and more unmistakable. An elaboration of the concept of science in the field of art became its basic task. On 19 May, it was decided that Inkhuk should join forces with the Izo section of Narkompros (in respect of creating a new Museum of Pictorial or Artistic Culture). Inkhuk's programme was approved on 26 May and its statute was drawn up and approved over the course of the same month.

The programme, written by Kandinsky, states that the 'aim of the work carried out by the Institute of Artistic Culture is the scientific study, conducted in an analytical and synthetic manner, of the basic elements, both of the individual arts and of art taken as a whole'.³ The programme put forward as a fundamental task analysis of the objective laws of psycho-physical perception of works of art and explanation of how and to what degree the means of expression of individual artistic activities exerted an influence on man.

According to its statute, Inkhuk would have the following structure: the general assembly was indicated as the guiding body, to be called not less than once every

Dual portrait: V. Stepanova and L. Popova, 1924. 9 × 12.



three months. The general assembly was then to elect, for a term of six months, a Praesidium of five people who were responsible for management of the Institute. Inkhuk was divided into three sections: 1. Section comprising different types of art; 2. Section dealing with the interrelationship of the arts; 3. Section of Monumental Art, or of art as a whole. The sections were divided in their turn into working groups.

Disagreements within Inkhuk.

Rodchenko and Kandinsky

To understand how Rodchenko's ideas took shape during the period when he was coming to the end of his 'run-up' and before he devoted himself to Production Art, it will be useful to examine his relations with Kandinsky.

Kandinsky was twenty-five years older than Rodchenko and he had displayed a protective, almost fatherly, attitude towards the young painter. For a while Rodchenko even stayed in Kandinsky's apartment. For Rodchenko, Kandinsky was one of those 'left-wing' painters who were alone responsible for the ten years of painting history that he 'had skipped' while living in the province of Kazan. He esteemed him greatly as an artist and admired his stubborn attempt to grasp the processes of form on the theoretical plane and to analyse how and by what means artistic expression was made manifest.

Rodchenko and Kandinsky founded Inkhuk together and were the only ones determined to specify its aims as a scientific and theoretical body. Together they fought against more conservative tendencies. And yet, when the ideas of the two artists were compared in their totality, the difference in their attitudes towards the relations between different kinds of art and towards the destiny of 'left-wing' art was so great that it soon turned into discord and open conflict, with the result that Kandinsky found himself obliged to leave Inkhuk.

It has already been pointed out that radical changes were taking place in the ruling body of Inkhuk throughout its period of formation. Little by little all those artists who thought it fundamental to take a practical approach to the Institute's work were driven out. After the decision not to set up a practical section, the whole of Inkhuk's work, over the space of several months, was concentrated in the theoretical section under the guidance of Kandinsky. This soon came to be known as the Section of Monumental Art.

In practice, the flight of many artists and the establishment of the Section of Monumental Art eliminated from the agenda the need to give a basic direction to the Institute's work. Those members who had taken part in the last general assembly of the spring (22 May), and who had defined Inkhuk's structure, also formed the majority at the first meeting to be held in the autumn (the seventh) on 10 October: Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova and Sinezubov. Throughout the summer Inkhuk had in fact carried on without a Praesidium, since only two of its five members took an active part in the work (Kandinsky and Rodchenko), while the other three (Lentulov, Falk and Shestakov) gradually drifted away.

It looked as though the long battle to give an analytical bias to the work of Inkhuk was to end in the victory of the group of most active members of the Section of Monumental Art. But cracks were slowly appearing within this group as well. Some members of the Institute did not approve of the working methods of the section directed by Kandinsky. Rodchenko was their spokesman. Thus two different factions were set up within the only section then in existence. A way out could have been found by organizing a new section, especially since the statute provided for the existence of three autonomous sections. But the general assembly was not called and the only remaining possibility was to create a Working Group within the Section of Monumental Art. Yet this left Rodchenko and his sup-

V. Stepanova, 1924. 9 × 12.



Number 8, Dolgy Lane (now Burdenko Street). Rodchenko and his wife V. Stepanova lived in Kandinsky's apartment from autumn 1919 to October 1920.



porters dissatisfied as they wanted independent control over the direction in which their activities should lead.

The Working Group in the field of painting was set up on 1 September within the section dealing with different kinds of art — a section that had not existed until that moment. But it failed to avert open conflict, formed as it was by the very people who would not tolerate the limits imposed on them by the Section of Monumental Art. The first (and only) organizational meeting of the Working Group on painting was attended by Bubnova, Kandinsky, Popova, Rodchenko, Sinezubov, Stepanova and Franketti. Only Sinezubov, a wholehearted supporter of the method of work devised by Kandinsky, was co-opted onto the Section committee. This left the Working Group under the de facto control of Kandinsky, a fact little appreciated by Rodchenko. Hence the team turned out to have very little independence and the conflict was deferred rather than resolved.

The impossibility of ironing out the differences became apparent at the seventh general assembly of Inkhuk, when two neutral figures, Bryusova and Bubnova, were appointed as chairman and secretary of the meeting (these positions had previously been held, without elections, by Kandinsky and Stepanova, who now found themselves on opposite sides of the fence).

The agenda of this assembly was very broad: the staff of Inkhuk was specified, and the automatic nature of exclusions defined, new members (A. Lavinsky and V. Ravdel) were accepted, the establishment of Working Groups on painting (the report was read by Kandinsky) and dance (Bryusova) was confirmed and Kandinsky's report on the work of the Section of Monumental Art was heard.

As replacements for three members leaving the Praesidium, Bryusova, Stepanova and Shenshin were permanently elected to the staff. With this make-up, the first Praesidium of Inkhuk remained in office from 13 March to 9 October, in the form of a collective without a president. On the latter date the new Praesidium held a meeting to deal with organizational matters at which the posts were distributed as follows: president, Kandinsky; vice president, Bryusova; members, Rodchenko and Shenshin; secretary, Stepanova.

After this, events at Inkhuk took a dramatic turn. Out of the disputes and conflicts that took place between the end of 1920 and the start of 1921, a new Inkhuk came to be formed, which concerned itself with working methods, structure and to some extent staff.

Much of the history of Inkhuk at this period has remained obscure. The documents that survive (and which have never been published before) testify as to how the new Praesidium, given the differences of opinion between its members, did not in fact function. After the first organizational session, it never met again in its entirety. The alignment of forces within the Praesidium was as follows: Kandinsky and Shenshin represented one tendency, Rodchenko and Stepanova another, while Bryusova at first maintained a neutral position.

The document recording the convocation of the meeting of the Praesidium on 20 October 1920, in which Kandinsky, Shenshin and Bryusova took part (the meeting was held in Kandinsky's apartment), reveals that the activity of the official Inkhuk Praesidium had in reality come to a halt. From 9 October to 12 April not even the general assembly of the Institute was convened. For a while (up until 13 November) regular meetings of the Section of Monumental Art were held, but even these began to fall off after that date.

It was during this period that the so-called parallel Praesidium of Inkhuk, set up at Rodchenko's initiative, began to function (the first meeting was held on 3 November). The Working Group on Objective Analysis held its first meeting on 23 November. This was the first open revolt against the 'tyranny' of Kandinsky and against the working methods he had devised for Inkhuk. For a better understanding of just what these methods were and of the reasons for the conflict between Kandinsky and Rodchenko, it is essential to look at the work of the Section of Monumental Art, for the activity of the latter fully reflects the general approach taken by Inkhuk in the early days, under Kandinsky's guidance.

Two views of the relationship between different kinds of art

The meetings of the Section of Monumental Art took place regularly once a week, on Wednesdays. As laid down in the statute, the Section was made up of members of Inkhuk and collaborators. Membership of the Section was settled during the first few meetings. It included both those members of Inkhuk who had previously belonged to the Council of Masters (Kandinsky, Popova, Rodchenko, Sinezubov, Stepanova, Falk, Franketti, Shevchenko) and those who had joined the Institute during its first general assemblies (Borichevsky, Bryusova, Bubnova, Korolev and Shenshin).

The basic work of the Section was the work programme of Inkhuk, initially drawn up by Kandinsky for the theoretical section. The programme had set itself the aim of analysing the 'basic elements' of art both in its individual aspects and in its totality. To attain this end three fundamental types of analysis were indicated: analysis of different types of art, of the relations between them, and of art as a whole. In view of the absence of other subdivisions, the Section of Monumental Art came to tackle in some degree all the problems raised by the programme. The fundamental objective was to come up with a precise definition of the way in which the individual was influenced by works of art (*Doc. 7*).

Cover of the magazine *Iskusstvo*, 1919.



The programme laid down broad schemes for investigation of the means of expression used by individual arts. It was also important to look for analogies of the ways in which some kinds of art influenced others.

If one looks at the actual activity of the Section of Monumental Art, however, it can be seen that of the five types of art listed in the programme (painting, sculpture, architecture, music and dance), real attention was only given to three, painting, music and dance, fully in keeping with Kandinsky's concept of 'monumental art'.

By analysing the individual's psychological perception of the means of expression used by different art forms, Kandinsky hoped to create a new synthetic art (which he defined as 'monumental art') that would know how to make use of all artistic means, while taking into account the way in which these means influenced different people. Hence particular attention was given to studying the connection of painting with other art forms whose means of expression were primarily suited to conveying inner states, for example music, dance and lyric poetry. Out of this arose Kandinsky's attempt to create a new synthetic art, based on painting and these other art forms, that would be able to express the whole range of man's emotional states. He spoke of the movement of colour in space, of the musicality of colour, of interaction between abstract form and colour. His attempt to base his new synthetic art on the interrelation of painting, music and dance demonstrates how far architecture and sculpture had been pushed into the background in the Section of Monumental Art. This was not due solely to the personal predilections of Kandinsky, but also to the shift, characteristic of that time, in the aesthetico-formal experiments of that tendency of 'left-wing' painting which he represented within Inkhuk. It is difficult to grasp the reasons for the split in the ranks of Inkhuk that took place in the autumn of 1920 without taking into account the differences between the two basic trends in 'left-wing' painting. In fact the conflict arose between those artists, with Rodchenko at their head, who were drawn towards an analysis of the interaction of painting with architecture and sculpture, and those who, following Kandinsky, were seeking a synthesis of painting with music and dance. Apart from partialities of this kind, which seemed to be dictated by reasons of taste or profession, there were profound differences of opinion bound up with the processes of formation of the new stylistic movement.

It has already been mentioned how in the first quarter of the 20th century the complex process by which the new style came into being tended to evolve out of the confluence of painting and architecture. It was out of this fusion that a new field of art was born: design.⁴

During those years, the 'opening' towards architecture and design was interpreted by many as the death of figurative art. In reality the first designers were either 'left-wing' painters or architects, and for the former the new designation signified a serious psychological upset, which led them, on occasion, to a verbal rejection of their figurative art (Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova, V. and G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky and others).

Alongside this current in 'left-wing' painting which had passed from the representation of an object to its construction, the other one, which had not abandoned painting, continued to operate. The abstract compositions of adherents to the latter took on an increasingly decorative character, with the gradual loss of elements specific to figurative painting. On the one hand, they aspired to give a symbolic meaning to their non-representational compositions by revising the language of abstract symbols, and on the other, to breathe new life into painting as part of a synthetic art made up of colour, sound and movement.

Kandinsky was one of the key figures in this current of 'left-wing' painting. In part this may explain the great influence that he had over symbolic interpretation of the significance of different means of artistic expression and experiments in the field of a synthesis between painting, music and dance.

In contrast to Kandinsky's concept of 'monumental art', the aim of Zhivskulptarkh — set up a year before Inkhuk — was to create a new spatial art

⁴ *Teams of architects and 'left-wing' painters were being formed in the various European centres where the new architecture and design were emerging: L'Esprit Nouveau (France), De Stijl (Holland), Bauhaus (Germany). Right from the earliest years of Soviet power in Russia innovative architects had established an intense collaboration with 'left-wing' painters, giving rise to various organizations such as Vitebsk's Unovis, Zhivskulptarkh, Vkhutemas and others.*

evolve new forms and illustrate the material qualities of objects. The members of Zhivskulptarkh, Rodchenko, Shevchenko and Korolev, had joined the Section of Monumental Art at Inkhuk, although Korolev and Shevchenko only attended its meetings for two months. After 21 April, Korolev took no further part and Shevchenko only came once more.

Thus the Section's only true representative of the trend towards a fusion of 'left-wing' figurative painting and architecture was Rodchenko. It was left to him to maintain opposition to Kandinsky and to help set up the Working Group on Objective Analysis which in some ways carried on with the work begun in Zhivskulptarkh.

The meetings of the Section of Monumental Art

During 1920 the Section of Monumental Art held thirty-three meetings, from 12 May to 29 December.⁵ The permanent members of the Section committee were Kandinsky and Stepanova, with Bryusova and Borichevsky as appointees. The minutes were drawn up and countersigned by Stepanova. After the meeting held on 24 November the members of the Working Group on Objective Analysis, Rodchenko, Stepanova and Popova, took no further part in the Section's initiatives. Evidently it was during that meeting⁶ that the definitive split took place between Kandinsky's group and Rodchenko's. The day before (23 November) the first meeting of the Working Group on Objective Analysis had been held, and Bubnova, Popova, Rodchenko and Stepanova had approved its programme of work. As a consequence, the rupture with the Section of Monumental Art had already been given de facto confirmation on the eve of the 24 November meeting.

Moreover, the 'parallel' Praesidium of Inkhuk was already operating by that time, having held, under the chairmanship of Rodchenko (others present were Bryusova and Stepanova, members of Inkhuk, and A. Babichev and Brik, who had not yet joined), six meetings by 24 November. One may assume that the other members of Inkhuk were not at that time aware of the existence of a 'parallel' Praesidium. This conclusion is suggested by the following facts. In the combined minutes of meetings held on 19 and 23 November (item 3) there is discussion of the decision to approve the Working Group on Objective Analysis. Yet this decision could not be a definitive one since the official Praesidium of Inkhuk was the one chaired by Kandinsky. Consequently the meeting of the Section of Monumental Art at which all the members of the official Praesidium were present was at the same time a meeting of the 'parallel' Praesidium. A copy of the minutes of this meeting, handwritten and countersigned by Stepanova, has survived, but it does not mention the participants. The dues to be paid were agreed on and the plan of operation for the Working Group on Objective Analysis was approved.⁷

During the very first meetings of the Section it became clear that priority should be given to the attempt to analyse the problem of interrelationships between the arts. This effort was directed at first towards painting and music, subsequently moving on to poetry (later on dance was included as well). Decisions were taken to draw up questionnaires on painting and poetry; to prepare schedules for work on music and poetry; to produce reports on the basic elements of music, painting, poetry and sculpture. In the questionnaire on painting drawn up by Kandinsky, answers were required to the following questions. Which art arouses the strongest emotions? What is the specific effect of this art? Does the person being questioned find that different means of artistic expression (colour in painting, sound in music, etc.) have a particular influence on his psyche? What feelings and associa-

5 *Of the thirteen members of the Section, only eight attended its meetings on a regular basis: Bryusova (29 meetings), Bubnova (20), Kandinsky (28), Popova (21), Rodchenko (26), Sinezubov (21), Stepanova (29), Shenshin (24). The other members of the Section only attended meetings during the first two or three months: Borichevsky (7), Korolev (5), Shevchenko (10), or came very rarely: Falk (2), Franketti (2).*

6 *Only the letter of convocation has been preserved. The meeting was attended by Bryusova, Bubnova, Kandinsky, Popova, Rodchenko, Sinezubov, Stepanova, Falk and Shenshin.*

7 *Active collaborators and guests of the Section of Monumental Art were: A. Shemshupin, I.N. Rozanov, E.P. Pavlov, A.A. Sidorov, A.V. Babichev, G.T. Krutikov, V.E. Ravdel, F. Platov, V. Shershenevich, Monin, F.I. Schmidt and others.*

tions of ideas are set in motion in man by the simplest and most complex of drawings, and by technical drawings? Can man express graphically (but not figuratively) his sensations, his impressions, his feelings or his fancies with regard to any phenomenon in existence? Does man experience different sensations when faced with an isolated shape or one combined with another shape, or when shapes combined in this way change positions or are distributed in different ways on a sheet of paper? For example, does not the person being questioned feel that a triangle moves towards something, does it not seem to him wittier than a square? Does not the triangle arouse a similar sensation to that of a lemon? Which does the twittering of a canary resemble most, a triangle or a circle? Which geometric shape reminds him most of a bourgeois, or a fine day; which colour affects man most strongly? Is its effect pleasant or not? Do particularly fascinating or unendurable colours exist? Which colour does one picture as the most strong, dense, active, mobile (especially in which direction), flat, deep, malleable, solid, etc.? Does colour act differently when taken by itself or when applied to an object? Which colour can most easily be conjured up by thought? And does this imaginary colour affect man? Which colour is best suited to a precise geometric shape or to a free form? Which colours can be associated with which phenomena of life? Is it possible to render specific emotions with colour?

The questionnaire was an illustration of the wide-ranging programme of analysis that was being applied to the study of pictorial means of expression. Kandinsky was trying to discover the limits within which the perception of an abstract composition could be put into a concrete image.

His aim was to discover in non-figurative means of painting not only those symbolic forms that are more or less familiar to everyone, but also those bound up with the very nature of perception. By starting out from the naked emotion and grasping the links in its logic, Kandinsky sought to render non-figurative composition as concrete as possible. Yet the process by which it took on palpable form varied from art to art. Individual reactions to a work of art also varied. Even within the limits of a single art form this reaction might change in a decisive manner. Each art form gives expression to the contents of an image by different means and modalities.

The same emotional state can be aroused in man by different concrete images. This fact is significant if one wishes to make a precise study of how specific means of artistic expression influence man.

When Kandinsky set out in his questionnaire to investigate which emotions were stirred in man by particular techniques of painting, he carried out the analysis, taking into account the way in which an image is formed, in painting. However when he tried to establish which geometric shape came closest to the idea of a bourgeois, he was overestimating the possibilities of abstract form.

At this point the question arises whether it is worth conducting an enquiry which puts such questions as: which are the means of pictorial perception that lead man to associations with this or that material phenomenon of life? Answers can only serve to illustrate the emotional intensity with which a given means of expression is perceived.

In analysing the modes of perception of painting, it is possible to identify the emotional state to which this or that form, this pattern or that colour, gives rise in man. It is a subject that lends itself to statistical processing. Yet the relationship between a concrete image and an emotional state functions in only one direction (a particular image gives rise to a particular emotional state in a range of people); in the other direction, on the other hand, a particular emotional state can give rise to an infinite set of artistic images, all of which are personal.

In the absence of precise data it is impossible to establish with certainty that Kandinsky was trying to investigate the possibility of obtaining concreteness of image from abstract compositions, by resorting to the potential for symbolic and associative perception of non-representational means, of the 'elements' of painting. Yet analysis of his 'Questionnaire' makes this a not unlikely hypothesis.

Kandinsky at Narkompros.



Minutes of the Section's meeting on 2 July 1920 show that Kandinsky prepared a report with the title 'Basic elements of painting: their essence and value (brief technical description of pictorial form)', in which he made a thorough examination of drawing with and without the use of colour, defining them as 'outer expression of an inner content'. Kandinsky identified three basic elements in drawing: point, line and area. Even in the pure and simple line drawing (non-figurative) Kandinsky attempted to isolate expressive elements capable of getting across complex sensations. According to him, this was possible even without resorting to figurative techniques. He also claimed that it was possible to express a whole range of 'sensations' with a non-figurative language, including joy, tenacity, malice, tenderness, discomfort, lucidity, speed, gaiety and excitement. From the list are missing many 'sensations' typical of other forms of art, such as architecture and sculpture (mass, weight, solemnity). On the other hand these 'sensations' can easily be expressed through music and dance as well.

Kandinsky made a thorough analysis of elementary geometric shapes and planes, in an attempt to explain their expressive possibilities and their symbolic meaning. Dealing with the problem of the expressive qualities of form (the absolute value of a given shape, taken by itself), he spoke of the change in these qualities when a shape is set alongside another (the relative value of a shape). An exception to this, according to Kandinsky, are those elementary geometric shapes which retain their own qualities under any circumstances.

By analysing thoroughly the qualities of the primary colours (red, yellow, blue), secondary colours (green, purple, orange) and mixed colours (made up of no less than three colours) and combining them successively with different shapes, Kandinsky tried to establish a parallel between colour and sound. To do this he compared a particular colour with the sound of a particular musical instrument. Hence he likened the colour yellow to a trumpet, light blue to a flute, orange to the viola, clear red to the cello, violet to the cor anglais, and so on.

Kandinsky's report is without doubt the clearest example of the method of analysis employed by the Section of Monumental Art. Analysing shapes and colours, Kandinsky came to formulate a highly original and acute series of observations. Especially interesting are those on how man perceives different geometrical shapes when combined with colour. However, in his analysis of the various possible ways of perceiving 'the elements of painting', Kandinsky did not always draw a distinction between what was bound up with objective laws of psycho-physiological perception (and therefore common to all human beings) and what derived instead from associative and symbolic circumstances.

This, according to his opponents, was the most questionable and weak aspect of his method of formal analysis. They maintained that the attempt to attribute a complicated symbolism to a number of elementary means of expression inevitably led to a loss of objective standards and to too much importance being placed on subjective and extremely individual sensations.

It was just this subjectivism in Kandinsky's method that Rodchenko could not accept and it is no coincidence that the Working Group he set up in opposition to the Section of Monumental Art was dedicated to 'Objective Analysis'.

At meetings of the Section, Kandinsky's report was followed by other reports from various members and guests of Inkhuk. The second report was that of Bryusova, on 'The elements of music' (26 May). These two reports defined the Section's method of working. It was decided to continue with the analysis of the basic elements of the various art forms.⁸

The following report by the Section whose discussion was recorded in the minutes was the one by Professor F.I. Shmidt on the 'Museum of Children's Art' (28 July, item 12 of the minutes). He analysed the process of development of the faculty of imagination in children on the basis of their drawings. It was established that eighteen types of drawing existed, subdivided in relation to the process of assimilation of specific elements on the part of the child. These elements included line, shape, pattern, rhythm, figure, movement, space, the transmission of

8 *The minutes of the early meetings of the Section only contain summaries of the reports (where a copy of the report itself is not included) without any mention of discussions or decisions taken after the meeting. Later on, the debates were taken down in the minutes and reference was made to decisions taken with regard to the reports. These materials help to explain what was going on within the Section and the position of its various members, since debates over reports often turned into genuine theoretical discussions.*

9 *Kandinsky and Rodchenko were among those who took part in discussion of the report. Kandinsky pointed out that there was a certain amount of distortion in the report. According to him 'the child should have been given a pencil only when he asked for it, that is, when the spiritual need to draw had emerged in the child'. Rodchenko objected to Kandinsky: 'I do not agree that children should not be given a pencil before they feel the need for it. They might not ever ask, since they don't know what a pencil is, or they might only want it when they see it. After all we ourselves use every new technical invention and it may be that we will use something that replaces the pencil in the future.'*

10 *'The present position of poetry', Kandinsky said, 'recalls that of painting at the beginning of the period, when it was intended to turn painting into a decorative art. There is no doubt that all the arts are moving in parallel towards a great abstraction. The scholars of art have two tasks: a first historical duty and a second that consists in studying the basic elements and the ways of using these elements. Inkhuk should work within the limits of this second task.'*

11 *In clarifying the difference of position between Platov and Inkhuk in his comments on the report, Rodchenko said: 'The speaker says that there exists something already determined that*

will continue to repeat itself, while we are still looking for it... A proletarian art cannot exist, there is only a proletarian way of taking in art, a way that will disappear in time.'

12 *We give here a summary of Rodchenko's remarks that is of particular interest in understanding just where he stood on the problem of defining the elements of art.*

'The mass is divided into two parts: a mass that swells, or statics of mass, and a mass that splits up, or dynamics of mass. The dynamics lend a state of movement to a solid mass. It is these two moments that make up the elements of mass. Mass as such can be the material element of sculpture.

'An atom or a unit, whether of time or of mass, is a non-artistic element. On the other hand, the way in which this atom is treated, artificially or creatively, is art. Consequently it is possible for the element in a work of art to be both purely material element and artistic element.'

'I am convinced that this element must be present in a part of the work as well as in its totality.

'It is necessary to know why and when this element becomes art.

'By itself the element is not an artistic element. In this way we come to have two types of element: a creative element and a material element.'

13 *At the end of the debate, dealing with the problem raised by Rodchenko about the modes of using colour in painting, there was a significant discussion about how a work of art was born in the artist's awareness. We give here a brief extract from the minutes, dedicated to this subject.*

Bryusova: *'I would be interested to know how painters begin on a work. Musicians first perceive a chaos of sounds that later take on a settled arrangement. In poetry too first a series of harmonies must be heard, then it all takes shape.'*

Rodchenko: *'This process does not exist for painters.'*

Popova: *'Yes, at the start one feels the desire for a colour, but it takes shape at once.'*

Stepanova: *'I think that when one experiences an immediate and spontaneous creative impulse there is also a great chaos.'*

14 *As the minutes of the debate reveal, the participants (including Sinezubov himself) intervened on more than one occasion: Kandinsky 12 times, Rodchenko 4, Shevchenko and Bryusova 11, Popova 7, Stepanova 6 and Sinezubov 5.*

light and colour. The professor spoke of experiments carried out on a nine-month-old child to whom pencil and paper had been given."

At the Section meeting on 4 August in which a report on 'The elements of poetry' was given, Rozanov took part. During the discussion that followed the report, Kandinsky made a series of remarks that reveal his attitude towards the role and prospects of 'left-wing' figurative art and its relationship to the world of objects.¹⁰

At the next meeting of the Section, on 11 August, at which Kandinsky was not present, F. Platov gave a report on 'The experimental workshop'. Among other things he said: 'In my opinion proletarian art is a special art. The proletariat has in fact its own artistic models and techniques that produce distinct artistic products.' The contents of the report aroused criticism from Stepanova, Popova and Rodchenko and it was judged to be extraneous to the purview of Inkhuk.¹¹ At the 18 August meeting Bubnova read a report with the title 'The force of gravity in African sculpture'. The report provoked lively debate, with many members intervening on more than one occasion (Kandinsky was again absent). The discussion turned mainly on the question of what was the fundamental element of sculpture and of art in general.¹²

The music scholar Bryusova, who also took part in the discussion, postulated that 'the material element becomes an artistic element when this element is invested with the vital principle of creation'. Taking up this concept, Rodchenko said: 'In this case the element — let us take the colour yellow — applied artistically to a work, tends to disappear as such, that is as an element. In general, colour cannot be real. To become real it must have a limit, before which it does not exist. In creative work, then, it defines itself, that is, it becomes an element of art.'¹³

At the following meeting of the Section, on 8 September, Sinezubov's report on 'Faktura' was read, in which he advanced the following definition: 'The "Faktura" is a way of expressing the quality of a colour, in its concrete application.' A lively debate ensued.¹⁴ Kandinsky did not agree with Sinezubov's definition of 'faktura'. In his opinion 'faktura' was a way of preparing the background surface. He thought that 'faktura' concerned above all those forms of art which 'need a base material for their expression'. With reference to drawing and colour, it was more correct to speak of harmonization of colour and drawing. "'Faktura" is the manner of employing material means. In this way, the "faktura" reveals how a work has been made from a material point of view. When one is concerned about "faktura", this means that one is also concerned about the backing surface, which explains the use in painting of other materials than paint, the addition of glass, sand, etc. The final goal is the composition, while "faktura" merely regards one of the external means; it is possible to have poor harmonization but good "faktura".' It was his opinion that the painter ought not to yield to the material, by trying to adapt himself to its nature. It would only become possible to speak of the quality of 'faktura' of a work of art 'when laws and instruments capable of measuring what is valid and what is not valid have been found'. In painting "'faktura" is a way of processing the pictorial material', but 'colour cannot be described as "faktura"'. In the musical field, Kandinsky maintained, "'faktura" consists in the manner of interpreting a performance', consists therefore in the orchestration of a musical work, in the increase or alteration of its sound, in the same way as happens with the use of paint in painting ('preparation of the paint', 'laying on of paint', etc.).

In general Kandinsky claimed that 'faktura' exists where it is possible to perceive it by touch, by hearing. Hence he considered it wrong to speak of 'faktura' in relation 'to arts devoid of material means' such as poetry for example. According to Shevchenko, "'faktura" is the level of priming of the picture or, to be more precise, co-ordination of the levels of priming. Priming too, which gives to the picture the harmony that unites all its elements, is "faktura".' Rodchenko could not agree with Shevchenko that 'when there is unity, there is consequently also "faktura"'.¹⁵

In a work, according to Rodchenko, 'there is "faktura" when the artist has studied in advance how to prepare a given surface: it is a question of method. It may happen that an artist has not given particular thought to the "faktura", but that it is there by chance, just because he has managed to attain his own particular aim, that of rendering the volume, the lightness, the weight, etc., and not just... of being compelled to reproduce nature. We say that there is "faktura" only when it is of good quality and not when it is poor. When we say that it is a question of method we mean that "faktura" exists only when it is present in every part of the picture, in the composition, etc.; indeed it is of no use to have carefully drawn up a schedule of work, when the work as such is missing.'

At this meeting Rodchenko carried on a lengthy argument with Shevchenko, but he was not completely in agreement with Kandinsky either.¹⁵

The method of analysis of different art forms accepted by the Section of Monumental Art demanded a precise definition of this or that concept and an appropriate use of terms. Thus it was decided to hold a discussion of terminology itself. They began by working on definitions. The first to be examined was the definition of 'time' put forward by Bryusova: 'Time is an inner movement from one state of calm to another.'

Discussion of the definition was very heated and lasted for two meetings (6 and 20 October). The definition of time given by Bryusova (judging by her statements) referred to music. However, during the meeting the range of the discussion was extended, with the problem of time in general being examined and an attempt being made to define this concept in relation to different forms of artistic activity.

Kandinsky sought to clarify the use of the term in music and painting. In his opinion, the experiments carried out to examine the various ways in which people look at a painting had turned out to be particularly useful.¹⁶ Rodchenko spoke almost exclusively of the concept of time in painting. He tried to get a grip on the relationship between the concepts of calm and time, and to define the concept of inner movement; on a whole series of topics he did nothing but argue with Kandinsky.¹⁷

Kandinsky felt that in Bryusova's definition the term 'inner had been used correctly since, there being always a relationship between form and content, the term inner expressed the quality of this relationship'. Rodchenko and Popova, on the contrary, expressed doubts about the wisdom of introducing this term into the definition. 'The dangerous term "inner"', said Rodchenko, 'should be explained, ought to be made clear.'

Rodchenko went on to say that 'movement without a psychological connotation exists in the circus, where it is understood as the attainment of something laid down in advance, and has nothing to do with any aesthetic intent. It is a movement that responds to other needs. It is the same movement that is found in the machine, in the acrobat, in dance and in a work [of art].'¹⁸

Overall, the working methods of the Section of Monumental Art reflected the programme drawn up for Inkhuk by Kandinsky. All the reports by active members of the Section (Kandinsky, Bryusova, Shenshin, Bubnova) were based in one way or another on the method of research proposed by Kandinsky.

The differences of opinion between Kandinsky's group and Rodchenko's did not come to the surface immediately, although careful examination of the records of the Section reveals how they were secretly increasing. Kandinsky managed to get the members of the Section to accept his method of working. He certainly 'guided' discussion, pushing it in the direction most agreeable to him. On several occasions Rodchenko took the opposite point of view to Kandinsky, but he was in a difficult position, for the differences emerged as particular problems were being discussed. From the outside, the conflict between Rodchenko and Kandinsky seemed to fall within the bounds of normal debate. The further the work advanced, the more difficult it became to oppose the rigid system of analysis of the basic elements of art laid down by Kandinsky, which came to typify all the documents

15 We give here an extract of the discussion.

Rodchenko: ' "Faktura" is a necessary part of the composition, as a way of using the paints. Shevchenko is talking about the "faktura" of a work but not about "faktura" in general.'

Shevchenko: 'If we look on "faktura" as an element, it is nothing but a way of preparing the material, so that "faktura" and material turn out to be the same thing.'

Kandinsky: 'To make the nature of a material coincide with his way of using it is a threat, we cannot be slaves of the material ... "faktura" is the way of treating the pictorial material.'

Stepanova: 'It seems to me that one can speak of "faktura" on three levels: "faktura" in general, "faktura" in the pictorial field and "faktura" in a work of art.'

Shevchenko: 'If we go outside the field of painting, then yes, Kandinsky's definition is correct; "faktura" in the pictorial field is something special.'

16 He thought it important to draw attention to the difference between plastic art and art bound up with the temporal dimension: 'Let us compare painting with a work of music. In the field of painting we can go back to look at a work of art without this work ceasing to exist; in the field of music this is not possible... if during a performance I would like to hear a particular passage again I cannot, it is impossible to go back, since the work is in the process of realization.'

'In painting it is impossible to point to the beginning and the conclusion of the creative process as in music.' 'If time is to be introduced into painting, one would presumably start out from one form to arrive at another... but it is dangerous to stop at this point. Time is a living movement.'

In painting, movement and calm can be put across by means of expression: 'a precise form of drawing expresses calm. But a colour can also express calm or tension; it depends, then, on our sensitivity.' 'The shape itself, the way in which it is set on the canvas and in which it is coloured can render movement in painting.' According to Kandinsky, 'Bryusova's definition of time expresses the process of movement.' 'In the work of music', says Kandinsky, 'the pause is fed by what came before.' 'The difference between music and painting... lies in the different use made of time.' Replying to questions about whether a work of art that was only in the mind and never realized could be real and if it was possible to imagine an aesthetic perception without the participation of external sense

organs, Kandinsky said: 'if this were possible, materialization would not be necessary'.

17 'In painting', said Rodchenko, 'stillness is nothing but time, for stillness is the outcome of movement, that is, a completed movement. But time can also be a state of immobility and not just a movement.' 'In painting time is the transition from tension to calm. Calm itself is already static.' 'In music it is impossible to render an entire work with a single line, that is, transmitting an entire musical work in a single moment with all the instruments together, would not be the entire work.'

18 Rodchenko's comment was followed by a brief exchange of ideas:

Popova: 'In dance one does not see what the movement is for.'

Bryusova: 'A corps de ballet, for example, makes an imprecise movement, immediately sets it right and takes another pose.'

Kandinsky: 'In ballet many movements are barely hinted at and then vanish.'

Rodchenko: 'Movement can be simple, psychological and necessary to something, be it art, the machine or the acrobat. The latter is highly interesting for us. In this case the movement becomes necessity, art.'

Popova: 'The "eccentrics" have unexpected, absolutely gratuitous movements.'

Shenshin: 'Time is not itself movement but possibility of movement. Creative time can exist without movement. At the start of the creative process one can create an incomplete form linked to the dimension of time.'

Kandinsky: 'In pauses sounds do not increase, but for us painters everything is different.'

Rodchenko: 'In painting the pause corresponds to moments when one is not working with the brush and these moments are always rigidly calculated.'

produced by Inkhuk and the Section: the programme, statute and questionnaire.

At that time Rodchenko had evidently not yet fully worked out his own method for the analysis of artistic activity. Unable to approve many aspects of Kandinsky's method, he withdrew more and more from the active work of the Section. The minutes of the discussions reveal how he gradually took less and less part in the debate. The active contribution of Stepanova and Popova also declined. The work of the Section became increasingly concentrated on problems of the relations between painting and other forms of art bound up with the dimension of time, such as music (and, in this sphere, song as well), poetry and dance, that is to say, on problems of interrelation and synthesis between those art forms in which Kandinsky was most interested.

In his investigations of the interrelations between basic elements, Kandinsky was trying to find a series of objective laws out of which to create a new art form, an art form that would make simultaneous use of colour, line, sound, movement and words. This also explains the thematic turn taken by the Section's work and Kandinsky's attempt to bring specialists in music and dance into Inkhuk. Sculpture and architecture were forgotten. The expected reports by Korolev and Lavinsky on sculpture and by Krinsky on architecture were continually put off and in the end were never read. Korolev ceased to attend meetings while Lavinsky and Krinsky showed no interest in the Section's work.

Work at Inkhuk outside the Section of Monumental Art was practically impossible. In fact the painting group organized by Kandinsky took over the whole Section, while the Working Group on sculpture set up by Korolev (with the aim of analysing the fundamental elements of sculpture on the basis of works of art from different ages) may not even have managed to start work: no record of its activity has been found in Inkhuk archives. Over the same period, Korolev organized a Working Group to look at the relationship between the arts, on the Zhivskulptarkh model, with the participation of members of the sculpture group. No trace of the activity of this group survives either, if one excludes a note in the minutes stating that its programme involved study of 'basic elements, their comparison and their relationship' and proposing to set up 'a workshop of pictorial, sculptural and architectonic construction'.

According to Inkhuk's programme and statute there were supposed to be three sections split up in their turn into working groups. The painting group created by Kandinsky ought to have been the first in a network of teams under the guidance of the Section of Monumental Art. The Working Group on Interrelationships among the Arts, set up by Korolev, showed just how decisively Inkhuk's structure had changed. Judging from its internal organization this group aspired to become a new section, on a par with the Section of Monumental Art. In fact the statute provided for the establishment of a section dealing with interrelationships among the arts (with its own working groups). The sculpture group was also highly attracted to the would-be section's programme of work.

The Working Group ('Section') on Interrelationships among the Arts was made up of sculptors, architects and painters (who felt drawn to architecture and sculpture): Korolev, Matveev, Radvel, N. Istselenov, Ladovsky, N. Dokuchaev, Krinsky, V. Fidman, Rukhlyadev, Rodchenko and Shevchenko. This 'Section', given its make-up, represented a Zhivskulptarkh with new members (eight of them were from Zhivskulptarkh). The formation of a new 'Section' was communicated at a meeting of the Section of Monumental Art held on 8 September and from then on Korolev and Shevchenko took no further part in meetings.

Given its members and the method of work formerly adopted at Zhivskulptarkh, the new group could have carried on (alongside the Section of Monumental Art) its own fully autonomous activity within Inkhuk, turning its attention to the interrelationship between figurative art and architecture. But obviously Rodchenko and his supporters (Stepanova and Popova) were not yet ready at the end of September to form a new centre within Inkhuk. In all probability, they still believed some kind of collaboration with Kandinsky to be possible.

Hence the work of the new 'section' did not go ahead at that time; quite apart from the fact that none of the architects who belonged to the Zhivskulptarkh collective was then a member of Inkhuk.

By the beginning of October the gulf between painters belonging to the collective and the Section of Monumental Art had grown still more profound. It was clear that Kandinsky now accepted the inevitability of the formation of a new section oriented towards the interrelationship between painting, architecture and sculpture, and gradually, but with growing determination, he shifted the work of his section towards a synthesis between painting and those arts linked to the dimension of time. By the autumn of 1920 the Section of Monumental Art's exclusive concern with painting, dance and music had become explicit. In addition to the painting group already in existence, the decision was taken at the meeting held on 13 October to create a Working Group on dance, while the question of setting up a Working Group on music was tackled at the meeting on 10 November. The first meeting of this group was held on 16 November. The programmes of these new Working Groups were fully in accordance with that of Inkhuk and with the method of working devised for the Section of Monumental Art by Kandinsky. Another art form that Kandinsky considered important to the creation of a new synthetic art was poetry, the art of words. At meetings of the Section much attention was given to the problem of poetry as such, and to its relationship with music. It was the general opinion that Kandinsky intended to set up a Working Group on poetry within the Section as well. In an initiative of a methodological and organizational character no less important than the creation of working groups, work was begun on the formation of a research laboratory to investigate the modes of perception of a work of art. In his desire to link up his theoretical studies with laboratory work, Kandinsky attempted to introduce break-throughs in science into the Section, and with this in view established contacts with a number of scientific institutes.

This kind of activity was of less and less interest to the supporters of Rodchenko who, more drawn to a study of the relations between painting and sculpture, between architecture and the objects of everyday life, longed for practical work.

The meeting on 24 October, attended by both factions, was the last in the series. The day after, the first meeting of the Working Group on Objective Analysis was convened.

The split in Inkhuk

Thus came the establishment of a second — parallel — Praesidium within Inkhuk; one which, in support of the Objective Analysis Group, set out to find a new methodology of work. The Section of Monumental Art continued to be active meanwhile.

At the Section meeting on 15 December, A.A. Sidorov proposed setting up a laboratory in which experiments on the modes of perception of a work of art could be carried out. The topic was raised again on 29 December and Sidorov's paper was approved. It was decided to make Sidorov himself responsible for the laboratory and he was asked to present a report on modes of artistic perception and on the laboratory's programmes. To judge by the surviving documents, this was the last meeting held by the Section.

The date of Sidorov's report had been fixed for 12 January 1921. However, on the same day, the general assembly of Inkhuk was held, at which Sidorov's application for membership of Inkhuk was rejected. This event brought the differences that had long been present within Inkhuk to a head and led to all the

active members of the Section of Monumental Art leaving the Institute, with Kandinsky at their fore.

To simplify matters, it might be said that the rupture within Inkhuk occurred between two groups of artists who, while agreeing in their desire for abstract painting to develop within a new, and not yet well-defined, synthetic art, proposed different solutions for overcoming the crisis through which 'left-wing' painting was passing at the time.

The general assembly of 21 January 1921 represented a turning point in that it changed the theoretical approach to the activity of Inkhuk. At the assembly, the nine people who had until then regularly attended the meetings of the Section of Monumental Art — Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Shenshin, Popova, Stepanova, Bryusova, Falk, Bubnova and Sinezubov — represented at that moment two opposing currents of opinion.

It was decided to postpone the re-election of the Praesidium to a time when the Institute had been renewed by the addition of new members. In all, eleven candidatures were voted on, three put forward by the Section of Monumental Art (Pavlov, Uspensky, Sidorov) and eight by the Objective Analysis Group (Udaltsova, Drevin, Babichev, Stenberg, Medunetsky, Krinsky, Ladovsky, K. Ioganson). All the new members were already active collaborators in the Section and in the Group. Only two, Sidorov and Ioganson, obtained less than half of the

The Working Group of Constructivists, meeting in Rodchenko's house. At the rear: E. Rodchenko, the artist's mother. Seated: Z. Bykov, A. Lavinsky, A. Vesnin, L. Popova, the Mironovs. In front: V. Stepanova. Photo Rodchenko, 1924.



votes (four) and were not elected.

The addition, as members of Inkhuk, of a considerable number of collaborators from the Objective Analysis Group profoundly altered the balance of forces between Rodchenko's supporters and Kandinsky's, to the disadvantage of the latter.

The Praesidium was not re-elected at the following general assembly on 27 January, with the result that the members of Kandinsky's section jointly tendered their resignations.¹ The general assembly dealt exclusively with this communication, of which the Izo section of Narkompros must have already been aware, even before the assembly was convened, as Shterenberg and Brik, who were present as guests, sought to avoid the split in Inkhuk, trying as hard as they could to pacify the opposing parties.²⁰

In their speeches, the supporters of the two groups — Kandinsky and Shenshin on one side, and Rodchenko and Stepanova on the other — dealt not so much with the essence of the controversy as with its formal aspects, trying to accuse each other of formal errors and breaches. This was because both sides were perfectly aware of the real nature of their conflict. They had no need of any further demonstration of the gulf that separated them and could see no prospect of bridging it.

Hence Kandinsky's supporters, on the one hand, and Rodchenko's, on the

A. Gan at work, 1924. Photo Rodchenko.



19 We give here the entire text of the communication drawn up by Sinezubov.

'To the Inkhuk General Assembly.

'Given the profound difference of opinion, existing for some time and openly manifested at the general assembly on 12 January 1921, over the tasks, work-plan and programme of Inkhuk, we the undersigned members of the Monumental Section consider it impossible to remain members of Inkhuk and tender our resignations.

'Conscious of the great scientific value and the urgent need for investigation of the problems raised by the Monumental Section, we consider it necessary to set up a special scientific office to continue this work.'

The signatories: Shenshin, Kandinsky, Sinezubov, Uspensky, Pavlov.

20 Speaking on behalf of the Izo section of Narkompros, Shterenberg said: *'We have organized the Institute as a centre for the elaboration of scientific hypotheses on the problems of art... If differing opinions have emerged within the Institute, so much the better. The work should be organized in such a way that each section may work freely without doing any violence to or interfering with the life of others.'* As for the proposal put forward jointly by the members of the Section of Monumental Art that a new 'special scientific office' should be set up to continue with their work, Shterenberg declared that Narkompros could not support different parallel institutes and that the People's Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky, wanted Inkhuk to continue.

In his speech, Brik stated that a radical reform of the Institute was necessary. 'Obviously the programme has been devised by a single person and now that not everyone is in favour of it, it ceases to apply... Kandinsky's programme is the programme of his section; I invite the other groups to work out a programme of their own.'

21 We give the entire section of the minutes covering the last part of the general assembly. Shenshin: *'Group announcement: given the in-*

sufficient number of representatives of the group, this announcement will remain in force until Wednesday [the day established for meetings of the Section of Monumental Art. After the general assembly of 27 January, the next Wednesday would have been 2 February], since those present cannot continue with the meeting.

Babichev: 'If the group leaves, the whole agenda is forfeit.'

Shterenberg: 'The general assembly can examine my proposals.'

Babichev: 'Does the assembly believe it possible to consider Shterenberg's proposal in the comrades' absence?'

Stepanova: 'The declaration of the Monumental Section is obstructionism.'

Brik: 'The statute co-ordinates the work of the Institute. It is important that the Monumental Section should be present, leaving aside the problem of the resignations. Let the statement be considered, in relation to the reorganization of Inkhuk.'

Kandinsky: 'The declaration remains in force.'

Shterenberg: 'Brik's statement is correct. If Inkhuk's work is interrupted, I will consider the group from the Monumental Section responsible for the break. I see no obstacle to the possibility of working together. Whoever wants a split should assume responsibility for it.'

Kandinsky: 'I assume my responsibility.' (He leaves the meeting.)

22 The minutes of this meeting have not been found. All that has been preserved is a handwritten statement (by Sinezubov) delivered to members of the Section at Inkhuk and dated 2 February 1921. The text is as follows: 'To the General Assembly of Inkhuk.

'After having examined the proposal that we should withdraw our resignations as members of Inkhuk made to us on 27.1.1921, we the undersigned request that our communication should be regarded as still in force.'

Signed: Kandinsky, Pavlov, Shenshin, Sinezubov.

23 Along with his supporters, who left Inkhuk with him, Kandinsky carried on with his theoretical and laboratory research in the Psycho-Physical Section of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (Gakhn: Gosudarstvennaya Akademiya Khudozhestvennykh Nauk).

24 N. Tarabukin, *Ot mol'berta k mashine* (From the easel to the machine), Moscow 1923, pp. 17-18.

In this connection, the following is to be found in an Inkhuk report published in the same year of 1923 (Arvatov was president of the

other, spoke of nothing but the possibility of ensuring that their section or group could work independently. As a consequence, all the mutual recrimination was merely designed to draw attention to cases where the autonomy of this or that group had been infringed or where there had been interference with their internal affairs. Ideally, each group would have liked to work in an absolutely independent fashion, in separate organizations. The first to put forward this proposal had been Rodchenko's supporters, a minority in the Institute when they had set up a 'parallel' Inkhuk.

However the Izo section of Narkompros was unable to lend its support to the idea of organizing two parallel institutes. It was then that Rodchenko decided to strengthen his position in the 'old' Inkhuk and create the Objective Analysis Group. This move was successful when the new Working Group managed to bring in a considerable number of its supporters as members of the Institute at the general assembly held on 12 January. Kandinsky's supporters then found themselves in a minority and made the same attempt to set up a parallel institute, but without their proposal getting the backing of the Izo section of Narkompros.

Those who tried to make peace between the warring factions were convinced that a solution could be found in a radical reorganization of Inkhuk's organizational structure. Yet those involved on both sides of the dispute maintained that their differences could not be patched up and they could see no possibility of settling questions of principle within the compass of a single institute.

Over the course of this embittered struggle for control of Inkhuk, the widening gulf over matters of principle led supporters of both sides to dramatize the situation to an excessive degree. Brik's idea that it was necessary for Inkhuk 'to tackle the problems of art from all sides' was not without foundation. He saw a real possibility, once the Institute had been reorganized, of parallel work going on in different sections, each with a precise programme of its own.

Consideration was given to Shterenberg's proposal that the Institute's statute should be revised. But before deciding on this proposal, Shenshin requested a ten-minute break in the name of the Section of Monumental Art (Kandinsky, Shenshin, Sinezubov and Uspensky were present). After the interval, the members of the Section asked for a suspension of the meeting.

At the end of a heated debate, Kandinsky left the hall.²¹ After his exit, Shterenberg's proposal was accepted and a committee was set up to re-examine the statute.

On 2 February (as always on a Wednesday), the Section held a meeting at which the question of Kandinsky's resignation from Inkhuk was raised.²² Two days later, on 4 February, another general assembly was held. The second item on the agenda dealt with the communication from the Section of Monumental Art, whose members were not present, and it was decided to 'consider comrades Kandinsky, Shenshin, Pavlov and Sinezubov to have resigned from Inkhuk'. The fourth item on the agenda was the election of the new Praesidium.

The new Praesidium was made up of the following: Rodchenko (president), Brik, Bryusova, Babichev and Stepanova; Popova and Krinsky were nominees. Rodchenko had been de facto head of the 'parallel' Praesidium of Inkhuk since the beginning of November, and twenty-eight meetings had been held from the third of that month to 1 February. Therefore the elections on 4 February merely ratified what had already been the case for some time. This brought to an end the first period of Inkhuk's activity, in which Kandinsky had played a determinant role.²³

Artists and theorists of Production Art.

Facts and legends

Now that the profound changes in the direction taken by Inkhuk's work have been described, it becomes possible to divide the period of its activity into three phases: from 1920 to 1921, when the Institute's work was based on the theories of Kandinsky; 1921, when the direction of Inkhuk was taken over by Rodchenko; from the end of 1921 to 1924, when the approach of Inkhuk to its work was laid down by the theorists of Production Art.

The latter would have the period of its activity divided into only two phases, regarding the time when the Institute was run by Rodchenko as a period of transition. Both in the press of those years and in the studies of contemporary critics, the work of Inkhuk was portrayed as exclusively bound up with the activity of the theoreticians of Production Art (principally B. Arvatov, O. Brik, N. Chuzhak, B. Kushner and N. Tarabukin). The very evolution of Production Art was seen by the critics almost as the practical consequence of the ideas put forward by the theorists of Production Art. The result is that Productivism has not been regarded as an artistic phenomenon, but as something that was born and developed with speculative aims quite separate from art.

A partial explanation of this lies in the fact that the studies of Production Art produced up until the present day have all been incomplete. Only the texts have been analysed, studied and examined from a scientific point of view, while very little attention has been reserved for the works of Productivist artists, so that there is a risk of providing only a partial picture of the situation.

In the first place, one is still prone to think today that the theory of Production Art is of much greater interest than the practical work of Productivist artists. Secondly, this merely serves to reinforce the traditional opinion according to which the entire body of new work produced by Productivist artists was nothing but the result of the influence of theoretical processes. Thirdly, the very sphere of influence of such theoretical processes is exaggerated; one is inclined to attribute to theory many of those formative artistic processes which characterized a very definite style. On the other hand, when Production Art is studied, very often no account is taken of just what its theoretical base was. The fact is that the theoreticians of this art were not artists.

The theories and creed of the various artistic trends of the 20th century were usually elaborated during the process of creative research carried out by the artists themselves. Judging by what has been written on the subject, the case of Production Art was entirely different. It was a group of theoreticians who took on a guiding role and even defined the stylistic direction.

The theorists themselves helped to create this belief when, in their publications, they assigned to the artists the role of submissive executors of concepts for which the theorists were alone responsible.

Let us take an example. In his examination of the process by which painters 'moved away' from painting towards the world of objects, Tarabukin wrote in 1923: 'One cannot fail to mention the famous meeting of the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) held on 24 November 1921, at which Brik gave a report on Inkhuk's move from the Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) to the Supreme Council for the National Economy, Vesenkha. When twenty-five artists from the left-wing art group rejected easel painting as an end in itself, turning their attention to production, they regarded this as a necessary and inevitable choice. For the first time in the annals of art history painters, in a conscious rejection of their specific field and a shift of orientation, became highly sensitive seismographs of the tendencies of the future.'²⁴



Above and to the side: caricatures of Osip Brik, executed by Rodchenko. The photograph dates from 1924.

Praesidium at the time: 'A special moment in Inkhuk's activity came on 24 November, a day, without a doubt, of great historical significance. It was then that Brik gave the report in which he invited painters to abandon easel painting and move on to practical work in industry. Inkhuk accepted this invitation. Twenty-five progressive artists from the left wing of art, caught up by revolutionary enthusiasm, rejected "the pure forms of art", regarding easel painting as outmoded and their activity as painters to be useless. The new artist hoisted the flag of production.'

Report of the Institute of Artistic Culture in *Russkoe iskusstvo* (Russian Art), nos. 2-3, 1923, p. 88.

²⁵ The art critic E. Rakitina began an article on L. Popova as follows: 'A sensational event took place at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture on 24 November 1921. Twenty-five artists, some already established and some not, who had already taken part in a number of exhibitions, judged their artistic activity to be useless and decided to move on to production.'

E. Rakitina, Lyubov Popova. *Iskusstvo i*



Little by little the press has created a legend out of that 'historic' meeting of Inkhuk, which has been handed down (along with other similar legends) from essay to essay, book to book, to the present day.²⁵ The phenomenon appeared to be a very simple one: a theoretician turned to the painters with a message and they, accepting this message, immediately abandoned easel painting and moved en masse (twenty-five people) on to production. But in reality the process was more complicated. There really was a meeting of Inkhuk on 24 November and Brik actually spoke, in his report, of Inkhuk's move from the jurisdiction of Narkompros to that of Vesenkha. But another fact must be taken into account; the end of 1921 also marked the start of the third phase of Inkhuk's activity, in which control passed into the hands of the Productivist theoreticians: Brik had just been appointed president of the Praesidium in place of Rodchenko.²⁶

Consequently, Brik was referring in his report not so much to an 'invitation' to painters to change their activity radically as to the 'recognition' that they were ready to 'give up' painting and move on to production, having already completed the 'running-up' phase, a phase which coincided with Rodchenko's presidency. But among those who listened to Brik's report, which were the artists that had, allegedly, to be urged to reject easel painting? They were the architects Ladovsky, Krinsky, Alexander Vesnin, A. Efimov, the painters G. and V. Stenberg, Medunetsky, Popova, Ioganson, the sculptors Lavinsky and Babichev, the theorists Tarabukin and Ilin and two other people. In reality, there was no need to urge anyone, and certainly not the architects. In any case the painters had even then already carried out many experiments with three-dimensional compositions. Furthermore, there were not twenty-five painters in the group that was running Inkhuk at the end of 1921, but only ten, if one refers to those painters who had already completed their preparations before 'passing' to the world of objects.

Brik's proposal that they should move to Vesenkha was in fact accepted at that meeting; indeed a committee was formed to draw up a number of documents relating to the move, composed of Brik, Rodchenko (who did not attend the meeting) and Kushner. Yet Brik's proposal led to no practical results; when the Izo section of Narkompros was dissolved, Inkhuk came under the control of the Academy of Artistic Sciences.

It was not the urgings of the theoreticians of Production Art — although these played a decisive propagandist role — but the more profound processes of a change in style that characterized the new tendency, drawing it away from painting and towards architecture and the emerging field of design.

Without diminishing in any way the role of these theorists, it must be said that the process by which 'left-wing' painting turned its attention to the design of objects, through the experiments with abstract form, had begun before the definitive affirmation of Productivist theory. It was carried through without ever straying outside the bounds of artistic laws based on the elaboration of forms, something on which not all the theoreticians of industrial art place due emphasis.²⁷

manifesty (Lyubov Popova. Art and posters), in the collection Khudozhnik, stsena, ekran (Artist, stage, screen), Moscow 1975, p. 152.

26 In his report Brik stated: 'Given the large number of members of Inkhuk, even after some defections, and seeing that almost all share the ideological viewpoint of Production Art, one might ask if the time has not come to tackle the question of moving Inkhuk to Vesenkha.' Item 8 of the minutes of the Inkhuk Council meeting on 24 November 1921. Private archives.

27 A passage from an article by R.O. Antonov serves as an example of how the relations between theorists and artists were interpreted: 'In order for the new concepts of the programme of Production Art to become reality, much still had to be done and in particular it was necessary to find artists who would be able to realize the theoretical proposals of the group of Productivist Constructivists (N. Chuzhak, O. Brik, B. Kushner, N. Tarabukin and others) in metal, glass and wood.'

'Thinking, rightly, that it was necessary to study in order to put the new proposals of this group into practice, Rodchenko joined Vkhutemas.'

R.O. Antonov, 'Evolutsiya khudozbestvenno — konstruktorskikh programm fakul'teta obrabotki dereva i metala Vkhutemasa' (Evolution of programmes of artistic construction in

V. Kandinsky. Cover of *Tekst kudozhnika* (Artist's text), published by Izo in 1918.

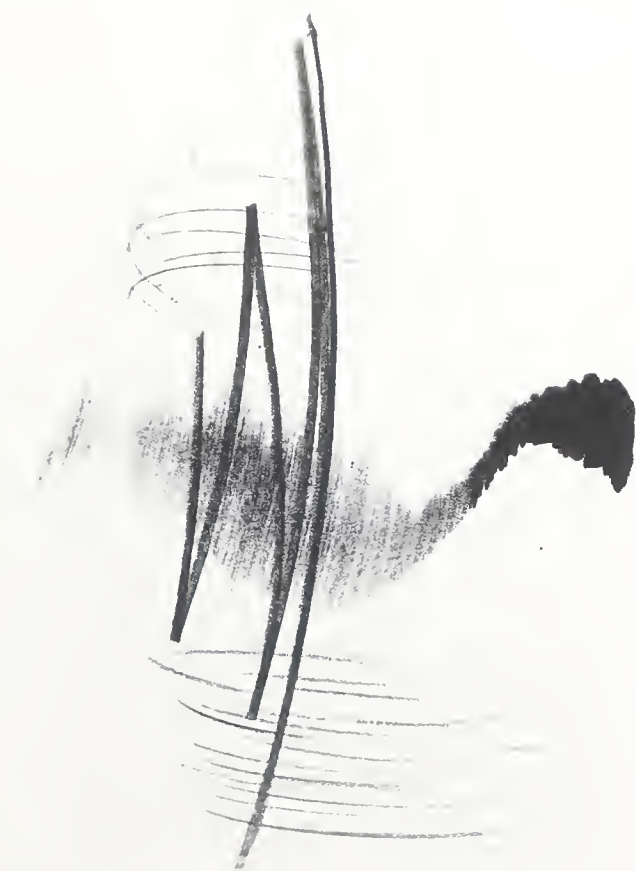


the faculty of wood- and metalworking of Vkhutemas), in *Khudozhestvenno—konstruktorskoe obrazovanie* (Artistic—Constructive Education), no. 4, Moscow 1974, p. 195.



Sketch, 1921. Paper, pencil, 18.5 × 14.5.

Sketch, 1921. Paper, pencil, 18.5 × 14.5.



The Objective Analysis Group

The second phase of Inkhuk's activity (when Rodchenko presided over the Praesidium) began with the theoretical work of the Objective Analysis Group, on which the whole range of Inkhuk's basic pursuits was concentrated right from the start.

Its formal analysis of the elements of art was totally different from that of Kandinsky's Section of Monumental Art. The basis of the analysis were the structural elements and the laws of composition used in the creation of a work. The first meeting of the group was held on 23 November 1921, and was attended by Rodchenko, Popova, Stepanova and Bubnova. In the minutes of the meeting the group was designated a Working Group of the Section of Monumental Art.

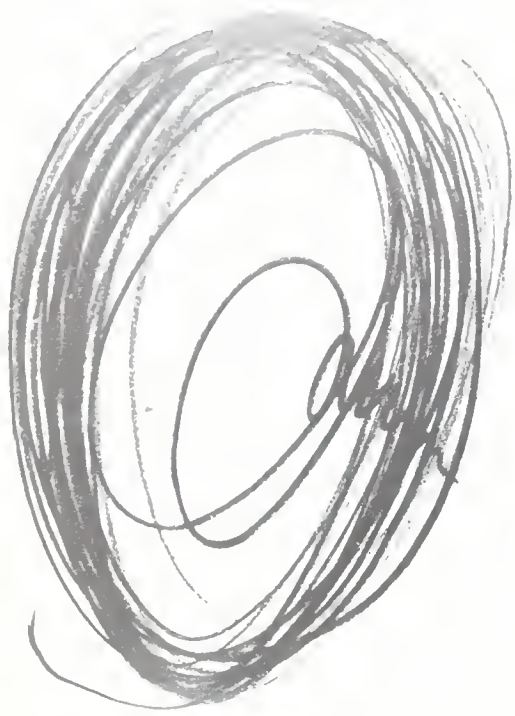
Discussion of the group's work-plan was placed on the agenda. To be presented for the approval of the Praesidium, this specified the 'System of analysis of works and elements' (Doc. 8).

One of the first problems to crop up for the Objective Analysis Group was that of co-opting new members. The names of a number of people were put forward to be contacted by an actual member of the group. At subsequent meetings, new collaborators with the group were presented. The list of candidates, which was given final confirmation during the group's meetings (although many of them failed to take an active part in the life of the group itself) and the new set of collaborators are revealing: the architects Ladovsky, Krinsky and Vesnin; the sculptors Babichev, Korolev and Lavinsky; the painters Medunetsky, G. and V. Stenberg and Ioganson, who were experimenting with three-dimensional constructions, and other painters like Drevin, Udaltsova and Klyun.

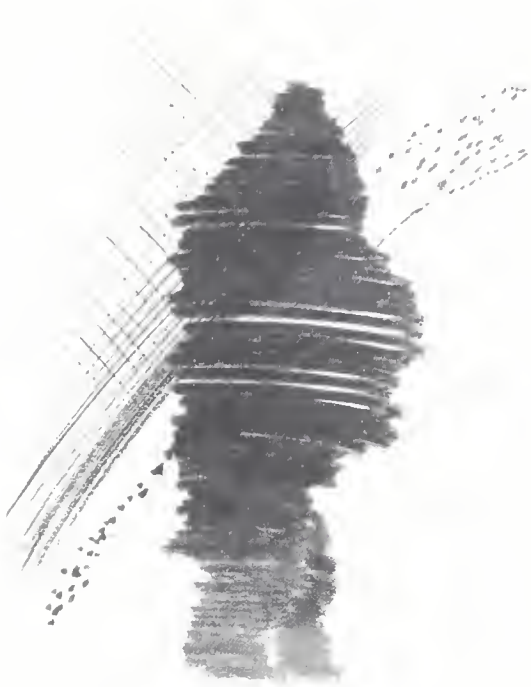
At the second meeting it was decided to begin the group's laboratory work with analysis of modern works of art, following the different artistic trends. Impressionism was the first. In order to analyse these trends in modern art, group meetings were held in a room at the Museum of Western Art (formerly the Shchukin mansion), where the originals could be examined. Three such meetings were held at the Museum, while others were used to discuss the conclusions of the analysis. The trends given a thorough examination were Impressionism (works by Monet), Pointillism (works by Signac) and the works of Matisse.

The first phase of the group's work was marked by a period of study of the methods by which pictorial works could be subjected to 'objective analysis', methods completely different from those used by the Section of Monumental Art.

Given the specific nature of the group's work, it was decided to change its status within Inkhuk and transform the Working Group into a Section. This question was raised more than once at meetings. At the start the name given to the group was the Section of Individual Artistic Pursuits, and then this was changed to Section of Interrelationships among the Arts. Finally, when Kandinsky's group left Inkhuk and the Section of Monumental Art ceased to exist, it was decided to stick to the original designation of Objective Analysis Group.

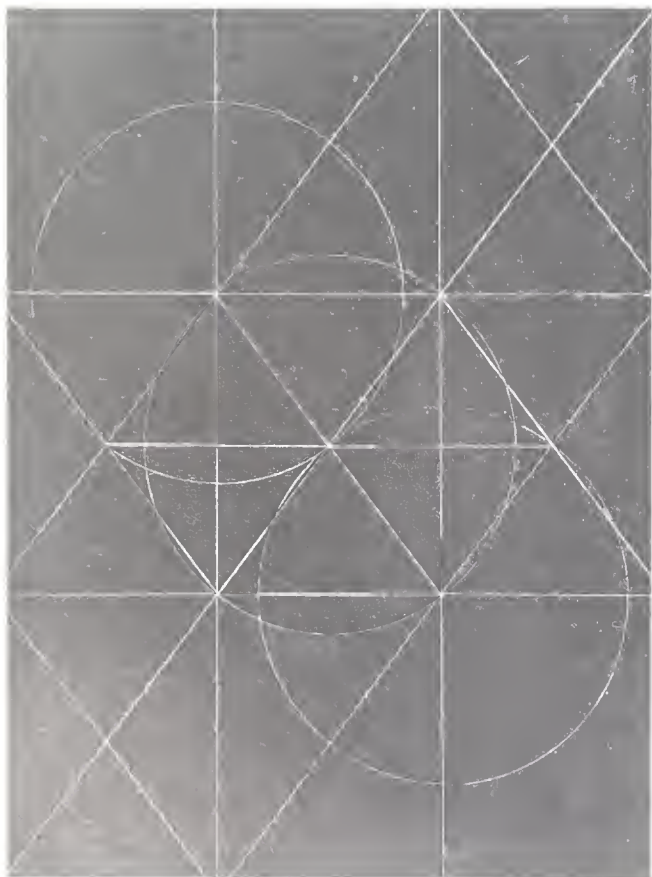


Sketch, 1921. Paper, pencil, 18.5 × 14.5

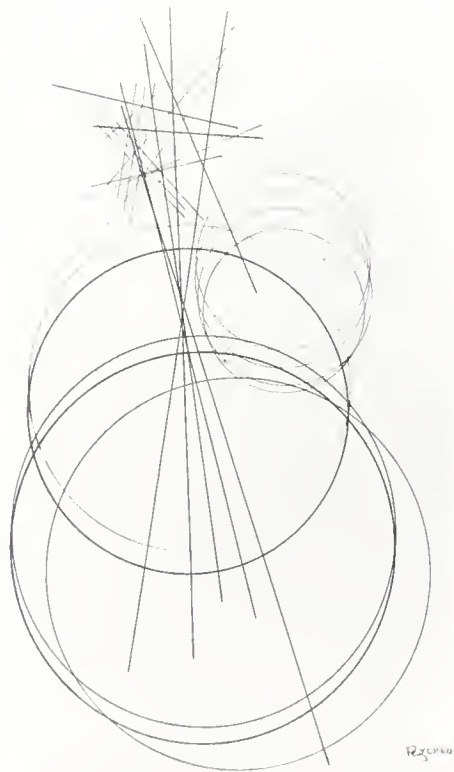


Sketch, 1921. Paper, pencil, 18.5 × 14.5.

Drawing—engraving, 1921. 20 × 15.



Linear composition, 1920.
Paper, pen and coloured Indian ink.



28 'These exhibitions, instead of bringing together the artist's merits and thereby doing credit to him, assemble his errors, sins, weaknesses, dualisms and blocks, which go to make up the anything but pleasing armoury of qualities of a mediocre talent...

'One may regard as great only that modern artist who, after a retrospective exhibition, is capable, I would not say of increasing his fame, but rather of retaining it; retaining that fame that he had created for himself when he had introduced himself to the public with a few paintings a year, imposing himself on it with the most worthwhile part of his art and of his creative work...

'... I feel with real pain that my love for Malevich... is being unexpectedly shattered... It was just an illusion...

'What once seemed mysterious and fascinating in Malevich now appears barren and contemptible...

'... As a painter, as a master of technique, as a master of tone, as a master of colour, Malevich represents nothing of importance.'

A. Efros, 'K. Malevich. Retrospektivnaya vystavka' (K. Malevich. Retrospective exhibition), in *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'* (Artistic Life), no. 3, 1920, pp. 39-40.

29 The aim of this exhibition, wrote the critic, 'consisted, evidently, in wanting to give some of our "left-wing" painters the opportunity to display their creative work as a whole. This is the case with painters like Kandinsky and Rodchenko. On the other hand, their pictures occupy two of the largest rooms in the exhibition. The work of Kandinsky (it appears to be the first time he has put so many pictures on show in Russia) and of Rodchenko, who is himself literally staggered at his own fertility, is so extensively represented that one is tempted to speak of "left-wing" painting in general. Especially since both the artists mentioned seem to be the "yardstick" of "left-wing" painting, the ones who up until today have "ruled the roost".'

'In the first place, their revolutionary commitment to the left appears doubtful. Their work still clings to the fastidious novelty of seven years ago. We have moved far ahead since then, we have had new experiences, we have learned much. Psychology has been renewed, broad horizons have opened up. Now we feel solid ground under our feet, we know what we want. We see "left-wing" art stuck in a sort of quagmire, a creative anaemia. It is really true, the painters who fell asleep in 1913 have woken up in 1920.'

The problem of 'discoveries' in painting

The author went on to analyse Kandinsky's painting which in his opinion 'starts out from Impressionism' and traverses that line of development of 'left-wing' painting with which Rodchenko is connected. This line which 'joins together a series of artistic tendencies, in which form and construction have an important role, is the outcome of the development of a number of lines already to be found in Cézanne's painting'.

This is how the critic saw the development of this line from Cézanne to Rodchenko: 'Having inherited the form from the old masters, Cézanne approached it by way of pictorial analysis. "Meditating with the brush in hand", he first studied carefully elementary abstract forms, such as the cylinder, sphere, cone and cube, whose extensions are living forms. On this Picasso founded his Cubism. Adapting the living form to the simpler abstract shape, Cubism continues to analyse and observe this form "scientifically" from different points of view, from above, from the side, from outside and from inside, and the form is broken up into different parts, translated in the picture into a rhythmic pattern. The parts and surfaces of objects in a picture of this kind begin to take on a life of their own... Another problem is that of the geometrical construction of surfaces. Matter dominates painting, the very elements of painting become the object of analysis.

This is pure formalism, the logical consequence of the whole prior development of painting. Summing up what has been said, we see that the analysis of form and colour has led painting towards metaphysics — an academic metaphysics — and alchemy and has condemned it to creative sterility. This is what Rodchenko, whose experiments take up an entire large room in the exhibition, is engaged in. In this artist "inventiveness" becomes a cult. Claiming that "line and form" are the basis of painting, a principle that is actually correct and modern, he applies this in such an abstract manner in his paintings that all that comes out is a "manual dexterity" that is an end in itself. It is clear that what we are faced with here is a dynamic, an energy, that leads nowhere. He is posing the metaphysical problem "what is a rope?" Even the most abstract of the arts, architecture, becomes far more practical. A true artist cannot just "invent" without knowing what may be expressed with this invention.'

D. Melnikov, 'Po povodu "levoi" zhivopisi na 19-y Gosudarstvennoi vystavke' (On the subject of 'left-wing' painting at the 19th State Exhibition), in Tvorchestvo (Creative Work), nos. 7-10, 1920, pp. 42-44.

From 1910 to 1920 there was a continual succession of aesthetico-formal experiments by 'left-wing' painters, each of which was independent of the others. The feverish search for the new, the unheard-of and the original often led to rivalry and arguments over priority. The artists attributed a great deal of importance to all their 'discoveries' in the course of artistic research, and they tried to keep them secret until the next exhibition. Even Rodchenko, in a series of autobiographical writings and statements, scrupulously listed all his 'discoveries' and 'inventions'.

All this inventive activity served as a laboratory of art for those engaged in research into new means and methods of expression. It was an important and even necessary pursuit aimed at a complete renovation of style. But the research was always of an experimental kind, whose meaning was usually only comprehensible to those engaged in the work. In fact at this stage the experiments with abstract form were intended for a very restricted and specialized public. Only artists interested in aesthetico-formal research were able to recognize the efforts of their colleagues as new discoveries and appreciate them as artistic contributions aimed at extending the gamut of means of expression available to the new tendency in art.

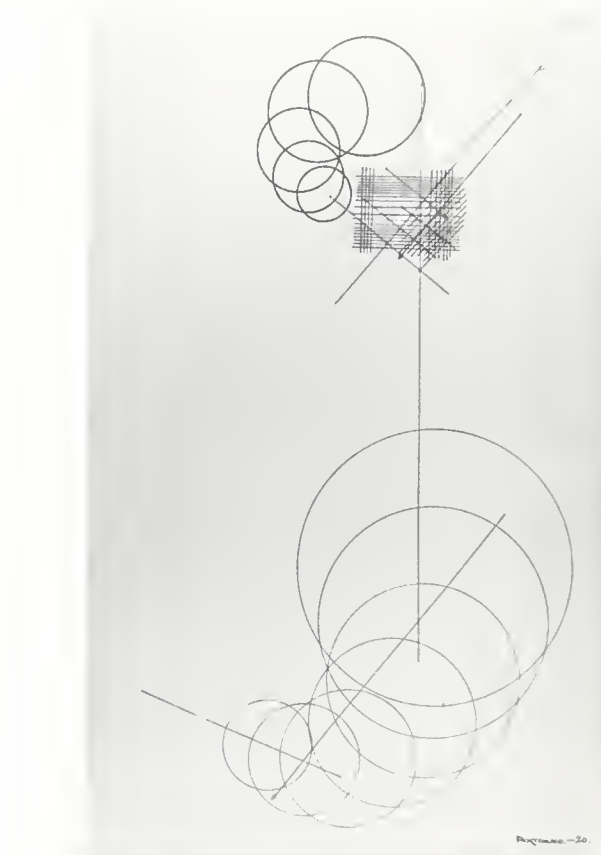
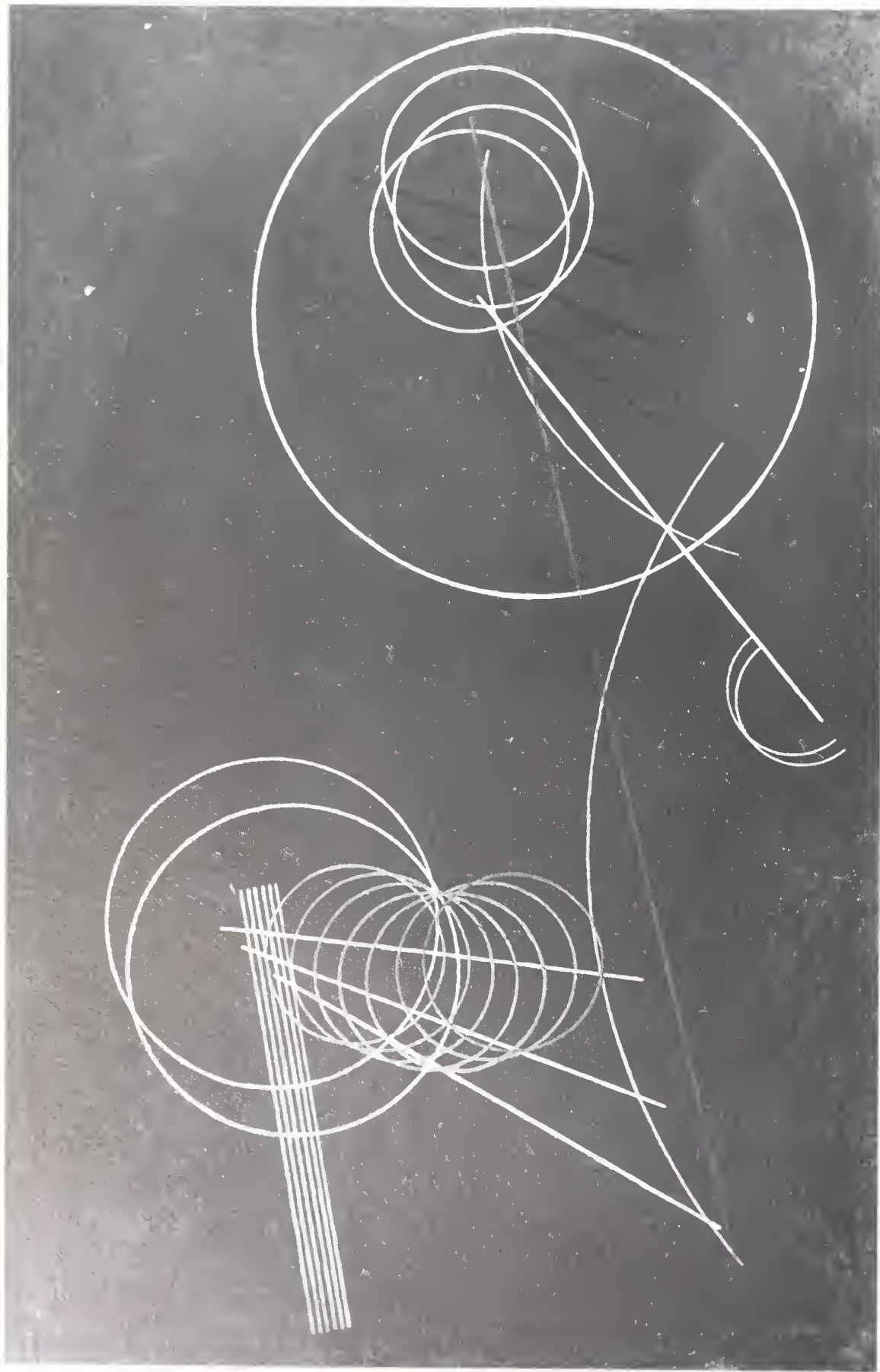
The numerous art exhibitions that were held from 1918 to 1921 contained every conceivable experiment intended to bear witness to a variety of discoveries and inventions on the plane of aesthetics and form. Although they aroused a great deal of interest among a narrow circle of specialists, these exhibitions left much of the public wholly perplexed and attracted unfavourable reviews from many an art critic. This is quite understandable if one considers that the public at large and the critics were accustomed to seeing the results of research and not the research as such. The experiments with abstract form drew particularly harsh criticism and a degree of psychological rejection could be detected, even on the part of some professional critics, in the face of these laboratory discoveries with which the art galleries were crammed.

In this connection it is revealing what that section of the press specializing in questions of art had to say about the works put on show by Malevich, Rodchenko, Kandinsky, Rozanov and other painters at the exhibition held in 1919. The works of these painters, who were often engaged in bitter controversy with each other, were received by many critics as a single 'raw material' of experimentation.

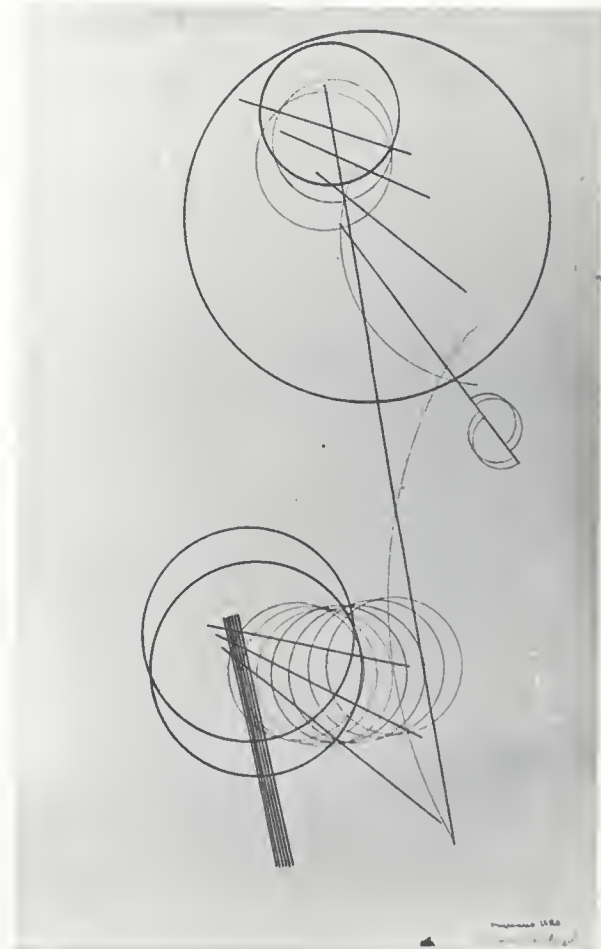
In the summer of 1919 a one-man show by Malevich was staged in Moscow (the 18th State Exhibition). In the bulletin of the artistic section of Narkompros, Abram Efros, one of the more thoughtful and authoritative critics, published a detailed review of the exhibition, but one that was couched in extremely negative terms.²⁸

A few months later, the 19th State Exhibition, which opened in the autumn of 1920, provoked a similar reaction. Kandinsky and Rodchenko, linked to their common roots in Cézanne and Cubism, were openly accused of formalism by the critic Melnikov.²⁹ Speaking of the 21st State Exhibition, a year later, the latter expressed the same opinion: 'The Central All-Russian Office, charged with the staging of exhibitions, makes one think of an undertaker's establishment. Every exhibition put on by this office is a first-class funeral of the old art, including its left-wing tendencies.'³⁰

Linear composition, 1920. Brush, oil, 104 x 70.



Linear compositions, 1920.
Paper, pen and coloured Indian ink.



In charge of the Museum of Artistic Culture in Moscow

30 D. Melnikov, '21-ya vystavka kartin IZO Narkomprosa' (21st Exhibition of pictures of the Izo section of Narkompros), in *Tvorchestvo* (Creative Work), nos. 1-3, 1921, p. 32.

31 In *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo* (Figurative Art), no. 1, 1919, p. 74.

32 In an article devoted expressly to the new type of museum, K. Malevich wrote: 'At present the first stone is being laid for a museum [devoted] exclusively to artistic culture... In my opinion, a museum ought not to be made up solely of pictorial works, but of all those art forms in general that help to re-awaken the dead...

'The museum I have in mind is a place where anyone can see the change, growth and development of an organism in its totality and not have to look at each detail of a whole, divided into separate sections.'

K. Malevich, 'Os 'tsveta i ob'ema' (The basic essence of light and volume), in *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo* (Figurative Art), no. 1, 1919, pp. 28-29.

In his article 'The Museum of Artistic Culture' Kandinsky wrote that museums organized according to a historical criterion did not provide the possibility of seeing the artist's work of creative research, and created the image of 'an artist extraneous to the common living conditions of the worker. The artist came to look like someone favoured by destiny, a man who usually lives in idleness and who only at certain moments and by easy paths known only to himself, manages to achieve great results that procure the maximum advantages in life for him.

'Instead the artist works twice as hard: (1) he himself is the inventor of his art and (2) he himself divides the technical tools of the trade which he needs. The more he possesses these two qualities, the more often he is cited in the history of art. To throw light on the artist's activity, on activity that has been shrouded in darkness up to now, means to display a new side of the artist: that of the worker who creates genuine values by talent and hard labour, demonstrating his right to occupy a place that is at least equal to that of other workers.'

V. Kandinsky, 'Muzei zhivopisnoi kul'tury' (Museum of Artistic Culture), in *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'* (Artistic Life, January—February 1920, p. 18.

33 The debate continued:

Rodchenko: 'At first no material was collected, taking just what was on hand. Only later on did systematic choices begin to be made. Our Museum has not worried about the masters of

The hostile attitude of the critics towards the inventive activity of 'left-wing' art should probably be seen in relation to the fact that during the years immediately following the Revolution artists became involved with the management of museums. In doing so, they criticized traditional methods of organization and turned away from a criterion based on the illustration of history towards one which would testify to the progressive attainment of new methods, creative discoveries and inventions in the field of painting (*Doc. 9*).

The question of a new type of museum was given a great deal of discussion by artists. At the same time initiatives of an organizational character were undertaken. Special acquisition commissions purchased pictures with which to create a state collection from painters on a list approved by Narkompros. The list ran to 134 people, and Rodchenko was included as number 14.³¹ The works were to be used for a section of the new Museum of Artistic Culture. In 1919 new types of museum were set up in Moscow and Petrograd and authoritative leaders of the artistic left were tapped to run them: Kandinsky, Malevich, Rodchenko, Altman and others.³²

Inkhuk had close ties with Moscow's Museum of Artistic Culture. In the decision to link Inkhuk to the Izo section of Narkompros, it was stressed that this should be 'through the Museum of Artistic Culture'.

Initially management of the Museum and Inkhuk was in the same hands. Kandinsky was in charge of both organizations. When Rodchenko replaced Kandinsky as head of Inkhuk he also became director of the Museum. At the meeting of the Objective Analysis Group on 13 May 1921, Rodchenko read out a report on 'The Museum of Artistic Culture' which was discussed at the text two meetings (19 and 20 May). The draft of Rodchenko's report and the shorthand text of the discussion, in which he himself intervened on more than one occasion, have been preserved. The report specifies the tasks of the Museum, which was to concern itself essentially with the spheres of education and cultural output (*Doc. 10*).

In the ensuing discussion, the importance of the first remarks focusing on the problem of skill and inventiveness should be emphasized.

Stepanova: 'I would like further clarification of the problem of the Museum and of its role in artistic culture, and our own relationship to a Museum of Artistic Culture as it has been envisaged.

'A Museum of Artistic Culture is an interesting event, but we have not yet made clear which artists and which artistic trends. Every artist has some excellent things when judged from the qualitative point of view, but often they do not express his individuality...'

Rodchenko: 'Art has two faces: skill and inventiveness. Sometimes when there is inventiveness skill is lacking. Our Museum is a collection of beautiful things: often these things reveal different skills. We lack things that might be "inventions"; with the result that we have never taken ugly things, even though in some cases they were the products of inventiveness. We have confused skill with inventiveness, and what has come out is a museum of beautiful things.'

Udaltsova: 'The present moment is the moment of creativity. In the Museum, where things are fixed once and for all, there is no room for experimental works, and that is why we must create another kind of museum, a laboratory-cum-museum.

'In a Museum of Artistic Culture there are things of value; but here we see the artistic currents of three years ago. Where are the works being produced now?'

Rodchenko: 'Let's set ourselves, as a minimum goal, at least a Museum of Izo. In

my opinion, our Museum will be the Museum of the Profession. We must do all we can to make it work.'

Shterenberg: '... We need to contrast the model of the Museums of Art History with a Professional Museum.

'We had suggested that the problem of the museums should be left to us to handle in our own way: it meant going to the Hermitage and other Russian museums and picking out everything, from Western and Russian painting, that indicates a degree of originality and then opening a new museum with these works. The thing got no further because young artists were not interested in what had been done before them. Neither here in Moscow nor in Petrograd did we manage to put together a museum from a number of other museums (the Shchukin and Morozov Galleries would have been enough). But many artists were opposed to taking things away from the Galleries...

'In reality there is no Museum of Artistic Culture, there are just exhibitions of separate things. We have individual works by groups of artists. Of course, the work that we are doing now will lead to a positive conclusion.

'Until today there has been a selection of artistic works, and as new things appeared the old ones were devalued. The Museum of today could provide a better service for the study of those painters who have made certain choices. A tendency in art can be evaluated only on the basis of those choices.

'The work of the Institute will lead to an objective evaluation. Up until now the viewpoint from which this evaluation has been carried out has always changed. We want to document the presence of an invention with precision.

'Great efforts have been made to assert this or that claim to originality (a good example is Picasso who has eliminated a whole series of artists). No one knows who is the real inventor, these artists or Picasso.

'Our primary task consists in documenting a chain of inventions, keeping originality separate from quality. Our Museum will represent the attempt to organize a Museum of Artistic Culture, but it will not be anything definitive. As elements of originality, many things, even when they have no artistic value, will be highly interesting and will have a great deal of significance. The Museum will hold significance in that what has been done will not be lost.

'It would be desirable for the Museum to have ample and well-documented catalogues of what is going on in the West, of all the discoveries in the field of painting. There should be nothing repetitive in art. This is the first work to be done. The lack of an evolutionary museum has an effect on artists. If it is not possible to gather evolutionary material in the field of invention, then it will be necessary to try to put together a bibliography on the subject.

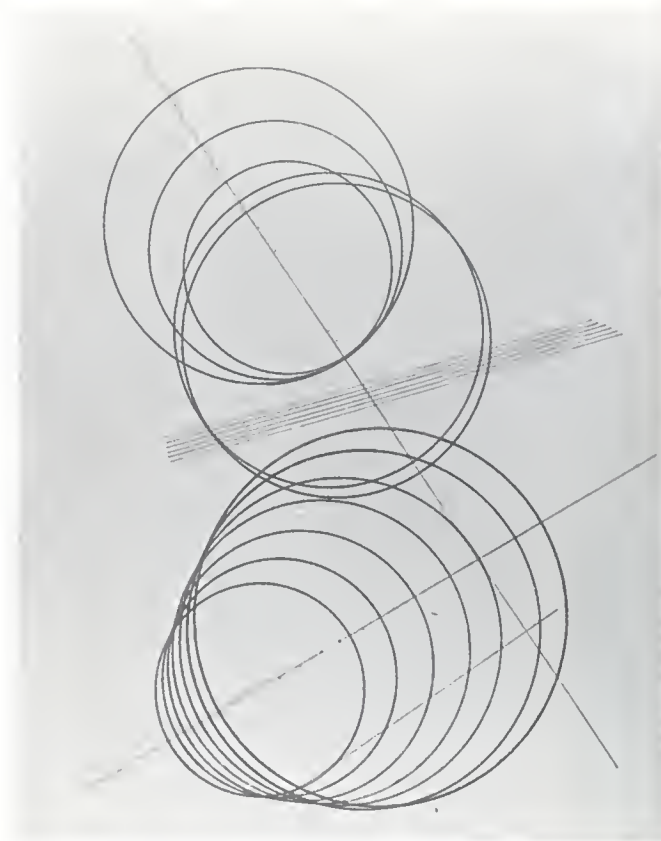
'Here everything is moving towards the discovery of new forms; we are a step ahead of the West. There is no work of this kind in Paris; there fashion and the patrons wield a great deal of power. Our work is fairer and freer...'

Klyun: 'The idea of creating a Museum of Artistic Culture is a good one, but it is often the artists themselves who hold back the initiatives. Each new committee does the experiments it wants and gets rid of...'

Stepanova: '... Whatever the artistic culture may be, the Museum must expand artistic activity founded on experiment. Our Museum has nothing haphazard about it, it has solid bases. It will not be possible to say that our Museum reflects the tastes of the artists. It will be perfect. All the artists will have the same value...

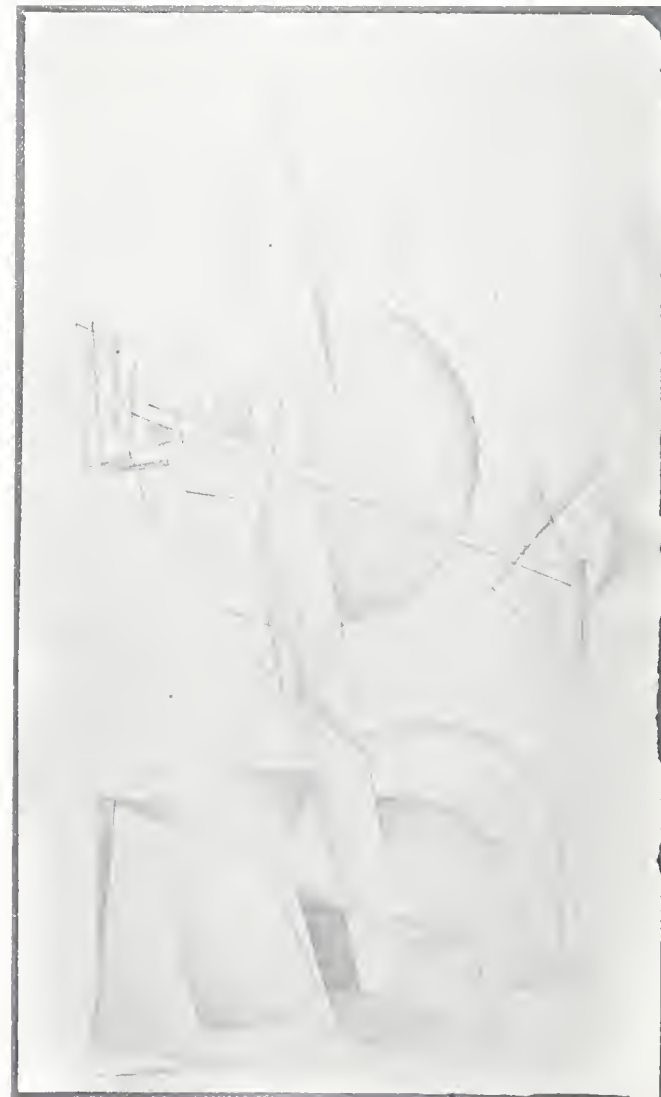
'On the other hand it will be possible to judge the works in the Museum on the basis of active work, work which leads to skill. Going by the arguments put forward, we have seen that artistic culture is inventiveness plus skill. Both invention and skill can be documented in the Museum of Artistic Culture. What do we mean by invention? A change and a gradual discovery, or something that crops up in a totally unexpected manner? A sudden change with respect to the past? In my opinion, invention is never sudden for an inventor. Can artistic culture display quality or can it express creative energy?'

Shterenberg: '... A museum not just for professionals but for the masses. Everyone



Linear composition, 1920. Paper, pen and coloured Indian ink.

Project for table lamp, 1921. Paper, pencil, 36 × 22.



the past; what happened yesterday was of little interest to us. Artists were working, exhibiting, but their paintings were not being bought. We have made a start, seeking to preserve the achievements of the present day. We buy them and we set them down in the record. I am speaking of Constructivist works and not those which do not represent an invention. We are tied to painting and we cannot make a museum of pure and simple invention. Our Museum already exists, [so] rather than destroy it, it is better to make a new work-plan, starting to collect what is already there. We can collect all the material that has been despatched to the provinces, it is not lost.

'We must collect the things of the present day, the ones that have a meaning, without bothering about checking who was the first, the second or the third to invent them.'

Ladovsky: *'Comrade Shterenberg's idea of a museum of inventions means going back centuries. Can it be done? We are only at the start and already beset with difficulties and obstacles. A bibliography of new and interesting discoveries might be prepared. It would be the first work of organization for the future Museum. It would be better to publish a critical selection of existing works that have a degree of inventiveness and Inkhuk could undertake this venture.'*

Lavinsky: *'A museum exists so that painters do not repeat themselves...'*

Rodchenko: *'The fundamental principles for creating a museum are a scientific base and precise criteria in choice of the works. For us individual works are not important, but the lines of an artistic culture, and the profession which should be displayed in its entirety. We must be very careful not to end up with a mere art collection. Much material must be collected and put on show periodically, as long as it is not possible to have a permanent exhibition. But first of all the principles must be established.'*

Shterenberg: *'Western publishers have approached us and begged to be sent material documenting all that has been done in the sector of constructing museums. We have to send them "photographs and models" as soon as possible.'*

Stenberg: *'I feel that a museum should display both past and present. If we look at an invention from the point of view of the profession, the works may not even go in a museum, but it could also happen that someone who realizes something from the professional viewpoint will be accepted in a museum and considered an inventor.'*

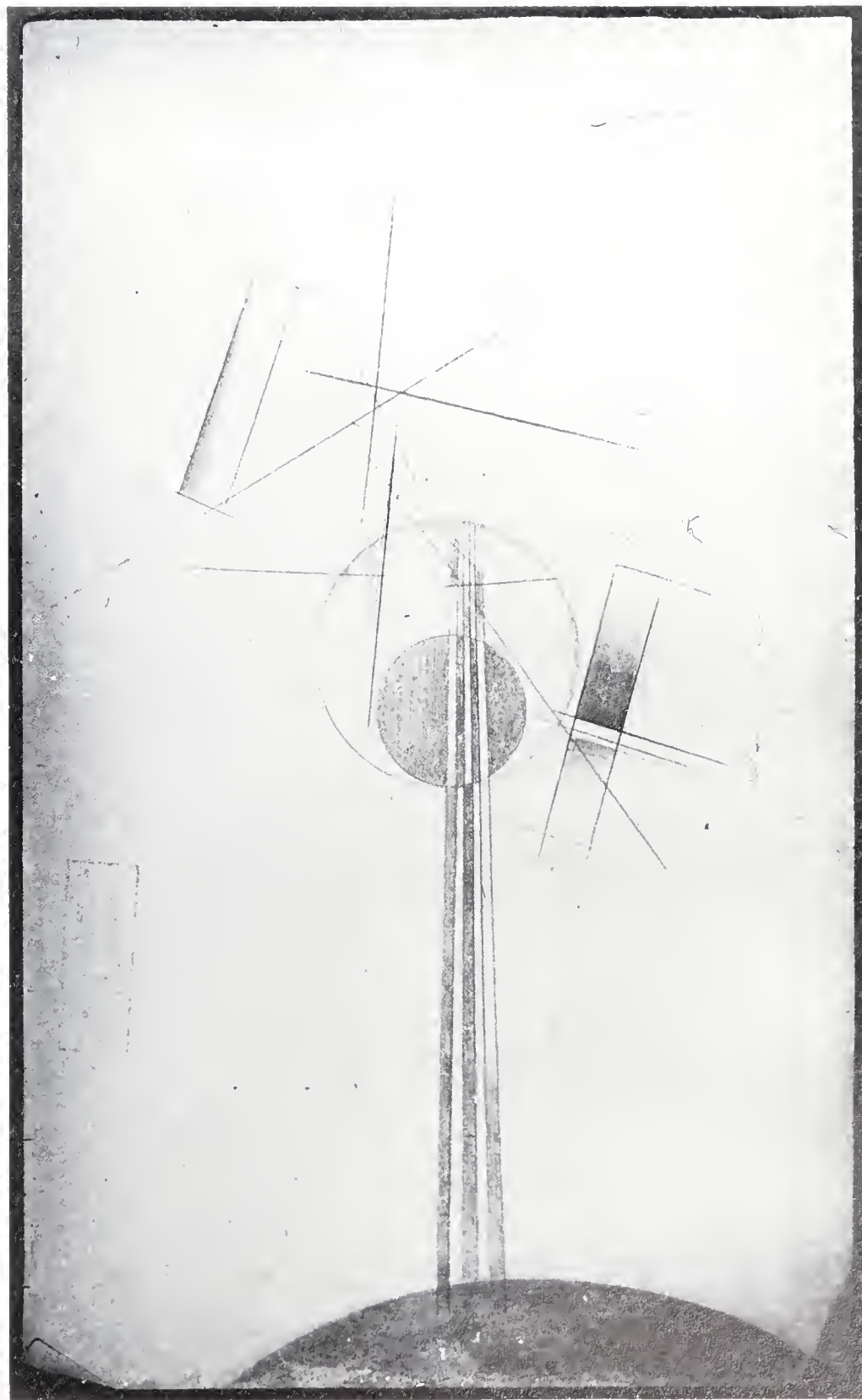
Ladovsky: *'I think that the expression*

ought to be capable of understanding professional work. We propose that alongside each artist in each room should be hung a notice explaining his inventions, or his errors...'

'Invention cannot occur unexpectedly, a given situation evolves gradually until it leads to a discovery...'

Popova: *'... I think that when one tackles organizational work, two problems arise: one concerns quality, the other originality. And that's what we see in the museum of today, either the historical succession of good works or the line of development of creative ability. It would be worth looking at this...'*

Design for table lamp, 1921. Paper, pencil, 36 x 22.



*Tarabukin: '... In the development of artistic culture there can be discoveries that have no value for us... One cannot separate the profession from quality. A work of art has value when it is carried out with talent. If a work is nothing but inventiveness, it is not a complete work, it has no value. In the Museum of Artistic Culture there should be works from every age and from every people...'*³³

A Rodchenko and V Stepanova, 'Itinerant musicians', 1921.



'Museum of Artistic Culture' corresponds neither to its present-day reality nor to that of the future. The wording should have a broader sense so as to take in sculpture and other types of production as well as pictorial works.'

Korolev: 'At one time the name "Plasticopictorial Museum" was suggested. But "Museum of Artistic Culture" is more suitable. It embraces the whole realm of the arts, even the applied ones.'

Lavinsky: '... Ladovsky is right when he proposes a new name for the future collection of works, which ought to testify to its artistic value. I agree that another word should be found, perhaps "Artistico-material". But I would like to speak of something else. Now, for us what has received testimonials in the past has a great influence and is very important... Setting works alongside one another, one will see at once which is dated and has lost its value and which is modern...'

'... A comparative method will have to be adopted. Otherwise they might accuse us of only collecting works by Futurists.'

Ladovsky: 'I don't agree with comrade Lavinsky's plan. I am of the opinion that only new things ought to be collected. Our Museum could be called "Museum of the New Material Culture". We could let technical works into the Museum as well, machines for example, whenever they are sculptures. In a museum of this type there will be no need to establish where sculpture and painting finish and something else begins...'

Klyun: 'I am opposed to comrade Ladovsky's proposal that the Museum should be organized around works of the new art alone...'

'I do not agree with the name "Museum of Material Culture". In artistic culture not everything is material... Does not the wording "Museum of Artistic Culture" seem broad enough to you? The term "artistic culture" does not refer just to painting, sculpture and architecture, but also to the art of words and music.'

Bubnova: 'In Klyun's wording the term "artistic" limits the scope of the Museum, since its meaning does not cover the machines mentioned by Ladovsky.'

'I would like to go back to comrade Shterenberg's proposal... to define a chain of inventions, if only in the form of a catalogue. I feel this ought to be a task for the Objective Analysis Group. Our reports could be used as material for determining these points or chains of inventions. A catalogue of the past could also be made.'

Inkhuk Archives.

4: THE SOURCES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Debate over the concepts of construction and composition

The most interesting initiative undertaken by the Objective Analysis Group of Inkhuk was the discussion of the subject 'Analysis of the concepts of construction and composition and their definition', that took place from January to April of 1921. Rodchenko took an active part in the debate and by collating his various contributions to it we can get a fair picture of the main lines of his thought, based on the proposition that construction by means of aesthetico-formal experiments on abstract form would have to play an increasingly obvious role in painting. In his analysis of the work of other artists, Rodchenko took great pains to identify the presence or absence of 'construction', as a genuine step forward in the process of aesthetico-formal research.¹

In that period the concept of Constructivism was taking shape and Rodchenko, along with his collaborators, was working out the theoretical bases which would later be adopted by the first group of Constructivists.²

After an initial exchange of ideas, the participants in the discussion decided to make a joint analysis of the work of various artists and to evaluate it from the viewpoint of composition and construction.³ Of all the works examined, only those by Rodchenko were unanimously accepted as Constructivist works, even though Rodchenko himself had been fairly cautious in describing them merely as an 'aspiration towards construction'. During the course of the debate by the Objective Analysis Group he tried to explain just what were his criteria of evaluation with respect to composition and construction in pictorial works.

'In construction', Rodchenko maintained, 'there are two stages: construction of the forms themselves, independently of their disposition on the canvas, and construction of the whole composition on a canvas of precise dimensions. In the latter phase one takes into consideration the dimensions of the surface and all is constructed in relation to the size of the canvas; that is, for a given construction of forms, it is sufficient to make allowance for a precise minimum space of the canvas, an area that cannot be enlarged.'

The discussion gradually moved beyond the limits of an appraisal of works of painting. It was Ladovsky who, by putting forward his own definition of construction, shifted the debate onto new ground. According to Ladovsky's definition, 'technical construction is the whole set of material elements of expression in accordance with a precise plan, i.e. a scheme that is required to attain a forceful effect'. In his opinion construction was marked by a total absence of superfluous materials and elements. 'The fundamental difference, with respect to composition, is hierarchy, subordination.'

This definition was examined by all those taking part in the discussion; accepted by some, rejected by others, it became a common point of reference.

Rodchenko, for his part, attempted to apply Ladovsky's concepts of construction and composition to painting.⁴ He suggested that attention should be concentrated on those works in which the principle of construction had been perceived. Rodchenko's proposal was accepted and the group decided to examine in detail the works which had been analysed at previous meetings. These comprised: Rodchenko's *Two circles*, paintings by Morgunov and Medunetsky, Exter's *The road*, the flat constructions of G. Klutskis and the spatial works of G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky and V. Tatlin.

Careful analysis of these works was supposed to establish the presence or absence of 'construction'. Hence, and it is important to emphasize this, it was the pictorial works of Rodchenko which were analysed and compared with not just the pictorial but also the spatial works of other artists, in which 'construction'

Notes

¹ The so far unpublished shorthand texts of this discussion, which dragged out for several days with Rodchenko joining in on more than one occasion, are preserved in the Inkhuk Archives.

seemed to have been rendered in the clearest fashion. And yet almost all the participants judged Rodchenko's work to be the most relevant from the point of view of Constructivism.'

It is clear from the minutes of the discussion taken down in shorthand that Rodchenko's collaborators did not have an accurate idea of what was meant by 'construction' in painting. They were attempting to make an analysis of a logical

Drawing on the theme 'Composition' (Design used for a lamp in the Café Pittoresque), 1917. Paper, coloured pencil, 25.5 x 20



2 We give here an abstract of Rodchenko's comments. To give a better picture of the way the discussion was going some of the other participants' remarks are included.

Krinsky: 'The engineer, unlike the architect, uses raw material and only considers utilitarian problems when he is thinking about a construction.'

Udaltsova: 'One cannot add anything to a construction designed by an engineer.'

Babichev: 'But you can take it away. Technical forms often have a superfluous solidity that gets in the way of construction, as we understand it in art.'

Rodchenko: 'What happens in architecture with the engineer happens in painting too. What is left is the problem itself, stripped of everything, without any mysticism...'

'The architect will not make use of the engineer's break-throughs; the engineer will produce architecture.

'...In the same way, if sculpture does not choose new materials, sculptors will not be sculptors.

'It is absolutely necessary to abandon the old for the new...'

'Every trace of aestheticism will drop away. Painting tends towards engineering because its course of evolution follows that of the engineer, technology and revolution, and rejects everything which, despite already being dead, is laid down in tradition.

'The target must be one of necessity and not of taste and we are after exactly what the engineer is after... For many centuries building has been carried out with only construction in mind... we gaze in admiration at locomotives and bridges, in which there is not art but just construction...'

'Every new experiment in the field of art has come out of technique and engineering and is headed in the direction of organization and construction. We know that taste and pleasant sensations are dead for ever...'

Bubnova: 'The aims of construction for an engineer and for an artist are different.'

Rodchenko: 'There is only one construction, and construction is the primary aim.

'Composition, on the other hand, is an aesthetic choice and not an aim. If you compare construction and composition they turn out to be two completely different things.

'In the field of painting, when art had no objective, it was composition. Now that the question of an objective has emerged, construction has eliminated composition.'

Babichev: 'Organization is a process, composition a result.'

Popova: 'In composition organization is lacking.'

Rodchenko: 'Before construction comes organization.'

3 We give here Rodchenko's opinions on the work of these artists and, by way of comparison, those of five members of the group: the architect Ladovsky, the artists Popova, G. Stenberg and Medunetsky and the sculptor Babichev (their opinions are quoted in the order in which they were expressed, and as a consequence the influence of those put forward earlier can be noted).

On the painting of K. Korovin.

Ladovsky: 'Both construction and composition are missing.'

Rodchenko: 'There is neither composition nor construction.'

Stenberg: 'There is neither composition nor construction.'

Medunetsky: 'There is no composition.'

Popova: 'Both composition and construction are lacking.'

Babichev: 'Neither composition nor construction.'

On the painting of A. Arkhipov.

Ladovsky: 'There is neither composition nor construction.'

Rodchenko: 'There is no composition.'

Stenberg: 'There is no composition or construction.'

Medunetsky: 'There is no composition.'

Popova: 'Both composition and construction are lacking.'

Babichev: 'Neither construction nor composition.'

On the painting of O. Rozanova.

Ladovsky: 'There is neither composition nor construction.'

Rodchenko: 'There is composition.'

Stenberg: 'There is no composition.'

Medunetsky: 'There is no composition.'

Popova: 'Composition is not there.'

Babichev: 'There is nothing.'

On the painting of K. Malevich.

Ladovsky: 'In Suprematist works there is no construction, in Cubist ones there is a moment of construction.'

Rodchenko: 'There is composition in both cases.'

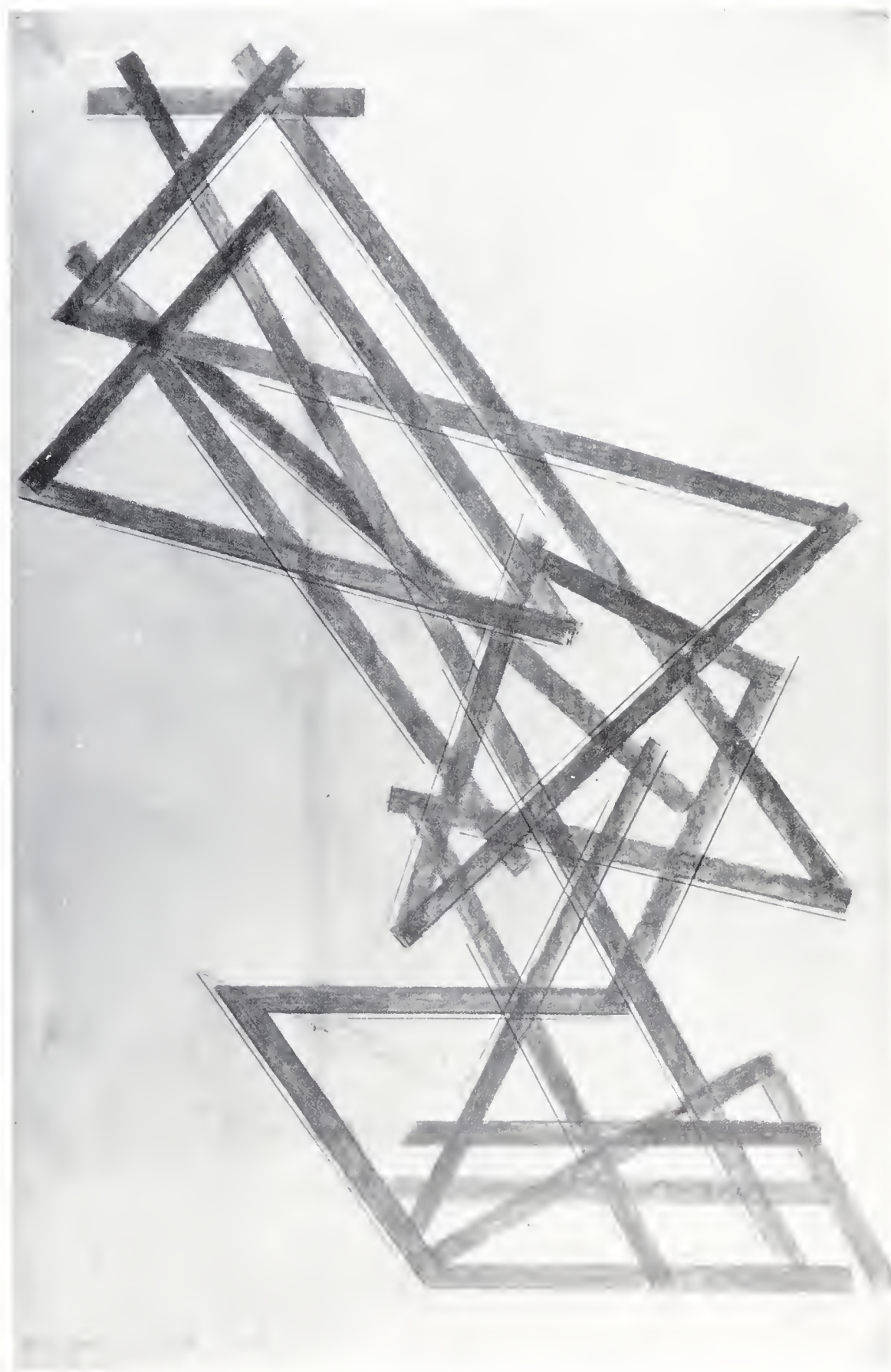
Stenberg: 'There is composition.'

Medunetsky: 'There is composition.'

Popova: 'There is composition.'

rather than aesthetic type, but in the end all of them laid great emphasis on the formal merits of a work. This is an important fact since the analysis of work by artists of the group close to Rodchenko carried out by the theoreticians of Productivist art was completely different and made on an exclusively logical basis. This was not just a question of terms. For the artists of Rodchenko's group, the term

Drawing presented by Rodchenko at Inkhuk in April 1921 in response to the theme 'Construction' (Design for construction of a lamp), 1921. Paper, coloured pencil, 48.5 x 32.5.



'construction' bestowed a stylistic significance on their works, facilitating the escape of artistic experiments from the narrow confines of figurative problems and carrying them onto a more general level of research that embraced the spatial arts as a whole.

The Objective Analysis Group continued to look for the presence or absence of the principle of 'construction' in an artist's work.⁶ Specific works by a number of artists were examined; these included paintings by artists belonging to the group known as 'The Knave of Diamonds' (*Bubnovyi valet*) such as Konchalovsky (*Landscape*) and Kuprin (*Still life*).⁷

During the discussion an attempt was made to draw conclusions from the work carried out, commissions were set up to put the minutes of the meetings in order and a number of conclusive statements on composition and construction were prepared. The first commission, formed on 25 February 1921, was made up of the sculptor Babichev, the architect Ladovsky and the artists Popova and Shterenberg (*Doc. 11*). On 4 March 1921, Babichev gave a report on the results of the commission's work at a meeting of the Objective Analysis Group and these were thoroughly examined by the participants in the debate.⁸ At the same meeting a new commission was set up at Rodchenko's suggestion, made up of himself, G. Stenberg and Medunetsky, for further revision of the material on construction and composition. The new commission was also joined by artists who would in the future form the Working Group of Constructivists.

While the debate over composition and construction continued, other problems of a general character were examined and a number of works analysed. The stands taken by participants became more and more precisely defined and in the final stages of the discussion various Working Groups were once again organized within Inkhuk: one of architects, one of 'Objectivists' and finally one of Constructivists and sculptors.⁹ At the end of the debate the participants evaluated two graphic works by each with the precise aim of realizing 'construction' and 'composition'. The difference between the various conceptions of art turned out to be even clearer with regard to theoretical formulations.¹⁰ When the discussion was concluded, a decision was taken to publish all the materials, but the plan was never put into effect (*Doc. 12*).

The Objective Analysis Group became the main point of reference over the period from January to May, taking over this role from the Section of Monumental Art. While it retained the name of a Group, it functioned de facto as a Section; as such, according to the statute of Inkhuk, it should have been split up into working groups. Within the Section of Monumental Art a system of working groups on a strictly corporative basis had been created — according to Kandinsky's ideas (groups of painting, dance, music) — but within the Objective Analysis Group a different system of working groups was being developed, organized both on a professional basis (groups of architects, sculptors) and on a conceptual one (groups of Constructivists and 'Objectivists').

These groups were set up in the first half of 1921, when the debate over construction and composition was still under way. Consequently, the members of these groups were playing a dual role, in that all of them belonged to the Objective Analysis Group and at the same time took part in one of the newly formed groups. Thus meetings of the Objective Analysis Group in the first half of 1921 always turned out to be plenary sittings of the whole of Inkhuk. Meanwhile, the work of the newly formed groups was already taking on concrete form: programmes were devised, reports read, topics of discussion defined, etc.

Rodchenko, as well as being at that time chairman of the Inkhuk Praesidium and in charge of the Objective Analysis Group, also promoted the formation of the Working Group of Constructivists.

Babichev: '*Neither composition nor construction.*'

On the work of K. Medunetsky.

Ladovsky: '*There is no composition, or construction.*'

Rodchenko: '*Composition.*'

Stenberg: '*Elaboration, elementary composition.*'

Popova: '*Composition.*'

Babichev: '*Composition.*'

On Rodchenko's painting (the opinions of all those taking part in the discussion are included).

Ladovsky: '*There is construction.*'

Rodchenko: '*An aspiration towards construction.*'

Stepanova: '*On the plate and in the black enamel there is construction; in the circles there is an element of composition too.*'

Stenberg: '*Construction.*'

Medunetsky: '*On the plate there is construction.*'

Popova: '*On the plate there is composition; the circles show composition, and the black is clear and precise.*'

Krinsky: '*There is construction everywhere but especially in the black.*'

Ioganson: '*In the black one construction is more visible than ever.*'

Altman: '*The plate and the circles show composition, the black shows construction.*'

Babichev: '*Construction is there in the circles and on the plate.*'

Bubnova: '*The construction is more ideal in the circles, less so on the plate.*'

On the painting of P. Konchalovsky.

Ladovsky: '*There is no composition.*'

Rodchenko: '*Idem.*'

Stenberg: '*Idem.*'

Popova: '*Idem.*'

On the painting of V. Stepanova.

Ladovsky: '*Transitional.*'

Rodchenko: '*Composition.*'

Stepanova: '*Composition.*'

Stenberg: '*Composition.*'

Babichev: '*Composition.*'

On the painting of V. Kandinsky.

Ladovsky: '*There is an element of construction.*'

Rodchenko: '*It is not clear and comprehensible.*'

Stepanova: '*The first phase of composition involves putting the materials together.*'

Popova: '*A quest for composition.*'

Bubnova: '*An accidental composition.*'

4 *Some excerpts from comments by Rodchenko and others follow.*

Rodchenko: 'In painting genuine construction does not yet exist; pictorial construction will always have something superfluous, the area of the canvas if nothing else. In my works there is not yet pure construction, instead there is constructive composition... The ideal construction should have an immutable dimension of its own, while our paintings only come close to it. I cannot enlarge this "Black", which will never change. We do not consider that there may be a loss of material; what counts instead is the quadrangle of the canvas, the conventionality of the colour...'

Medunetsky: 'One cannot confuse technical construction with artistic construction.'

'Let us take a locomotive, the important thing is that it moves, its whole construction has been directed towards that end...'

Popova: 'Even in painting there can be just the same construction as in the locomotive, with the difference that in painting the construction will have a pictorial purpose and in the locomotive a technical one. But in neither case should there be superfluous elements or material.'

Altman: 'I suggest that we look at an ideal composition to find out if there is anything superfluous or not.'

Rodchenko: 'Let us take Raphael's Sposalizio. What is superfluous in it? First the temple, irrelevant as far as the marriage itself is concerned.'

'Naturally there was a tendency towards constructiveness even then, although the composition was made to fit into a triangle. But those details with which the composition, the subject, was killed, were totally useless; it would be better, then, to check all this out on the abstract plane, where everything is more precise...'

Ladovsky: '... In each construction there must be precise data and an aim. In the locomotive the aim is clear... In painting however it is not so clear.'

Rodchenko: 'The aim is very precise in painting, except that we always operate with the same materials, paint, dyes, canvas, and these conceal it to some extent.'

Ladovsky: 'Let us take a concrete work of art now... Here is Rodchenko's painting Two circles. What are the means and what is the purpose of the work?'

Rodchenko: 'The purpose of this picture is to create two shapes with distinct colours on a flat surface. When I was using enamel paint I was obliged to recognize that the paint spreads and that I could not paint in the same way as with oil colour, using a paintbrush. I had to find another technique suited to the material, with which I then worked...'

'It is clear that oil painting involves a different technique from watercolour. The material must be used by exploiting its specific qualities in the best way. This will be constructive...'

'In my painting Two circles it is natural that I made an effort to utilize the qualities of the material in the best possible manner. When I chose enamel, I realized that I could not paint with the paintbrush and I painted it on the floor; i.e. I got round to using the material after I had found out that enamel paint spread.'

Ladovsky: 'So the material was used in the right way.'

Popova: 'In Malevich's works, the colour, flat shape and movement are intentionally prepared.'

Rodchenko: 'I do not agree. He used colour merely to bring out the surface; it is not prepared. The form on the other hand holds and is deliberate, so that if he had used another colour, of the same intensity, nothing would have changed...'

'Malevich produces a geometric solution, there is no overall effect, just a linear one. This is why altering the colour does not change the effect...'

'An intersecting line conveys tension; in Malevich this black line that passes through the area only conveys an aesthetic sensation of construction, but it is not constructive in itself. It is this line that characterizes the whole composition.'

Popova: 'This transverse black line is constructive in Malevich, holding together the whole composition.'

Rodchenko: 'I propose making a precise and detailed selection of works from the point of view of construction; not a general analysis but probing deeply, taking one work at a time instead of many...'

'Ladovsky spoke of the pure construction of the engineer. In contemporary paintings there is no pure construction yet, in so far as no definition of pictorial construction exists. So in order for us to get clear what construction is, we can start with Ladovsky's definition, which is a technical and engineering definition. In painting there is no out and out construction. But we are inclined towards this construction and in many works executed in conformity with the principle of Constructivism, we have seen that we are getting close. Hence we should start out from the technical definition of construction and find out whether construction of this type exists in painting or whether we are only close. As a new aesthetic standard, the "effect of force" is no use in art. We need a precise and clear aim without arriving at an "effect of force". In art the composition as a whole is "effect of force".'

Udaltsova: 'Construction is a concept that portrays an interior force, while the "purpose" is a secondary concept, an external feature.'

Drevin: '... A construction of colour cannot exist; only a construction of form exists. Taken as a whole, everything is construction... In painting construction is only the creation of separate forms, while putting these separate forms

together is called composition.'

Klyun: 'Even in colour there can be construction... The strength of colour contributes to construction, along with form, giving it a precise force... The purpose of an object defines its type, construction gives the impression of forces, as a result of the combined action of different forces.'

Rodchenko: 'There may not even be a purpose. Construction is not a fixed thing. Construction is the appropriate utilization of the properties of materials, that is to say, end and not just means.'

'What Drevin and Klyun are talking about is not construction. Construction is not just putting different parts together. In construction neither colour, nor form, nor technique can be separate. We do not have to introduce construction into art whatever the cost. It may not be there. All that is needed is to establish what is and what is not. But since we have taken the concept of construction from mechanics, we must apply this technical definition of construction to art and find out whether it is there or not.'

'If we take a lamp, we can analyse it as a composition with all its decorative features and its bearing surface, but there are lamps with a specific function, i.e. lamps whose purpose and use are much more precise from a Constructivist point of view. This type of lamp represents a construction because the aesthetic form of composition for which it has been made is not mixed up with the element of decoration. The same is true for a painting: once the superfluous has been eliminated — i.e. its nature as an object, figurative image, expression of a feeling, aesthetics, etc. — there remains what is useful: the real painting. We have made use of the definition of construction put forward by Ladovsky. If it cannot be applied to painting we will get rid of it, otherwise we will accept it as a starting point, to be tested in concrete terms...'

5 Here follow the comments of those taking part in the discussion with regard to Rodchenko's painting Two circles.

Drevin: 'With Rodchenko construction is present in the tension between the curved lines of the two circles and the flat lines of the canvas and in the handling of the flat surface, while it is less visible in the straight lines, just as the technique is solely decorative...'

Udaltsova: 'Elements of construction are present in Rodchenko's work, only in the technique and in the way in which he deals with straight lines.'

Klyun: Rodchenko has a characteristic feature, he constructs on circles. The other shapes are multiform, since they are easier to construct than circles. Rodchenko has handled the scheme of composition very well since enlarging or reducing the circles runs the overall construction. And enlarging the circles destroys the area

of the canvas. The upper mass counterbalances the lower one. The spots of colour [brown paint] cannot be eliminated, but the relationship of the spots of colour to the area [of the painting] is not very clear.'

Popova: '...Rodchenko: the "effect of force" is related here to the form, colour and technique [of the material]. The given features are: (1) as far as form is concerned, the square of the canvas and the two circles; (2) as regards colour, white, black and brown; (3) as regards material, enamel paint and its technique of application. In this case, is there the "effect of force"? I think so. But there is also an aesthetic element that remains unsettled. The aesthetic element, unlike that of technique or purpose, comes into play when one speaks of taste.'

Ioganson: 'Rodchenko: circular construction, specific use of specific materials, an option that excludes straight lines. There is only the flat surface and the large size of the circles, which depends on the dimensions of the canvas.'

'In the other works there is not even a hint of construction...'

Babichev: '... Rodchenko: the construction is connected with the circles and with the square in which they are inserted. Colour: the areas of brown paint make the blue stand out in contrast. The material provides, within the limits of the problem tackled, the maximum of contrast between white and dark...'

Medunetsky: '... I do not admit the word construction, even though the works of Stenberg, my own metal ones and those of Rodchenko are all very precise examples of construction... There is a precise law of composition which in painting could perhaps be construction and logical co-ordination of forms.'

Stenberg: 'Only in Rodchenko is there construction; in fact the circle is a Constructivist shape. The manner in which the circles are arranged makes one think of a construction.'

6 Rodchenko commented, inter alia: 'Ladovsky has given a definition of technical construction in which, in my opinion, a variety of categories are combined, all of them based on taste.'

'Only the aesthetic one depends on taste, the others do not. From the point of view of technical construction one cannot start out from this definition. But thanks to the new conception of the world and thanks to industry we are getting close to technical construction. In the works we have analysed there is only composition, which in a few cases turns into construction. Construction is something unitary, and totally different. In these works there are just a few elements which may contribute to construction, i.e. to its realization. We see that from a Constructivist viewpoint many things are used in the right way, but many others are superfluous. In many works there is a welter of elements that, though they are not ugly, lead nowhere from the aesthetic point view.'

Further on, Rodchenko gave his opinion of works by other artists: 'Medunetsky: there is no stimulus, only intuition.'

'Exter: there is taste, but no construction.'

'I see that it is impossible to introduce technical construction into painting. When we think of construction we are influenced by modern industrial thinking. And yet we go on thinking of the machine in the same way as in the past, that is, with an aesthetic attitude.'

'Stenberg: construction is there to some extent, but just in the simple, necessary works, in which one can free oneself of all the useless things that weigh one down.'

'Klutsis: there is not even composition.'

'Overall there is not the slightest degree of construction.'

'Medunetsky: in the choice of material and form he is much more modern than Tatlin. There is a pure harmony, typical of painting, and only the forms are simple, essential (and make one think of an apparent constructiveness).'

'I have constructed a pictorial composition...'

'In the two works by Stenberg and Medunetsky everything is born out of painting and not out of space.'

7 Rodchenko: 'Kuprin's method of composition is extremely banal, but in the works we have examined Kuprin's quadrilateral is in any case more interesting than Konchalovsky's diagonal shapes. In Konchalovsky there are no Cézanne-style planes, and not even perspective planes, just barely sketched horizontal planes...'
Medunetsky: 'With the "Knave of Diamonds" painters everything is spontaneous, built on intuition... In their works everything can be turned upside down without changing anything...'
Rodchenko: 'We want to find precise laws of composition and we see that they do not exist in the art of the past. To some extent, the "Knave of Diamonds" painters have their own laws, which did not exist at all before. Before everything was based on taste, now taste is being destroyed.'

'In Kuprin's work some things can be shifted but not everything.'

8 We quote some extracts from the minutes.
Rodchenko: 'When painting was concerned with objects, its technique, which we are still very familiar with today, was: transparency, varnishing, impasto, etc...'

'After this type of painting and its technique was abandoned, the problem of construction arose. In the West the constructor creates things. But in art and in life, he is still a sentimentalist and idealist... Despite the extraordinary — when compared with our own — progress in technology, the whole of Western art is still aesthetic in nature...'

'So far there has only been the image of construction or an aspiration towards construction in our works.'

'Genuine construction involves making

things and objects in real space...'

Stepanova: 'In my opinion, the committee's conclusions represent an important stage in our work. But these conclusions do not suffice; they must be completed and made more exhaustive...'

Medunetsky: 'I do not agree with the definition of construction made by the committee... it is a definition that tallies with the technical one and we cannot agree on the matter.'

Rodchenko: 'We have to accept the technical definition of construction, until we are in a position to modify it. Let us compare our art with that of the West: in wartime the Germans built forty-two-inch guns; in peacetime they decorated them with little birds and snakes.'

'Ours is the same kind of pure construction that the Germans applied to their arms. If we knew how to use it in a conscious way, the concept of art would be totally changed.'

9 There follows a series of statements made by Rodchenko during the final stages of the discussion, when he was already a member of the group of Constructivists.

Rodchenko: 'I do not regard construction as a dogma or an end in itself. Even with simple technical matters construction is not an end in itself but is used to solve this or that problem. It cannot be claimed that construction is something well defined or complete. At any moment we will come across a particular type of construction suited to given working conditions...'

'Construction is the phase in which material is organized in order to attain a particular end.'

'The same thing is true for art; if all this is defined as construction in engineering, then it is defined as composition in art.'

'If we accept the concept of construction as a process or means of creation, it may turn out to be different in each specific work, even when the same elements and materials are used, in relation to how this or that problem has been solved...'

'As a matter of fact, construction does not exist in painting. In reality construction is a precise object and in painting we cannot depict a construction; we can only fashion well a particular object that, as such, will be Constructivistic.'

'Construction in painting involves organizing an object by setting it a precise task...'

'The concept of composition... is not a specific feature of art; it is a particular aspect of a total action that takes place in a fixed order and according to a precise law... We must decide on this law.'

'To explain this I will take an example: a pair of boots lying on the floor is a composition, the same boots in a picture are also a composition, but a figurative one. We must determine the principle according to which this action takes place...'

Drevin: 'There cannot be construction in the picture, since construction is to be found in the

ensemble of things or parts, which cannot be there in painting...'

Rodchenko: 'Drevin starts from painting, but to speak of construction one cannot start from painting where construction is absent. One cannot see just "the pictorial" everywhere and ignore the rest.'

'Let us take a paperweight; when it was invented, it was given a new shape that did not exist in nature. So we too will invent a new and real form...'

'How did painting start? Out of the necessity to paint in a lifelike way. Painting on a flat surface was born as representation of reality...'

'For us, both what we paint and how we paint are important, but in a different way from painters in the past...'

'Painting has been the most revolutionary activity in culture, and yet there is something very reactionary about it in life, for until now it has remained tied to old traditions and old materials, all painting, with the exception of the most recent...'

'In technology there is an attempt to achieve perfection, an aspiration towards an ever greater industrialization of material. In painting, however, we are always looking for the charming spot of colour and a picturesque location.'

'We have new techniques, new colours, but all this has been made for the old type of figurative painting...'

'Our painting has remained what is was, that is, we paint in a "vivid" manner. But we will extirpate the colour connected with this type of painting. Even the shape is not new, not even in the square, since it is not objective, and we will destroy this old shape. Each element has a new significance for us. The time has come to make things and not just "imitate" them. Painting has not arrived at any new stage, it is dead.'

'We only experiment in the field of form...'

'The end of colouristic painting has come; it is necessary to start out with the material from which we have obtained this colour. If there is still art, it is all in the material, which will give us a new form, as well as a new colour and a new technique... Creating with old materials does not really mean creating, and this is what is going on in painting. Painting aims at the creation of new forms, new things with new materials. Now we will devote ourselves solely to the material, but if we make pictorial compositions with the old colour of figurative art, this would be the stupidest thing we could do. We must follow the current trend in things.'

'So far... art was built on spirituality and psychology... but it is absurd that a whole host of artists do not know how to apply their own energy and industry to something real.'

'Inventors are artists. In essence the artist is an inventor, and has to be one. This is what we want, to move on from the surface of the canvas to Constructivist production.'

Rodchenko said: 'It appears to me that the disease of construction spreads particularly fast among those who are not involved in it.'

'Deliberately I have not called my work "construction". I believe that all art in general is aesthetics. The lines of Drevin's chair are outside art; one cannot sit on that chair. In the other works there is art. I am not saying that construction cannot be brought into art; if geometric quality is introduced into its form or as Cubist decomposition, construction is brought in... But this is not construction, it is art. When there is construction, we will talk about it again...'

Udaltsova: 'Rodchenko has changed his mind:

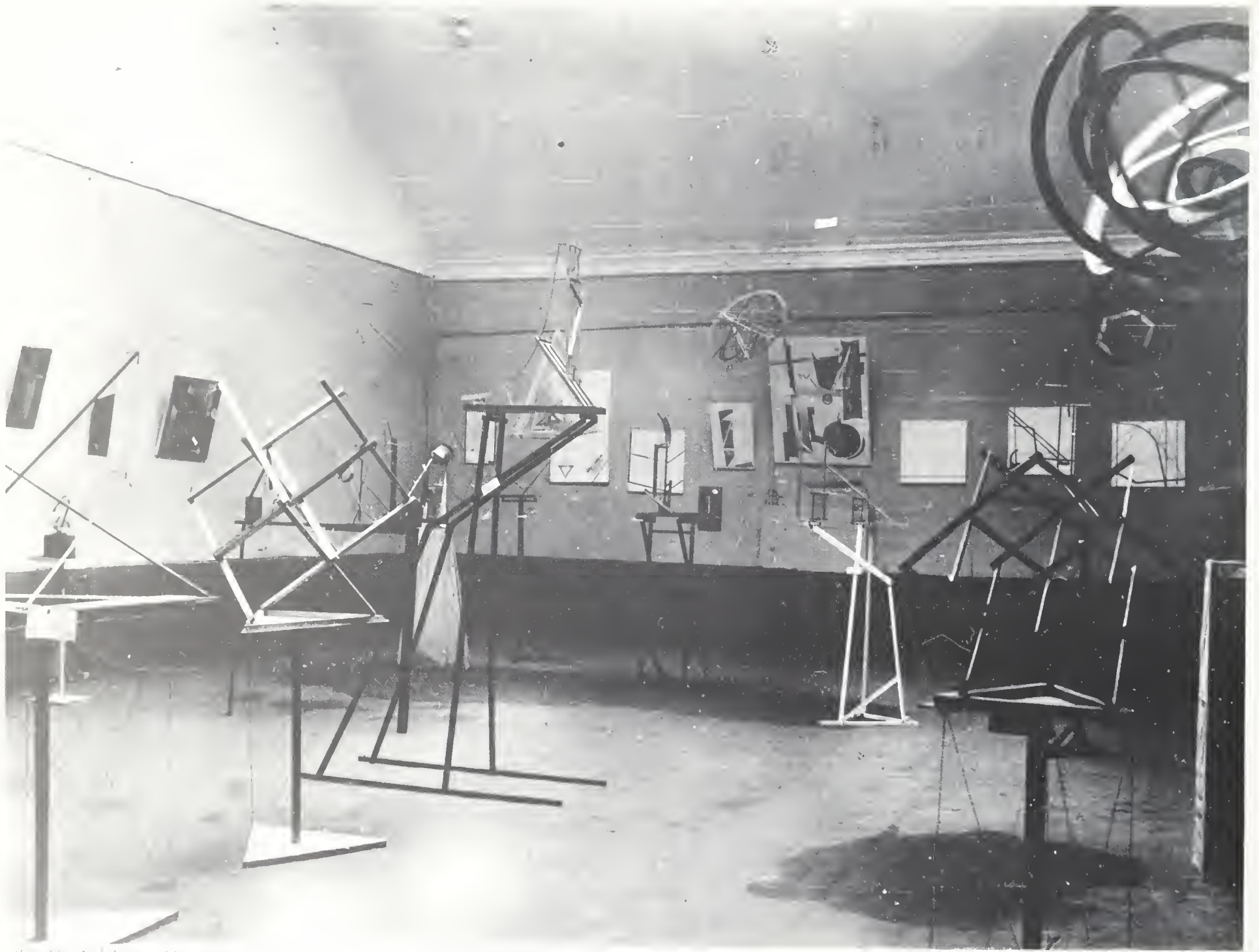
first he said that technical construction was applicable on the canvas, now he says that there can be nothing but aesthetical composition on canvas. In our concept of construction there is also elaboration of space. My work sets out to represent the movement of two planes in space...'

Rodchenko: 'I have always said that construction cannot be applied to art: if one were to construct a locomotive aesthetically, it would probably not work. In Udaltsova's work there is an "illusory space". From the technical viewpoint there is nothing. From the artistic viewpoint there is nothing new. Nor from the utilitarian point of view.'

Wrestler. Canadian champion, 1919. Paper, watercolour, gouache, 38 · 23 5.



чемпион Канады



Obnol'ya Exhibition, Moscow, May 1921

The first Working Group of Constructivists

During the debate within the Objective Analysis Group on the concepts of construction and composition, profound differences with respect to the problems of form had emerged between the group of artists and Constructivists and that of architects and Rationalists. According to the former, what lay at the base of the problem of form was the definition of the concept of construction, whereas for the others the most important thing was composition.

For Rodchenko in particular construction was more important than composition.

It was right after the debate over problems of form that new Working Groups

- 11 *In the essay entitled 'Paris' that he wrote later about the situation in French art during the twenties, Mayakovsky said: 'The new artistic term, Constructivism, was coined for the first time not in France but in Russia and it is meant to refer to the formal work of the artist exclusively in terms of engineering... French artists must learn from us... To build a new culture, a clean sweep is needed. The sweep of the October*

Revolution is needed.'

V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniya* (Complete works), vol. 4, p. 238.

12 A. Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Constructivism), Tver 1922, p. 3; *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture), no. 3, 1928, p. 79; *Katalog pervoi diskussionnoi vystavki ob'edinenii aktivnogo revoliutsionnogo iskusstva* (Catalogue of the 1st Discussional Exhibition of the Associations of Revolutionary Art), Moscow 1924, p. 14.

13 An article published in the review *Ermitazh* in 1922 carried important information about the history of this first Working Group of Constructivists: 'On 13 December 1920, the first Working Group of Constructivists was formed.

'The non-figurative painter Alexander Rodchenko, the painter Varvara Stepanova (Varst) and the mass agitator Alexei Gan, having examined the situation of art in relation to social change and wishing to give a sociological foundation to the new tendencies, have decided to make two clear distinctions: on the one hand there will be the art which continues the speculative line of aesthetic creation, depicting reality in a wholly unconscious manner; on the other that art which, by getting involved with real and energetic social reconstruction, seeks forms of artistic work that have a precise social purpose.

'Alexander Rodchenko's shift from the flat abstract compositions of "non-figurative creation" to the construction of objects in real space, the pictorial schematization and mechanization of the human figure that characterizes the works of Varvara Stepanova and, finally, the materialist background of Alexei Gan... are elements uniting these artists on the productive plane of conscious artistic labour.

'The first two, who have worked in the sector of figurative art, have moved from composition (of the aesthetic kind) to construction (according to a productive principle); the third, after having discovered the magic and fascination of the theatre (the art of the stage), has gone on to tackle the problem of how to organize the life style of the workers' society (*Mass Action*).

'Oriented towards the future culture of Communism and based on a concrete analysis of the situation, they have devised a programme and have been looking for collaborators.

'Constructivism has become fashionable.'
In *Ermitazh*, no. 13, 1922, p. 3.

were set up within Inkhuk: the Working Group of Constructivists (Rodchenko, Stepanova, G. Stenberg and others), the Working Group of Architects (Ladovsky, Krinsky and others) and the Working Groups of 'Objectivists' (Popova, Drevin, Udaltsova and others).

The Working Group of Constructivists was formed in March 1921. But it could be claimed that a group of this kind was already in existence even before its formal constitution within Inkhuk. This is worth stressing since the term *Constructivism*, which later achieved worldwide renown, first appeared in connection with the name of this first Working Group of Constructivists, founded by Rodchenko and Gan.¹¹

In a series of publications that came out between 1922 and 1928, Gan dates the formation of the first Working Group of Constructivists back to 1920.¹² The same claim turns up in an article on Constructivism that appeared in the review *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* (*Contemporary Architecture*) in 1926. In both cases, the birth of Constructivism is linked to the creation, within Inkhuk, of the Working Group of Constructivists and it is claimed that the material and copies of the works of the Constructivists had been handed over to El Lissitzky, who was leaving at that time for Germany and France; the material on file, however, testifies that the Working Group of Constructivists was not set up in Inkhuk until 1921. But in 1920 the organizers of the group had the intention of establishing a new trend in art, to which they were already thinking of giving the name *Constructivism* (this name does not appear in the documents before 1921).¹³

The first meeting of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk took place on 18 March 1921. The minutes of the meetings, still unpublished today, the shorthand records of group discussions during the months from March to May 1921 (these materials are almost exclusively concerned with the devising of a programme for the group and the direction that theoretical work should take) and various other documents (schedule, accounts, etc.) are still extant (*Doc. 13*).

At the early meetings the programme of the group was defined with precision, its organizational structure and schedule of work were approved, a decision was taken to set up a subgroup for study made up of students from Vkhutemas, several reports were read, etc.

Rodchenko was used to seeing the theoretical positions of people taking part in discussions and debates as an integral part of each artist's views about creation. This was how it had been in Zhivskulptarkh, in the Section of Monumental Art and in the Objective Analysis Group. But the theoretical assertions of each artist were just one aspect of their personal creative creed (or that of a school or tendency) and made no pretence to being of general theoretical significance. The dialogue between artists, even when limited to concepts alone, was clear to everybody, despite the use of specialist jargon and the metaphorical meaning of many statements that were expressed in the form of slogans. As the theorists of Productivist art were not, for the most part, professional artists, they were interested in coming up with precise concepts, universal terms and theoretical positions that were of general significance rather than the mere expression of incidental standpoints.

All this helped to create a situation of tension between artists and theoreticians of Productivist art. The former accused the theoreticians of being too academic while the latter — who tended to take a more radical stand — criticized the artists for their slowness and lack of courage.

Ill at ease with fine points of terminology, the artists found themselves in an embarrassing position in their discussions with the theorists. And this led to a gradual shift, imperceptible at first sight, in the analysis of certain problems. Often arguments over terminology or explanations of the content of this or that theoretical principle threw no light on what the artists considered the real essence of a problem. On the other hand, the theorists of Productivist art exerted greater and greater sway over the work of Inkhuk.

This difference regarding the way in which problems should be tackled, bet

ween artists on the one hand and theoreticians like Tarabukin on the other, had already cropped up in the discussions about composition and construction. The only theorist in the group of Constructivists was Gan, and the task of formulating systematic plans and devising a terminology had been left to him.

The shorthand records of group discussions show how the artists, as well as having to analyse and consider the crux of a problem, were often obliged to discuss the merits of questions of terminology, managing only with difficulty to extricate themselves from Gan's scholastic definitions. The latter, whose main concern was to devise a platform out of the verbal declarations of the Constructivists, liked to give new meanings to words, producing detailed justifications for his linguistic experiments — the terms 'tektonika' and 'faktura', for example, were interpreted in a totally original manner — so as to make them unassailable from a logical and formal standpoint. Rodchenko and the others balked at Gan's lexical juggling, although they often gave in in the end once Gan had made his explanation, claiming that it was not a question of terminological problems but of substance.

The policy statements and declarations of the Constructivists gradually filled up with terms and expressions whose real meaning was clear only to the Constructivists themselves and perhaps not even to all of them.

This complicated situation is plainly illustrated in the minutes of discussions of Gan's reports.¹⁴ On 27 April 1921, Gan's theses on 'tectonics' (of which there were thirty-eight) were examined. Expounding his arguments, Gan made it known that they were only an introduction to the second part of the work, devoted to the 'disciplines of tectonics'. Since a great deal of significance was assigned to 'tectonics' in the Constructivist group's programme, a lively discussion ensued, during which members of the group criticized Gan for having cut his arguments off from concrete problems of creativity.¹⁵

At the meeting held on 4 May 1921, the group's plan of theoretical work was analysed and Rodchenko proposed 'moving on to analysis of the group's programme and giving priority to trying to solve the problems that revealed themselves to be most urgent at the time'. In particular Rodchenko recommended that 'slogans be made clearer'.¹⁶ In the ensuing discussion, the argument polarized around the term 'tectonics' but once the difficulty of grasping its contents had been realized, it was suggested that Gan should deal with the problem specifically in a report to be given at a subsequent meeting.

The proposal, put by Varvara Stepanova, was accepted and Gan's report 'On tectonics', or more exactly the promised second part of his earlier report, was on many occasions included in the order of the day at subsequent meetings of the Working Group of Constructivists. But Gan was either not present at the meeting or not ready to make the report. On 11 May 1921, the report 'On tectonics' was once again included in the order of the day, but Gan did not turn up for the meeting. The decision was then taken to analyse the meaning of 'tectonics' as it had been expounded by Gan, giving rise to strong disagreements between some members of the group. Those present at the meeting made an effort to get clear what kind of link there was between the concepts of construction and 'tectonics' and to establish the role they should play in the ideas of the Constructivists.¹⁷

At a certain point, it was decided to divide the group up into three subgroups or sections, each to handle a different kind of work: organizational group: Stepanova (in charge) and Gan; production group: Rodchenko (in charge), Ioganson, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg; press and publicity group: Gan (in charge), Medunetsky.

In this way the founders of the Working Group of Constructivists (Rodchenko, Stepanova and Gan) formed the secretarial staff and directed the different sections.

At the third meeting (1 April 1921), the Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists was approved, the text of which is preserved in the Inkhuk archives (*Doc. 14*). The Programme was published with a few modifications in the review *Ermitazh* in 1922.¹⁸

14 *We give a number of excerpts from these discussions and the documents approved during meetings.*

On 28 March 1921, Gan read a report entitled 'On the programme and work plan of the group of Constructivists'.

Gan: 'In our approach to Constructivist and spatial work up to now, each of us has very often used material in a totally haphazard manner...'

'We must get down to carrying out concrete experiments in real life. Not making abstract plans but working on concrete tasks demanded from us by Communist culture...'

'The field of Constructivist and spatial constructions in the culture of the future will be in the hands of us workers and Constructivists.'

'How are we going to venture on this work?'

'Let us say first of all: "a purposeful constructiveness".'

'The purpose should be seen in terms of the essential distinctive features and requirements of Communism and the material should be treated on an industrial level.'

'We must play a real part in life. I know that for a long time we will be busy with projects, but we will have to justify everything on the formal level as well as that of ideology.'

'In order to put our work on show, an exhibition of Constructivist spatial works should be staged, as testimony not only to what we are doing today but also to what we are aiming for and the tasks that we have set ourselves.'

'In this way the ideological aspect of the group will justify the practical side.'

'I will move on now to the actual programme, which I will split up into two parts. In the first one I introduce three basic elements: the first I call "tectonics", the second "construction" and the third "faktura"....'

'Tectonics or the tectonic style emerges organically out of the specific features of Communism itself, and is realized in the purposeful use of industrial material, but not without thorough prior study.'

'Construction should be seen as a method of saving large quantities of material, but also of discovering the consequent functionality of tectonic development.'

'In my opinion "faktura" is the conscious selection and appropriate use of a material that will not hinder the construction's movement nor limit its tectonics...'

'... I define these elements as elements of action.'

'The second part of the programme is devoted to physical elements.

1. Material in general, analysis of its elements, industrial application, peculiarities and intended use.

2. Light.

3. Space.

4. Volume.

5. Surface.

6. Colour.

'We must look at light and space, as we have looked at material...

'In this part we must devote all our attention to industrial material, since our tectonics, our construction and our "faktura" are all meant to operate with just these materials...

'Communism uses all the possibilities of human production to the hilt...

'Wood, granite, minerals and other gifts of nature will be turned into metal, glass, concrete and other products of Communist culture, out of which we Constructivists will build a new world with forms and constructions that will render raw geological material obsolete, along with the caves of primitive man and those monuments, the work of sufferers from gout, that existed before the Revolutionary era.'

Rodchenko: 'I am opposed to dealing with "faktura" in the programme. We do not have a specific type of "faktura" born out of art. Our "faktura" at present is the material itself. We are no longer concerned with working its surface. We intervene directly with the material.'

'Material has its components, and it is these components that have become important for us. Only at a later stage is this material worked and painted in order to preserve it. This operation is the technical constructivity that ensures preservation of the material.'

'The painter works the surface, concerning himself with technique as such, as an end in itself, and then constructs his work. But we tackle this process not as an end in itself but as a way of finding the most appropriate method of handling the material. The important thing for us is the material and its components. Not even in manufacturing does there exist a technique in the sense in which it is understood by painters.'

'In the new painting "faktura" is an end in itself. It is a means of preparing the surface without taking the make-up of the material into account. Thus, in so far as it diverts our attention from the problems of the material, it does not help us.'

Gan: 'Rodchenko defines "faktura" from a professional point of view. We must approach "faktura" from a physical point of view, without getting old definitions mixed up with this concept. We must come up with a completely new definition...'

Rodchenko: '... Our new kind of "faktura" does not involve treating a surface but using the material. So it is better not to use that word.'

There is no "faktura" in Constructivism, just material. Taking care not to fall in love with the surface, we make an effort to work with the material...'

Gan: 'When I say material I mean raw material; making purposeful use of the material while it is being worked is "faktura".'

'In a still more precise fashion, "faktura" is the organic component of a processed material and the new component of a material organism.'

'... "Faktura" signifies a concrete fact... The material is a concrete fact, but "faktura" is concerned with the concrete fact of the material itself...'

Rodchenko: 'Then I agree with Gan. I felt it was important to distinguish the material from the "faktura" in view of the specific meaning that it takes on in art. It ought to be stressed that we give more importance to the material than to the way in which it is worked on the surface.'

Gan: 'But I too say that the material is needed. To the extent that you are a Constructivist, you are concerned with "faktura". That is to say, you rework the material but not just on the surface...'

Ioganson: 'I am still thinking about the name of our group. Would it not be better to call ourselves Constructors instead of Constructivists?'

Gan: 'No, it would not, because when one says Constructivist one means something quite precise, while a Constructor is merely an executor...'

15 Rodchenko: 'Comrade Gan's theses on tectonics are not clear to me. Things are taking a very abstract turn. Much is being said of geology and the like without this having any connection with the object under examination. It is an unwieldy introduction...'

'Gan says that the conclusions will deal with what he calls the discipline of tectonics; but it is not possible to establish disciplines without getting the nature of tectonics in general completely clear first...'

Ioganson: 'The theses have been written in too literary a fashion. They are not much use in practice. A simpler form of presentation is needed...'

Medunetsky: 'The form really is too literary... Moreover the nature of tectonics ought to be explained in a much more concrete manner.'

Stenberg: 'I agree with comrade Gan when he says that the artistic culture of the past should not be accepted...'

Stepanova: '... these are not theses on tectonics. They are rather theses on the ideas of the Constructivists...'

'Whether or not the artistic culture of the past is accepted has nothing to do with tectonics: The tectonics discussed in the report was present in every style during the early phase of its development, and was then lost, just as a style can harden into a conventional form. If we accept

the concept of tectonics, we must definitely explain it from our viewpoint...'

'Comrade Gan does valuable work for the Group, but his approach is too philosophical. He should go more deeply into what is going on in the field of art... It is necessary to make art coincide with art, but not in the way that comrade Gan does... Denying is not enough, it has to be demonstrated... I would like to take a look at some errors of method in our work. We ought not to be accepting or rejecting this or that position... We should be dealing with the problems together in the form of a discussion.'

'That is how we will define tectonics. The experience of the Objective Analysis Group has shown that the method of collective discussion works. Only by involving everybody and obliging each person to expound his own theories have we been able to get to the heart of the problem. Only in this way have a number of groups gelled perfectly.'

16 Rodchenko: 'Each member of the Group should tackle the problems in the order in which they appear in the programme; then we will try to solve them.'

Stepanova: 'I suggest we begin the theoretical work with the first point in the programme, that of tectonics...'

Rodchenko: 'I insist that we start with the basic concept, that is, from Constructivism... Otherwise the name that we have given ourselves will not seem to be sufficiently justified.'

Gan: 'Tectonics cannot be the fulcrum of the Constructivists... it is the outcome of a work of construction and "faktura". I suggest we start with "faktura", as it makes more sense to move from the material to construction, rather than the other way around...'

Rodchenko: 'According to the programme tectonics is the most important element. It is the goal and the basic problem. Therefore I insist that the first thing to be done is to make clear what is the essence of Constructivism.'

Medunetsky: 'In the programme Gan has based our work on the problem of tectonics. So I feel that, in order not to be called "tectonicists", we should start with the fundamentals of Constructivism.'

Gan: 'We cannot describe ourselves as tectonicists, since the basic pivot is construction.'

'... Usually a work is defined on the basis of what is... its central core. The fundamental element... is construction... We construct (work with the material) on technique. Let us include construction and technique in tectonics.'

Ioganson: '... As long as actual objects do not exist, there will not even be an idea to justify them; essentially we are producers... we cannot start out by trying to explain our sustaining idea right from the start.'

Gan: 'Tectonics liberates Constructivism from ideology. Constructivist ideology derives on the one hand from Communism and on the other

from achievements and inventions in its sector.

'... The task of the Constructivists also lies in defining a new point of view in the art field, just as the Communists have done in politics... It is not tectonics that needs something, but construction. Tectonics places itself at the service of construction and "faktura"...

Rodchenko: 'What matters to us is not philosophy but explaining how our art fits into this programme... until there are new things, it is useless to talk about construction...

'I feel we should first get clear what are our relations with the art of the past...

'We cannot deny all that has been done so far... If there is something valid in what we have been doing up to now, then we should say so, assert it, before going any further.'

Stenberg: 'We must leave tectonics and start to explain construction.'

Ioganson: 'We will get nothing clear until we produce a new work.'

17 Some other excerpts from the discussion follow.

Stepanova: '... Tectonics is the attitude of the artist towards the real essence of a problem, independently of the style of any particular era... In my view tectonics substitutes for the word "faktura"...

Rodchenko: 'Comrade Stepanova is right... Tectonics involves everything all at once. It is an ideological form. It could not exist without an experiment, that is without construction and "faktura"...

'Tectonics is the ideological basis present in any problem, but how does the artist tackle the work from the formal point of view? From the bottom to the top or from the top to the bottom, that is to say, singling out a detail but keeping in mind the whole while he works, or the other way round?'

V. Stenberg: '... Before, there was no tectonics. We made something without thinking about where it was going to go.'

Rodchenko: 'Tectonics is an ensemble of precise laws or a programmatic part of construction and "faktura". Let us look at this problem: building a room for twenty typists. Everything needed must be provided for, without forgetting or wasting anything. We are given details of the work and we set about constructing, while bearing the inner principle in mind, that of tectonics.'

Stepanova: 'It has been made clear that tectonics is either an ideological principle or a precise philosophical attitude. It is not a work in the formal sense, but an ideological realization... If we accept tectonics, it is imperative that we clarify these two points; that is to say, whether to start out: from production in order to solve a problem, that is, it is construction and execution that determine laws; or from the problem in order to move on to production, that is, since the nature of the problem has been grasped,

make both construction and "faktura" dependent on tectonics... I believe that it is production that lays down the laws; the material is improved, knowledge increased and new conditions and possibilities for solution of the problem emerge. If we take the problem of building a room for typists, it can be solved if we have very good material to work with. Only then can we provide far more than is asked of us, without having to tackle construction and "faktura" at once or limit ourselves merely to questions of economy and utility.'

Rodchenko: 'If we provide much more than is required, we run the risk of destroying the construction. It should be done in such a way that there is nothing superfluous. If we understand tectonics in the sense of mutability, we will have to produce something with universal application, for instance typewriter desks that can be set to one side and used for cutting or turned upside down and used for something else.'

'If we work in this way, we will come up against completely different problems and we will not succeed in playing a part in modern life, for everything would have to be reconstructed. If they were to ask us to construct a convention building, it would have to be built according to a universal principle, for example with movable walls that would allow it to be linked up with another, thereby obtaining two buildings. Such a building might resemble one of those American cabinets to which it is possible to add one or more shelves according to need, so as to form a complete wardrobe.'

G. Stenberg: 'We ought not to be too concerned with material. Brick might be replaced by iron or glass. If we tackle things from the tectonic viewpoint, we run the risk of building with bricks in mind, since they are available at the moment, when what the construction really requires is iron. At present old materials are still being used, while we are designing new things. I fear that in this way we will always remain at the planning stage. In fact modern tectonics obliges us to make things with what is at hand, to treat glass as in the past, while our designs envisage new means.'

Medunetsky: 'Tectonics, as it is described by comrade Gan, would emerge like an explosion from the centre of the earth. Hence I picture it as something highly spontaneous and disordered, whereas construction is order, organization and will. Gan says that it is something vague, an internal disorder; I think that if tectonics is going to be a hindrance to us, we can do without it.'

Rodchenko: 'Tectonics is useful to us. We can do without it only in that sense that we are trying to get clear. There it can be regarded as something generalized or as something dynamic. We are not obliged to take this word as it has been defined by comrade Gan.'

'There will be no explosion. Comrade Stepanova maintains that we should keep the

modern viewpoint in mind. I say that we will accept the tasks, we will design how we wish and with the materials that we wish. No concessions should be made to utilitarianism. Let us get our principles clear as well as the material we will make use of.'

'Of course when one begins to construct in a new way, the material will be there too. Our designs are waiting for their moment. We will not stop with the requirements of the present day, but look ahead.'

V. Stenberg: '... The new term "tectonics" is as useful as any other word.'

Ioganson: '... I do not agree with Medunetsky; in my view tectonics understood in the sense of purposeful utilization involves a principle of extreme order.'

Rodchenko: 'We are not concerned with the origin of the word, but the idea that we have invested it with.'

V. Stenberg: 'Tectonics, according to comrade Stepanova, is a kind of transformism, like the hare's white coat in winter and grey one in summer. But we may find it better to do the opposite...'

G. Stenberg: 'Constructivists take on what it is most appropriate to tackle at this very moment. Construction contrasts with tectonics because it is lacking in constructivity...'

Stepanova: 'Stenberg and Medunetsky are not talking about tectonics, but about construction. The possibility of transformation is itself constructivity. We should not get things mixed up. It is a matter of concepts, not words. Tectonics is not a concrete fact but a quality which one starts out from...'

'There was construction in stone architecture too, but not the same as we are talking about. We must take tectonics into account, and not monumentality. In the place of monumental style we put tectonically oriented constructivity with a very precise aim...'

Medunetsky: 'Purpose should form the basis of construction. We need to think about what the construction is for. Look at the Greek temple, it was made in the name of beauty. The Gothic church too, but not in the name of practical function.'

Rodchenko: 'We must begin with the material. Its qualities and the purpose for which it will be used lead us to construction. Taken as a whole it gives us tectonics. Even the temple had its practical purpose, as does any work.'

G. Stenberg: 'I suggest that we abandon conceptual analysis of the word tectonics and use it as it is...'

Rodchenko: 'I see that we cannot manage to consider tectonics as a new word. We are not used to it. Time is needed...'

Ioganson: 'If we throw out tectonics, there will be a gap in the programme...'

Rodchenko: 'Someone should define the purpose of a Constructivist construction. It should

turn out to be something generalized and very broad. We must begin not with the work but with the reason for it. We set ourselves general tasks...

Stepanova: '... But we must also get the specific properties of a material clear, if this material is to offer us completely different means to work with.'

'We should not decorate but work according to a precise plan. For this we choose those elements which reveal themselves to be most suitable for carrying out this plan. If, after having thoroughly analysed the properties of a material, we make something with a degree of organic unity, then we will have worked in a tectonic manner...

'... We cannot set ourselves the task of creating a style... We operate in a tectonic manner, not according to the style of a particular period, but systematically. We completely rework an object, making new discoveries and immediately afterwards putting them into practice. Working in this way, there will never be a rigid form, the creation of a style in the old sense of the word...

Rodchenko: 'I propose we interpret tectonics as a common ideology. Working in a Constructivist manner, we will come across a variety of expressions and work systems. Each worker will have his own system of working. But there will be just one principle common to all.'

G. Stenberg: 'There must be a common principle, but can it be called tectonics? I suggest we do not give it a name right away; it would be too difficult. On the other hand, taking a word that has its own precise meaning and giving it another seems risky to me. Better find a more suitable word.'

Stepanova: 'The word tectonics is the most accurate; it is not fortuitous. It indicates the attitude we should have towards the essence of things, in an organized manner, without submitting to the circumstances of the day.'

G. Stenberg: 'What matters is not the word but the concept. Of course the word tectonics derives from nature and places the accent on organic unity. But we are opposed to the word "tectonics" in that it does not reflect the concept that we are trying to impose on it.'

Medunetsky: 'Tectonics indicates the fatality of nature: why should we give this name to our ideas, given that it is just what we are fighting against?'

Ioganson: 'I suggest we forget about the word and talk about the idea, on which we are all in agreement.'

Rodchenko: 'The word "tectonics" is useful for defining our ideas. The eruption of a volcano is the result of a precise work of nature and not a chance event... It is difficult to find a more appropriate word.'

Abstract composition, 1920. Plywood, oil, 96 x 61



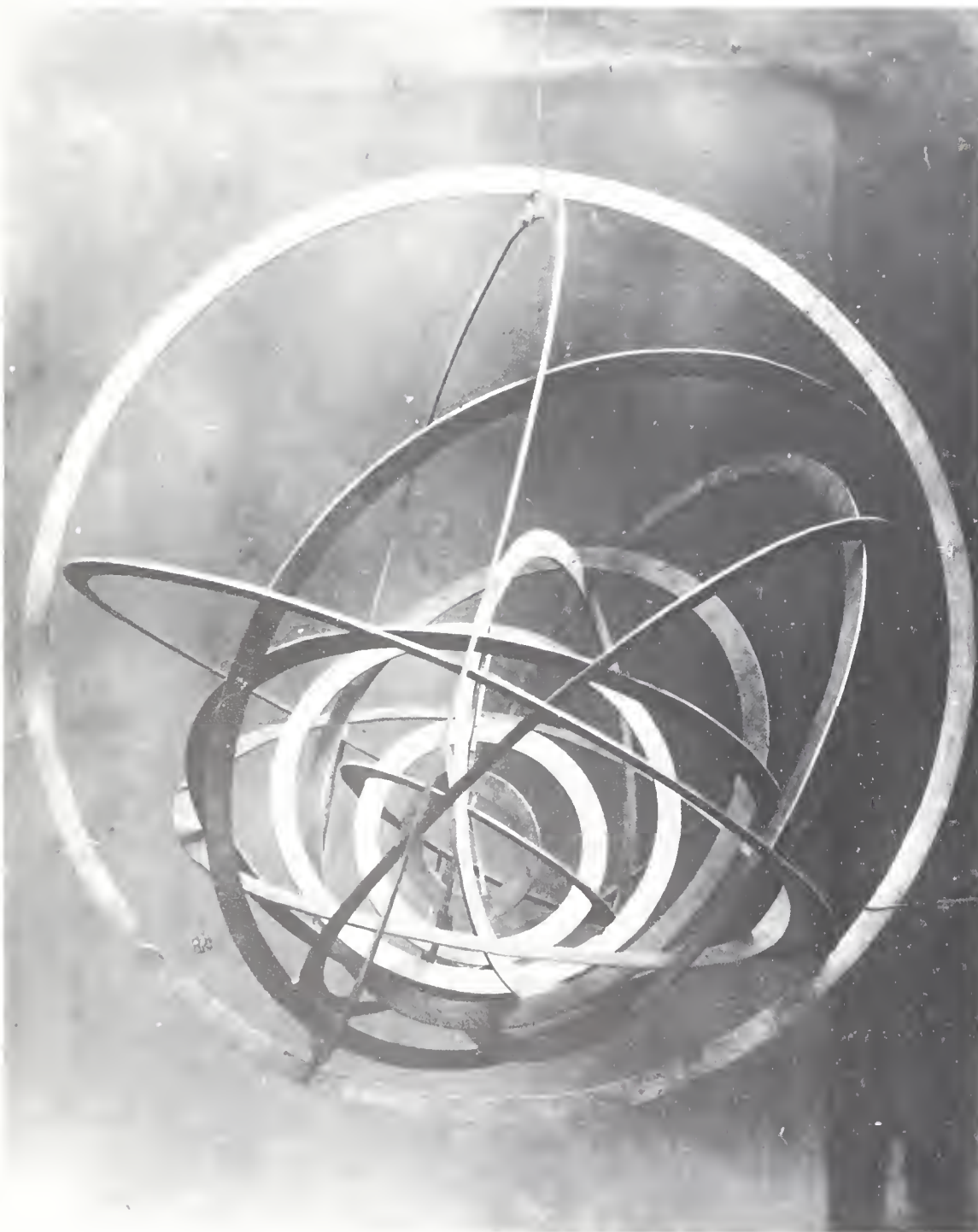
The Constructivist concept of art

The disavowal of art in the declarations of the Constructivists is a theme that has always attracted critics and historians of art. If taken literally, the arguments of the Constructivists can really only lead to a blind alley. It seems strange that it should be *artists* who were organizing new Working Groups to deny *art*. The problem is certainly more complex than it appears in the analysis of many scholars.

The Constructivist artists were struggling against the old art, against the means and methods of traditional artistic expression, against old stylistic and decorative criteria. By insisting on the utilitarian and constructive aims of the new form of objects, their real intention was to create a new *aesthetic* concept of form, independently of how successful they were in this attempt.

The 'objective' method of analysing works of art aimed to shift the attention of artists away from external aesthetical research towards the law governing the constituent structure of form.

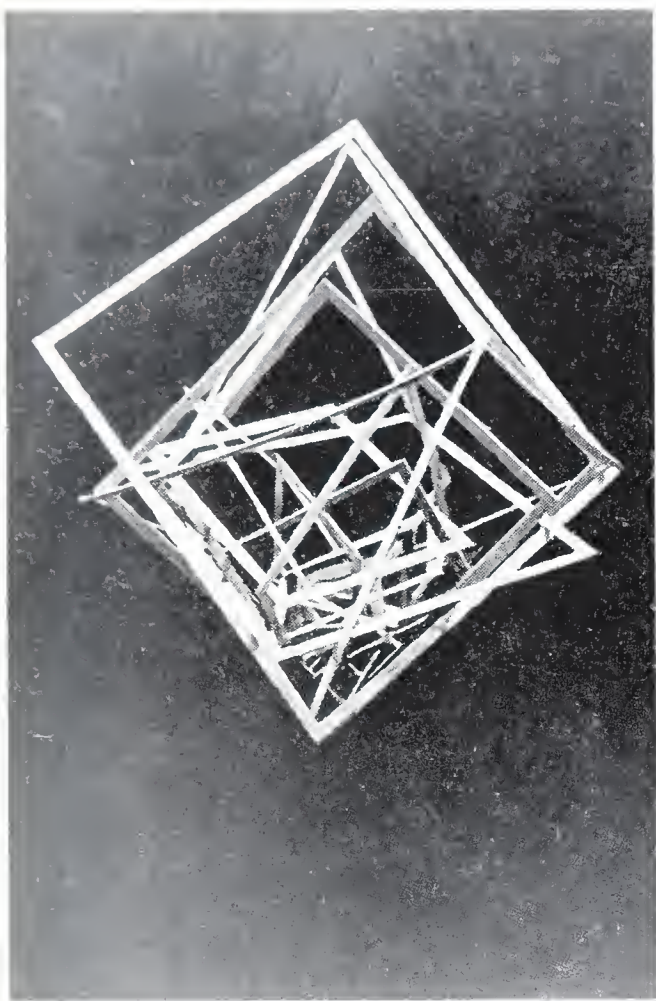
Spatial construction no. 9 (suspended), 1920-21.



Second series of spatial constructions (according to the principle of 'similar forms').

Spatial construction no. 14, 1921.





Spatial construction no. 11 (suspended), 1920-21.

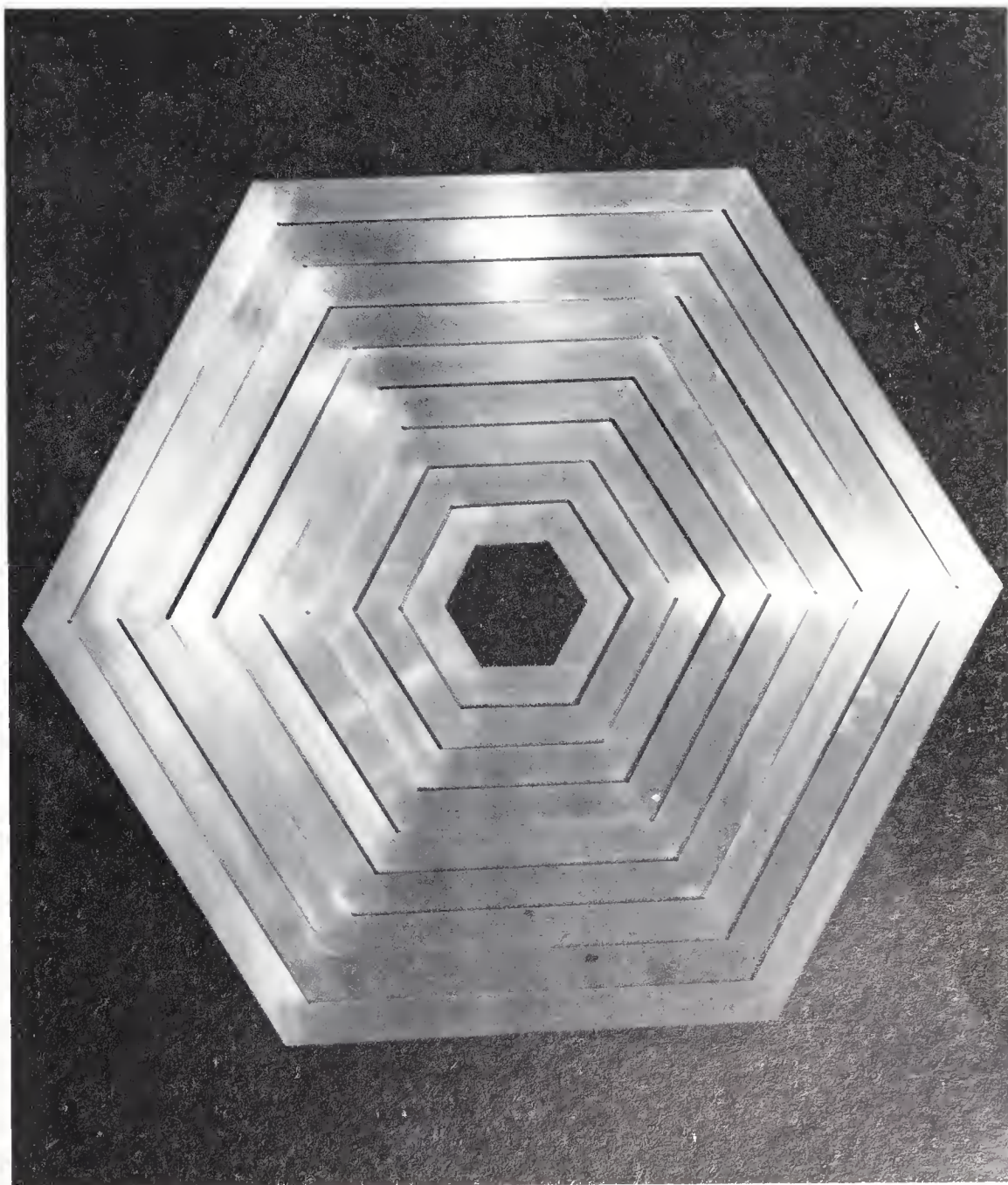
Spatial construction no. 10 (suspended), 1920-21.



At the height of the debate over construction and composition and even before the Working Group of Constructivists was set up, Rodchenko, who was already teaching at Vkhutemas at the time, wrote some highly original slogans, which might be interpreted as the creed of an artist who was moving from figurative art to the world of objects and who was at that very moment teaching the introductory course in 'construction' (*Doc. 15*). In the form of aphorisms, these slogans reflect Rodchenko's aspiration to replace the art of the past, essentially at the beck and call of a parasitical social class, with an art for a society of workers. Art is not rejected as a creative phenomenon in its totality, but only in so far as it 'does not enter into life', limiting itself to being 'a beautiful patch on the squalid life of the rich', 'a precious stone in the midst of the dark and dirty life of the poor man', a means of escaping from a life 'that is not worth living'. Rodchenko stressed the rational principle of the organization of man's environment, in which he saw the dawn of the creativity 'of the true artist'. He saw the duty of the artist in working for life and not for palaces, cathedrals, cemeteries and museums.

This nihilistic attitude towards the art of the past often affected the whole of art in general in the difficult situation of those years, as happened in the case of Gan, who categorically disavowed, in his articles and statements, art in general

Spatial construction no. 10 (before opening). Reconstruction by A. Lavrentiev.



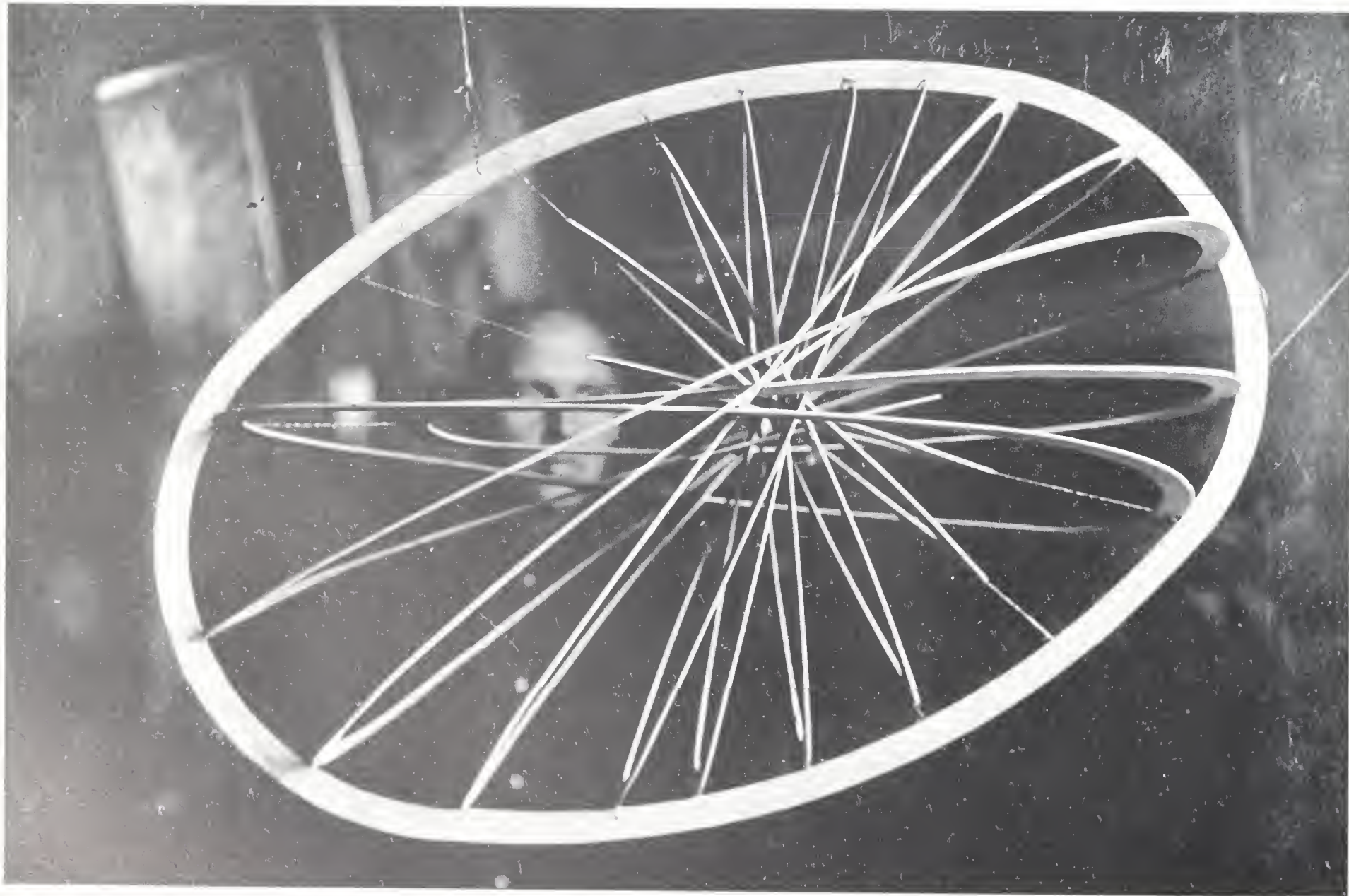
and declared himself opposed to any transformation of Constructivism from a *method* into a *style*. For Gan it was an absolute necessity that the form of a work, whatever it might be, should reflect its utilitarian and constructive aims. His statements could not help but influence all those Constructivist artists with whom he was in contact, however inexpert they may have been in theoretical terminology.

While negating 'art' in words, the Constructivist artists were in fact creating a new art, evolving a new stylistic tendency and devising a new theoretical concept of form. Like any new trend in art, the Constructivists formalized, i.e. stylized, their own methods and means of expression, in clear contrast to their more orthodox comrades, especially Gan. Like the theorists of industrial art, the orthodox Constructivists were of the opinion that, by concentrating on the utilitarian and constructive aims of the new form, the whole problem of form and aesthetics was excised at the root. They were astounded by the fact that in whatever field they worked, those very stylistic and artistic methods that they considered 'obsolete' would be grafted onto the technical and functional principle.

On the other hand, emphasizing the technical and functional aims of the new form meant establishing a new *aesthetic* concept of form, a concept that could not evade the *artistic* laws of form itself, especially the need to formalize methods and means and to devise a system consonant with the new tendency. The inevitability

19 *In this connection the argument between the theoretician Gan and Smirnov that took place in the pages of the review Zrelishcha (Spectacle) during the years 1923-24 is highly illuminating. Gan wrote that 'right from when they first appeared on the scene the Constructivists rebelled not just against any school of aesthetics, but against the very concept of*

Spatial constructor: no. 12 (suspended), 1920-21. In the background, Rodchenko.



aesthetics’.

A. Gan, ‘Konstruktivizm’, in *Zrelishcha*, no. 55, 1923, p. 12.

In his article, pointedly entitled ‘Constructivism, an epoch in art’, N. Smirnov wrote that the Constructivists were obliged not so much to deny aesthetics, as to ‘formulate a new aesthetics which could meet the requirements of the new age and act, with the backing of this aesthetics, in the field of art. There is no need to be frightened by this. It will only be the beginning of a new epoch in art, out of which will arise a long series of schools and methods. It is absolutely clear that the Constructivists protest against aesthetics in the name of a new aesthetics... Despite what Gan says, the Constructivists prefer to remain in the field of aesthetics and art, and in this they are absolutely right.’

N.G. Smirnov, ‘Konstruktivizm kak epokha v iskusstve’, in *Zrelishcha*, no. 62, 1923, p. 4.

Gan replied with another article entitled ‘Constructivism — gravedigger of art’, in which he claimed to reject not only the art of the past but the whole of art in general: ‘it is time to stop believing in art’.

A. Gan, ‘Konstruktivizm — mogilshchik iskusstve’, in *Zrelishcha*, no. 78, 1924, pp. 3-6.

*In a further article, Gan made yet another attack on those who ‘identify Constructivism with art and who regard it as a new artistic tendency’. At the same time he declared that Constructivism ‘is not a new and modern trend in art but... a dialectical transcendence of art...’ (*Zrelishcha*, no. 80, 1924, p. 4).*

In reply, Smirnov wrote that if Constructivism was ‘rationalized artistic work’, it was pointless for Gan to keep it separate from art, in that ‘artistic work, however rationalized, presupposes an output of artistic values’. ‘What is the difference between comrade Gan’s activity and the work of other artists?’ asked Smirnov. ‘Gan rationalizes his artistic work, as if others did not do the same thing...’

N.G. Smirnov, ‘Konstruktivizm, Otvet A. Ganu’ (*Constructivism — Reply to A. Gan*), in *Zrelishcha*, nos. 83-84, 1924, p. 4.

20 *In his memoirs, R. Rait speaks of a visit that Mayakovsky made to one of the exhibitions held in those years where these spatial constructions were on show. He was probably referring to the Obmokhu Exhibition: ‘Exhibition by the Constructivists: Rodchenko... Not many people, Mayakovsky comes into the room. It is evening. We stream in, with that unmotivated gaiety that has never left us. I take off my coat; nearby there are some metal poles in a cross,*

of this ‘stylization’ was clear to many people in the twenties, even to Constructivist artists, but the theoreticians went on rejecting any kind of artistic stylization in the various sectors of art.¹⁹

Gan was one of the most implacable enemies of art, and among all the theorists of Productivist art he was the only one with experience of the art itself, being one of the pioneers of the new graphics in publishing, a sector in which he worked with compositions that were extremely important from the *artistic* point of view. It was just this contradiction, between his ‘anti-art’ declarations and his practice as an artist, that brought him close to other Constructivist artists, including Rodchenko.

With hindsight it is impossible not to be aware of the limitations of many of the assertions of Constructivism and the theory of Productivist art in general. However, rather than emphasizing its contradictions, errors and polemics, it is important to identify the objective suppositions which gave birth to this phenomenon, so decisive for the art of the 20th century.

The theories of Constructivism and of Production Art were undoubtedly the outcome of a set of objective factors that were typical of the reality of Soviet life in the twenties. It suffices to recall a few of these: above all the decisive role taken by new forms and new technical materials in the definition of the style. Secondly, the new principle of the interrelation of creative activity in pure art and in the sphere of objects. In the third place, the new relationship between worker and means of production, which had become the property of society. Fourthly, the application of the new technique to picturing the society of the future, whose specific stylistic forms were, naturally, fairly difficult to predict, but in which the presence of the new techniques was a concrete fact, obvious to everyone. Fifthly, a definitely critical attitude towards the forms of objects and of the art of the past, in which the new ruling class, the workers, saw the embodiment of the wealthy classes’ way of life. Sixthly, a marked asceticism in the habits, clothing and official and social life of those who had fought for Soviet power and had built the new society. Workers contrasted this asceticism, which became an ethical standard in the first decade after the Revolution, not only with the luxury of the defeated upper class, but also with the behaviour of the social elite that had been reborn with the Nep or New Economic Policy.

All this could not help but have an effect on the stylistic procedures of art. The theorists of Constructivism and of Production Art attempted to explain the new tendencies in the creative work of artists on the basis of new social demands. In particular Arvatov, one of the greatest scholars of Constructivism, faithfully recorded the lines of development of creative activity and helped artists to become aware of all the profound changes that were taking place.

Many of these theoreticians’ basic principles, such as giving the same artistic value to utilitarian objects and works of art, emphasizing the functionality of a form, equating the concept of functionality with that of beauty and laying stress on ethical and social effectiveness in the aesthetics of design, were fundamental contributions to the creation of a new architecture and of Soviet design.

But in the struggle on behalf of a new kind of art which would involve the sector of industrial production as well and in the battle against old aesthetic standards and artistic traditions that were considered obsolete, the theoreticians of Constructivism and industrial art were dragged by the controversy outside the limits of their field, in which it made sense to talk of a new art, and found themselves tackling problems that were not strictly bound up with artistic questions. They took a stand against art in general, against the aestheticization of the new functional forms and against any kind of artistic attitude towards creative work. But with respect to the entire theoretical system of Constructivism and Production Art, these polemical outbursts were nothing but partially negative elements of a phenomenon that was extremely positive as a whole. Yet they were often used as a pretext by opponents who tried to make out that they were the basic postulates of the entire theory.

The second and third series of spatial constructions

In 1920 and 1921 Rodchenko continued to experiment with three-dimensional form, with the growing conviction that he did not want to be confined by the surface of the canvas.

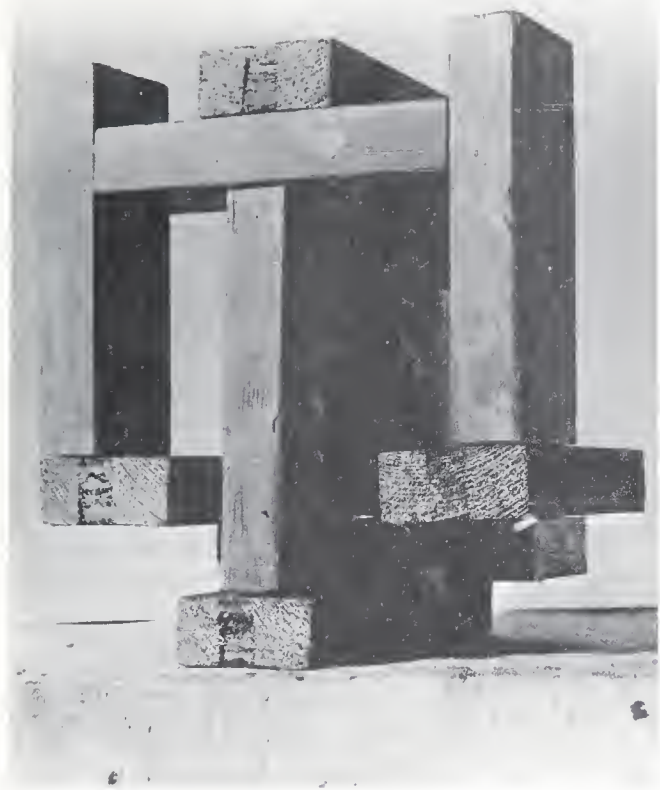
Rodchenko in working overalls, with a number of dismantled spatial constructions, 1922. Photo M. Kaufman.



Spatial construction no. 16, 1921.

Spatial construction no. 15, 1921.

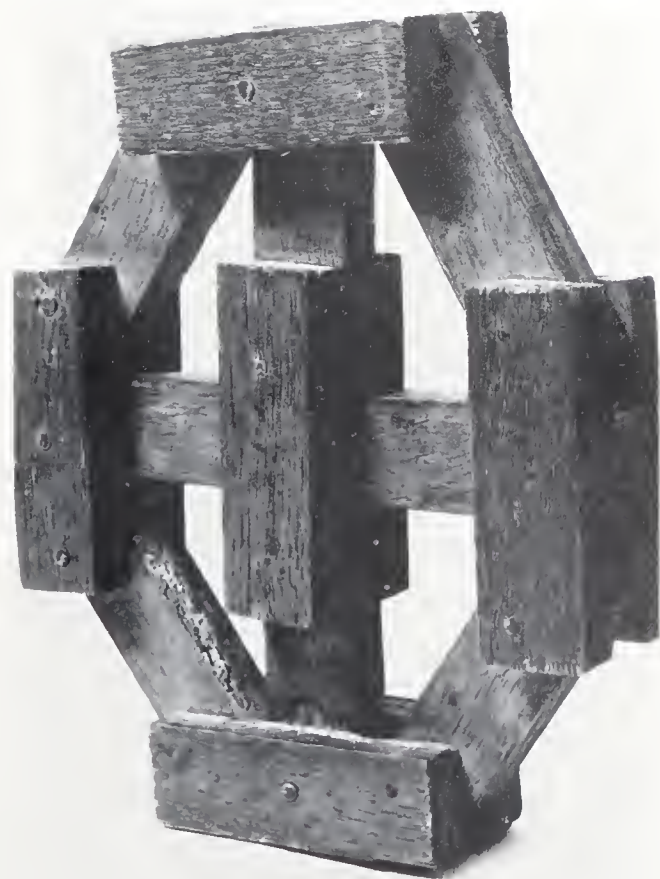




Spatial construction, 1921.

Third series of spatial constructions (according to the principle of 'similar forms'), 1920-21.

Spatial construction no. 18, 1921. Oakwood, 18 × 15.5 × 4.



The two series of spatial constructions produced by Rodchenko between 1920 and 1921 are very important in grasping the process by which his creative principles as a Productivist artist were formed. In these constructions Rodchenko tried out and developed ideas and methods that he was to use later on in the construction of real objects.

The fundamental distinction between these two series and the first series of spatial constructions lies in the conscious effort 'to build a new organism for a precise purpose'.

These works serve to demonstrate Rodchenko's evolution from the surface of the picture to real space. Malevich first represented volumes on the surface and then realized them in space; Tatlin began with space, seeking to transform the illusory relief of the Cubist painting into volumetric relief; V. and G. Stenberg and Medunetsky first traced the plans of their constructions on the surface and then realized them in space.

In his second series of spatial constructions Rodchenko did not extend the flat composition directly into a spatial one. His spatial constructions in this series could easily be produced again in two-dimensional compositions. In them he was working less as a painter than as a builder, looking for new rational methods of construction and possibilities of utilizing spatial constructions.

This group of Constructivist structures contained the seed for many of the solutions to which builders, engineers and painters would turn in the years to come. The very notion of creating a series of equal and concentric elements was an extremely original one. There was also an intuition of cosmogonic planetary construction.

Moreover, Rodchenko was experimenting with a number of ideas for convertible furniture, tools and panels for exhibitions that he would develop later together with his students in the Department of Metalwork at Vkhutemas.

He selected a flat surface (made of plywood or tin) with a particular geometrical shape (square, circle, hexagon, ellipse, triangle) on which he drew concentric figures at regular intervals (according to the principle of 'analogue'). Afterwards

Spatial constructions, 1924. Photo Rodchenko.



he cut ('sawed') the surface along these lines and 'shifted' the shapes obtained in space, creating original compositions with no 'top' or 'bottom' that almost took flight in space.

In May 1921, Rodchenko put this series on show (together with the spatial constructions of his colleagues in the Working Group of Constructivists, V. and G. Stenberg, Medunetsky and Ioganson) at the Obmokhu Exhibition in Moscow.²⁰

Almost at the same time as he was working on the second series Rodchenko produced another series (the third) of three-dimensional structures (about twenty-five works) in which each composition was either made out of standard elements (pieces of wood of the same size) or of the same standard elements but of two (sections of the piece) or more (lengths of the piece) different sizes.

By building with these elements, Rodchenko was trying to demonstrate the stylistic possibilities of the principle of using standard components in the field of construction.

In 1922, in an 'auto-monograph' dedicated to his creative activities from 1917 to 1921 with the curious title 'The experimental transition of painting through Constructivist art and spatial forms towards industrial production', Rodchenko defined his third series of spatial constructions as follows: 'These are the last spatial constructions. They have been worked out by me in an experimental way... These constructions are a universal demonstration that everything can be built out of equal shapes with different methods, systems and sizes. With these works, in so far as they are real constructions, I am laying down a precise condition for the future constructor of industry: "Nothing is by chance, everything is calculated."

'This can all be summed up in a universal rule: simplify, generalize.'²¹

In 1921, just when Rodchenko was carrying out his laboratory research into abstract form, he had moved on to experiments with three-dimensional constructions. This move from the surface into space was more logical than that of 1918 (the first series of spatial constructions) and formed an intermediate step towards the development of useful and real objects in the sphere of design. This transitional phase had direct links with the formation of the new creative movement of Constructivism. However this was taking place at a time when the theory of Productivism had not yet been put into practice. Thus it is important to emphasize that Rodchenko should be seen as one of the founders of Soviet Constructivism.²²

The preparatory course of Vkhutemas

For the first half of 1921, Inkhuk, headed at that time by Rodchenko, functioned as a centre for all those artists who had helped to work out the aesthetico-formal bases of the new stylistic tendency. Active in Inkhuk were four Working Groups: those of Objective Analysis, the Constructivists, the Architects and the Designers of Objects.

Over the same period artists and architects who were members of Inkhuk joined Vkhutemas, taking over effective control of the Basic Section and utilizing their experience in the analysis of artistic form as a method of teaching in the preparatory art courses. Thus artists belonging to the four Working Groups put their ideas about creativity to the test at Vkhutemas, as teachers of four subjects that formed part of the introductory course of the Basic Section, then under the direction of Rodchenko himself.²³

The long discussions held under the auspices of Inkhuk on the relationship between construction and composition influenced the approach taken towards the various artistic subjects of the preparatory course, in which emphasis was in fact laid on the 'Constructivist' aspects of form. The word 'construction' was

with a triangle and some semicircles attached to one side. Someone hangs my coat on one of the rigid arms of this sculptural composition. We are in a good mood: art has shown itself to be "useful"... But at that moment Mayakovsky comes up and, really angry, says, in a very severe but lowpitched tone so as not to attract the attention of the sculpture's creator who was standing close by: "Take it off at once, ignoramus! Is it possible that you do not understand..."

'Seeing that we did not understand, he explains to us, now softened by our embarrassment, how the artist had wished his work to show new shapes in mutual relationship, shapes that did not exist before, which he had wanted to teach people to look at in a different, completely new way; a way that would be able, in the future, to help us construct new things: bridges, buildings and machines.'

R. Rait, 'Vse luchshe vospominan'ia' (All the best memories), in Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo universiteta — Trudi po russkoi i slovyanskoi filosofie (Research notes of the Tartu University. Studies of Russian and Slavonic philosophy), IX *Literaturovedenie*, Tartu 1966, p. 275.

21 A. Rodchenko Archives.

22 In this connection, Gan wrote: 'In 1918, while Rodchenko was carrying out his experiments in the field of abstract painting, he cleared the field of Suprematist dogmatism.

'By designing abstract areas, in different colours, and intersecting them with lines in depth, he demonstrated the conventional character of colour as a device for separation of one area from another.

'... he said that as soon as he found another means for separating one area from another, he would use it.

'Now we know that Rodchenko did not just find another means but went totally beyond the flat and abstract treatment of space, moving on to construct physical masses in actual space. He became Constructivist.'

A. Gan, 'Rodchenko', in Zrelishcha, no. 1, August—September 1922, p. 9.

23 In the early years of the existence of Vkhutemas the organization of the subjects taught in the Basic Section was as follows:

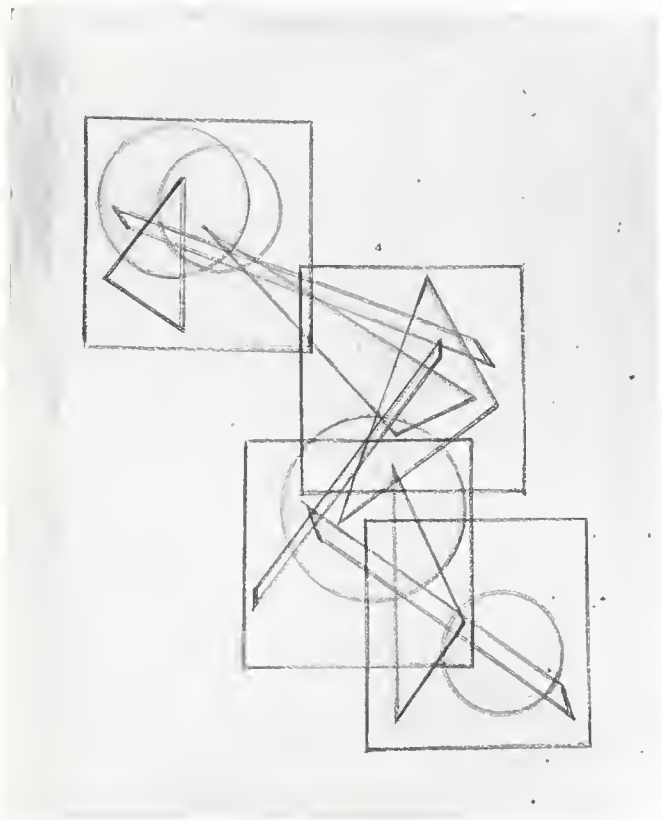
Colour Construction. Teachers: Vesnin and Popova; departments of graphics, painting, textiles and ceramics.

Spatial Construction. Teachers: Ladovsky, Krinsky and N. Dokuchaev; departments of woodworking, metalworking, architecture and sculpture.

Graphical Construction. Teachers: Rod-

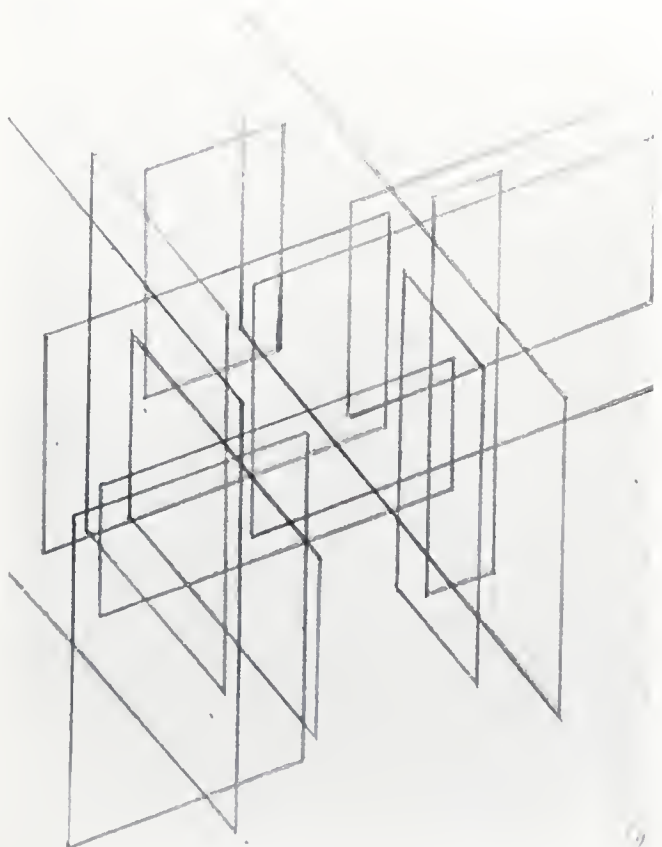
chenko, Kiselev and A. Efimov; departments of painting, textiles, graphics and ceramics.

Volumetric Construction. Teacher: Lavinsky; departments of woodworking, metalworking, architecture and sculpture.



A. Achtyrko. *Spatial composition inside four intersecting squares*, 1921.

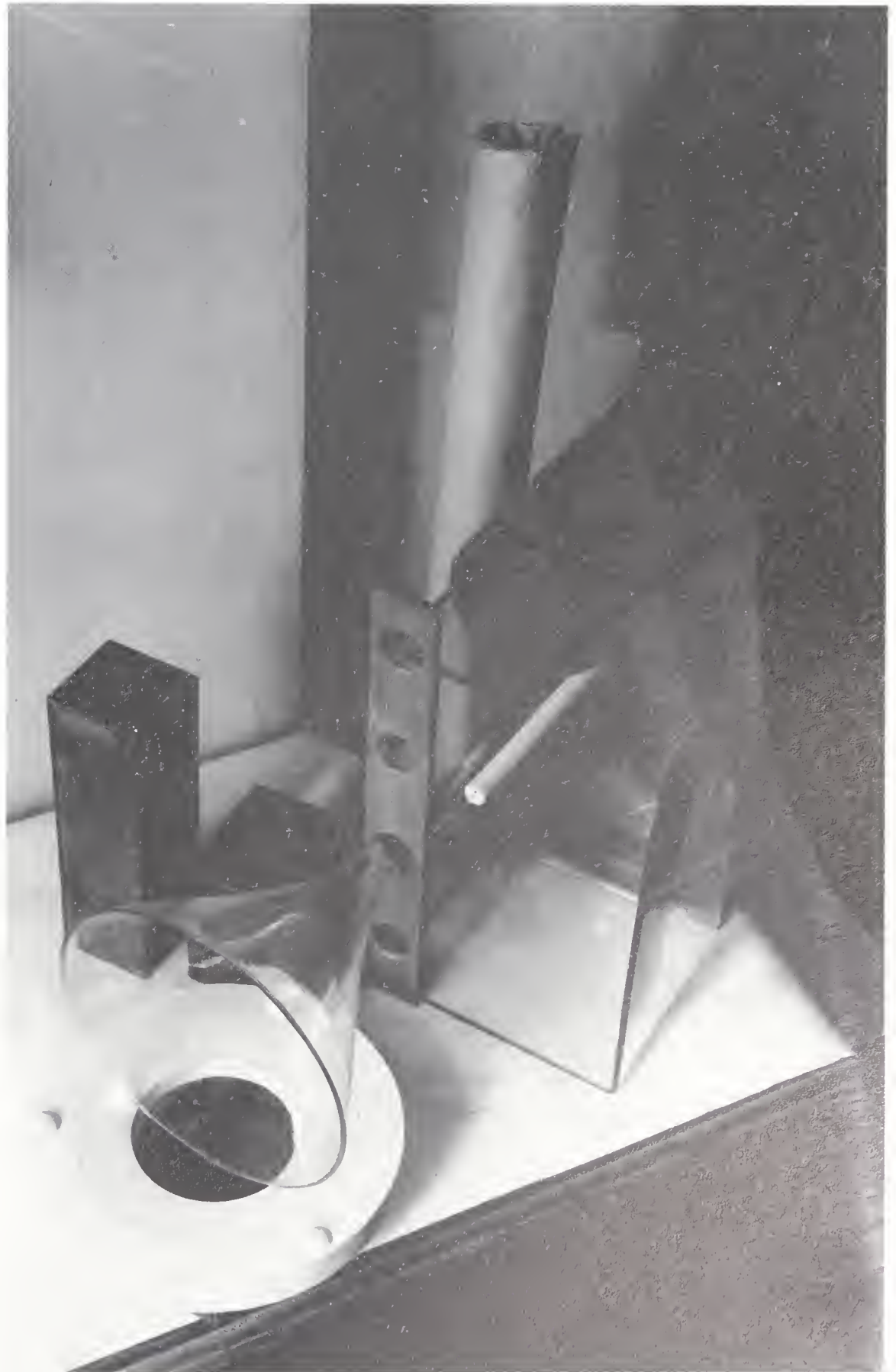
A. Achtyrko. *Composition of rectangles in space*, 1921.



understood in a very broad sense by artists. The talk was of rational analysis of those means and methods of artistic composition that were not characteristic of one form of art alone but that reflected a pattern of artistic perception common to the whole of mankind.

After a series of modifications, the preparatory course was organized in a stable

Study of still life for a painting, 1924. Photo Rodchenko.



in 1923-24 onwards. It should be remembered that the experiments with abstract form introduced by 'left-wing' painters became the fundamental activity of the new art college.

On the basis of their own personal experience, Rodchenko, Popova, Vesnin, Ladovsky, Krinsky and Lavinsky tried to lay down some fundamental methods in the course of preparation, common even to artists with different specializations. As well as a whole range of ideas, the introductory art courses proposed a single criterion of style for all the different artistic professions.

As a consequence, experiments with abstract form were carried out in two distinct phases. During the first they formed a common stylistic frame of reference for all the three-dimensional arts. In the second phase, they offered a common basis of training for specialists in each of these three-dimensional arts.

The first phase of these experiments was a temporary one, with the artists themselves viewing this kind of creative activity as an evolutionary process, i.e. as a movement away from painting and towards the world of objects. Therefore the 'serial quality' that one encounters in works from the formative period of this or that artist (especially Rodchenko) does not indicate an attempt to devise definitive means and methods in isolation from the problems of style, but rather the desire to take these experiments as far as possible in a still formative period, a period that for many of them came to an end in 1921-23.

The second phase of these experiments, on the other hand, had a more definitive character. In the educational sector it was absolutely essential to devise a common method of teaching, in order to tackle the work on abstract form in a rational manner. The scope of the preparatory course was to develop in the student, right from the start of his studies, the sense of colour, line and harmony in composition and the habit of thinking in terms of space and volume, both equally essential elements for artists of any specialization. In the early stages of their course, students made no attempt to tackle the concrete problems of a given form of art, but looked at the laws of artistic composition in general by studying a series of abstract problems.

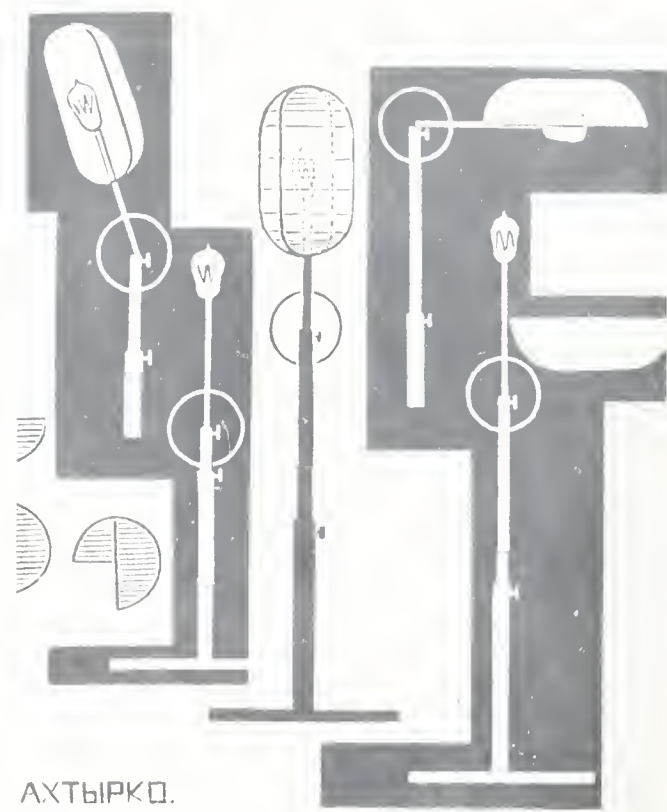
But not everyone had grasped the difference between these experiments with abstract form and other trends in non-figurative art that were then in fashion. This hindered a correct appraisal of their role at the time. Lunacharsky, for example, became increasingly cautious in his attitude towards experiments with abstract form as the fashion for non-figurative art grew. At the end of 1921, his critical attitude placed artists following the lead of Inkhuk in serious difficulties.

At one of the Inkhuk meetings (when Brik made his 'historic' report) the question was raised of shifting the affiliation of the body from Narkompros, which was headed by Lunacharsky, to Vesenkha. At that time the phase of preparation was already over for many artists and they had largely overcome the limits of figurative art (for example, Rodchenko's second and third series of spatial constructions) without having yet entered into the realm of Production Art (design) and architecture. The support given them in the press at that time by the theorists of Production Art was decisive, helping them to begin to look on their research into aesthetics and form as an initial step towards the world of objects. Although the theorists of Productivist art did not thoroughly appreciate the stylistic role of experiments with abstract form in their publications, their support at a critical time served as an encouragement to innovative artists to bring their own period of formation to an end.

Lunacharsky followed the development of innovative trends in figurative art attentively but, being biased towards Classicism in architecture, he was unable to appreciate the elements of stylistic novelty to be found in the experiments with abstract form.

Moreover, Lunacharsky saw and gave his support only to the role which these experiments were supposed to play in the Vkhutemas preparatory course.²⁴ In 1921 the Basic Section had not yet attained its definitive form. The first faculty to inaugurate the preparatory course was that of painting, where Rodchenko was

ПРОЕКТ ЛАМПЫ.



АХТЫРКО.

А Achtyrko. Project for a lamp, 1922.

А. Achtyrko. Seated figure, 1921.



24 *Discussing the methods of teaching in the Basic Section of Vkhutemas, Lunacharsky wrote in 1928: 'This introductory course in which young people study the elements of art in the form of various subjects (line, colour, space, volume, etc.) is a valid example of our research, begun right after the Revolution.*

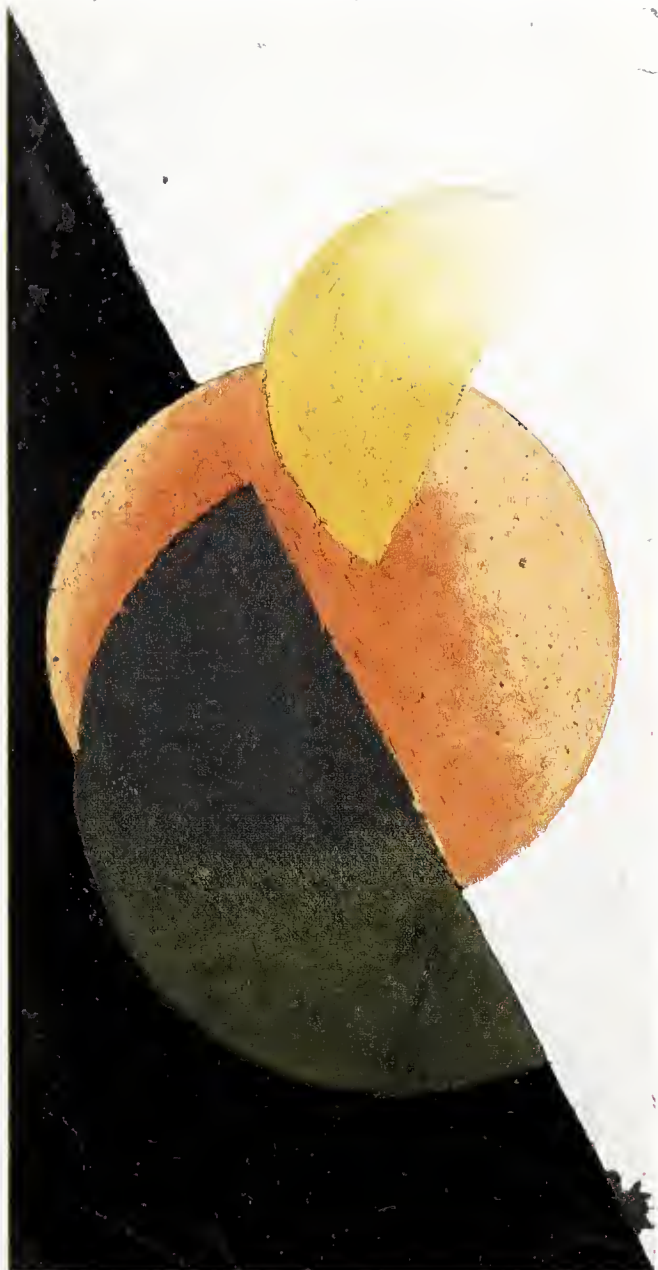
'... Our syllabus, divided into subjects in this manner, would deserve a medal at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris. Now it is absolutely clear that this innovation has put down profound roots and forms a sound methodological base for future successes in our teaching of art.'

In Izvestiya Vtsik (News of the Vtsik), no. 122, 27 May 1928.

25 *Inkhuk Archives.*

26 *Inkhuk Archives.*

A. Achtyrko. *Exercise in shades of colour*, 1921.



teaching at the time. Thanks to those teachers whose didactic approach favoured tackling and solving abstract problems in the early stages of a student's training, compulsory artistic subjects were established for the students of several faculties. This led to the formation of a single Basic Section for the whole of Vkhutemas during the first few years of the art college's existence, supplementing to some extent the introductory courses established in other faculties.

At the end of 1920, Rodchenko wrote his first version of a syllabus for Vkhutemas ('Organizational programme for workshop for the study of painting'); this represents a first draft of the preparatory course in a range of subjects — colour, form, construction, material. Even at this early stage, where he is only referring to the training of painters, Rodchenko lays emphasis on its experimental character and on the importance of workshop study, and above all on the primary importance of general problems of painting technique, quite apart from individual creativity. That is to say he was talking about preparatory training (*Doc. 16*).

As a lecturer in the faculty of painting, Rodchenko taught from 1921 to 1922 one of the preparatory subjects: 'graphical construction'.

Rodchenko's teaching material, as indeed in all the other subjects, was consistently based on a thorough study of abstract problems, according to the method of objective analysis of form. The two syllabuses devised by Rodchenko differ from each other in that the first is a list of concrete problems on the theme of 'graphical construction on flat surfaces', while the second represents the theoretical basis of the preparatory discipline as a whole (*Doc. 17*).

In 1922 Rodchenko moved from the faculty of painting to that of metalwork.

At Vkhutemas Rodchenko had two groups of students who were in close accord with his ideas. The first group was made up of those who had studied with him from 1920 to 1922 in the faculty of painting and the 'Graphical Construction' workshop and who went on with their studies in other departments, including that of metalwork. The second group was made up of those students who had begun their work directly in the faculty of metalwork in 1922.

Rodchenko's first group of students at Vkhutemas had been formed during the period when he was in charge of Inkhuk and had created, first the Objective Analysis Group, and then the Working Group of Constructivists. Rodchenko involved this first group of students in the work of Inkhuk. On the initiative of the Working Group of Constructivists special regulations were drawn up for study subgroups made up of students who were able to co-operate with the Inkhuk Working Groups. One study subgroup of Constructivists was set up in April—May 1921 and worked with the group of Constructivists at Inkhuk. The roster of participants in this subgroup has not been preserved in the Inkhuk archives, but it probably consisted of Rodchenko's students from Vkhutemas: A. Borisov, G. Miller, L. Sanina, G. Chichagova, O. Chichagova, N. Akhtyrko, E. Melnikova and others. For this Constructivist subgroup of study a special programme was drawn up, in which it was stated that: 'The duties of the subgroup for study consist in involving its members in the experimental and revolutionary activity of the Constructivists who have decided to give concrete expression to the Communist idea in physical works.'²⁵

The relations between the members of Inkhuk who joined Vkhutemas and the students were difficult and contentious. Their 'objective' method was not accepted by all the students. On more than one occasion reciprocal relations between Vkhutemas and Inkhuk were discussed at Inkhuk meetings. At the meeting held on 17 November 1921, Rodchenko declared: 'Why is Vkhutemas not ours? It is our own fault, we have allowed old students to remain there; it is necessary to clear Vkhutemas of these elements.'²⁶

In January 1922 Rodchenko was placed on the educational board of Inkhuk.

Exhibition '5 × 5 = 25' — Pamphlet 'The Line' — Objects and textiles

At both Inkhuk and Vkhutemas, Rodchenko continued with growing insistency to raise the subject of moving on to the construction of utilitarian objects. Ever since his lamp designs for the Café Pittoresque (1917) and his architectural projects (1919-20), Rodchenko had known perfectly well what his experiments with abstract form were getting at. Yet he felt that the aesthetic and formal researches that he had carried out with other artists were not yet concluded, although the end was now close at hand.

In 1921 Rodchenko continued with his experiments in the field of graphics and with colour, 'faktura' and three-dimensional construction. This experience was brought to an end by the exhibition '5 × 5 = 25', in which five artists (Rodchenko, Vesnin, Exter, Stepanova and Popova) put on show five of their experimental works. The exhibition opened at the end of 1921 and was staged for brief intervals in various locations, so that some of the artists (including Rodchenko) changed the pictures that they had on show. To summarize, one might say that in this phase the search for fundamental elements of style started out with a marked interest in curvilinear forms, and then moved on to experiments with acute-angled shapes and dynamically complex compositions, to arrive at simple geometrical forms and balanced and spare compositions. Before many other artists (and in any case before his colleagues in the '5 × 5 = 25' exhibition), Rodchenko realized that the basic tendency in the process of stylistic formation was concerned not with complicated curvilinear forms nor with acute-angled compositions, but with simple geometrical forms (above all rectilinear and orthogonal ones). And it was just in this direction, in 1921, that he took his experiments in the field of graphics (drawings constructed out of shapes set at right angles, experiments with circumference), of spatial constructions (second and third series) and of painting.

In the realm of painting Rodchenko took his experimentation to the extreme limit of abstraction; at the '5 × 5 = 25' exhibition, he put on show three paintings of the same format, painted in the primary colours of yellow, red and blue.²⁷ Only with these works did he reach the end of his researches in the field of pictorial representation and shift his interest towards the construction of real objects.

When he was in the full swing of creative activity, Rodchenko did not like to write. He took part in discussions and wrote brief reports, programmes, statements, slogans, etc., but he never wrote long articles or books. In 1921 there were practically no texts by Rodchenko intended for publication or already published, if one excludes his introductions to the catalogues of various exhibitions.

Consequently Rodchenko's first text prepared deliberately for publication is of extraordinary interest. In the minutes and reports on the activities of Inkhuk, Rodchenko's manuscript *The Line* is solemnly referred to as a 'book', even though it was in fact a terse pamphlet of eight typewritten pages (*Doc. 18*).²⁸

The Line went through a long and difficult gestation period, drawn out over the whole of 1921. The text entitled *Slogans* (22 February 1921) constitutes its first and very short preliminary draft. The first version, six pages in length, appeared on 3 May 1921, while the final version carries the date of December 1921. It reflects Rodchenko's various points of view at one of the most crucial moments in his creative life, when he was working with the group of Constructivists and while he was devising the syllabus for the introductory course in construction at Vkhutemas. The different versions of the text testify to the evolution of his ideas in his slow transition from experiments on abstract form to the creation of ob-

27 According to Stepanova the exhibition '5 × 5 = 25' was inaugurated twice: once on 18 September and again on 6 October. In all probability Rodchenko put his three pictures based on spots of colour on show the second time.

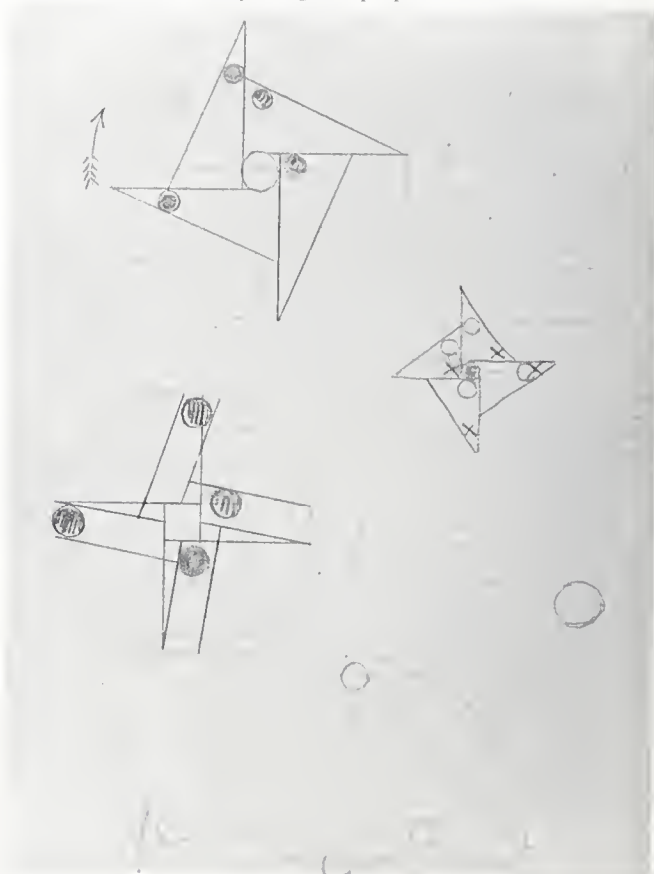
28 At the general assembly of Inkhuk on 20 October 1921, Tarabukin read his report entitled 'The last picture has been painted' (on Rodchenko's paintings in the '5 × 5 = 25' exhibition). According to the minutes of the meeting the following were present for the debate over the report: Stepanova, Klyun, Bruni, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Altman and others. The others may have been Exter, Ladovsky, Popova, G. Stenberg, Dokuchaev, A. Efimov, Krinsky, Lavinsky, Babichev and Bubnova. The subject of the report was of particular concern to painters, architects and sculptors.

29 Inkhuk Archives.

30 Inkhuk Archives.

31 The pamphlet should have been published in 1922. Rodchenko had even made a sketch for its cover, showing that work on the manuscript was still going on in 1922. In any case, in February 1922 he received a further advance 'on account for the pamphlet *The Line*' (Inkhuk Archives). The fact that Inkhuk had decided on its publication is also confirmed by an announcement that appeared in the press, in which it was stated: 'The Constructivist Rodchenko has sent a pamphlet on line for printing.' But the

Project for the *Vechnyi dvigatel* (perpetual motion machine).





Cover of the catalogue of the exhibition '5 x 5 = 25', to Rodchenko's design, 1921.

Page from the catalogue of the exhibition '5 x 5 = 25', with a drawing by Rodchenko, 1921.



jects.

Rodchenko certainly handed over the final version of the text to Inkhuk before 22 December 1921, since in a document that has been preserved and is dated 22 December, it is stated that Rodchenko 'has received an advance on the sum for the consignment of the pamphlet *The Line* and for four accompanying drawings'.²⁹

The text was reviewed by two members of Inkhuk, Ladovsky and Tarabukin, who wrote on 26 December 1921: 'The contents of the manuscript do not correspond to the title'; but it 'presents a picture of the development of pictorial forms from Impressionism up to Constructivism' and 'really only makes passing reference to the line'.³⁰

In reality the manuscript *The Line* is not so much a treatise on line as a first effort at autobiography, an attempt by the artist to reflect on a transitional phase in his creative career that had just drawn to a close (*Doc. 19*).³¹

Rodchenko wrote it at a time when innovative artists were trying to define a new language, after having moved from symbolic and dynamic compositions to linear geometrical constructions, and when the first stylistic elements of the new art were already becoming apparent.

Rational geometrism, a characteristic stylistic feature of the new tendency, fascinated Rodchenko to such an extent that for a while he completely ignored the possibility of making freehand drawings as well.

In any case, even in his decoration of china or his drawings on canvas in which one assumes a great deal of creative liberty on the part of the artist, Rodchenko always remained faithful to geometrical design.

In 1922 Rodchenko worked on a design for a tea service: a large and small teapot, milk jug, tray, sugar bowl, cups, saucers, etc. The form, decorations and colours (red, black and white) of the various elements of the service still look absolutely modern today. Careful examination of the designs will show that not a single line is drawn freehand. The whole project was carried out with drawing instruments, using only the simplest of geometrical lines — straight lines and curves (circumference or arc of circumference) that respect the shape of the individual pieces of the service and that also blend with the decoration, an ornamental pattern made up of circles, squares and triangles. It is evident that Rodchenko returned to the same patterns that he had used in the drawings for the *Vechnyi dvigatel* (perpetual motion) project of 1921.

The geometrical character of the service's design, the symmetry and order of the composition and the effort to create a stylistic unity between form and pattern are totally different from those early decorative experiments in which the artist favoured dynamic and symbolic compositions that 'destroyed' the form. A typical example of these experiments is his 1917 design for the decoration of an aircraft hangar, onto whose simple façade Rodchenko envisaged inserting a complicated composition that would to some extent break up the triangular shape of the plane.

Rodchenko also used ornamental geometrical designs in his sketches for painting on fabrics. In 1924 he came up with several decorative schemes, whose design was based on a system of identical or differing circles, rigorously executed with the compass.

The relations between theoreticians of Production Art and artists

The minutes of the Objective Analysis Group and the Working Group of Constructivists in Inkhuk and several texts by Rodchenko help to provide a more com-



Pages from the catalogue of the exhibition '5 x 5 = 25', designed, in order, by: Vesnin, Exter, Popova (last two).

Rodchenko's poster for the 2nd exhibition '5 x 5 = 25', 1921.



Page from the catalogue designed by Rodchenko.





Sketch of a hangar, 1917. Paper, tempera, 35 × 44.5.

Cup and saucer. Paper, gouache, Indian ink, 37.5 × 27.



Teapot, 1922. Paper, gouache, Indian ink, 27 × 37.5.



subjective view of how the art of Productivism had come into existence and of the relations between theoreticians and artists.

Various publications of the period lead one to believe that the creative tenets of Productivism coincided with the claims of contemporary theoreticians. In practice things were different.

Productivist theory certainly had an influence on both Constructivist design (i.e. Productivist art) and architectural design. However, in order to understand the theoretical presuppositions of Constructivist architecture, it is first of all necessary to take a hard look at the statements and practical work of the leaders of this movement (Alexander Vesnin, M. Ginsburg and I. Leonidov). And yet as far as the art of Productivism is concerned, many authors have believed it to be sufficient to examine the work of the theorists alone, looking on the work of the artists merely as a sort of illustration of this or that stand taken by the theorists. This is a mistaken attitude, which leads to a distortion of the real picture of the development of both Production Art and Constructivism.

The primary requirement is to analyse the work of all those who were protagonists during this period of transition and to recognize the important role played by the leaders of artistic movements, especially Tatlin and Rodchenko. Even the theoreticians acknowledged this at the time. In 1922 B. Arvatov wrote that: 'within left-wing artistic circles there had been a strengthening of the position of a group of non-figurative Constructivists (Tatlin, Rodchenko, the Obmokhu group) who were engaged in study and analysis of real materials, as a transitional step towards Constructivist engineering'.³² Arvatov rightly emphasized the fact that, by their move from painting to the realm of objects, these artists had contributed to the foundation of modern design.

Yet, many theorists have appraised and analysed their creative work from an almost exclusively utilitarian point of view, forgetting that they were dealing with artistic processes that concerned problems of form. This gave rise to a degree of confusion in the criteria for evaluation of the part played by this or that artist in the overall process by which the new style came into being.

The artists who were experimenting with abstract form in those years were draughtsmen and painters of great talent. Moreover they felt themselves to be responsible for the overall destiny of art and were driven by a highly creative impetus, aspiring to play an active part in the process of interrelation among the different arts and wishing to contribute to the formation of a new style. They were engaged in these experiments only for a brief period, since they considered aesthetico-formal research to be but a step in the direction of other forms of art. All of them later worked in different sectors of art and thereby helped to create a stylistically homogeneous movement.

Even should we wish to start out from the reality of the new architecture and design, in which certain characteristic forms have become the unmistakable marks of the new stylistic current of the 20th century, we would still have to ask ourselves the same question: where did these forms come from? Retracing the history of the new architecture and design, we are bound to end up with the experiments on abstract form carried out by 'left-wing' painters: this can be demonstrated and documented.

Rodchenko and Vesnin had an important role in the process of formation of design (Production Art) and the new architecture not *in spite of*, as some critics believe, but *thanks to* their early experiments with abstract form.

The creative work of this group of 'left-wing' painters laid the first foundations of the new style, foundations common to painting, architecture and design.

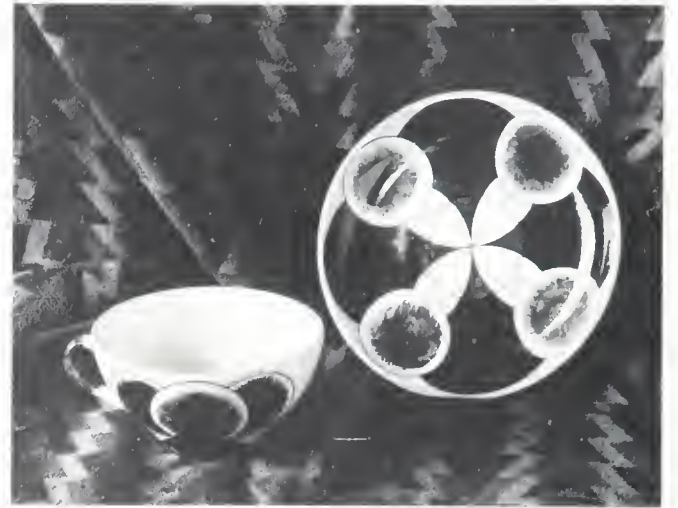
The experiments with abstract form in the sectors of three-dimensional constructions, bas-reliefs and architectural projects, functioned as a 'transmission belt' between painting and architecture. And this occurred with the full collaboration of painters and architects.

In those years the process of interaction between different forms of art was typical not only of research but also of artistic associations. Working groups of

pamphlet was never published.

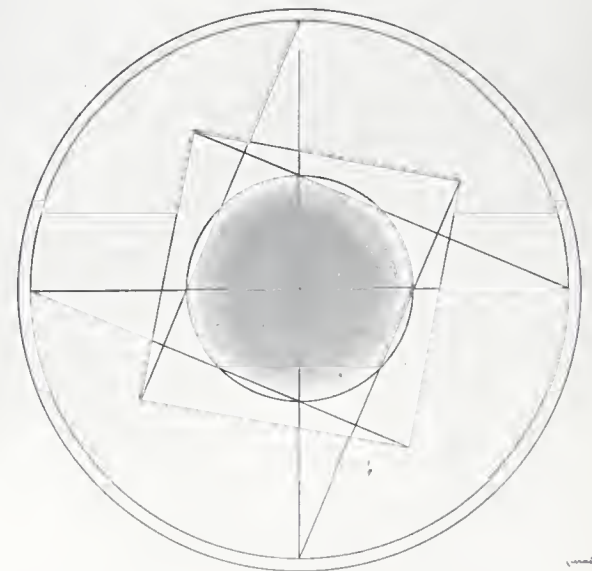
In Vestnik iskusstva (The Messenger of Art), no. 5, 1922, p. 26.

³² B. Arvatov, 'Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo' (Figurative art), in Pechat i revoliutsiya, no. 7, 1922.



Cup and saucer made to Rodchenko's design by students from the Industrial Art College.

Goblet. Paper, gouache, Indian ink, 37.5 x 27.





Сахарница

Родченко (1918)

Sugar bowl. Paper, gouache, Indian ink, 37.5 x 27.

Milk jug. Paper, gouache, Indian ink, 37.5 x 27.



Молочник

Родченко (1918)

painters and architects, joint bodies and offices of a very special kind, were being set up. Rodchenko actively collaborated with architects in the most important centres of organization (Zhivskulptarkh, Inkhuk and Vkhutemas).

Independently of their individual training, these artists worked not only as painters, but also as architects, graphic artists in the world of publishing, designers, set-designers, pattern makers and as organizers and decorators of mass theatrical productions.

Rodchenko was in fact one of the most versatile of these artistic personalities. None of the pioneers of the new art can stand up to him as far as the range of his creative potential is concerned. In practice, Rodchenko worked in every realm of artistic activity. This is why an analysis of his creative activity takes on such a special significance in understanding the complex process of interrelation between different forms of art and the creation of the new style.

It was Rodchenko's aesthetico-formal experiments that furnished the basis for the very first elements of the new artistic tendency. Kandinsky too had carried out experiments with abstract form, but his non-representational compositions did not play a part in the process by which painting reached out towards the world of objects.

Going back to the problem of the relationship between the aesthetico-formal research of the painters and the assertions of the theoreticians of Productivist art, it is important to stress that by means of their experiments on abstract form, the artists wanted to create an aesthetic bedrock common to all the arts, thereby creating the basis for a new style, and not simply to move on from painting to architecture and design.

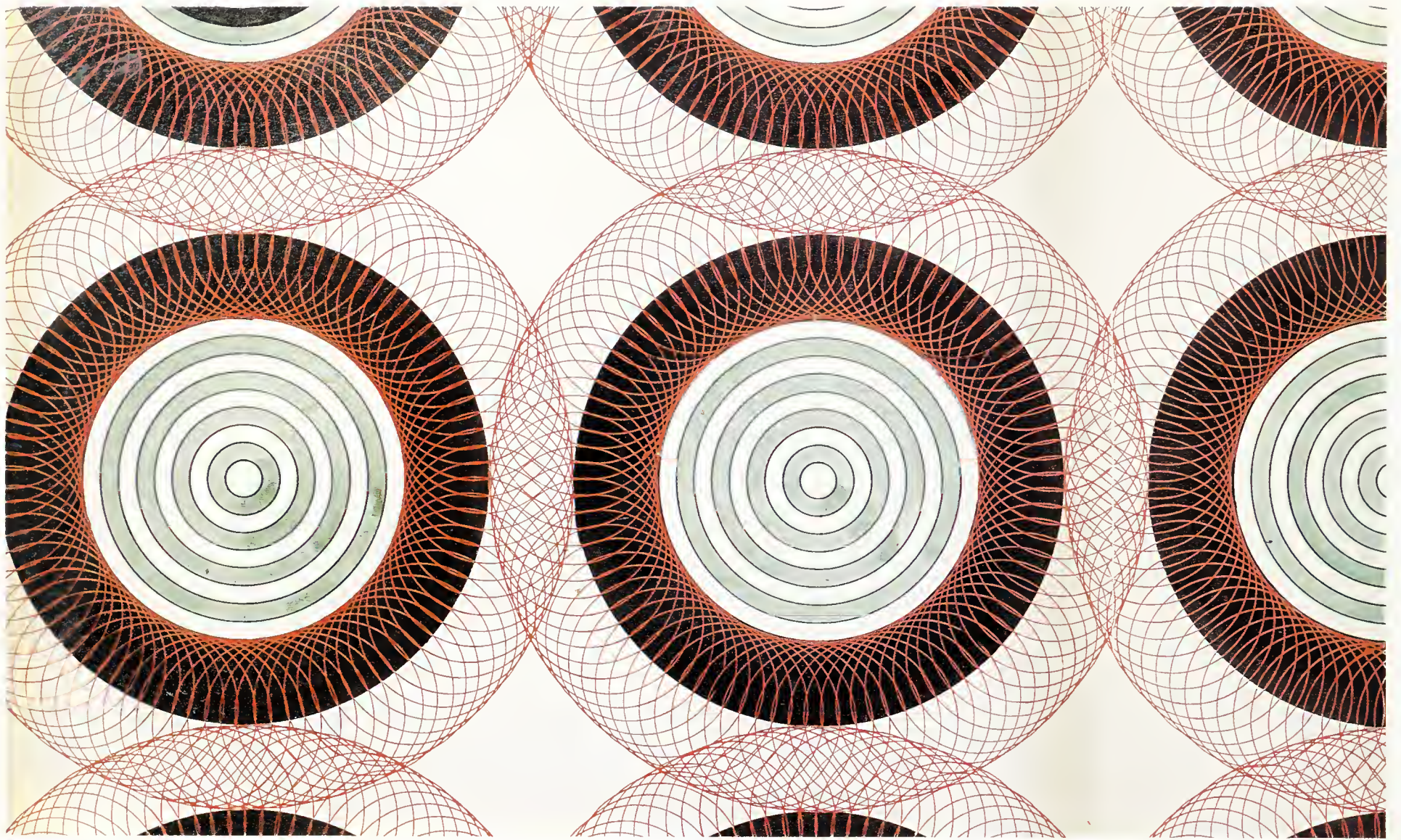
Yet the literature of those years and especially the books by theorists of Production Art only considered the moment when painters moved on to production to be of importance in the process by which the various arts were interrelated. Even Rodchenko himself was seen as a painter who had rejected painting so as to work in the field of Production Art and not as a painter who had made a considerable contribution in the very earliest stages of the new style's formation. A number of different factors have combined to produce this interpretation.

Any innovative work, on its first appearance, encounters resistance and provokes a certain kind of hostility on the part of its creator's contemporaries. From a psychological point of view this is perfectly understandable. Even in the scientific world it is necessary to struggle against the most reactionary attitudes and the superiority of the new over the old can only be demonstrated by logic. However, an artistic discovery is not verifiable by means of logic. The element of novelty in art becomes apparent when old criteria of evaluation are still current, which can only be modified within the overall process of development. Hence the whole history of art consists of nothing but a battle between innovative works and outmoded aesthetic standards.

It is only natural that the aesthetico-formal research of artists, and in particular their experiments with abstract form, should have come into conflict with previous aesthetic criteria. Resistance to the new was directly proportional to the degree of innovation in the work. In this case the novel features exceeded, in their radicalism, the bounds of figurative art and were therefore interpreted as the 'death' of art.

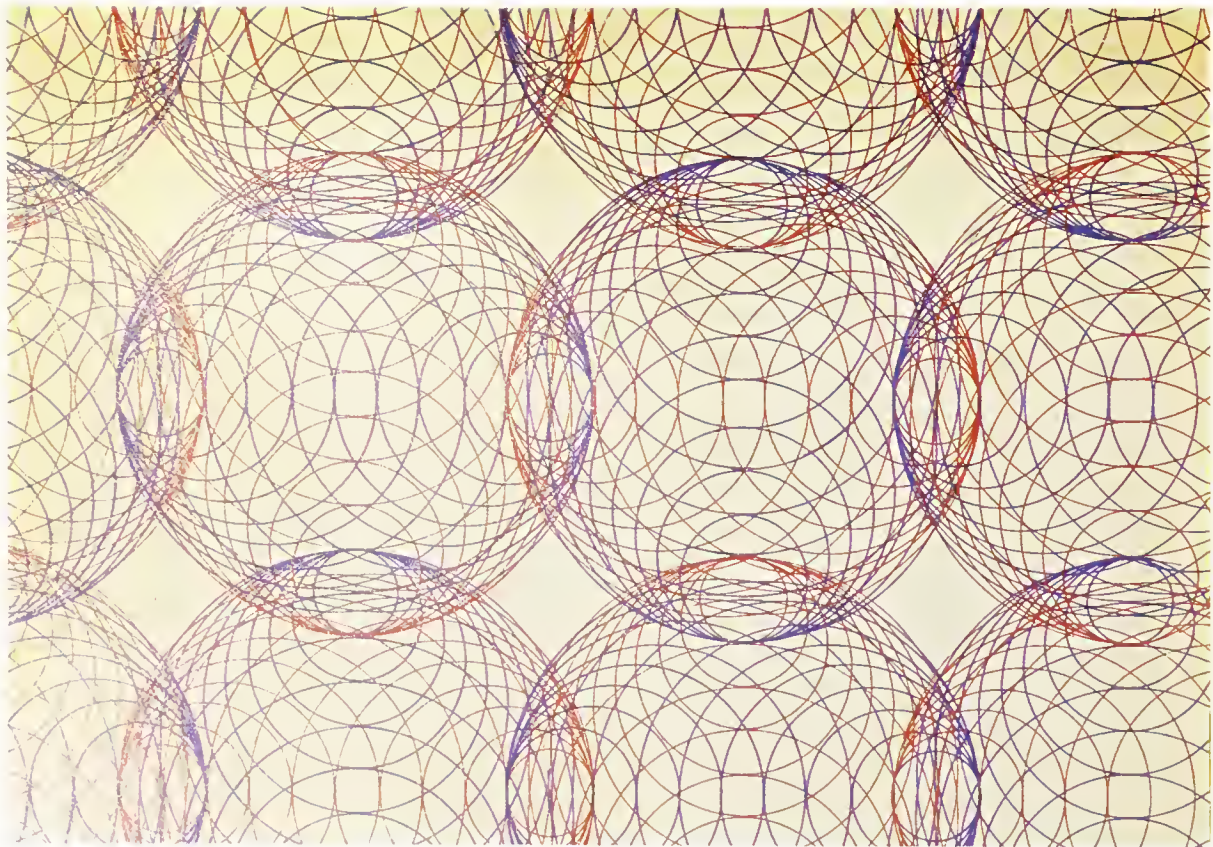
The artists themselves were aware of the radical nature of their research. It is no accident that Rodchenko proposed to his supporters, in 1918, the foundation of an Association of Ultra-Innovators, Asskranov. Moreover the innovative quality of this research into aesthetics and form clashed not only with old-fashioned aesthetic standards and criteria of value based on common sense, but also with the tradition of a certain kind of Russian art criticism which appreciated innovations in art, but looked at them from the point of view of utility or logical functionality.

As has been said, logic cannot be used to justify change in the field of aesthetics. In fact artistic problems ought not to be analysed as an aesthetic pro-



Fabric design, 1924 Paper gouache, coloured Indian ink, 42.5 x 32

Fabric design, 1924 Paper, pen and gouache, 29 x 29.



Fabric design, 1940.





Fabric designs, 1940. Paper, watercolour, 38 × 28.5.



blem which is an end in itself, bound up with an individual's particular mode of perception. If, on the other hand, innovative research in the field of form is linked to new problems, new meanings and new materials, then there is a possibility of using logic to demonstrate the necessity of a determinate form, a determinate method, a determinate composition.

The Rationalist architects, for example Ladovsky, Krinsky and others, made their experiments in the realm of form while remaining in the field of aesthetico-formal research, and were hence known as 'formalists'. By asserting that the new form should be functional and Constructivist, the Constructivist architects on the other hand (Vesnin, Ginzburg and others) obtained wider support.

The painters found themselves in a similar situation. When their research into aesthetics and form moved on to experiments with abstract form they did not justify this by arguments of a utilitarian character. Their experiments were aimed at creating a new aesthetics; for them, in other words, the problems of form were still artistic problems. This is why they were harshly criticized and ostracized.

The appearance of a group of sociological theorists brought about a profound change in the situation. The aesthetic problems of form began to be seen as an integral part of the new social order. By giving prominence to the social aspects of the new political and cultural situation through a complicated set of arguments, they gave a functional value to the new form and managed to make the aesthetical research of the 'earliest innovators' appear to have a logical basis.

Reading Arvatov, Brik, Gan, Kushner, Tarabukin, Chuzhak and other theoreticians of Production Art, one gets the impression that either they were not very interested in the artistic evolution of form or, which is less credible, they were not competent enough to deal with problems of aesthetics and form. In any case they based their arguments on questions of mere social utility. To put it another way, the social and utilitarian approach of the theorists of Production Art took no account of the specifically artistic nature of the aesthetico-formal research carried out by these painters.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic evolution of form demanded attention, because of the inherent laws of art, and was given a precise formulation in the research conducted by these same artists — Rodchenko, Tatlin, Popova, Vesnin, Exter and others.

It must be admitted however that these new forms imposed themselves partly through the efforts of theoreticians who did their utmost to ensure that the new aesthetic ideal would be recognized and accepted.

Moreover the utilitarian concept on which the theorists of Production Art relied in order to justify experiments with abstract form acted to some extent as a safeguard for the 'most extremist innovators' during the most critical phase of their 'development', when their research into aesthetics and form went well beyond the limits of the realm of figurative art. The logical justification (despite being in many ways totally inconsistent) of the new forms protected these radical innovators from the accusation of formalism and certainly helped the breakthroughs in aesthetics and form achieved by the new trends in painting to spread into other forms of art.

But these temporary tactical standpoints were also to have negative consequences for Production Art and the architecture of the Constructivists. All the innovative tendencies linked in one way or another to the theory of Production Art were accused later on of being merely utilitarian and were dismissed as art. The attitude of critics in the thirties followed a logic of its own. The utilitarian concept was slowly assimilated not only by the theorists but also by the artists and architects themselves, until they began to use it to motivate their own research or criticize that of other tendencies.

In spite of the wholesale assimilation of this concept, Production and Propaganda Art in the twenties and the architecture of the Constructivists remain an important *artistic* phenomenon which defined an aesthetic ideal and the style of an entire era.

From this point of view, the legacy of Rodchenko on both the theoretical and the creative plane is of fundamental interest. His experiments on abstract form touched on a whole range of problems: colour, material, working methods, 'faktura', form, composition, three-dimensional construction, the geometry of elements, standardization, similarity, transformation, assembly, etc.

Many of the artists who had made a substantial contribution to the research into aesthetics and form during the early part of their careers went on to do very little work in other sectors of art or confined their creative interests to the narrow circle of Production Art, Propaganda Art or the field of architecture. Rodchenko, however, both during the period of his training and later on, when he left the world of painting for that of objects, worked in almost every sector of art. The range of problems that he tackled was such as to make his work a unique phenomenon in the history of art of that period.

The controversies between Rodchenko and the theorists of Production Art dragged on, revealing two very different ways of tackling artistic problems. But these problems were rapidly pushed into the background when control over Inkhuk passed into the hands of the theoreticians.

In the period of Inkhuk work after Rodchenko ceased to be its director (1922-24) the activity of the Working Groups, which provided for discussion of various creative problems by all the artists, gradually dropped off. Inkhuk's work became increasingly concentrated in the general assemblies where the theorists read out their extremely abstract reports. The utility of Production Art was insisted on and artists were invited to abandon their work in the realm of figurative painting and devote themselves to production. These invitations were often couched in too categorical a fashion, without taking into account the difficulties that artists met with in fitting into the requirements of manufacturing, from the organizational as well as the psychological point of view. On more than one occasion the artists drew attention to these difficulties during the discussions.

At the meeting of Inkhuk held on 6 April 1922, Kushner read a report with the title 'The artist in production'. The report was a highly theoretical one. According to Kushner, man's need for models of behaviour was fully satisfied by art. 'The complexity of modern culture demands completely new forms of behaviour; these forms are revealed in Constructivism... The artist enters production as a representative of the consumer.' Unlike many of the others, Brik gave his backing to the report.³³ Brik, then president of Inkhuk, became aware of the conflict that was arising between theorists and artists over the concept of Production Art and came to the none too hasty conclusion that it was necessary to examine practical questions as well as theoretical ones. Yet he sought to accelerate the process by which Inkhuk would be transformed into a body of people who all gave the same kind of support to Production Art.

At the following meeting of Inkhuk (13 April 1922) Brik gave a report entitled 'What the artist can do at present' in which he once again invited artists to move on to production and to combine their efforts towards turning Inkhuk into an organization whose sole objective would be Production Art. Many artists and architects, including Rodchenko and Alexander Vesnin, declared themselves opposed to transforming Inkhuk into a body for theoretical discussion devoted exclusively to the aims of Productivism. Vesnin expressed his agreement with the concept of the 'artist in production' but added that, in his opinion, even in production the artist must concern himself with his specific field, that is to say the 'influence of form on awareness'.³⁴

Rodchenko and Kandinsky advocated transformation of Inkhuk into a theoretical and scientific body and were opposed to its becoming concerned with solely practical and creative matters. In its two earliest phases (under the direction of Kandinsky and Rodchenko) Inkhuk was a centre for the theoretical elaboration of new principles, in which all the artists took part. When administration of Inkhuk passed into the hands of Productivist theoreticians an atmosphere of tension arose between artists and theorists. According to the artists, just at the moment

33 We give an excerpt from the discussion.

Stepanova: '... The artist cannot be limited within the realm of models of behaviour. We have moved on to Production Art through our own work on form. The speaker would like to reduce the role of the artist to an exclusively intellectual one. But the role of the artist cannot be limited. We must work on the form of expression...'

Gan: '... By referring to the role of the artist as that of a go-between, the speaker limits his role to a purely speculative function.'

Shterenberg: 'The speaker... does not refer to the role of the contemporary artist with respect to modern production...'

Rodchenko: 'We need a concrete, photographic picture of production. We are not at all interested in the abstract viewpoint of the report, which is wholly aimed at explaining the role of the artist in generic terms.'

Brik: 'The problem cannot be posed in the terms in which Rodchenko has set it. He demands concrete information. The theoretical aspect of Kushner's report is a virtue not a defect... The discussion has strayed from the subject of the report and has brought two points of view to light: defence of theoretical positions and problems of a practical order. Hence I suggest that the two problems should be discussed.'

Inkhuk Archives.

34 *The shorthand text of the discussion of Brik's report has survived, but without corrections. We give Rodchenko's speech, with a number of abbreviations that are explained where necessary in brackets.*

Rodchenko: *'... Kushner has described the picture to us and shown us... what happens. To tell the truth, the details were not necessary. O.M. [Brik] had already pointed them out to us. The actual work should have been shown us, and no one has spoken [of this]. If we read reports and discuss them... there will be only one outcome. This is what will happen. The theorist reads his report. We do what we must do, we have nothing to say, or we begin the work or I don't know what... Let us assume that they show us factories; perhaps when someone comes from a factory, from a plant, our horizons will be enlarged. For the moment we cannot go there. It is not allowed. Ladovsky is right. One hears nothing but go, go [towards production, author's note]. Of course we look at ships and planes with great interest, but we need details. Perhaps Inkhuk could organize visits, for if we go there on our own it is one thing, but if we go as a scientific delegation it is another. Some actual work should be carried out. Perhaps they ought to take us aside and tell us that we really know nothing. But if we carry on discussing, there will never be any actual work.*

'With regard to experimental work, I understand, it is the old story; in a lamp factory, for instance, less must be spent on glass. The artist will carry out a lot of laboratory work, will seek, in the design, in experience, will be far more revolutionary before producing that given thing; every time that he sets about producing, creative capacities will show up. The artist, as we picture him, is different from the mere engineer who makes a given object. The engineer will perhaps... carry out a whole series of experiments, but as far as observation and the capacity to see are concerned we are different from him. The difference lies in just this fact that we know how to see.'

Inkhuk Archives.

when they were getting involved in production, discussions at Inkhuk had taken on an excessively abstract tone. Long-term problems were being examined, while more vital ones concerning the creative momentum of Productivism were neglected.

The new Praesidium, elected in the September of 1921, and chaired by Brik, was made up of the sculptor Babichev and the architects Ladovsky and Krinsky; all those artists who had until then determined the direction of the work undertaken by Inkhuk were excluded. This only served to deepen the split between theoreticians and the artists who sided with Rodchenko. The discord became more acute in the autumn of 1922 and at the Inkhuk general assembly on 13 October, at the time of Brik's departure abroad and the resignation of Ladovsky, the Board was completely reorganized. Arvatov (president) and Kushner were elected and Babichev was reconfirmed (Rodchenko was not present at the meeting). Babichev declared that Inkhuk represented 'the fusion of two groups, on the one hand practising artists and on the other theorists. This contact between practical and theoretical activity indicates the only fertile direction for work. The groups complement each other, but each of them must carry out its own work in its own specific sector.'

At the meeting Stepanova and Popova raised the problem of making Inkhuk's work more concrete. At the discussion of the report 'On the future theoretical work of Inkhuk' presented by Kushner at the next meeting (20 October 1922, which again Rodchenko did not attend) there was no lack of argument between theorists (Kushner, Arvatov and Tarabukin) and artists (Medunetsky and V. and G. Stenberg).

At a meeting of the Board held the day after, it was decided to increase the number of its members by including a representative of the practising artists. At the following Board meeting (27 October) Rodchenko was co-opted and given the task, along with Medunetsky and Stepanova, of drawing up a plan of practical work. This plan was presented by Medunetsky in the name of the committee's three members at the meeting held on 3 November 1922. In the report he pointed out that although 'in the past activity of Inkhuk the work of theorists had predominated over that of painters' now 'it was necessary to reorganize everything and establish new objectives'; that is to say, there was a 'need to limit the work of the theorists so as to expand the practical [work]'

Kushner responded very harshly to this formulation of the problem. A discussion followed. As is recorded in the minutes of the debate: 'The majority of those present took part in the discussion. The exchange of ideas showed that Inkhuk had split into two quite distinct groups. One, which gave its total support to Medunetsky's viewpoint, and which consisted of Rodchenko, Stepanova, the Stenberg brothers, Lavinsky and others; and another, made up of Kushner, Babichev, Arvatov, Tarabukin and others...

At this meeting of the executive group, Stepanova and Medunetsky had been co-opted along with Rodchenko, thus redressing the balance between the views of theoreticians and practising artists. The outcome exposes the complexity of relations between the theoreticians of Production Art and the group of practising artists, including Rodchenko. Although there existed overall accord on the concept of Production Art, they came into collision over the problem of the relationship between art and production.

The art of propaganda in the creative work of Rodchenko

Once the phase of his experimentation with painting was concluded, Rodchenko devoted himself from 1922 to 1923 to active work in various sectors of the art of propaganda and that of the applied arts. Inspired by the new political and social developments, he brought into being that unique style of the art of 'mass agitation' which was to characterize the decade following the Revolution, to the point where it became its most representative symbol.¹

Rodchenko's work, along with that of Mayakovsky, has formed a milestone in the gestation of this activity. Indeed, at least for a while, his style set the tone for the era. Rodchenko had begun to turn his attention to various kinds of agit-prop almost as soon as the Revolution was over. These ranged from designs for posters to the preparation of projects for propaganda centres.²

In those years a great deal of importance was attached to mobile forms of mass propaganda, including a succession of agit-trains, agit-ships and special barges and wagons of propaganda. For the All-Russian Exhibition of Agriculture Craft Industries in 1923, Rodchenko drew up two projects for an open-air mobile cinema which could be used for the projection of films in rural areas both in daylight and in the dark.³

Design for cine-truck, 1923. 20.5 x 13.5.



5: BOOKS, ADVERTISING, POSTERS

Notes

- ¹ *In the history of art it would go down as that 'Futurist style' which (as the famous actor I. Ilinsky put it) 'was the first to place itself at the service of the Revolution... it gave a special romantic allure to that period... it embellished the life of those years'.*
I. Ilinsky, *Sam o sebe (I speak of myself)*, VTO, Moscow 1961, p. 66.



Cover of *Zaum*, by A. Kruchenykh, 1922. Paper, coloured pencil, adhesive, 18.8 × 14.

- 2 In the minutes of a meeting of the Board of Narkompros RSFSR (on 11 November 1918) it is stated: 'A request has been made on the part of the Chief Inspectorate of War of the Red Army to send a group of artists to prepare posters, book covers and pamphlets... It has been decided to send the following left-wing artists... 4. Rodchenko.' In 1919 Rodchenko 'took part in the preparation of celebrations for the second anniversary of the October Revolution'.

In *Agitatsionno massovoe iskusstvo pervykh let Oktyabrya* (Mass-agitational art in the early years of the October Revolution), Moscow 1971, pp. 96 and 114.

- 3 It was designed to be mounted on a normal truck. For night screenings, the projection booth was set up at the rear of the truck and the screen mounted on top of the cabin. For daytime screenings a special amplifier facing outwards (towards the audience) was set up on the bed of the truck and the projector was placed on top of the cabin.

- 4 In the years following the Revolution the polygraphic school of Moscow became, in contrast to the St Petersburg style of the *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art), an experimental cen-

Cover and frontispiece of *Zaumniki* by A. Kruchenykh, G. Pernikov, V. Khlebnikov, 1922. Linocut, 21 × 28.5.

The dynamic and symbolic phase in the research into graphic art

Rodchenko's creative work during the Constructivist period was preceded by a phase of stylistic research oriented towards the development of characteristic forms of dynamic symbolism. In the graphic art sector, as well, work on Constructivist principles was preceded by a phase of dynamic symbolism. The book covers and 'pure' collages he produced between 1919 and 1922 belong to this phase of research.⁴ During this period Rodchenko conceived a series of collections of Futurist poets, and produced them by hand so as to emphasize his rejection of the kind of luxury editions brought out by *Mir iskusstva*. Another reason lay in the typographical difficulties encountered in those years, which explained the use of wood engraving, lithography and the presence of hand- and typewritten manuscripts.

It was in just this sector of graphic art that many artists like Exter, Yakulov and P. Miturich found their fullest opportunities for self-expression.

Rodchenko's personal style is closely bound up with the graphic experiments he carried out at the time, especially his album of engravings from 1919, the title page of which stands as a synthesis of his future graphic work. Yet, unlike the majority of other artists, his compositions were highly geometrical. Straight lines predominated, while those rare curves that did appear were drawn with a compass. In the intricate graphic treatment of the book covers (with their intersecting lines, areas of complex shape and plethora of acute angles and diagonal lines) the very elements of the graphic composition are highly geometrical, traced with square and compass and never drawn freehand. Even the typographic character of the covers, although typical of the graphics used in publishing at the time (slanting and broken lines, letters bunched together, a total lack of parallelism), produces an overall impression of even greater severity. In short it is clear that Rodchenko's early experiments in the field were of a totally different kind from all other investigations of symbolic dynamism and already revealed the traits of graphic Constructivism;⁵ indeed they indicate that his publishing activity and his engravings stemmed from a single root.



From collage to photomontage

His experiments with collages and photomontage were also rooted in graphic Constructivism. Rodchenko's collages from the period 1919-22 could be described as 'polygraphic' given the repeated combination of typographical letters with ornamental elements, especially figurative drawings and photographs. These collages are not the aesthetical and formal experiments of a painter, but the authentic studies of a budding graphic artist. It should however be stressed that, while Rodchenko was more interested in the overall composition in his early collages (1919), emphasizing the relationship between the outlines of images and the colours, the collages he produced in 1922 were dominated by his concern with conveying, through contrasts, the logical sense of the composition, making extensive use of letters and figurative patterns.

While in his early collages the composition to some extent 'wandered' over the surface of the paper, producing the effect of something brought in from the outside ('represented'), the sheet of paper became the base of the whole composition in his later efforts. In these collages Rodchenko was not creating a pattern out of a variety of separate pieces arranged on the paper almost as an afterthought, but was constructing the very composition of the sheet itself.

Rodchenko did not see his work on the collage as separate from the technique of photomontage, a technique which he regarded as one of the most important means at his disposal, during the period when his attention was taken up with graphic Constructivism, for the production of book covers, illustrations, advertisements, posters and the like.⁶

In 1923 Mayakovsky's poem *Pro Eto* was published, with illustrations by Rodchenko which are today regarded as a seminal work of photomontage. In fact, it could be claimed that the painter was the co-author of this work, since he had not

tre dedicated to the 'liberation' of artists involved in the publishing sector from graphic forms which had become obsolete. According to Yu. Molok, 'the lack of a clear tradition has in a way favoured the emergence of post-Revolutionary graphics in Muscovite publishing, in as much as it is an absolutely new phenomenon'. An important role was also played by the fact that in the years leading up to the Revolution 'many Futurist publications had come out in Moscow which bore witness to an attempt at synthesis between poetry and graphics'. These editions were almost entirely lithographic, hand-drawn by the artist... booklets by the young Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, with uneven letters and broken words, but whose asymmetrical pattern created a pictorial effect. A number of these books made use of different points and characters taken from the wooden type used for posters. At the time these Futurist graphics were used for collections of poetry with low print-runs.

Yu. Molok, *Nachala moskovskoi knigi*. 20-gody (The origins of the school of book graphics in Moscow during the twenties), in the collection *Iskusstvo knigi* (The art of the book), issue 7, Moscow 1971, pp. 36 and 44.

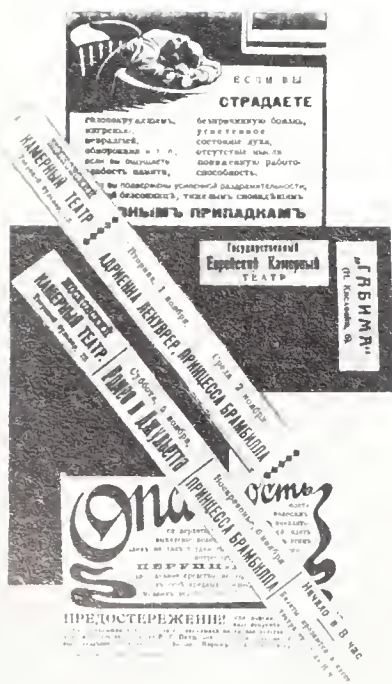
5 As well as the frontispiece to the 1919 album of engravings, Rodchenko's earliest graphic works include: the cover for the collection of typewritten poems by A. Kruchenykh, Zaum (a fragment from one of the folios of the album of engravings was used in the composition of the cover); the small volume *Zaumniki*, a collection of poems by the Futurists Kruchenykh, Petnikov and Khlebnikov (as with the engravings of the 1919 album, the cover graphics of this collection were executed in white on black); the frontispiece to the sketches of costumes for the play *Us*.

6 Sergei Yutkevich, in conversation with a number of young directors at the start of their careers and advising them as 'artists who influence the public... with all the visual means' to keep a careful eye on the slightest nuance of image, drew their attention to the 'work of an exceptional artist and photographer, like Rodchenko'. Yutkevich went on to say that 'the evolution of the "collage" is demonstrated in the twenties by the example of the German Communist artist Heartfield and the Soviet artist Alexander Rodchenko; both — the former with his propaganda posters, the latter with his series of illustrations for the history of the VKP (b) [the Bolshevik Party], and for the poems of Mayakovsky — adopted the technique that they

Collage, *Type of convict*, 1922.

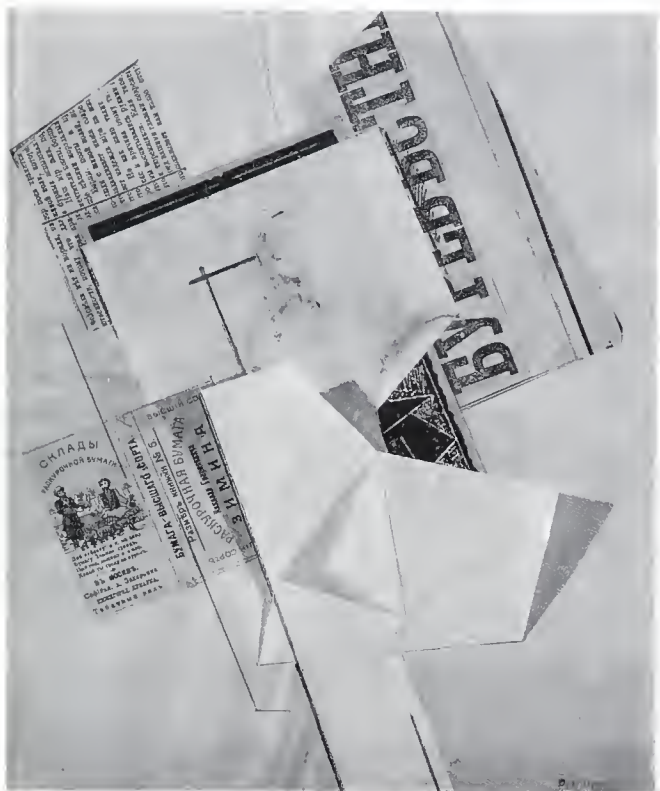
Paper, adhesive, 27 × 17.5.

Collage *Danger*, 1922. Paper, adhesive, 27 × 17.5.



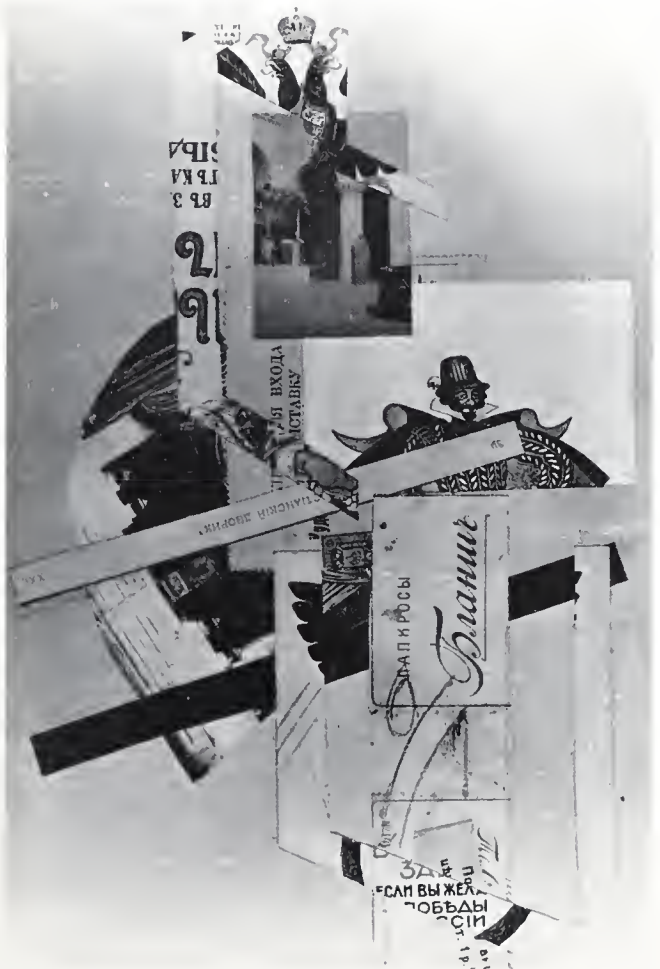
call photomontage, enriching it with a completely new significance and a Revolutionary content'.

S. Yutkevich, 'Kino-eto' pravda 24 kadra sekundu' (The cinema is reality at 24 frames a



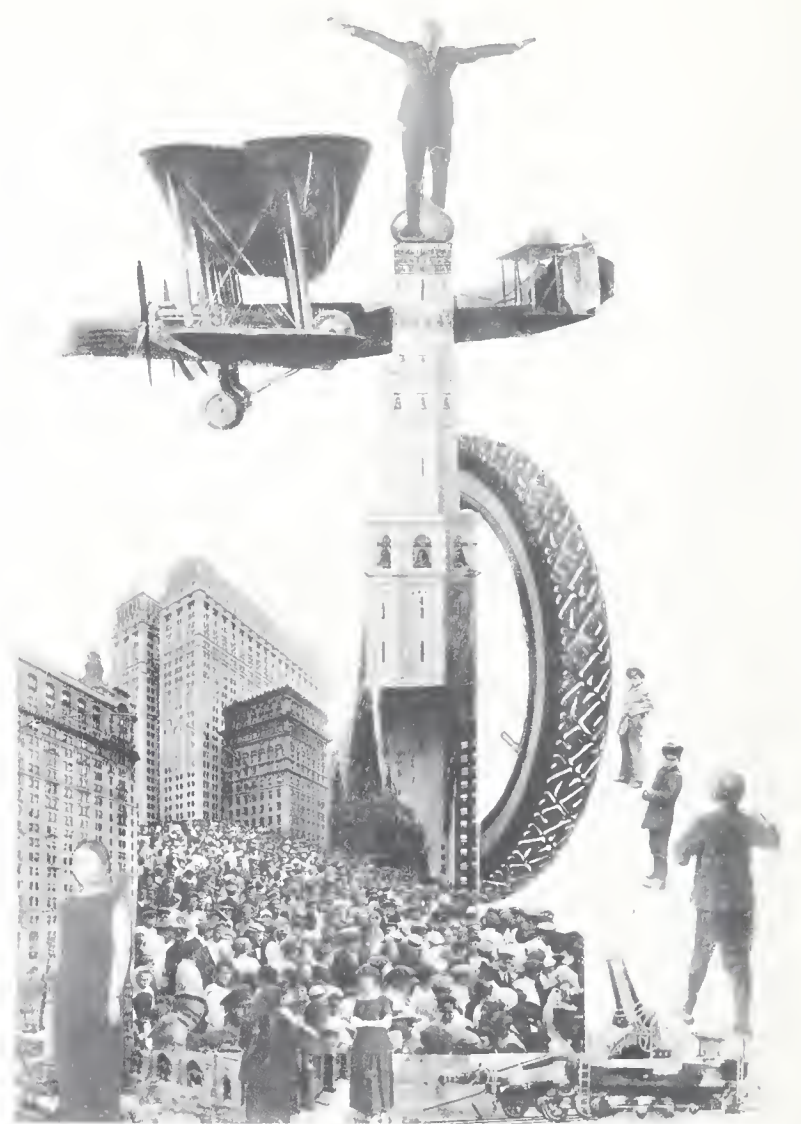
Collage, 1919.

Collage, 1919. Paper, adhesive, 27.5 × 17.5.



Cover for Mayakovsky's poem *Pro Eto* (For This), 1923.





Photomontages for *Pro Eto*.



second), in *Iskusstvo*, Moscow 1974, pp. 179 and 196.

7 As Rodchenko would later recall when speaking of his work on photomontages for this poem, 'it was Shterenberg who photographed Volodya and Lilya for the materials of the photomontage; at the time I still did not take photographs'.

A. Rodchenko, 'Rabota s Mayakovskim' (The work with Mayakovsky), in *V mire knig* (In the world of books), no. 6, 1973, p. 64.

8 V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniya* (Complete works), vol. 12, Moscow 1959, p. 333.

N. Chardzhiev, who considered Rodchenko 'one of the most representative figures of the first decade of Soviet art', claims that in the artistic preparation of a book 'he devises new means capable of interacting visually with each other'. 'In his hands the technical means (typographic character and photograph) acquired an enor-

limited himself to illustrating the poem in order to render its meaning clearer, but had created a series of artistic compositions, capable of conjuring up profound associations of meaning.'

The work of his 'co-author' was highly appreciated by the poet himself, who pointed out in particular his 'exceptional merits as a trailblazer in the field of artistic photomontage'.⁸ The illustrations represent a succession of visual images which, although closely tied to the text of the poem, acquire an independent value of their own through specific associations of meaning.

In 1924 Rodchenko came up with a similar series of photomontages for the covers of editions of a novel by Marietta Saginyan, *Mess Mend*.⁹ Over the same period he produced a number of satirical political posters, including 'Crisis' and 'Political football'. 'By photomontage', wrote Rodchenko, 'is meant the use of photographs as figurative material. The putting together of photographs instead of other artistic material. With the consequence that the photograph is not used by the artist as a reproduction of an event, but as that very event, caught in its true essence. The accuracy of the result has an expressive force never before achieved in painting or graphics.'

Photomontages for *Pro Eto*.





Photomontages for *Pro Eto*.





Lili Brik with the volume *Pro Eto*, 1924 Photo Rodchenko



Photomontage, *Crisis*, 1923. Paper, adhesive, 36.5 x 24.5



Cover of *The Genius of the Investigative Police*.

Cover of *The Black Hand*.



Cover of *The Yankees are Going*.

Cover of *The Mask of Revenge*.



Mess Mend series, by Jim Dollar (M. Saginvan).
 State Publications, Moscow 1924.



To the generals of the cross and the rank, 1930. Paper, adhesive, 51 × 35.



Political football, 1930. Paper, adhesive, 51 × 35.

Spatial photomontage—collage, 1924 Photo Rodchenko.



mous expressive force. One of Rodchenko's most surprising insights was that of applying photomontage to book illustration... Rodchenko's photomontages correspond so well to Mayakovsky's style and underline his images (hyperbolic, lyrical, emotive, satirical) with such force that they represent one of the most successful examples of a balanced relationship between illustration and text.'

N. Chardzhiev, 'A.M. Rodchenko', in the collection *Iskusstvo knigi* (The art of the book), 2nd edn, Moscow 1961, pp. 189-90.

9 Many years later (in 1970) M. Shaginyan wrote: 'The happiest days of my creative life are linked with the name of Rodchenko. He prepared ten editions of *Mess Mend for the State Publications*. He was a brilliant artist. He had breathed the air of the twenties. This air helped everyone, and me in particular, to remember always, right into old age, until death, the life-giving oxygen of the Revolution.'

Self-caricature, 1924. Paper, adhesive, 18 x 13.



Spatial photomontage--collage, 1924. Photo Rodchenko.



A classic of graphic Constructivism

The year 1923 may be regarded as the starting point of Rodchenko's career as a graphic artist, including under this heading his output of photomontages, book illustrations, posters and advertising. For the following decade Rodchenko found himself cast in the role of a classic of polygraphic Constructivist art. In particular the years 1923-25 saw the creation of the characteristic 'Rodchenko style' which was to have a great influence on the work of many artists in the twenties.

On the other hand the Constructivists' insistence on the importance of functionalism and of using technology to deal with problems of aesthetics encouraged the search for new forms, particularly in that sector concerned with objects. The new stylistic principles first came to the surface in those artists working in the more 'dynamic' fields of art, such as graphics. In the name of a new *artistic standard*, though often merely on a theoretical level (as with Gan), they rejected the tradition, refusing to consider the book from a solely aesthetic point of view. Yet their creative work was not confined to the rational and systematic use of typographical techniques but also included the production of books that were true works of graphic art. At the time this was clear to all, even to the opponents of Constructivism.¹⁰ But what was it then that set apart the work of Constructivist artists involved in the field of the graphic arts during the twenties?¹¹

Graphic art, alongside architecture and design, was a sector in which the Constructivist principle found broad application, contributing to the development of new artistic criteria. Over the first half of the decade the artists at work in the graphic sector along Constructivist lines included Stepanova, Vesnin, G. Klutskis, Popova, Lavinsky and S. Senkin, although the majority of critics tend to regard Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Gan as the true founders of Constructivist graphic art.

In art, especially when one is speaking of the formation of a new tendency, it is always highly important to establish who was in at the beginning and who went

10 'Naturally in the works of the Lef', wrote Lezhnev, 'there is no less aestheticism than in the works of any other school. Rodchenko's book covers were just as refined as Beardsley's drawings.'

A. Lezhnev, *Sovremenniki* (Contemporaries), Moscow 1927, p. 28.

11 We give here the judgements of a number of critics who have made a thorough study of graphic art in the publishing industry.

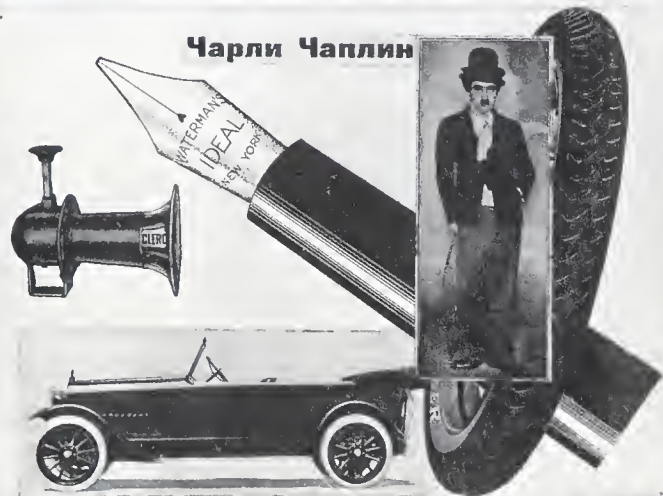
According to Yu. Molok, 'one can even speak of a precise Constructivistic, and essentially Muscovite, style of publishing in the twenties... if the old type of book with its decorativeness resorted to the use of elegant characters and illustrations... Constructivism, by eliminating figurative decoration and replacing it with a geometrical one, changing the elegant lettering for that of posters, replacing illustration by photomontage, destroying the classical symmetry of the book page by every means available... revolutionized the book in its way... it tried to lay bare the material... of the type-case characters, resorting to all sorts of contrast and frankly insisting on the predominance of the technical aspect. The Constructivists wanted to destroy the traditional form of the book... hence the cover of a Constructivist book reminds one of a poster, and the principles of its lay-out, a

Rodchenko and V. Stepanova, 1923.



Цена 75 руб.

КИНО 2 - ФОТ И



АНОНС. КИНО-ФОТ № 3 ПОСВЯЩАЕТСЯ ЧАРЛИ ЧАПЛИНУ. АНОНС.

Covers of Kino-fot, 1922.

Цена 75 руб.

КИНО 4 - ФОТ И

МАЯКОВСКИМ



НЕ
ДЛЯ
ДЕНЕГ
РОДИВ
ШИЙСЯ
КИНО
по
РОМАНУ
ДЖЕКА
ЛОНДОНА
МАРТИН
ИДЗН

Cover of the collection of verses Years. Krasnaya nov Editions, 1923.

Цена 250 руб.

КИНО 5 - ФОТ И

ЭДИССОН



on to elaborate the new theme and introduce it to others. When Constructivism began to gain the upper hand in various sectors of art during the twenties, there were lively arguments about the priority of this or that artist. The discussion went on in the press for two years, for example, over who had been the first to produce Constructivist stage sets.

From the historical point of view, many things have not yet been cleared up about the birth of graphic Constructivism. For instance, there has not as yet been any thorough study of how this new art of graphics and publishing came to emerge at the beginning of the twenties.¹²

In 1922, when the artistic style of Constructivism was taking shape, Gan, an ardent Constructivist, was acknowledged by all not just as theoretician and advocate of the new tendency, but as its organizer and publisher. His book *Constructivism* came out in 1922 while he was a member of the editorial staff of one of the first Constructivist magazines, *Kino-fot*. Gan introduced new principles of page design into both the book and the magazine. As Lissitzky pointed out, he was the first to begin working 'directly in typography alongside the printer and with the machine'.¹³ However, not being a creator of typefaces, he was obliged to make use of available lettering for his lay-outs. Many other Constructivists accepted this criterion in theory although in practice they all designed their own characters for covers and title pages.

This is where the difference lies between those working at the moment when Constructivism began to emerge in the field of publishing (including Rodchenko and Lissitzky) and Constructivists of the later period;¹⁴ the latter were much influenced by Gan, who held that the new type of book should be produced by ex-

newspaper' (Yu. Molok, op. cit., pp. 46-47).

'The merit of the Constructivists', according to Lyachov, 'lies in their having wished to push the artist to create an artistic form within a graphic work... Their creative principle was to give expression to the functional nature of a book. The major representatives of this current were Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Stepanova...

'Their socio-cultural ideas based on the desire to use more economic and functional graphic means to devise a new graphic art for the masses, their concern to bring out the individual nature of each edition, their perfect awareness of publishing and typographical problems, of photographic technique and photomontage, and their precise attitude to propaganda, are all still the object of study today.'

V.N. Lyachov, *Oformlenie sovetskoi knigi* (Design of the Soviet book), Moscow 1966, p. 31.

¹² Having acknowledged the seminal role played by Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Gan in graphic Constructivism, any attempt to determine which of them could claim priority in the creation of

Cover for *The Choice Verses*, by N. Aseev, publ. Krug, 1923.



'the Constructivist style' in the field of graphics will have to draw a distinction between the part played by Rodchenko and Lissitzky and that of Gan. Two factors need to be taken into account: (1) that, unlike Gan, Rodchenko and Lissitzky were painters; (2) that, chronologically, they made their debut in the publishing field before Gan.

13 El Lissitzky, 'Kniga s tochki zreniya zritel'nogo vospriyatiya — vizual'naya kniga' (Books from the viewpoint of visual perception — The visual book), in the collection *Iskusstvo knigi*, issue 3, Moscow 1962, p. 167.

14 'Unlike the Constructivists of the early period, who had done active work in the fields of painting, architecture and the theatre and who had brought the laws of the new art into the book from these experiences, the later Constructivists were essentially skilled executors. Their work does not demonstrate the new style openly as do the first books by Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Alexei Gan.'

Yu. Molok, 'Predislovie k vystavke' (Introduction to the exhibition); in the catalogue for the exhibition of works by S. Telingater, Moscow 1975, p. 8.

15 Although in the composition of the covers for *Kino-fot* letters of the alphabet are used along with photographs and drawings (which is partly explained by the specifically cinematographic character of the magazine, whose cover carried film sequences or publicity drawings), it should be said that the designs were mostly made up of typographic characters.

clusively typographical techniques. Naturally, this criterion shaped many aspects of the Constructivist book, although it turned out that a knowledge of typographical technique was not sufficient to create an authentic style. The hand of an artist was required as well. It has been shown that the covers of Gan's magazine *Kino-fot* were done not by Gan but by Rodchenko, as were the designs for the cover of Gan's own book, *Constructivism*.¹⁵

Even in his sketches of 1922, Rodchenko was trying out many of the elements that would later form the basis of composition for his Constructivist covers, even though the range of means and methods of expression was still extremely narrow. The typographical character dominated, with the exclusion of any decorative feature or figurative pattern. The ground was rendered with an even tone, as was required by the orthodox conception of Constructivism: only absolutely indispensable ('functional') elements should be used to make up the covers, i.e. letters. But Rodchenko, even though he conformed to these dictates, was evidently not yet wholly convinced of their expressive possibilities. For the covers of the magazine *Kino-fot* he used not only different types of lettering but colour too, and arranged lines both vertically and horizontally, in an effort to fill up the whole area of the cover. These were the same methods that he used in his sketches for the cover of *Constructivism*, although in this case he superimposed letters of two different colours, producing an effect that had never been seen before. The 'lower' set of letters (forming the word Constructivism) uniformly occupies the whole space of the cover, with the name of the author (Alexei Gan) superimposed on top, as if against a sort of ornamental background.

Rodchenko again adopted this method of composition with two layers of typographical characters in different colours for the cover of the book by N. Aseev, *Izbran: stikhi* (*The Choice: Verses*) in 1923, in which the overlapping words are at right angles to each other. One of his most characteristic covers, and one might say most classic from a Constructivist point of view, was the one for the book *Mayakovsky Smiles, Mayakovsky Laughs, Mayakovsky Guffaws* (1923) where, as well as the typographical character, he used a two-colour background, thus enlarging the expressive qualities of the image.

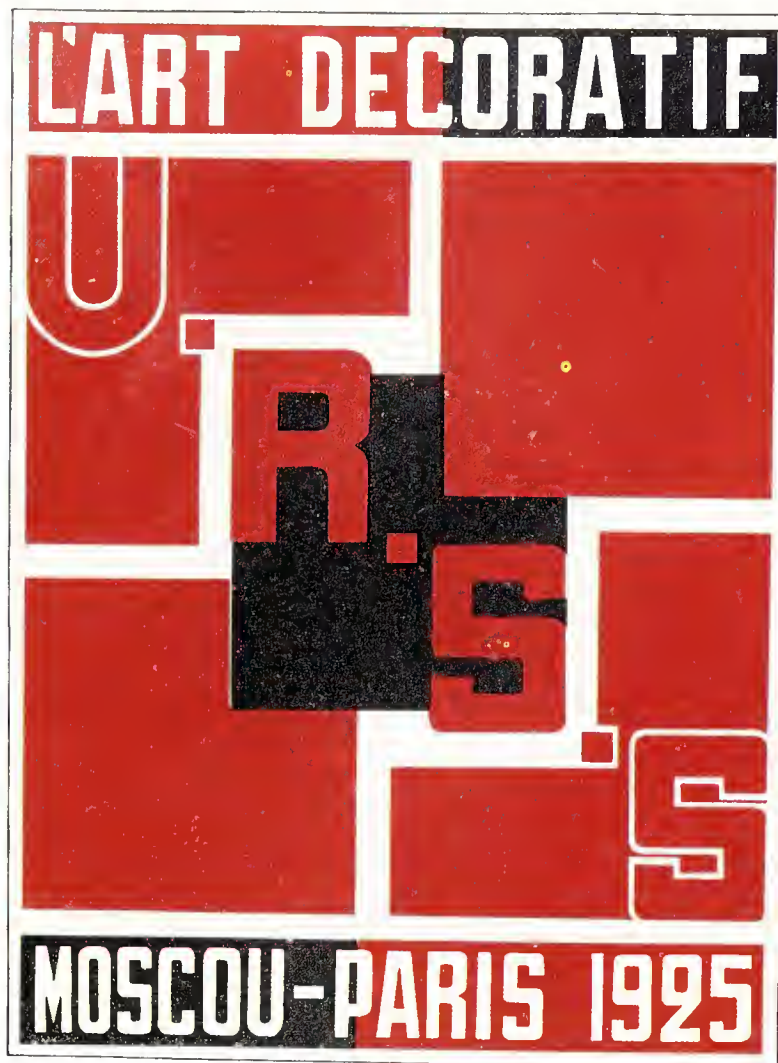
Rodchenko produced an enormous number of covers in 1923, each of them composed solely of typographical lettering taking up the entire space, which was one of the specific characteristics of the Constructivist book. The size of the letters in these covers was in proportion to their ideological import, and therefore

Cover of *Mayakovsky Smiles, Mayakovsky Laughs, Mayakovsky Guffaws*, publ. Krug, 1923.

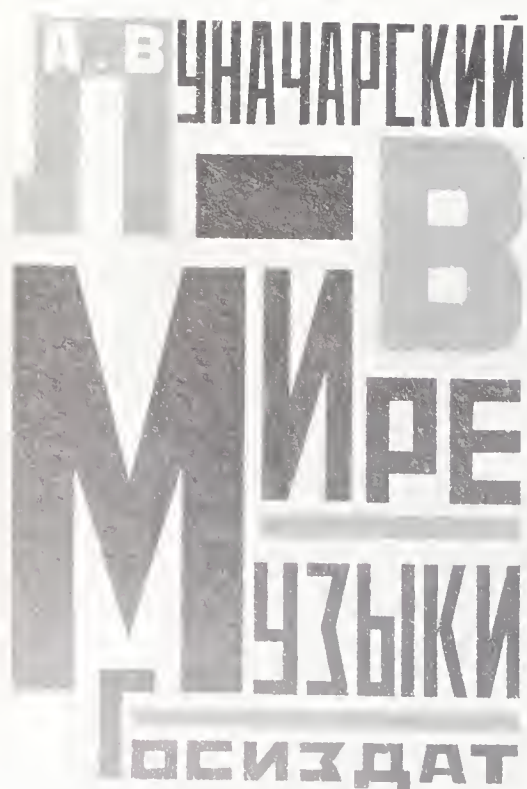




Graphics for the International Exhibition in Paris, 1925.



Sketch for the cover of *In the World of Music*, by A. Lunacharsky, 1924. Paper, gouache, 24 x 16.



Sketch for the cover of *On Mayakovsky*, by B. Arvatov. Paper, gouache, 23 x 15.5.



Cover for *Hades*, by E. Sinclair. Krasnaya nov Editions, 1923. 20 x 13.5.



16 Another of the specific features of the Constructivist cover consisted in the use of two or three strongly contrasting colour tones, of a highly legible character, totally different from the elegant type of lettering used by Mir iskusstva. Such compositions based on contrast aroused a great deal of controversy at the time.

17 V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniya* (Complete works), vol. 12, Moscow 1959, p. 332.

18 'Rodchenko was opposed', wrote N. Chardzhiev, 'to the aesthetic outer appearance given to editions for "book-lovers" which imitated old patterns of typographic art, a Productivist and Constructivist principle. When making up a book, Rodchenko not only made use of all the characters of the type-case but also all the ideograms in "everyday" use in signs and other graphic elements from posters and advertising.' N. Chardzhiev, 'A.M. Rodchenko', in the collection *Iskusstvo knigi* (The art of the book), issue 2, Moscow 1961, p. 190; 1966, p. 31.

In 1925 the well-known art scholar O. Beskin wrote: 'The mode of making up covers of a book adopted by the Constructivist Rodchenko, with his simplicity and his ability to bring out the essence of the book, has given rise to a whole school of young [graphic artists], has created a model. Just this... Constructivist has taught the whole Union how effective photomontage can be, a method which has taken him far beyond posters; no artist of Akhkr can compete with Rodchenko. His photographs are less expensive and more expressive.'

O. Beskin, 'Otvét napravo — zapros nalevo' (Answer on the right — question on the left), in *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* (Soviet Art), no. 6, 1925, pp. 11-12.

19 'The social content of this kind of cover had a strong grip on the public and this is just what the best Constructivist artists were aiming at. The innovative element of their work consisted on the one hand in developing and promoting the contents of a book, and on the other in devising new methods of "artistic" construction by using all the characters and photography.'

V.N. Lyachov, *Oformlenie sovetsoi knigi* (Design of the Soviet book), Moscow 1966, p. 31.

20 Lissitzky, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

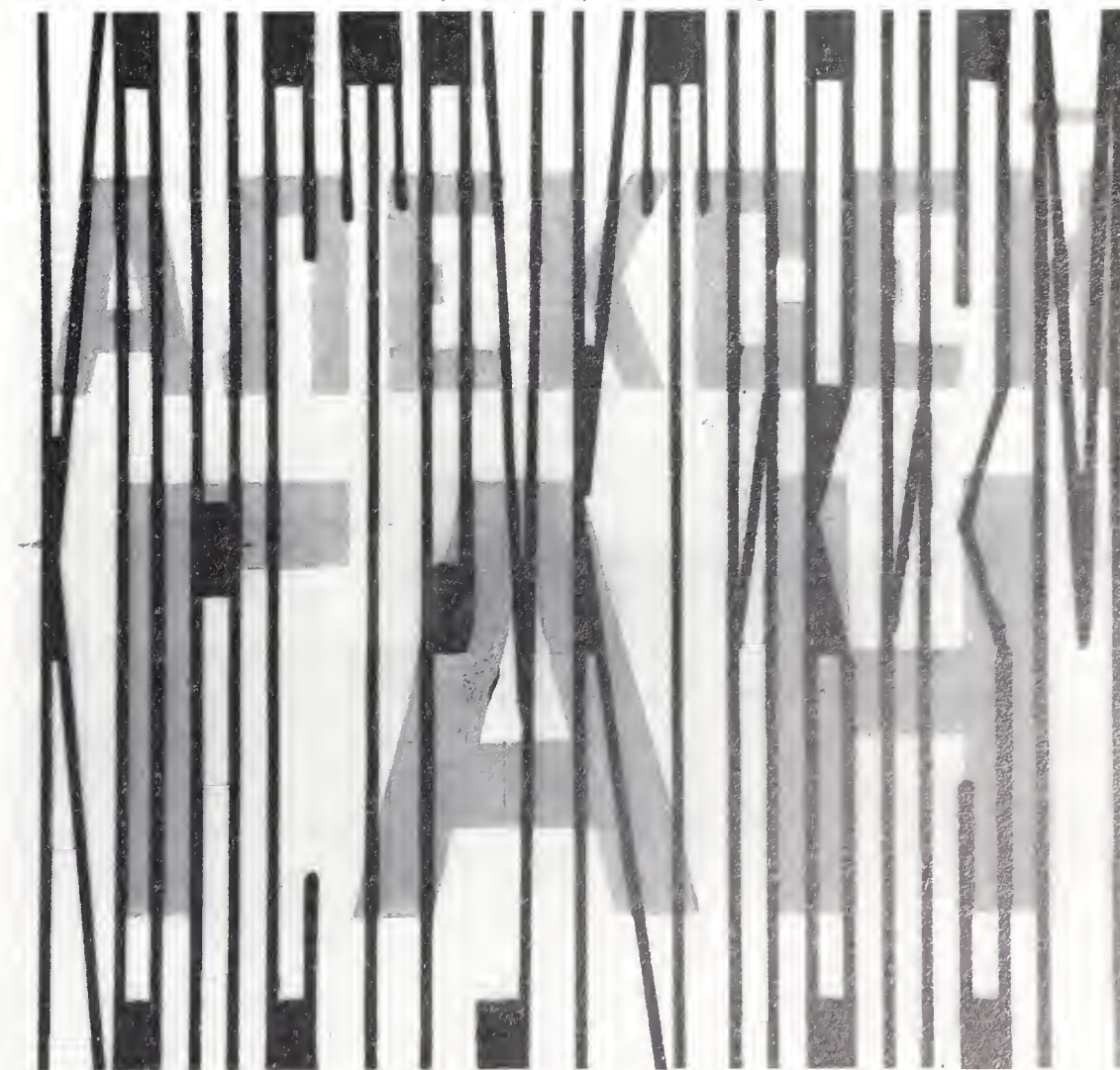
often occupied the whole page; this was a new principle in book design, along with that of joining words together on the cover to create a single sequence of letters.¹⁶ The Constructivists were accused of introducing the methods used for placards into book design. The accusation was a fair one, especially where Rodchenko was concerned. From 1923 to 1925 he was working in many sectors of the graphic art of propaganda simultaneously: he designed lay-outs for books and magazines, produced posters and advertisements, designed trademarks for various industrial complexes, composed subtitles for films and designed boxes and cases for desks, and much else.

The close ties between advertising methods and the art of publishing in the years 1923-25 were far more obvious in Rodchenko than in other Constructivist artists, devoting as he did much time and energy to both these fields. Rodchenko collaborated intensively with Mayakovsky during this period, designing and executing covers for *Lef*, the magazine edited by Mayakovsky, and later on for the magazine *Novyi Lef* (1927-28), designing thirty-five books by Mayakovsky and editing the first complete collection of his works. Mayakovsky thought highly of Rodchenko's work as a graphic artist and declared in 1927 that 'Rodchenko had invented the style of the new covers.'¹⁷ Mayakovsky's influence was decisive in the spread of the 'Rodchenko style'.¹⁸

The other Constructivists also made extensive use of advertising methods for their book covers, with the technique of photomontage or documentary photographs transforming the covers into effective political manifestos.¹⁹

The cover-cum-poster of Constructivist books in the twenties was born out of a combination of the principles of book design with those of the poster. 'The traditional book', wrote Lissitzky, 'was broken up into many separate pages, enlarged by a factor of a hundred and displayed in the streets as a poster.'²⁰

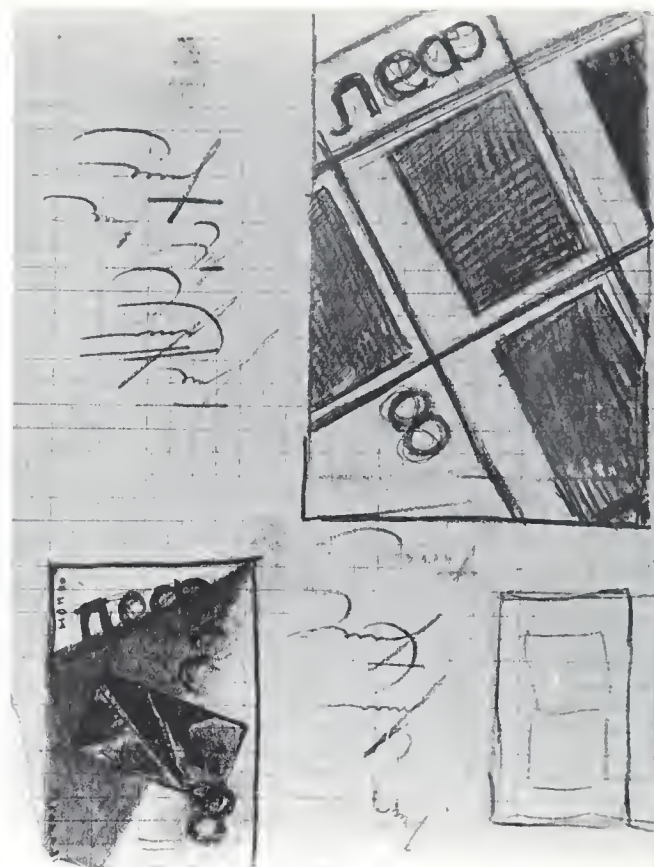
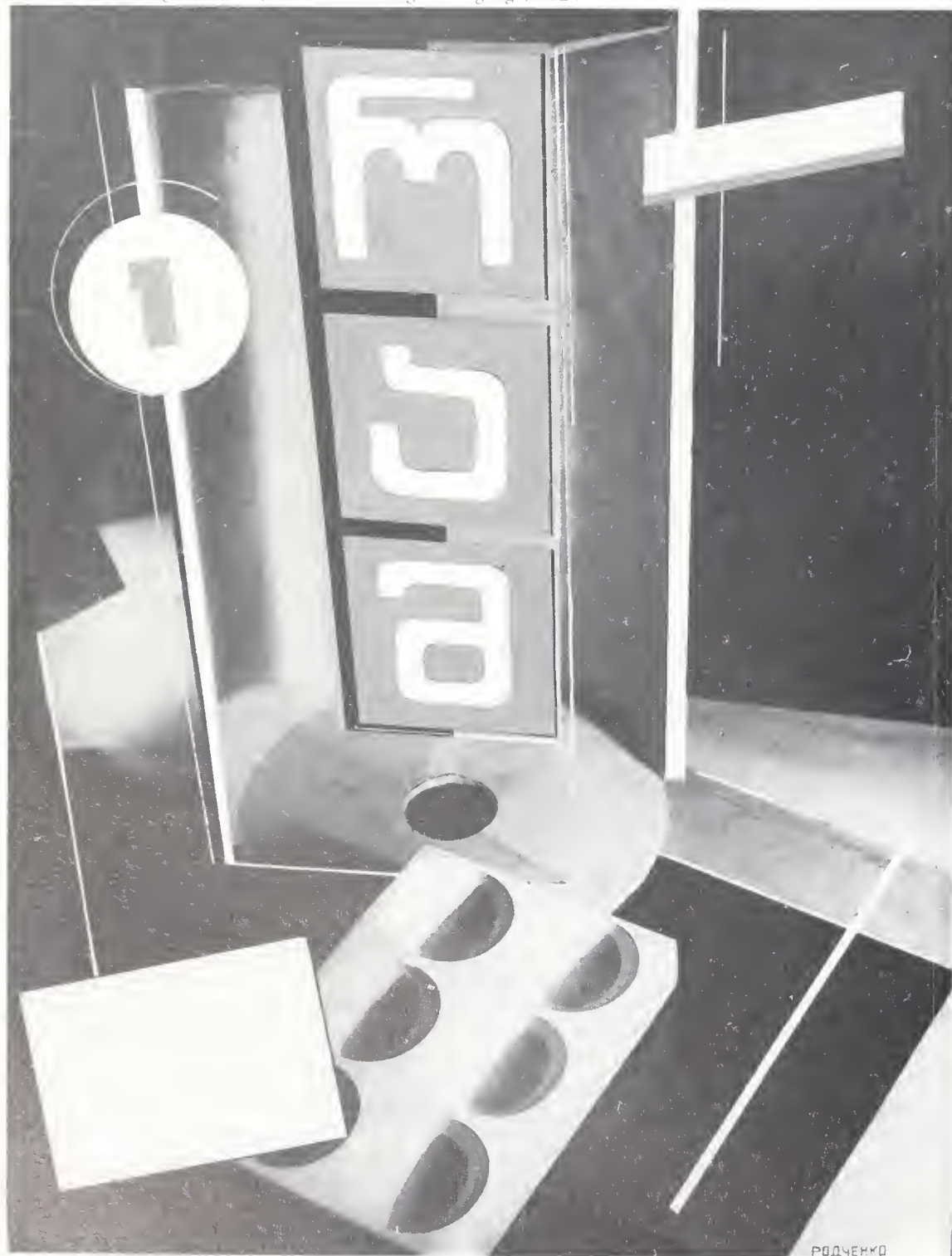
Sketch for the cover of *Constructivism*, by A. Gan. Paper, Indian ink, gouache, 22 x 15.





Cover of the magazine *Lef*, no. 1, 1923

Sketch for the magazine *Rem/Lef* in the Georgian language, 1924



Sketch for the cover of *Novyi Lef*, 1928. Paper, coloured pencil, 17 × 13.

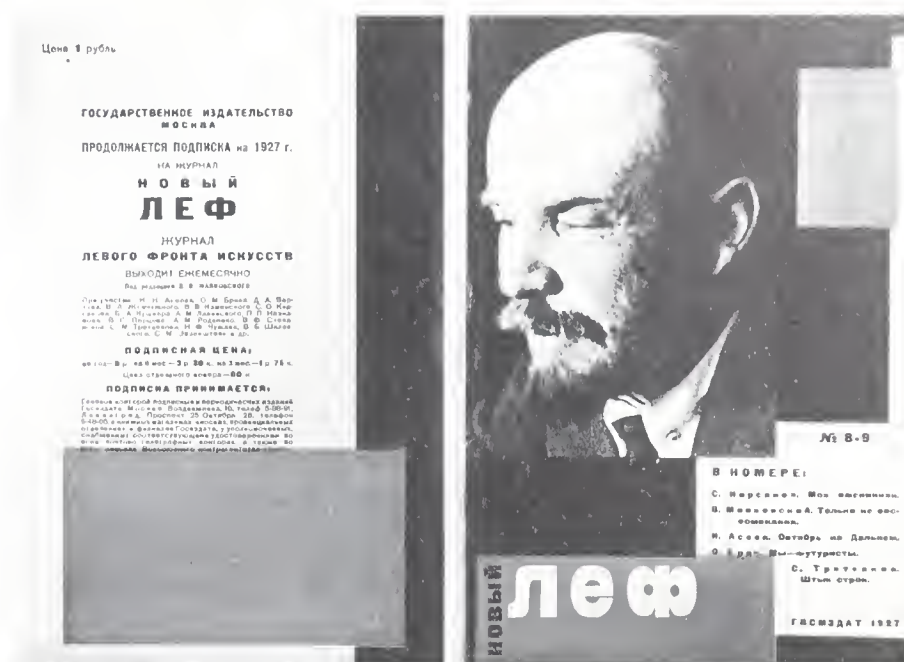
Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 3, 1928. 22.5 × 15.





Cover of *Lef*, no. 3, 1923. 23 × 15.5.

Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 3, 1927. 22.5 × 15.



Cover of *Novyi Lef*, nos. 8-9, 1927.

Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 8, 1928. 22.5 × 30.5.



Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 1, 1927.



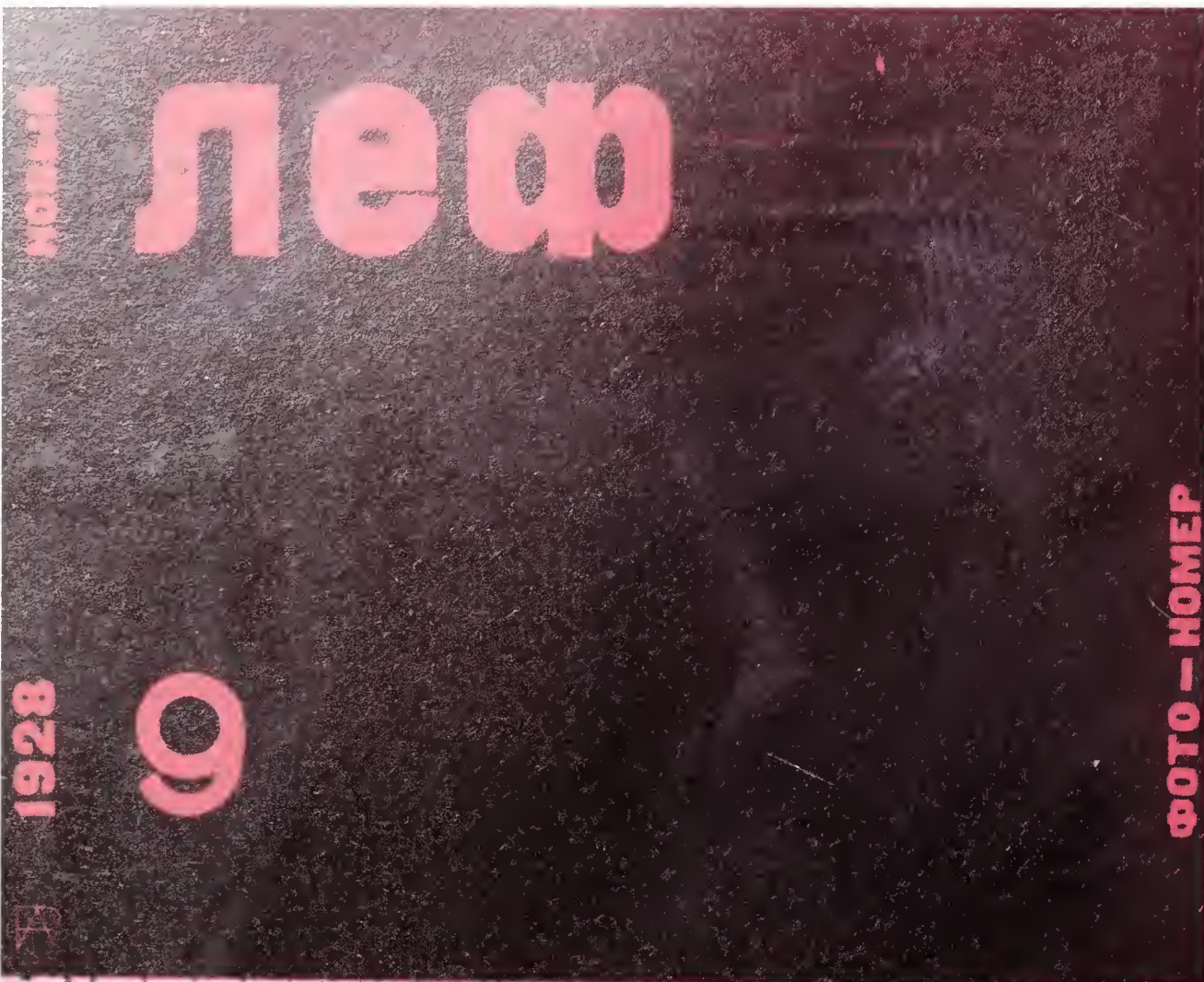
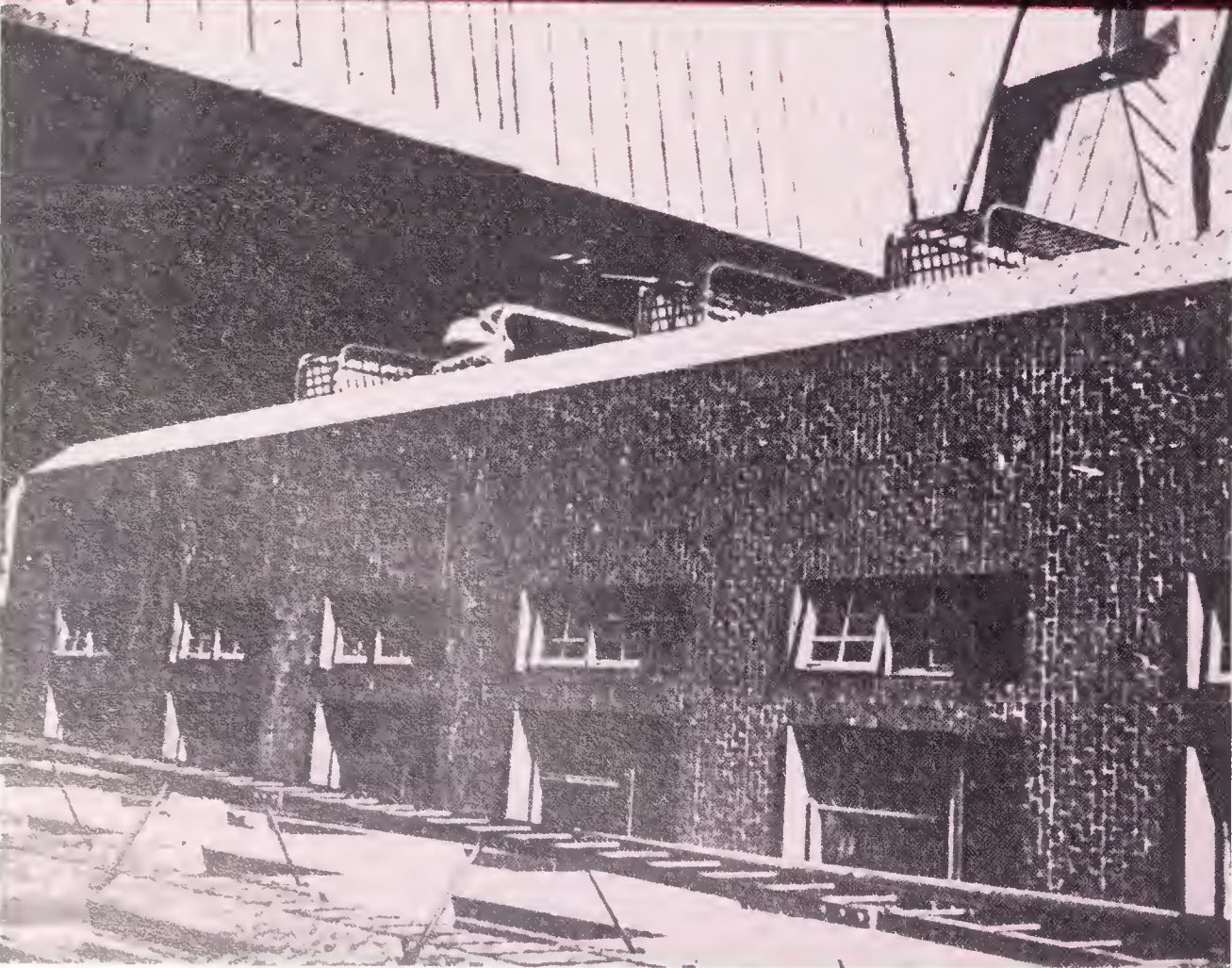


ФОТО - НОМЕР



Cover of *Lef*.

Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 9, 1928. 22.5 × 15.

Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 2, 1927.



**НОВЫЙ
леф**

**№ 2
МОСКВА
1927**

**ЖУРНАЛ
левого фронта
искусств**

**ПОД РЕДАКЦИЕЙ
В. В. МАЯКОВСКОГО**

ГОСИЗДАТ





Cover of *Lef*, no. 2, 1923.

Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 6, 1927. 22.5 × 15



Cover of *Novyi Lef*, no. 6, 1928. 22.5 × 15.



ГОСИЗДАТ

1927



Photomontages for *To Sergei Esenin*, 1926.



Cover of *Conversation with the Agent of the Masses about Poetry*, 1926, publ. Zakkniga, Tbilisi. 17.5 x 25.5.

Цена 25 к.

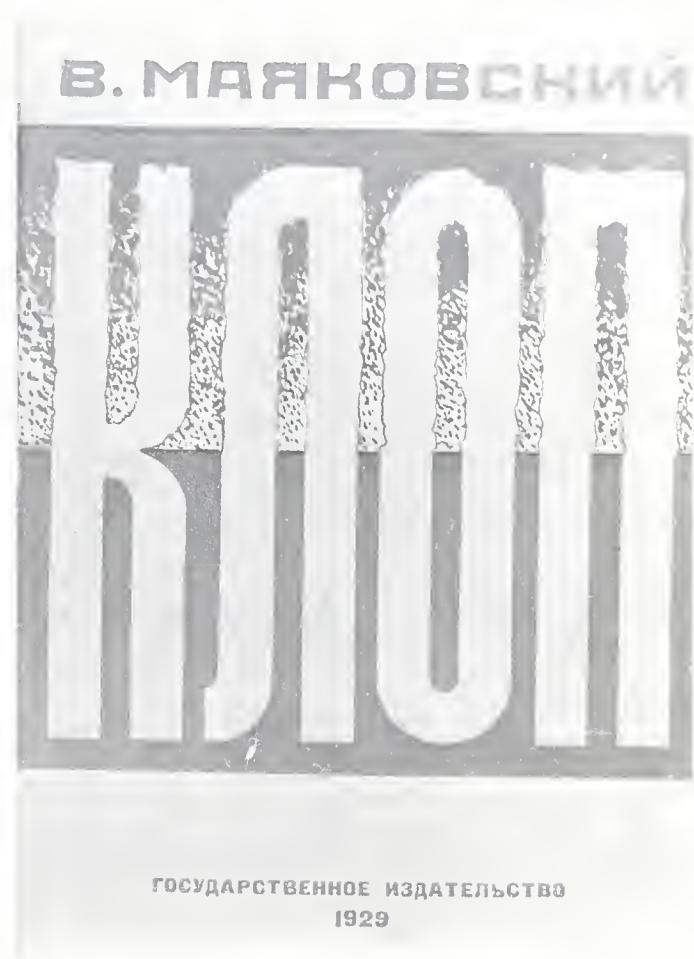


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Москва, Издательство,
Саратовский пр. 3



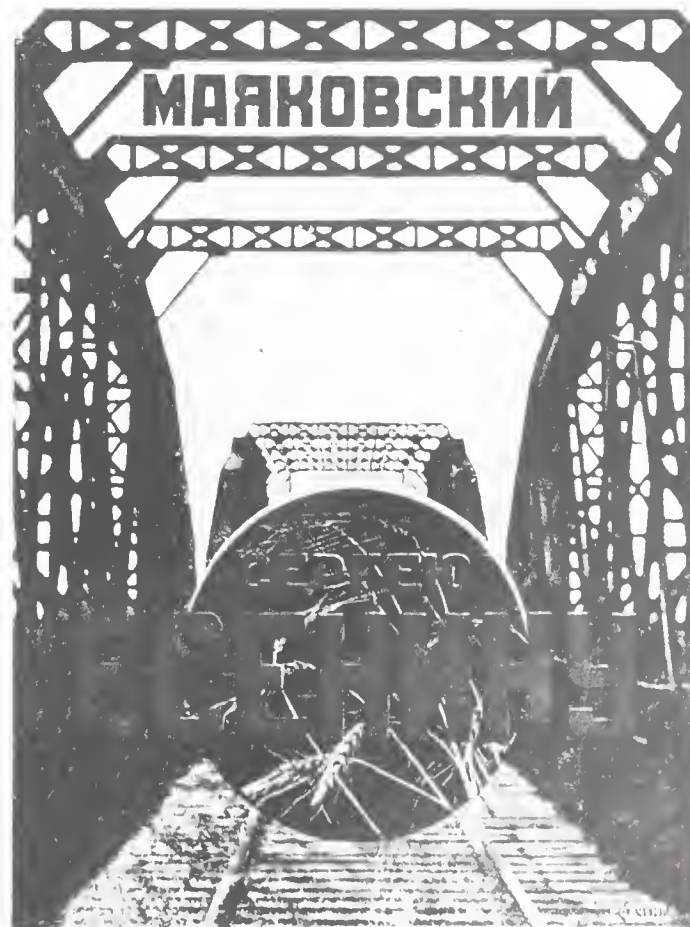
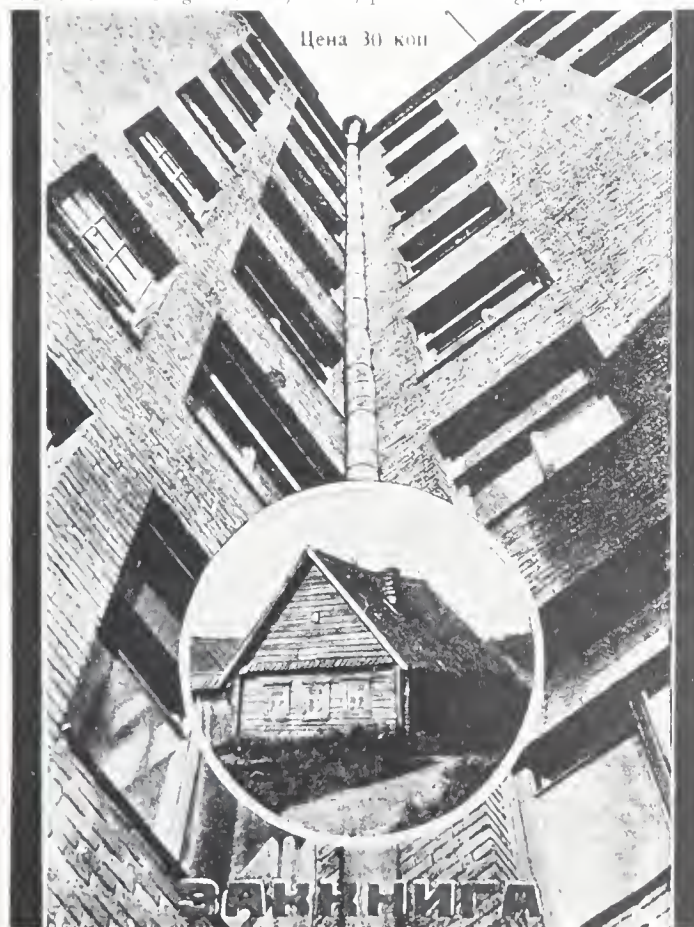


Cover of *There and Back*, 1930. Federatsiya Editions. 17.5 × 12.5

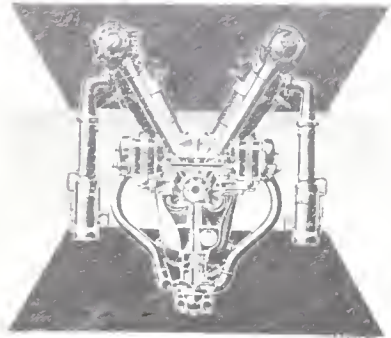


Cover of *The Bed Bug*, 1929. Gosizdat Editions. 19.5 × 13.5

Cover of *To Sergei Esenin*, 1926, publ. Zakkniga, Tbilisi. 17.5 × 26.

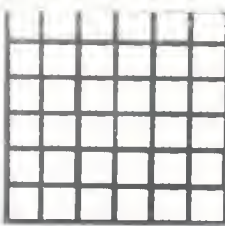


ПРОФ. Л. МАРКС
**АВИАЦИОННЫЕ
ДВИГАТЕЛИ**



ПЕРЕВОД И ПЕРЕРАБОТКА С АНГЛИЙС.
А.А. ДОБРЫНИНА И С.И. АЛЕКСЕЕВА
ПОД РЕД. ПРОФ. Н.Р. БРИЛИНГА
НКПС М1925

ТЭЙЛОР
ФРЕДЕРИК
УИНСЛОУ



НАУЧНАЯ
**ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ
ТРУДА**
С ПРЕДИСЛ. П. М. КЕРЖЕНЦЕВА

НКПС
ТРАНСПЕЧАТЬ
МОСКВА

СЕРИЯ НОТ

В.В. ЕФИМОВ

УТОМЛЕНИЕ

**И
БОРЬБА С НИМ**

ТРАНСПЕЧАТЬ

НКПС

И.М. САВЕЛЬЕВ

ТРАНСПОРТНОЕ
ОВАРОВАВЕДЕНИЕ

НКПС ТРАНСПЕЧАТЬ М.1925



ПОСЛЕДНЯЯ



ПРОФ. В. Е. ТИМОНОВ

УСТРОЙСТВО
И
ЭКСПЛУАТАЦИЯ

РЫБАЧЬИХ

ПОРТОВ

НКПС
ТРАНСПЕЧАТЬ М 1925

И.М. САВЕЛЬЕВ

ТРАНСПОРТНОЕ
ОВАРОВАВЕДЕНИЕ

II
ЧАСТЬ

Н.К.П.С. МОСКВА
ТРАНСПЕЧАТЬ

1926

В.В. ЕФИМОВ
СЕРИЯ НОТ

**УТОМЛЕНИЕ
И БОРЬБА С НИМ**

ДОПОЛНЕННОЕ ИЗДАНИЕ

МОСКВА 1926

НКПС ТРАНСПЕЧАТЬ

ИНЖ. П. П. РИЦОНИ

РЕМОНТНОЕ
ПРОИЗВОДСТВО
ЖЕЛЕЗНОДОРОЖНЫХ
МАСТЕРСКИХ

ТРАНСПЕЧАТЬ

НКПС

МОСКВА



On previous page: covers for the Transpechat Editions and book-marks.

Right: cover of *Materialization of Science Fiction*, by I. Ehrenburg, 1926. 17.5 × 13.





Cover of *Chungo*, by S. Tretyakov, 1927. 20.5 × 14.



Cover of *Aerial Communications*, by N. Rynin, 1926.



Cover of *For the Living Ilyich*, 1924.

The new 'Moges', Leica. In *Daësh*, no. 6, 1929.



Cover of the review *Daësh*, no. 6, 1929. 30.5 × 23.





Decoration of the Mosselprom building to Rodchenko's design. Photo Rodchenko, 1925.

Steering wheels. Leica. In *Daësh*, no. 14, 1929.



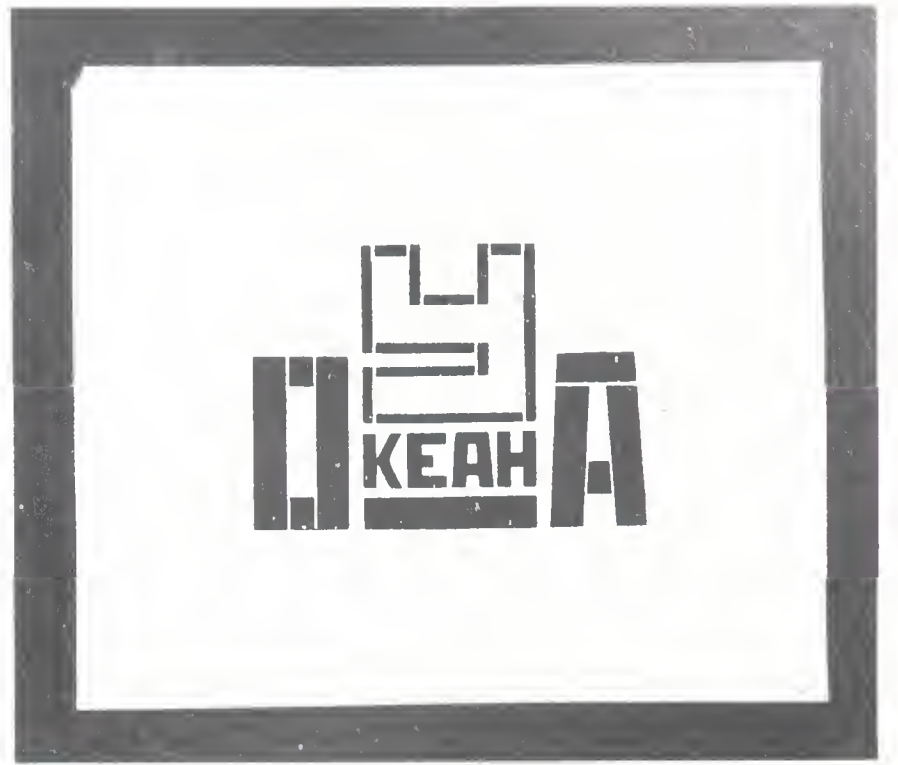
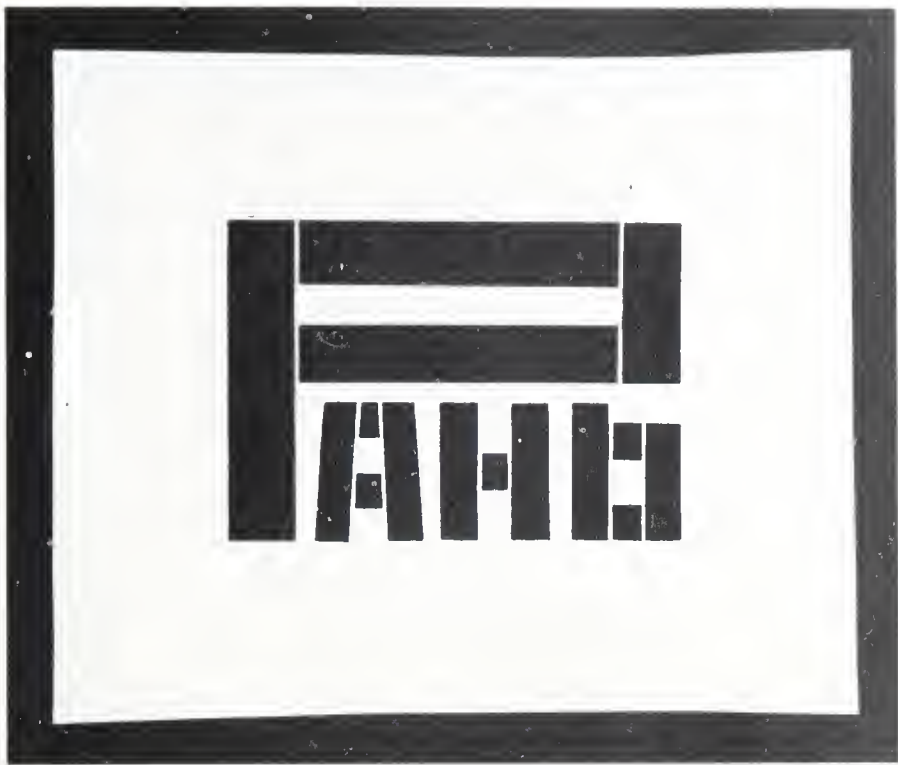
Cover of the review *Daësh*, no. 14, 1929. 30.5 x 23.



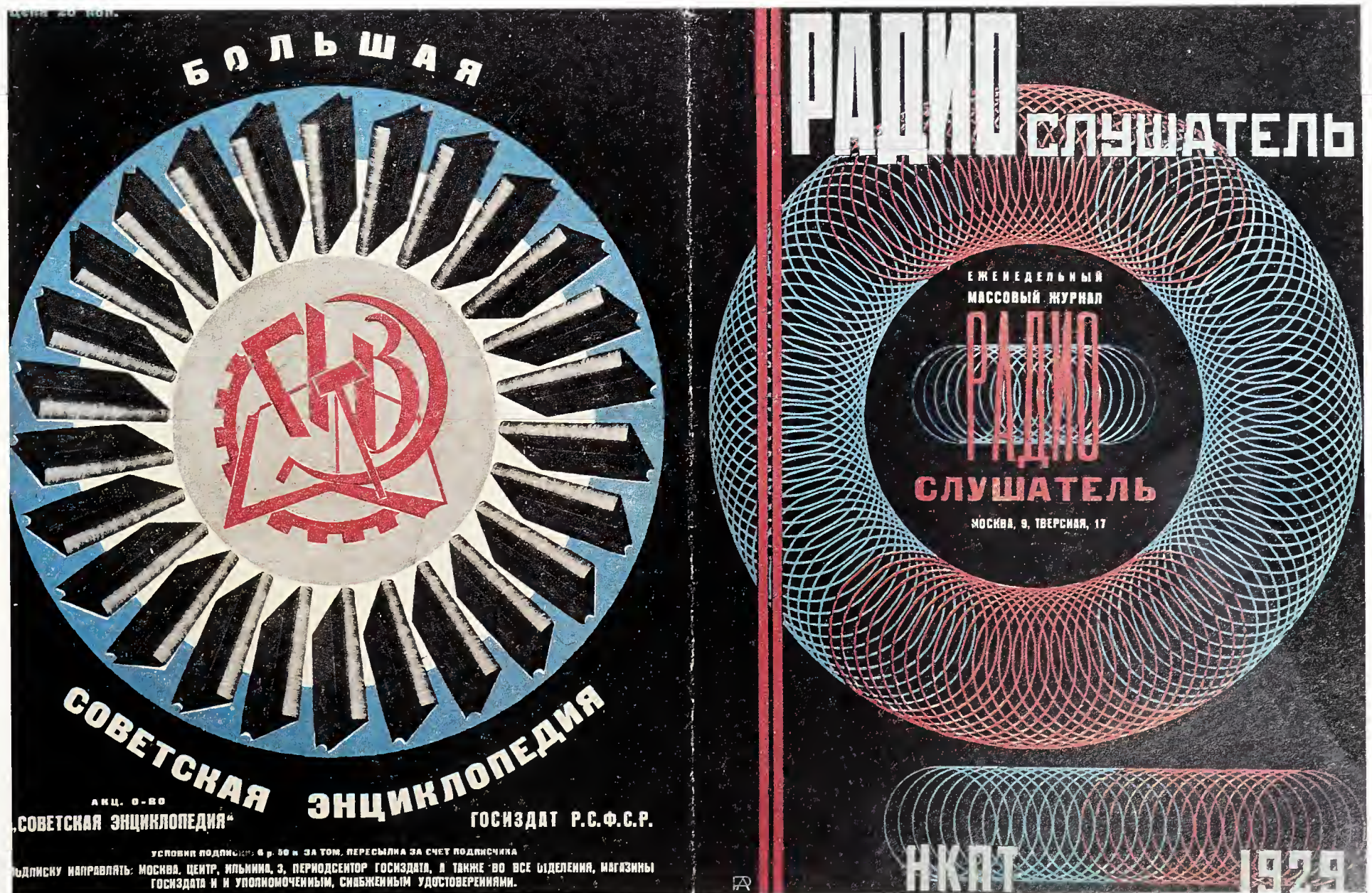


On this page and on the next one: lay-out of the titles for *Conclusion*, by S. Tretyakov, 1923.





Cover of the magazine *Radioslyushatel*, 1929. 31.5 × 45.



Mayakovsky and Rodchenko as advertising agents

The advertising poster emerged and developed side by side with the political one. Publicity was intended to attract customers to the state-run stores and convince them of the quality of goods produced by public concerns. This was of great importance not only from the economic point of view, but also from the political one, especially in view of the tough competition faced by Nep, the New Economic Policy, in those years. The form and content of commercial advertising was of course completely different from what it had been before the Revolution. Artists sought new ways of influencing the mass consumer, with particular regard to workers and peasants.

Without doubt the best products of commercial advertising in the twenties were those devised by Rodchenko around texts by Mayakovsky.²¹ Rodchenko's work was pleasing to everyone and his clients, unaware of the subtleties of the controversy raging between different artistic tendencies in those years, did not always realize that the artist who carried out their commissions was a Futurist, a Constructivist and a member of Lef, i.e. that he had close ties with that art of the far left which was subjected to so much harsh criticism in the press.²²

As well as commercial advertising posters, Rodchenko designed posters for the entertainment world, including those for films by Dziga Vertov (*Cinema-eye*, 1924) and Eisenstein (*The Battleship Potemkin*, 1925).

One cannot help but agree with Rakitin when he states that the Productivists and Constructivists approached their work with posters as if it were 'a creative work... for the masses' and that 'the advertisements and posters of the twenties were the most striking demonstration of just how important it was for artists to try out new means and modes of expression. This was the sector in which the objective laws of visual perception were being defined. Aspiring to be an active art form, the advertisement and the poster could not pass unnoticed.'²³

In this field, Production Artists did not adopt a strictly orthodox attitude, as they had often been wont to do where publishing was concerned.

Looking back today, at a distance of many years, it is possible to identify each of the major artistic figures with his own typical method of working and way of handling images. While, for instance, the characteristic features of posters by the Stenberg brothers were eccentricity and a playful manner, the most characteristic element of posters and advertisements by Rodchenko and Lissitzky was 'the insistence on the optical attacking force of the visual form'.²⁴

In particular, Rodchenko's activity in the field of commercial graphic art was closely bound up with straightforward political propaganda, for whose forms of expression there was a great deal of interest in those years (Rodchenko's satirical and political photomontages, publicity for new books and for Soviet trade, political and union posters). Many of the book and magazine covers designed by Rodchenko were really, despite their small format (which was just what allowed thousands of copies to be printed), political posters. Examples of this are the covers for the books *For the Living Ilyich* (1924) and *The Popular Masses in the Russian Revolution* by A. Vulyams (1925) and the covers for the magazines *Novyi Lef* (nos. 3, 6, 8-9 of 1927 and others) and *Abroad* (no. 2 of 1930 and others).

Rodchenko took an active part in the search for new methods for the production of political publications;²⁵ among these the twenty-five sheets of *The History of the Soviet Communist Party in Posters*, published by the Communist Academy in collaboration with the Museum of the Revolution in 1926, are in a class of their own. Each sheet is composed of a drawing or photograph and accompanying text. Mayakovsky expressed his distinctly positive opinion of this work, which at that time could be regarded as 'the sole history of the Communist Party recounted in photographs and drawings'.²⁶

21 Rodchenko would recall: 'In 1923... I started to work on publicity for the Dobrolet company; I designed the trademarks and the poster "Only a shareholder of Dobrolet is a citizen of the USSR".'

'One evening we were all sitting in the pavilion on Tverskoi Boulevard, Volodya [Mayakovsky], Aseev and I. They were laughing at that verse of the "Dobrolet"... thinking that the verse was the work of some bad poet. I took offence and began to argue since they did not write advertising jingles, and I told them that that verse was mine and that it had come into my head wholly by chance; I had merely abbreviated it and inserted it in the text which had been given me.'

'I do not know whether it was this that struck Volodya or whether he was already thinking about it, or if he had noticed the poster, but shortly afterwards he suggested that we should do posters for the GUM: "English tobacco", "Moser watches", "Dutch butter", etc.'

'We began working together. Our firm was called Mayakovsky—Rodchenko advertising agents. We worked with a great deal of enthusiasm.'

'The texts were written by Mayakovsky on various little bits of paper, on the piano in the house in Vodopyany Alley.'

'I went to the Briks in Vodopyany Alley (it was near my home) and waited until Volodya, standing in front of the piano, had finished the texts. Every so often he paced round the room, touched a key with his hand and then leaned on the piano again and started to write.'

'... the work for the newly created Soviet publicity proceeded at full swing.'

'Volodya wrote the texts at night and delivered them or went to take orders during the day.'

'With the help of two Vkhutemas students I used to draw until morning.'

'It was extra work, without gain, but it helped to spread the new advertising everywhere.'

'The whole of Moscow was decorated with our output...'

'The signboards of the Mosselprom... All the kiosks were ours. The signs of the Gosizdat: "black, red, gold".'

'We realized about fifty posters, a hundred or so signboards, wrapping paper, containers, advertising columns, illustrations for magazines and newspapers...'

'Volodya took this work very seriously. In the morning he went to get the material which was supposed to tell us the print-runs and the subject to be tackled. Most of the time they were

statements of accounts, boring publications, and it was he who, after reading them, established the numerical quantity and the theme.

'I arrived around seven or eight in the evening. Sometimes he wrote the texts in front of me and sometimes they were already done. At times the text was accompanied by a drawing that he had done himself, and then he said: "Here is what I have already done, you don't have to work on it: I did it like this for greater clarity."

'After having worked out the proportions and established the work to be done, I went home, where I set to work at once. Some young students from Vkhutemas used to come — they set themselves up in my studio and we got down to work. As I had already prepared the sketches, I checked the execution of the work, doing the most complicated parts myself and determining the proportions.

'Sometimes I used to work until dawn. At eleven o'clock in the morning I took the posters to Volodya or he came over to me...

A. Rodchenko, 'Rabota s Mayakovskim' (The work with Mayakovsky), in *V mire knig* (In the world of books), no. 6, 1973, pp. 64-65.

22 'At the State Publishers', Rodchenko wrote in 1927, 'they once told me without beating about the bush: "A.M., you are a talented artist, and a decent person: tell me, what do you need this Lef and Constructivism for? They are a hindrance to you, for you work in a new way, but then why do you accept these definitions? Many people, you see, imitate you and even make commissions 'in the style of Rodchenko'."

'I have worked for Dobrolet for over two years, designing posters and other things. The people who worked there were very busy, [and] had no knowledge of art; for them it was something new and interesting.

'They like my posters. They got used to me, they don't know my name but they know me personally.

'Everything goes well. Then the All-Russian Exhibition opened [in 1923]. Dobrolet organized publicity flights that lasted twenty minutes.

'I am called in by the engineer Lazarevich, a fine intellectual type, with a pince-nez and a jacket with gold buttons, who says to me: "Comrade artist, do me a Futurist poster for the flights."

'I put on the perfectly sincere expression of someone who doesn't understand. And he says: "How can I explain, something original, you understand, but not too much."

'I still do not understand and ask him what sort of posters does he think my ones hanging on the walls are. He says: "Yours are realistic."



Sketches for Dobrolet trademark, 1923. Paper, Indian ink, gouache.





Sketch for Dobrolet poster, 1923. Paper, pencil, watercolour, 22 × 35.

Dobrolet poster, 1923. 107 × 69.



'Then I understood everything and said: "No, comrade Lazarevich, I don't know how to do Futurist posters."

'So they commissioned another artist who worked in the "Futurist style".'

In *Novyi Lef*, no. 6, 1927, pp. 5-6.

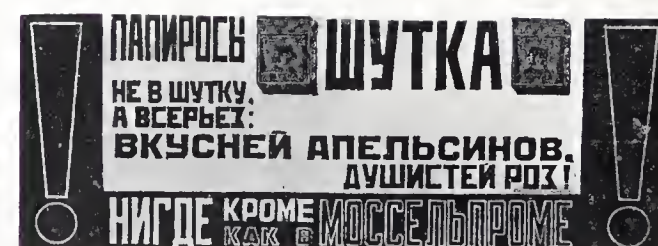
In V.N. Lyachov's introductory article to the album *The Soviet Advertising Poster in the Years 1917-1932*, where he expresses a highly favourable opinion of the results of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko's collaboration and in which he stresses that during that period 'the best products of commercial advertising were to be found in the creative work of Productivist artists like A.M. Rodchenko, V. Stepanova, Levin and others', the writer goes on to say that 'the artistic language invented for commercial advertising by these artists... was calculated to establish a dialogue with the public, bringing together grand architectural systems and individual constructions. This language was very close to the new typographic art, and was all one with the style of decorations for street celebrations, with clothing styles, and with Constructivist functional designs for furniture, crockery and fabrics' (V.N. Lyachov, *Sovetskii reklamnyi plakat 1917-1932*, Moscow 1962, p. 9).

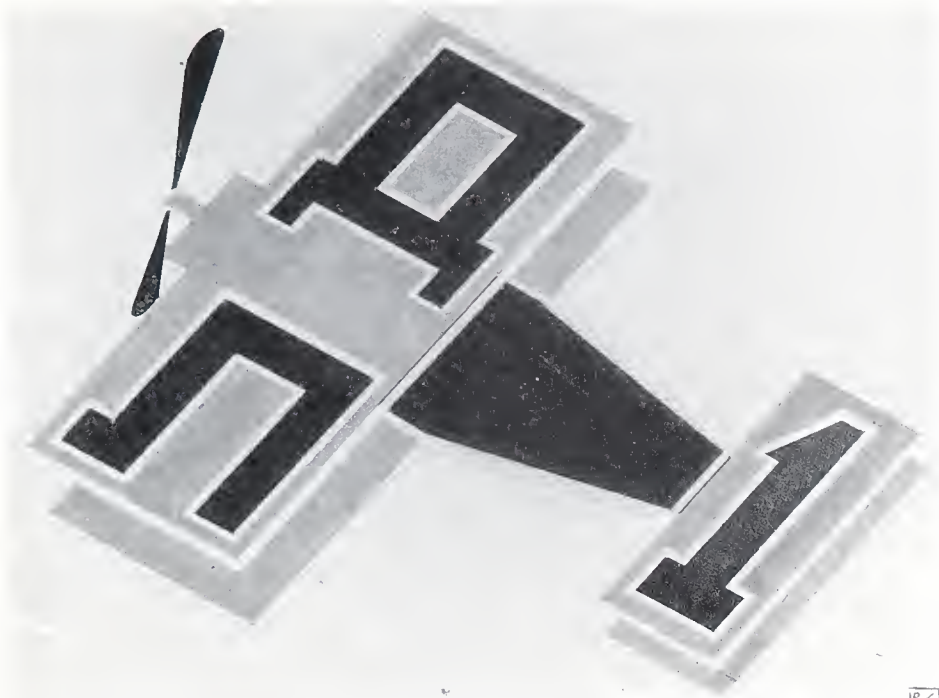
'The most aggressive advertising posters (for Gosizdat and other organizations) and the most expressive and effective ones', wrote O. Beskin in 1925, '... are those by the Constructivists Lavinsky and Rodchenko' (O. Beskin, op. cit., p. 12).

23 V. Rakitin, 'Retsensiya na knigu V.N. Lyachova' (Review of the book by V.N. Lyachov, *The Soviet Advertising Poster 1917-1932*), in the collection *Sovetskaya grafika* (Soviet graphics), Moscow 1974, p. 175.

24 V. Rakitin, op. cit., p. 12.

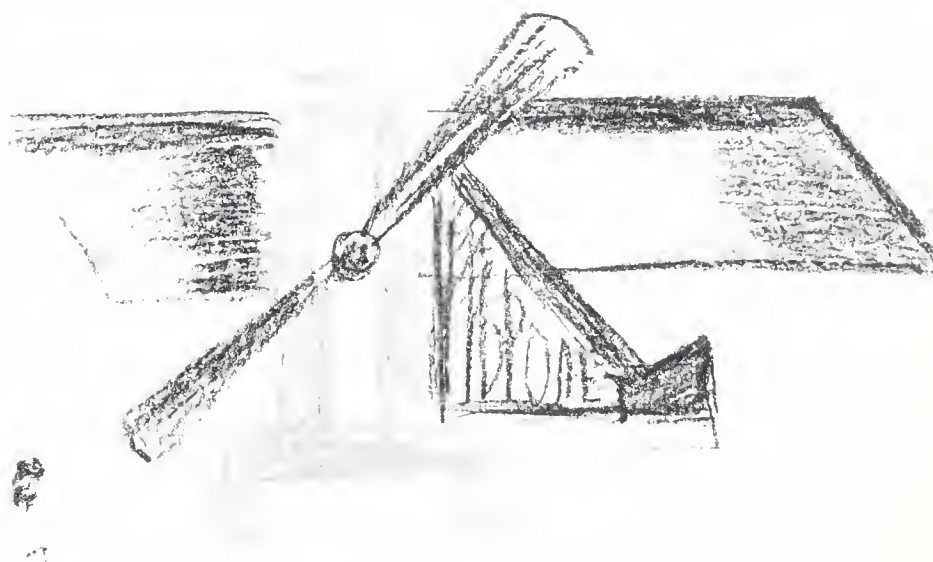
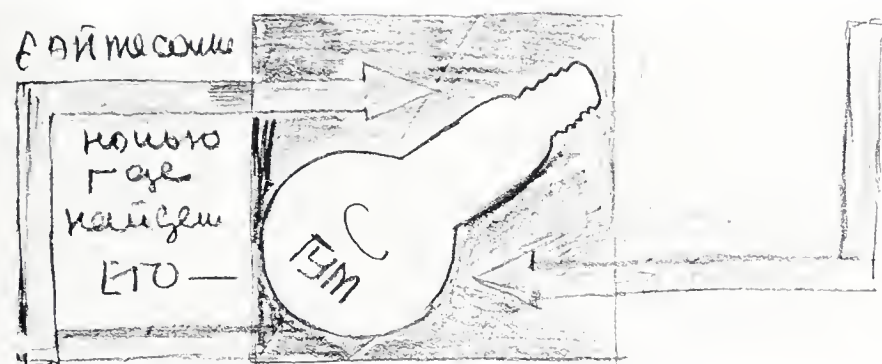
'Sutka' cigarettes, 1923. 8 × 21.



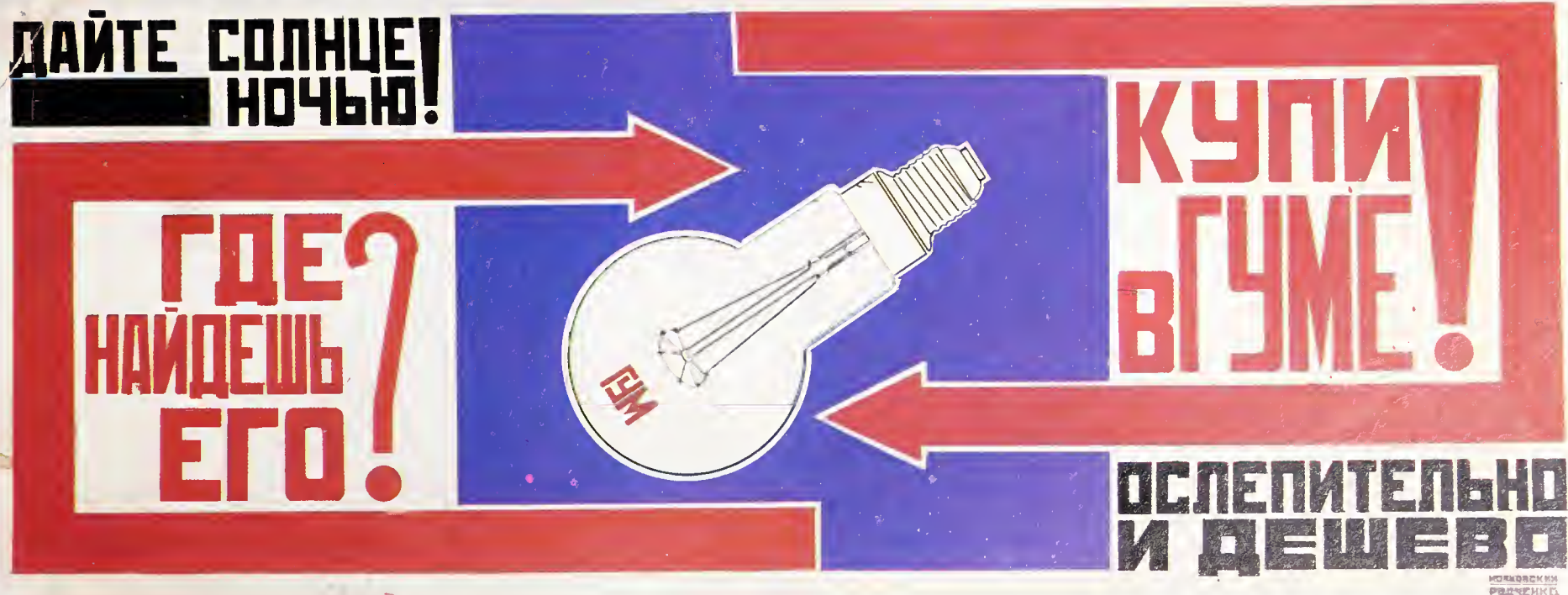


Definitive version of the Dobrolet trademark, 1923. Paper, coloured Indian ink, 26 x 31.

Sketch and (below) execution of an advertisement for light bulbs. Paper, coloured pencil, 22 x 36.



Sketch for Dobrolet trademark, 1923. Paper, coloured pencil, 24 x 17.5.



All that the heart requires. 1923 68 x 54

ВЕРХНИЕ ТОРГОВЫЕ РЯДЫ

ВСЕ ЧТО
ТРЕБУЕТ
СЕРДЦЕ
ТЕЛО ИЛИ
ВСЕ УМ-



ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫМ УНИВЕРСАЛЬНЫМ МАГАЗИНОМ

ХВАТАЙТЕСЬ ЗА ЭТОТ СПАСАТЕЛЬНЫЙ КРУГ!



ДОБРОКАЧЕСТВЕННО ДЕШЕВО! ИЗ ПЕРВЫХ РУК!

Grab this lifebelt..., 1923.

There is no room for doubting or thinking, 1923.



ГРУДИЩЕ
НЕ СТРАШНЫ ДОРОГОВИЗНА И НЕ П
ПОКУПАЙТЕ!
ДЕШЕВЫЙ ХЛЕБ.

СЕЯННЫЙ
 ОТ
15%
 СКИДКИ!
 ЧЕРНЫЙ СИТНЫЙ
 БУЛКИ

ВО ВСЕХ
 МАГАЗИНАХ И КИОСКАХ
МОССЕЛЬПРОМ

Cheap bread, 1923. 73.5 x 49.

Advertisement above a kiosk, 1924.



СТОЛОВОЕ
МАСЛО
 — ВНИМАНИЕ —
РАБОЧИХ МАСС

В ТРИ
 ДЕШЕВЛЕ
 КОРОВЬЕГО!
 ПИТАТЕЛЬНЕЕ
 ПРОЧИХ МАСЛ!

НЕТ
 НИГДЕ
 КРОМЕ

КАК
 В
МОССЕЛЬПРОМ

Butter for the table, 1923. 69 x 51

Einem biscuits, 1923. 29.5 x 21.

Я ЕМ ПЕЧЕНЬЕ
ФАБРИКА КРАСНЫЙ ОКТЯБРЬ
БЫВШ ЗИНЕМ

КАК В
МОССЕЛЬПРОМ

НЕ ПОКУПАЮ НИГДЕ КРОМЕ, КАК В
МОССЕЛЬПРОМ



Mosseľprom advertising symbol, 1924. Reconstruction by V.A. Rodchenko.

Posolskie' cigarettes, 1923. 8 × 21.



ТРЕХГОРНОЕ



The beer of..., 1925. 70 × 48.

25 'The history of the Soviet political book', wrote V. Lyachov, 'has to its credit a series of interesting works of very great social value, of great perspicacity and effectiveness. In particular the editions produced by El Lissitzky, A. Rodchenko, S. Telingater and others. The basic rule in their works is the principle of construction that takes on the value of an ideological framework in which to concentrate all the illustrative material and the text itself.'

V. Lyachov, 'Tvorcheskie problemy v oformlenii politicheskoi knigi' (Creative problems in the production of the political book), in the collection *Iskusstvo knigi* (The art of the book), issue 4, Moscow 1967, p. 16.

26 V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniya* (Complete works), vol. 12, Moscow 1959, p. 333.

Right: advertisement for a beer, 1925. 50.5 × 50.5.



МАЯКОВСКИЙ
РОДЧЕНКО

МОССЕЛЬПРОМ №10000 ТИРАЖ 10000

Sketch for Gosizdat poster, 1925.



РОДЧЕНКО



V. Stepanova with cap for the vendors of the Gosizdat Editions, designed by Rodchenko, 1924. Photo Rodchenko.



Books. 1925. Reconstruction by V A Rodchenko.

Advertisement for 'Chervonets' cigarettes, 1924.



ГАЛОШИ РЕЗИНОТРЕСТА



ВОСТОК

МАЯКОВСКИЙ — РОДЧЕНКО



Gosizdat (State Publications) bookshop, designed by Rodchenko. Photo Rodchenko.

Poster for the Gosizdat (State Publications), 1925.



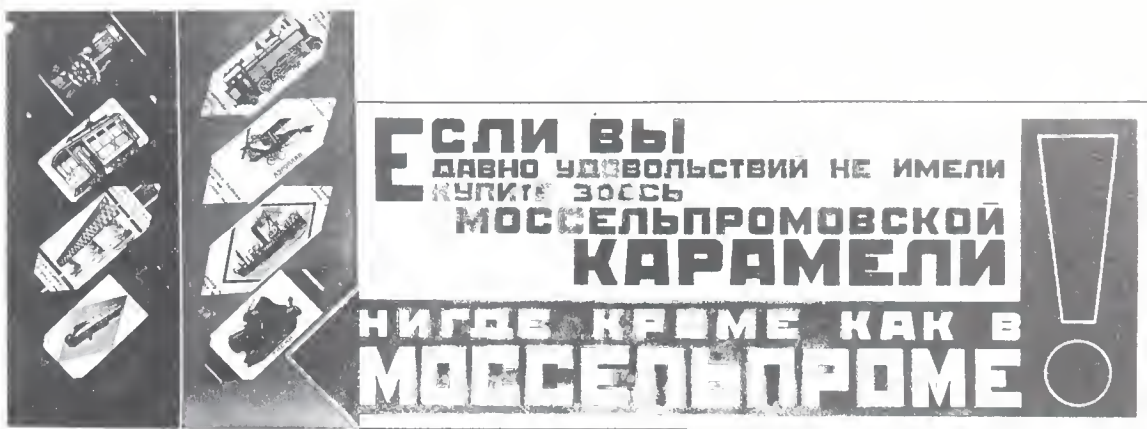
Sketch for Mospoligraf advertisement, 1923. Paper, coloured pencil, Indian ink, gouache, 22 x 18.





Advertisement for the magazine *Molodaya guardya*.

Advertisement for the Mospoligraf, 1923: *Our weapon is the press*. Photo, gouache, 43 × 30.



Stop the road traffic, 1924.

Man with watch, 1924. 18 × 15.5.



بشتا بید بخرید



قالو شهای اعلاى
باب شرق را
آورده میشود ببارشتر.
رزینتر پست.

Buy, man of the east. . 1923. 73.5 • 51 5.

The Rezintrest defends. . 1923
Reconstruction by V.A. Rodchenko.

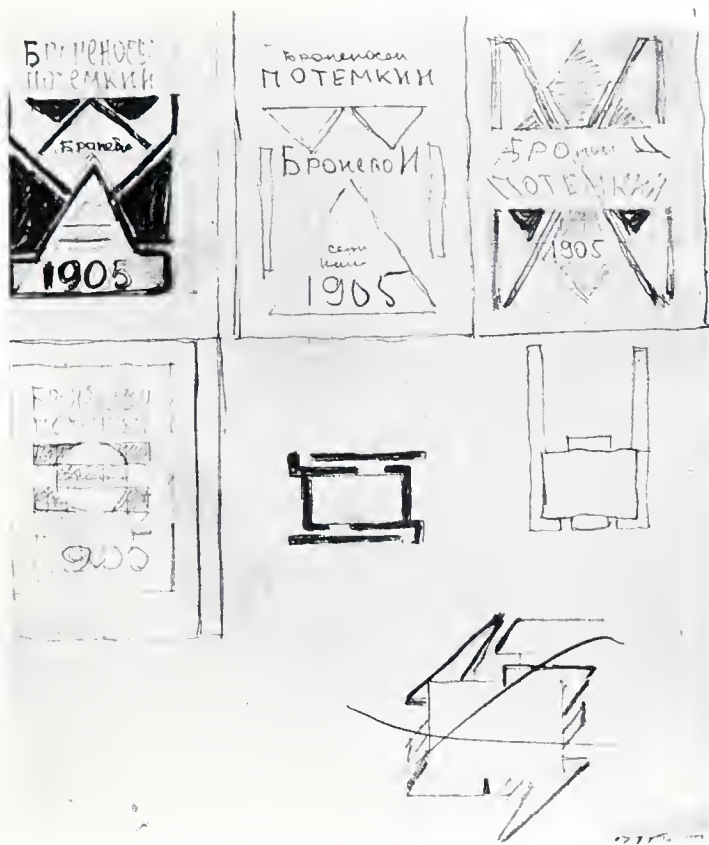
РЕЗИНОТРЕСТ
ЗАЩИТНИК В ДОЖДЬ И СЛЯКОТЬ



Above: advertisement for pencils. Below: Better pacifiers there have never been.... 1923. Reconstructions by V.A. Rodchenko.

ЛУЧШИХ СОСОК
НЕ БЫЛО И НЕТ





Sketches for the cover of the film catalogue. Paper, coloured pencil, 16 × 20.

Advertising for S. Eisenstein's film *The Battleship Potemkin*, 1925.

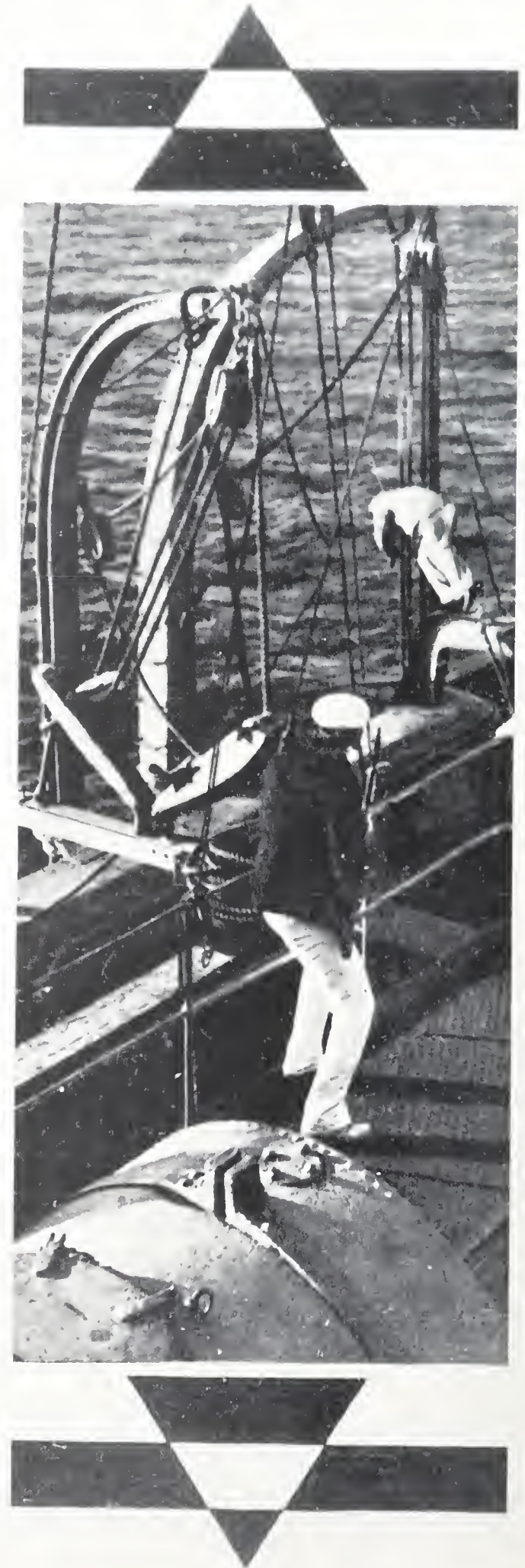
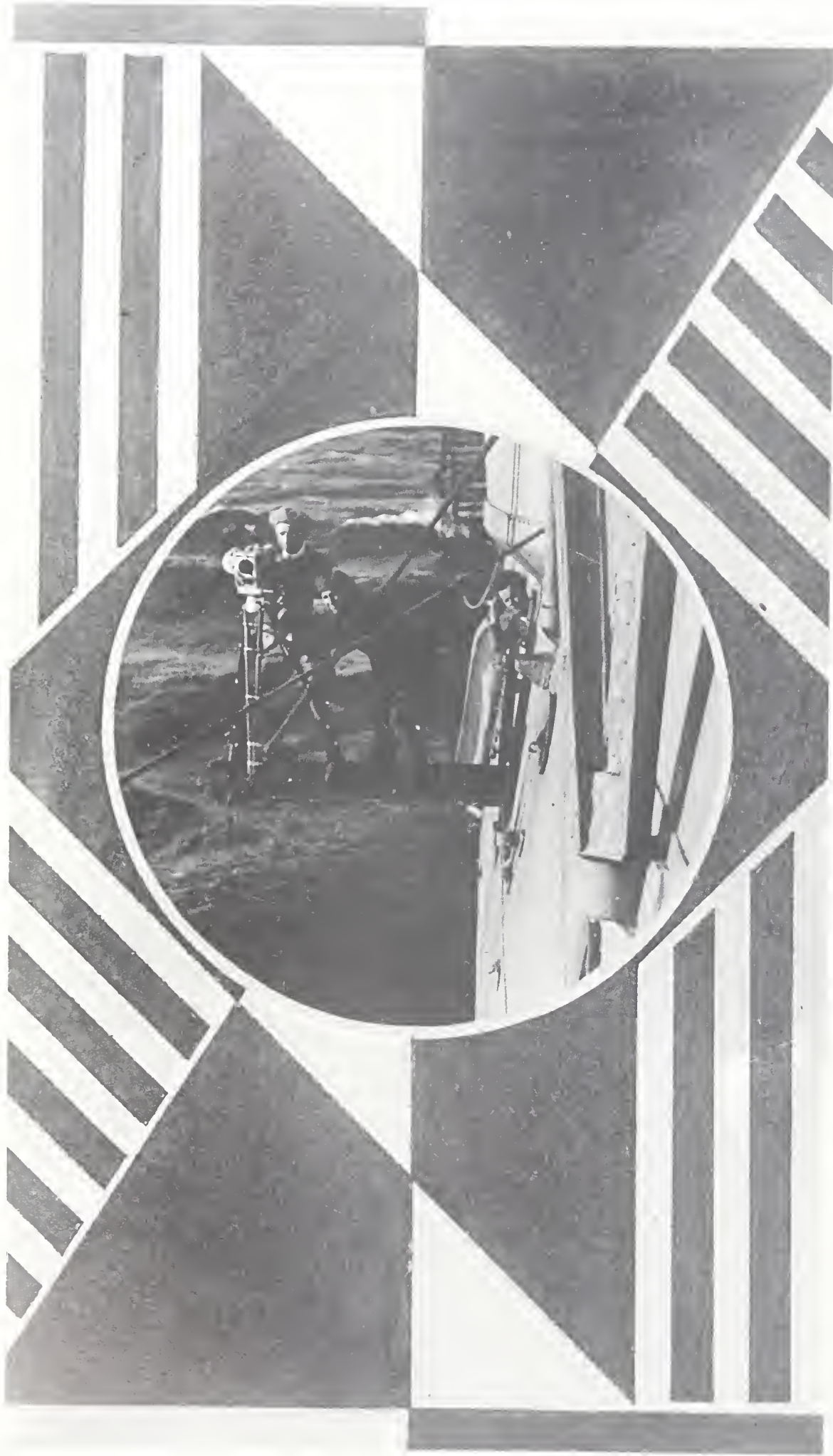


Cover for the *Battleship Potemkin* catalogue. 22.5 × 14.5.



Sketch for the montage of a book on the film. Paper, Indian ink, adhesive, 25 × 17.5.





Titles for *Kino-pravda*, 1924.



Titles for issue no. 13 of *Kino-pravda*

Kino-Pravda monogram





Poster for the *Kino-glaz*, 1924, 25 × 40.

Advertisement for the *Kino-glaz*, 1924, 7 × 10.



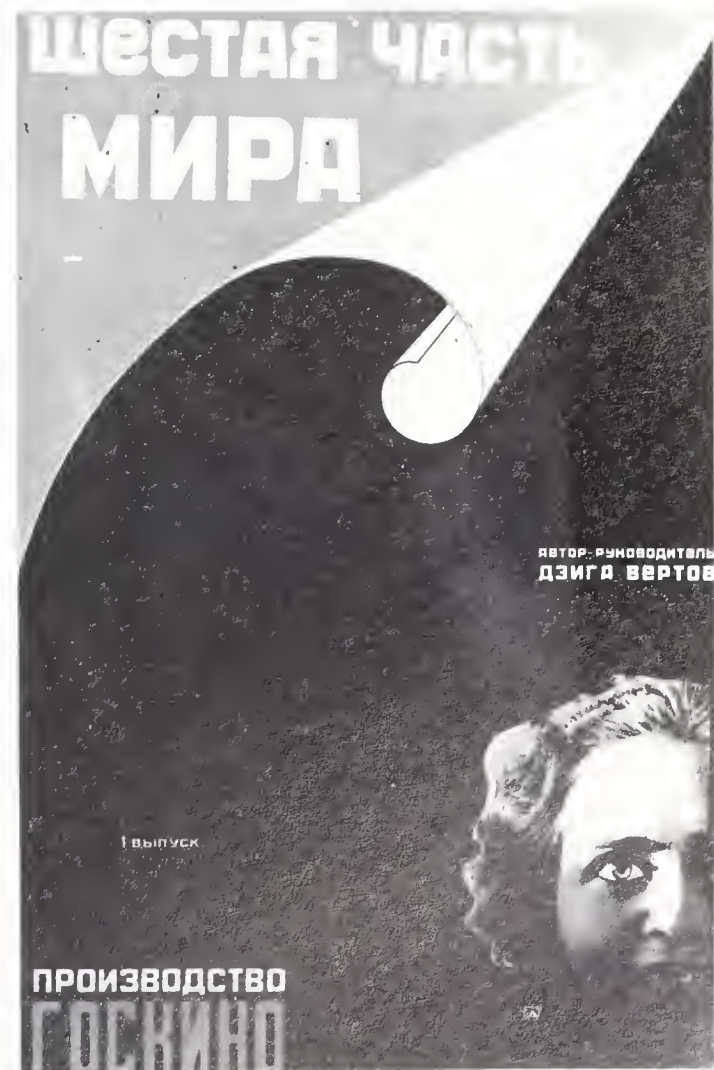


Poster for *Kino-glaz*, 1924. 25 × 39. Photo Rodchenko.

Poster for *Kino-glaz*, 1924. 25 × 40.



Poster for *The Sixth Part of the World*, 1926. 106 × 70.





Photomontage for the cover of a book on the film *The Sixth Part of the World*, 1926.

СОЮЗЫ БОРЬБЫ ЗА ОСВОБОЖДЕНИЕ РАБОЧЕГО КЛАССА

1^й съезд Росс. Соц-дем. Раб. Партии

ИСТОРИЯ
ВКП (б)
В ПЛАНАХ

3

1894-98

ОТ КРУЖКОВЩИНЫ
К МАССОВОЙ АГИТАЦИИ



МОСОВСКИЙ
РАБОЧИЙ
СОЮЗ



С.И. МИЩЕНКО



М.Н. ЛЯДОВ



Группа инициаторов
Петербургского «Союза Борьбы»
с. 1894-1897.



А.Н. ВИНОНУРОВ



Ф.И. ПОЛЯНОВ



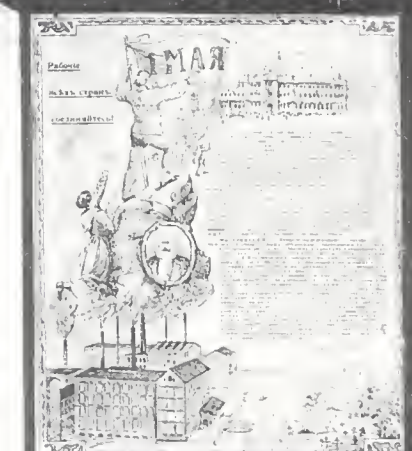
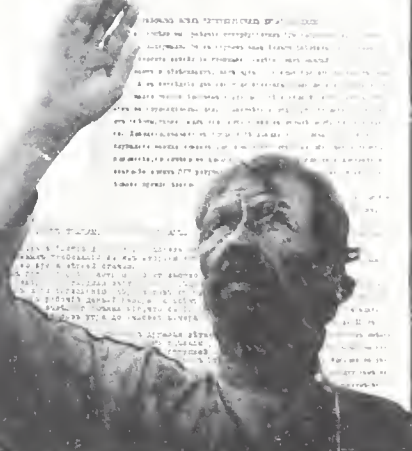
А.И. ХОЗЕЦКИЙ



Группа рабочих таб. фабрики в Москве
но марту 1894.



Б.Л. ЭЙДЕЛЬМАН
председатель ЦК РСДРП
с. 1895-1896.



Дом, где происходил 1^й съезд РСДРП
в Минске 1898.

From graphic Constructivism to the construction of new objects

During the twenties, Rodchenko tried his hand at almost every genre of graphics, even the most modest ones: he prepared catalogues for exhibitions, drew cartoons of various kinds for newspapers and magazines, created publishers' imprints and logotypes, made ingenious coloured bookmarkers and produced captions for the cinema.

Far from regarding marks and imprints as a minor genre of graphic art, he saw them as a link between Production Art and the graphic art of advertising. He produced an enormous number of sketches for trademarks (as well as those for Dobrolet) in which several elements of the new technique were applicable, thereby anticipating many of the most typical aspects of his style in the design of objects and utensils for everyday use. It is no coincidence that he introduced a course in the study of trademarks into the metalworking faculty (Metfak) at Vkhutemas.¹

According to the theoreticians of Production Art, the artist's work in the publishing sector and his introduction of new systems of page lay-out and new and austere covers based solely on the use of lettering and photomontage, was equivalent to his working 'in production'. This is the gist of Brik's 1923 article entitled 'Towards production' and devoted to Rodchenko, which appeared in the first issue of the magazine *Lef*. In that year Rodchenko's time was almost wholly taken up with graphic work in the fields of publishing and advertising. At Vkhutemas he had barely started organizing the work of the metalworking department and, although he had not yet turned his hand to the invention of objects and tools of daily life, he was already regarded by his collaborators in *Lef* and *Inkhuk* as a practising Productivist.²

That section of Production Art with which he was getting more and more creatively involved from the mid-twenties onwards demanded patience, resoluteness and willpower. Unlike the graphics of advertising, he would in fact have to wait for years before obtaining concrete results in the publishing field, quite apart from the fact that nothing guaranteed that these objects made by artists, given the difficult conditions of the time, would ever go into mass production.

Over this period architecture underwent a much more rapid development than in the past and was influenced in a decisive manner by the currents of innovation in painting.

Trademark of the Silicate Board, 1924. 6.5 x 7. Paper, Indian ink.



Trademark of the Federatsiya publishing house, 1925. Paper, Indian ink, 28 x 20.



6: THE PIONEER OF SOVIET DESIGN

Notes

¹ 'The aesthetic and social themes of the post-Revolutionary period came together in graphic art.'

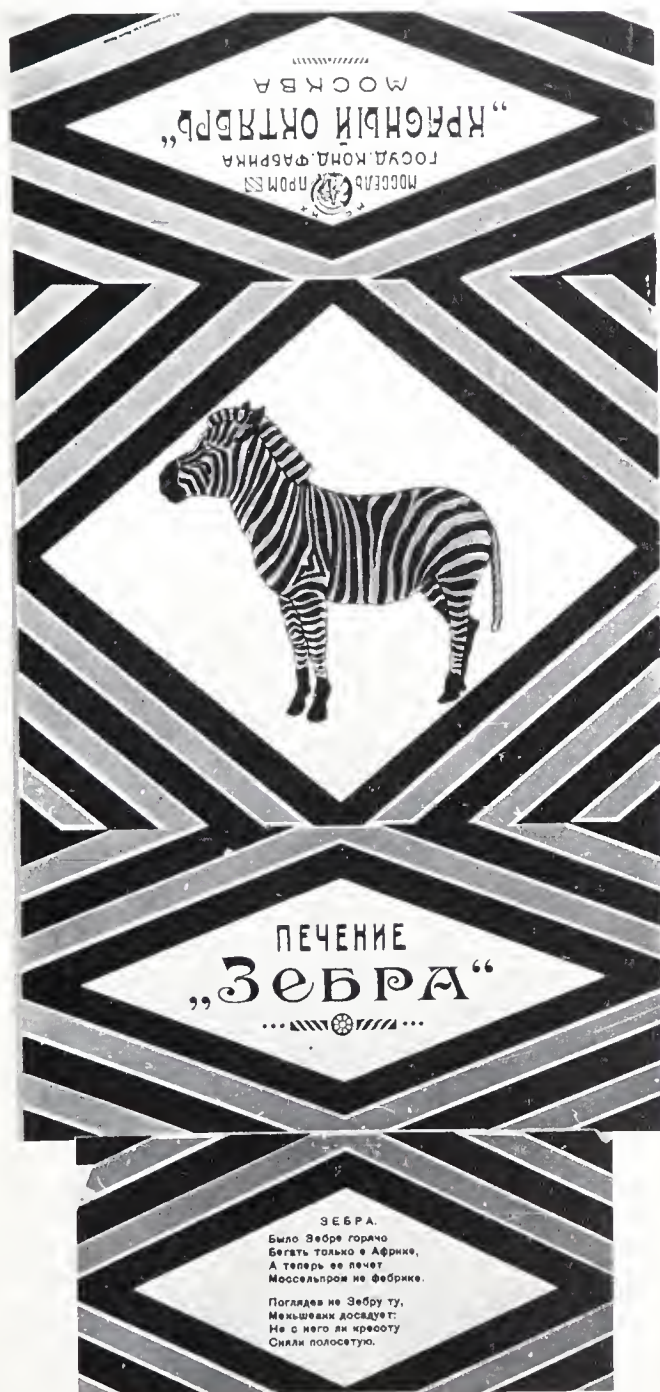
Yu. Molok, 'Predislovie k vystavke' (Introduction to the exhibition), in the catalogue to the exhibition of works by S. Telingater, Moscow 1975, p. 8.

This also explains the close ties (and even the mutual interaction) between this sector and both the art of mass propaganda and the design of Production Art.



'Kino' cigarettes, 1924. 33 × 24.5.

'Zebra' biscuits, 1924. 36 × 14.5.



On the other hand the process was slower in the decorative and applied arts, while out of the confluence of innovative trends in painting and architecture a new artistic activity was evolving: design. The creative principles of this new field were completely different from the traditional ones of the applied and decorative arts. Instead of producing handmade objects, the artist was in fact developing models for manufacture on an industrial scale.

Under the influence of the theoreticians of Production Art, the aesthetic point of view in the elaboration of forms was gradually being replaced by ethico-social considerations. The architecture, art of mass propaganda and Productivist art of the twenties in a way constitute a preparation of the ground for a new artistic culture; a culture in which an idea that for one reason or another found no immediate application in one art form could find it in another. Different lines of research in this cultural sphere were complementary to one another, interpenetrating to such an extent that the whole process of development of a new style was accelerated. It should also be pointed out that the rates of development and assimilation by the masses in different sectors of Production Art were totally different. Those sectors closest to the art of propaganda, such as publishing and fabric design, developed at very fast rates, while others, and especially those that were to form the basis of the just emerging field of design, were much slower off the mark, remaining well behind architecture, for example.

Rodchenko was drawn to just this less developed area of the new artistic culture; an area that was, at the time, the least gratifying for an artist. In fact there was no hope of seeing one's own work produced on a mass scale in that the entire production system for utilitarian objects and machinery would have to be restructured from the bottom up. There were not any artists and architects who were prepared to throw in their lot with a field that offered such limited practical potential. But any phase of application on a mass scale would have to be preceded by an experimental period of elaboration and preparation. Once the basic theoretical principles, artistic concepts and professional methods of practical realization had been determined, models and experimental designs for various types of utensil were produced, and the first designers were ready. Much of this work, unfortunately, led nowhere, given the changes that artistic trends went through at the beginning of the thirties, both in design and in architecture, and given the replacement of the methods of design by the traditional ones of the applied and decorative arts.

Rodchenko managed to find a way of his own to realize and promote his ideas. He published projects in the press (in general they were the work and graduate theses of his students) and devised new ways of staging exhibitions, which permitted him to include full-scale models of new interior furnishings. In order to try out and publicize new objects he turned to the design of theatrical and cinematographic stage-sets.

While he was still at Inkhuik, and even though he accepted the ethico-social approach of Productivist art, he never tackled the stylistic problems of form from a purely utilitarian point of view. It emerges clearly from the design of Rodchenko and his students that the more technological requirements were assimilated, and the more the characteristics of materials were studied, the more importance was given to the problems of form in relation to the object's function in the new society.

At the beginning of 1922, when Rodchenko moved from the faculty of painting at Vkhutemas to that of metalworking (Metfak), he had to deal with the practical problems of design at their heart. The situation he found was not very cheering: the Metfak was still being fitted out, few students at Vkhutemas were drawn to it and those that finished the course were left without any clear qualification. In effect it was necessary to start again from scratch.³

In order to establish a new school of design Rodchenko had to override the influence of the old-fashioned methods adopted by the Stroganov Institute, which had a long tradition behind it. The Stroganov Institute, which had developed out



Sweet wrapper, 1923. 8 × 7.5.

Our industry' sweets. Lines of verse by N. Aseev, 1923. 38 × 23.5.



Sweet wrapper, 1923. 8 × 7.5.

Sweet wrapper, 1923. 8 × 7.5.



2 During meetings of Inkhuk Rodchenko 'explained how to mount the signs and advertisements he had designed for the Central Committee of the agricultural show' and 'expounded the principles of photomontage' (minutes of the meeting on 18 May 1923), 'displayed a series of posters for the GUM, the Rezinotrest and other industrial complexes' (20 October 1923) (Inkhuk Archives). In the same year, Lef published his covers (no. 1), his design for the Dobrolet trademark (no. 2), and described the method of photomontage (no. 1). All this goes to show that Rodchenko was regarded as one of the pioneers of Production Art in 1923.

In this connection Brik wrote an article in which he said: 'Rodchenko has become a Constructivist and Productivist not in words but in deeds ... Rodchenko has understood that the job of an artist is not limited to an abstract awareness of colour and form, but that he must be able to apply it to a concrete object [and solve] any problem...

'... a decorator paints an object, Rodchenko creates it. The decorator sees an object as handy for his decorative work, Rodchenko sees in the object the material which must take shape... For Rodchenko the total absence of decorative elements is the essential condition for the creation of a functional object...

'It is a difficult moment for the Constructivist-cum-producer.

'The artists turn their back on him. Irritated factory managers reject him. The petit bourgeois goggles...

'Much resolution and willpower is required...

'Rodchenko is confident...

'Rodchenko has patience. He waits, and in the meantime does what he can: he is revolutionizing aesthetic taste, clearing the ground for the future... functional material culture.'

In Lef, no. 1, 1923, pp. 105 and 108.

3 On the subject of the Metfak, Rodchenko later wrote in his autobiography: 'The faculty began its work on nothing, or worse, on the basis of the orthodox clerical prejudices of the former Stroganov Institute where religious objects were made... I set myself the task of training constructors for our industry who would know how to handle metal from both the artistic and the technical point of view, capable of making even the internal fittings of a motorcar or an aeroplane; constructors who would have creative initiative and be backed up by a thorough technical preparation.

'The creation of a new type of artist—constructor who had no precedent in Tsarist Russia was an extremely difficult objective.'

of the school of drawing opened by S. Stroganov in 1825, trained artists for industry, the applied and decorative arts and architecture. Little by little a system of workshops, provided with equipment and run by good teachers, grew up within the Institute. Alongside workshops for ceramics, joinery, graphics, decorative art, set-designing, porcelain, and glass-, leather- and horn-working, there was also a group of workshops for metalworking, with facilities for chasing, casting, assembly, the making of jewellery, galvanoplasty and enamelwork. All these workshops were closely linked with each other for the process of production, and many objects were made by students moving from one workshop to another. The students' field of specialization included a familiarity with the whole cycle of production.

Apart from work in the various workshops, the Stroganov Institute ran courses in such subjects as 'creative work' and the 'study of styles', again closely interconnected. In practical applications, the students learned by themselves to invent an ornamental design and to work in different styles. Once assimilated, they put these into practice by making vessels, furniture, interior decorations, small-scale architectural structures (gateways to estates, fountains), fireplaces, lamps, religious objects (icon covers, crucifers, bindings for the Gospel) and votive shrines.

The system of teaching at the Stroganov Institute had its own structure that was certainly no less rigid, and perhaps even more so, than that of the College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. This was due not so much to the teaching staff as to the interlinked system of workshops, especially the ones for metalworking, which had their own tools, materials, professional traditions, experiences and artists. The workshops were inherited from the Stroganov Institute, first by the Free State Artistic Studios founded in 1918, and then by Vkhutemas. On the basis of the old institute, Vkhutemas set up the Faculty of Metalwork on 1 December 1920. The first students were enrolled at the beginning of 1921.

Although the declarations, programme and study plan of the Faculty of Metalwork all stated that it would be oriented towards the practical needs of life at first much remained as it had been before. There was still a shortage of teaching staff and not even the qualification of its graduates was clear.

Teaching in the academic year 1921-22 was based on the engraving and enamelling workshop. At the same time, new artistic trends had entered the Metfak through the preparatory courses taught in the Basic Section by Vesnin, Popova and Rodchenko himself. Rodchenko was of course familiar with the Stroganov Institute, having been a student there on his arrival in Moscow from Kazan in 1914.

Ever since 1922, when the Metfak began to function regularly, Rodchenko had been working out and immediately applying his methods of teaching.⁴ In fact, as well as courses in general culture, students in the Metfak took special courses of theoretical studies: the study of machines, a special course in chemistry, electro-technics, technology of metals, technical computation and efficiency, the study of art, history of the art of metalworking, theory of the artistic working of metals, organization of production, composition and practical lessons in the construction of objects (models). Practical lessons in the workshop consisted in learning the craft of the smith and the mechanic, the technique of metal-turning and casting, chasing, assembly, engraving, enamelling, filigree work, galvanoplasty, electroplating and the decorative working of metals. A period of practical training in factories and works was also provided for.

On 12 February 1923, Rodchenko set out the 'Provisional Syllabus of the Metfak', aimed at awarding diplomas to 'engineers—artists—constructors' who should be capable of manufacturing objects for everyday use (tools, household appliances, stamps, writing implements, etc.).⁵

In March, Rodchenko drew up the syllabus for the 'minimum practical work for the academic year 1922-23' in which he envisaged that students would be given a grounding in architecture: study of forms, design of buildings, planning

of the city. From 1922 to 1924 Rodchenko continued devising programmes for the training of the first Soviet designers. He went on clarifying the aims and the tasks of the department, worked out a methodology of teaching and a course of specialization, and drew up plans of study, syllabuses and memoranda.⁴

The earliest documents of the Metfak show that Rodchenko was concerned with the artistic training of new specialists. The system he devised was intended to produce not merely qualified specialists for the metalworking industries but genuine artists of a new kind; in other words, designers.

Analysis of the documents (and here we are not speaking of student projects) confirms that Rodchenko, perfectly aware of the role of the disciplines of art and composition in the training of new specialists, set out to establish an *artistic* school of Soviet design.⁵

The new methods of teaching did not meet with the favour of all the teachers, and students in the faculty were not always attracted by the prospect of working in industry at the end of their course of studies. Many transferred to other faculties and the influx of new students was drastically reduced. In fact, out of all the students who enrolled in the Metfak in 1921 and 1922, only a small group remained to follow Rodchenko down the road of research and experimentation, throughout the whole period of the school's formation. Not all of them reached the end. Only eight students completed the seven-year course, in 1929, to submit their graduate projects and become the first Soviet designers in the field of metal product design. The subsequent course (those enrolled in 1925) did not manage to complete its studies at Vkhutemas or its continuation, Vkhutein, since the latter was closed down in 1930.

It may seem strange that there should be such a small number of students in the Metfak, in spite of the famous declarations of the Productivists in which they urged students to enrol in the production-oriented faculties of Vkhutemas, but their advice was surrounded by very heated controversy at the beginning of the twenties, as is clear from the publications of those years. A large number of students did in fact abandon the 'artistic' faculties for the 'Productivist' ones, but the polemical tone of the Productivists derived from the fact that the departments concerned with production were faced with many difficulties in reality, with far less students than the workshops of other faculties such as those of architecture or painting.⁶

In 1925 the entire group of production-oriented faculties accounted for only thirteen per cent of the students at Vkhutemas, while the number of those enrolled in the Metfak came to less than one per cent. If by 1925 the production departments of the school had not developed to the extent envisaged in their general programme, this goes to show that the members of Inkhuk (including Rodchenko) had been right when they had published in the magazine *Lef* in 1923 a joint declaration on the situation, entitled 'The break-up of Vkhutemas'.⁷

Former students of the Metfak tell of the difficulties they encountered during the early years when the new methodology of teaching was emerging, and of the decisive role played by Rodchenko in the process of the faculty's reorganization. In his attempt to link study with real practical needs, Rodchenko envisaged in the 'syllabus for the course of design of metal objects' that the students should make objects out of not only metal but also other materials. Some objects were designed to have a single function and others to have two or more.⁸

A profound change in the direction taken by the department of metalworking occurred in the first year of its activity. This was demonstrated by the first exhibition of students' work held by the faculty in 1923, which provided unmistakable evidence for Rodchenko's interest in the study of everyday surroundings.⁹

The characteristics of Rodchenko's school of design were evident even in this first exhibition, characteristics that would leave their mark on projects carried out by the students in the future too, both during the course and for graduation. The elements of a given object were designed to be multi-functional, interchangeable and portable. Among the first projects realized during the course and put on show

A. Rodchenko, *Avtobiografiya* (Autobiography).

Manuscript. V.A. Rodchenko Archives.

4 A note, dated 3 February 1923, from Rodchenko in his capacity as dean of the faculty runs: 'The task and the aim of the faculty... consists in providing the state with... highly qualified workers, i.e. engineers-cum-artists-cum-constructors. The students... will design useful objects and put them into practice at the end of the course. When they get their diplomas, they will have to go into the factories and plants of the metallurgical industry with a good artistic preparation and with a complete grasp of modern technique.'

Manuscript. V.A. Rodchenko Archives.

5 Tsgali, f. 681, 2, 48, f. 39.

6 Tsgali, f. 681, 2, 65, f. 126.

7 One of these documents was 'The study plan' of the Metfak for the years 1922-24. In this document he defined the aims and duties of the faculty in the training 'of highly qualified specialists for the metallurgical industry, able to produce material objects and to make artistic forms out of metal, with the intention of applying this knowledge and experience to the new culture of daily life and the mass production of artistic products'.

Manuscript. V.A. Rodchenko Archives.

8 V. Stepanova, Rodchenko's wife, wrote in her memoirs: 'The early period in the organization of the Metfak was very difficult in that it was necessary to destroy the Stroganov Institute's old style of "decorative chasing". It was necessary to make propaganda on behalf of the industrialization of metalwork, a campaign on behalf of the manufacture of objects and the Constructivist handling of metal as opposed to a tradition of "luxurious" knickknacks in poor taste, produced without any regard for aesthetic principles. The revamping of the baggage of knowledge carried by the old students of the Stroganov Institute and the members of the teaching staff took place amidst enormous difficulties and it took over two years before the workshop of handcrafted jewellery was transformed into the metalworking department of the technical and art college. At the same time hard work had to be done in order to improve the syllabuses of the Metfak, the only school in the world which trained constructors of objects for small-scale industry.'

V. Stepanova, *Materialy po istorii dizaina* (Materials for a history of design), Moscow 1969, p. 29.

9 On 1 November 1925, the number of students at Vkhutemas was 1,281, subdivided by faculties as follows: Basic Section, 288;

Faculty of Architecture, 241; Faculty of Painting, 288; Faculty of Graphics, 148; Faculty of Sculpture, 52; Faculty of Ceramics, 31; Textile Faculty, 105, Faculty of Woodworking, 16, Faculty of Metalworking, 12.

10 *In particular this declaration had the following to say: 'The production-oriented faculties are empty. Machines are sold off or rented out, the staff is being cut down...'*

'Vkhutemas does not concern itself with any practical problem...'

'It is necessary to take immediate and decisive steps.

It is necessary to:

1. cut down drastically on the number of "purists" in Vkhutemas and increase the number of Productivists;

2. unify the industrial faculties...;

5. insert the compulsory teaching of industrial subjects in the syllabus of the Rabfak and the Basic Section;

6. link Vkhutemas to the centres of State Economy and to those of political education...'

11 *Four stages were envisaged in the achievement of these objectives:*

1. preparing natural-size objects (a spoon, a door handle, pans, an iron, scissors, forks, clothes pegs, lighters, a portable kettle, padlocks, clocks, an inkstand, lamps for photographic laboratories, etc.);

2. preparing objects to be produced in the form of a model (folding garden chair, newspaper kiosk, glass case, screen, folding bed, table lamp, book shelves, wall clocks, metal pans, portable toilet set, etc.);

3. working out a project on paper (a motorcar hood, a showcase for books, street lamps with advertising signs, interior finishings of a tram, folding worktables, central heating plants, articles for a book store, department store windows, luminous and moving street signs, articles for a library, loudspeakers for use in the squares, post and telegraph offices, banks, public baths, canteens, workers' clubs, etc.);

4. producing designs for the surface of various objects (plaques with enamelled and engraved inscriptions, union badges, emblems, coats of arms, etc.).

Khudozhestvenno—konstruktorskoe obrazovanie (Artistic-Constructive Education), no. 4, Moscow 1973, pp. 207-10.

12 *The students' work on show at the exhibition was discussed in an article by V. Stepanova which largely reflected the ideas of Rodchenko himself.*

'The exhibition', said the article, 'has revealed two Constructivist principles' in the field of

were a folding bed, by P. Galaktionov, an armchair that could be turned into a bed, by N. Sobolev, and six designs for a theatre stand that could be disassembled, by Z. Bykov, V. Pylinsky, A. Galaktionov, A. Istratov and others.

Today these early designs seem naive in the way the movements of individual parts are conceived, and primitive in form, but the outlines of a new approach to modern utilitarian objects are clearly visible and their originality was universally recognized even then.¹³

Without doubt the most original designs were the work of those students who had completed the course of study under Rodchenko and who were the first to graduate in 1929. Among them were the models of theatre stands by Pylinsky, A. Galaktionov and, in particular, the one designed by Bykov. In the majority of the projects the problem, to design a book stand to be set up inside a theatre, was solved by a perforated construction with a rotating upper section, while the base of the stand was an empty counter with shelves. Bykov came up with a different solution. In his design, the stand when closed served as a block for transporting the books, but opened up to expose vertical and horizontal surfaces. The whole construction could be dismantled and folded with great ease.

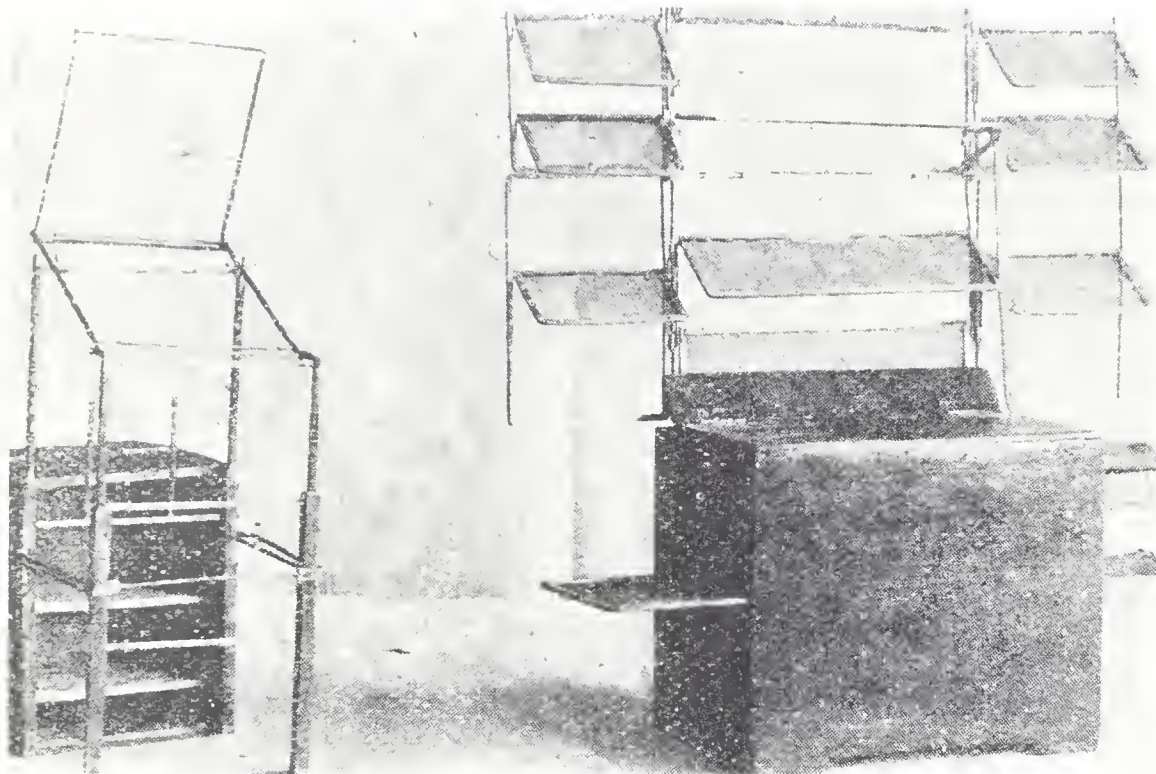
Further information on these projects carried out by Rodchenko's pupils appeared in the list of works chosen for the International Exhibition in Paris in 1925.¹⁴ These included four projects from 1923. The first was a project by Bykov, a kettle-cum-saucepan for camping. When closed, the article had a highly practical shape and was carried by a strap; when opened it revealed a teakettle, a saucepan and frying pan, a tumbler and a knife, fork and spoon. The second was a rotating table lamp designed by P. Zhigunov. The third project, the work of

Z. Bykov. Variant of a trademark, 1920.



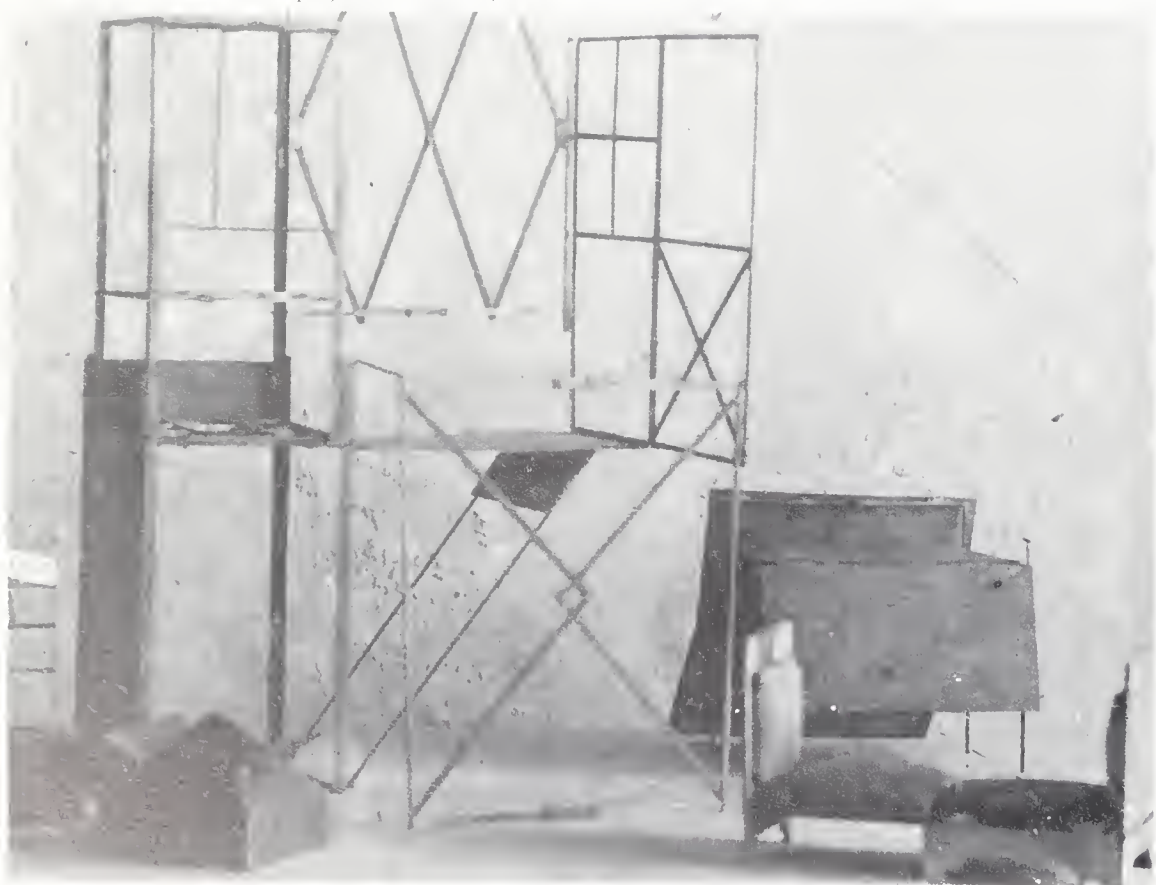
Isratov, was a portable washbasin for apartments without running water. The fourth and last was a lamp designed by D. Zhigunov with interchangeable glass shades in neutral, red, green and yellow.

On the list of works by Metfak students selected for the Paris Exhibition also appeared designs and models for enamel badges, trademarks and publishing imprints. The badges were usually represented by the actual objects, whereas the marks were in the form of designs that could be realized in metal or by industrial processes. From the stylistic point of view, these projects and trademarks showed



Two bookshelves. The one on the right is by V. Pylinsky, that on the left by A. Galaktionov.

Exhibition of the students' projects at Metfak, 1923.



the construction of new objects.

'First: the physical realization of an object, in contrast to its aesthetic form... starting out from function, material and construction one reaches the form of the object as a whole. In the works on show, the student has not started out from the expected aesthetic form of an object, but the form derives from the solution to a precise basic problem...'

'Second: Once the problem has been solved, the item of furniture emerges. This problem presupposes a new principle of organization and has an educational significance of its own, in that it develops the students' spirit of initiative.'

The works displayed on the basis of this criterion offer three examples of a solution to the problem:

1. an object ready for use, with moving parts... This is the case with a mobile showcase for books with a special type of stand for display of the volumes...

2. an object that can be dismantled and folded up after use, such as a stand or a folding bed...

3. a multi-functional object for personal use by a student at home; a bed and drawing table, an armchair and a bed...

V. Stepanova, 'O rabotakh konstruktivistskoi molodëzhi' (On the works of the young Constructivists), in Lef, no. 3, 1923, pp. 53-56.

13 'It was so obvious', wrote Stepanova, 'that students from other faculties and institutes visiting the exhibition put just one question: "But is it art?"'

"You have not tackled any problem of form." (Students from the faculty of architecture in Vkhutemas.)

"Ah! You give them the final artistic touches later?"'

In Lef, no. 3, 1923, p. 53.

In his article entitled 'The school of the Constructivists', Brik spoke of these early projects produced by the Metfak students.

'By the name of Constructivism', wrote Brik, 'should be understood that tendency which holds that it is correct for art to devote skill and artistic talent to the creation of useful objects...'

'Constructivism must not be confused with "applied (decorative) art"; the difference is vast. The decorators paint a ready-made object. The Constructivists make this object, spurning any kind of affectation. The Constructivists wish the value of an object to depend not on how it is decorated but on how it is made.'

'But then what is a well-made object? It is an object which answers to the highest degree of functionality. One cannot give a general formula for defining a beautiful object, everything

depends on its actual use and the conditions of its manufacture. The Constructivist's task lies in weighing up all these uses and conditions and finding the right solution. The metalworking faculty of Vkhutemas, headed by Rodchenko, one of the most talented of Constructivist artists, has already translated ideological and technical principles into practice...

'Naturally the works by students are not yet concrete objects, ready for use; they are just trials, important tests that demonstrate how art has emerged from the narrow confines of the easel, and that little by little, but decisively, the way towards production is opening up. From it will be born the material culture of the future' (Ibid.).

14 The list included: interior designs and fittings for bookshops, lamps for photographers, lamps for the home, table lamps, driving goggles, an indicator for a tram, and advertising signs.

15 'However belatedly — later than the other countries — Soviet Russia was invited to take part in the Paris Exhibition,' wrote Ya. Tugendkhold, 'however modest the material means which the Soviet government was able to provide for this exhibition abroad, however difficult things may have been for the artistic industry in previous years, with every possible hardship, our section at the Paris Exhibition constituted an undoubted cultural victory of the USSR.'

Ya. Tugendkhold, 'SSSR na Parizhskoi vystavke' (The USSR at the Paris Exhibition), in *Krasnaya niva*, no. 39, 1935, p. 932.

16 This is how this section of the Paris Exhibition was described by the correspondent of the magazine *Rabochyi Klub* (The Workers' Club): 'In this building, each country had been assigned one or two rooms where there was a real competition to display the latest achievements of bourgeois luxury. From a bourgeois point of view the exhibition was successful. On show were an infinite quantity of dressing tables with space for innumerable scent-bottles, ottomans for corpulent idlers, very delicate and complicated pieces of furniture on which one can only sit sideways; an infinite number of screens and drapes, pianos and gramophones, beds and night tables, etc., etc... In short each country had done its best to put on show luxurious objects, made to satisfy the taste of a tiny number of people...

'But what did the representatives of the USSR do with their two rooms?

'They showed consistency: to everyone's horror, they were not at all interested in bourgeois comfort, which only serves to mask the space



In the Vkhutemas workshop, 1924.

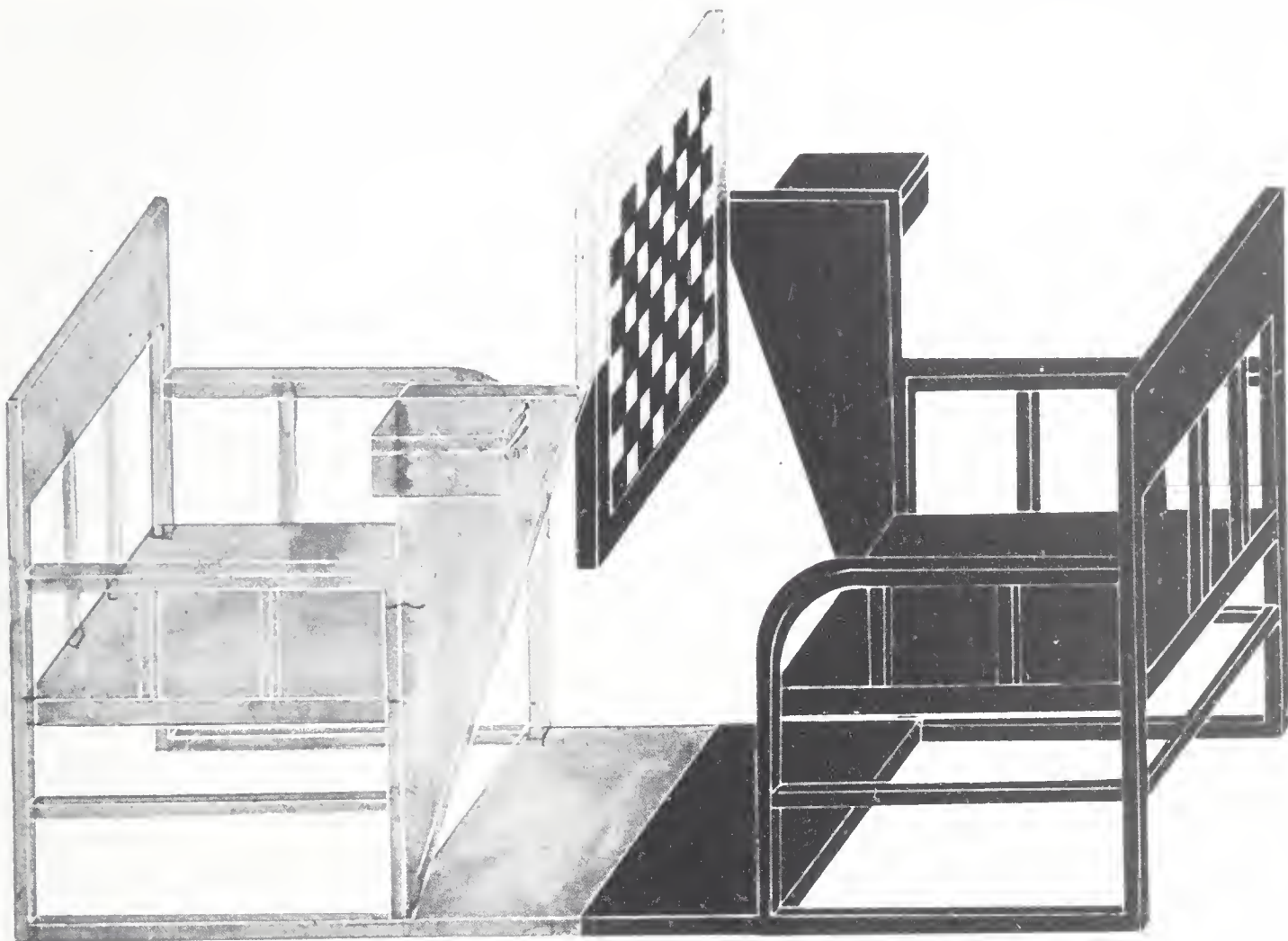
Z. Bykov. Teapot and mess tin, 1924.





Views of the interior decoration of the workers' club, 1925.





Chess table. Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25.

View of the Soviet pavilion at the Paris Exhibition, 1925.

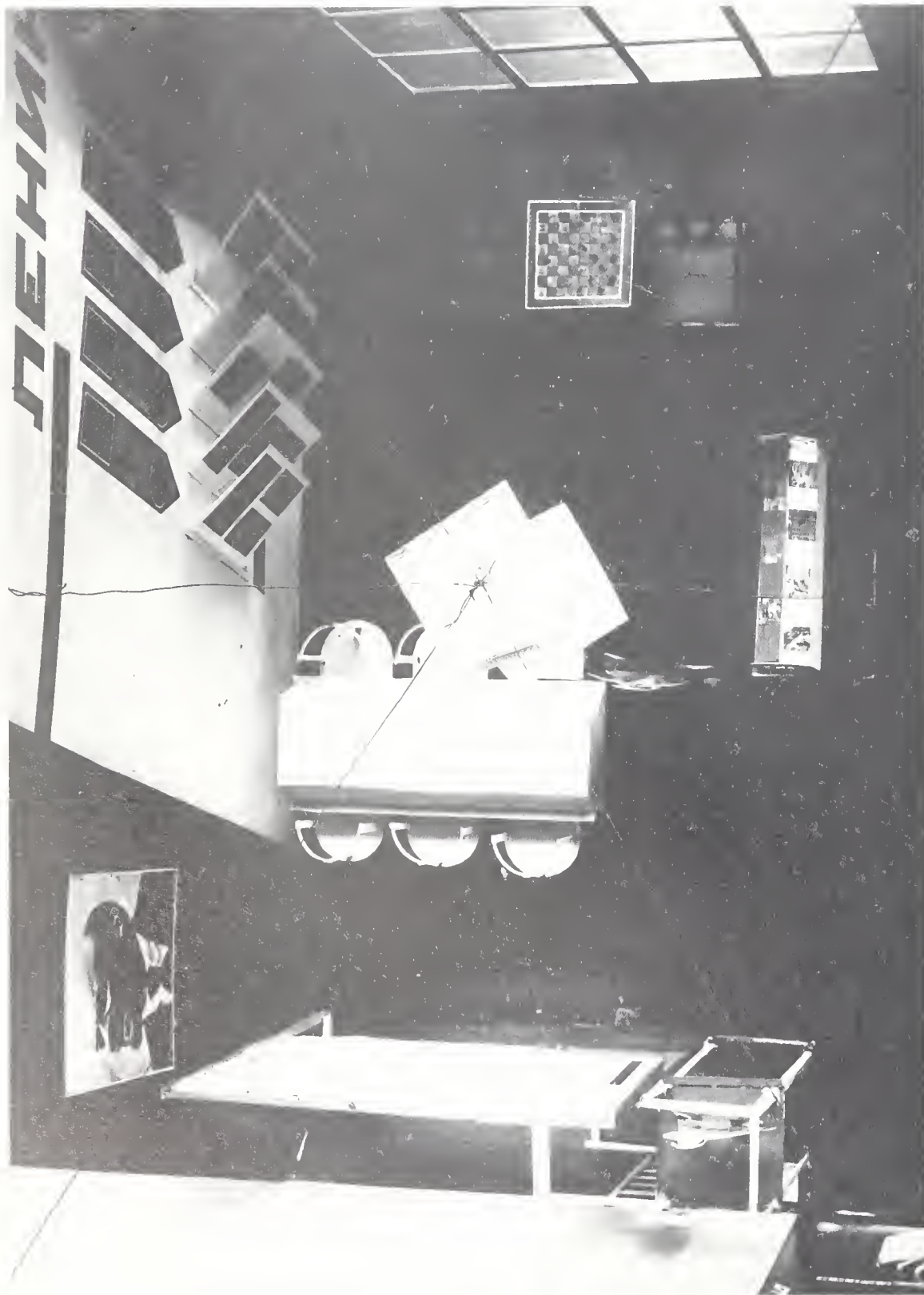


the direct influence of Rodchenko's own work. He had in fact invited Metfak students to work with him on publicity for the Mosselprom, handing over to them a proportion of his commissions for the make-up of magazines and books.

Interior design of the workers' club for the Paris Exhibition

With the introduction of new methods of teaching in the Metfak, Rodchenko came into his own as a designer, making a considerable contribution both to

Maquette of the workers' club, 1925. Photo Rodchenko



that remains unused, but displayed the achievements of a broad social stratum. To the horror of all... they have exhibited... an isba-cum-reading room and an example of a workers' club, with their related furnishings.

'... In the opinion of the specialists, as well as of the French press, obliged to give our attainments their due, the furnishings of this model workers' club are highly economical, light, practical, mobile and, most important, have been produced at a minimum of expense. The unit as a whole is a model of comfort and functionality — made up of a minimum number of objects intended, according to their designer, the Constructivist Rodchenko, to fulfil this or that requirement according to need...

'Many people have visited the place where the workers' club was on show; many saw its furnishings as a novelty, others sneered, architects and artists paid attention to every detail; but those who looked with completely different eyes were the French workers who visited the club in large numbers. "This is how our club ought to be!", exclaimed one worker touching the space reserved for the wall newspaper.'

P. Khermanov, 'Na Parizhskoi vystavke' (At the Paris Exhibition), in *Rabochyi Klub*, nos. 8-9, 1925, pp. 81-82.

17 Tsgaor, f. 5,283, 11, 6, ff. 55 and 64.

18 Rodchenko explained the artwork carried out under his supervision during the creation of the workers' club for the Paris Exhibition as follows: 'The basic requirements that I have singled out in the work on each object for the workers' club are:

1. economy in the use of floor sections in the club room and economy in the space taken up by an object so as to get the best possible use out of the object itself;
2. simplicity in the use of the object and its standardization, should it be necessary to expand or increase the number of its various parts (in the case of an increase in work or accumulation of material).

'Starting out from these requirements, almost all the objects have been constructed according to a principle of mobility, making it possible to use each object and then replace it when no longer in use. In my opinion this is a principle which is typical of the production of modern objects. I have been working along these lines for five years in the Faculty of Metalwork of Vkhutemas and the last two years have shown that an object designed for its dynamism has a larger number of potential uses and is better suited to modern living conditions.

A. Rodchenko, *Rabochyi Klub* (The Workers'

Club). *Manuscript, V.A. Rodchenko Archives.*

It is worth noting that the spotlights for the club were brought back onto the market by an Italian company in the seventies.

19 *Recalling his work for the Paris Exhibition, Rodchenko later wrote: 'In 1925... at the suggestion of Volodya [Mayakovsky], who represented the Academy of Arts on the committee for the 1925 International Exhibition in Paris, I was asked to put "The workers' club" on show at the Paris Exhibition. It was also necessary to make a number of copies of the posters we had done for the Mosselprom, the GUM and the Rezinotrest.*

'The club project, the maquette and the drawings were accepted, but it was decided to set them up in Paris in a very short span of time. Hence I had to go to Paris.

'As well as the club I was supposed to take care of the exterior and interiors of our pavilion, carry out the project, finish off three rooms in the Grand Palais and transport the objects that were to go on show.

'In short there was a lot to do!

'I left in March 1925 and set to work. In Paris I stayed in the pavilion from ten in the morning until six in the evening, and then I went home to draw. I worked for three months.

'Volodya came to Paris, on his way to America. We spent some evenings together. He showed me Paris and introduced me to Elsa Yurevic Triolet and Leger.

'Ehrenburg took me round Paris too. I already knew his wife L. Kozintseva from Moscow, since she had been my student at Vkhutemas.

'Speaking of art the Ehrenburgs said "what is it for?", just as I always used to say every time I saw art and not technique.

'At the time, I only acknowledged technique...

'At the Grand Palais, they unexpectedly assigned us three rooms. We did not have the money to fit them out and did not even know if the pieces on exhibition were enough. The Grand Palais had been used for exhibitions for some time, and so the walls were filthy, damaged, full of the holes left by nails, and the floor was in no better state; the light from above entered through dirty windowpanes.

'I was faced by the problem of how to prepare the rooms in a way that would cost little, and yet be fast and original. I had this idea: light shelves of plywood and walls lined with paper which I then painted with different colours; as for the floor... I painted it with black paste.

'I put panels in the corners and painted them

elaboration of the general principles of artistic production and to the actual realization of useful articles.

For Rodchenko the problems of design in Production Art were universal and involved the design of the whole of man's surroundings. The overriding concept in his own projects and those of his students was that the world of objects constitutes a system of correlated equipment. By his creative work, the designer had to link together the different sectors of daily life. This explains the extreme variety of the designs produced not only by Rodchenko but also by his students: utensils for everyday use, fittings for cultural and educational institutions, road signs, signs for exhibitions and for different means of transport.

Not only were projects by his students on show at the 1925 Paris Exhibition, but Rodchenko himself was represented by a set of model furnishings for a workers' club. This work of his attracted the attention of specialists from various countries and is still seen in print today, as the first example of an integrated design for interior furnishings.

The USSR's participation in this international exhibition of industrial and applied arts in Paris was of great political significance, above all as propaganda for a new model of Socialist life.¹⁵ As well as the national pavilions and the halls of the Grand Palais, a special building was fitted out for the exhibitors, to be used for the display of interior designs.¹⁶ At the close of the Paris Exhibition, the furnishings of the workers' club were presented to the French Communist Party and were used as a model for a French workers' club.

When Rodchenko's design had been discussed at the meetings of the committee in charge of the Soviet display at the Paris Exhibition, many fears were expressed that the 'essentiality' of the club's furnishings was not suited to an environment intended for recreation.¹⁷ Experience has shown how groundless were these fears.

But just how did Rodchenko produce these furnishings? At the same time as he was teaching in the Metfak, he often used to turn to wood for his own work, as if he was using this material to offset the preference for constructions in metal. It was wood that he used for the furnishings of the workers' club. These included the furniture for a reading room (table, chair, shelf for the display of books and magazines, glass case for posters, documents and newspapers); an area made up of easily assembled components for meetings, assemblies and readings of the 'living newspaper' (comprising a speaker's platform, a place for the chairman or editor of the newspaper, a movable wall, a screen for the projection of illustrative material, and a retractable screen strip for slogans and slides); a small corner for Lenin (a movable glass case for the display of materials, including space for captions, a movable showcase for posters and slogans and another for photographs); a stand for the wall newspaper with movable flaps for automatic making-up; a chess table with shelves that form a single block with two seats; spotlights to direct light up and down; 'Club Notices' and a space for glass slides. All the elements of the club furnishings were in four colours: grey, red, black and white.¹⁸

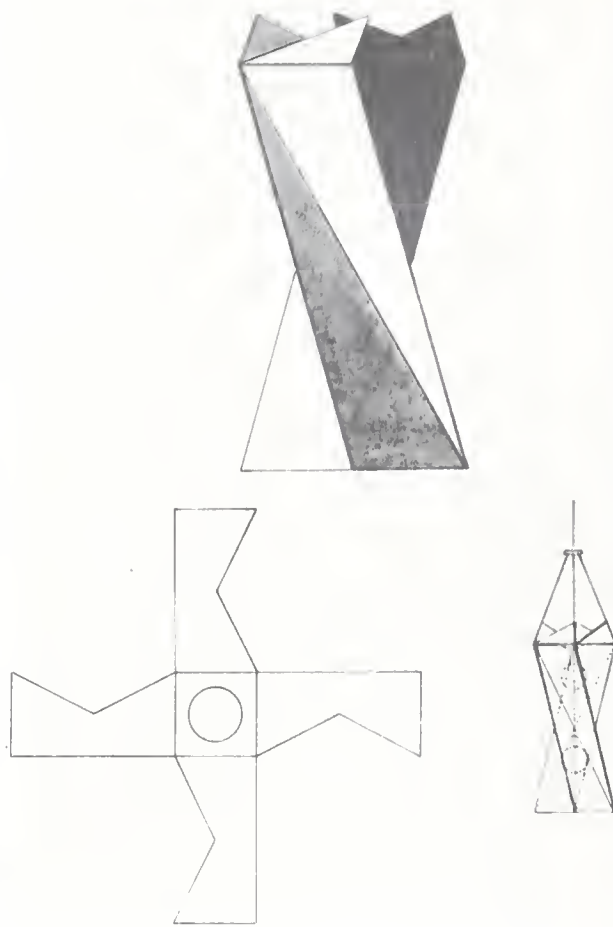
Rodchenko took part personally in the preparations for the Soviet display at the Paris Exhibition,¹⁹ staying in Paris from March to June of 1925.²⁰

On 23 March 1927, a discussion was held in the great hall of the Moscow Polytechnic Museum entitled 'Lef or Bluff?' It had been organized after a controversy had broken out between the editor of the magazine *Novyi Lef*, Mayakovsky, and the critics V. Polonsky and M. Olshevets. The motives for the discussion were the following: in the newspaper *Izvestiya Vtsik* had appeared articles by Olshevets ('Why Lef', no. 22, 28 January 1927) and by Polonsky ('Observations of a journalist, Lef or bluff?', nos. 46 and 48, 26 and 27 February 1927), in which the recently published magazine *Novyi Lef* had been attacked. In particular, passages from Rodchenko's correspondence from Paris which had appeared in the magazine came in for criticism in Polonsky's article.

On 5 March 1927, a meeting of contributors to the magazine *Novyi Lef* was



Table and chair for the club reading room. Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25.

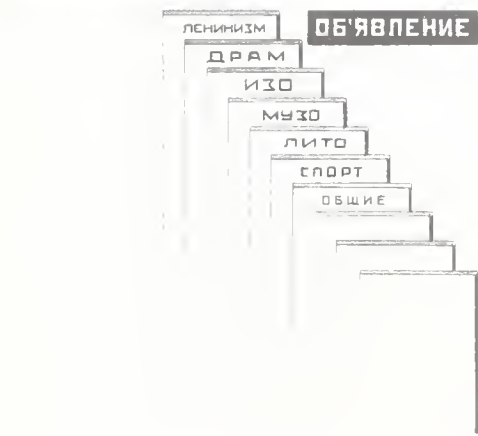


Project for a lamp, 1925. Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25.

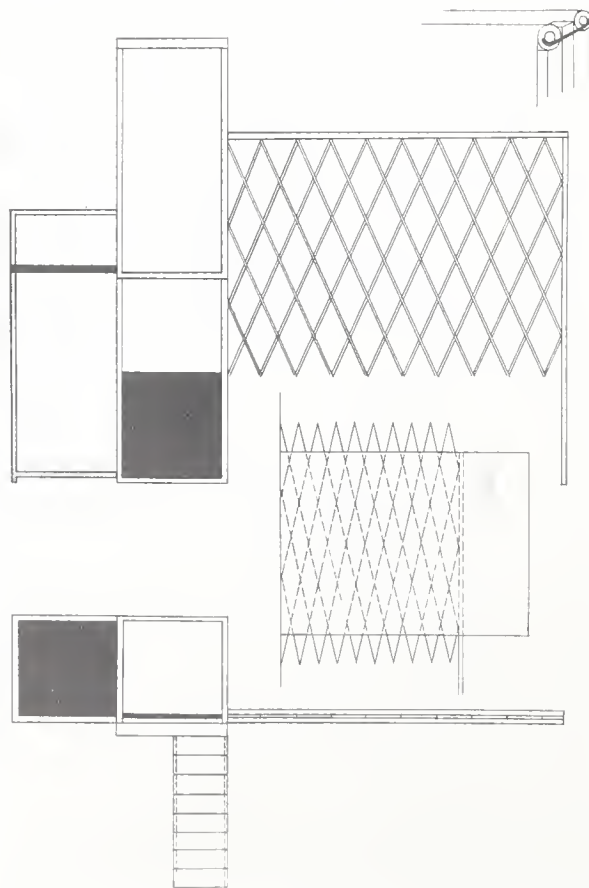


Reconstruction of the lamp. Arteluce, 1973.

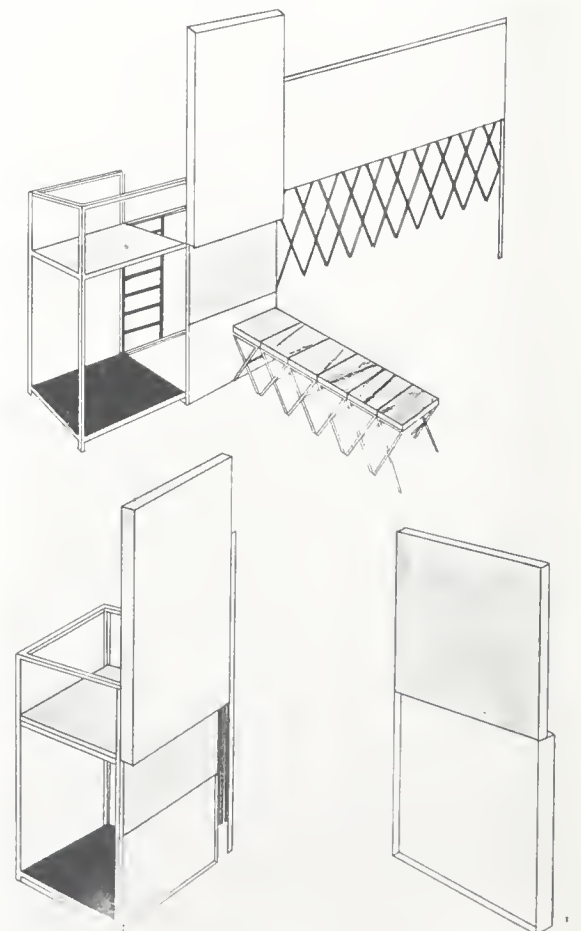
Club entrance and posters. Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25.



Dismountable platform (orthogonal). Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25.



Dismountable platform (axonometric). Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25.



grey, white and red; when one entered from the room of another country, Poland for instance, there was no sign saying that it was the pavilion of the Soviet Union and even the colour red was absent, but then as one moved further into the room there was more and more red and when one was already inside the pavilion a large inscription could be seen: "USSR".

A. Rodchenko, 'Rabota s Mayakovskim' (The work with Mayakovsky), in *V mire knig* (In the world of books), no. 6, 1973, pp. 66-67.

20 He wrote home regularly from Paris. Some extracts from his letters were published later in the magazine *Novyi Lef*.

'Tomorrow, 29 March, we leave from Riga for Berlin at eight in the morning. The tickets are for Paris...

'... I am in Paris. I am living in a garret. Five floors. It is already spring, the window is open. The traffic is terrifying...

'They have confiscated all my papirosy [Russian cigarettes]. Everything else is safe and sound; however there have been many delays with the customs.

'Why covers with Lenin on them? Why posters of Lenin?' However everything has been sorted out. It is not easy to carry many things... Publicity in Paris is mediocre, while in Berlin there is some good stuff. I look at much, see much and study, but my love for Moscow only grows.

'... Outwardly Paris is bigger than Berlin, [and] resembles Moscow. Outwardly even the people look like those of Moscow. The Germans on the other hand have more particular features.

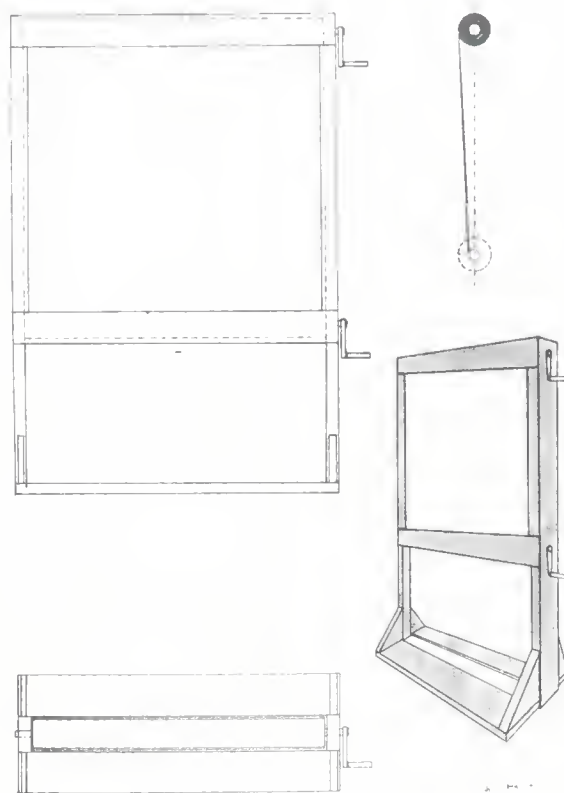
'... The pavilion is almost ready. Our pavilion will be the finest from the point of view of innovation...

'Yesterday we walked round Paris a little by night and by day and, to my great amazement, their advertising is so mediocre that there is nothing to say about it. Those advertisements in colour are not bad and not so much for what they advertise, as because there is a lot and the technique is excellent.

'Yesterday, watching people dance the fox-trot, I was overcome by a great desire to be in the East and not here. But I must learn to work in the West, organize things and then work in the East.

'How naive and decent the West is, and you can only grasp it perfectly by being here...

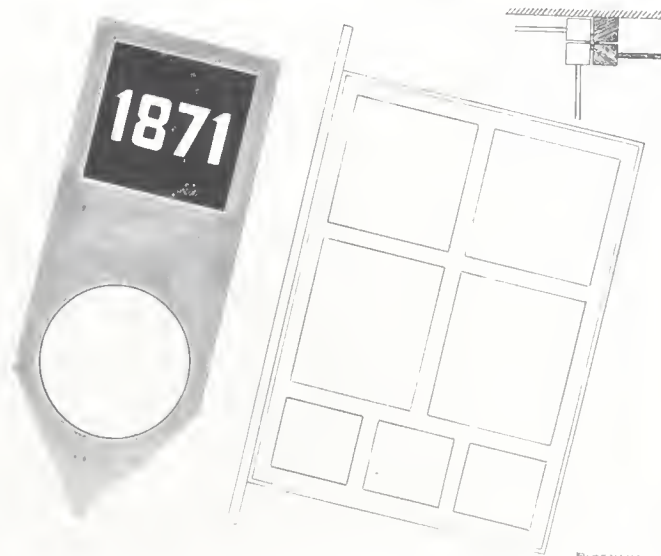
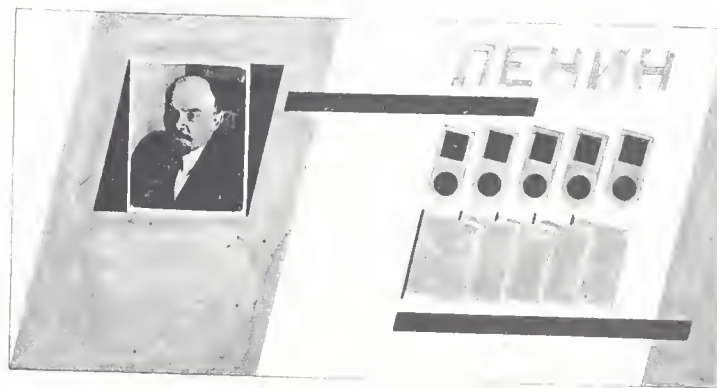
'The cult of women as objects. The cult of women like the one for cheese with worms and for oysters, is taken to such a point that now "ugly women" are in fashion, the women like



Showcase for Lenin posters. Paper, Indian ink, 36 × 25.

Lenin's corner. Paper, Indian ink, adhesive, 36 × 25.

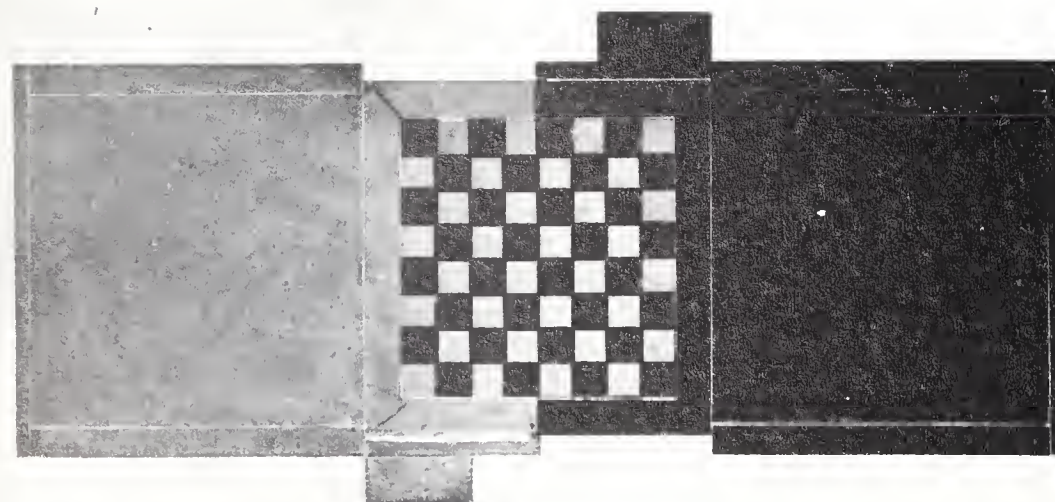
ЛЕНИНСКИЙ УГОЛОК



held to discuss the articles by Olshevets and Polonsky; Mayakovsky, S. Tret'yakov, V. Shklovsky, N. Chuzhak, Rodchenko, N. Aseev, M. Levidov, B. Malkin and Brik took part in the debate. After discussion of the aforesaid articles, the decision was taken not to respond to the two journalists in the pages of the *Novyi Lef*. They limited themselves to publication of the minutes of the discussion (Doc. 20).

Mayakovsky, by quoting at length from the letters by Rodchenko published in *Novyi Lef*, showed that Polonsky had merely picked out details of customs described by Rodchenko, taking them out of context, while the letters were full of acute political, social and journalistic observations. Mayakovsky's comment on the quotations from Rodchenko's letters was: 'This is truly a man, one who only wants to concern himself with organization... This is truly one of our Soviet

Chess table Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25



rancid cheese, with thin and elongated hips, no breasts and no lips and with incredibly long hands, covered with red blotches, Picasso-style women, women in the fashion of the "negroes", "sickly" women, "city garbage" women...

'Things are fairly cheap here because the material is of poor quality; in fact what is important is to buy cheaply, fashion changes and with the new fashion, new things have to be bought. English and American products can be bought, it is completely different from back home.

'Today I wandered through the suburbs of Paris, very pleasant. The workers play football, walk with their arms round each other, hang about in the gardens and dance in the cafés.

'... In the next few days I am going to visit a motorcar factory and a film studio. They have invited me to make the sets for a film...

'There is a system for printing on fabric at home and it is possible to make very fashionable clothes at home; I think that when I get back I will set up a workshop for you for the manufacture and printing of various small objects...

'Today I delivered drawings to those who had commissioned them from me, went to a factory where they make articles out of wood and metal, saw the machines...

'I go around with P. who shows me everything and is amazed that I see something everywhere. On Sunday he is taking me to visit some workshops and factories...

'Yesterday they wanted me to make some sketches for the sets of a film. When I read the script I refused, it was such rubbish and so vulgar...

'P. told me today that Picasso and Ehrenburg wanted very much to see me. I said, in a few days. There are some curious, small cameras...

'To tell the truth, there is nothing to see at this exhibition. They have set up a huge number of pavilions; seen from a distance they are all ugly, and if you look at them close up, an unrivalled horror... Overall, from an artistic point of view, Paris is provincial. The bridges, lifts, escalators, on the other hand, are really fine.

'... A lot of workers live in Annecy. For the moment I am watching how they live and how they work... I would like very much to observe their life more closely. But it is difficult. You are right, it is true that the streets are interesting when there is traffic and when they are lit up in the evening. I don't know where that advertisement you mentioned is, the one in the style of Toulouse-Lautrec. There are not many advertisements, or rather posters, that are worth looking at.

'For some time there has been a demand for

great novelty in Paris and now they are selling fabrics with that pattern we like to imitate so much in Moscow. I have even seen geometrical designs. Tell them in the factory — if they act the coward they will be going backwards again...

'They have painted the pavilion — to my design — red, grey and white; it has turned out very fine, and nobody says that it was my idea; everything round here is mine.

'The Grand Palais, the six rooms, the whole range of colours are mine, and they go on not mentioning me...

'Polyakov and I set up the rooms: (1) Hand-made objects, (2) Vkhutemas, (3) Graphics, publicity and architecture, (4) China and glass, (5) Fabrics; we still have to get the reading room ready, and perhaps the theatre...

'On the whole I am calm. Let them get annoyed with me, it was bound to go like that; I have to share out the work when there is too much, but they don't have a thing to do...

'Everybody is waiting for me at the "Rotonde". They all know I am in Paris, Picasso, Leger, and various Russians, but I don't go. So I think that in the next few days I shall change my angle of observation from that of technics to that of art...

'At the Exhibition there was the Show of Independents — what a lot of mediocrity and insignificance! The French, evidently, have nothing more to say. After Picasso, Leger and Braque there is emptiness, there is nothing else. Our Russians, who come from Moscow, snort, "Abstract painting!" And they are better than the others, but then little by little they give way to the romantic taste and it's all over...

'S. ... is a director; this is what he says: at the beginning the French had a great deal of admiration for Russian art, but then they began to fear, and even now they fear, the superiority and the talent of the Russians. They look at everything, they like everything, but they are afraid...

'And so... if the worst thing before was to be a Russian, now it is better not to be a Soviet citizen, and yet...

'This means that what matters is to work, work and work...

'The light that comes from the East is not just the liberation of the workers, the light from the East is a new rapport with man, with woman, with objects. Even the objects in our hands should be true comrades and not black and mournful slaves like here...

'Here there are millions of things to make you turn your head; they would make you want to buy wagon-loads and bring them home.

'So many objects are made that when you

citizens... These are the words of a Revolutionary.'

During the discussion the literary scholar I. Nusinov put this question to Mayakovsky: 'Pushkin did not publish prose, but wrote *The Captain's Daughter*. Where in your magazine is *The Captain's Daughter* of Lef?' Mayakovsky answered him: 'Our "captain's son" is Rodchenko.'²¹

Emblem of the workers' club. Paper, Indian ink, 36 x 25.





cannot buy them, you feel like a beggar...

'To live here, you would either have to be against everything or become a thief.

'Steal so as to have all this.

'It is just this that has made me love things the way we see them. Now I understand the Capitalist who has too little, but objects are the opium of life...

'It is true that they do not understand, at all what is a true object and what is a surrogate.

'And so, we must make and love true objects...

'We must stay united and create new relationships with those who do artistic work. We will not build any model of life if our mutual relationships are the same as the bohemian ones of the West. This is the problem. The first thing is our life. The second is to get together and stay united and have faith in one another...

'... now I have grasped that absolutely nothing should be imitated, but taken and remade according to our own taste.

'... well, the club is ready, I am sending you the photographs. It is so really simple, clean, full of light, that you never want it to get dirty. A lot of enamel paint, a lot of white, a lot of red and a lot of grey...

'At the inauguration an enormous crowd of workers gathered who greeted Krasin with the cry "Up with the Soviets" and struck up the Internationale.'

'Rodchenko in Paris. From letters home', in *Novyi Lef*, no. 2, 1927, pp. 9 and 21.

21 And this is what Mayakovsky said about Rodchenko: 'We have published the letters by Rodchenko about which Polonsky writes: "Twelve pages of family letters by the unknown Rodchenko". In *Lef* there is a note by Shklovsky: "If Rodchenko is unknown to Polonsky, that is not Rodchenko's fault but Polonsky's." However if Polonsky does not know him, let us enlighten him. Comrade Rodchenko has a place in Soviet culture in that he works in collaboration with the other founders of the left-wing front, the most revolutionary spokesmen of the artistic method in figurative art.

'Proceeding in step with technique, Rodchenko was the first, in the pages of this magazine *Lef* in 1923, to abandon the figurative image drawn with pen and pencil in order to move towards photomontage.

'This took place in 1923, and now the printers are given the order, signed by the editor, to print the photomontage or illustrations according to Rodchenko's method. In three years the strokes and lines of his pen and his first photomontages have changed the [printing] style of the book and of Soviet magazine covers.

Comrade Rodchenko has established the style of the new book covers. Among the best of these covers it is sufficient to recall: the complete works of Lenin and the catalogue of the Paris Exhibition, two hundred works in all, and all executed by him.

'When it was necessary to promote Revolutionary left-wing art in the West, whom did the Committee in charge of the Paris Exhibition send to France? Rodchenko, who has decorated almost all the pavilions in our section. It was he who prepared the reading room, the one which, along with the workers' club, was presented to the French Communist Party at the close of the exhibition. The Soviet Republic would never have been able to present an eyesore to the French Communist Party. It means that this gift was the public image of the Soviet Union at the International Exhibition.

'Hence it is perhaps just because of the credit due to him in the field of photomontage that Rodchenko is in a position to solve the problems presented by covers as well as those of other sorts, and thus has no cause to be disregarded by Polonsky.

'So, comrade Polonsky, look at the recent pages of *Izvestiya* and *Pravda* and, if you are interested in the history of the Communist Party, you ought to know that twenty-five pages of the edition by the Communist Academy — the whole story of the Party — are the work of Rodchenko... Hence it would be very strange to write a history of the Soviet poster without mentioning the name of Rodchenko. Let us move on, now, to *Mosselprom*, which brings us to the heart of our modern life. If you look closely at *Gosizdat*, you will see that both its standard emblem and its interiors are in the colours black and red-gold, characteristics that can be met with throughout the Soviet Union [and which were] created by Rodchenko himself.'

V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniya* (Complete works), vol. 12, Moscow 1959, pp. 332-35 and 649.

22 Let us examine four projects, carried out by Rodchenko's students as part of their course, in which different systems of conversion were used for items of furnishing.

Bykov and Galaktionov undertook projects on a single theme, a bookshelf that can be dismantled, coming up with different solutions. In Galaktionov's project the shelf was made up of a number of standard components, set one on top of the other in a compartment. Before use, the standard components fitted together into a compact block (almost a package). In Bykov's project the shelf-cum-showcase for books and magazines was a complex construction that

Rodchenko, Shklovsky and Mayakovsky in the garden of Gendrikov Alley 1926 Photo V. Stepanov



Design of convertible components and structures

The furnishings of the workers' club in Paris, executed to Rodchenko's designs, gave the artist an opportunity to test whether there was any real possibility of using convertible elements. In the Metfak various systems of conversion had been studied, at increasing levels of complexity. This kind of work had become possible towards the middle of the twenties when the students in his first group began to graduate. The students had made a thorough examination of different systems of conversion, gaining familiarity with the characteristics of the material and looking at the possibilities of construction.²²

The designs of Rodchenko and his students attracted the interest of both Constructivist architects (who published them in their journal, *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture)), and the theorists of Production Art.

The problem of a new type of furnishing was becoming increasingly urgent, with the growth in building on a mass scale and the construction of buildings for social purposes. In the second half of the twenties a lot of buildings began to go up for workers' clubs, which had until then, given their scarcity, been housed on existing premises and furnished with whatever came to hand. The new club buildings cried out for new fittings.²³

The models for new club furnishings developed in 1927 in the Izo Laboratory of the Moscow Proletkult (run at the time by the workers' clubs) under the guidance of Rodchenko were not published in the magazine *Novyi Lef* but in the *Rabochyi Klub* (The Workers' Club). The magazine, while it showed appreciation for Rodchenko's work, considered it necessary to publish a list of basic requirements for the fittings of the club along with the designs:

'1. The furnishings of the club must be constructed with due regard to the fact that they have to serve one or more precise collective functions.

Mayakovsky's stay in Berlin, 1924 (standing: A. Rodchenko, V. Mayakovsky, A. Lavinsky, M. Koltsov, L. Grinkrug; seated: A. Levin, N. Aseev, V. Shklovsky, B. Malkin). Photo Rodchenko.



could be extended to four levels. The shelf could be dismantled with books and magazines inside, turning into a container (in the shape of a parallelepiped). One of the most complicated projects involving the use of convertible components was the one produced, under Rodchenko's guidance, by the Metfak student I. Morozov in 1926. This was a multi-functional table which could be used as a desk, dining table and drawing table. Four folding chairs fitted into the lower part of the table, which also had sections for books, magazines and papers. Half of its surface could be raised, along a movable slide, and in the vertical position became a sideboard. The raised vertical section contained folding shelves, while lower down there were stands for plates and teacups. When the upper part of the table was lowered, it formed a dining table, without the plates inside breaking. The other half of the table's surface could be raised to the correct angle and used as a drawing board. The whole piece of furniture was easily movable on castors.

Another student, N. Sobolev, designed a folding bed that fitted in the vertical position into a niche in the wall.

²³ 'It is for two years now', wrote Rodchenko in 1927, 'that I have been teaching in the Izo workshop of the Proletkult... I have taken the students from the work of Izo to the design and invention of furniture and fittings for the club. An order from the VtsSPS [Central Trades Union organization] has been undertaken and is almost ready. The VtsSPS has seen it and is pleased. Mossoviet has taken part of the furniture; they are asking for designs for provincial clubs as well.

'The designers would like to see their projects published in *Lef*. Proletkult on the other hand wants them published at the moment of delivery; they are afraid! That is *Lef*!'

Novyi Lef, no. 6, 1927, p. 5.

²⁴ I. Chranikov and N. Serov, 'Klubnaya model' (The model club), in *Rabochyi Klub*, no. 2, 1928, p. 32.

²⁵ I. Chranikov and N. Serov, op. cit.

²⁶ While it was being made, Lev Kuleshov explained the idea of the film as follows: 'We realized that we could tackle a very serious and responsible job, i.e. that of creating Soviet and modern everyday objects...

'The theme of *An Acquaintance of Yours* is realistic but in essence represents a satire on the petite bourgeoisie in its modern way of life, not in society but in the family. It touches on daily life, the family environment and the way of life at home and in the office.

'The action takes place partly in the editorial office of a newspaper and partly in a condominium for journalists and in the apartment of a respectable worker who lives in a petit bourgeois environment.

'There is an almost total absence of plot and the events are insignificant, and yet it is necessary to pay a great deal of attention to what happens on the screen since it represents an important phenomenon in present-day life...

'During the shooting, our work team was joined by a new figure, Rodchenko, who had to work in close rapport with the director, building the sets, framing the shots, designing the costumes, staging the exteriors, etc.'

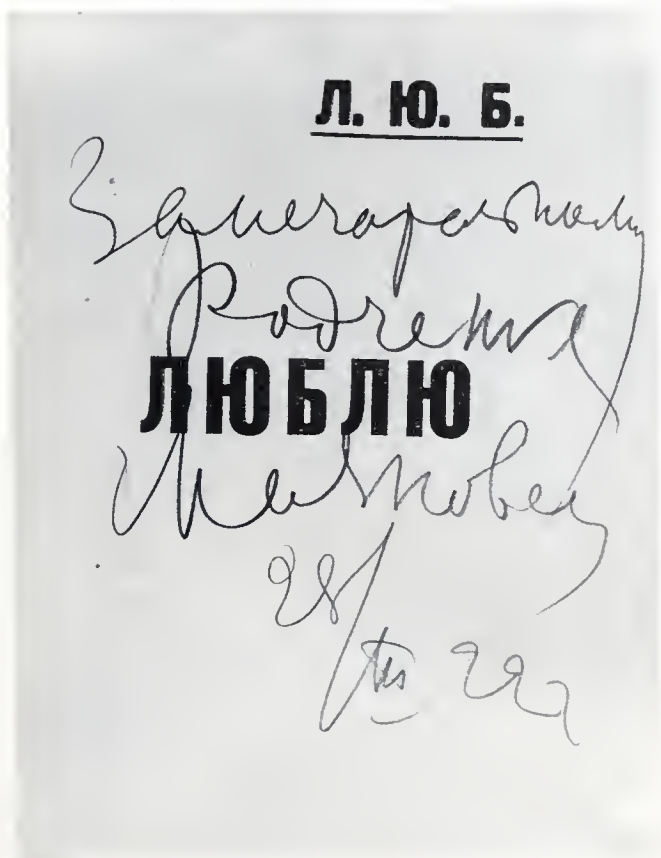
In Sovetskoe kino, 1927, no. 2, 1927, p. 6.

In an article entitled 'The set-designer and the physical setting in a thematic film' Rodchenko commented: 'I do not believe that the role of the set-designer in the cinema is the same as that of the "decorator"... Everything can be of concern to him and he has to take part in everything... With the script in his hand, a set-designer must construct a series of locations in which the characters of the film will move...

'By making the plan, he comes into contact with the whole setting and has to differentiate the different places where the action takes place, defining their relationships.

'... Everything demands equal attention, equal accuracy and careful work. To achieve an

Note from Mayakovsky to Rodchenko, 1922.



2. The furnishings of the club are very few and will have to fulfil various different functions. This is why an object needs to be convertible, i.e. change form when it changes function. (The attempt at a rational economy of equipment should be based on convertible objects, not low-cost ones.)

3. Given an object's adaptability to carry out first one, then another function, its construction must take into account not an arbitrary transformation but a reduction of the waste of effort and time to a minimum.

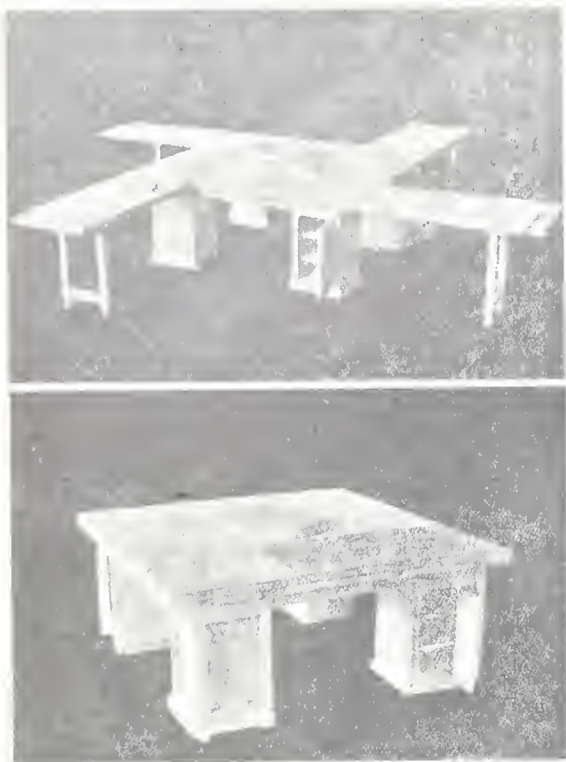
4. Considering that the activities of a collective often require objects to be cleared away to create space, it should be possible to "get them out of the way" very easily and stack them in the minimum of space.'²⁴

These were just the principles that Rodchenko had been promoting and developing in the design of new furniture (and of various kinds of equipment) during the twenties. Convertible systems were widely adopted in the studies for 'furniture for a model new club' as well: a folding armchair (that converts into a counter or table); a cupboard with a system of compartments designed for different functions (flat vertical containers, for example, that slide out sideways to hold documents) and a folding table; a buffet that occupies an area of one square metre when closed, but which opens to form a showcase for merchandise, with three legs, a sales counter and a shelf for pans and products; a reading table (four square plinths) that opens up to provide three times as much utilizable space; a showcase for notices — a complex convertible structure comprising a space for notices to be made up (with vertically moving clamps and compartments for the letters), an extractable worktable, spaces for messages and movable panels for posters.

The authors of the article in the magazine *Rabochyi Klub*, in claiming that 'the object answering to the requirements indicated here will easily be able to fulfil the various needs of the club and will make the club itself more cheerful', expressed the hope that 'an object of this type, playing a promotional role, would be able to enter, given its convenience and functionality, into the daily life of the worker'.²⁵

Rodchenko with students of the Metfak (standing: N. Sobolev, Rodchenko, I. Morozov, Z. Bykov, seated: P. Zhigunov and Makarov), 1925





Folding chair-cum-armchair, convertible into bench counter or table (made up of two elements).

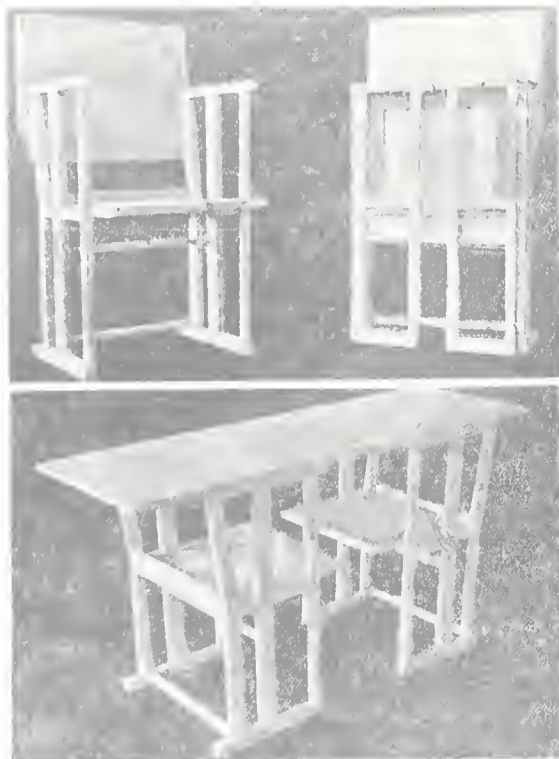
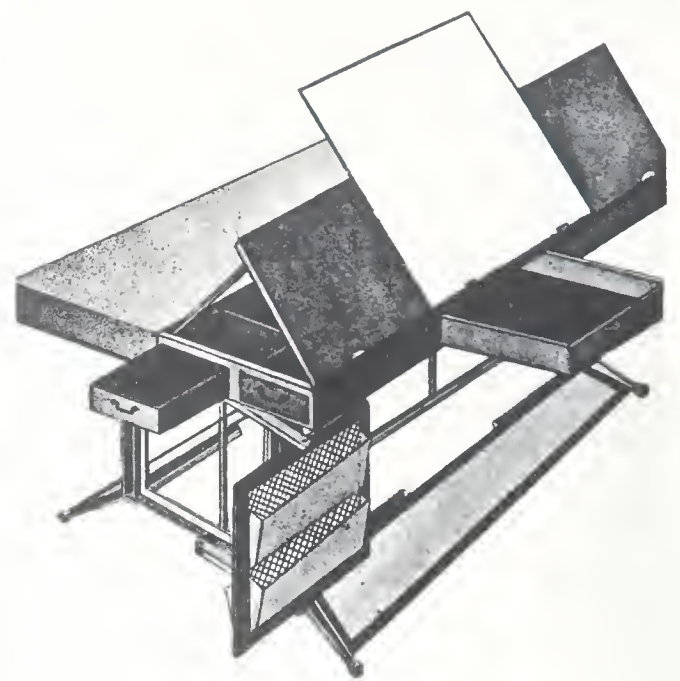


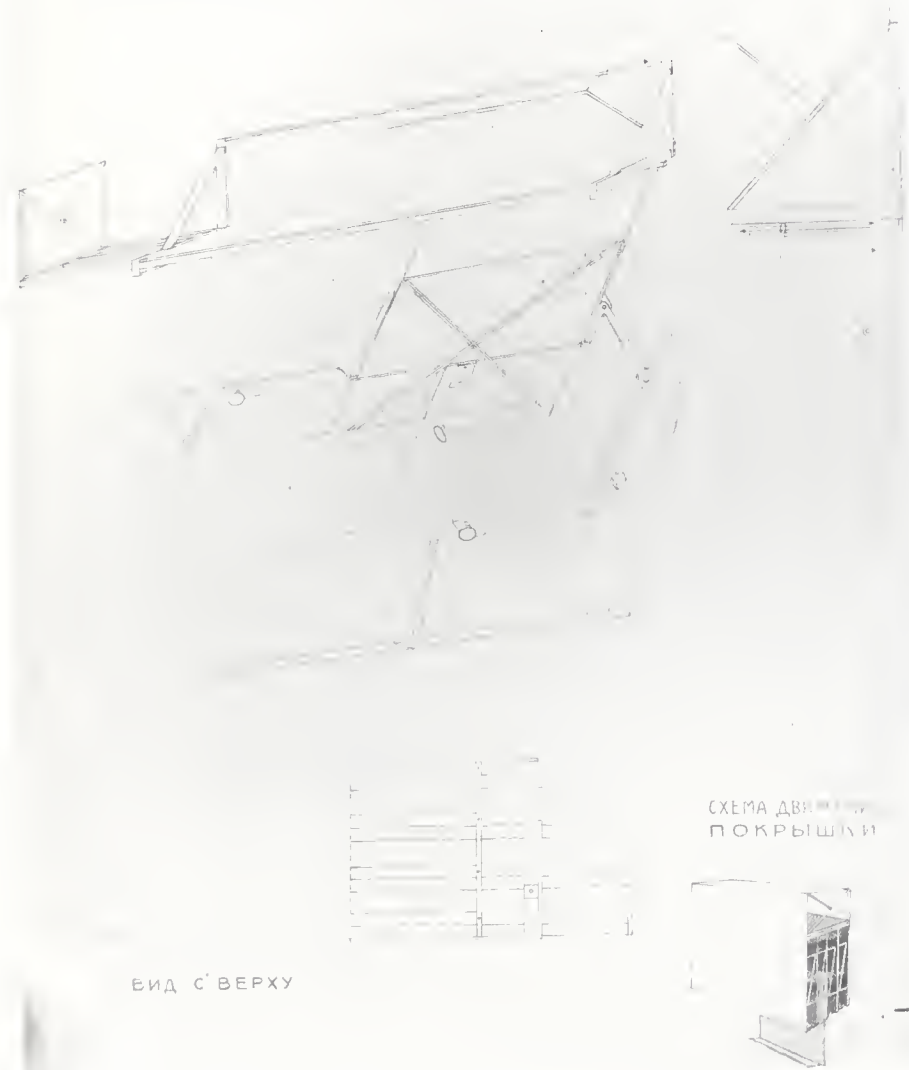
Table for reading room, in four positions.



I. Morozov. Standardized convertible table, 1926.

Z. Bykov. Folding wall shelves for books and magazines, 1926.

ПРОЕКТ ПОЛКИ ДЛЯ КНИГ И ЖУРНАЛОВ



effect, the set-designer must be much more careful and work much harder to solve the problems presented by any small room than he has to for the overall set-designing which certainly gives more satisfaction.

'Here one often works in two "studios" and in another adjusts "everything in bulk". There is no respect for the material object: this lack of culture is one of the most important factors in the making of a film.

'... large-scale items — stairs, railings, heavy furniture — ... are all set up in one room.

'The table in the iron foundry of *An Acquaintance of Yours* is a very specific element and cannot be taken away from the room; it is what characterizes the meeting hall. In *Vasilchikov's* home there may be one or two bookcases, four or five chairs, but it is essential not to get rid of the extractable bed, the multi-functional table-cum-writing desk, the dining table and all the objects which characterize the life of the Soviet reporter who is involved with the scientific organization of labour, objects which promote a new model of material life.

'Even the most insignificant object which appears in the film must have a precise purpose, must be used in the proper way.

'In the cinema the important thing is to be able to get rid of objects that have no function of their own, the cinema cannot stand realism... The film cannot put up with shots in which there are eleven bottles when the actors are only drinking from two; in any case the viewer would not see the others...

'There are objects which are not provided for in the screenplay but which can be helpful if used in the right way.

'For example, the room of a "flighty girl" had to be designed; usually one puts pictures on the wall, flowers, vases, shells. I went in search of these articles and got two vases, but then my eye fell on a glass elephant.

'Set on a shelf this totally useless elephant was by itself sufficient to get across the idea of who lived in that room, so that the rest was superfluous. Naturally it was illuminated in the right manner and was a hundred per cent successful.

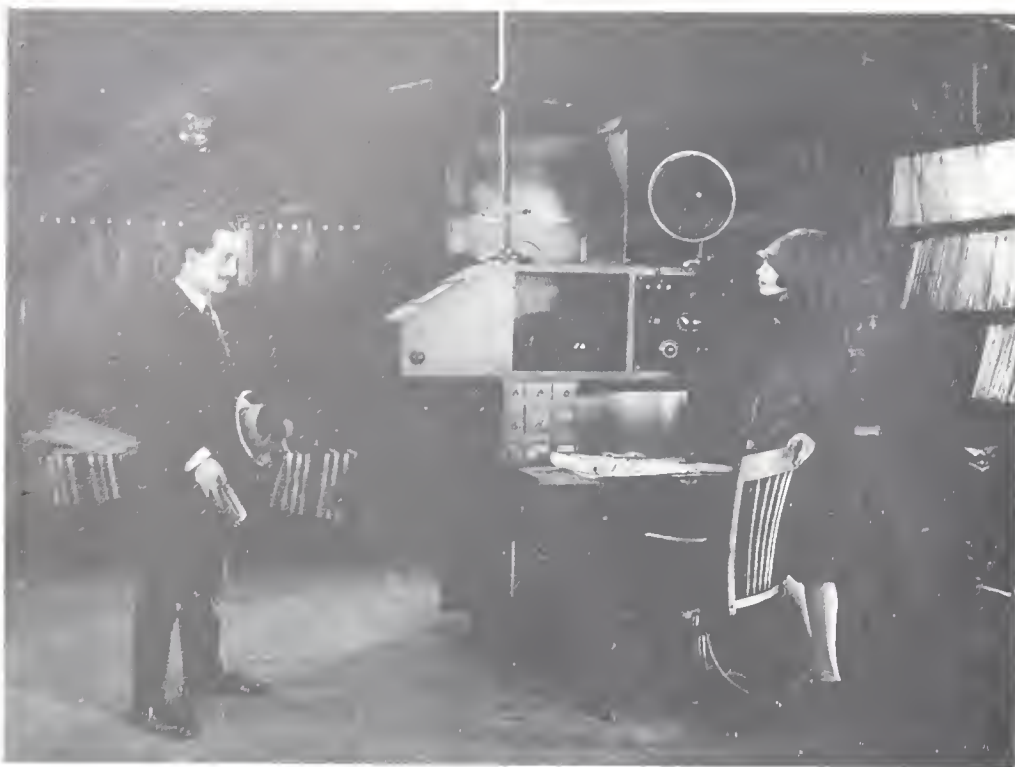
A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova in the role of two strangers in S. Eisenstein's film *Old and New*, 1926. Eisenstein wrote on the photograph: 'In memory of your debut in the cinema. Moscow, summer 1926.'

New settings and new objects in design for the cinema and stage

In the twenties great importance was attributed to the production of new objects and furnishings for both public and private buildings. For this purpose, the periodical press (in which the models of these designs appeared), exhibitions, the cinema and even the theatre were mobilized. The question of new objects was linked to the broader and at the time more topical question of the creation of a new model of living.

When Rodchenko became involved with the set-design for the film *The Presswoman* (*Zhurnalistka*) by the director L. Kuleshov (working title of the film *An Acquaintance of Yours* (*Vasha znakomaya*)), he made extensive use of the principles and methods of construction he had devised for new furnishings, convinced that this type of work was an integral part of the movement under way in those years in favour of the Scientific Organization of Labour (NOT). The action of the film takes in scenes of office and house interiors (such as the room of the reporter





Still from the film *The Presswoman*: the photoreporter's room of the NOT

Montage of scenes from the film *The Presswoman*. Photo Rodchenko.



'Later on we added a flower vase and put it not in the usual place but on the couch, and instead of a flower we put a clothes hanger in it.

'The important thing for the set-designer of a film is to find the typical object which has not yet been filmed, to display a trivial object from a new point of view, in a way it has never been seen before.

'What matters in the cinema is to have a sense of proportion. The cinema is not life and nor is it the theatre. In the cinema one is limited by the gradual development of the treatment. At best you are not aware of what is superfluous, but sometimes the superfluous will turn out to be annoying...

'One more remark. Since visual reaction time in the cinema is very short it is necessary to emphasize or tone down many details.

'To show that there is dirt and confusion in the editorial office, everything must be made much dirtier than it would be in reality...

'It is a mistake to insist on special effects to convey "the emotional state of the hero"; anything can become exaggerated or vice versa, it depends on the thing itself.'

A. Rodchenko, 'Khudozhnik i "material'naya sreda" v predmetnom filme' (The set-designer and the 'material environment' in a thematic film), in *Sovetskoe kino* (Soviet Cinema), nos. 5-6, 1927, pp. 14-15.

27 In *Novyi Lef*, no. 6, 1927, p. 3.

28 In the article he states: 'Nowadays a healthy art tries, through its best representatives, to assert its right to be "a factor in Socialist edification", making an effort to enter into daily conduct, into the heart of the problems entailed in its reorganization. Certain horrible ways of life may be destroyed not merely by economic means (the budget, building programmes) and scientific means (sanitation in housing) but also through artistic education.

'We can regard artistic education as complete only when a perfect technical form (a rational one) can produce a feeling of pleasure and when at the same time another less perfect form can arouse a feeling of horror and disgust. To achieve these results in the field of artistic education, art has no choice but to link its activity with appropriate sectors of industry. Only when art is completely bound up with (technical and scientific) industry will it become possible to launch a planned attack on trivial taste and fight for the interests of future socialization.

'In the cinema this contact is becoming a de facto reality, and we can record some concrete achievements. In the film *An Acquaintance of Yours* (*The Presswoman*) the viewer is con-

fronted not with the usual scenery but with a model set of furniture and a rationalization (however primitive to start with) of working conditions. In the room where the female reporter lives, reconstructed in the studio in accordance with the most recent building standards, the viewer learns to recognize a series of absolutely new ways of life which the script or the direction alone could not possibly have conveyed against the setting of an old type of house.'

N. Lukhmanov, 'Zhizn kakoi ona dolzhna byt' (Life as it should be), in *Sovetskii ekran* (Soviet Screen), no. 15, 1928, p. 6.

29 'The objects', he wrote, 'reflect the image of the man, the class, the country... Objects are useful to the new man only within the limits of their functionality... This shift towards a rationalization of our living conditions, towards

who works for the Scientific Organization of Labour) in which all the pieces of furniture are convertible, multi-functional objects. One cupboard contains a folding bed. The work place is particularly interesting: the whole set is made up of components that can be dismantled, extended and moved; everything is carefully studied, within reach and constructed on the principle of the maximum working comfort.²⁶

Rodchenko, who had a shrewd understanding of the role of objects in a film and the kind of influence they wielded over the audience, did everything he could to use *The Presswoman* to promote his new household articles and office equipment.

In 1927 Rodchenko wrote: 'At the screening of the film *The Presswoman*, Trainin said: "Rodchenko is highly realistic. Our Utkin now, he has imagination!" And now everyone talks about "daily life with imagination".'

The critics did not fail to draw attention to how the problems of a new setting had been solved in *The Presswoman*. N. Lukhmanov, who had discussed the new architecture and Production Art on several occasions during the twenties, wrote an article with the significant title 'Life as it ought to be'.²⁷ In his article 'The objects', N. Kaufman spoke of the active role of objects in the modern film, giving as an example the chairs in *The Presswoman*.²⁹

From 1927 to 1928 Rodchenko designed sets for the films *Moskva v Oktyabre*

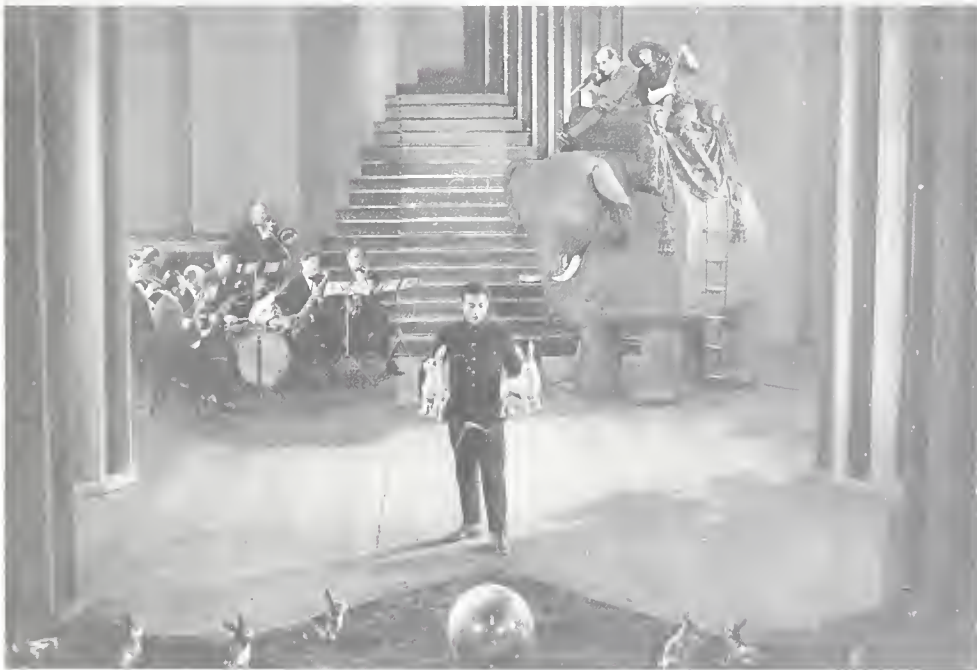
A scene from the film *The Presswoman*. Photo Rodchenko.



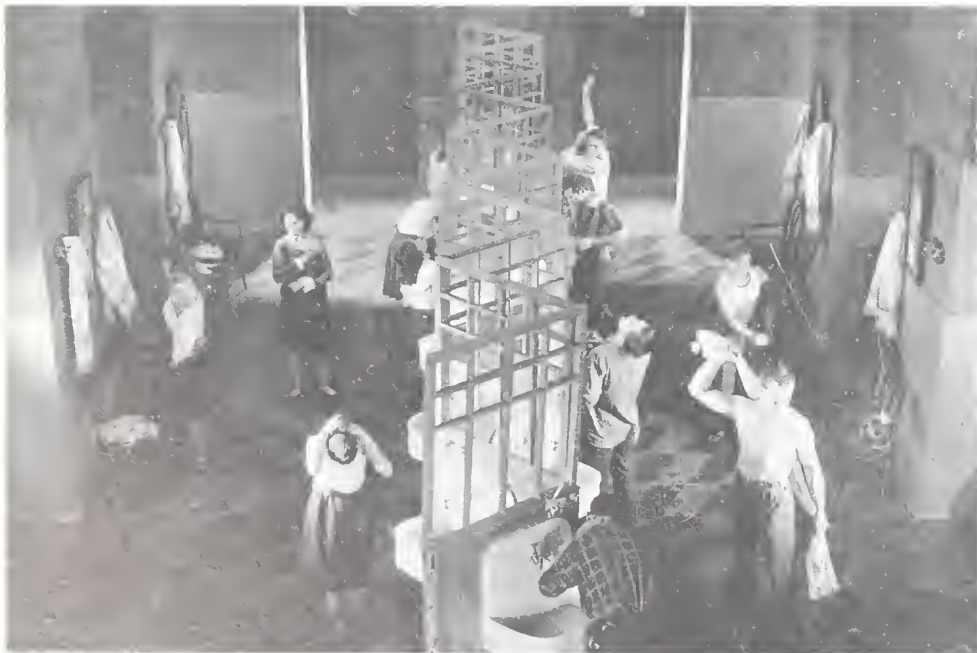


Still from the film *The Presswoman*: the office.

Still from the film *The Presswoman*: the rabbit hunt



Still from the film: the bath.



an economic utilization of material culture, this clearing away of the dust of centuries and useless accretions, the rejection of this overflow from the museums that we have at home, is one of the positive aspects of the new way of life...'

N. Kaufman, 'Veshchi' (The objects), in *Sovetskii ekran* (Soviet Screen), no. 15, 1928, p. 10.

30 B. Arvatov, 'Ot rezhissury teatra k montazhy byta' (From theatrical production to the construction of a life style), in *Ermitazh*, no. 11, 1922, p. 3.

31 B. Arvatov, 'Teatr i plakat' (Theatre and poster), in *Zrelishcha* (Spectacle), no. 6, 1923, p. 7.

An article by Ippolit Sokolov published in the same period had the same theme: 'The theatre has always been the "propagator" of conduct. In every era the theatre has been the arbiter of fashion.

'In every country the theatre has always laid down the fashions in clothing, furniture, upholstery, behaviour and gesture. In every era the public has taken the style of its gestures, dress and furniture from the stage.

'The theatre establishes the style of an era in painting, sculpture and architecture.

'The theatre of our own time can create a new way of life. In the theatre it is possible to accomplish what it has not been possible to accomplish in life...

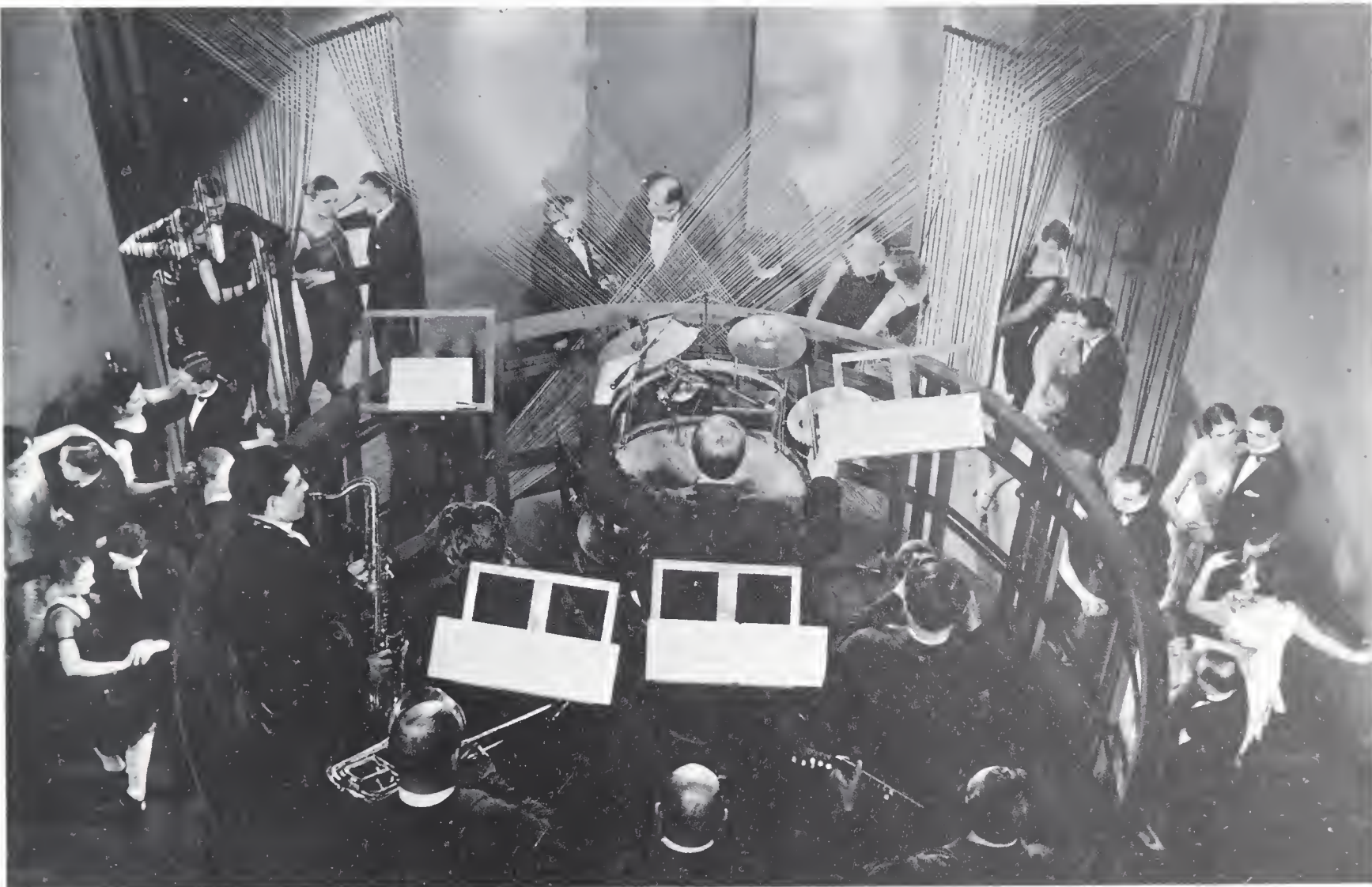
'With the aid of words, gestures, movements and objects, the theatre should promote a new model of life.'

I. Sokolov, 'Revolutsiya byta' (The revolution of the way of life), in *Ermitazh*, no. 13, 1922, p. 3.

32 For this play Rodchenko designed chairs, armchairs and a table which could be opened and closed with great ease. A couch could be transformed into a sort of bench (the back of the couch folded forward on hinges, forming the surface of a table). An armchair opened up to form a bed. Rodchenko had come up with an original idea for an office desk; it was in the shape of a parallelepiped from which, according to need, could be extracted, unfolded and opened up: an armchair for working, a chair for a guest, various work surfaces, a shelf, etc. A showcase opened out on a vertical hinge.

He also designed a wardrobe and created two new types of lamp, one of which (the table lamp) was even reproduced by an Italian firm in the seventies.

33 'The staging of the performance, done by Rodchenko, is remarkable,' wrote A. Asmarin. 'Of particular interest is the furniture, designed in a rational and intelligent manner, for a club,



Still from the film *The Presswoman*: dancing.

A still from the film. In the main role: I. Ilinsky.





Stills from the film *The Presswoman*.



an apartment in a new house, a Party cell and the director's studio.' In *Novyi zritel* (New Spectator), no. 14, 31 March 1929, p. 9.

An article published in *Pravda* ran: 'The artist—constructor A.M. Rodchenko has carried out a valuable experiment... The individual objects have been designed in an intelligent fashion and could be adapted to everyday life. An attempt to create new forms has been made in the field of clothing as well.'

In *Pravda*, 28 March 1929.

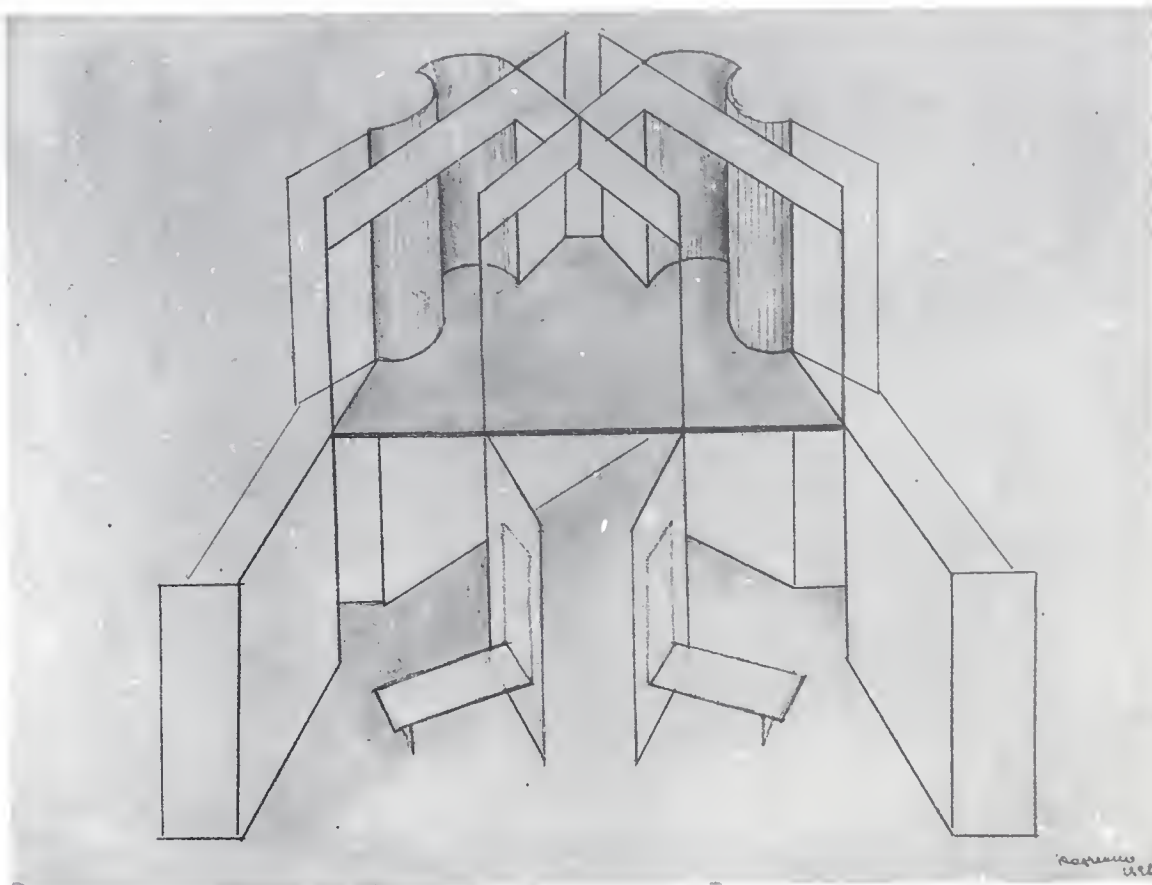
34 'The artist Rodchenko', Novitsky went on to say, 'has quite rightly made use of the stage to publicize rationality, convenience and functionality through the theatrical medium. He has shown us extremely simple pieces of wooden furniture that can be dismantled and used for more than one purpose, not getting in the way of people's work and taking up the minimum of space. Objects play their part in the struggle for a new psychology and a new way of life. There exist objects which subjugate psychology, hamper work and ruin taste and awareness. But there are also objects which produce energy, answer to man's needs and save time. Rodchenko has broadened the social concept of the playwright's theme by bringing the problems of the culture of objects into the foreground.'

P. Novitsky, 'O novoi zhenshchine' (On the new woman), in *Daësh*, no. 3, 1929.

35 I. Berezark, 'Veshch na stsene' (The object on the stage), in *Novyi zritel*, nos. 32-33, 1929, p. 10.

36 Lukhmanov wrote that manufacturers of furniture followed the 'demand of a pseudo-aesthetic market' and imitated 'old, customary forms...' to indulge the customer. In his opinion art had to take the initiative to eliminate the existing gap between new requirements and the current level of production. 'The artist... can make the demand of the market and the requirements of the science of housing sanitation coincide with his productive activity. The present market trends favour this situation.'

According to Lukhmanov, 'the shortage of merchandise on the market encourages the sale of new industrial products, in keeping with the plans of the cultural revolution. The design of fabrics, the construction of furniture, the shape of kitchen utensils, standard fittings and merchandise, all types of packaging, in short, everything that goes to make up the aesthetics of daily life can introduce a unique industrial style into common usage.' But it was necessary to fight for new aesthetic attitudes and to publicize the new objects. 'In the theatrical art, two recent examples suggest that this struggle has begun'; he



Designs for a convertible scenery platform. Paper, pencil, 26.7 x 36.



(*Moscow in October*, directed by B. Barnet), *Albidum* (director L. Obolensky) and *Kukla s millionami* (*The Doll with Millions*, directed by S. Komarov). He designed men's and women's changing rooms, divided by zigzag-shaped partitions, for *Kukla s millionami*, and rational office furniture for *Albidum*.

Ever since the start of the twenties, Arvatov had been using his articles to exhort all those working in the theatre to make an effort to bring new patterns of living into Soviet society, urging them to be 'the engineers and builders of a new life style' and 'to transform their studios into engineering workshops and factories

for the new man and for a better way of living'. " 'The theatre', wrote Arvatov, *is a figurative artistic workshop for a new style of living*. The new ways of life, altering under the influence of historico-social evolution, will settle into an early form of organization that will initially be little evolved from the artistic point of view, then, passing through the theatre, they will become increasingly integrated with everyday life.'¹¹

In 1929 Rodchenko had a great opportunity to display to the public a complex system of new interior furnishings, in the set-designs for A. Glebov's play *Inga*, put on at the Theatre of the Revolution. The action of the play called for a contrast to be made between the old model of bourgeois life and the new conditions of work, living and recreation of the young working class. Rodchenko designed a variety of elements with enthusiasm, concentrating all his attention on their rationality and resorting to the principle of conversion and the use of easily assembled and dismantled components. The performance was merely a pretext to set up a complex system of furnishings. Consequently the concept of transformation governed the whole artistic approach to the play.

Rodchenko created a single set which could be transformed into an apartment bedroom, a club, an office, etc. This was not a purely theatrical solution, useful for a quick change of scenery. The transformation of the set took place along the same lines as would be used in the transformation of an apartment interior: the walls 'opened' and were converted by various devices into tables, benches and beds.¹²

The performance was not an event from the theatrical point of view. The critics hardly noticed it. At that time, the cultural event lay in having displayed new furniture on the stage. Even theatre critics gave their exclusive attention to this aspect.¹³ The rector of Vkhutemas, P. Novitsky, who was a consistent supporter of the ideas of Production Art in the press as well as in the institute of which he was the director, came out with a detailed review of the play.

'The professional drama critics', he wrote, 'have neglected this play. With indulgent indifference the reviewers have dismissed it as a not very successful performance. And yet no other play this season has had such a major and indubitable success with the public as this one has.' The greatest merits of the play, according to Novitsky, lay in its having expressed the problems 'of the formation of a new personality in the female proletarian environment' in such a penetrating manner and in the fact that the theme of the script had given 'to the director and set-designer the opportunity to tackle the problem, in very clear terms, of how to decorate an interior, of which objects to choose and of how to conceive a life style in artistic terms'.¹⁴

However not everyone greeted the proposed solutions with enthusiasm. An argument sprang up over the play's scenery. Although I. Berezark's article 'The objects on the stage', which was published as an opening to the discussion, emphasized that the theatre had a great role to play in promoting 'a new way of looking at apartments and residential buildings' and that 'the models of a new way of living with rational, comfortable, economic and tasteful furnishings should be shown on the stage', it criticized the set-design. 'In this entertainment', wrote Berezark, 'a unity of style is lacking. The play, produced by the extreme left-wing set-designer Rodchenko, has turned out to be old wine poured into new bottles. The wooden furniture stacked up at the front of the stage is an amusing trick for the audience. The audience does not understand the connection between this furniture and the new stage setting, including that of the club and the communal canteen.'¹⁵

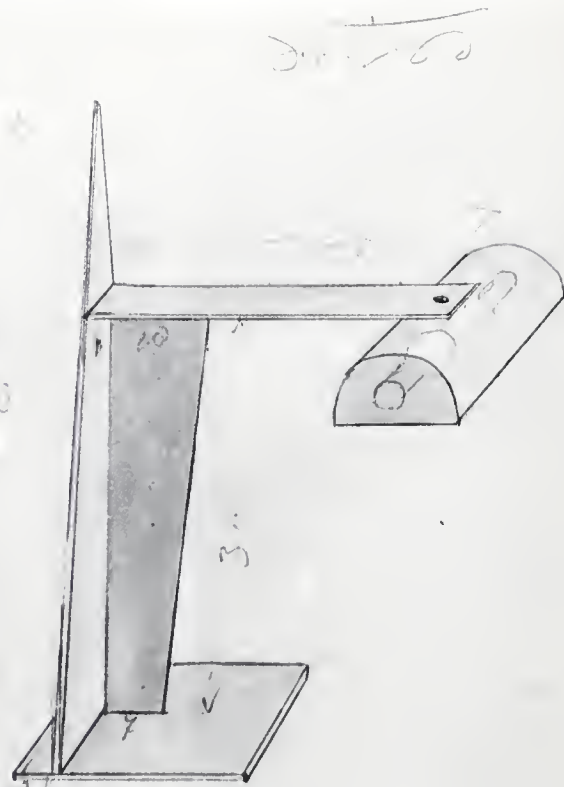
Lukhmanov immediately replied to the author of so critical a judgement with the article 'In defence of the objects'. Before the appearance of Berezark's article, Lukhmanov had already praised Rodchenko's work highly in connection with the scenery for *Inga*, insisting on the importance of these pieces of furniture, produced at a time when design and the manufacture of new household articles were only in their infancy.¹⁶

In the polemic answer to Berezark's article, Lukhmanov repeated his view of

was referring to the plays for which Rodchenko designed the sets: Glebov's *Inga* and Mayakovsky's *The Bed Bug*.

Above all Rodchenko had succeeded in demonstrating the practical necessity of 'constructing new and modern standard models for the manufacture of furniture'. 'In every act of the play there is something of interest for our daily affairs: an office table or even just a desk, a bed, a chair. All these objects are new and constructed in an interesting fashion. The display of these articles on the stage has a great educational significance. In the immediate future it is objects like these that will have to be supported on the economic plane so that they can establish themselves in our market. Their rationality and the hygiene that such objects presuppose favour their success.' Lukhmanov not only held the objects designed by Rodchenko in high esteem, but he also thought well of the play, simply because the director had not set out to 'demonstrate the superiority of Constructivist objects over those on the old pattern', had not worried about explaining 'why table and chair were an integral part of a single

Table lamp for *Inga*, act II. Paper, Indian ink, pencil, 36 x 26.7



Лукманов

organic construction, why bed and chair had to be of the folding type' and had not 'required the actors to move in an unnatural way between these new kinds of object. This would be enough to show how unjust are the claims that Rodchenko's furniture in *Inga* is not very convincing which have been put forward in a number of reviews.

N. Lukhmanov, 'Bez slov' (Without words), in *Zhizn iskusstva* (The Life of Art), no. 22, 1929, p. 4.

37 N. Lukhmanov, 'V zashchitu veshchi' (In defence of the object), in *Novyi zritel*, no. 36, 1929, p. 3.

38 E. Rakitina, op. cit., p. 153.

39 Rodchenko recalled his work as the set-designer for *The Bed Bug* as follows: 'They were already rehearsing the first part, the one set in the present day whose sets had already been made by the Kupryniksy "brothers" while the

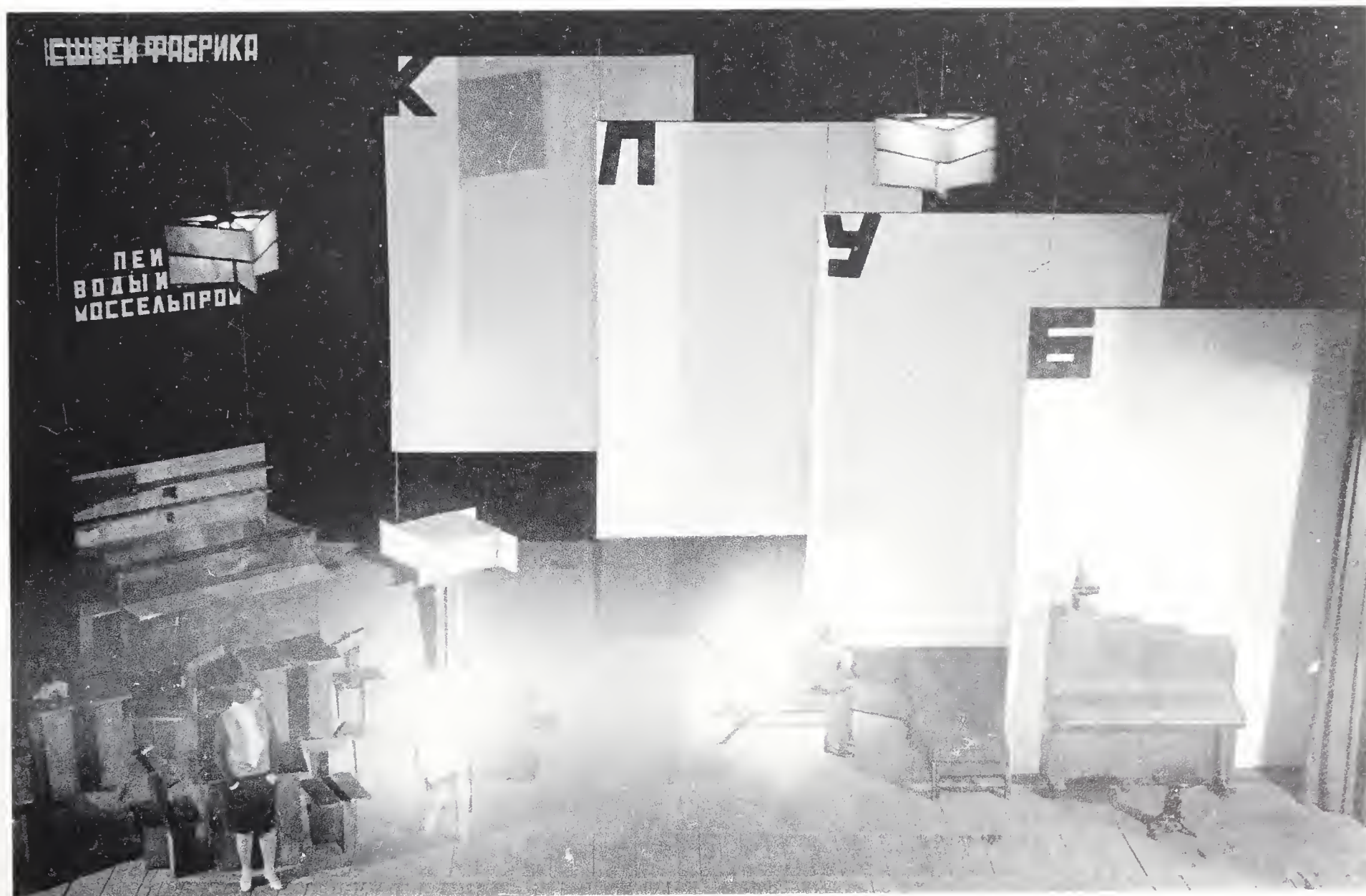
the importance and modernity of Rodchenko's proposals, presented for public inspection through the medium of the theatre. Once again and with still more force he stressed his opinion that 'the inventor of new Constructivist objects can heal the harmful split... that exists between science and light industry'. He went on to say that 'theatrical scenery and the cinema screen should be a sort of daily bulletin recording experimental work in the light industries and art colleges'.

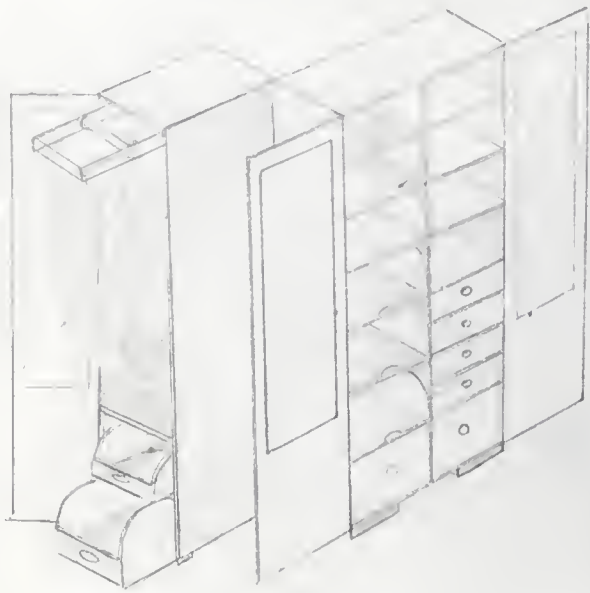
On the subject of Rodchenko's debut in the theatre, E. Rakitina, a historian of set-design, wrote at the end of the twenties: 'The involvement of Productivists and Constructivists in the design of scenery for plays had, of course, only two aims. Firstly, that of contributing, to the best of their ability, to the rapid destruction of the traditional theatre. Secondly, that of using the stage to promote new forms of conduct... Rodchenko publicized the new forms of conduct with two plays: *Inga* (1929) and *The Bed Bug* (1929). It is no accident that this set-designer gave the title "Discussion of a new type of dress and furniture and how to produce them" to an article on the play *Inga*. In any case, when the performances of the play were at an end, the most enterprising stage hands took the furniture home and used it with every success.'³⁸

Mayakovsky's play *The Bed Bug* was staged in 1929 by V. Meyerhold. When the director asked Mayakovsky to suggest a set-designer for the play, he proposed that the trio known as Kupryniksy be used for the first part of the play (set in 1929) and Rodchenko for the second part (set fifty years in the future).³⁹

The problem faced by Rodchenko was a difficult one. In the second half of the

Scene from the show *Inga*, act I. Photo Rodchenko, 1929.





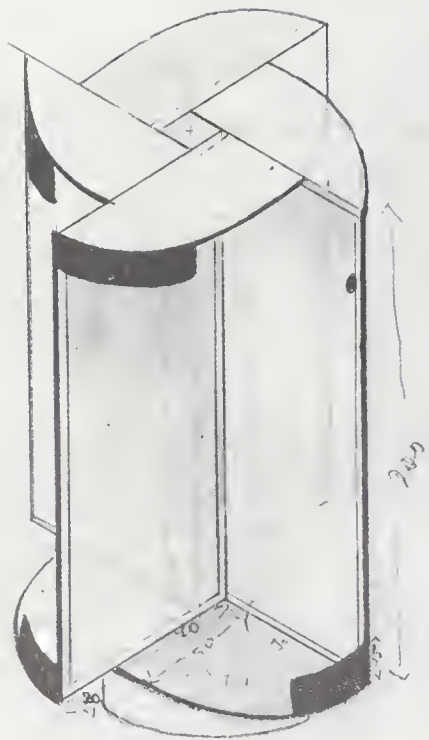
арт 2

шкаф-гардероб

деревяно

Cupboard-cum-wardrobe Paper, pencil, 37.5 × 25.5.

Showcase, act IV. Paper, pencil, 25.6 × 37.

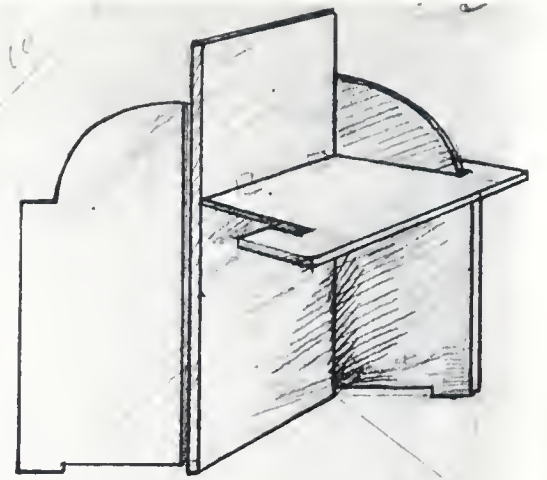
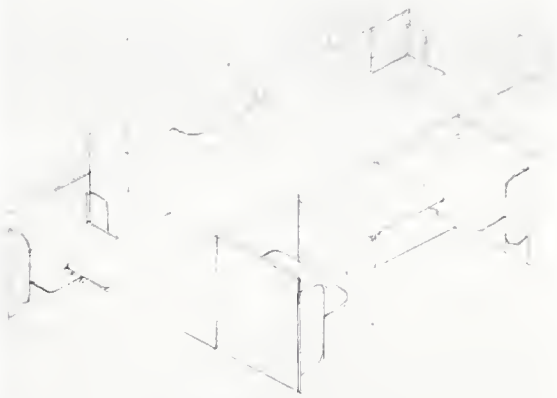


Арт 4

витрина

деревяно

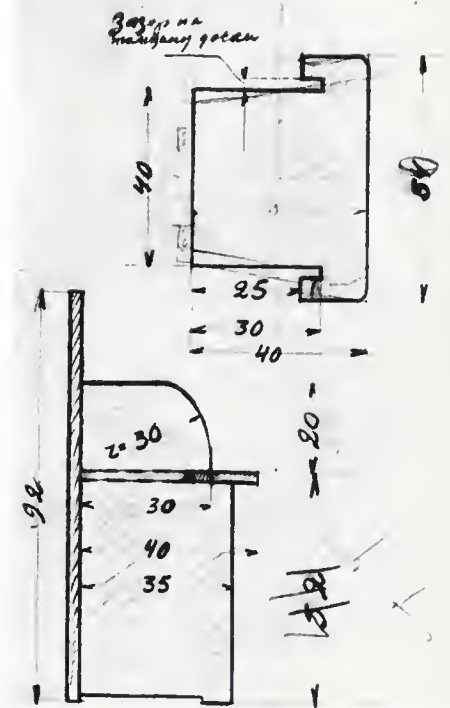
Office table, act IV. Paper, pencil, 36 × 26.7.

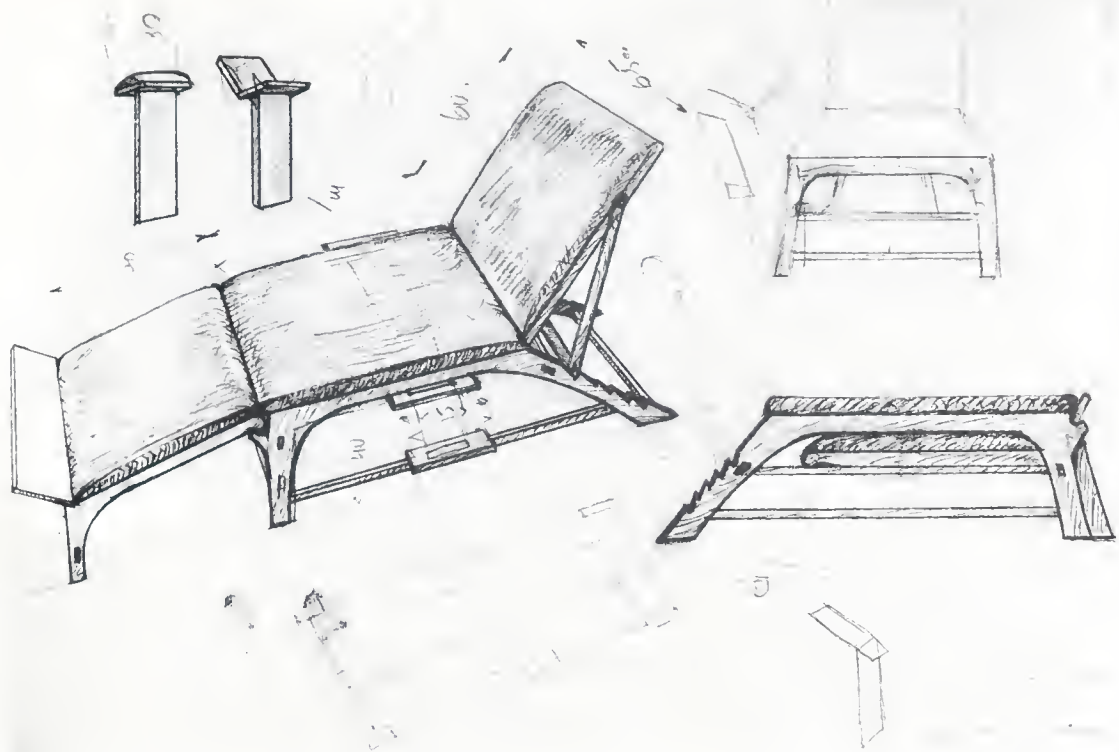


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Chairs, act I





Couch for the club, act I. Paper, pencil, 25.6 x 37.

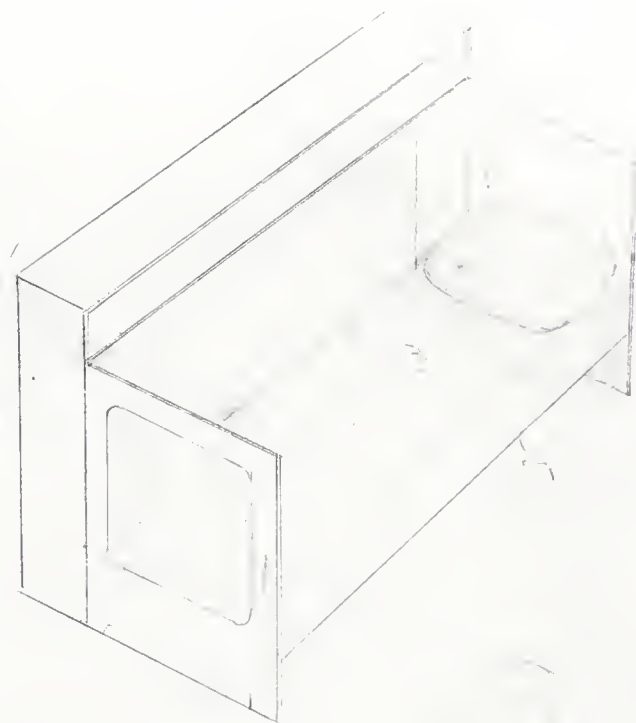
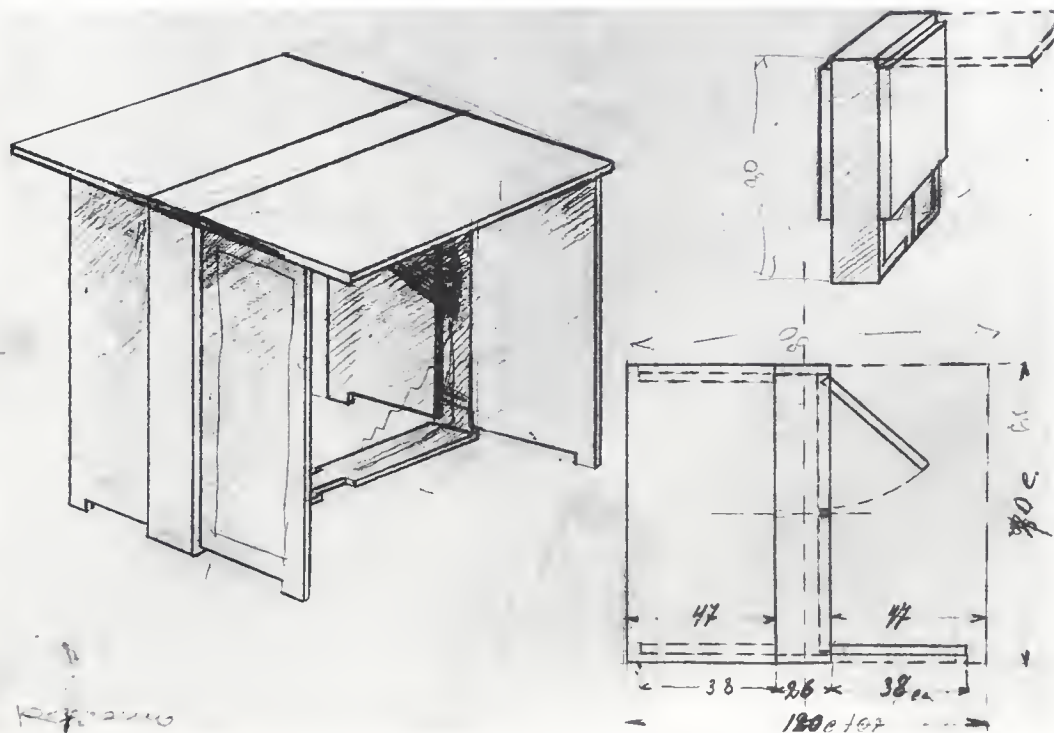


Sketch for a folding chair. Paper, pencil, 36 x 26.7.

Designs for the stage properties of *Inga*

Bed, act II. Paper, pencil, 36 x 26.7.

Dinner table, act I. Paper, pencil, 19.2 x 25.5.





part set in the future — the year 1979 — scenes 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9, had not been done yet.

'But Volodya had evidently talked to Meyerhold and I was asked to design the sets.

'I immediately designed a maquette and while my assistants worked on its realization, I produced sketches for the costumes without delay, seeing that there were a great number of them.

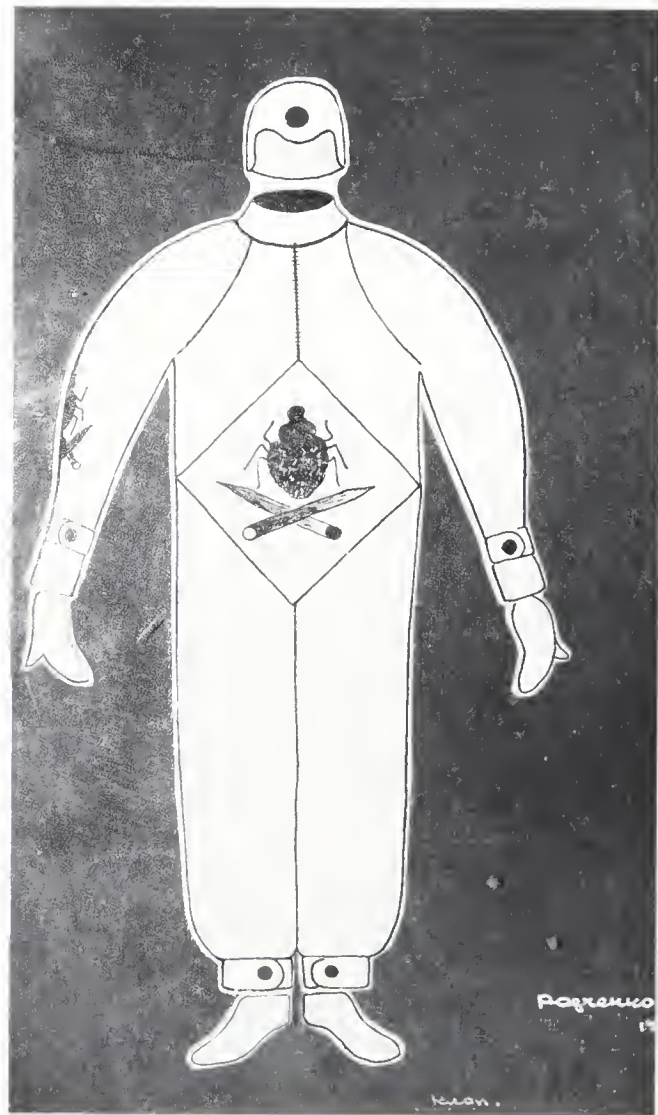
'Meyerhold does everything by himself and hence prefers young and little-known set-designers, who are willing to be guided.

'He knew that he could not do this with me and gave me full freedom of action, never questioning my decisions. Only in the last few days, when they brought the finished set from the workshop, leaving it temporarily in the stalls, did he declare that it was gloomy and would not do. He said the same thing when I showed him some of the costumes.

'I told him calmly: let's wait and see the whole thing on the stage this evening and then we will discuss it and decide.

'The workers began to put up the set and I, after having made the arrangements, went home

Costume for *The Bed Bug*.





Scene from the show *The Bed Bug*.

From the brochure of the show *The Bed Bug*.

ГРАЖДАНИН

СПЕШИ
НА ДЕМОНСТРАЦИЮ „ВЛОДА“
У НАСЫ ХВОСТ
В ТЕАТРЕ ТОЛПА
НО ТОЛЬКО НЕ ЗЛИСЬ
НА ШУТКИ НАСЕНОМОГО

ЭТО НЕ

ПРО ТЕБЯ

А ПРО ТВОЕГО ЗНАКОМОГО

for lunch. A rehearsal with the scenery and costumes had been fixed for the evening.

‘I was late on purpose and, when I got to the theatre, the rehearsal had already started. First Volodya came up to me, shook my hand and said “Thankyou”; he had liked the whole thing very much.

‘I noticed sadly that Meyerhold was not happy. However Volodya said that he was delighted.

‘Meyerhold also congratulated me, as if nothing had happened.’

A. Rodchenko, ‘*Rabota s Mayakovskim*’, op. cit., p. 67.

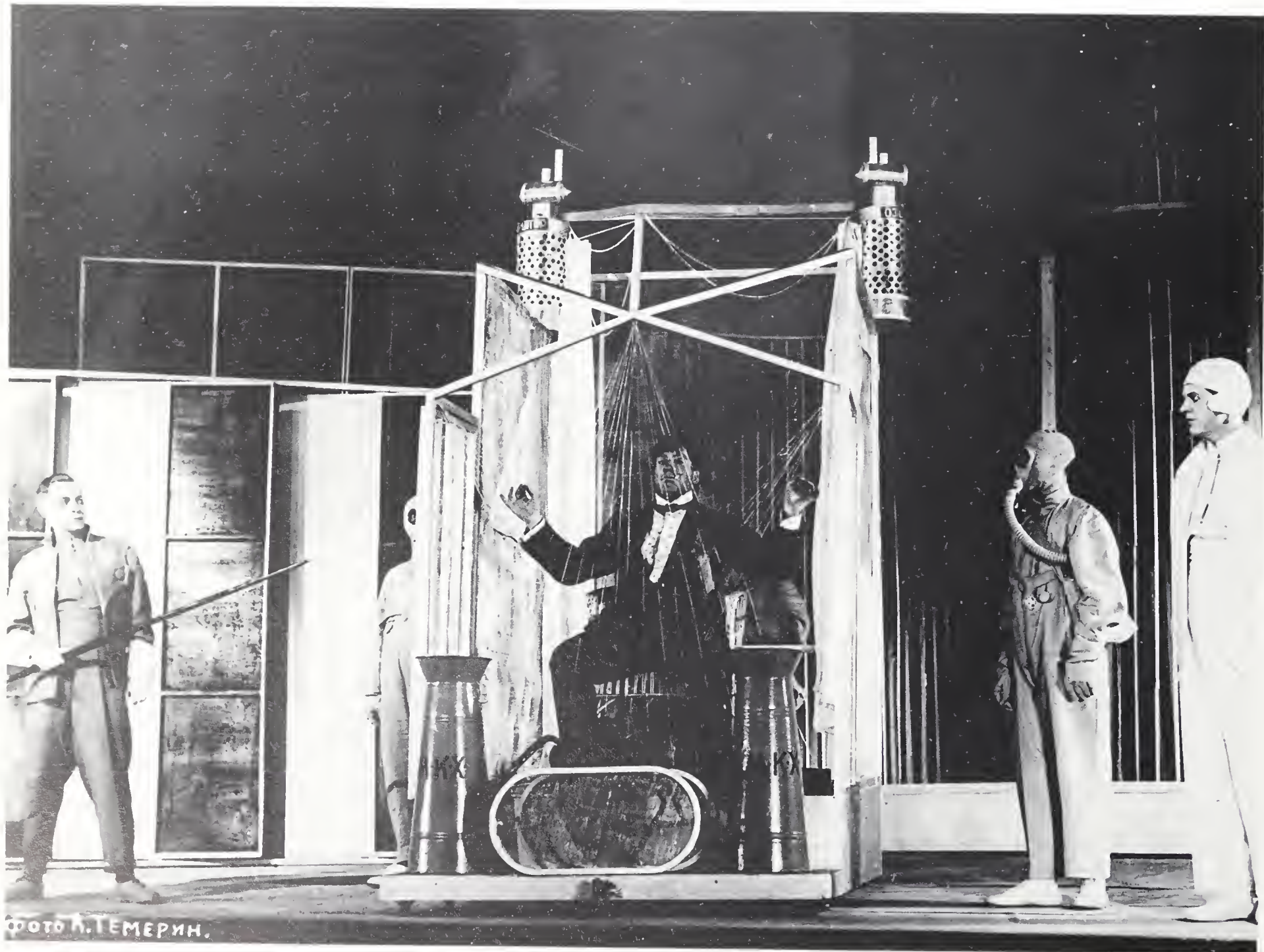


... Mavakovsky contrasted the world of the future with that of the petite bourgeoisie unmasked in the first half. He wanted to portray the healthily sane and cultural life of a luminous future, but he ended up representing it ironically, as it was imagined by the petit bourgeois. In other words he showed how middle-class attitudes are a long time in the dying. All this had to be made apparent in the scenery for the second part of the play. Rodchenko, who at that time was actively engaged in promoting the new objects he had designed, saw that it was impossible to predict the details of a future environment. For this reason, as one of the play's reviewers pointed out, Rodchenko's scenery of the 'future', unlike that of the first part which was solidly embedded in real life, 'depicted a new model of life on an almost unreal plane'.⁴⁰ The reviewer rebuked Rodchenko for this, while admitting that the 'unreal' appearance of the scenery fitted in with the intentions of the set-designer. This is how Rodchenko replied to questions put by the correspondent of the review *Sovremennyi teatr* (*Contemporary Theatre*), in connection with his set-design for the second part of *The Bed Bug*: 'It would have been futile to have made a serious attempt to present a complete picture of the

40 I. Berezark, 'Veshch na stsene' (*The object on the stage*), in *Novyi zritel*, nos. 32-33, 1929, p. 10.

41 Later on A.V. Fevral'sky, who had worked on the staging of *The Bed Bug* at Meyerhold's theatre, would recall: 'The scenery was imaginary, which allowed the location of the action to be changed and defined for each scene... In the last but one act there were just two light white screens at the front of the stage, with Prisyarkin lying on a bed in front of them. The next scene depicted the zoo. The screens were at the rear, with various kinds of tower in the centre. At the front, Prisyarkin was seated in a big cage, like a strange wild beast. The last act took place in a semicircle that took up all sides of the stage. Phosphorescent paint was supposed to be

Scene from the show *The Bed Bug*. Photo A. Temerin.



used, but then at the last moment there was not enough time.'

Quoted from the book by L. Volkov-Lannit, Alexander Rodchenko, Moscow 1968, p. 45.

The play was widely reviewed in both the specialized and the mass-circulation press.

Turkeltaub wrote: 'With the aid of the set-designer Rodchenko, who has handled the scenery of the last two acts splendidly, the director has mechanized the outward life style of the society of the future...

'The moment when Prisyppkin is thawed out at the Institute for Resurrection is handled with great scenic skill. Everything — from the laboratory equipment to the very procedure of resurrection — has been staged in a masterly manner.'

I. Turkeltaub, 'Klop v teatre im. Meyerholda' (The Bed Bug at the Meyerhold Theatre), in Zhizn iskusstva, no. 12, 1929, p. 7.

In the following issue of the same review Mokulsky wrote about the staging of The Bed Bug, referring to the 'wonderful constructions by the set-designer Rodchenko which delight the

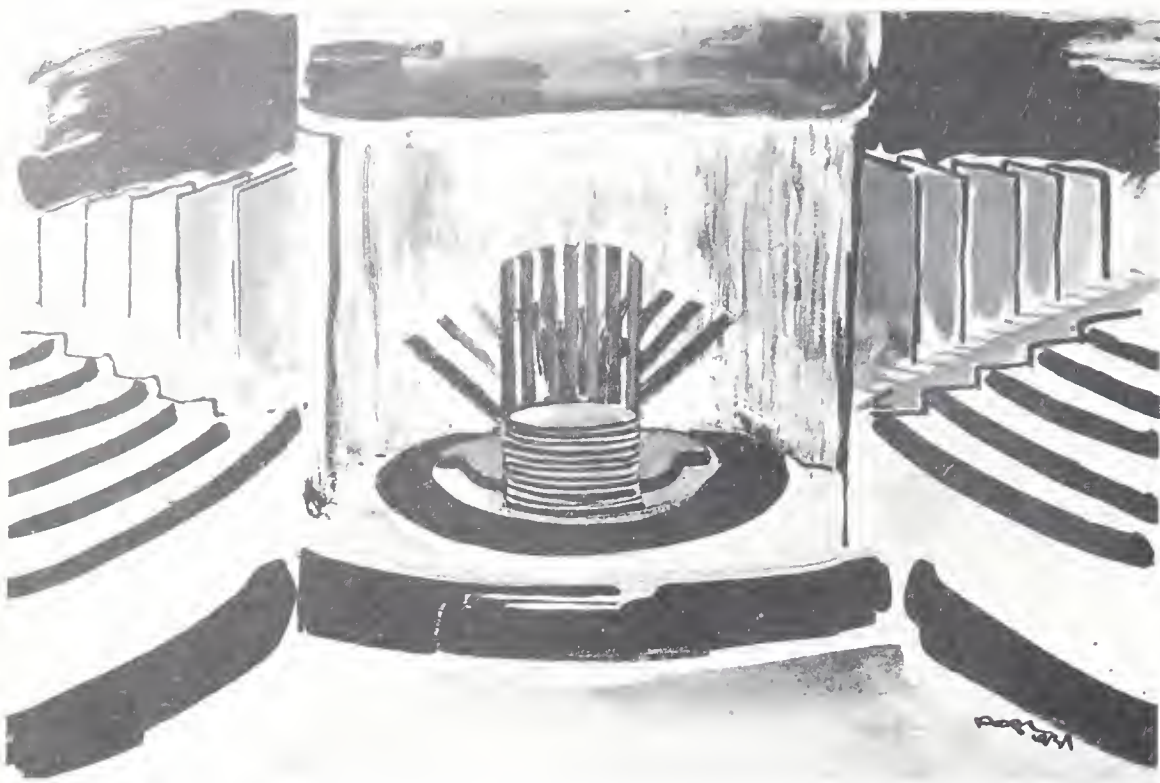
future on the stage. In my scenery I show the simplicity, the functionality of objects, complex structures. The costumes of pink and blue indicate how the petite bourgeoisie might imagine the future. The irony, which is also apparent in the way Mayakovsky describes the future, was necessary in order to demonstrate how terribly difficult it is, in such a short period of time, to eliminate the vestiges of our petit bourgeois habits.'⁴¹

In short, Rodchenko designed the props for *The Bed Bug* without worrying about creating objects intended for the modern user. This is the basic difference between the sets for this play and those designed for *Inga*. For the latter Rodchenko had produced model fittings that could be used by anyone, whereas for *The Bed Bug* he did not come up with any precise objects, confining himself to indicating the line of development which such objects might take. In Rodchenko's view, lightness, convertibility, transparency, technical equipment and hygiene would be the basic features of fittings in the future.

He designed the 1929 objects with a touch of humour aimed at his contemporaries. Prisyppkin's bedroom and the appliances for thawing were highly ingenious, using special effects and a deliberate stylistic contrast between the accessories of the future and the elements of life in 1929. The satirical tone (suggested by the script itself) of the set-design was a way for Rodchenko to contrast real objects taken from contemporary life with the basic scenery, intentionally handled in a conventional manner.⁴²

D. Shostakovitch, V. Meyerhold, V. Mayakovsky and A. Rodchenko during rehearsals for the show *The Bed Bug*. Photo by A. Temerin.





Sketch of scenery for the revue *The Sixth Part of the World*. Paper, Indian ink, gouache, 22 x 35.

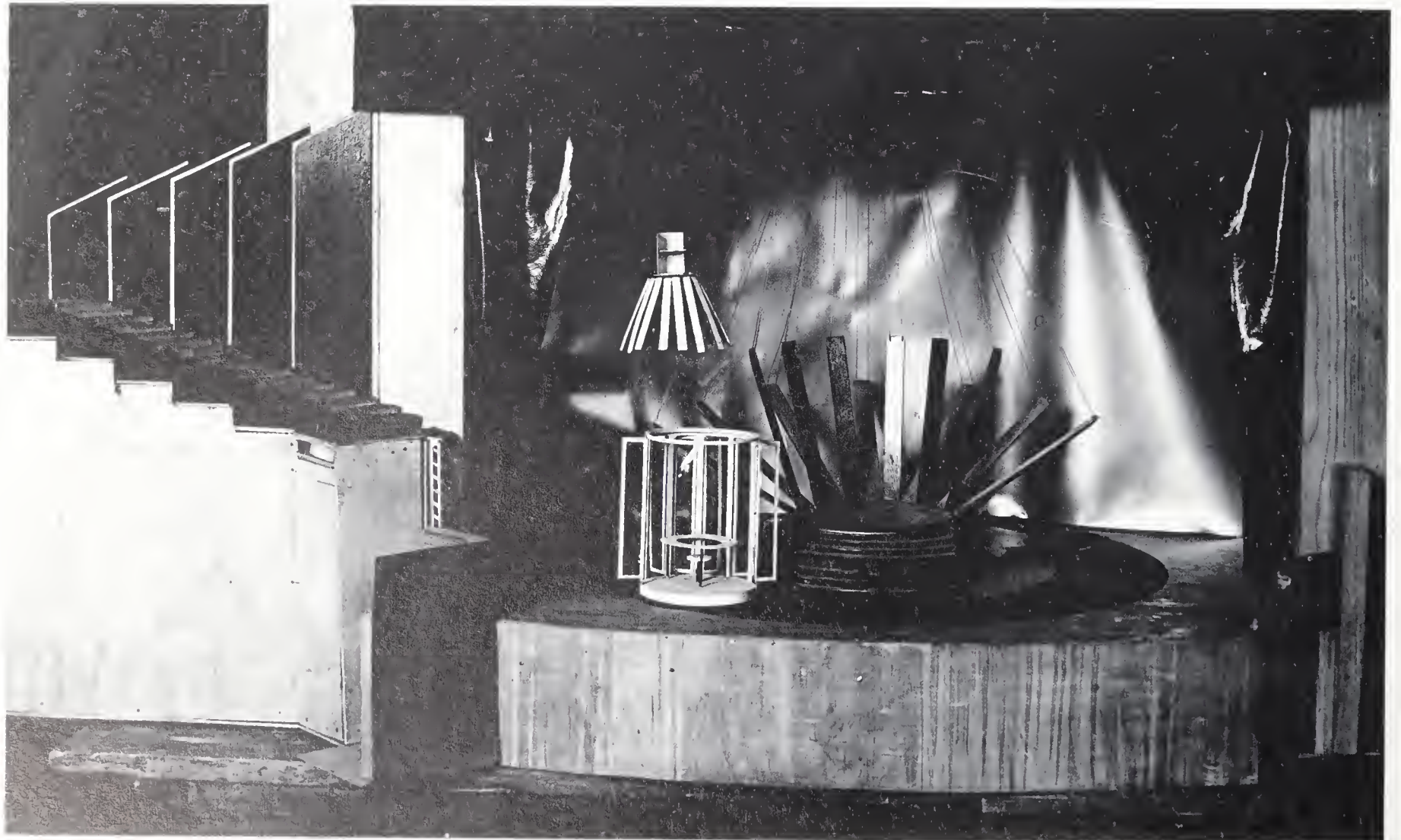
eye with their harmonious proportions'.
S. Mokulsky, 'Eshche o Klope' (On the subject of The Bed Bug again) in *Zhizn iskusstva*, no. 13, 1929, p. 10.

42 This allowed the set-designer 'to give his attention to the details that serve to underline the satirical hyperbole of the play (the modern Moscow Council dustbins in front of the cage and the ozonizers of our toilets transferred to 1979). Even in the scenery of the "Institute for Resurrection", the satirical tone of the script allowed the set-designer to make two choices: one purely industrial (the glass walls of the Institute, to which the hero is unable to attach the modern accessories of petit bourgeois comfort) and the other completely bound up with handicrafts (the hero's bed is an exact copy of the wooden beds still used in the countryside today).'

N. Lukhmanov, 'Bez slov' (Without words), in *Zhizn iskusstva*, no. 22, 1929, p. 4.

Novitsky liked Rodchenko's work for the play produced by Meyerhold very much. On the other hand he did not like the scenery for the first part of the performance, designed by the

Maquette of scenery for the revue *The Sixth Part of the World*. Photo Rodchenko.



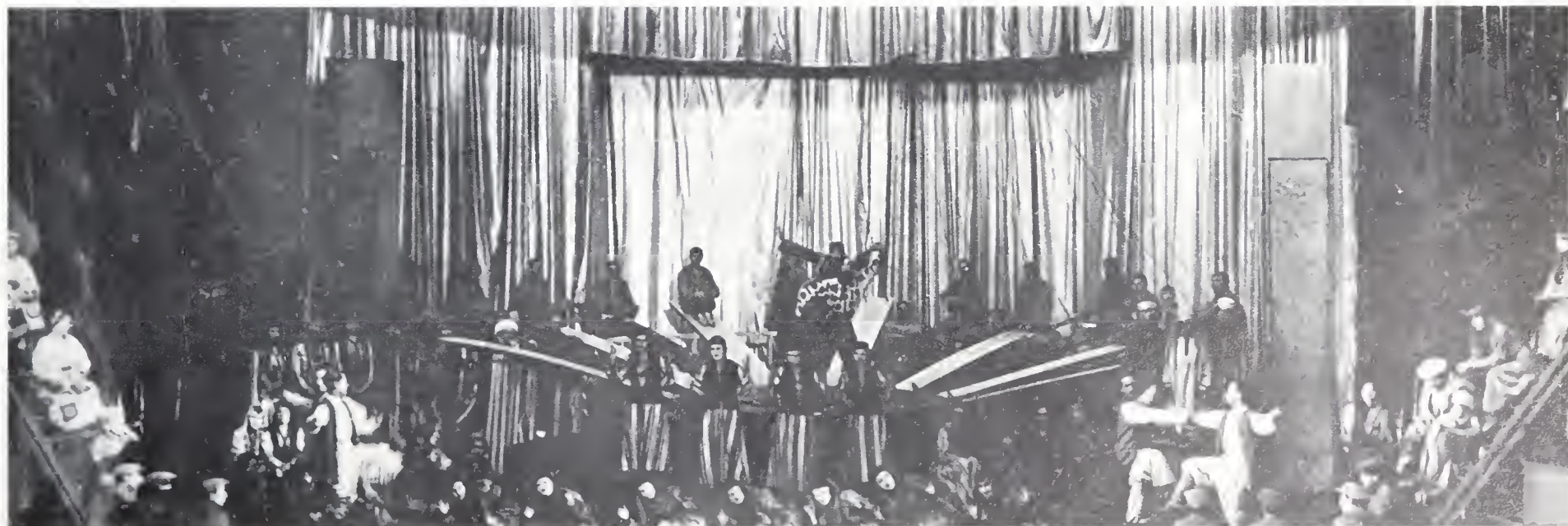


Costume design for *The Sixth Part of the World*: Uzbek. Paper, gouache, pencil, 32 x 22.5.



Costume design for *The Sixth Part of the World*: America, advertisement for spring. Paper, gouache, pencil, 32 x 22.5.

Scene from the revue *The Sixth Part of the World*.



The problem of a new style of dress

The design of clothing formed an integral part of Rodchenko's work as an artist—constructor, even though he confined his attention exclusively to theatrical costumes. In 1914 he had made sketches of costumes for Oscar Wilde's play *The Duchess of Padua* in the style of experimental Cubist compositions. From 1919 to 1921 he produced a series of costume designs for Gan's play, *My (Us)*. In the sketches for *The Duchess of Padua* what prevailed was a typical Cubist stylization of theatrical costumes, in the spirit of the historical era in which the play was set, whereas in the ones for *Us*, whose action was set in the present, Rodchenko was mainly concerned with the social characteristics of the characters, whether clerk, peasant or worker. Starting out from Cubist, frankly decorative designs, Rodchenko's later sketches showed an increasing interest in the actual shape of the costume.

When Rodchenko came to design costumes once again at the end of the twenties, he handled the task in a totally different way to his early experiments, that is as a set-designer-cum-constructor or by now convinced Constructivist.

Over the course of the twenties, the Constructivists contributed a great deal towards the devising of a new style of dress. Among them, it was Stepanova who paid particular attention to the question of clothing. Naturally, her attitudes were shared by Rodchenko too, who in a report to an Inkhuk meeting in 1923 stated: 'In clothing, two basic principles should be present: comfort and functionality. There is no style of dress *tout court*, but there is a manner of dressing for a particular productive function... The form of the *prozodezhda* [working clothes] will depend on what kind of work is to be carried out. The *spetsodezhda* [professional dress], on the other hand, will be the dress of the surgeon, the fireman, etc. The *sportodezhda* [sportswear] will also have quite a different form.'⁴³

One of these experimental garments was created by Rodchenko himself. It is a comfortable outfit with large pockets and small sections to hold tools. All those parts subject to continuous wear (collar, edges, cuffs, upper part of the pockets, belt) are bordered with leather. Starting out from the concept of the *prozodezhda*, Rodchenko pursued the idea of a democratization of dress in his costume designs for *Inga* and *The Bed Bug*.

A title and job for the new specialist: the designer

In 1926 the metalworking faculty, Metfak, became a separate section of the combined faculty of wood- and metalworking, the Dermetfak.

In the Dermetfak of Vkhutein (set up in 1927 to replace Vkhutemas), much more attention was paid than in other faculties to the future qualification and type of occupation for the specialists it was training. It became necessary to define a completely new profession, that of the designer (or engineer-cum-artist). A problem cropped up immediately: where would the new specialist work and just what would the sphere of his activity specifically cover? The problem was presented in these terms: would the student who completed his course in the Dermetfak produce his own objects (like the students of the former Stroganov Institute) or would he create models? Would he oversee their production in the factory, take part in the technological process of manufacturing as a specialist or confine himself to the design of new objects? Many aspects of the problem were not clear:



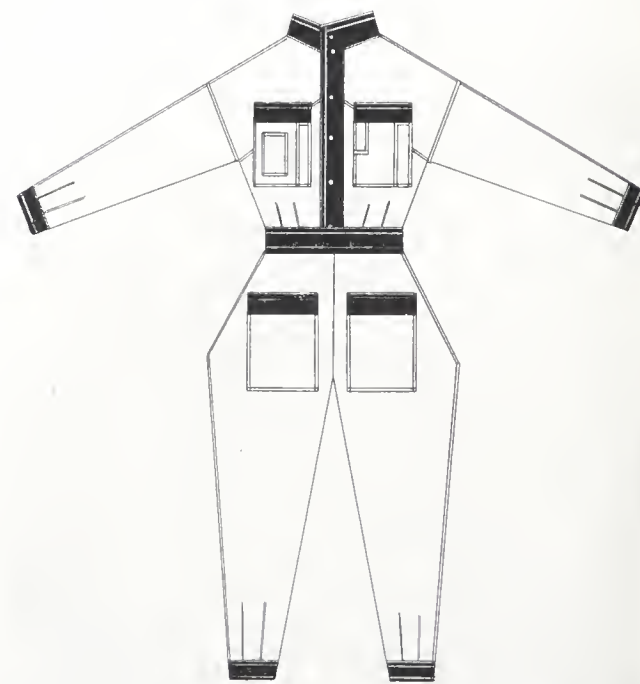
Родченко 1914.

Родченко

Родченко 1914.

Costumes for *The Duchess of Padua*, 1914. Paper, watercolour, lacquer, 32 × 70.

Design for work overalls, 1922. Paper, Indian ink, 36 × 29.5.



Kupryniksy brothers. 'The second part', wrote Novitsky, 'has been worked out very well. The new society, which knows no sycophancy, alcoholism, maudlin emotivity or paranoia, is portrayed as being organized on a scientific basis, inspiring a profound sense of solidarity and fraternity, something founded on a perfect technical culture. The brutish image of Prisyppkin is in glaring contrast to the new men. The outward image of these characters is highly suitable from an aesthetic point of view. Rodchenko takes us into a world of clear and simple forms, produced by industrial techniques and by the scientific laboratory. The physical and spiritual health of the new men is made still more evident by their perfect physical condition...'

P. Novitsky, 'Metky udar' (Precise blow), in *Daësh*, no. 1, 1929.

43 'The important thing about this programme of the Constructivists', wrote T. Strizhenova, 'consists in their having paid attention to one of the important aspects of clothing, i.e. that of its production function, which they have rightly singled out as its fundamental characteristic: functionality, which is directly dependent on the type of activity carried out...'

'Concentrating on these principles, the Constructivists have created experimental models of production clothing, some specific forms and elements of which later went into mass production.'

T. Strizhenova, *Iz istorii sovetskogo kostjuma* (History of Soviet dress), Moscow 1972, p. 84.

44 An editorial analysing the outcome of the conference in the magazine of the Constructivist architects, *Sovremennaya arkhitektura*, stated: 'It should be stressed that this faculty represents a new phenomenon in the life of technical and art colleges. There is nothing of the past in it. Everything has been built up from scratch. The problem of rationalization and materialization of artistic work ought to find a practical solution here. If on the one hand the faculty must train artists-cum-constructors involved in the design of objects connected with the new type of social and private life, on the other it cannot help but educate a new type of engineer with a profound knowledge of the organization and rationalization of production as well.'

In *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture), nos. 5-6, 1926, pp. 136-37.

45 But, as well as teaching the basic professional course, Rodchenko also taught 'technical drawing' in Courses III and IV of the *Dermetfak*. In the study plan he drew up in May 1928, he wrote: 'Technical drawing helps the student to

there was no established practice for how these specialists should be used, there were no corresponding factory jobs and not even any sectors of design in which they could work.

This uncertainty about their future activity had a great influence on students in the *Dermetfak* and was one of the principal reasons behind the small number who actually enrolled. This was in spite of the fact that students were encouraged to attend the production-oriented courses and that these faculties were given precedence in the planning of places available for new students.

Not even the theoreticians of Production Art who had first urged artists to get involved with production had a very clear idea of what the concrete role of the artist would be. Some of their statements lead one to suppose that they intended artists to take part in production in the strict sense of the word. But when the debate shifted to the training of a new type of specialist designer (of artist—constructor, or engineer-cum-artist), the problem arose of defining the new profession and the nature of this specialist's work.

In the first documents drawn up by Rodchenko for the *Metfak* (syllabuses, notes for reports, etc.) two questions were examined with particular attention: training and the relationship with modern production. In contrast to the old *Stroganov Institute*, training was not based on how to decorate objects but on how to solve technical and functional problems. In itself the definition of the new specialist's job seemed clear — i.e. he would work in the sector of modern industrial production — but his actual role, position and sphere of activity were much less certain. This was a problem of which the directors of *Vkhutein* were very much aware, since the forms of specialization in the courses of the *Dermetfak* also depended on a precise definition of the new specialist's qualification.

In the autumn of 1926 the First Academic Conference of the *Dermetfak* was held in order to review the general situation, examine methods of study and tackle the problems of the new specialist's qualification.⁴⁴

This first conference concluded with the following declarations: 'The faculty's efforts to concern itself with the technical and artistic aspects of concrete everyday problems were to be regarded as correct:

(a) the organization and fitting out of apartments and of buildings used for public services;

(b) the organization of public places;

(c) the organization of spaces dedicated to transport, as well as vehicles and other objects of material culture.'

In his concluding speech, Novitsky, the rector of *Vkhutemas*, touched on the problem of the new specialist's qualification. He said that the *Dermetfak* should not turn out cadres for the factories, but train specialists similar to architects who would work on projects rather than on the production lines. In other words the need was accepted for a training course for designers that would set out to tackle the problems of this new profession from a modern viewpoint.

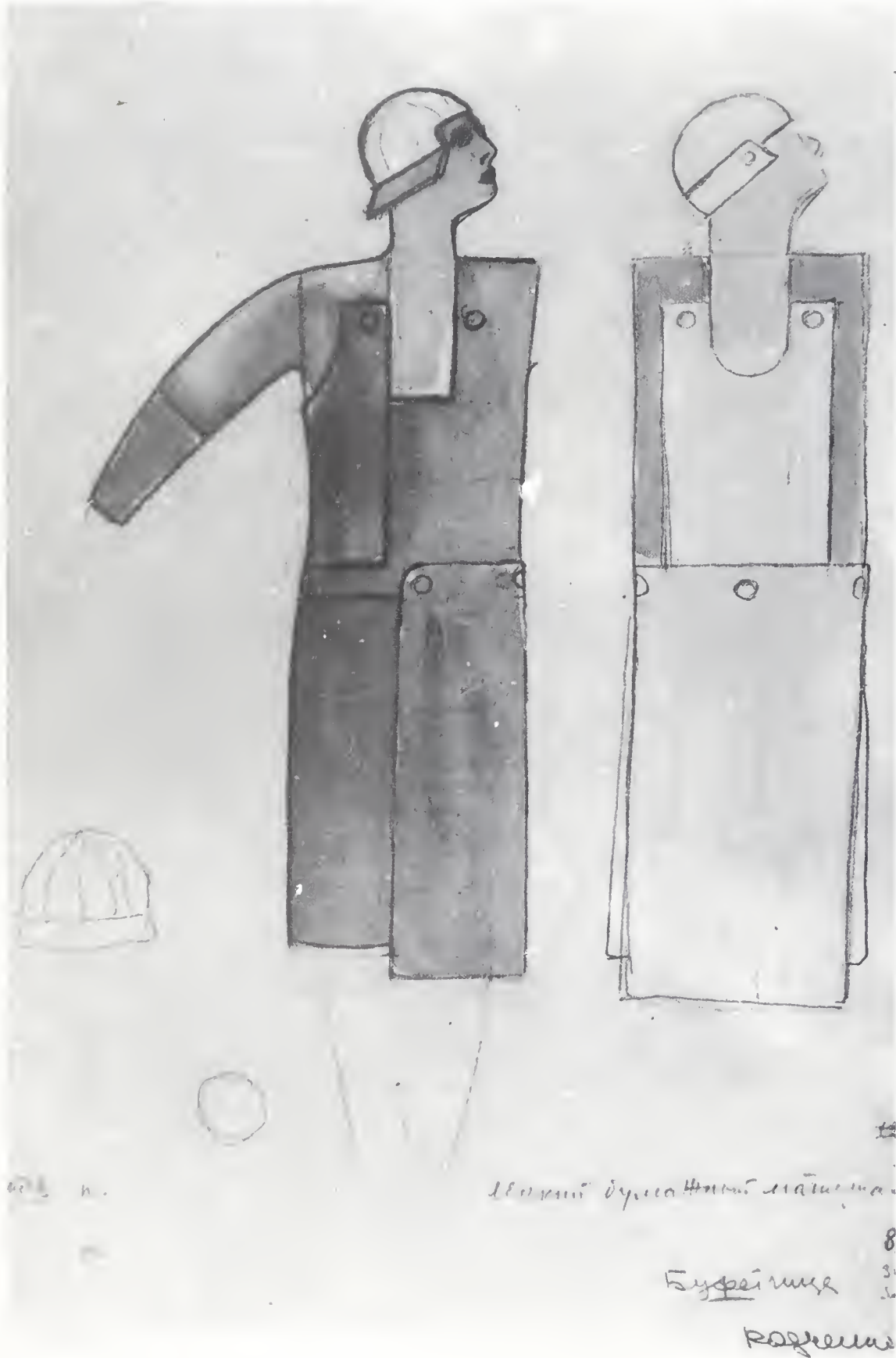
In the *Metfak*, Rodchenko was teaching the artistic design of metal objects and implements. In practice all the students between 1922 and 1930 worked on their projects, whether as part of the course or for graduation, under his direction.⁴⁵

The students drew objects with a simple structure (knives, chairs), others with a partly concealed structure (desk, accordion) and still others with a completely hidden structure (fountain pen, electric stove). Drawings were done from memory of objects shown to the students for only a few moments, or on the basis of a photograph.

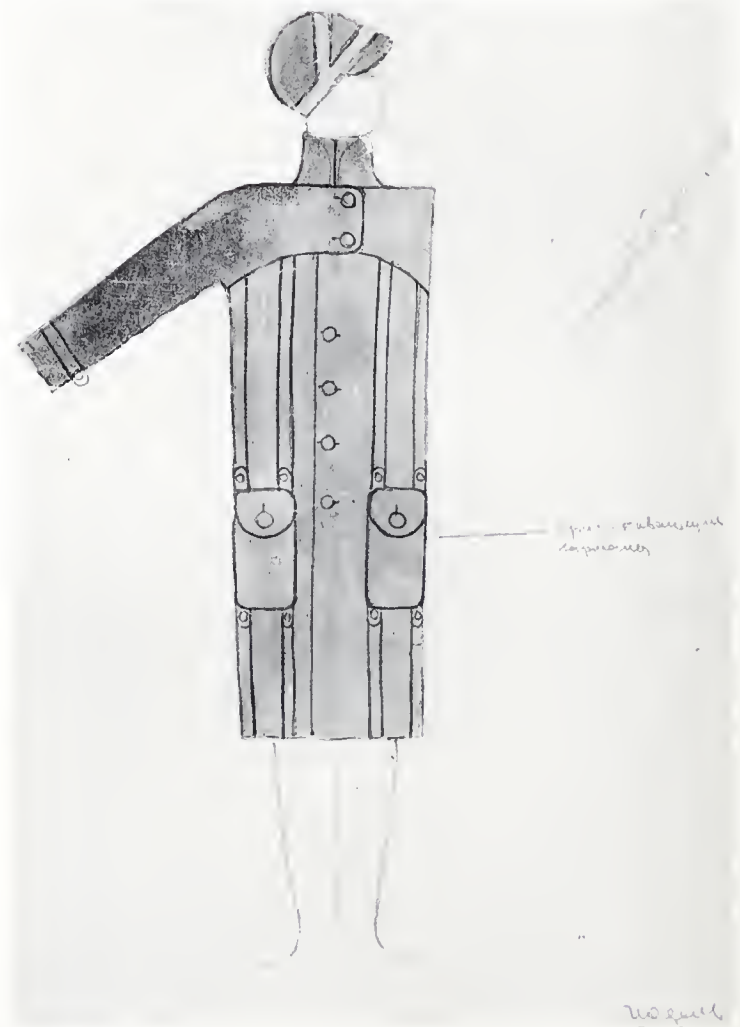
Assignments of technical drawing were given to students during their trial period in a factory as well. Rodchenko advised them to draw all the fundamental stages of the technological process. He required that the students be able to represent graphically the manufacturing process and the way in which it was carried out.

Rodchenko's study plans showed that the final stage of training in the *Vkhutein* school of design was more concerned with the problems of devising complicated equipment than with the design of individual objects.

Commodore V. ... in the bullet. Paper, watercolour, Indian ink. 36 x 26 1/2

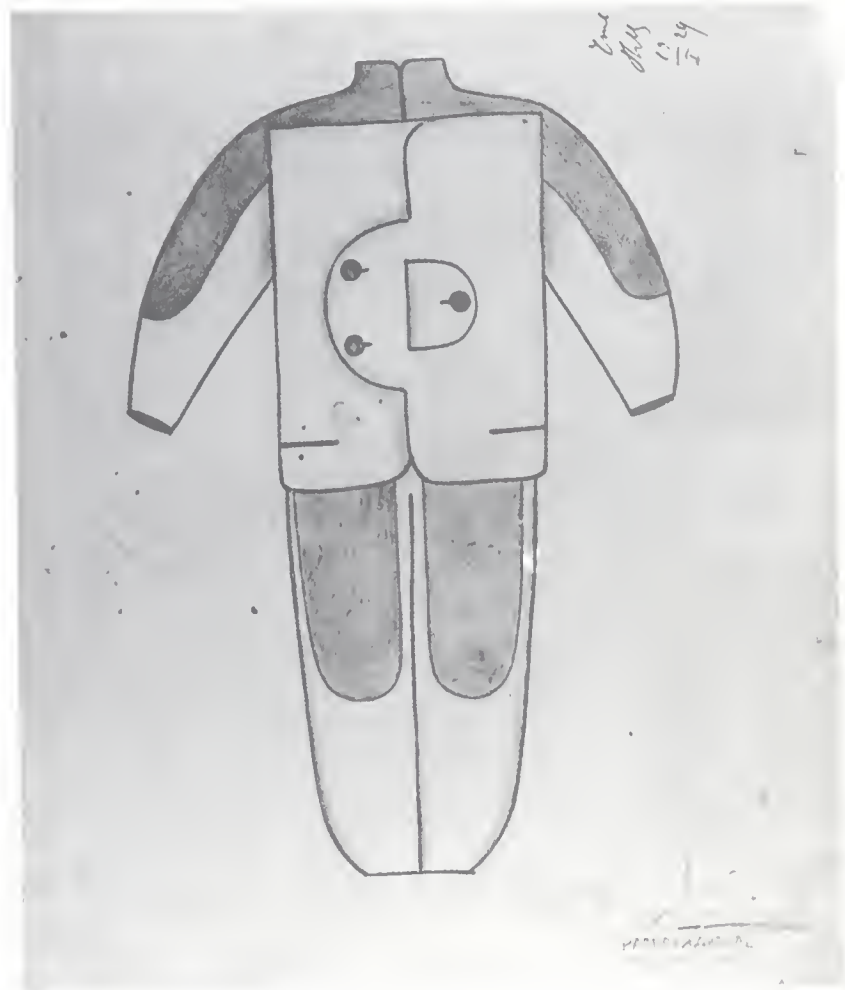


Costume designs for Us.





Costume design for *The Bed Bug, the Brazilian*. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 × 27.

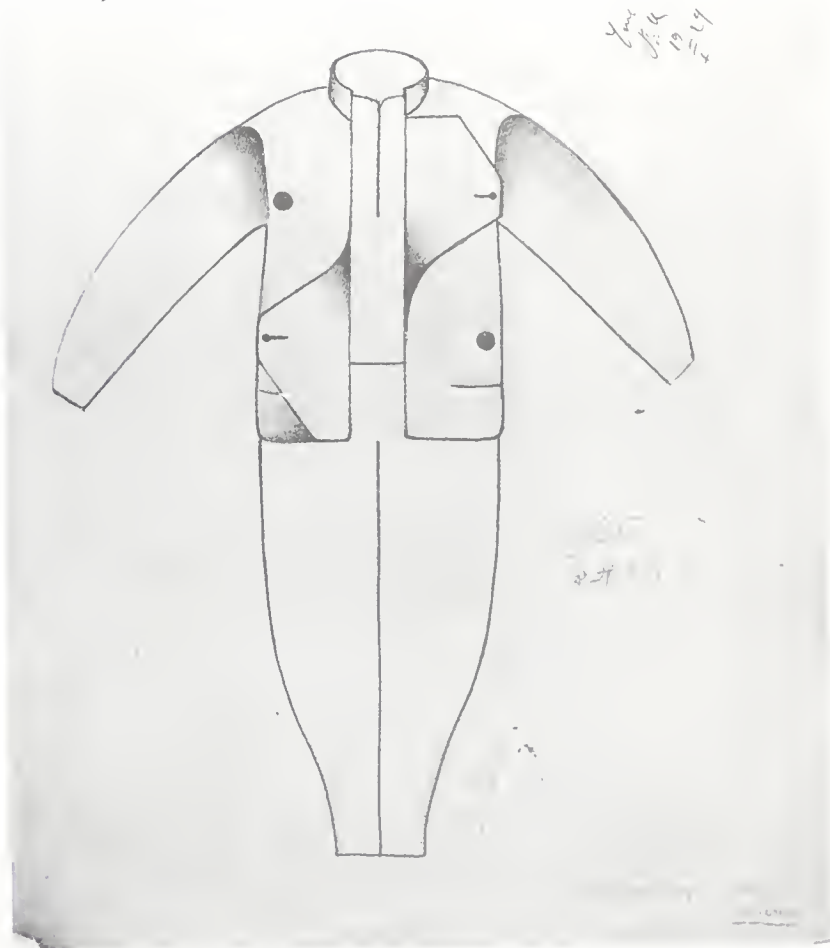


Costume design for *The Bed Bug, the person in charge of the assembly*. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 × 27.

Costume design for *Us*. Coloured pencil, 36 × 26.7.



Costume design for *The Bed Bug: the director of the zoological garden*. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 × 27.



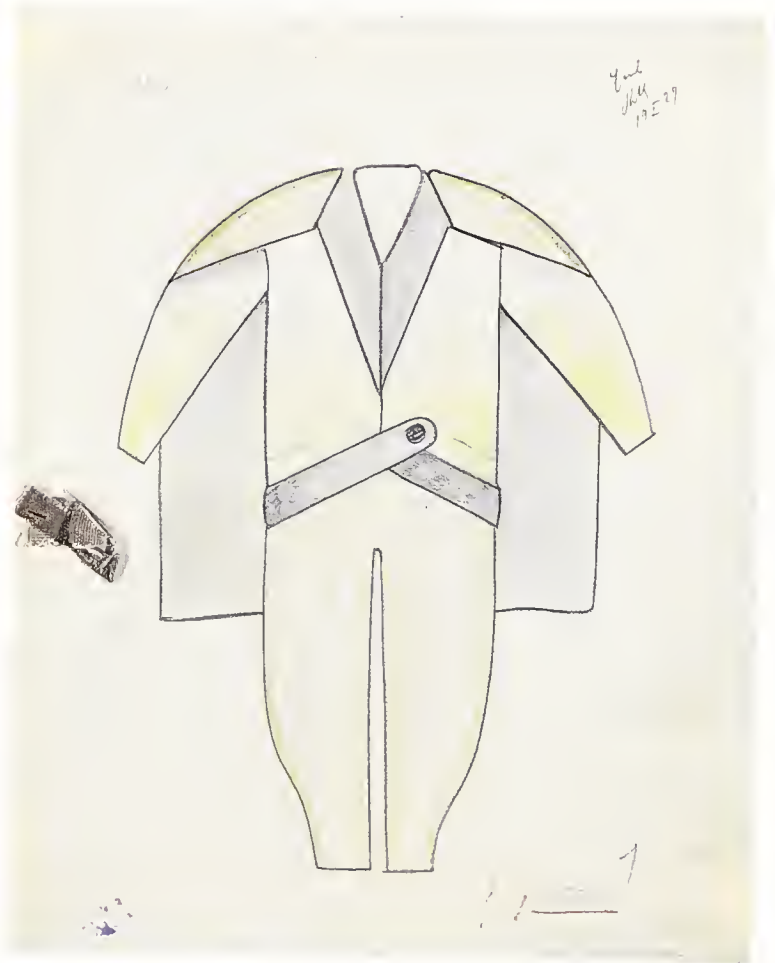


Costume design for *The Bed Bug*, the news-vendor. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 x 27.

Costume design for *The Bed Bug*: a visitor to the zoo. Paper, coloured pencil, 36 x 27.



Costume designs for *The Bed Bug*.





Costume design for *Us*: Peasant. Paper, tempera, oil, Indian ink. 53 x 37.

Costume design for *Us*: Worker. Paper, Indian ink, tempera, 52 x 37.



Frontispiece of the album of sketches, 1920. Paper, oil, Indian ink, 53 x 37.

Costume design for *Us*: Clerk. Paper, tempera, Indian ink, 53 x 37.



In 1928 when the first group of Metfak students had already completed their studies, Rodchenko used the experience he had gained in the training of new specialists to draw up a programme for the continuation of studies by those Metfak students who had attended the basic course (artistic construction). The students had to carry out the following tasks in successive phases: (1) select existing objects ready to be placed on the market; (2) simplify them; (3) make them more complicated; (4) devise new types of already existing objects; (5) create an object that did not yet exist; (6) work out a system of objects ('create out of the same material different objects of the same type — constructed on the same principle, using the same colours and the same design. It is not at all necessary that there should be one single type of object in any particular setting'); (7) design fittings for interiors.⁴⁶

In the same year the first group of graduates from the metalworking department of the Dermetfak tackled three subjects in their own theses: (1) Organization of equipment for means of transport; (2) Organization of the cultural base; (3) Organization of meeting places for the people.⁴⁷

The first group of designers from Rodchenko's school

The first group of students in the Metfak to graduate did so in 1929. It was an event that aroused considerable interest throughout a broad stratum of public opinion. The exhibition of graduate projects by Rodchenko's eight students was written up in the periodical press, and not just in the specialized journals (*Contemporary Architecture*, *Building in Moscow*, *The Building Industry*, *The Communal Economy*, *Red Students*, *Daësh*, *Soviet Screen* and others). In fact it was far from usual for the press to devote so much attention to such a small number of newly graduated specialists. But Rodchenko's young pupils were seen as a completely new type of specialist of which the country, which was moving towards industrialization, was absolutely in need. All the articles pointed out the real necessity for such specialists and praised the practical topicality of the themes and the results of the graduate projects.

The ten students who completed their studies in the Dermetfak (where Lissitzky taught the basic course) in 1928, and the engineers-cum-artists who graduated from the Metfak were the first Soviet designers.⁴⁸ How did Rodchenko's students approach their graduate theses?

G. Pavlov designed a number of fittings for long-distance buses, including a seat for two passengers that could easily be converted into a comfortable sleeping berth, with the upper part being used for another berth.

Z. Bykov designed accessories for a truck with a trailer suited to the climatic conditions of Siberia. The various types of trailer for passengers consisted of coaches on skis made up of standard components. Detailed study was made of the fittings for the passenger trailer: seats convertible into sleeping berths, folding shelves, etc.

P. Zhigunov constructed an original aeroplane seat for long-distance travel. Furthermore, a series of seats could be converted into two rows of sleeping berths.

D. Zaonegin designed an interesting mobile library-cum-cinema. All the equipment was located on top of an open truck, whose hood could be converted into shelves for books. The truck also carried a radio set, a projector and screen and folding seats for an audience of 120. When open, not only was there space for the projection of films but the whole perimeter of the inside and outside panels of the truck could be used to house the screen, showcases for books, folding reading tables, etc.⁴⁹

learn to observe and recognize the mechanical principles of modern objects, their function and system of construction, and to discover the possibilities of modifying these principles in practice, by extending or limiting their functions.

'The practice of technical drawing should develop in the future artist-cum-engineer the capacity immediately to recognize the basic principles of construction, the form and the materials of the modern objects that he will come across.'

In Khudozhestvenno—konstruktorskoe obrazovanie (Artistic—Constructive Education), no. 4, Moscow 1973, pp. 210-11.

⁴⁶ *'This last task is simply the summation of the preceding phases and permits the artist-cum-engineer to demonstrate the degree of his preparation before starting work. In this final stage of design what is required is the most accurate and comprehensive rendering of all the details of any internal or external fitting, concentrating on the cultural effect of the whole set of fittings. Examples: a communal house in a sovkhos. A communal house. A street in a Socialist town. A cinema hall. An auditorium. A library. A canteen. A park for culture and recreation.'*

A. Rodchenko, Material'noe oformlenie veshchi (Material design of the object). Manuscript, 1928. V.A. Rodchenko Archives.

⁴⁷ *Tsgali, f. 681, 3, 26, ff. 264-66.*

⁴⁸ *We give here some comments on the graduate projects of Rodchenko's students that were published in the press, as an indication of the esteem in which these first graduates of the Metfak were held at the time.*

'Until today our industry has had no specific core of specialists working on the rational construction of articles used in everyday life (furnishings for private houses, offices and commercial premises, fittings for transport, squares, streets, parks, etc...). Industry, not having qualified workers, is obliged to draw on the old catalogues of objects that are not yet obsolete... In this field there is an absolute necessity for an engineer-cum-specialist who is perfectly familiar with both the technical and productive aspect and the social and organizational one. Vkhutein has now begun to turn out specialists of this type. The Metfak of Vkhutein has done its job and has given our industry a series of excellent workers. The studies of fittings for transport vehicles and exhibition sites, on show at the exhibition, demonstrate how the faculty is training such specialists.'

Veshchi byta. Diplomnye raboty studentov

Metfaka Vkhuteina (*The objects of everyday life. Graduate theses of the Metfak students of Vkhutein*), in *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture), no. 3, 1929, inside back page.

'Each model demonstrates an absolute artistic perfection and an indisputable practicality.'

M. Kar, 'Iz dereva i metalla' (From wood and from metal), in *Kommunalnoe khozyaistvo* (The Communal Economy), nos. 7-8, 1929, p. 157.

'Over the course of the last few years our Vkhutein has gained a reputation as one of the best art colleges in Europe. The first group of students to graduate from the metalworking department demonstrates how fully deserved this reputation is... these young constructors' designs for interior furnishings reveal such freshness of ideas, such independence of approach to construction and such a close correspondence to our modern needs that it is worth paying the closest possible attention to them.

'In conclusion: a very high not only technical but also cultural and artistic level.

'... These projects from Vkhutein are very good precisely because they are original, well constructed and in perfect keeping with the practical requirements of the present day. These graduates in a field that is naturally totally lacking in tradition owe these qualities to those who have guided them. In this connection should be mentioned the name of the organizer of the department, its moving spirit and founder: A.M. Rodchenko.'

D. Aranovich, 'Konstruktor vnutrennego oborudovaniya' (Designer of interior equipment), in *Stroitel'naya promyshlennost* (The Building Industry), no. 4, 1929, pp. 365-67.

49 The design for a travelling cinema to serve remote villages was highly appreciated by the magazine *Soviet Screen*, where it was pointed out that 'the project satisfies all the special requirements of a travelling cinema. Everything has been provided for. Right down to the smallest detail.'

A. Klinov, 'Ot loshchady k avtomobilyn' (From horse to motorcar), in *Sovetskii ekran* (Soviet Screen), no. 16, 1929, p. 18.

50 This project showed signs of Bauhaus influence, as was pointed out in the press at the time.

51 'If comrade Galaktionov's work was to be produced by the use of standard elements, it would save a great deal [of money] and there would not be such waste on accessories that do not last and are in poor taste.'

'Na puti k standartu' (Towards the standard), in *Daësh*, no. 3, 1929, on the inside back page.

I. Morozov designed a whole range of facilities for a bus station: toilets and washrooms, a book stand, a buffet, a waiting room, plus an original dismantlable construction with four seats held together by panels for advertisements.

V. Pylinsky came up with a design for convertible tables to be used in a floating rest house. The tables were for dining, but when the room was employed as a cinema hall they could be converted into seats with backs.

P. Galaktionov designed a set of standard pieces of furniture that could be dismantled and transported without difficulty (a table, an armchair, a chair) to be used in various social facilities: cinema, theatre, club, meeting hall, canteen, etc.⁵⁰

A. Galaktionov devised an original system of standard components for construction (twenty-four types in all) which could be used to create a variety of fittings for trade fairs and travelling markets, suitable for the display of photographs, drawings, paintings, books, etc. The structure was composed of a central fixture and a number of universal joints and braces that allowed it to be set up in any situation without the use of further materials or supports.⁵¹

The graduation of the first group of students from the Metfak marked a great personal victory for Rodchenko. Right there in the old Stroganov Institute, where specialists in the manufacture of objects of worship for the church had once been trained, had been created the first centre of Soviet design.

Costume designs for the acrobats in *The Sixth Part of the World*. Paper, gouache, pencil. 32 · 22.5



Collaboration with Dziga Vertov

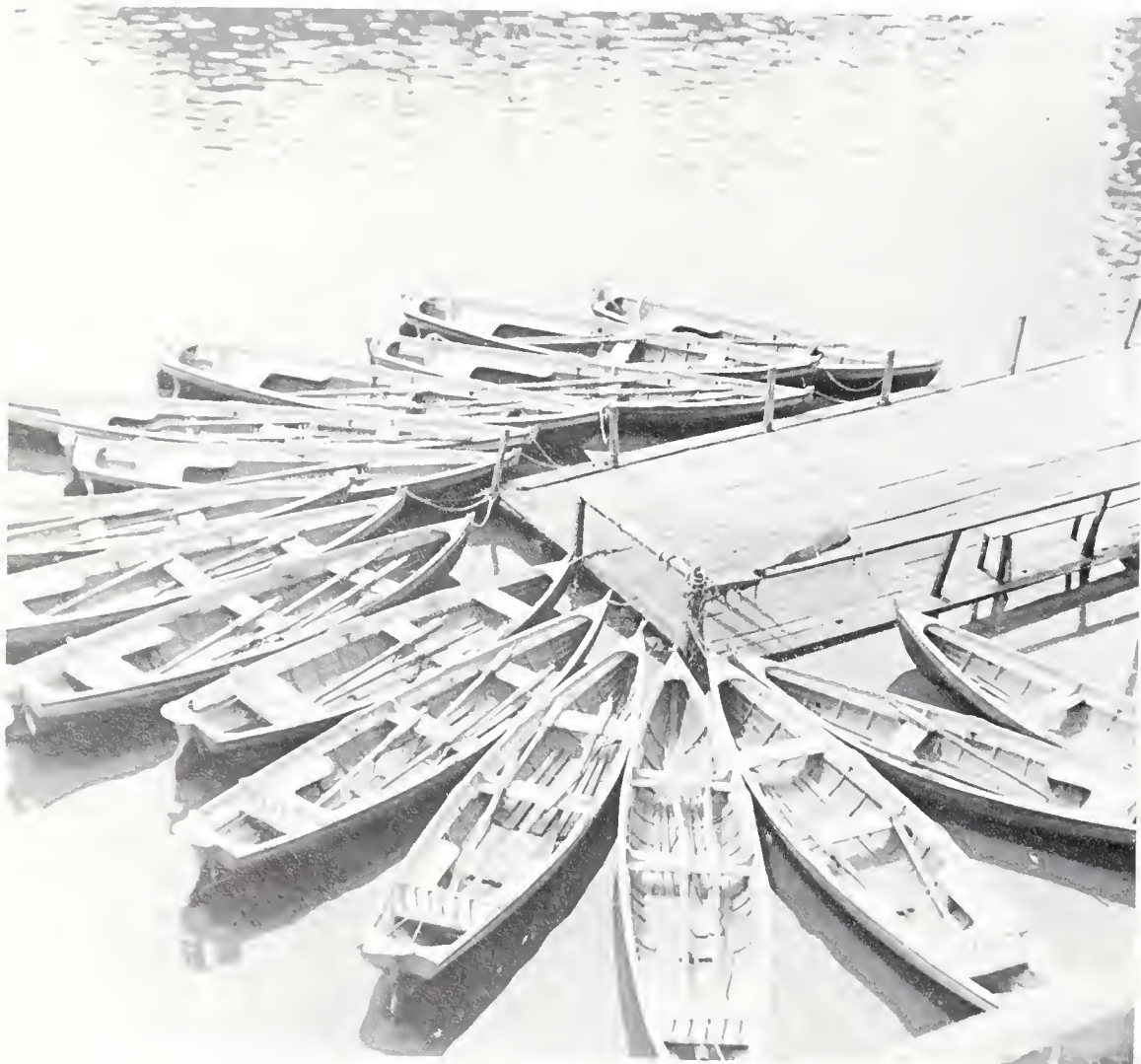
Rodchenko showed an interest in photography right from the beginning of the twenties. Initially it served as a pretext for making up photomontages. His use of the photomontage in books and posters in place of decorative and figurative elements reflected to some extent the requirements of the 'factography' demanded by 'left-wing' Constructivism.

The theory of the 'fact' constituted an integral part of the Production Art of propaganda, which preferred real and useful objects to those handled in an aesthetic fashion.

At the beginning of the twenties the theory of a cinematography that was not based on 'treatments' gained ground, and was linked primarily to the name of Dziga Vertov. Spurning 'artistic' cinema categorically, Vertov urged film-makers to turn their attention to the making of documentaries. By setting up the *Kinoki* group, Vertov hoped to push cinematography in the direction of 'film-reporting'. He was convinced that the chronicling of events would change the art of film-making and that once 'mediocre reconstructions of the imagination' had been eliminated the viewer would be taken on a journey of discovery into real life. During the discussion 'Is the cinema art?' in 1923, Dziga Vertov said: 'the path of development for a revolutionary cinema has been found in life, beyond the world of actors and outside the playhouses'.¹

Rodchenko, who at that time was moving further and further away from his

Boats, 1926. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968: 45-6.
(The measures refer to the format of the negative.)



7: THE PAINTER REFORMS PHOTOGRAPHY

Notes

- 1 Dziga Vertov, 'Kino-glaz, radio-glaz i tak nazyvaemyi dokumentalizm' (Cinema-eye, radio-eye and so-called documentarism), in *Proletkino*, no. 4, 1931, p. 12.
- 2 Essentially Dziga Vertov was the first person in the cinema to put forward the concept of documentary art. He began to put this idea into effect with a series of documentaries, *Cinema-truth* (Kino-pravda), starting on 5 July 1922. With his method known as 'Kino-glaz', Dziga Vertov aimed not just to capture the most real aspects of life, but to take them 'by surprise', that is, without any preliminary preparation of the subject to be filmed. In this way, falsifications would be avoided. 'We film only the facts, and we bring them to the attention of the workers through the screen.'
Dziga Vertov, 'Otvét na pyat voprosov' (Answer to five questions), in *Kino-gazeta*, 21 October 1924.
- 3 Dziga Vertov and Rodchenko also experimented with credit titles for the 1924 newsreel. In it was stated: 'Experimental newsreel. Screenplay and editing by Dziga Vertov. Subtitles by the Constructivist Rodchenko.' In *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 1, 1926, p. 24.
- 4 L. Volkov-Lannit, Alexander Rodchenko, Moscow 1968, pp. 67-68.

Page from the magazine *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 4, 1928.



experiments on aesthetics and form, and getting interested in the idea of photomontage (though at the beginning he did not use his own photographs), was attracted by the ideas of 'documentary' film-making.

He collaborated with Dziga Vertov, making tests and captions for the *Kino-pravda* series and for *The Sixth Part of the World* and other films. Together with Dziga Vertov, he produced issues no. 13 and no. 14 of *Kino-pravda*, which came out in November 1922.²

Rodchenko learned a great deal from the theory of the *Kinoki*. He was fascinated by the very idea of the 'Cinema-eye', the possibility of filming from new points of view and taking life 'by surprise'.

For the first series, *Kino-glaz* (Cinema-eye) — the work of a group under the direction of Dziga Vertov — Rodchenko produced a poster using the technique of photomontage in which 'was expressed the basic concept of the *Kinoki*, which involved rejecting artistic cinematography and filming genuine events instead.'

Pines, 1927. 4.5 x 6. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.



Balconies. From the series 'The house in Myasnit'skaya Street', 1925. 4.5 x 6



The painter becomes photographer

Even as far back as the first half of the twenties Rodchenko was interested in the realm of objects. Abandoning figurative art, he set about designing book covers, advertising posters and utilitarian objects. His artistic perception remained trained on everything that made up part of the everyday environment.

By the time Rodchenko took up the camera, a number of great technical innovations had occurred in the field of photography, but it had not yet been demonstrated that the camera was capable of documenting daily life in artistic terms or that it could become a creative instrument. Hence the real problem lay not in the camera but in the way of looking at the world through its lens.

At that time the criteria by which a photograph was judged were heavily influenced by the skill with which the negative was handled. Increasingly sophisticated standards of printing were emerging. The ability to imitate the methods of a quite different art were regarded as amounting to the same thing as a good artistic result. By subjecting the negative to every possible type of processing, the original was turned into a unique product, not amenable to reproduction on a mass scale. In the words of Volkov-Lannit, 'Rodchenko was unable to accept this system. Opposed to any "manual" manipulation of the original, he sought to single out what were the methods appropriate to photography. The photographer was not supposed to influence the documentary picture in any way' (Doc. 21).¹

The photographer carries out experiments with light

To some extent Rodchenko used the camera to carry on with the experiments he had been doing in the field of painting. He carefully scrutinized what made up a stone, a fabric, the face of a man. He analysed patterns, perspectives and the relationship between light and shadow.² He made an effort to discover new lighting effects. His trials using glass were just one aspect of his experiments along these lines.

Having rejected the flat surface of paintings to move into the three-dimensional world of objects, he made a careful study of the possibilities of light and shade, as is demonstrated by his early spatial experiments with flat elements — the lamps for the Café Pittoresque and the 'white sculptures' series.

He began to use the camera to demonstrate and capture such effects — both on flat surfaces and in three dimensions — by playing with light and shade. By this means he illustrated S. Tretyakov's fable *Samozveri*. He took drawings of figures on a flat piece of paper, cut them out and shifted them out of the plane. Once these figures had been separated from the flat surface by the effect of light and shade they changed completely.³

In the course of his experiments with light, Rodchenko made a thorough examination of all the different stages of photographic development, investigating the potential of every factor, including that of the printing paper. He had already played around with the possibilities of the latter in the twenties, when he was interested in heliography. In fact he was convinced that, quite apart from the camera itself, it was very important for a professional photographer to be familiar with all the possibilities offered by paper. Consequently he began to work on this with his students, starting out with the experiments in heliography.⁴

5 In an issue of the review *Novyi Lef* he made the following comments on his photographs: 'Those of my photographs published in this issue are an experiment, involving taking pictures of objects transparent to light.'

'The first photograph was taken in a way that is not totally clear and requires some explanation.'

'It was taken in this way: a crystal vase was placed on a sheet of glass, above which was set an electric light dimmed by a dark disc to avoid burning the film. The picture was taken from below, looking through the glass towards the glimmer of light.'

'To understand all this, the photograph should be looked at from below, holding it above the head, parallel to the ceiling.'

'In photo no. 2, a goblet/chalice/glass has been set on a rose window turned upside down. Light comes from the lower left through the edges of the rose.'

'In photo no. 3, a lighted electric lamp has been placed behind a jug of water, with its shade facing the lens. The light source is set behind the base of the carafe's handle.'

'This type of experiment offers the possibility of changing our customary view of the objects that surround us.'

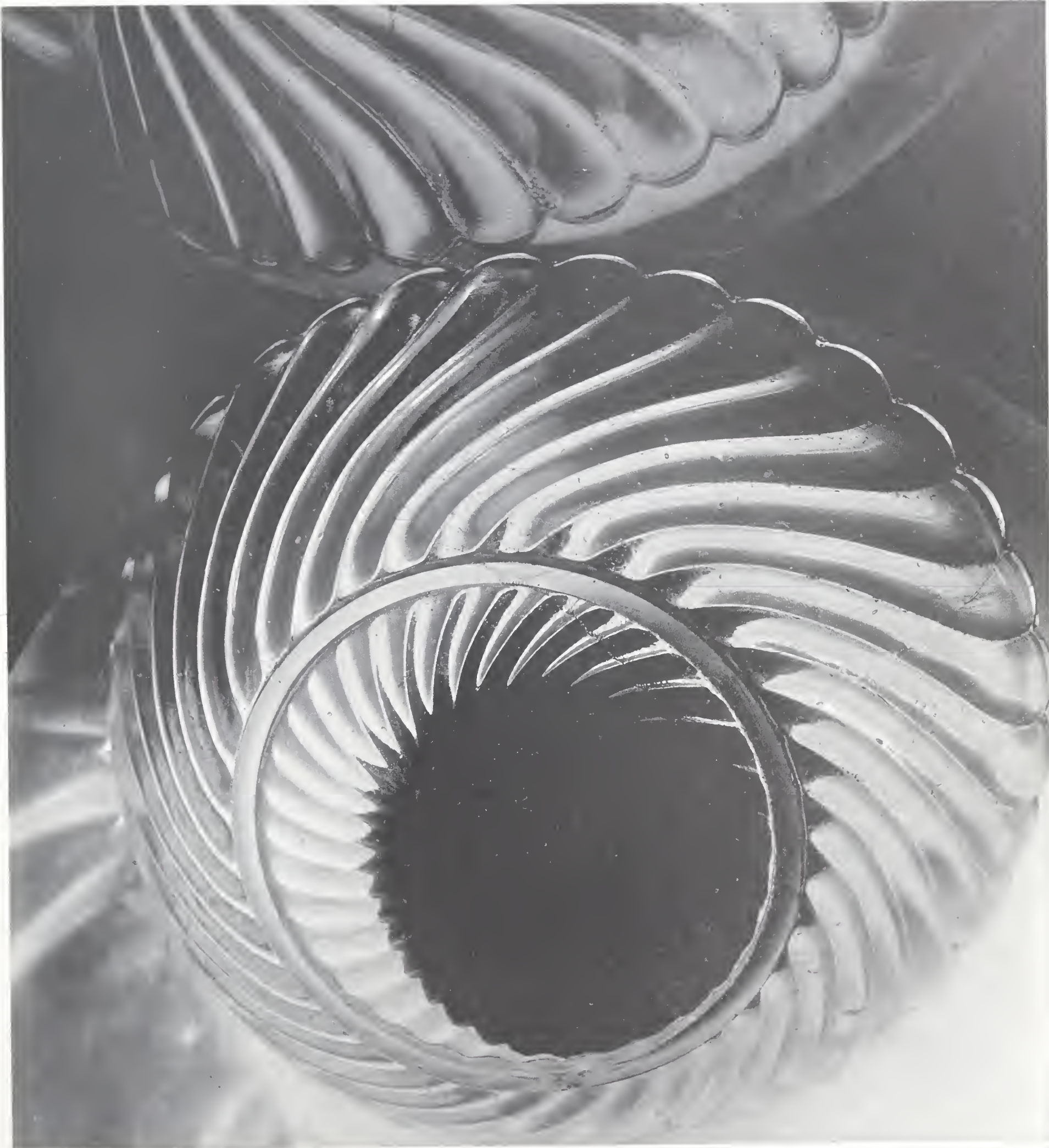
In *Novyi Lef*, no. 3, 1968.

6 The novelty immediately attracted attention. The fable illustrated by Rodchenko was published at the same time in the first issues of the review *Novyi Lef* and *Sovetskoe kino* (Soviet Cinema), starting in 1927.

Sovetskoe kino published these illustrations in its feature 'Photography in the cinema' with a brief note that ran as follows: 'The photographs used for the animation are of special interest for the cinema. For the first time the figures of men and animals are in three dimensions, unlike the flat ones of the animated films made up to now. Used in this way, light has infinite possibilities.'

'The problem of light in cartoon films had never been solved; thus the appearance of three-dimensional cartoons in the cinema is a step forward and can be applied to an infinite number of subjects. The cartoon is, so to speak, "made cinematographic", [allowing it to] experiment with all the possibilities of film-making. It will also find wide application in scientific films.' V.S. 'Foto v kino' (Photography in the cinema), in *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 1, 1927, p. 15.

Next page: *Still life*, 1928. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, 1968.



The following statement appeared in the news section of the second issue of the magazine *Novyi Lef* in 1927: "Over the last year A. Rodchenko has been and is still working in the sector of photography, discovering new viewpoints and angles from which to make exposures."

In 1928 an argument sprang up over the new criteria for photography put for-

1928. Photo by A. Rodchenko. Moscow, 1968



7 *The great Soviet cameraman S. Urusevsky took his first steps in the field of photography under the guidance of Rodchenko himself, at that time professor in the Metfak of Vkhutemas, while he was a student in the graphics department.*

'I am very grateful to Rodchenko', wrote Urusevsky, 'for the lessons he gave to us as students at Vkhutemas. His was a short course of information about photography. Personally I got a lot out of those lessons.'

'We waited for them to start with impatience. We were imagining the moment when we would finally get our hands on the camera.'

'We were very disappointed when Rodchenko came to the lessons and did not talk about the camera at all.'

'He took us to the laboratory. He laid a sheet of white paper on the table. He illuminated it from the side with a lamp. Between the light source and the paper he set a number of objects whose shadows were cast on the paper. Then he exchanged the ordinary paper for photographic paper, illuminated it and began to work on it. He produced a very curious composition.'

'Then he invited each of us to do the same thing.'

'Without our realizing it, Rodchenko made us understand that photography was an art with an expressiveness, a plastic quality of its own.' S. Urusevsky, 'Neskolko slov o Rodchenko' (A few words on Rodchenko), in *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12, 1967.

8 *After a few months Rodchenko wrote in the same magazine: 'It is said: Rodchenko's photographs have become a bore: always looking down from above, looking up from below.'*

'But everyone has been photographing "from centre to centre" for years; not just I but the majority of photographers ought to be taking pictures looking up from below or down from above.'

'I will take them sideways on...'

'You take an object, a building or a man, and you think, like the photographer, this way or that way? ... Everything has already been seen...'

'They have taught us, through thousands of years of painting, to see according to the rules of our forefathers.'

'Instead people should be encouraged to see from every point and with every type of lighting...'

'The magazine Soviet Cinema has asked me to contribute. I went there and asked: "Of course you will have seen Moholy-Nagy's book...?"'

"Yes," they said, "you are right. Once we

published it, then we decided that its things were left-wing.”

‘At the magazine *Soviet Photography* they particularly liked the photographs published in *Lef*. When I bring more of them, they will have nothing to say.

‘Damn it, nobody knows what is beautiful and what is not. They do not understand new things.’

Novyi Lef, no. 6, 1927, p. 3.

Sovetskoe foto, no. 4, 1928.

Instead it was published in its entirety in the review *Novyi Lef*. Some excerpts from it follow.

‘To the Editors of *Soviet Photography*. 6 April 1928.

‘In photography there are old foreshortenings and perspectives by someone standing firmly on the ground and looking straight in front of him, what I call “shooting from the navel”, when one holds the camera against one’s belly.

‘I struggle and will go on struggling against this way of seeing that is also shared by those of my comrades who are involved with the new photography.

‘Photograph from any point except “from the navel”, until all these ways of taking pictures have been recognized as legitimate.

‘The most interesting modern shots are those “from below” or “from above” and it is these that need to be worked on. I do not know who invented them, but I think they have existed for a long time. I want to endorse them, expand on them and get used to them...

‘Anyone who talks about photographs taken from above looking down or from below looking up and says that they are in the style of Rodchenko is merely very ignorant; people should be made familiar with modern photography, by being shown photographs by the best artists from different countries.

‘... You can assemble as many of them as you want and then compare them. But to conclude that it is a matter of plagiarism is at the least foolish.

‘How could culture progress if there was no exchange of experiences and discoveries...?’

‘As for “the illustrations” to the letter: D. Martin’s *Boats* are not exactly like my own from the point of view of composition; I think that one could collect a whole album of boats like these.

‘Renger-Patzsch’s *Chimney* and my “tree” photographed from below looking upwards are very similar, but is it possible that “the photographer” and the editors have not grasped that this similarity is intentional?’

ward by Rodchenko, when the magazine *Soviet Photography* accused him of plagiarism. In issue no. 4 of the magazine an illustrated letter addressed to the editor of the column ‘At home and abroad’ was published. In it three photographs by Rodchenko (boats, pine and balcony) were compared with three pictures by foreign photographers (D. Martin — *Boats*; A. Renger-Patzsch — *Chimney*; Moholy-Nagy — *The balcony*). The photographs were accompanied by the following text: ‘Note: A.M. Rodchenko is not just a photographer. He is an artist, a professor in the Moscow Vkhutemas, experimenter in the field of photography, famous for his ability to see things in a different, personal way, from his own point of view. This ability of his is so well known and recognized by all that if any photographer takes pictures looking down from above or looking up from below, they immediately tell him that “he takes pictures in the manner of Rodchenko, imitates Rodchenko”.

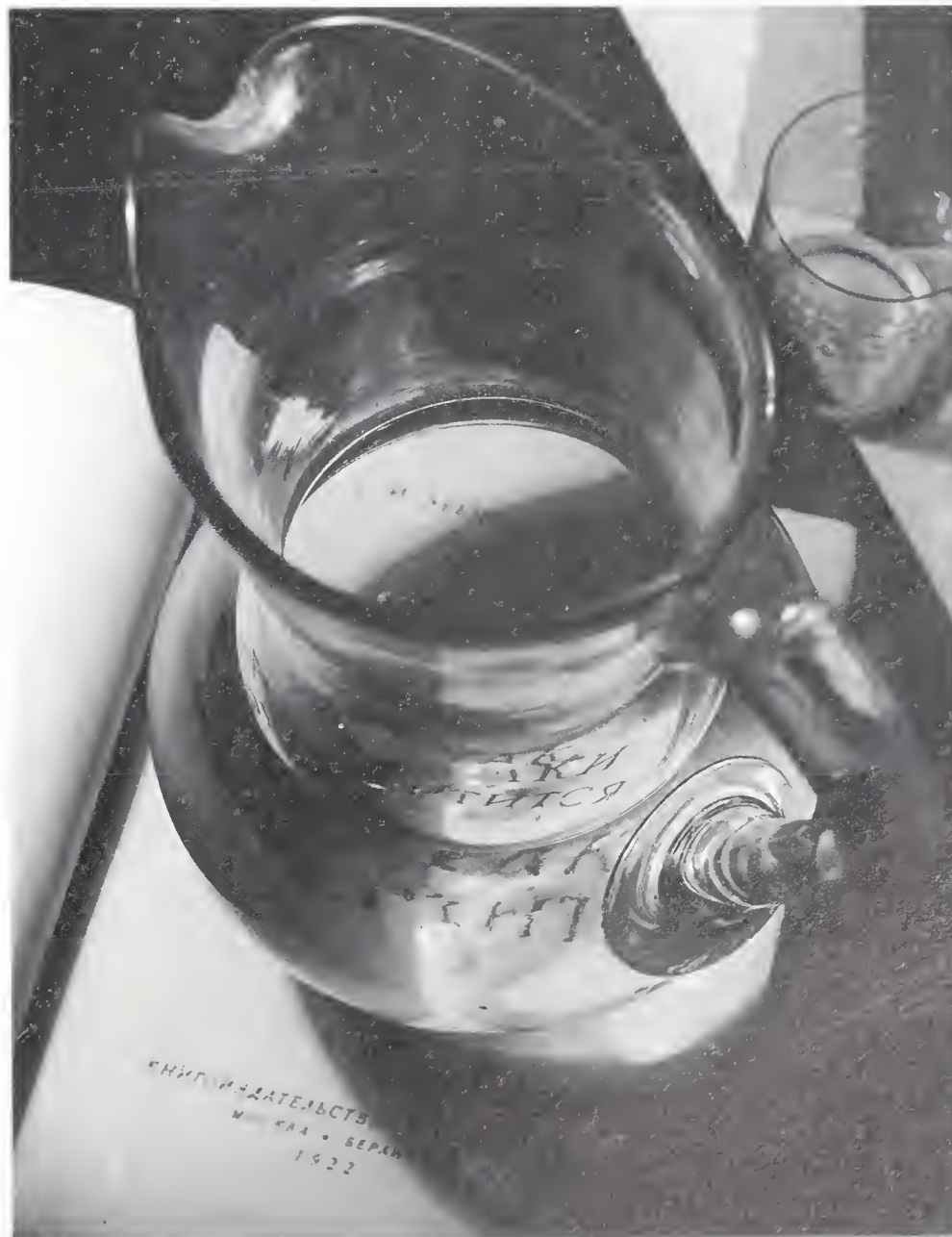
‘Preliminary conclusion: how shameless of foreign photographers to use the discoveries of a Soviet photographer for their own imperialistic aims, and then claim that they are their discoveries!

‘Conclusions: let the readers draw their own from the foregoing.

A photographer’

Rodchenko sent the magazine a letter in answer but it was never published.¹⁰

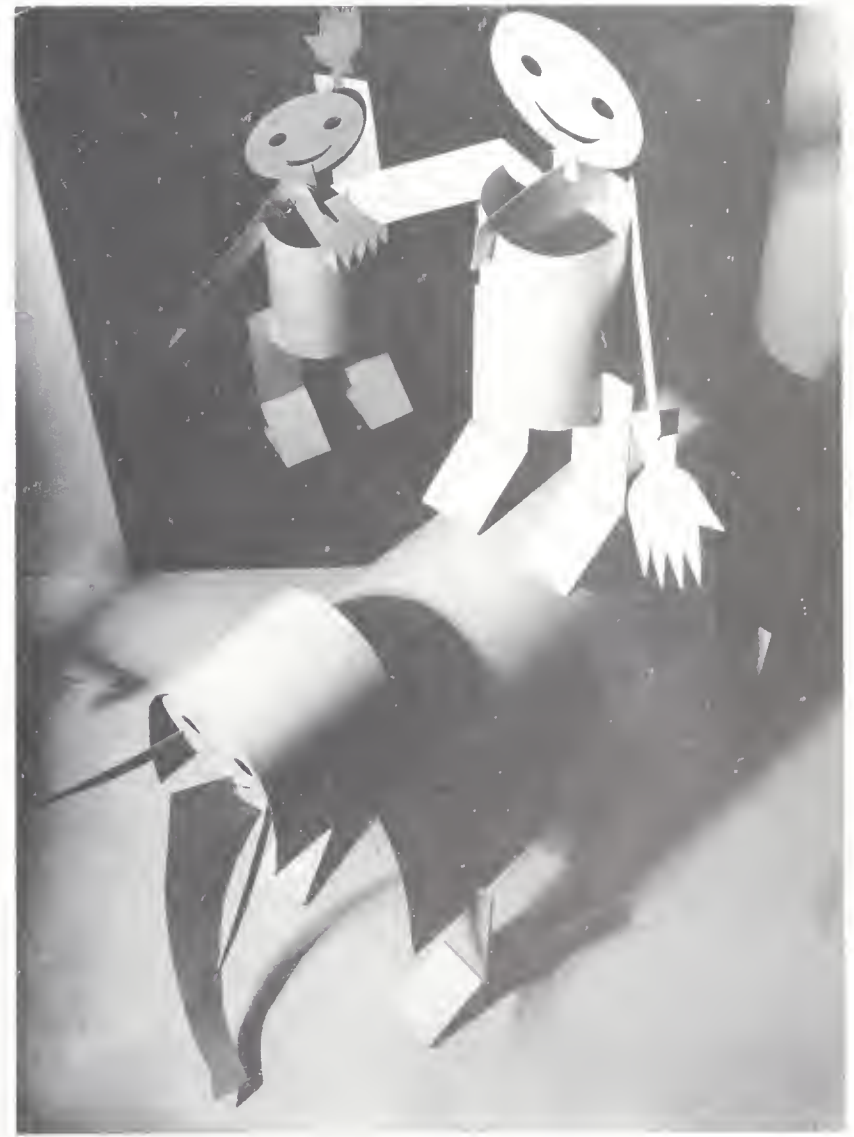
Still life, 1928. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968







Pages 220-21: illustrations for the book of children's verse *Samozver.*, by S. Tretyakov, 1926, published in *Sovetskoe Kino* and *Novyi Let*



For a hundred years painters have been pro-
... for us the tree seen "from the navel"; and
photographers have followed in their
footsteps. Now my wanting to take a picture of
a tree, looking up from below, as if it were an
industrial object, a chimney, is a revolution in
the eyes of the bourgeoisie and of the old-
fashioned lover of landscapes.

'In this way I am broadening the concept of
customary objects...

'Moholy Nagy's photograph *The balcony and
my "balcony"* are "extremely similar"... But
the date of these two photographs speaks in my
favour...

'I will say, indeed, that there is still a
"balcony" - by Moholy-Nagy which closely
resembles mine...

'None of this is intended in any way to belit-
tle the merit and value of a great artist like
Moholy-Nagy, an artist for whom I have the
highest regard.

'Moholy-Nagy, formerly a "left-wing"
painter of abstract pictures, has never asked me
if he could have my photographs. He knows
them very well and appreciates my work. When
I was a painter I had a great deal of influence on
him, and he has said so in his writings on more
than one occasion...

'I believe that my photographs are no worse
than those with which they have been com-
pared, and in this lies their value.

'Apart from these, I have many other
photographs, very difficult to compare with
others.'

A.M. Rodchenko, 'Krupnaya bezgramotnost
ili melkaya gadost?' (Great ignorance, or a little
muck?), in *Novyi Lef*, no. 6, 1928, pp. 42-44.

Two months later an 'open letter' addressed
by B. Kushner to Rodchenko was published in
the same magazine *Novyi Lef*. 'Dear Rod-
chenko,' wrote Kushner, 'there should be no
need on my part, of course, to express my total
solidarity with what you said in your letter to
the editors of *Soviet Photography*...

'There is just one sentence in your letter that
is not clear to me and raises doubts. It does not
concern the not very intelligent attacks made on
you by the author of the letter published in
Soviet Photography, but the principles of
modern photography.

'You state that "the most interesting modern
shots are those taken from below or from
above"... Perhaps it is the result of my personal
ignorance in matters of photography, but I do
not find the arguments about this obligatory
position of observation at exactly ninety degrees
very convincing. The need for a real battle against
the conservative notion of "photographing from
the navel" is absolutely no explanation for the
categorical and definitive preference you display
for the vertical position over all the other
possibilities.'

B. Kushner, 'Otkrytoe pis'mo' (Open letter), in
Novyi Lef, no. 8, 1928, pp. 38-39.

Rodchenko's answer came out in the follow-
ing issue of the magazine: 'Dear Kushner!

'You have touched on an interesting question
with regard to the shots from above looking
down and from below looking up...

'I am a firm supporter of this position over all
the others and this is why.

'Look at a history of the arts or a history of
art from all countries and you will see that all
the pictures, apart from a few exceptions, have
been made taking the navel or the level of the
eyes as a point of reference.

'Do not be deceived into thinking that icons
and primitive painters produce the sensation of
a bird's-eye view. They have just enlarged the
horizon in order to fit many figures into the pic-
ture; but each one of them has been painted at
eye level. As a whole, [the painting] corresponds
neither to reality nor to a bird's-eye view.

'In spite of the illusory view from above, each
figure has a profile and a real face. The only dif-
ference with respect to the realists is that the
figures are on top of each other and not one
behind the other.

'The same is true for the Chinese. Although,
to tell the truth, they have one point in their
favour, consisting in the fact that they represent
all the possible inclinations of an object, caught
in the phases of movement, but the point of
observation is always from the centre.

'If you look at the photographs used to il-
lustrate magazines in the past, you will see the
same thing. Only in recent years do you come
across new angles sometimes. I repeat,
sometimes, for they are very rare.

'I buy foreign magazines and collect
photographs, but I have only managed to put
together about thirty photographs of this type in
all.

'Behind this dangerous commonplace is con-
cealed a poor education in visual perception and
a complete distortion of the visual image.

'What is the impulse which has led to the
discovery of something new in painting?

'Initially, the desire to paint "as if it were
live", as in the pictures of Vereshchagin or
Dener whose portraits seem to emerge from their
frames and in which even the pores of the skin
were accurately depicted. As a result, instead of
appreciating the photographer, they got annoyed
with him...

'At a later stage, the desire to interpret the
world from a psychological and individual view-
point. This was the case with Leonardo da Vin-
ci, Rubens, etc., whose paintings depict,
although in different forms, the same subject.
Leonardo da Vinci, the *Mona Lisa*; Rubens, his
wife.

'The third phase was that of mannerism: pain-
ting for the sake of painting: Van Gogh,
Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Braque.

'Finally came abstraction, non-objective
painting, where the interest in the object became
almost scientific. Composition, execution,

space, weight, etc.

'But the search for new angles, new perspec-
tives and new views remained almost a dead let-
ter...

'The photograph represents a new and rapid
instrument for description of the world: given its
possibilities, it ought to be trying to show the
world from different points, it ought to be
teaching us to look from all sides. But at this
point "the psychology of the navel", with cen-
turies of authoritarianism behind it, clashes
with the modern photographer...

'When I began to take an interest in photo-
graphy, after giving up painting, I did not realize
that painting had laid its heavy hand on
photography...

'I have difficulty in writing, having a visual
way of thinking; fragmentary thoughts come in-
to my mind, in pieces. No one, however, writes
about this...

'The letter to the magazine *Soviet Photo-
graphy* that speaks of me is not only stupid and
false, it is a way of attacking the new
photography. With the aim of discrediting me, it
tries to frighten off photographers who are look-
ing for new ways of taking pictures...

'But let us go back to the basic problem. The
modern city with its multistorey houses, fac-
tories, mills, etc., two- or three-storey high glass
windows, trams, motorcars, giant illuminated
advertisements, ocean liners, airports, has chang-
ed, although not by much, the usual criterion of
visual perception.

'Only the camera seems to be really capable
of describing modern life.

'But...

'The antediluvian laws of the visual world
regard photography merely as a lower rung of
painting, etching, engraving... Thanks to this
tradition a sixty-eight-storey American building
is photographed from its central point, from its
navel which is situated exactly on the thirty-
fourth floor. To do this one climbs a nearby
building and takes a picture of the sixty-eight-
storey giant from the thirty-fourth floor.

'And if there is no building nearby,
retouching is used to try and render the image of
this building.

'Walking through the street, one sees
buildings from below. To see the street with its
cars and passers-by, one must look down from
the upper storeys; everything that falls within
one's gaze from the window of a tram or a
motorcar; all that one can see looking down
from one's seat in a concert hall or theatre, can
be transformed by changing the classical "from
the navel" angle...

'I remember when I saw the Eiffel Tower in
Paris for the first time from a distance, I did not
like it at all. But when I went past it in a bus,
I saw from the window iron bars coming down
to the right and to the left; this view gave me an
impression of mass and construction, while the
view "from the navel" merely produced the sen-



Photography and aesthetics

Through his experiments in the field of painting, Rodchenko had turned his attention to three-dimensional constructions. He went on to apply the new forms that emerged from these to the realm of objects, making a *concrete* contribution to the formation of the new stylistic current. The different stages of this process were all directly linked to the problems of artistic creativity, even if on more than one occasion the phraseology of the theoreticians had been adopted, and 'aesthetics' had been condemned *in words*. But it is always a mistake to interpret a technical text in solely literal terms.

On the whole by 'denying art' and attacking 'aesthetics', Production Artists were taking a stand against the traditions that were hindering development of the new art. They were showing their repugnance for the dogmas and clichés of the old aesthetics. Precise terminology was not their main concern. For them, theory was just a means of clearing the way for the new. Where art was concerned, the rhetoric of the theoreticians of Production Art often seemed to take on nihilistic tones, but it was just being used as a weapon in the struggle against the art of the past. Yet when this rhetoric began to set limits to artistic creativity in the new art, and when Rodchenko began to feel the paralysing effect of this excessive and polemical nihilism on himself, as an artist, he spoke out and defined his own right to artistic creation. All his work in the sector of photography is a demonstration of this.

In the beginning Rodchenko accepted the theory of the 'fact' promulgated by Lef, and was decidedly opposed to bringing the 'artistic' approach of painting into photography. He condemned 'aestheticization' of the subject being photographed and the artistic embellishment of reality.

Engaged as he was in the struggle against traditional photography, he rejected terms like 'artistic', 'art' and 'aesthetics'; initially Rodchenko was not conscious of the fact that he was creating a new *art* of photography.¹¹

At the end of 1928, however, Rodchenko wrote a series of contentious articles for the magazine *Novyi Lef* attacking those who did not acknowledge the artistic value of photography and the prosaic and utilitarian theory of the 'fact'. In that period Mayakovsky had left *Lef* and recent issues of *Novyi Lef* were edited by S. Tretyakov, who supported the purely orthodox line and did not allow any kind of deviation from utilitarian aims.

This was evidently the reason why Rodchenko's article 'Predosterzhenie' (Warning) was published in issue no. 11 of 1928 not as an article by one of the board of editors nor as a topic of discussion, but as an article in net contrast with the viewpoint of the magazine's editors. The article was preceded by a note which ran as follows: 'While giving space to Rodchenko, the editorial staff expresses its total disagreement with the basic idea of the author, who is defending a "new aesthetics", forgetting those utilitarian and Productivist functions which concern *Lef*.'¹²

In the next issue of the magazine the editors responded critically to Rodchenko's article, both in another article by B. Kushner and in an editorial comment which held Kushner's criticism to be insufficient.¹³ What had provoked this reaction on the part of orthodox supporters of *Lef*? A look at Rodchenko's contentious article makes this clear: 'Believing that it is "what" one photographs and not "how one photographs" that is essential in photography, some comrades in *Lef* put themselves on guard against the danger of making photography into easel painting, experimentalism and formalism without realizing that they are falling into the trap of the aesthetics of asceticism and Philistinism.'¹⁴

So Rodchenko rejected all the utilitarian and nihilistic extremes advocated by orthodox theoreticians. This is an important fact because a literal analysis of Rod-

sation of a figurine reproduced ad nauseam in postcards.

'It is the same image that one has of any factory when it is viewed from afar and not observed in all its details, from the inside, from above looking down and from below looking up...

'Not everything comes out well in a photographic reportage.

'One looks for new subjects to photograph, but one always takes pictures of them along traditional lines...

'Soviet Photography speaks of the "photo-graph-picture" as if it were something closed and eternal.

'The opposite is true. Different photographs of a subject should be taken from several positions, as if it were being observed from various sides and not just through the keyhole. Not making photo-pictures but photo-moments that have a value as documents and not artistic ob-

V. Mavakovsky, 1924. 9 × 12. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.



jects.

'In conclusion: in order to teach man to see from new angles, ordinary subjects should be photographed from unusual positions and new subjects from different angles, whereby the photographer tries to create a complete picture of the subject...'

'We do not see the stupendous perspectives, foreshortened images and positions of objects. Accustomed to seeing the usual and the banal, we have to discover the world of the visual. We have to revolutionize our way of seeing.'

'We must remove from our eyes the habit of looking "from the navel".'

'The most interesting modern shots are those from above and from below and in diagonal.'

A. Rodchenko, 'Puti sovremennoi fotografii' (The paths of modern photography), in Novyi Lef, no. 9, 1928, pp. 31-39.

11 As early as 1927 he wrote: 'It is interesting to

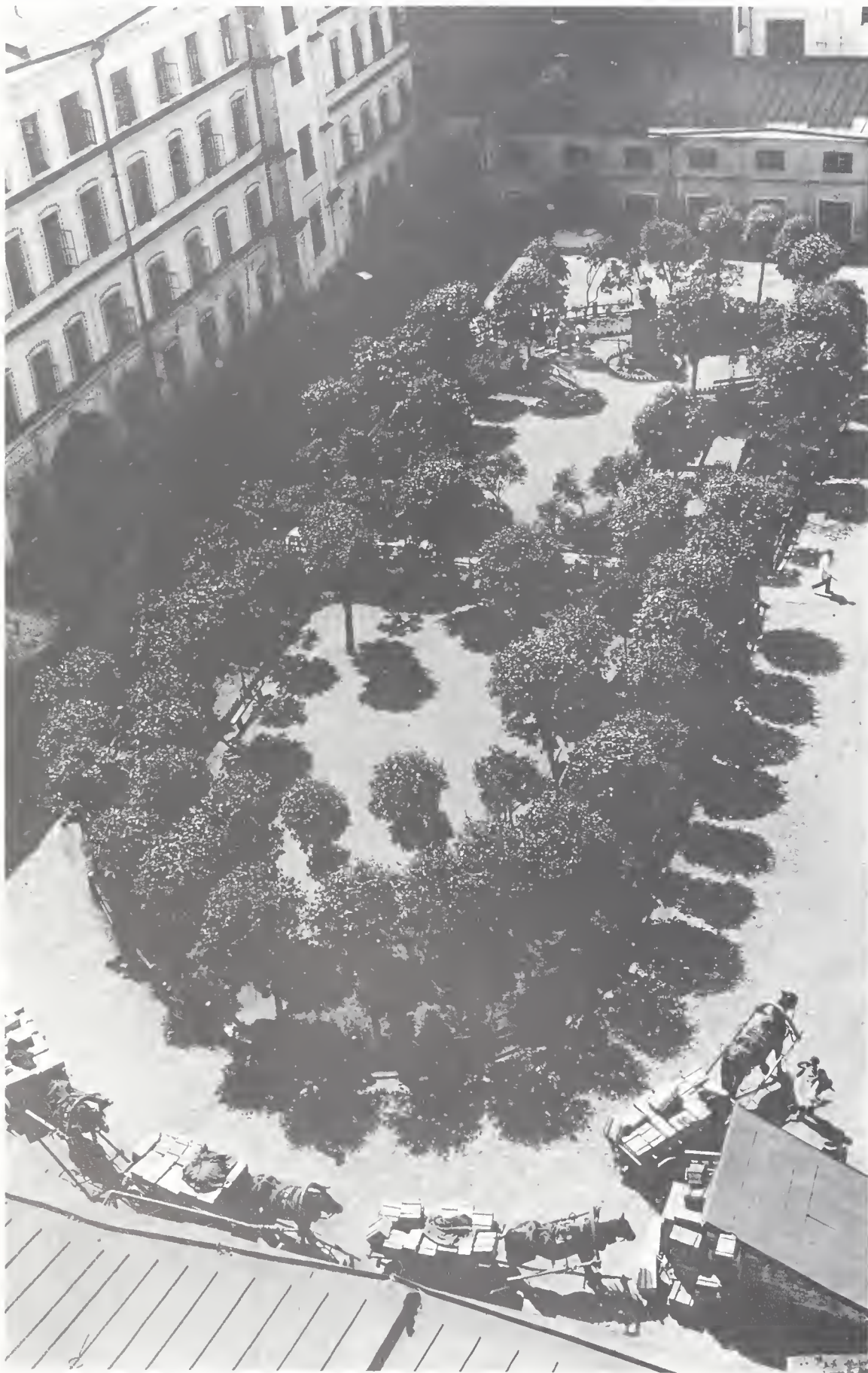
Portrait of Lili Brik, 1924.



V. Mavakovsky with his puppy Skotik, 1924. 4.5 cm



View of the courtyard of the apartment house built in the Soviet Republic in Moscow, 1918.



Pines. 1927. 4.5 x 6. Published in *Novyi Let*, no. 7, 1927.

Staircase. From the series 'The house in Myasnitskaya Street' 1925. 5 x 6. In *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 2, 1926.



be involved in experimental photography. In a photograph there is ninety per cent aesthetics.

'This is why I take an interest in radio at the same time. I do it as a point of discipline. There is no more than ten per cent aesthetics in radio.'

'Reinventing everything that has a bearing on art and training oneself to see the new even in ordinary and chance objects.'

'Here we make an effort to see the old in the new. While it is difficult to find and reveal the unusual in something absolutely usual.'

'The element of strength lies in this.'

In *Novyi Lef*, no. 6, 1927, p. 4.

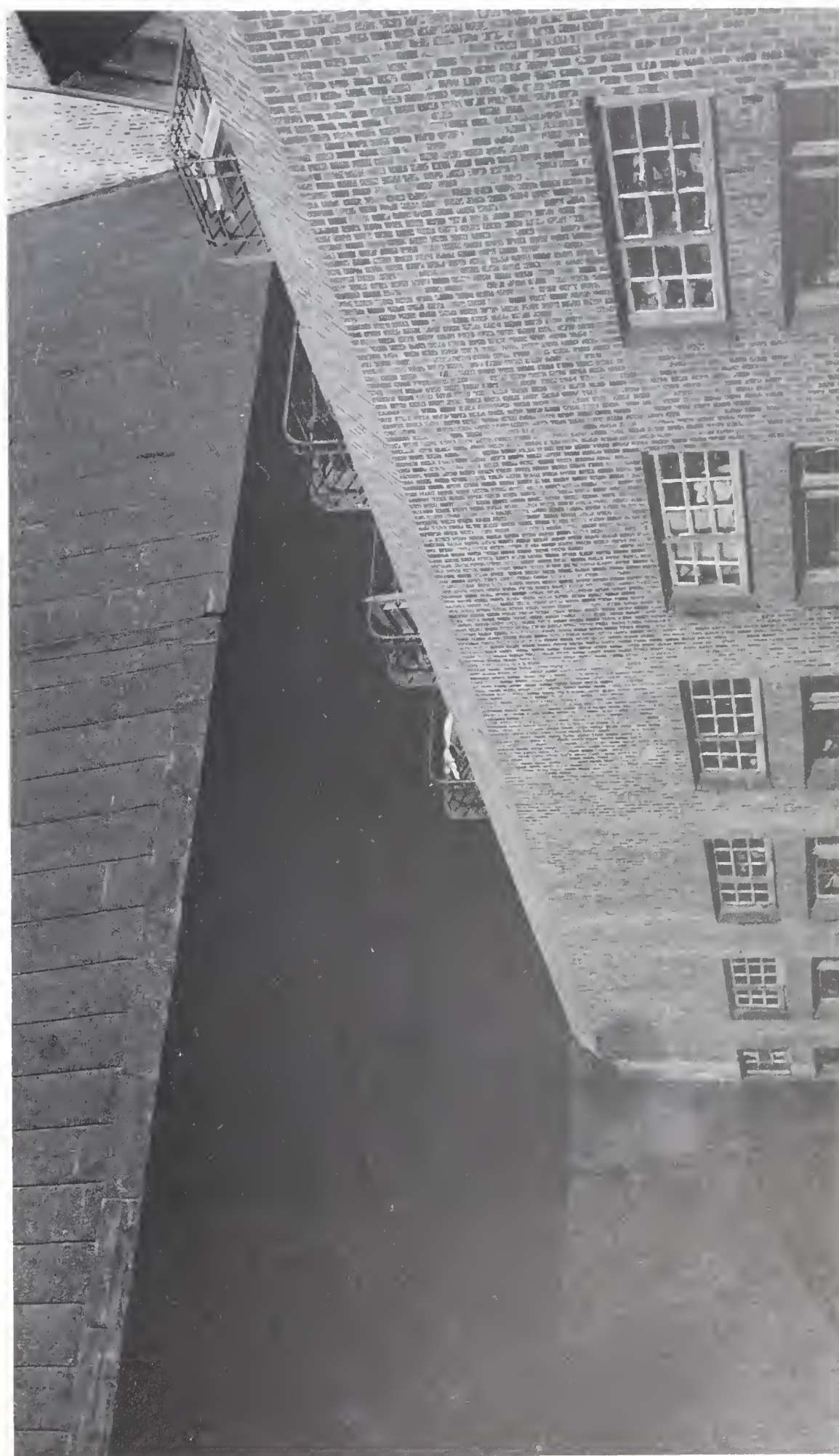
12 In *Novyi Lef*, no. 11, 1928.

13 'For the functionalists there is another important element as well as "how" and "what" (which stand for "form" and "content") and it is "why", the only thing that transforms a "work" into an "object", that is, into an arm of intervention aimed at a precise goal...

Staircase. From the series 'The house in Myasnikskaya Street', 1925. 4.5 x 6.



House in Myasnikskaya Street, 1925. 4.5 x 6. In *Novyi Lef*, no. 9, 1928.



Rodchenko's writings, without taking any account of his photographic work or the controversial situation, might lead one to believe, mistakenly, that Rodchenko opposed aesthetico-formal research in the field of photography.

On the other hand an innovative photographer was obliged to resist the traditions of so-called 'artistic photography', whose canons were based on imitation of figurative art. That he did so was obvious right from the first exhibition in which Rodchenko took part as a professional photographer.

The film cameraman Roman Karmen said of that exhibition, held in 1927: 'We saw different styles and genres, from Rodchenko's wonderful "left-wing" shots to the pictorial works of the old masters of artistic photography. The dynamics of shooting, the great vitality [of the photographs] and the high level of profes-

Fig. 124 * 12 Published in *Uchenye Rodchenko*, Moscow, 1968



'Instead of seeking to find out which and how many utilitarian tasks can be fulfilled by photography, Rodchenko is only interested in its aesthetic function, and his whole effort is aimed at educating taste according to a number of new principles...'

'Limiting the functions of photography to the same ones as painting had — reproduction, expression of an emotional relationship with the subject — Rodchenko narrows the problem and falls [into the trap of] stylistic subjectivism.'
In *Novyi Lef*, no. 12, 1928, pp. 41-42.

14 Some further extracts from Rodchenko's article follow.

'The comrades must be made to understand that turning the "fact" into a fetish is not only pointless but can be harmful to photography.'

'We struggle against easel painting not because it is an aesthetic form of painting, but because it is not modern, for it does not succeed in bringing out the technical side, it is a redundant, exclusive art, and it cannot be of any use to the masses.'

'Hence we are struggling not against painting but against photography carried out according to the models of painting as if it were an etching, a drawing, a picture in sepia or watercolour.'

'Struggling for "what" to photograph means nothing. Examples must be provided. That is what we are all doing.'

'A "fact" photographed badly does not represent a cultural phenomenon, and still less a cultural value for photography...'

'Revolution in the photographic field consists in photographing in such a way that photography will have enough strength not just to rival painting, but also to point out to everyone a new and modern way of discovering the world of science, of technology and of everyday life...'

'All the photographic clubs know what to photograph, but few know how to photograph...'

'In short, we have to find, we will seek and we will find (do not fear), a new aesthetics, a new enthusiasm, a new pathos to express the innovations of Socialist reality photographically.'

'The photograph of a factory built in a new way is not just a photograph of a building for us. The new factory in the photograph is not just a "fact", but the source of pride and happiness in the industrialization of the country of the Soviets...'

'We are obliged to make experiments.'

'Photographing facts as mere description is not an innovation. Behind a simply photographed fact painting can be concealed, and behind a simply described fact, a romance. You may be

advocates of the "fact", but you do not describe it so simply.

'Comrades, you will soon end up confusing left and right.

'A Lefist is not someone who photographs facts, but someone who, through photography, is able to struggle against "the imitations of art", with images of high quality, and to do this he experiments until he obtains a perfect "easel" photograph.

'What is this easel photograph...? It is the experimental photograph.

'Do not study theoretically without taking advice from those with experience and do not be the worst friends of your enemies.

'For those who are doing actual work, abstract theories based on the aesthetics of asceticism are highly dangerous.'

A. Rodchenko, 'Predosterzhenie' (Warning), in *Novyi Lef*, no. 11, 1928, pp. 36-37.

15 The exhibition aroused great interest among the public and a great deal of attention in the press. An article devoted to the exhibition was published in the review *Novyi Lef*. Mayakovsky suggested to its author that he should make use of comments written by the public in the visitors' book. Here is a sample.

'The artistic section of the exhibition arouses this impression: that ten years ago the photographer-cum-artist had closed himself in a dark and grey room, screened the windows, locked the door, and worked only with magnesium, shunning the light of the sun...'

'Napelbaum's portraits are shams, they lack character... The artist-cum-photographer catches the best feature of the human face but not the most characteristic one; for this reason he is false...'

'Shame, comrade Napelbaum!'

'There are only maudlin subjects in the artistic section; the various phases of photographic work are not brought out.'

'The majority of "artistic" photographers have dealt with "artistic quality" with fancy lighting and the image photographed. Rarely are solutions seen: less light, more composition...'

'A lot of aesthetics, not much real life — one does not see the October Revolution in the artistic section...'

'Long life to the obsequious photographer Napelbaum...!'

'In the section on artistic photography one is struck by the extraordinary prevalence of professionalism. An exhibition staged in this way turns into... lots of Napelbaum citizens...'

'Napelbaum's portraits are mediocre, pretentious and dead.'

The film director Kuleshov. 1926. 4.5 x 6. Published in *Iskusstvo*, no. 12, 1926.



...ism were a testimony to the maturity of revolutionary photographic art.’¹⁵

The anniversary exhibition ‘10 Years of Soviet Photography’ was held the following year, and included six photographs by Rodchenko: *Mother*, *The Vkhutemas building on the Myasnitskaya*, *The balcony of Vkhutemas*, *The courtyard of Vkhutemas seen from above*, *A part of the Bryansk station*, *The Mosselprom building*. It is telling that Rodchenko’s photographs were exhibited in the section dealing with photo-reportage and not in the section on ‘artistic photography’ (where, for instance, portraits by the then popular photographer Napelbaum were on show).

At the time ‘photo-reportage’ and ‘artistic photography’ were seen as two totally distinct genres: the former involved taking pictures as a record, whereas the latter meant the photography of carefully prepared subjects.¹⁶ The opinion that photography would eventually take the place of painting was a very widely held one in those days, as could be seen from the reactions of the public. But what was more important was the fact that photography was seen as painting’s successor in the portrayal of reality.

Rodchenko’s method was totally different from the one employed by Napelbaum in his portraits. It was intended to reveal not the outer ‘beauty’ and importance of the subject portrayed, but characteristic traits of personality. Rodchenko was sarcastic about photographic portraits where ‘a workman was portrayed in the manner of a Christ or a Lord and a working woman in the manner of the Blessed Virgin Mary’.

Rodchenko put his theory into practice, making a series of highly expressive portraits of Mayakovsky, at different times and under different conditions, which gave a comprehensive picture of his complex personality.¹⁷

‘While waiting for colour photography to get better, it is not worth spending years keeping track of what is going on in the field of painting, since photography, especially in colour, can perfectly well replace it...’

‘Today I went to the Tretyakov Gallery and then ended up here. I feel that over the course of time painting has degenerated as far as technique is concerned, whereas the opposite has taken place in photography. This exhibition demonstrates it perfectly...’

‘In my opinion painting ought to die after this exhibition.’

‘Pity that Rodchenko was not present with his best works...’

‘... Rodchenko’s works are few and badly displayed. I consider this experimental artist to be the best. Many are studying and will study with him. Overall the exhibition is a perfect demonstration of the artistic nature of photography and of the death of easel painting. Those who do not understand this are fools.’

In *Novyi Lef*, no. 7, 1928, pp. 43-44.

¹⁶ In an article devoted to the photographic portrait, Rodchenko wrote: ‘I have found myself arguing with a painter over whether photography can replace painting in the portrait. He maintained very seriously that the photograph only portrays a chance moment, while the painted portrait is the sum of a series of precise moments characteristic of a particular subject.

‘In short he claimed that the painter never created a particular subject objectively, but gave him an individual character, idealized him, rendered him just as he imagined him; that is to say, he recreated him, personally. But I do not want to argue about this; let us admit that the painting provides a set of characteristics while the photograph does not.

‘The photo catches a precise moment in a documentary fashion...’

‘It should be said that with the appearance of photographic documents, it is no longer possible to speak of a single portrait that cannot be reproduced. Man is not merely an ensemble, but rather the ensemble of many ensembles, sometimes totally at variance with one another.

‘With photography we can refute the idea that one set [of characteristics] exists for a given subject.’

In *Novyi Lef*, no. 11, 1928, p. 37.

‘Capture a subject not in a single “synthetic” portrait but in a series of instantaneous photographs, taken at different times and under different conditions.’

A. Rodchenko, ‘Protiv summirovannogo portreta, za momental’nyi snimok’ (Against the

The artist Shevchenko. Dual portrait, 1924. 9 × 12.
Published in *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 4, 1927.



The architect A. Vesnin, 1924. 9 × 12.





The poet Aseev, 1927. 9 x 12. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.



synthetic portrait and for an instantaneous photograph), in *Novyi Lef*, no. 4, 1928, pp. 14-16.

- 17 S. Urusevsky, who greatly appreciated the photographic portraits that Rodchenko made of Mayakovsky, wrote: 'I still cannot understand how Rodchenko achieves such an intense expressive force. They are simple, severe photographs, with diffuse lighting and absolutely no attempt to create an effect.'

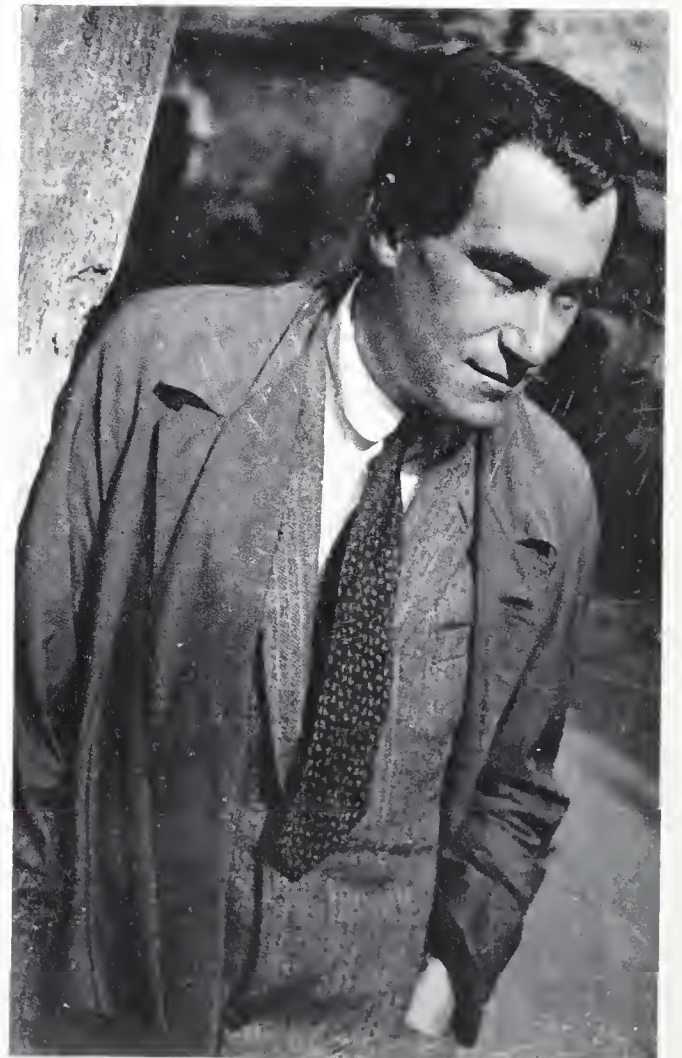
'Only Mayakovsky's face against a neutral, grey background.'

'In some the composition is totally symmetrical. Mayakovsky is looking straight at the camera. An almost banal photograph. Yet at the same time they are incredibly expressive, monumental portraits.'

'Naturally there are other photographs of Mayakovsky. But the ones taken by Rodchenko make you think and capture the image of the great poet... What is the strength of these photographs...?'



The writer Kataev, 1929. Leica.



'Perhaps it is the subject himself who makes us think.

'Perhaps it is the intelligent and inspired face of the poet himself that affects us.

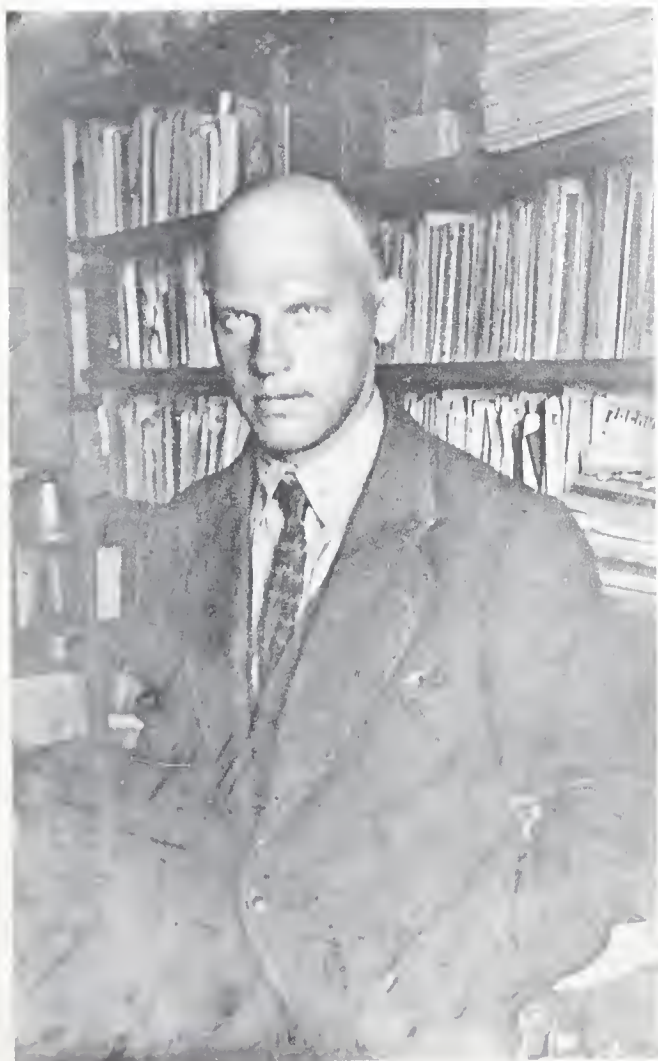
'But here is the portrait of an ordinary woman. This too is simple and severe, with no artifice. The woman's gaze is lowered. Her black headscarf, with its small white dots, takes up almost the whole of the photograph. Under the photograph we read Mother.

'This portrait also draws attention to itself. And once again we cannot understand how Rodchenko has managed to produce such an expressive and touching portrait.

'Evidently we are dealing with an artistic personality, an exceptional degree of professionalism, whose individual elements are difficult to identify. A professionalism that can be described with only one word: art.'

S. Urusevsky, 'Neskolko slov o Rodchenko' (A few words on Rodchenko), in Iskusstvo kino, no. 12, 1967.

The artist Drevin, 1924. 4.4 x 6.



Photography as a main profession

Rodchenko became more and more involved with photography, managing to realize many of his creative aspirations in this field. He had abandoned painting, and in fact had not worked as a painter since the mid-twenties.¹⁸ He went on working with graphics, but gradually moved away from its application to books and magazines to concentrate on photographic journalism.

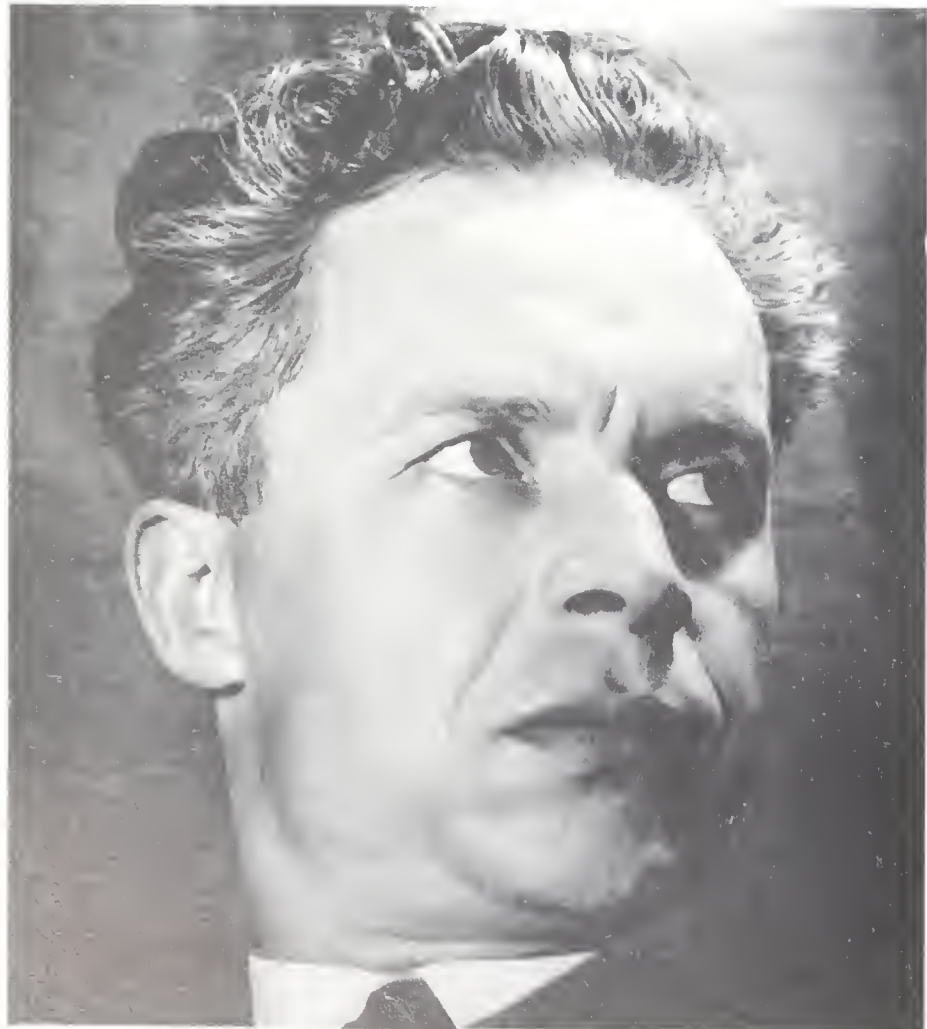
The poet Tretyakov, 1928. 9 x 12. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968



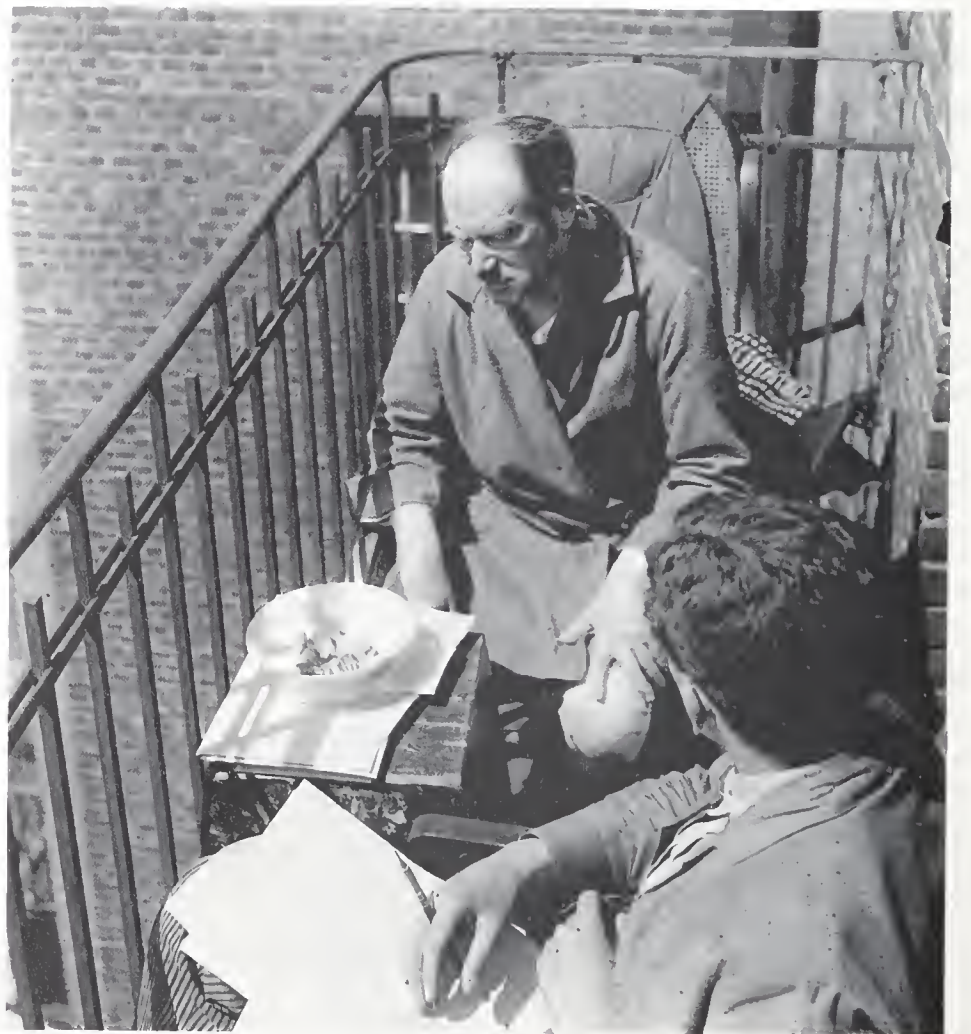


I. Popova, 1924. 9 × 12.

The film director Dovzhenko, 1930. 9 × 12. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, 1968.



The architect Ladovsky, 1927. 9 × 12.





Dual portrait: Rodchenko's daughter and mother, 1927. 6 x 9.

His mother at table, taken from above, 1928. 9 x 12.



He gave up his role as a set-designer for the theatre in 1929 (after working on *The Bed Bug* and *Inga*), although he did go on to design a number of other sets. In 1931, for example, he took part in the show *Armya mira* (*Peace Army*) directed by Yu. Zavadsky and the music-hall entertainment *The Sixth Part of the World*. The sets he designed were popular with the public and the press, although they were not as significant as the ones he had produced for *The Bed Bug* and *Inga*.

Rodchenko brought his work as a designer to an almost total halt by the start of the thirties. Stylistic trends in architecture had changed and the new methods of design elaborated in the twenties were being replaced by the traditional standards of decorative art. A second group of Metfak students left the faculty at the beginning of the thirties and Vkhutein was closed down. With it went the national college for the training of designers that Rodchenko had set up.

It also brought an end to the process of formation of a Soviet artist. The period of his major creative research and the great rupture with the past was over. Even the fertile interchange between different art forms, which presupposed the existence of a universal artist, drew back within the confines of tradition. A period had begun during which the means and methods of expression within individual arts were being perfected. The need of the moment was for highly qualified specialists in specific sectors.

Rodchenko devoted himself more and more to photography and during the thirties it was as a photographer that he generally regarded himself. Yet as an expert in photography, he went on contributing to the development of the new architecture. In a way he taught people to look at the new architecture, helping them to see it from an artistic point of view.

After the untrammelled experimentalism of his early period, Rodchenko spent some time on perfecting new methods of photographic printing, to the astonishment of many critics who were used to seeing him as the eternal 'disturber of the peace'. The first review appeared in which Rodchenko was criticized for not having carried on sufficiently with his researches into aesthetics and form. This was a rare occurrence in Rodchenko's life.¹⁸ What usually happened was the opposite. He was more often criticized for these very experiments on form. Many articles appeared during the course of the thirties accusing him of 'formalism'. By now it had become a habit to take him to task every time photography came up for discussion.

In an effort to understand what was going on around his creative research, Rodchenko himself went so far as to reject a whole range of his previous positions and to admit his 'errors' in a series of articles written during the thirties.

In 1932 an open letter from the Oktyabr group was published in the magazine *Za proletarskoe iskusstvo* (*For a Proletarian Art*). The letter was also signed by Rodchenko and was written in response to a series of articles criticizing the 'errors' committed by the group. In the letter the Oktyabr group distanced itself from its own photographic section.

The letter bears the date 17 January 1932, and yet on 25 January a decision was taken at a meeting of the group of photo-reporters belonging to Oktyabr 'to expel comrade Rodchenko from the group, for having systematically refused to participate in its reorganization and having stated more than once that he did not wish to be included. Moreover his signing of the group's open letter is considered a tactical manoeuvre designed to conceal his desire to oppose reorganization altogether.'

The influence of the language of Rapp can be felt very strongly in these documents. During the twenties and thirties so-called 'proletarian' organizations (Rapp and others) were formed within the various sectors of the arts. These organizations assumed the right to excommunicate anybody who did not think according to the canons of 'proletarian' art. An organization of this kind was set up in the sector of photography as well, under the name of 'All-Russian Organization of Proletarian Photographers', Ropph. The supporters of these organizations put into effect methods of suppression, attempting illicitly to carry any dissent

18 *This was Rodchenko's attitude towards his painting in 1927, when he took part in an exhibition for the first time as a professional photographer: 'When I look at all the paintings I produced in the past, I do not know what to do with them.*

'To burn them would be a pity, I worked on them for ten years!

'Here is useless work, just like a church.

'There is nothing you can do with it!'

In Novyi Lef, no. 6, 1927, p. 3.

19 *'Rodchenko — this revolutionary of form who lets houses, chimneys and trees fall onto him, now looks like an "academic" — has done his best work, perhaps the best in all these ten years of photographic activity, but then he has stopped. For Rodchenko, stopping signifies nonentity, death, and it will be of no use to have three pines instead of one, or twelve storeys instead of six balconies. Now photographs taken with "the Rodchenko perspective" have become so familiar as to be boring. Now it is time to move on, other paths are needed. Yet Rodchenko does not go beyond his usual "gimmick".'*

'He has ceased giving anything new to the art of photography, has stopped revolutionizing its form. This is the impression one gets from his one-man show. However we would like to think that it is only a passing phase.'

T. Les, '2-ya vystavka moskovskich fotokruzkov' (The second exhibition of the Moscow photographic clubs), in Iskusstvo, nos. 7-8, 1929, p. 98.

20 *In 1935 one of the students on the committee for the selection of works to be put on show in the photographic exhibition expressed his disapproval of the photography of 'the pioneer' Rodchenko. 'Why does the pioneer look upwards? It is not ideologically correct. Pioneers and the youth of the Komsomol must look ahead.'*

With regard to Rodchenko's photograph depicting a dive from the springboard, a critic wrote that he did not like the picture because the figure of the swimming instructor did not have classical proportions and his legs were hairy: 'As for the Swimming instructor of Soviet sport: anyone looking at it would like to see a fine and fit body. In Rodchenko's photograph the image is destroyed by the biological detail. The photograph is an unequivocal confirmation that even formalistic artists may resort to a naturalistic criterion.'

In Sovetskoe foto, nos. 5-6, 1936, p. 6.



The Mosselprom building, 1926. 4.5 × 6.

Courtyard in Myasnitskaya Street, 1928. 9 × 12. Published in Alexander Rodchenko, Moscow 1968.



about creative matters over into the political sphere.

In a decree passed by the Party's Central Committee on 23 April 1932 and entitled 'On the restructuring of artistic and literary organizations', these 'proletarian' groups were disbanded. This event was of fundamental importance to a revitalization of artistic circles. Argument regained its place in art, although the influence of the 'proletarian' groups' coarsely sociological methods could be detected in many articles published in subsequent years.

Rodchenko was often the target of this sort of criticism; yet, despite all the difficulties, he continued to work in the photographic field.²⁰ He produced a whole series of features on new constructions (the White Sea canal, etc.), on sport, on the circus, and so on. He contributed to a large number of magazines. His photographs and features appeared in the magazines *30 dnei* (30 Days), *Smena* (Change), *Krasnoe studenchestvo* (The Red Student), *Ogonëk* (Tongue of Flame), *Prozbektor* (Reflector) and many others.

Vakhtan lumber mill, 1930. Leica.



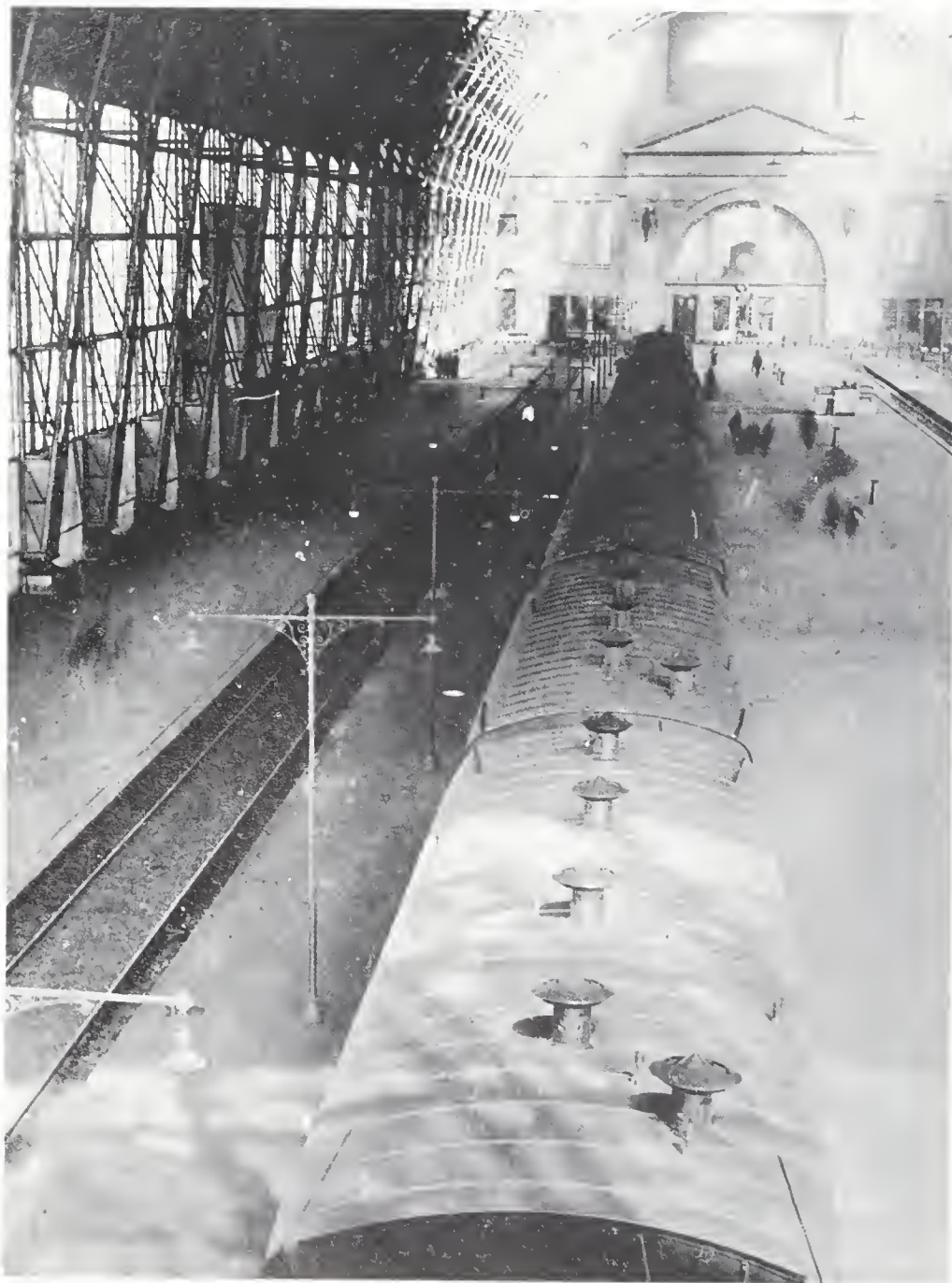
With the passing of the years Rodchenko's enormous body of work as a photographer was reappraised in more objective terms and accusations of 'formalism' gradually died away. Rodchenko became one of the most illustrious figures in Soviet photography.

In 1935 the exhibition 'Masters of Photographic Art' was held. In the catalogue Rodchenko's role was acknowledged with some reservations but one review of the exhibition had no trouble in accepting Rodchenko as a genuine master: 'The exhibition bore the title "Masters of the Photographic Art". There is no doubt that this referred essentially and explicitly to Rodchenko.'

At the First All-Russian Exhibition of Photographic Art in 1937 Rodchenko received a high award 'for the high artistic quality of the works on show, for having portrayed in exemplary fashion the gymnastic events of the various national regions'.

Heavy criticism continued to alternate with recognition, but by the end of the thirties it had become clear to everyone that Rodchenko was the best photographic artist at work in the country.²¹

Briansk station, 1927. 4.5 x 6. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.



21 In his 1939 autobiography *Cernoe i beloe* (Black and White) (where Rodchenko speaks of himself in the third person) he tells of the difficulties that he encountered during his artistic 'career' in the field of photography: '... He came to photography. The black nickel-plated Leica in his hands began to function.

'And so, he will display this world. A familiar, usual world, but caught from new angles. So, he will also show the people and the nobility and the strength of Socialist construction. So, he will make propaganda with photography. But then... daydreams come to an end. A service lamp on the stage again. The hall is dark and empty. Neither daydreams... nor applause... The critics came down on him with all their weight. Accusations of formalism for those shots...

'He is just a child again. He has become dangerous and harmful. They copy him but reject him. His friends are even afraid to go and see him. Then he decides to leave the photographic stage. Tired and disappointed.

'But did not the country of Socialism need ventriloquists, conjurers and jugglers? Carpets, fireworks, orreries, flowers and kaleidoscopes? Warily he got ready for the exhibition on the masters of Soviet photographic art. He did not know just what he ought to enter for the exhibition. They will criticize him again. He thought it over many times: was it worth participating? Then he decided. And suddenly success! It will come about. A thunder of applause. He got up and took flight... New and incredible artistic possibilities were opening up. The hall was jam-packed with people. Black gulf! All friends and acquaintances.

'They want daydreams. They want experiments and fantasies. Everything they had gone on dreaming about...'

In *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 7, 1935.



In the newspaper archives, 9 × 12. Above: still cut out by Rodchenko.



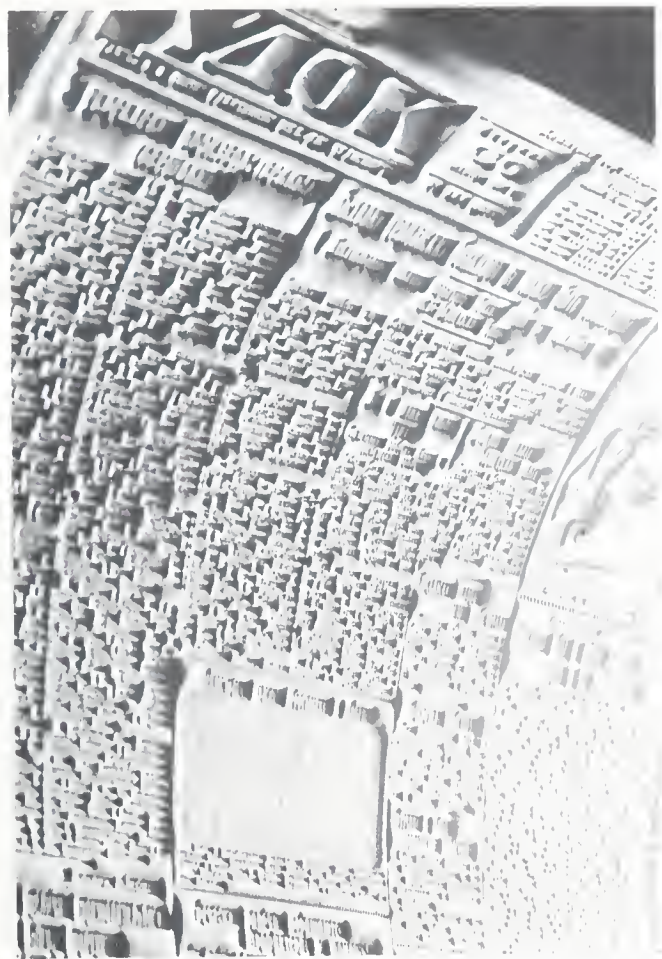
V. Mayakovsky. To the right: still cut out by Rodchenko.



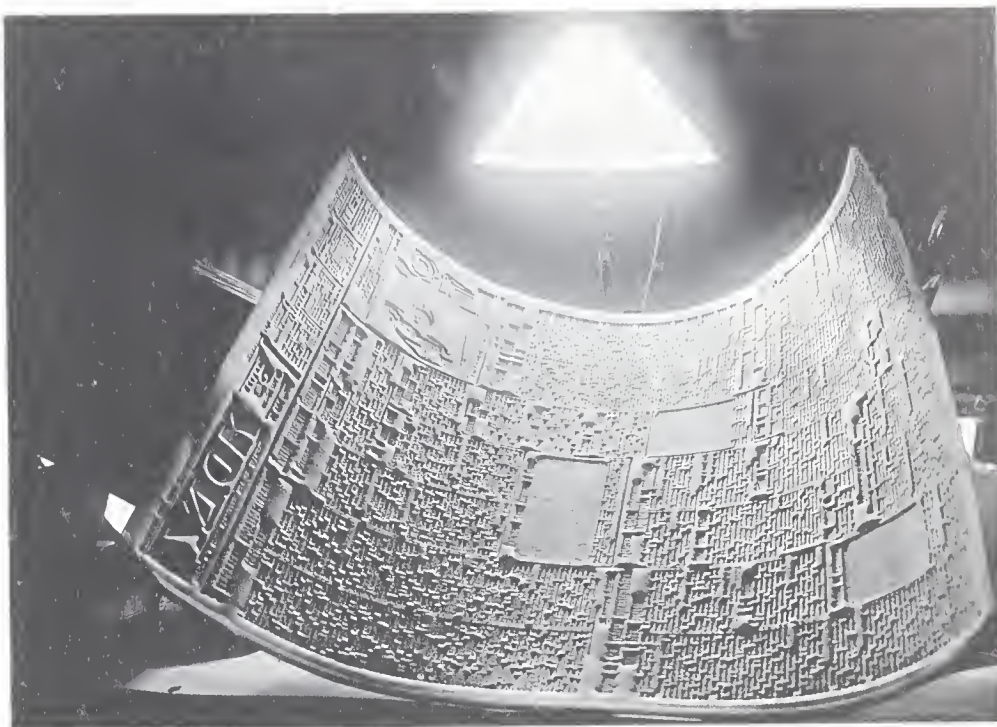


Below: *Pioneer bugler*, 1930. To the left: still cut out by Rodchenko. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.





Top right: *Matrix*. 9 × 12. Above: still cut out by Rodchenko.



Bottom right: V. Mavakovsky, 1924. 9 × 12. Below: still cut out by Rodchenko. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.









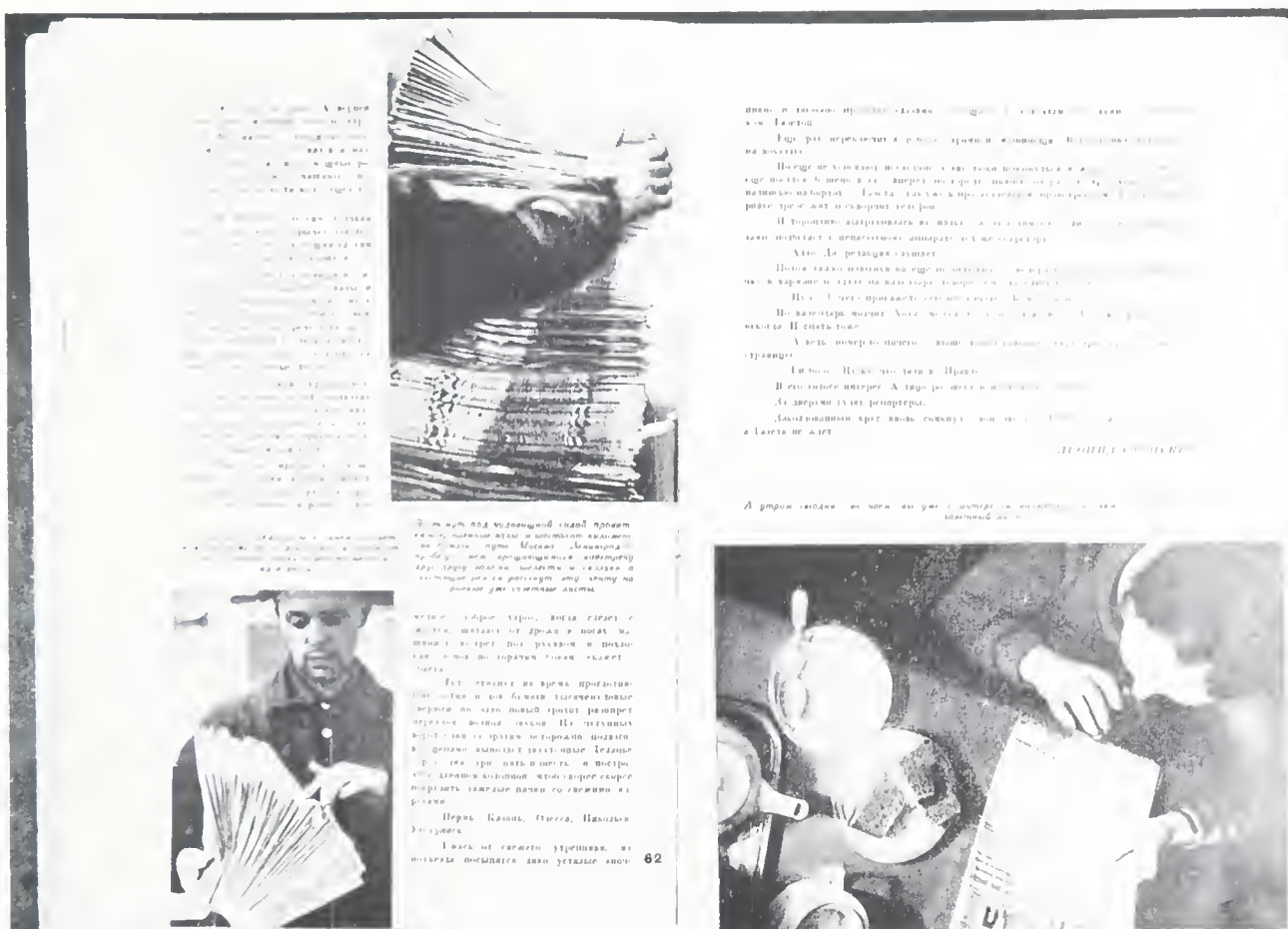
Dispatcher counting copies of the newspaper. 4.5.6



Newly printed newspapers. 4.5.6

1. 1947



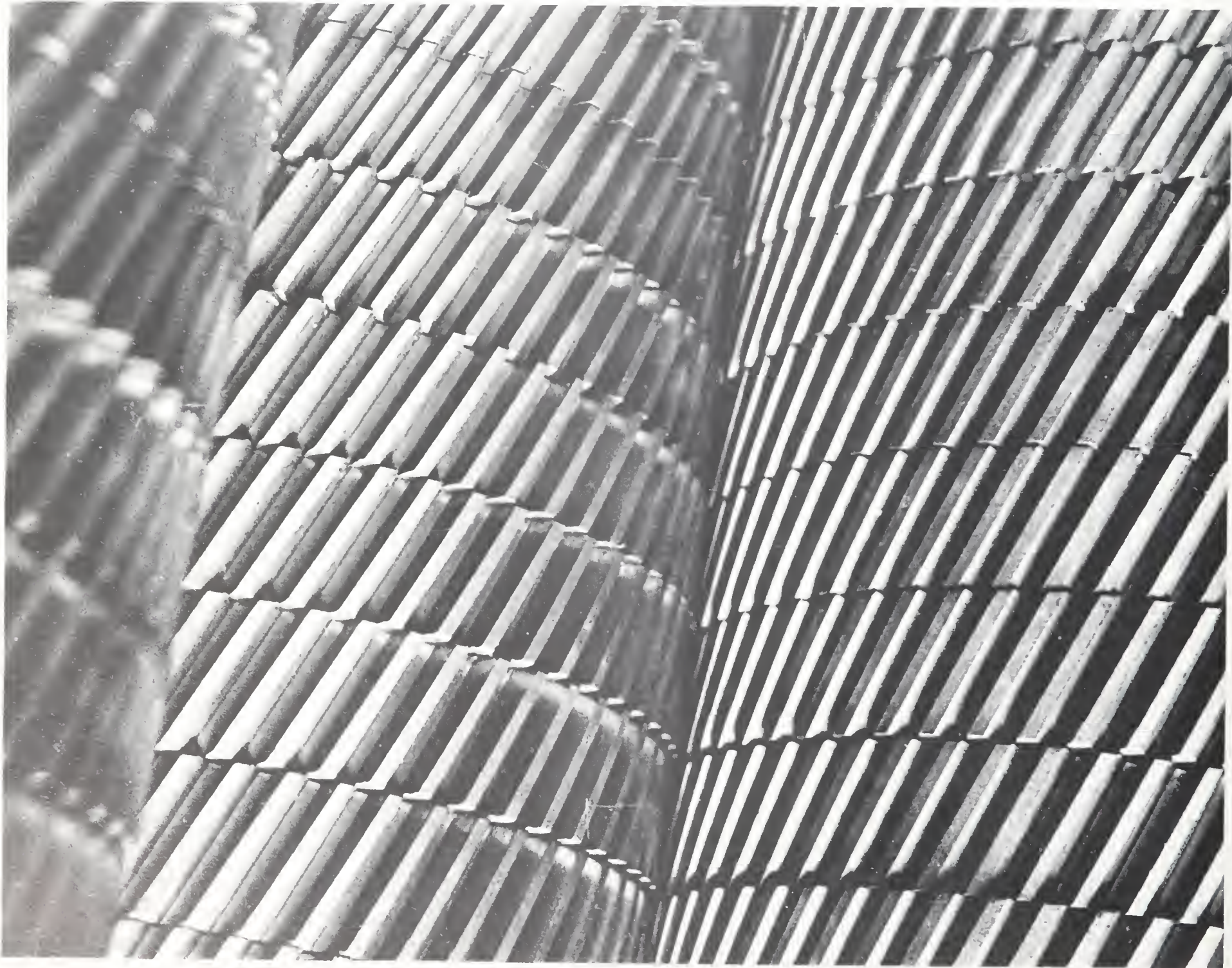


Pages from the journal *30 dni*, no. 12, 1928, with three photographs by Rodchenko, format 26 × 35.5

Listener to the radio. Published in *Radiosliushatel*, no. 40, 1929.



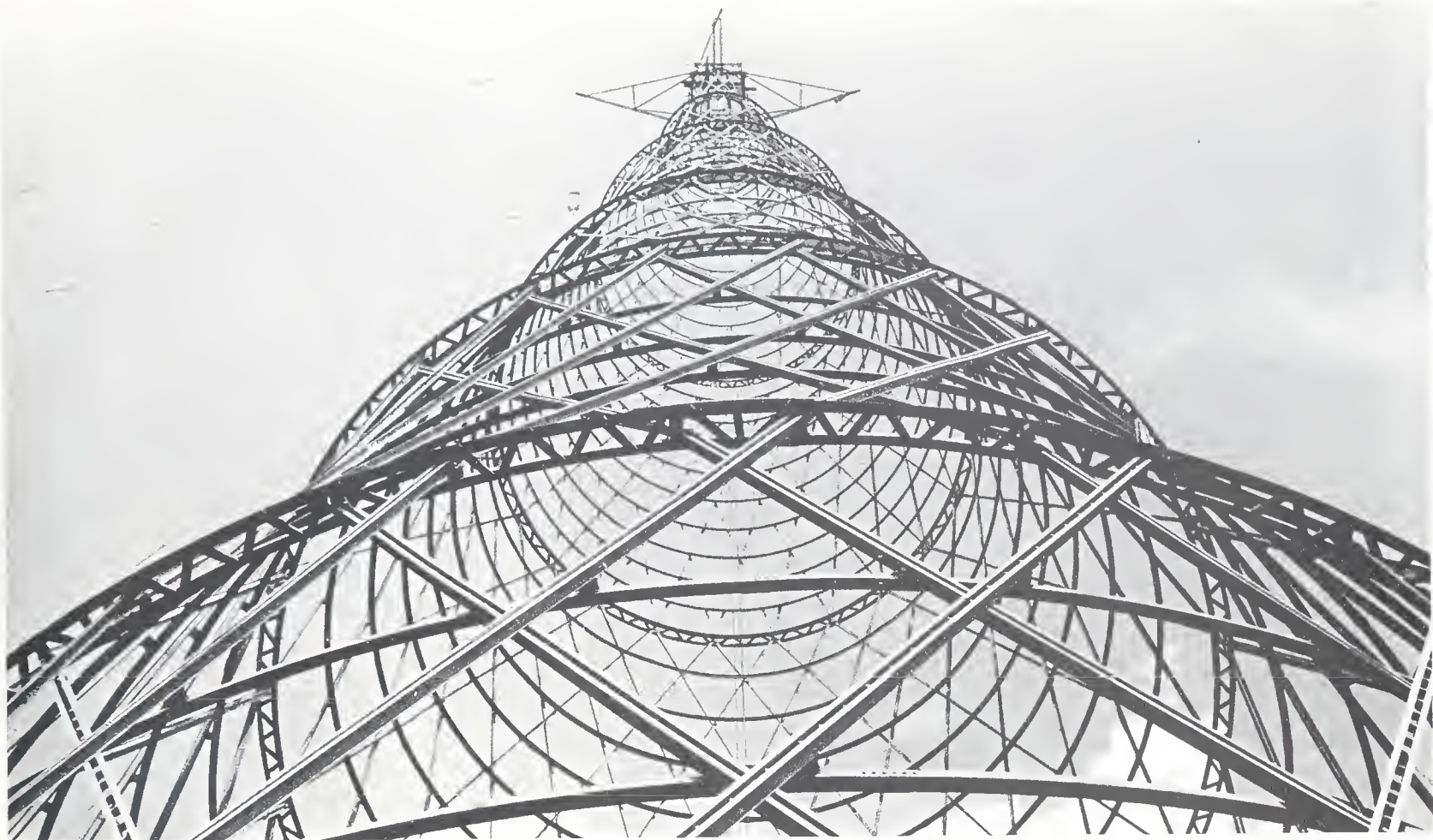
Cover, 1929. Published in *Dacry*, no. 14, 1929.



Stars, 1930. Leica.







The Sukov tower, 1929. Leica. In *Radiosliushatel*, no. 40, 1929.

Garage in Novorizansky Street, 1928. Leica.





The Dinamo stadium, 1936. Leica.

Office of *Izvestiya*, 1932. Leica.





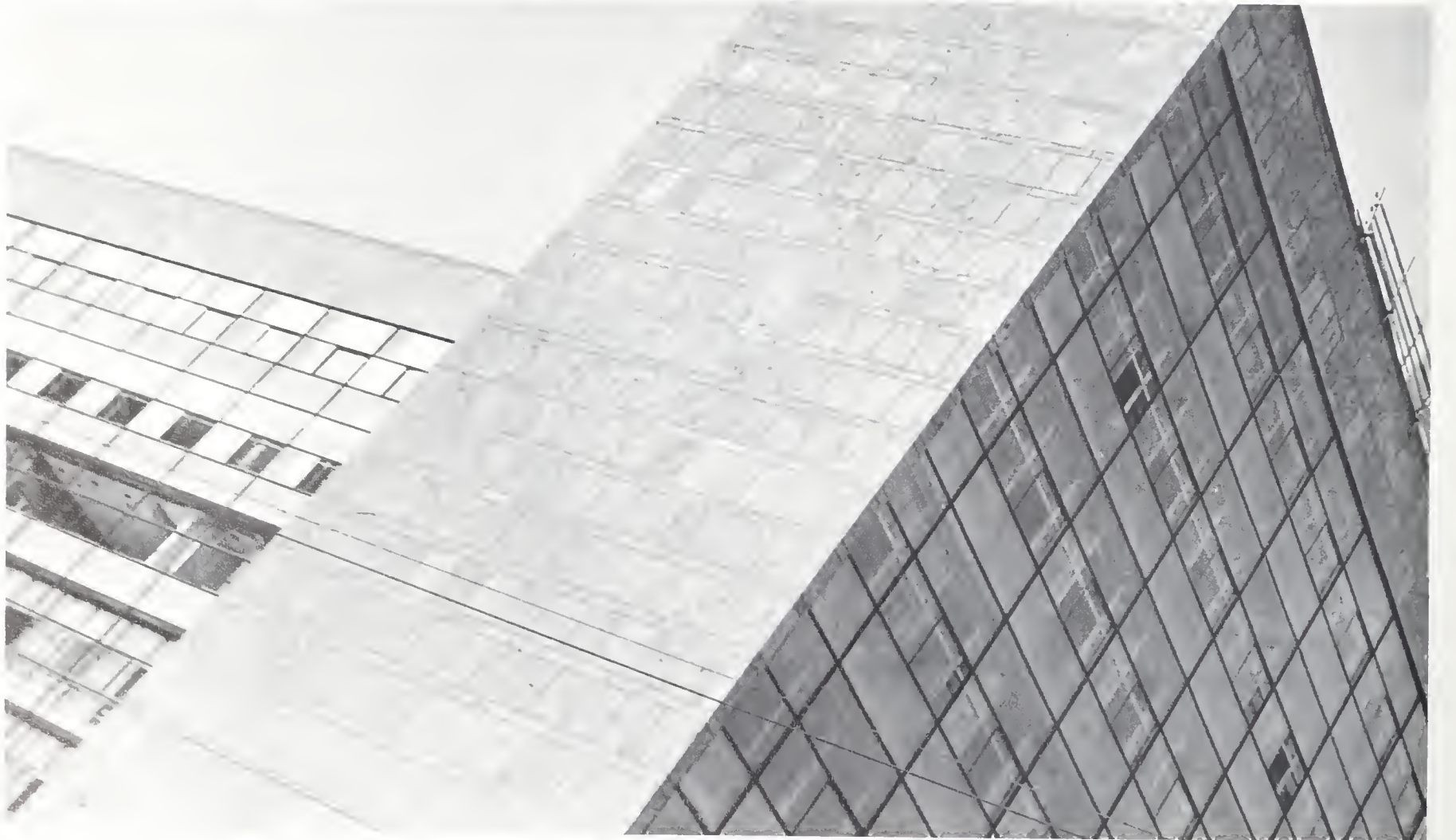
Above and right: the Narkomfin building designed by Ginzburg, 1932. Leica.

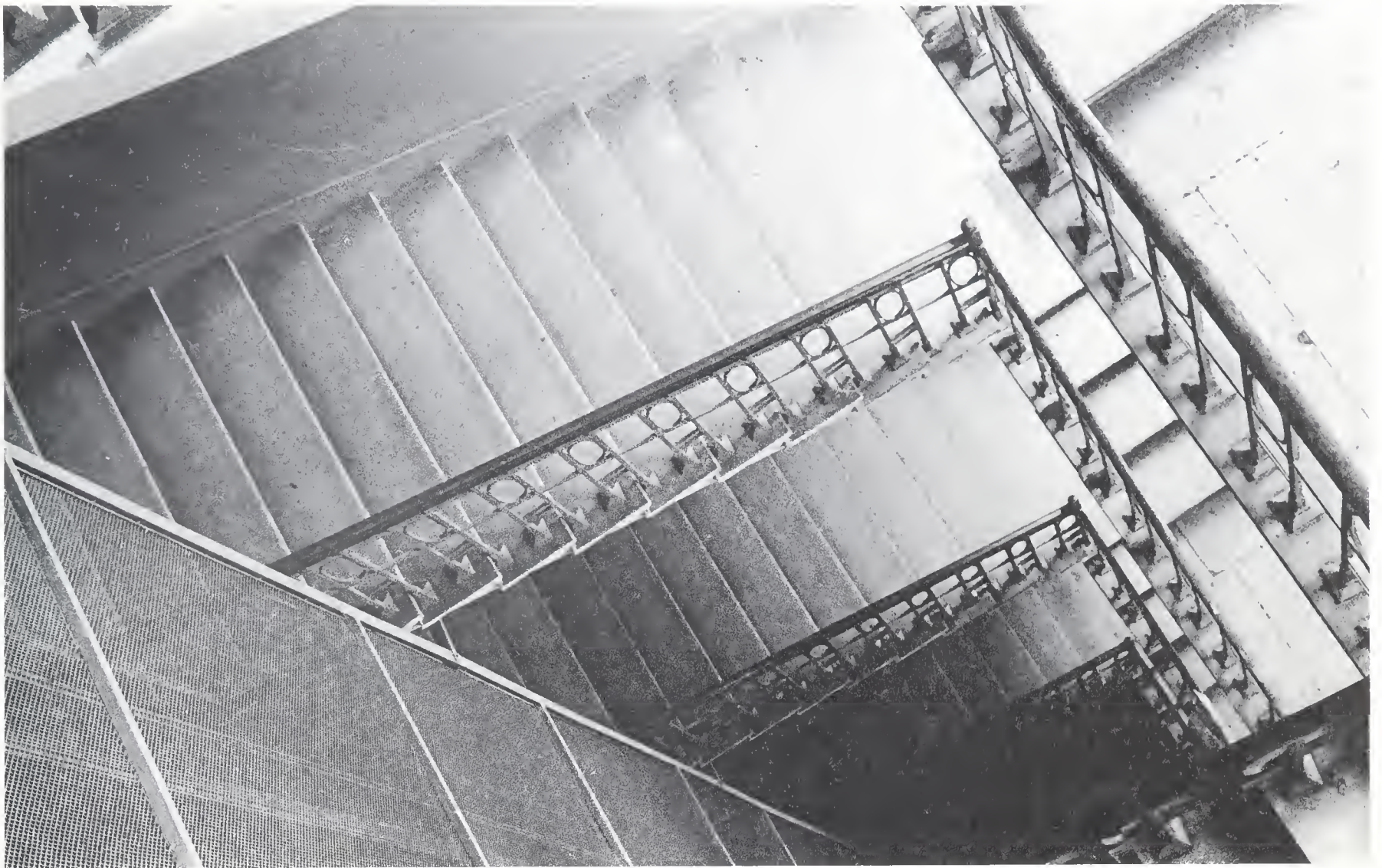
The planetarium, 1932. Leica.





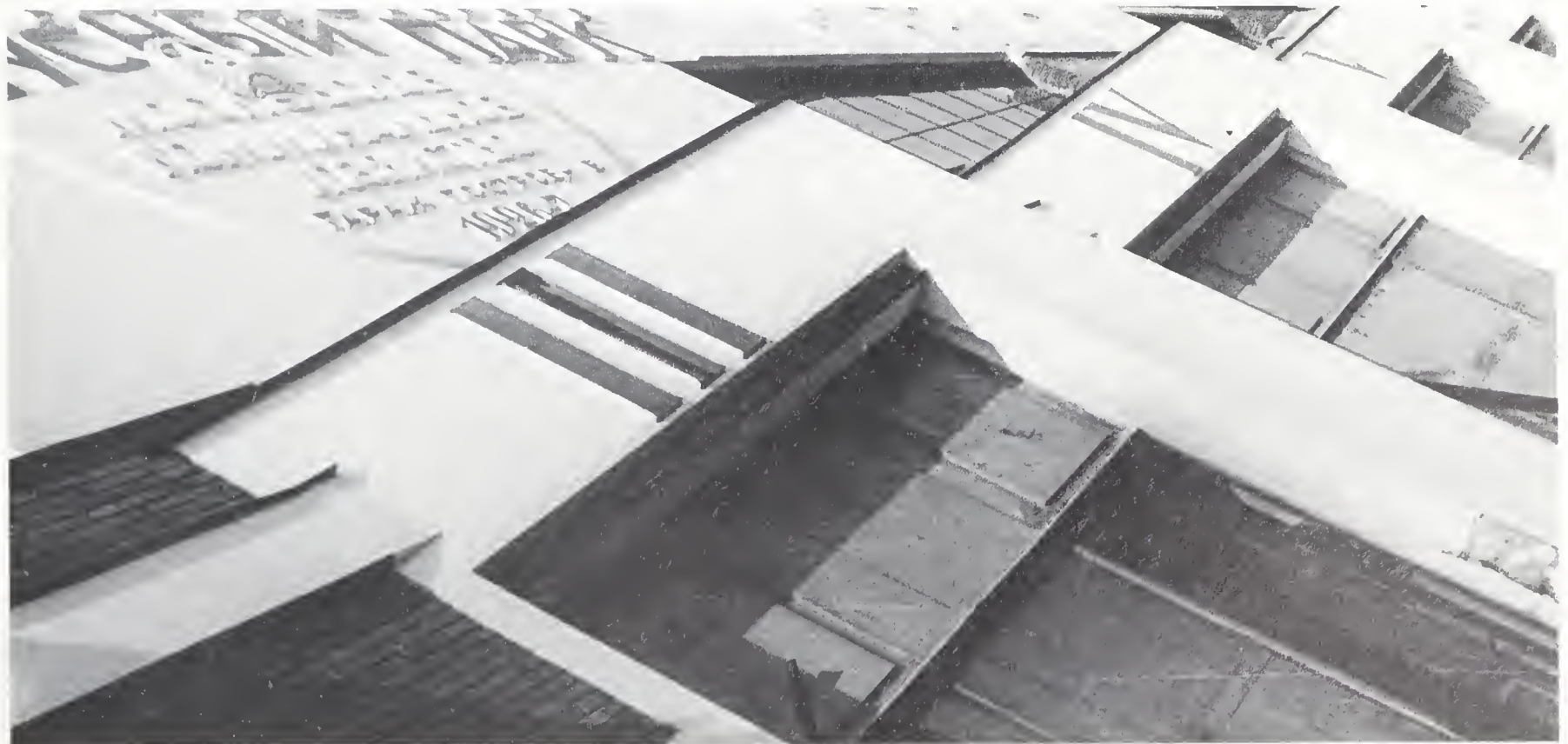
The Le Corbusier building in Myasnikova Street, 1934. Leica





The staircase of the *Pravda* editorial office, 1931 Leica

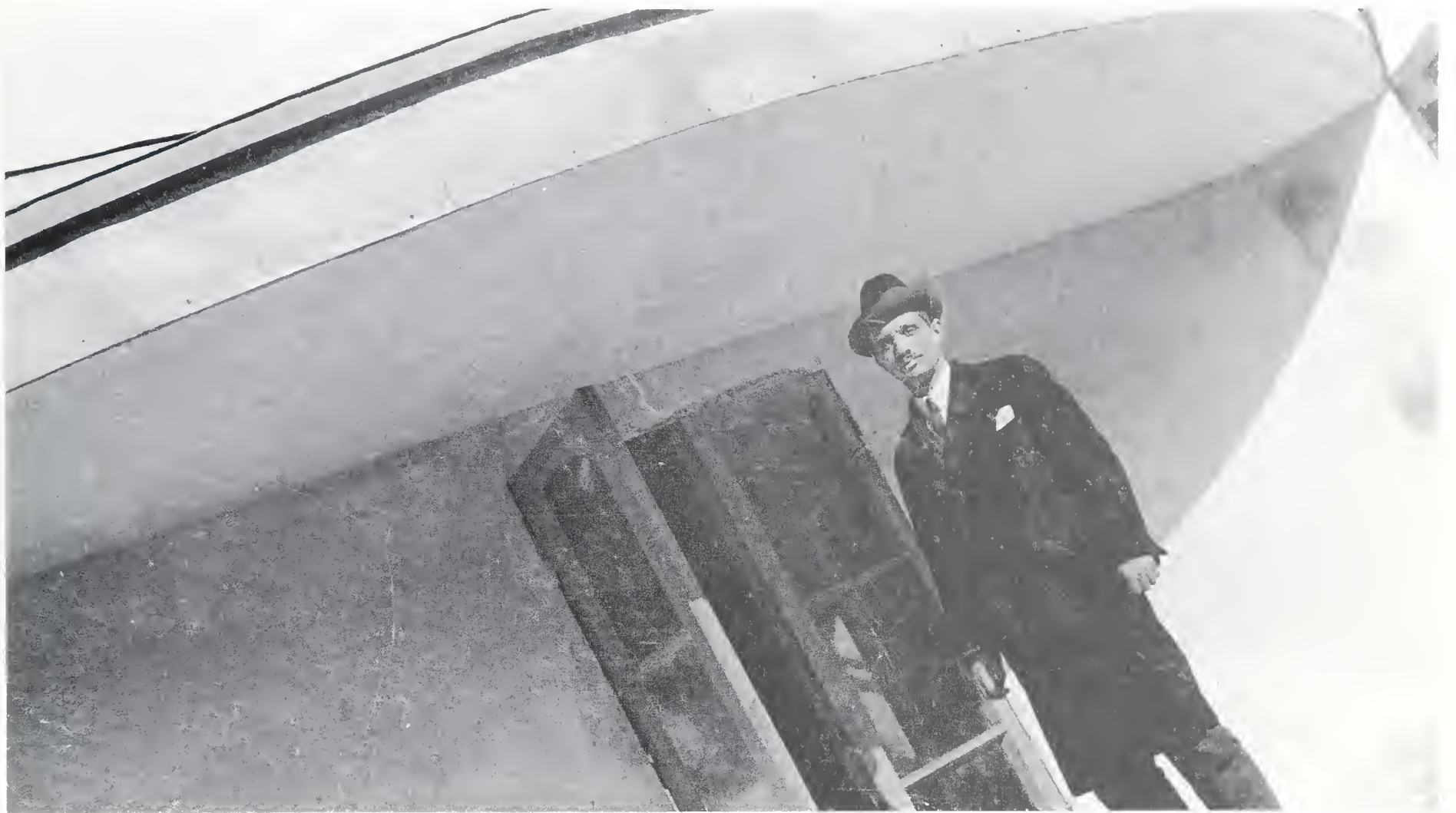
The Bakhmetevsky bus park.





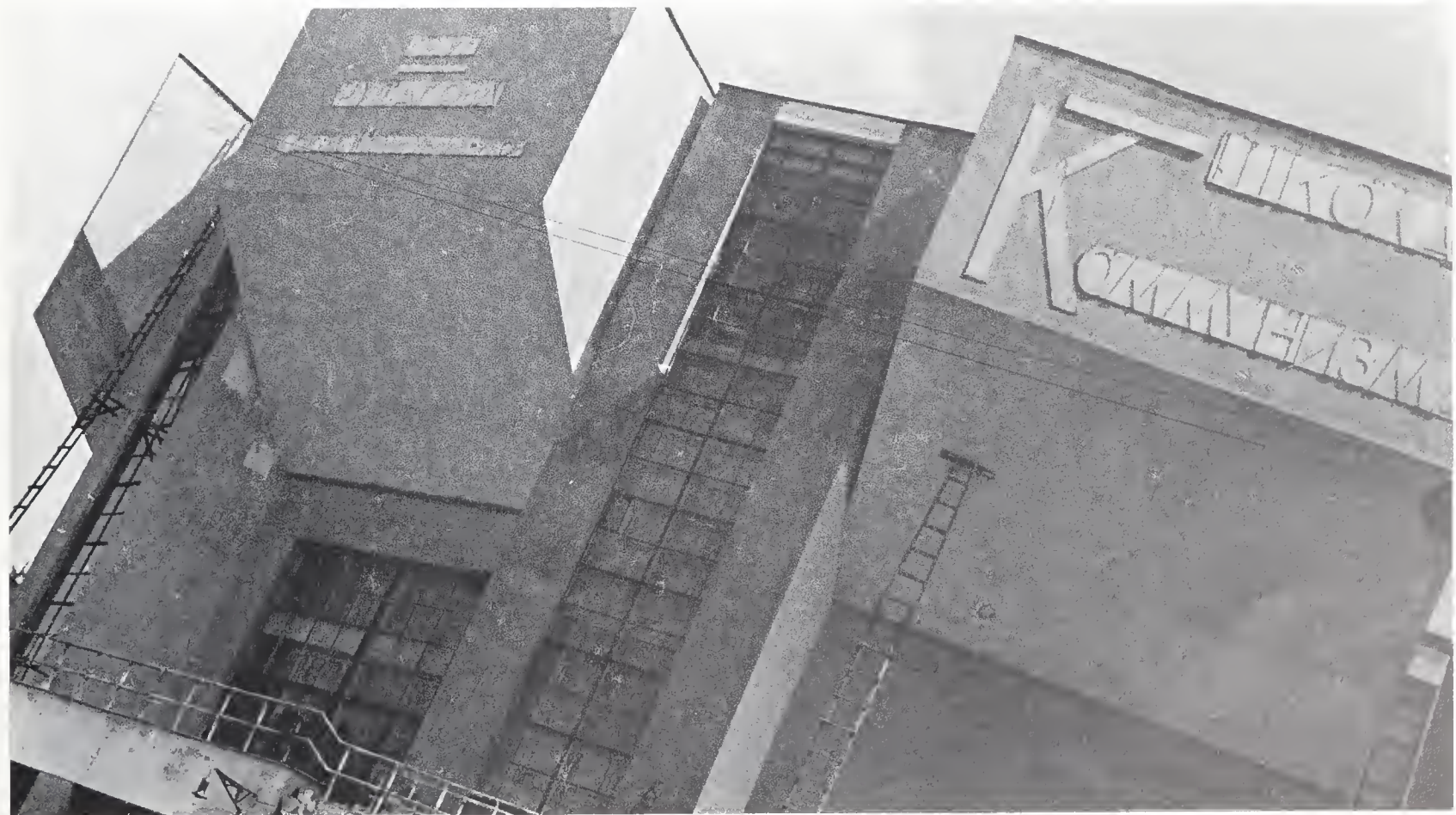
The Kauchuk club, designed by Melnikov, 1929. Leica.





The architect Melnikov on the roof of the Kauchuk club, 1929. Leica.

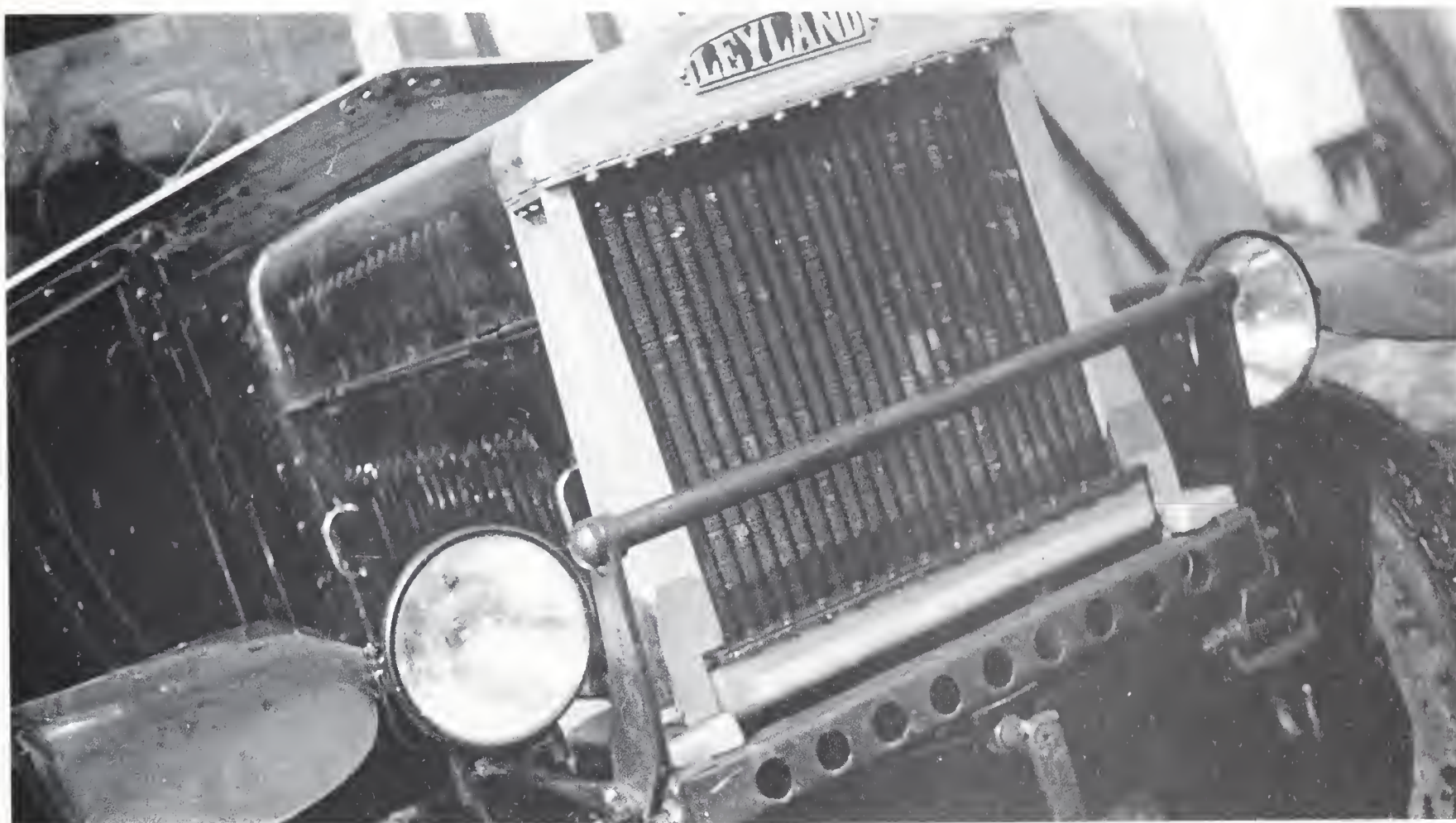
The Rusakov club, 1928. Leica.





Construction of the Sucharev market, designed by Melnikov, 1926. 4.5 × 6.





A 'Leyland' bus in the Bakhmetevsky bus station.

Garage in Novorizansky Street, 1928. Leica.





The Bolshoi Theatre, 1932. Leica. 'Izogiz' postcards.

Pushkin Square, 1932. Leica.





The Square of the Soviets, 1932. Leica.

The Theatre Square, 1932. Leica. 'Izogiz' postcards.



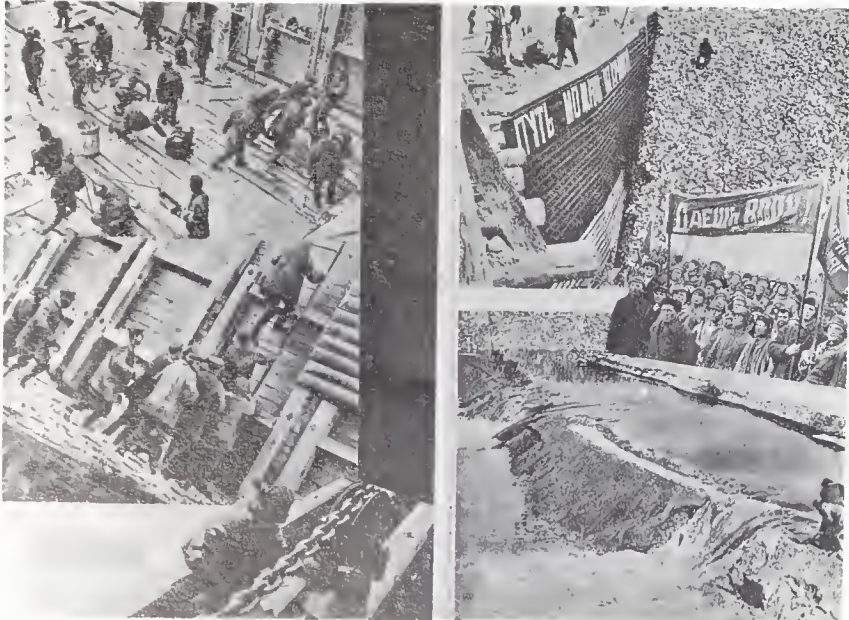


Photomontage for *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1933, devoted to the Belomor-Baltisk canal

Photomontages for *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1933.



Photomontages for *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1933.



SO WIRD IM JAHRE 1935 HOLZ VERLADEN



Pages from *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1935, devoted to parachuting.

Pages from *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1935.



Pages from *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1935.



STACHANOW-LEUTE

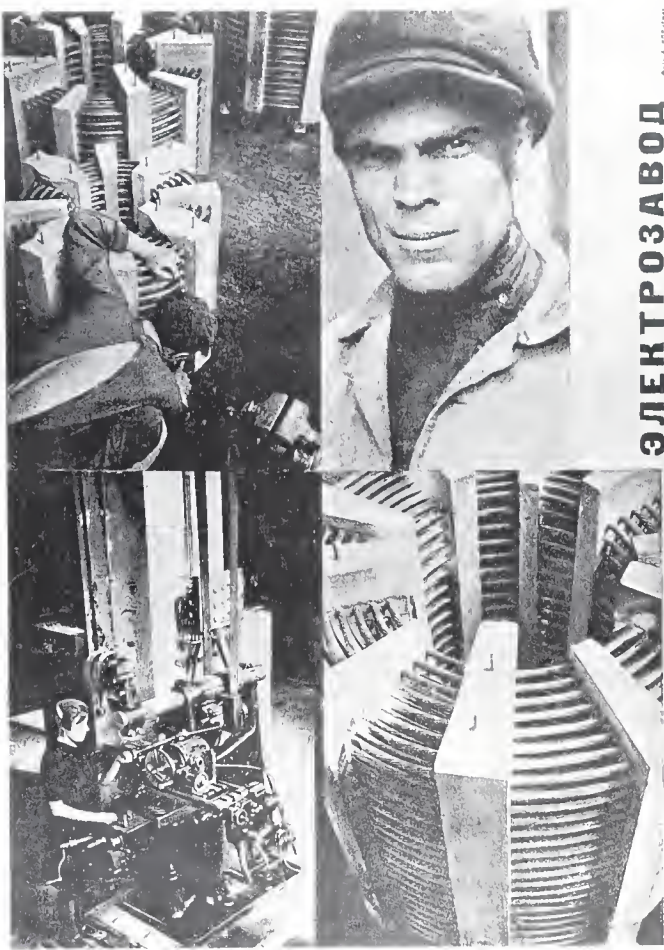
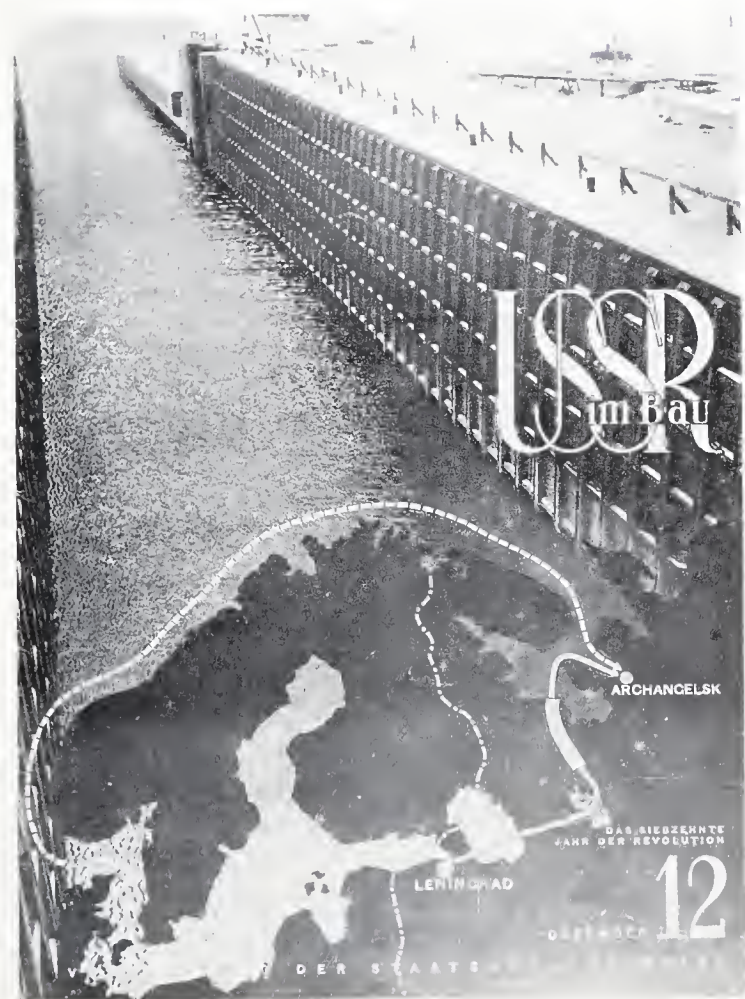
SCHAFFEN DAS VERLADEN VOR DER ANGESETZTEN FRIST





Photomontages for *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1935.

Cover of *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 12, 1933.

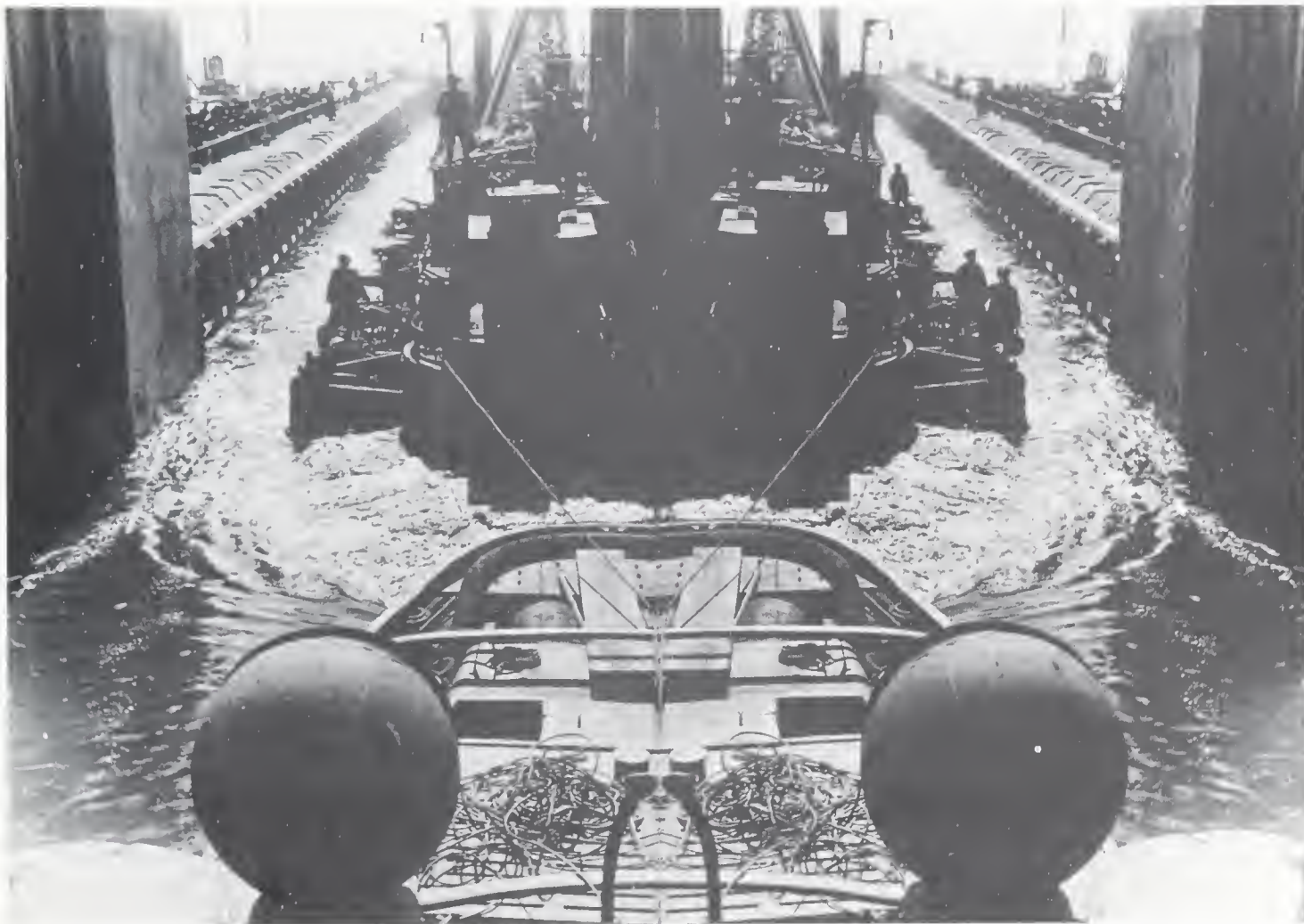


Photoreportage on an electric power station, 1929.

Cover of *The USSR Under Construction*, no. 5, 1937, devoted to gold mining in the USSR.







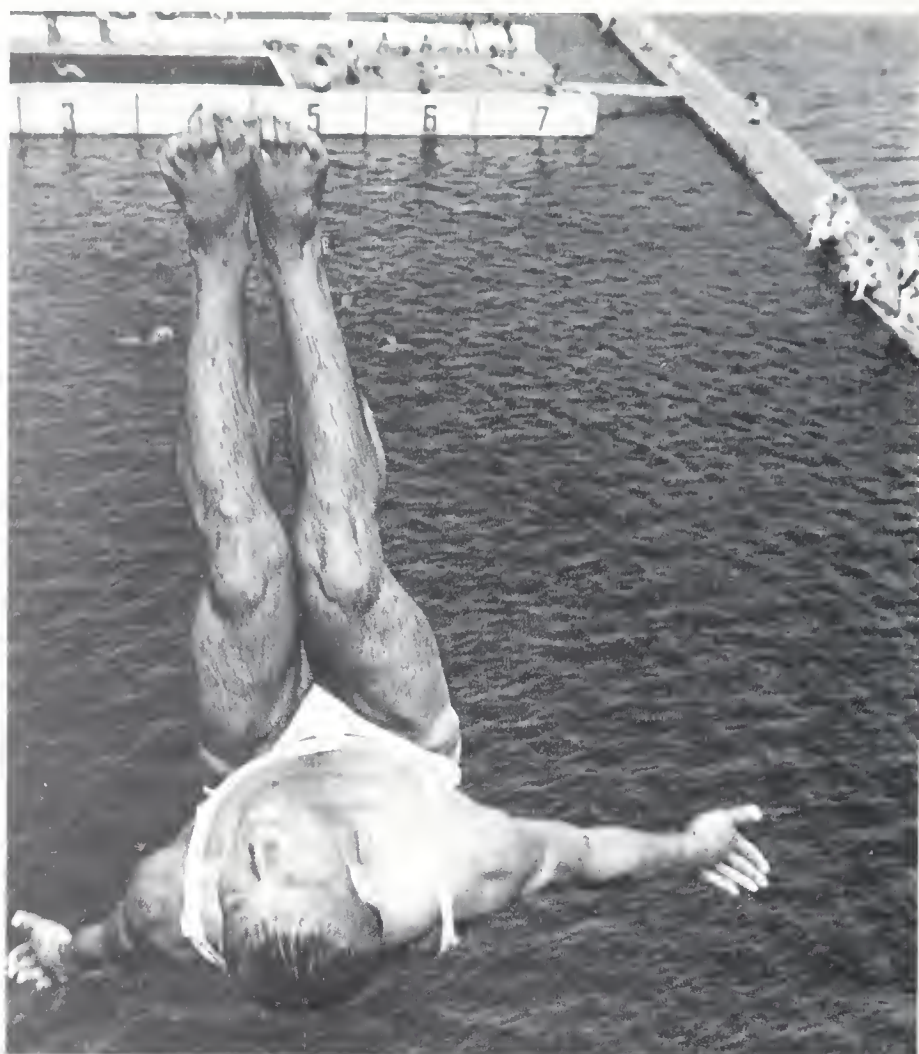
Motorships entering the lock, 1932. Leica (montage from a single negative). Published in Alexander Rodchenko, Moscow 1968.

Motorships entering the canal, 1932. Leica.



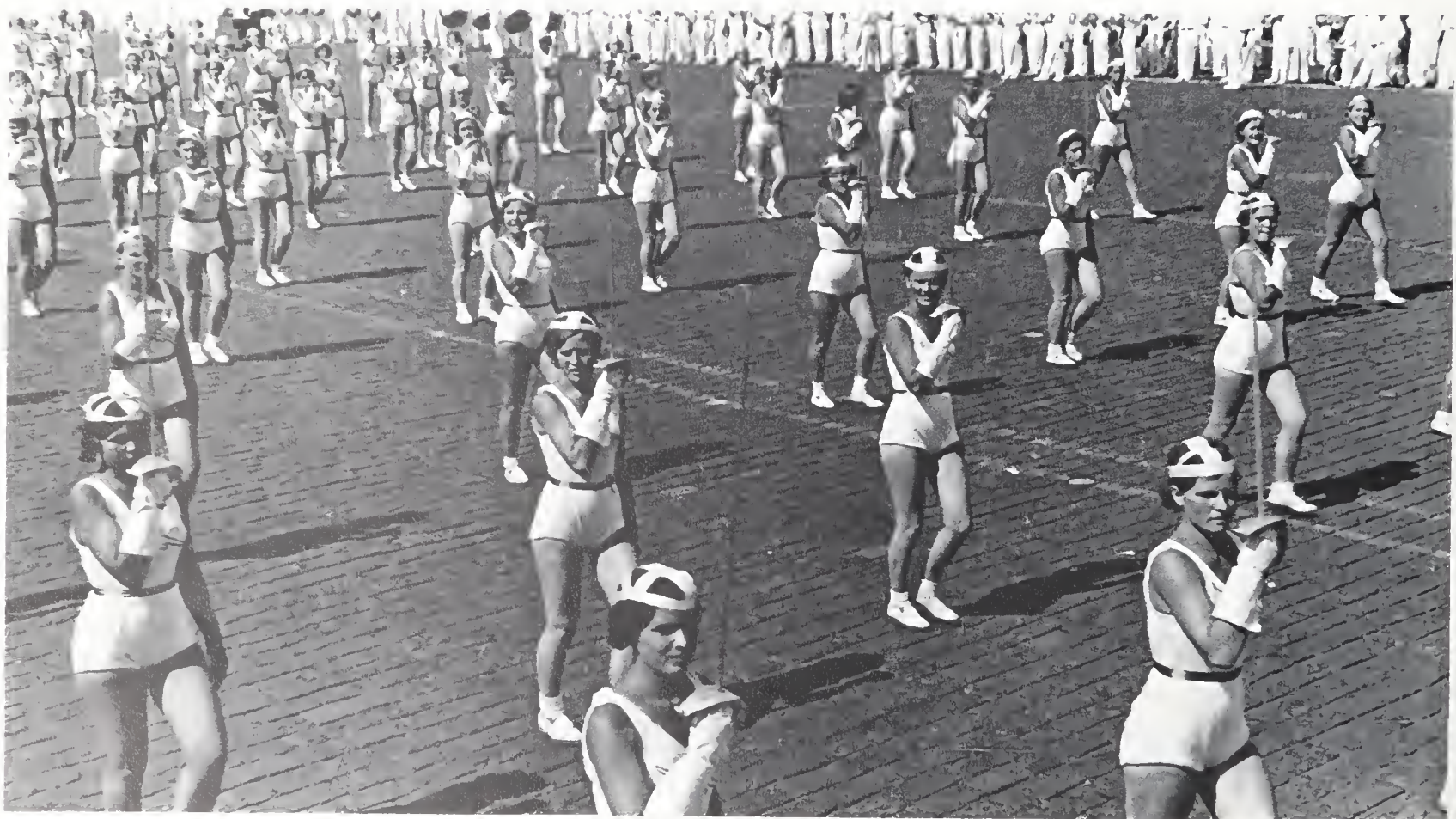


Dive into the water, 1936. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968



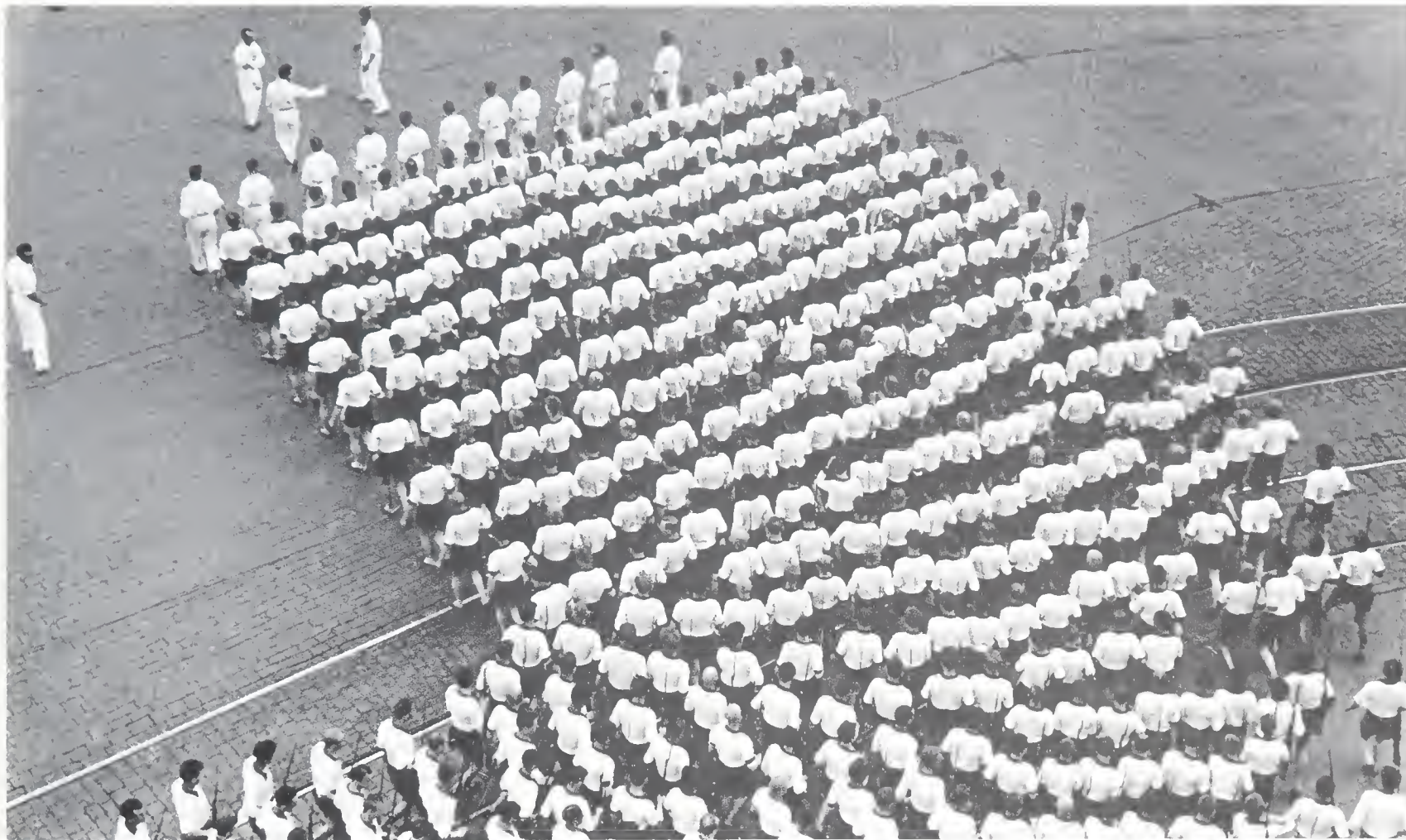
Dive, 1934. In *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 7, 1935.

Column of female fencers, 1936. Leica.









The Dinamo column. Leica. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.

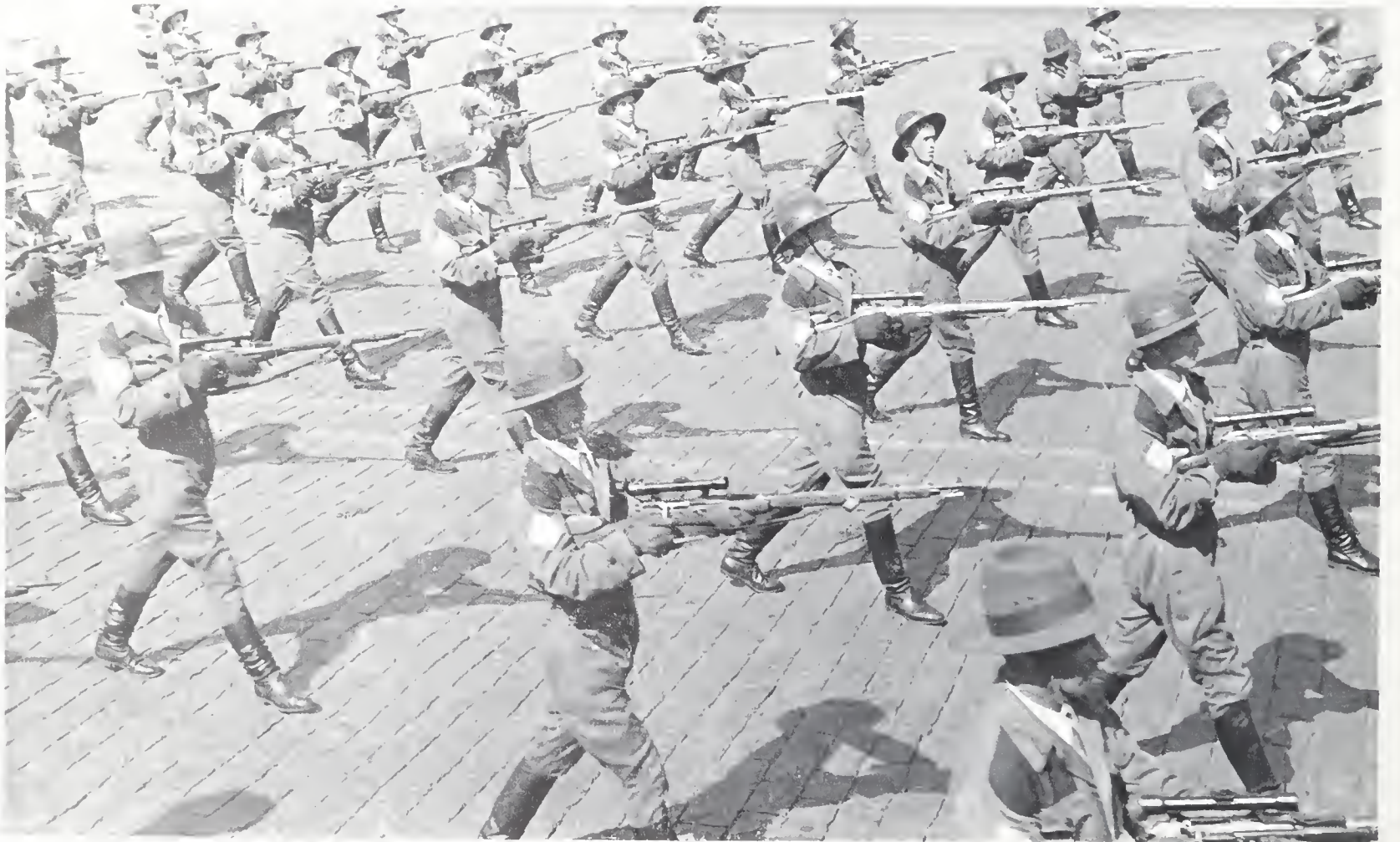
Music band, 1929. Leica. Published in *Alexander Rodchenko*, Moscow 1968.





Sports parade, 1936. Leica.

Column of marksmen, 1936. Leica.







Sports parade. Woman with bouquet of flowers, 1936. Leica.



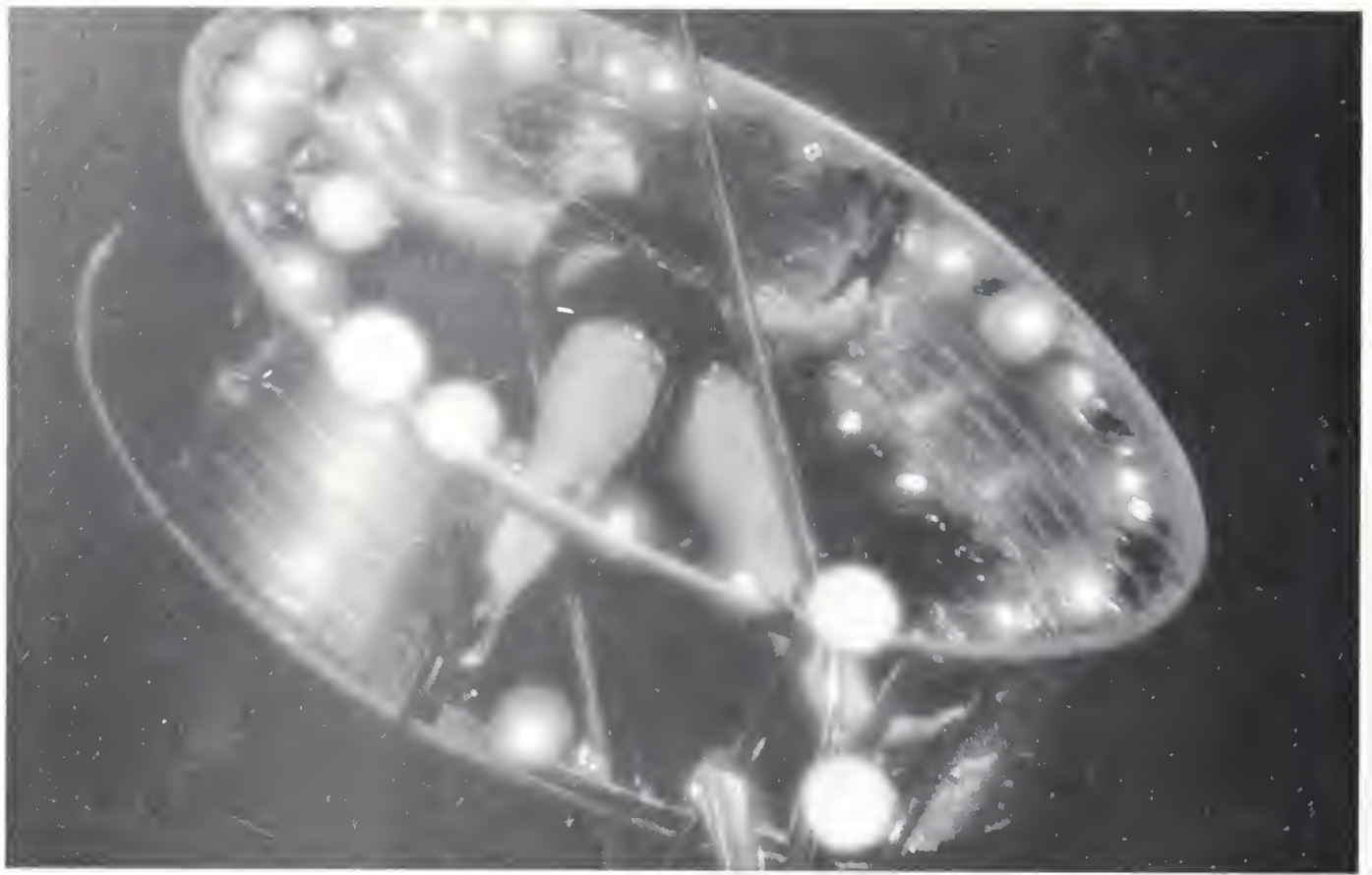


The ballet *Unnecessary Caution*. 1937. Leica

The opera *Ruslan and Ludmila*. 1937. Leica







The wheel, 1940. Leica

I. Durov with a seal, 1940. Leica



L. Durov with seals, 1940. Leica.





His last years

In the thirties and forties Rodchenko looked back over the artistic and creative course he had been following. He went on working very hard and took less and less part in discussions of art. He was more interested in analysing what had been going on in Russian art during the period in which he had been developing as an artist. He made an effort to understand the way in which artistic styles and trends had been formed and to grasp his own role in this complex and contradictory process.

He began to write his memoirs. His spirit was not yet wholly assuaged; he still wanted to discuss, demonstrate, argue and justify. This all came out in the memoirs, with their impartially narrative tone, but with a hint of polemics and sharpness as well.¹

He took no active part in the arguments over creativity, put on few exhibitions and did not look forward to the publication of reviews. He merely sought to give expression to all the creative aspirations that had been building up in him over a long period.

He started to draw again. With his feeling for colour and design, and without trying at all costs to make 'discoveries', or invent new formal methods. He just drew. For himself. He did a series of pictures of circus life. This subject, more than any other, mirrored his state of mind. The state of mind of an optimist, who loved life, loved everything that was light, but felt a profound lack of creative satisfaction. He made an attempt to understand what use all this criticism might be to himself, but at bottom he did not agree with the opinion of his creative development put forward by contemporary critics. The great artist who had worked so intensely in various fields of art seemed, at the moment of his highest

Equestrienne at the circus. Oil on canvas, 60 x 80.



8: THE RETURN TO PAINTING

Notes

1 In 1940 he wrote: 'We were for the new world, the world of industry, technology and science. We were for the new man, we felt him and we had no precise idea of the future. With our brushes, we did not fawn on the bourgeoisie who were on their way out. We did not paint their private houses, their balls and their estates. We were experimenters and we portrayed the world in our own way. We were not chewing over nature again in our paintings, like a cow with its cud. We have created a new concept of beauty and we have expanded the confines of art. We have made posters, written slogans and decorated squares and buildings. Even the typefaces, so precise and persuasive, were invented by us, and they are the ones that are still in use today... We made new objects whose utility no one questions any longer. But then... they attacked us — and how! — for being journalists, typographers, photographers, weavers and commercial artists.'

In Iskusstvo, no. 11, 1956, p. 58.



Costume design for *The Sleeping Beauty*: the fairy of the lilacs, 1949. Paper, gouache, 32 · 22.

creativity, not to be of much use. He was deeply hurt by this situation and, almost out of the blue, a subtle trace of psychology made its way into his series of circus drawings, through the complex graphic form and brilliant colours. Everyone was in agreement that this lively series of pictures had been painted by a cheerful and ironical person, but one who was also profoundly depressed and thoughtful.²

In the forties Rodchenko produced a series of abstract compositions in colours, avowedly decorative compositions, totally lacking in the ideological references or aims that were characteristic of his experimental work in the second and third decade of the century. Compass drawing was completely absent, with all the lines executed freehand. They were usually made up of lines, planes and curves that formed an ornamental design conveying an almost childish joie de vivre. The bright mixture of colours (red, green, blue and yellow) is set against a white and grey background.

Careful formal analysis of his abstract and figurative compositions from the

Clown with saxophone, 1938. Oil on canvas, 100 × 80.



2 This feature of Rodchenko's set of circus pictures was rightly emphasized by G. Karginov in his monograph: 'Thirsting for colour, all the colours of the rainbow laid out on his palette; ... his hunger appeased, he moved on to more toned-down hues, with tones of warm grey. The line becomes more stylized, the forms are dense and forceful. The subjects of the series are gymnasts, horseback riders, clowns... His clowns, for the most part musicians, are pensive, gloomy and full of irony. In the picture *Romance* the feeling of sadness and grief is conveyed in an extremely effective manner, in spite of the intensity of colour which in fact emphasizes it still further. In the expression on the clown's face and in his pose, especially in the upper part of the figure, in the line of shoulders and head and the position of the hands, there is a large measure of dramatic sorrow. The clown's state of mind seems to be shared by his trained dog, whose expression of intelligence has nothing light-hearted about it, just as the romance is anything but amusing.

Sadness and softened and pessimistic tones are completely new elements in Rodchenko's art. The bitterness that overcame the artist in the mid-thirties would fade in time, but his interest in figurative compositions and the portrayal of different states of mind remained strong for a long time.'

G. Karginov, *Rodchenko, London 1979*.

Pierrot. Paper, Indian ink, 30 × 29.





Decorative composition, 1944. Paper, Indian ink, gouache, 26.5 x 24.



Decorative composition, 1943. Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 35.



Circus: muse, 1943. Paper, gouache, 27.5 x 21

The circus: entrée, 1935. Board, oil, 44 x 60.



thirties and forties reveals the influence of other painters from the first quarter of the 20th century, and from that decade in which Rodchenko had given up painting. But there is no problem here, since Rodchenko himself was not at all interested in saying anything new in these works. He did them for himself, almost in response to an inner need. From this point of view Rodchenko's painting in the thirties and forties is particularly interesting, since it helps us to understand the internal processes that had previously taken shape in his artistic consciousness. They bear witness, for instance, to the fact that, while Rodchenko had abandoned

Portrait of a woman, 1940. Paper, pen and Indian ink, 28.5 x 20.5



Symperting woman, 1946. Paper, pen and Indian ink, 41.5 x 30

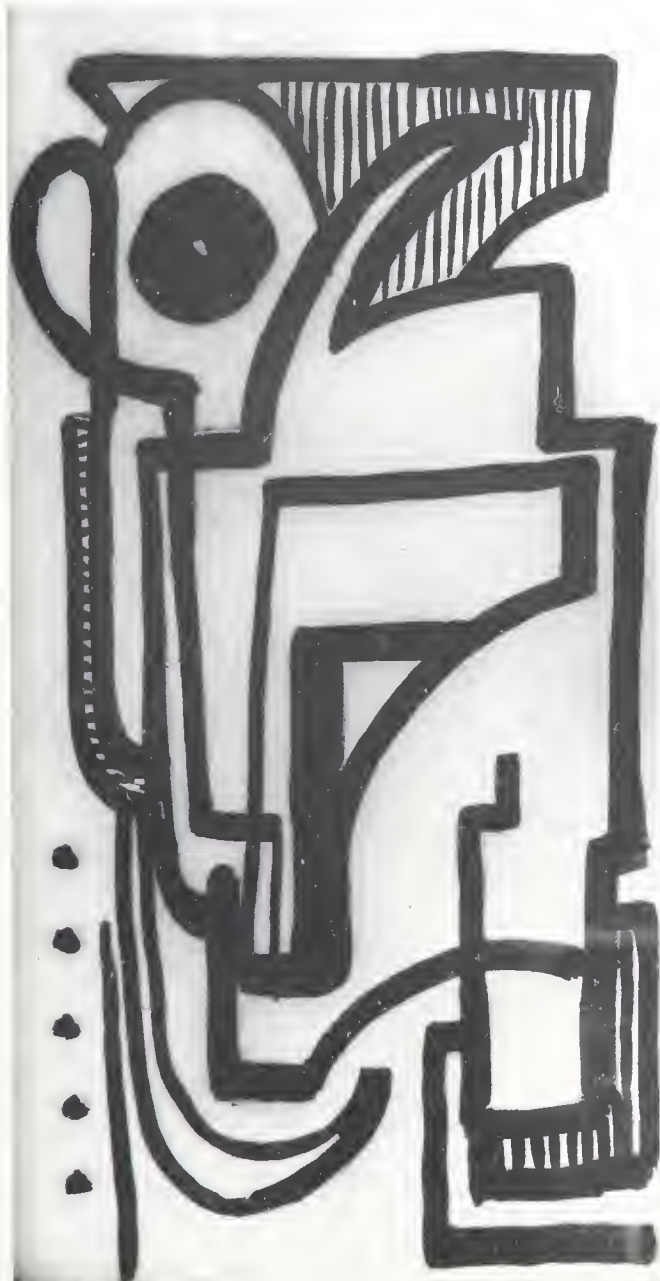
Composition, 1940. Paper, Indian ink, gouache, 21 x 38.5





Decorative composition, 1943. Oil on canvas, 33 x 38

Composition, 1940. Paper, Indian ink, 38.5 x 21.



painting in order to carry on with his experiments in graphic design and to devote his time to technical fields, such as graphics, design and later on photography, his artistic vein had not dried up and he had in no way become a Rationalist. On the contrary, his creative style underwent further development during those ten years of abstention from painting: his work became more delicate and lyrical.

Going back to painting after a gap of ten years, Rodchenko the Constructivist started to paint like those artists he had once criticized for the lack of 'construction' in their work.

Rodchenko died in Moscow on 3 December 1956.

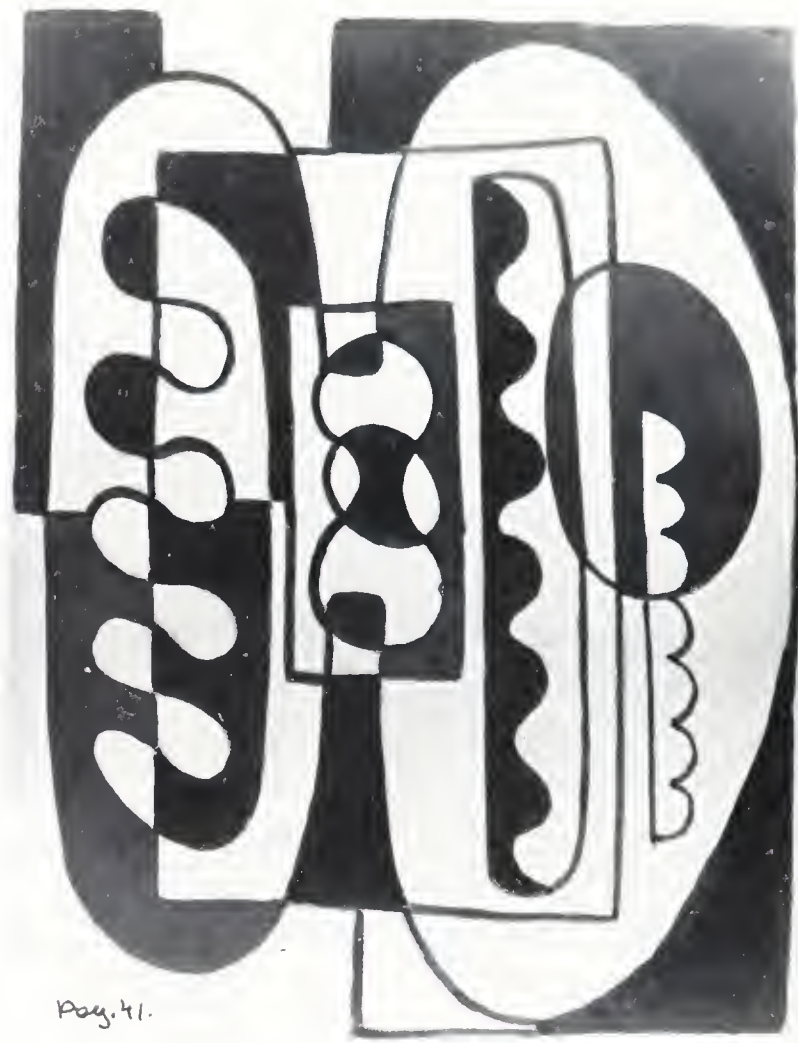
Sketch, 1941. Paper, pencil, 19.5 x 14.





Decorative composition, 1940. Paper, gouache, Indian ink, 26.5 x 24.

Decorative composition, 1941. Paper, gouache, 20 x 15.



Decorative composition, 1941. Paper, gouache, 20 x 15



Circus mask, 1943. Paper, gouache, 27.5 x 21





Clutch with trumpet 1944
Oil on canvas, 100 x 80"



Rodchenko at his desk, 1948. Photo V. Kovrigin.

DOCUMENTS

From 'Black and White', autobiographical notes by Rodchenko

He was born on the stage. In two small rooms with square windows. On Nevsky Prospekt. For him the theatre was something familiar. He could go on the stage every evening without any difficulty; all he had to do was go downstairs.

Every evening he heard all the sounds of the theatre. He knew them like boys know their countryside, their wood, their river. See, there were the dressing rooms, over there the stairs leading to the orchestra pit, here was the fireman with that wonderful shiny helmet of his; above was the room for the stage scenery with its smells of glue and wood, where matchboxes could be painted and then had to be left to dry; at home he had a whole collection of them. Then there was the store for theatrical props with its silver-painted wooden shelves and walls; here his father would make a roast chicken out of an old piece of bread, while a pot of anchovies, with a bit of glue and some black beads, would be turned into caviar, ready to be served.

In the evening, in this hall so familiar by day, something absolutely incomprehensible took place. It filled up with strange and unknown people, different every night. But the most important thing was there, there where it was dark, out of which spread warmth and perfumes. Usually he stayed in the wings and watched this black gulf with a degree of terror.

Sometimes, when the action required the presence of children, they took him on the stage. He did everything he was told, moved and spoke without difficulty; only he did not like that black gulf. For this child the theatre was his home and his world. Hence he dreamed of things still more real and fantastic than those that surrounded him. All children have fantasies. During the day when no one was around, neither in the hall nor on the stage, he sat on a bench in the middle of the stage, lit by the service lamp, and daydreamed... Only, in the midst of fantastic scenery, in a costume of such dazzling colours that it blinded the eyes, he did incredible things, created combinations of light and colour, now disappearing now reappearing in flight through the air filled with strange sounds and strange creatures. The black gulf was quiet, dismayed and frightened, did not fidget or cough. But after the silence, a long burst of applause! He used to jump from his seat and try to realize his dream... He tried to fly... but his fantasy did not come true.

During the summer a ventriloquist had arrived on tour. In two carts, accompanied by ten chests held together with bars of iron. The chests were painted black, engraved with inscriptions in French and the name of the ventriloquist, and numbered. It was all so strange and mysterious, completely different from the usual life of the theatre.

The chests were carefully arranged in the dressing rooms. The coloured padlocks and inscriptions only aroused his curiosity still further. He had tried to get into the dressing rooms, but without success. When all was brought out on stage and he, seated in the orchestra pit, saw this man all alone amidst the talking puppets, it made an everlasting impression on him...

In 1917, revolution came. He threw himself into it wholeheartedly, knowing whom the revolution was for and whom against. This is why.

During his childhood he had fallen sick; there was a danger of tuberculosis. His father managed with enormous effort to get together enough money to send him to stay with an old woman, an acquaintance of theirs, who had rented a dacha. Her daughter was a music-hall singer. In front of the dacha was a fence and there lived the owner of a brewery.

He had seen two young boys and a beautiful little girl, had gone up to the fence and got to know them. A plank had been removed and he had gone in to play. They had many toys, studied French, went sailing and ate good food. One day he closed the fence and there was no one around. He got scared, thinking he had done something wrong.

The day after, the girl came up to the fence and told him, before running away: 'We have been forbidden to have anything to do with you', while the boys threw stones at him from a distance.

That was when the war of stones in the yard behind the house started. He had built himself a fort and from it threw stones. At night he used to sneak into their fort and destroy it.

That was how he learned who he was and who they were...

Our apartment was a jail, and it was the only one over the stage of the theatre. I did not know where to go or whom to look for. Playing by myself was no fun...

I thought that the city was just made up of theatres, where everybody led the same life as we did...

Once my father took us to the circus. The circus made such an impression on me that it remained, for the rest of my life, my favourite entertainment

Advertisement for the soirée

The Futurists in Kazan. Once only tour.

Members' meeting, Thursday, 20 February.

Well-known Muscovite Futurists will speak on painting and literature.

Vasily Kamensky will give the report: 1) Aeroplanes and the poetry of the Futurists.

David Burlyuk will give the report: 2) Cubism and Futurism.

Vladimir Mayakovsky will give the report: 3) The achievement of Futurism.

They will read their poems.

Commencing at 8 p.m.

V. Kamensky, *Put' entuziasta (The path of an enthusiast)*, Perm 1968, pp. 112-113.

3 Communication to the Central Office for the Staging of Exhibitions

On behalf of the Association of
Ultra-Innovators in Painting

We request that the former Chludova premises be assigned to us 'Asskranists' for the staging of an exhibition in place of the 'Suprebez' (Suprematism-bezpredmetnichestvo) which is now defunct and whose artists have now joined our association.

A. Rodchenko, V. Stepanova, A. Drevin, N. Udaltsova, A. Vesnin

15 January 1919

Note convening the clandestine meeting of Molodava Federatsiya on 14 October 1917, bearing the signatures of A. Rodchenko, V. Pestel, N. Udaltsova, L. Popova, O. Rozanova, V. Tatlin, I. Klvun, A. Vesnin and Osmierkin.

Кр. протоколъ совѣщанія 14 Октября 1917 г.
г. Москва
14 Октября 1917 г. - совѣщаніе
членовъ ассоціаціи:

А. Родченко
В. Пестель
Н. Удалтсова
Л. Попова
О. Розанова
В. Татлин
И. Клевун
А. Веснин
О. Осмеркин



4 Statement by Rodchenko for the Catalogue of the 10th State Exhibition

Rodchenko's system.

The collapse of all the 'isms' of painting has given the go-ahead for my ascent.

At the sounding of the knell for colour painting as it accompanies the last 'ism' into eternal peace, the last hope and the last love are dashed, while I throw dead truths out of the house.

Not synthesis but invention (analysis) is the motive force. Painting is the body, the creation, the spirit. My task is to create new things from painting, so look at my work in reality. Literature and philosophy are the province of specialists, whereas I am the originator of new discoveries in painting.

Christopher Columbus was neither a writer nor a philosopher; he was just the discoverer of new worlds.

Moscow, January 1919

Rodchenko

5 To the People's Commissar for Education, Comrade A.V. Lunacharsky

...The activity of the Section of Figurative Arts (Izo) of the NKP, which has serious problems of a financial order, has involved nothing but buying the works of artists, thereby neglecting an absolutely essential factor for a further development of art, the creation, that is, of living conditions, however modest, such as to ensure a continual output of new works.

...The artists, associated in the Council of Masters of Painting, apply to you, People's Commissar for Education, with the following requests:

1. To grant... to artists the right to the allowance for the Red Army, for the artist himself, for his wife and for his children...

5. To grant to artists the right to have free of charge a studio, electric lighting, heating and the materials required for his own creative work, as well as linen, shoes, clothes and overcoats.

The Inkhuk Archives.

6 Provisional Statute of the Council of Masters

1. The Council of Masters is a free, voluntary and independent association of artists. The purpose of the association is to serve the interests of the people in the artistic sector and to tackle a range of practical and theoretical problems concerning art.

2. In contrast to other State-run artistic bodies, the Council of Masters confines its duties to a work of consultation. In particular, it encourages initiative in the various sectors that concern the development of artistic life in the country.

3. The Council of Masters, without going into the material and legal conditions of artists, which are the province of the Vserabis, aims to be a motive force in dealing with the problems of art and of ideas connected with this sector.

4. All those artists and painters whose names appear in the list accompanying this Statute are members of the Council of Masters, their applications having been examined and approved by the constituent assembly of the Council of Masters.

5. The admission of new members will be discussed at the general meetings of the Council of Masters and [each candidate must be] put forward by one of the members of the Council. 3/4 of the votes of the general staff of the Council are required for admission to the Council of Masters. In case of unavoidable absence, members of the Council will take part in elections by writing. Elections will take place by open ballot.

6. The general assembly of the Council of Masters takes the final decision in all problems. The quorum of the general assembly, except for cases involving the co-optation of new members, must be made up of 1/4 of the general staff of the Council of Masters. The general assembly will be convened according to necessity.

7. The body in charge of administering the affairs of the Council is the Praesidium, made up of 5 members.

The Inkhuk Archives.

7 Work programme of Inkhuk

The influence on the psyche is achieved through those means of expression that are proper to a given art and that constitute its language.

Hence it is clear that the theoretical study of any kind of art should have as its starting point the *analysis of this art's means of expression*.

... The problem of the analysis of means of artistic expression must, as a consequence, be presented as follows. What is the effect on the human psyche:

- a) of Painting as the depiction of colour and form,
- b) of Sculpture as spatial form,



Cover of *My Discovery of America*, by V. Mayakovsky, 1926

- c) of Architecture as form embracing mass, volume and space,
- d) of Music as temporal sound form,
- e) of Dance as spatial and temporal form.

The rich and almost unknown material that will be obtained by means of this analysis will help us to answer many questions concerning composition (especially construction) both in individual fields of art and with reference to art in general; questions that up to now we have tackled in an almost exclusively intuitive manner. In this way the intuitive element of creative art will obtain a new, or perhaps only forgotten ally, destined to be revived in the form of a theoretical element.

8 Work plan of the Objective Analysis Group of the Section of Monumental Art in Inkhuk

Object of the work

- A) Objective analysis of works of art in order to bring to light their fundamental and secondary elements and the laws of their organization.
- B) Analysis of the elements and their organization through various works of art.
System of analysis of works and elements:
 - a) Dismantling of elements in individual arts
painting
sculpture
architecture
music
poetry
dance
art of movement
 - b) Dismantling of laws, of their organization
construction
rhythm
 - c) Dismantling of the secondary elements
emotion
configuration.

The Inkhuk Archives.

The members of the Group

Declaration on the museum management

On September 1919 a special declaration was received by the Board of the Union of Figurative Arts and Production Art concerning the problems of museum management. Among other things, the declaration stated:

The history of all the European museums has shown how the space devoted to the activity of art historians and theorists, who work de facto in the museums (the cultural operators of the museums), is not commensurate with the space reserved for artistic and creative activity (of the painters)...

It is in the nature of their profession that cultural operators in the museums tend to preserve what has been done, in contrast to the artists who would like to replace the old by the new; since it is the artist who is the creative force in the field of art, it ought to be his task to guide the country's artistic education...

The old anachronism, whereby the museums are filled with works of modern art chosen by the aforesaid cultural operators, should be done away with. The job of buying modern works is strictly the province of artists.

The artist wants to know about the past of his own profession and must be familiar with it...

The artist is free to choose from among all the monuments of the past those works which best typify the culture of each type of art.

This culture... is determined by the creative moment, hence by the moment of invention. Only those works of the past which are indicative in one way or another of a professional or artistic discovery are of interest to the artist.

It should be conceded that: 1) artists, as the only people with a grasp of the problems of contemporary art and as the creators of artistic values, are the only ones capable of directing the acquisition of modern works of art and of establishing how a country should be educated in artistic matters; 2) as professionals who develop their own theories on the basis of worldwide artistic culture, they should have access to the works of art of the past in order to choose, from amongst them all, those which are typical of artistic culture. Once chosen, they should use these to create a *museum of creative artistic culture* which would also serve to promote the artistic life of the country.

In *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo (Figurative Art)*, no. 1, 1919, p. 85.

10 Thesis of Rodchenko's report on the 'Museum of Artistic Culture'

1. The Museum of Artistic Culture is a collection of works from all the genres of figurative art: painting, sculpture, spatial forms, reliefs, bas-reliefs, three-dimensional works, graphics, artistic production linked to industry, architectural projects, in short everything that testifies to the presence of an artistic culture.

The Museum has the following tasks:

I. To provide a service for State-employed workers in the field of art, i.e. to have a pedagogical aim that is pursued by means of a series of meetings held in the State Workshops on the principles of the Museum of Artistic Culture.

II. To carry out a work of cultural education, consisting in the improvement of existing museums and organizations and, where these do not exist, in the creation of new museums by following the principle of development of artistic form.

2. Both these tasks are equally necessary: the first because it facilitates the creative work of the artist—producer, the second because it predisposes the cultural consumer to observation of works of art and helps him to find his way through the output of art in all its forms and tendencies.

The museums are structured along the lines of a scientific approach to art of a material and professional kind.

The new building will be constructed on the basis of the principle that a museum should document the stages of development of artistic form, and not on the basis of a historical principle, which is exhausted in precise static forms, as happens in the Capitalist countries.

3. The historical museum of the past is only an archive, only a storehouse of works, not a museum as maker of culture. It is constructed to serve the ethnographer, the specialist and the amateur. Given its aims, even the old-style historical museum's technique of construction is totally different from that of the new museum.

The selection of works in a historical museum is haphazard, dictated by a subjective standard of aesthetic evaluation of the individual artist, without any analysis of his achievements with respect to the goals that this artist had set himself.

There is no provision for hanging the walls of one room with the works of a single artist, and the only effort of a historical museum lies in getting hold of everything indiscriminately, without making any value judgement about the works.

4. The new museum will be primarily a museum of works and not of artists.

The works will have pride of place. They will be selected according to the criteria that they should either reveal the presence of a movement or some future achievement, or indicate the presence of art as a profession.

The first factor might be called the factor of invention. It will be a dynamic principle that will carry art forward, without conceding anything to fragmentation or stagnancy, which favour the development of imitation.

This factor will sweep away unshakable classical *dogmas* and *canons* and get rid of the idea of an *eternal beauty* in Art.

Everything exists in time and space, and so does the work of art, which by passing away smooths and opens up the way to new conquests. The museum will be made up of *living* works which do not yet have a 'historical value' (in the narrow sense of the term).

5. The second factor, the one that concerns the occupation of art, will bring the work of the artist to a professional and scientific level. It will put an end to that absurd orgy of subjective qualitative judgements that make the work into a sort of spiritual gluttony, and which satisfies the refined *greediness* of the consumer who is looking for nothing more than the gratification of his desires.

A museum that sets out to be an organized form of art exhibition, that is, which aims to publicize art, must bear witness to the development plan of artistic form and to the technique of the artist's trade.

In our analysis of the system by which works are selected in the old and new type of museum, we have neglected a very important technical problem: the *display* of the works. In museums which follow the historical principle, the way in which the pictures are displayed, like the choice of the works themselves, is indicative of its special character: that of being an *archive*.

6. According to the criterion of individualistic evaluation of an artist, the problem of how to put the works on show was solved in a very simple manner: the best place was reserved for the most highly esteemed artist; the setting of one artist alongside another was justified by chronological succession.

This was the reason for the sudden leaps and imbalances on the walls which made it so difficult to follow the development of methods in art.

In confirmation of its nature as an *archive*, the habit has grown up in the historical museum of plastering walls with paintings from top to bottom. The physical impossibility of looking at the works of art was not even taken into consideration.

Works considered of secondary importance were either hung at the top or in the darkest parts of the room. The primary concern was to economize on space. The possibility of looking at the works was conditioned by the utilization of the walls of the room. The space between pictures was utilized to the last centimetre, with works hung next to each other, according to size.

7. The aesthetic criterion of how pictures should be hung coincided with the criterion of decoration of the walls, i.e. the picture was used, like any other decorative element of the surroundings, to cover the walls.

The system of display was based on symmetrical distribution of the pictures on the wall, with pictures of the same size being set side by side.

8. The new museum building cannot accept such a superficial criterion, which takes no account whatsoever of the problem of putting a picture on show. Posed in these terms, the problem excludes the economic utilization of a wall.

9. The principle of entirely covering the walls should be totally rejected. The wall no longer has a role of its own and the work of art, being the true protagonist, should not be subordinated to the wall.

Pictures should be hung according to a criterion of choice that reflects the stages of development of artistic form and methods, without reference to chronological order.

What should be taken into account when a painting is hung is not the fame of a given artist but the value of a given phase of development and the quality and technique of a given work.

When a work is hung on the wall it should be given the space needed for it not to impinge on another.

In order to find the right point at which a picture should be hung it is necessary carefully to take into account both the height of those looking at it and the character of the work itself, i.e. whether its pictorial representation is rendered on a large or small scale.

11 Report of the meeting of the Commission on conclusions following the discussion of 1 March 1921

Present: Shterenberg, Stepanova, Babichev, Ladovsky, Popova.

The discussion on the definition of the concepts of construction and composition was taken into consideration. (Reports nos. 9 and 13.)

The conclusions of Krinsky, Bubnova, Popova and Ioganson were examined.

The basic concept of each definition was entered into the minutes.

The conclusions were simplified. After comparison of the definitions put forward during the discussions and in the conclusions, it was decided to bring all the definitions together into a single one as follows.

The definition of construction breaks down into a definition of scheme and one of actual construction.

Construction is the suitable organization of material elements.

The characteristic elements of construction are:

- 1) better use made of materials,
- 2) absence of superfluous elements.

The scheme of construction is the set of lines with the areas and forms defined by them. It is a system of forces.

Composition is combination according to a precise conventional principle.

The opposite of construction is the absence of organic unity.

The conclusions of: 1) Krinsky, 2) Bubnova, 3) Popova, 4) Ioganson, were summed up as follows:

- 1) The line is the image of force; the set of lines with the areas and forms defined by them is a system of forces, is the scheme of construction.
- 2) Architectural construction is based on the physical law of gravity.
- 3) Construction is the object and necessity of a suitable organization. Composition is a suitable — in the sense of quality — arrangement of materials.
- 4) There is pictorial construction:
 - a) in non-figurative painting, as genuine organization of elements and non-representational organization;
 - b) when the construction of objects is accentuated and not the object itself;
 - c) when we make use of the qualities of materials.

A decision was taken to carry on, in future discussions, with the examination of definitions that have been taken into consideration and to make a general synopsis.

Secretary L. Popova

12 Rodchenko's conclusions on construction and composition

Construction is an object or a task that is dealt with according to a precise plan of work in which the materials, with all their specific components, are organized and used for their correct function, without anything superfluous. To deal with each space in the right manner is construction.

Goal
Work plan
Organization are construction
Material
Economics

Something really new is created only when there is a Constructivistic organization. Choosing the materials available, or filling the empty spaces with

Аборнїи еиетї прїсїдїатїолабїумї на заагаїум
№ 2 оїи 28 мартїа 1921. Радоїи Крунїи Коїлїтїрїемїбу Сїоїої
Иїхїїа :

1. Аборнїи Таїе
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4. Таїеїи
5. Таїеїи
6. Таїеїи



List of those attending the meeting of the Working Group of Constructivists: A. Gan, G. Stenberg, V. Stenberg, K. Ioganson, A. Rodchenko, V. Stepanova

decorations, is composition. The utilization of each space is composition. Filling empty spaces in an individualistic manner is composition. Composition is always the expression of individualism and of all that it involves.

13 Report no. 1. The Assembly for Organization of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk

18 March 1921, Moscow, 14 Volkhonka Street, int. 8, 10.20 a.m.

Present: Ioganson, Rodchenko, Stepanova, G. Stenberg.

Agenda:

1. Organizational problems

The president was absent

Secretary: Stepanova

Discussed	It was decided
1. The organization of a Working Group within Inkhuk specifically to examine the problems of spatial and Constructivist production (V. Stepanova).	1. That the Working Group of Constructivists was opportune and necessary.
2. The membership of the group.	2. That the organizing group be made up of comrades Rodchenko, Ioganson, Stepanova, Stenberg G., Stenberg V., Medunetsky and Gan.
3. The group's programme of work.	3. To ask members of the group to present their ideas on the work plan and programme at the next meeting.
4. The inviting of specialists in the field of science and technology to work in the group.	4. That it was necessary to invite a mathematics expert and an engineer--technician to work in the group.

5. To make entry into the group conditional on the presentation of a work based on the principle of Constructivism. The decision did not apply to those comrades invited on the initiative of the group.
6. The setting up of an Office for the group (Secretariat). 6. To appoint comrade Stepanova as the group's secretary.
7. An invitation to comrade Gan to work in the group (V. Stepanova). 7. To regard comrade Gan as a collaborator of the group.
8. The fixing of a day and place for meetings. 8. That meetings of the group be held on Monday, in the office of the Museum, at 8 p.m.
9. The agenda of the next meeting. 9. To put the question of the group's work programme on the agenda for the next meeting.

The meeting came to an end at 12.25 p.m.

Signatures of the members of the group:

Stenberg
Ioganson
Rodchenko
Stepanova

Report no. 2. Meeting of the Plenum of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk

28 March 1921, Moscow, 14 Volkhonka Street, int. 8, 8 p.m.

Present: Gan, Ioganson, Rodchenko, G. Stenberg, V. Stenberg, Stepanova.

Agenda:

1. Analysis of the programme and the work plan
Report by comrade Gan on the group's programme and work plan
 2. Problems of an organizational nature
 3. Any other business
- The president was absent

Secretary: Stepanova

Discussed	It was decided
1. The report by comrade Gan on the work programme of the Working Group of Constructivists. (The report and analysis of the report are included in discussion no. 1 of the Working Group of Constructivists.)	1. To accept in principle all that was put forward in comrade Gan's report and to invite him to present a concrete programme for the group on Friday, 1 April of the current year, so that it could be examined at the Inkhuk General Assembly.
2. The suggestion by comrade Rodchenko that the Constructivist group should produce a publicity statement, describing the positions, aims and tasks of the Constructivists in broader terms.	2. To invite comrade Gan to write a statement for the group, in conformity with comrade Rodchenko's proposal.
3. Comrade Gan's proposal that each member of the group think of a slogan to publish along with the statement. One slogan against and one for.	3. To invite each member of the group to present his own slogan at the next meeting of the group.
4. The enlarging of the group's secretarial staff to include comrades Gan and Rodchenko (V. Stepanova).	
5. The problem of appointing a spokesman for the group, to defend	5. To entrust the task of reporting to the plenary session of Inkhuk to

the Constructivists' programme at the plenary session of Inkhuk.

The meeting came to an end at 2.20 a.m.

Absent: Medunetsky

The Members of the Working Group of Constructivists

In witness whereof,

The secretary

14 Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk

(text corresponding to the first draft)

The Working Group of Constructivists sets itself the task of expressing the Communist idea in physical installations.

Wishing to tackle this task scientifically, even if only as a hypothesis, the group insists on the need for a synthesis between ideology and form so that laboratory experiments can be realized on the practical plane.

For this reason, the group's programme aims from the outset to make clear from the ideological point of view that:

1. scientific Communism, built on the theory of historical materialism, is the sole ideological presupposition for us;

2. theoretical considerations and the necessary investigation of the Soviet building industry should lead the group to move on from the experimental phase 'outside life' to the real experiment;

3. the specific elements of reality, i.e. tectonics, construction and *faktura*, applied to the physical elements of industrial culture — volume, surface, colour, space and light — justified on an ideological level, worked out on a theoretical plane and reinforced by experience, are the basis for expressing the Communist idea in physical installations.

The three paragraphs of an ideological character constitute the organic link with the formal part.

Tectonics or the tectonic style emerges and derives from the characteristics of Communism itself on the one hand, and from the functional use of industrial material on the other.

Construction is organization. It starts out from Communism and adapts itself tectonically to the material. Construction should be seen as a co-ordinating function between the elements and in turn as an expression of the functionality of tectonics.

The conscious choice of material and its appropriate utilization without interrupting the dynamics of construction and limiting its tectonics is defined by the group as *faktura*.

These are the three basic elements that come to play a part in the whole of intellectual and material production.

The group considers to be material elements:

1. The material in its totality.
Analysis of original components, its industrial processing or use in manufacture. Its qualities, its utilization.

The intellectual materials are:

2. Light. 3. Space. 4. Volume. 5. Surface. 6. Colour.

The Constructivists treat intellectual materials on a par with the materials of solid bodies.

Further tasks of the group

I. In the ideological field:

Demonstrating through action and words the incompatibility of artistic activity with the functionality of intellectual—material production.

The real participation of intellectual—material production in building Communist culture.

II. In the practical field:

Publishing a bulletin.

Weekly publication of the organ *VIP, Vestnik intellektual'nogo proizvodstva* (*The herald of intellectual—material production*).

Publication of brochures and leaflets on problems connected with the group's activities.

Constructive realization of projects.

Organization of exhibitions.

Establishing a link with all the Central Committees in charge of production and with the centres that actually put into practice and realize Communist forms of life.

III. In the field of propaganda:

1. The group declares open war on art in general.
 2. It stresses the inadequacy of the artistic culture of the past for producing the Constructivist installations of the new Communist form of life.
- The Inkhuk Archives.

15 Slogans

(The discipline of construction, chief director Rodchenko)

Construction = organization of elements.

Construction is a modern concept.

Art is a branch of mathematics, like all sciences.

Construction is the modern requirement for organization and utilitarian use of material.

Constructivist life is the art of the future.

Art which does not enter into life will be put under a No. of the archaeological museum of *antiquity*.

It is time that art entered into life in an organized fashion.

Life organized along Constructivist lines is superior to the delirious magic art of the sorcerers.

The future will not construct monasteries for the priests, prophets and minstrels of art.

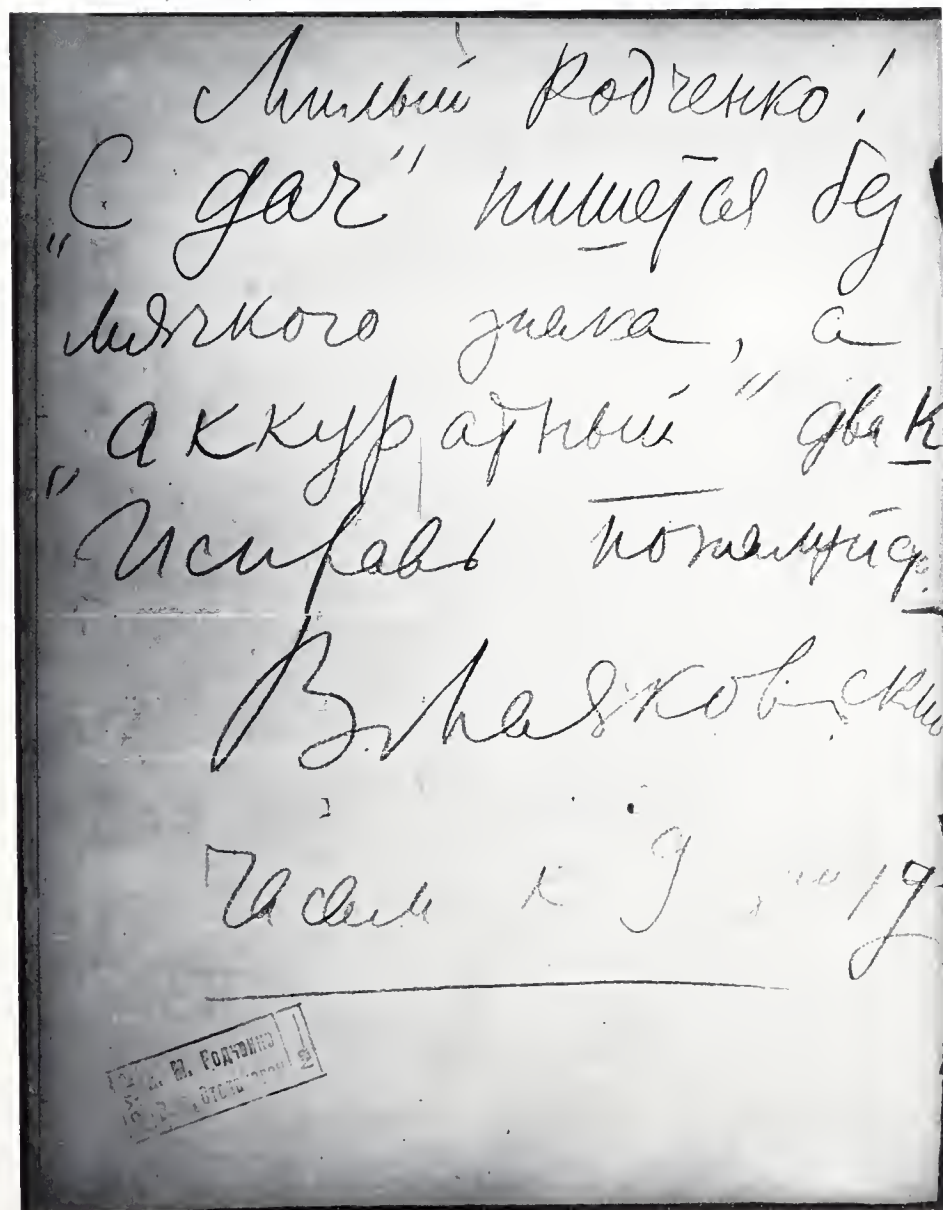
Down with art as a beautiful patch on the squalid life of the rich.

Down with art as a precious stone in the midst of the dismal and dirty life of the poor.

Down with art as a means of escaping from a life that is not worth living.

Conscious and organized life, that knows how to see and build, is contemporary art.

Note from Mayakovsky to Rodchenko, 1923.



The man who has organized his life, his work and himself is a genuine artist. Work for life and not for palaces, cathedrals, cemeteries and museums.

Work in the midst of everything and with everybody; down with monastic institutes, studios, ateliers and islands. Awareness, experience, purpose, construction, technique and mathematics, these are the companions of contemporary art.

Rodchenko

In *Khudozhestvenno—konstruktorskoe obrazovanie* (Artistic—Constructive Education), no. 4, Vniite, Moscow 1973, p. 206.

16 Organizational programme of the workshop for the study of painting in State Art Colleges

1. The workshop for the study of painting has an educational and an experimental function.

a) The scientific duties of the workshop are the analysis and elaboration of problems in art and in pictorial technique. In order to carry out this part of its work the workshop will conduct experiments:

1. in the field of colour
2. in the field of form
3. following the laws of construction
4. studying the treatment of the surface layer of materials, i.e. their preparation.

b) The educational aims of the workshop involve giving students a technical and scientific preparation and practice in the various techniques of painting, independently of creative individualism.

2. The workshop is divided up into special sections for analysis of the separate elements of painting:

1. colour
2. form
3. construction
4. *faktura*
5. materials.

The study breaks down into:

- a) elaboration of the elements taken individually
- 1) analysis of the fundamental characteristics of each element (on the practical and the theoretical plane)
 - 2) observation of examples of the treatment of elements in works of art from different periods
 - 3) analysis of elements in objects
 - 4) practical handling of special problems in the elaboration of individual elements
- b) comparison of elements
- 1) study of the interrelationship of different elements
 - 2) observation of the way elements are combined in works of art
 - 3) study of the combination of elements in objects
 - 4) practical handling of problems concerned with the combination of elements.

Rodchenko

12 December 1920

In *Khudozhestvenno—konstruktorskoe obrazovanie* (Artistic—Constructive Education), no. 4, Vniite, Moscow 1973, pp. 203-04.

17 Syllabuses devised by Rodchenko for the teaching of graphics in the introductory course at Vkhutemas

Subject: graphic construction on a flat surface

Exercise no. 1

Basic elements:

Take five sheets of paper of any size, as long as their dimensions are in the proportion 2:3. Next, take three shapes of any size: a circle, a triangle and a rectangle. The base of the triangle should be equal to the radius of the circle.

Mode of construction:

Make five constructions with the three given shapes:

1. diagonally from right to left;
2. diagonally from left to right;
3. vertically;
4. horizontally;
5. free composition (using any shape in any quantity)

Rules

1. In the construction all the shapes must be organized into a single group, paying very careful attention to the area of the whole sheet but without scatter

- 3 The construction must not be at all ornamental or symmetrically perfect
- 4 The shapes should not be set one behind the other, in a chain.
- 5 Be careful to ensure that the shapes are neither too big nor too small in relation to the dimensions of the sheet, the same holds true for the group constructed out of these shapes
- 6 Construct all the shapes into a single group in such a way that each shape is related to all the rest
- 7 Be careful to ensure that all the given elements (i.e. everything that makes up the shape, its lines and corners) play an active part in the utilization of the shape and that they appear distinct, without being located together or in close proximity to one another causing them to destroy each other.
- 8 The pattern should be traced with a ruler, preferably in clear and accurate Indian ink. Any shape that passes through another must be drawn in its entirety.

Exercise no. 2

Basic elements:

Take seven sheets of paper of any size, as long as their dimensions are in the proportion 2:3. Next, take five shapes of any size: two triangles, one acute and one isosceles, two rectangles and a circle whose radius should be equal to one of the sides of the triangle and one of those of the rectangle.

Mode of construction:

Construct seven patterns, each made up of five shapes, according to the following principles:

1. in an upright cross;
2. in a slanting cross (along two diagonals);
3. in a triangular pyramid, ensuring, that is, that all the weight and size come at the bottom;
4. in a triangle with its point downwards, in such a way that all the weight is at the top but the construction remains stable without overturning;
5. a triangle with the point to the right, i.e. concentrating the mass to the left;
6. a triangle with the point to the left, i.e. concentrating the mass to the right;
7. free construction.

Rules

1. Constructing crosswise does not mean arranging shapes in a cross but organizing a single group that has a cross-shaped pattern on its surface.
2. Constructing a triangle with the load on the left does not mean crowding all the shapes into the triangle but making a large shape on the left and sustaining it with other slighter and perhaps more subtle forces, so that the left side does not end up squashed.
3. Keep to the rules of exercise no. 1.

In order to proceed with the construction, the initial phase of the work can be used to cut out the five linear forms given from a sheet of white paper. Then take a sheet of black paper on which the construction can be arranged, finding the best position for the shapes.

1921

V.A. Rodchenko Archives.

Construction of a pictorial space (theoretical constituents of the subject)

Pictorial space is constructed out of the reciprocity of planes (or layers), made up of:

1. lines
2. areas
3. volumes

in their:

1. rhythm
2. extension
3. colour
4. *faktura*.

1) Line may be a graphic design, an element that defines the pictorial plane or one that delimits and intersects areas and their extension in space.

2) The flat surface is a two-dimensional plane.

3) Volume indicates the three-dimensional character of the construction, but it should not have a realistic sculptural form.

4) The basic element is the rhythm (static, dynamic and mutable) on which all spatial relationships depend.

5) Colour does not embellish the object but has an independent value and an import of its own, serving to clarify the spatial relationships between planes.

6) *Faktura* distinguishes parts of the surface of the picture, emphasizing the relationship of colour and lending substance to the planes.

Deformation and transformation

Starting from the consideration that no object is transferred onto the surface of a picture as it looks to the eye, but is analysed in its form so as to identify the pictorial elements that determine the construction of a given space, the principle of necessary deformation of an object's figurative value is established. Identification of the fundamental elements of form, of construction in the purity of its abstraction, and interference with its real figurative value, leads to unrestrained transformation of the object in relation to the problem of rhythm posed by the composition.

1920-21

In *Khudozhestvenno—konstruktorskoe obrazovanie (Artistic—Constructive Education)*, no. 4, Vniite, Moscow 1973, p. 205.

18 Communication to the Inkhuk Praesidium

I propose that a report on the theme 'The last picture has been painted' be read at one of the next meetings, along the following lines.

- 1) The illusory nature of representation is the foundation of the old kind of painting.
- 2) Realistic figurative form in the contemporary painting of the Cubists and Suprematists.
- 3) Liberation from ideological content and figurative illusion in contemporary painting.
- 4) The aspiration towards construction, as the basis of a search for new forms in painting, bas-reliefs and spatial painting.
- 5) The 'Crisis in Art' and the blind alleys of modern research.
- 6) The final blow to figurative art but also the collapse of construction in Rodchenko's latest work at the exhibition '5 × 5 = 25'.
- 7) The end of painting. Rodchenko the murderer and suicide.
- 8) But if painting is dead, is art dead as well?
- 9) Current social circumstances dictate new forms of art.
- 10) Craft as the basis of art.
- 11) Craft in manufacture. Art is bound up, like craft, with labour and production.
- 12) Transfiguration of life through art in the production of all the values necessary to life.

N. Tarabukin, 6 October 1921

The Inkhuk Archives.

19 'The Line'

In its heyday figurative art proceeded almost exclusively along the lines of naturalism, that is to say, the reproduction of nature. Through illusion, the trompe l'œil of reality, it tried to make the observer forget the presence of the flat surface of the picture. The greatest and most persistent effort was directed towards destroying the surface, whose value, despite being one of the most important, was not recognized until the moment when pictorial art became autonomous.

Making pictures of different sizes, in relation to the physical objects and subject represented, suggested to the artist much more intelligent and different combinations than exist in reality.

Concentrating attention on what is important in the subject and pursuing the effect of showing the true essence of its contents have led to all other factors, such as decoration and ground, being neglected. The composition of the picture has been overloaded, offering infinite possibilities for working freely with the material offered by nature.

By continuing to work on colour, tones and shades in order to obtain the maximum of harmony or of discord, the pictorial medium, which together with composition constitutes the professional component of painting, has begun to evolve.

Always painting the same places on the surface of the picture in order to obtain the maximum of those pictorial effects mentioned above has led to the emergence of a new element. This seems abstract when compared with the naturalistic effect, but it is, on the contrary, part of the true essence of painting: *pictorial quality*.

Pictorial quality, in its primary sense, is nothing but mastery of the craft of painting. Impasto, paint, preparation and glaze, taken together, represent the *faktura* of the picture's surface. These are the elements of pictorial quality, and they have become increasingly important in a work.

A new approach to painting has emerged and the picture has ceased to be picture, so as to become painting and object. From this moment on, *pictorial quality* becomes an immutable factor, a valid criterion for any work of art.

Hence this element, which could seem fortuitous, has assumed an important and definitive function, precisely because it constitutes the true essence of painting, forming the basis of professionalism.

Painting owes its entire evolution exclusively to the form that has been developed along a regular and unvarying line, hardly ever turning back on itself. Form has been used in all its most refined variations, to the point where it borders on epicurism.

After having experimented with the object in all its possible naturalistic interpretations, painting in the phase of Cubism has broken it down according to an almost anatomical principle. Eventually it has arrived at non-representational art, freeing itself from any constraint of realism.

With the abandonment of the figurative and the subject, the artist has been able to concentrate on his specific tasks. Becoming increasingly important for his creative work, they constitute his true goal, whose interpretation had previously been excluded.

In time, non-figurative painting renounced the old means of expression, introducing totally new methods of painting that are much more suitable for conveying its simple and geometric, clear and precise forms: hence the flat paintbrush, the use of dyes, rollers, presses, etc.

The paintbrush, so essential for a painting that had to convey the illusion of an object in all its detail, has become an inadequate instrument and been replaced by others which have made it easier and more convenient to treat the surface. Press, roller, pen, rule and compass have come into use.

In comparison with form, paint has undergone limited development in painting. The artist was conditioned by the material and there was no substantial change up until the advent of Cubism. Pure colour, handled in its various shades, has always been one of the achievements of pictorial culture in its aspiration to represent and reproduce nature.

The evolution of colour has gone through two stages: from grey to brown and from brown to pure and brilliant colour. And then back again. It has been a uniform and monotonous alternation. After reaching an unpleasant sequel of orange-brown, an academic preserve, colour has tended towards greater purity in the new painting, from Impressionism onwards.

But colour had not yet been analysed and developed in its true essence. The Impressionists went back to pure colour (the colours of the spectrum), but used it to convey the impression of air, light, etc. The Impressionists used paint as a pattern of spots, as an ornament.

Not until Cubism did a new phase in the evolution of colour take place, when the artist attempted to extend the range of his palette by turning to concrete materials. The Cubists were not aware of this phase, so that later on they used concrete material solely as a variant on pictorial shading, smothering it completely on the surface of the painting. It was merely a device for increasing the intensity of the spot of colour, without any independent value.

Non-figurative painting has been concerned with colour as such, disclosing all its possibilities. All the qualities of colour have been studied: its depth, weight, density and intensity. The last stage in this process has been the achievement of a constant monochromatic intensity within the limits of a single colour, without either increasing or diminishing its chromatic value.

Once artists began to look at the problem of colour separately from that of representation, the significance of the pictorial surface emerged in all its clarity, as a substitute for the illusory nature of figurative painting. The surface took on the whole of its function.

The surface was the material on which colour could be expressed. It was the first stage in the search for a new pictorial form, once painting had been freed from subject matter.

This process of liberation from the figurative influenced the whole structure of the work by detaching it more and more from the principle of composition. At the same time it drew closer to that of construction. The work was not born out of nature but constructed on the basis of those problems posed by the work itself. In this way the new form — the surface — demanded new organizing principles.

The creation of a work then became an autonomous matter on which all other problems depended, just as the individual parts of an organism are systematically subordinate to the whole. Work in the composition of forms and on their structural systems gradually brought the *line* to surface as an element of construction.

Continuing to work in this field, the absolute value of line emerged, as a primary element in the construction of anything whatsoever. The functionality of the line depended on the different phases of construction.

On the one hand, line is the entire construction taken as a whole, when, that is, it defines its characteristic system — in this case the line is the carcass, the skeleton, the relationship between different planes. On the other, it fixes the kinetic moments of the construction of an organism used as a unitary whole made up of individual parts, and in this case line is the path ahead, movement, collision, conjunction, break and continuation.

In the former case the line can be both the autonomous scheme of a hypothetical construction and the organizational plan of a precise organism made concrete.

In the latter case the autonomy of line with respect to what is taking place leads it to become more abstract. Here line conveys what is about to happen in algebraic form, without taking physical conditions into account and merely laying down the formula of an event that has already occurred, or is about to occur.

When it delineates a split it is important, not because it marks the confines of the area with precision (this forms part of the physical conditions of the area), but because it fixes a split that has occurred, as an event with all its circumstances.

Only the line, then, tells us what has happened, since without making use of material and excluding physical phenomena, it is the element that defines us, in the form that we see. It gives us the image of what is growing out from the construction as a whole, or at different stages in this construction, and of any other type of movement.

Conceived in this way, the line has stripped away the importance of spots of

Sketch for the cover of the booklet *The Line*, 1921.



... and finally, a statement of the non-figurative painting that is concerned with formalist themes. Line has brought about an alteration in our way of seeing the surface of the picture – changing the concept of shape represented solely by an area of colour. It has altered our perception of area by defining its precise qualities. The principle of accurately reckoning the contours of an area has begun to establish itself with the advent of construction.

As one of the fundamental moments of construction, line has managed to bring out all the possibilities of those elements which form part of painting.

Thus line has also been destroying the predominance of colour, last stronghold of non-figurative painting and in fact utilized as an end in itself. It adopts a limited role by transforming itself into material for the creation of a precise organism. By placing organization in the foreground, it strips from the work its value as an end in itself, bringing to light the constructive principle in each construction.

By giving primary importance to line, as the only possible element with which to create and construct, the aesthetic value of colour, *faktura* and style has been denied (seeing that everything which impedes construction in a work is style).

Shape, colour and *faktura* become materials and find themselves in a situation of dependency with respect to line, the only way in which it is possible to achieve the construction of something. It is the moment of construction which brings together the organization or the creation of a new and complete organism, not the description or creation of an abstract work executed on the easel in order to solve this or that pictorial problem.

Construction should be related to something organized that really exists or that requires real space and real materials and not to the illusory representation of something constructed on the surface of the canvas.

Line reveals a change in our way of conceiving art. The freehand line and the spot of colour in painting, with their vague outlines that we have assimilated from nature, no longer have any value. The inaccurate, trembling line traced by hand cannot compare with the straight and precise line drawn with the set square, reproducing the design exactly. Handcrafted work will have to try to be more industrial. Drawing as it was conceived in the past loses its value and is transformed into diagram or geometrical projection.

Faktura in painting (impasto, glaze, etc.) has been superseded by mechanical tools (roller, press, etc.) which make possible a scientific analysis of form and material.

The concept of the picture, as a product of painting, i.e. the canvas mounted on an easel, is replaced by the practice of constructing something in space. A totally new form is emerging out of the process of production. Our now habitual way of classifying art objects is being expanded, and destroying atavistic preconceptions.

The construction of works in two dimensions is only a projection of something that can be constructed in real terms. It merely represents a variant of geometric design and plan and is not the construction as such. The true value of construction, i.e. as organization of a real object, can solely be realized with physical material. Hence the appropriate utilization of material is one of the most important aspects.

Each system of construction requires a material and a specific utilization of its own, for it will always represent a discovery and an improvement, rather than a reproduction or a description. For this reason, nature no longer suffices to find a system that can be useful to us. This or that form of construction will depend on the specific nature and the requirements of the material, and on the problems that crop up during the process of working. We will not limit ourselves to the repetition of existing forms.

We can define construction as a system by which an object is realized thanks to the appropriate use of material.

This bias towards construction has brought the artist, through the phase of producing works in the dimensions of space and time, to work on real objects. That is to say, to production, where the artist is a constructor of physical works.

A.M. Rodchenko, 1921

The Inkhuk Archives.

20 From the minutes of the meeting of the *Novyi Lef* editors, held on 5 March 1927

Rodchenko: I regret that I did not ask Polonsky for a list of what I was supposed to see in Paris, but... I think that our tastes are different.

As for the fact that I saw workers dancing and playing football in Paris, Polon-

sky asks: 'What kind of workers were they?' Ordinary ones... like our own.

They were not like those portrayed by people such as Yuon, Lansere and Kardovsky in *Krasnaya niva*, stripped to the waist, with a sickle in one hand and a hammer in the other. That kind of worker does not exist in reality, neither in Paris nor even here.

As for the Louvre, perhaps we know it better than Polonsky, except that there is nothing to write about it.

We have no erotic interests. It is not worth my while getting into an argument with Polonsky. It would be like arguing with the person who invented Baedeker.

In *Novyi Lef*, no. 3, 1927, p. 43.

21 O. Brik and N. Aseev on the subject of Rodchenko the photographer

The photograph catches the events of everyday life in a more economic, rapid and accurate manner than the painting. In this lies its strength and great social significance. It is not bothered by any relapse into the craftsmanship of painting.

Photographers themselves do not grasp the great social significance of their work. They are aware of doing something useful and important, but think that they are mere artisans, humble workers, and not at all artists, or painters and creators.

The fact that the painter works not to commission but for himself; the fact that paintings go on show in major exhibitions, with private views, catalogues, music, refreshments and speeches; the fact that long articles are written about each painting and each painter, with detailed analysis of composition, technique and colour range; the fact that these exhibitions are considered cultural events; all this has a very great effect on photographers, who are convinced that painting is true art, whereas photography is a vulgar craft.

Out of this is born the dream of every photographer: to achieve the effect of painting in his photographs. It also lies behind the effort to take and process photographs in a 'pictorial' manner: 'so that they turn out like the reproduction of a painting'.

The photographer does not realize that by turning to the tricks of artistry and by servilely imitating painting he debases his profession, depriving it of the force which constitutes its social value. He no longer catches nature with precision and is left at the mercy of aesthetic laws that distort this nature.

The photographer would like to have the social status enjoyed by the artist. This is an absolutely legitimate desire, but one which can only be attained if the photographer contrasts an art of his own with that of the painter rather than trying to keep in step with him.

Starting out from the basic principles of his craft, i.e. from the desire to catch nature with precision, the photographer must create objects, pictures, which have an effect on the public, an effect in no way inferior to that produced by the paintings of any artist. The photographer has to show that it is not just life constructed on the basis of the laws of aesthetics that is pleasing, but also the real thing, caught in a photographic exposure.

The photographer will obtain his right to social recognition both by struggling against the aesthetic distortion of nature and by not striving to imitate models of painting that are foreign to photography.

It is a difficult road, but it is the only sure one. Difficult because neither here nor in the West do theoretical principles for the art of photography exist yet; an art which must be able to produce photographs of high quality.

The only things written or talked about are bits of advice and technical prescriptions, or suggestions as to how 'artistic effects' can be achieved, making the photograph look as little like a photograph as possible.

Yet there are, among photographers, workers in the cultural field and artists who have given up painting for photography, a few who have understood that photography has its own goals and its own lines of development. Such people have already achieved results in the field.

It is essential for them to communicate their own experience, to speak to each other and to unite their efforts in a common labour, in a common struggle against the 'artistic' abuse of power with regard to photography, in order to create a theory of the art of photography that will be independent of the rules of painting.

The experiences of former painters and set-designers in this field are especially interesting.

The most irreligious people are former popes and monks. No one knows 'the secrets' of the church and the monasteries better than they do.

The most dedicated opponents of pictorial aestheticism are ex-painters. No one knows the secrets of the art of painting better than they. No one is in a bet-

ter position than they to unmask the falsehood 'of the artistic reproduction of reality'. They have consciously given up painting. They will consciously struggle on behalf of photography. One of these people is A.M. Rodchenko, once a very fine painter, now a dedicated photographer.

His photographic work is not very well known to the public at large, for it is almost exclusively experimental in nature. He ought to be presented to the public along with his results. It is necessary for professional photographers, and those photographers who are interested in the development of the photographic art, to be familiar with Rodchenko's experiments.

His basic objective is to abandon those principles of painting that turn a photograph into 'a picture' and to find other laws suited to the way of taking and developing a photograph.

Is it possible that all this does not interest those involved with photography, not as if it were a 'humble' trade but as something that holds great significance on the social plane, something which can alter the pictorial criterion 'of the artistic reproduction of life'?

O.M. Brik, 'Foto-kadr protiv kartiny' (The photograph versus the painting), in *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 2, 1926, pp. 41-42.

From the second issue (no. 2, of 1926) onwards of the magazine *Soviet Cinema* four photographs by Rodchenko were published which reproduced details of the house in which he was living (21, Myasnitskaya Street) from an absolutely new perspective (looking up from below): balconies, windows and fire escape. In a short article on these photographs Brik wrote:

'Vertov is right. The cinema and the motion-picture camera should not imitate the human eye but should see and catch what is usually missed by the human eye.

'The cinema and the photographic lens can show us things from a different point of view, in an unusual setting: this possibility must be exploited.

'Once it was thought to be enough to take pictures of things at the level of the human eye with the feet planted firmly on the ground. Later man began to move around, to climb mountains, travel on ships, trains and motorcars, to fly in aeroplanes and descend to the bottom of the sea. And he always took the camera with him, capturing what he saw.

'The visual field has become more complex, undergoing change, but the relationship with the human eye has never altered.

'This relationship is not obligatory. Indeed, it is often superfluous, limiting and hindering the potential of the camera. The camera can act in an autonomous fashion. It can see things that man is not accustomed to seeing. It can suggest a new field of vision to man. It invites us to look at things in a different way.

'A. Rodchenko has made this kind of experiment, taking pictures of a house in Moscow from an unusual visual angle.

'The results have been extremely interesting. A familiar object (the house) has been turned into a construction never seen before, the fire escape turns out to be a marvellous construction and the balconies look like the towers of an exotic architecture.

'Looking at these photographs, it is not difficult to imagine how the same technique could be applied in cinematography, and just how spectacular it would be with the effect of normal photographs as well.

'... the ordinary human field of vision must be abandoned. We must learn to film things with a free camera...

'The cinema and the eye of the camera will have to find their own way of filming; not representing but extending the normal visual field of the human eye.'

O. Brik, 'Chego ne vidit glaz' (What the eye does not see), in *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 2, 1926, pp. 22-23.

After a time the magazine *Soviet Cinema* began to publish a regular feature, 'Photography in the cinema', in which, as the editorial staff put it, 'will be published photographs interesting for their spectacularity'.

On the first page of this feature were published two photographs by Rodchenko ('A house in Bozdvizhenke Street and 'Boats on the river'). On the same page was an article by O. Brik in which, emphasizing the importance of the new feature, he stated:

'The basis of cinematography is photography. Without photography there is no cinema...

'Yet in our cinematography, the problems of photography do not occupy the place they should if one considers how important they are to production.

'... The problem of photography should be brought into the foreground. The whole attention of workers in the cinema ought to be concentrated on this problem...

'... Anyone who works in the cinema, irrespectively of which sector and anyone who loves the cinema, should always keep up to date with the successes and achievements of filmcraft. The future of cinematography lies in them

'Knowing how to photograph means knowing how to take a picture with the maximum of spectacular effect.'

O. Brik, 'Foto v kino' (Photography in the cinema), in *Sovetskoe kino*, nos. 4-5, 1926, p. 23.

In subsequent issues of the magazine, pictures by Rodchenko were regularly published in the feature 'Photography in the cinema'. In one issue a series of pictures by different photographers (including Rodchenko) was accompanied by the following text:

'Each shot taken from a new visual perspective expands the limits of our visual imagination.

'Each exposure making use of a complex pattern of light and shade provides a new image of space. No serious modern film will be successful if it does not present an object filmed from an unusual viewpoint.'

In *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 8, 1926, p. 15.

In 1928 a series of experimental photographs by Rodchenko were published in an issue of the magazine *Novyi Lef*, accompanied by a theoretical article by O. Brik with the significant title 'From the painting to the photograph':

'Before the invention of the camera, drawing and painting were the only ways of capturing an image...

'Photography has opened up new possibilities for man.

'... It has turned out that just these photographic experiments, these photographic exposures which have absolutely nothing in common with the painting and which have been regarded as failures by celebrated photographers, are just the ones which have a fundamental value.

'We have seen that photography has possibilities and forms of expression of its own that have nothing to do with those of figurative art and that the task of photography lies in recognizing these possibilities and forms and developing them, in order to develop the art of photography.

'The invention of the motion-picture camera has given man another instrument with which to capture images...

'In conclusion we now have three different ways of capturing external events: painting, photography and cinematography. They have a range of possibilities that is anything but limited even though they continue to suffer from the influence of the age-old clichés of traditional figurative art.'

O.M. Brik, 'Ot kartiny k foto' (From the painting to the photograph), in *Novyi Lef*, no. 3, 1928, pp. 29-30.

In 1928 N. Aseev wrote an article devoted expressly to Rodchenko's photographs:

'The asphalted courtyard, made deeper by the two big nine-storey buildings, resembles a swimming pool emptied of its water. At the bottom of this pool very small children-cum-fish are dashing about...

'The artists — the building belongs to Vkhutemas — with their velvet berets and paint-stained trousers, drag their portfolios with them, and their drawings are so big that they cannot get through the gate...

'The house we live in is a genuine Bohemian refuge, a sort of Latin quarter, a little corner of art, a Muscovite Montparnasse which attracts the artists of the future from the farthest confines of the USSR... And the descendents of Velasquez come in through the grey vaulted entrances and the wind carries their artists' hairstyles into the past.

'Their beltless velvet shirts are gradually replaced by the multicoloured jumpers of the other faculties of Vkhutemas — those of ceramics, architecture, woodwork, metalwork...

'On one of these floors — the top one — lives an artist who has managed to transfer his gaze and his taste for form, volume and composition from the Middle Ages to the present. He has simply modified the material, and consequently the technique as well. He has taken plate instead of canvas, and sunlight and shade instead of paints and paintbrush. The building, so large that no canvas would have been able to contain it, changes its outlines under the resolute gaze of the lens... The technique conforms to a "new look", producing a series of new emotions and offering a continuous succession of new sensations to the eye and subsequently to the mind as well. All this, of course, with the aid of the camera skilfully trained on the multistorey building, on the confusion in the streets, on the bustle in the squares, on everything which feeds and enriches a city.'

N. Aseev, 'S devyatogo etazha' (From the ninth floor), in *Vechnaya Moskva*, no. 182, 1928.



News-stand, 1928. Leica.

A. RODCHENKO'S BIOGRAPHY

Alexander Mikhailovich Rodchenko was born in St Petersburg in 1891. His father was born in 1802 to a family of landless peasants in the region of Smolensk, and died in 1907. His mother, Olga Evdokimovna Paltusova, a washerwoman, was born in 1865 in the province of Archangel (formerly under the governor of Olonets). After his father's death, the family moved to Kazan. Olga Evdokimovna died in Moscow in 1933.

In 1911 Rodchenko enrolled as an external student at the Kazan Art School, after taking his grade IV exams at the Popular Religious School. He studied and gave drawing lessons. At that time, N. Feshin was a teacher at the Kazan Art School, and one of the artists who attended it was Varvara Stepanova.

Rodchenko finished art school in 1914 and moved to Moscow to complete his studies the same year. For two years he attended the Stroganov Artistic and Industrial Institute until he was called up for military service to work on a hospital train. From this period dates the series of theatrical costumes for Oscar Wilde's *The Duchess of Padua*. In 1916 he settled in Moscow with Stepanova and began to exhibit the same year.

In 1917 he was one of the founders of the Painters' Union and secretary of the Youth Federation.

From 1918 to 1922 he worked in the section of figurative arts at Narkompros (the People's Commissariat for Education) as director of the department of museums and member of the Artistic Committee.

In 1919 he produced a series of linocuts and a series of architectural designs. He also held a course in the theory of painting at the school of the Moscow Proletkult.

Between 1919 and 1921 he turned out three series of spatial constructions.

Over the period from 1920 to 1923 Rodchenko was on the Praesidium of Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture), in which he was a member of the Objective Analysis Group.

In these years he wrote the report *The Line* for Inkhuk and executed the series of drawings *Compositions and constructions*. From 1920 to 1930 he was a professor at Vkhutemas (the Higher Technical and Artistic Studios, 1921-24) and at Vkhutein (the Technical and Artistic Institute, 1927-30), where he was dean of the Faculty of Metalwork. From this period date the designs for work clothes and for the tea service.

In 1919 he began to take an interest in collage and then photomontage. Rodchenko was one of the first people to practise photomontage in the USSR.

In 1923 he started to collaborate with the publishing houses Molodaya gvardiya, Transpechat, Izdatelstvo, Krug and Komakademiya and with the magazines *Lef*, *Novyi Lef*, *Molodaya gvardiya*, *Sputnik kommunista* and *Krasnaya nov*, among others. The same year saw the beginning of his collaboration with Vladimir Mayakovsky, illustrating his poem *Pro Eto* (*Of This*).

From 1923 to 1925 he produced a series of advertising posters, sweet wrappers and union posters for the Mosselprom, Rezinotrest, GUM and Mospoligraf. In the same period he designed the captions for the *Kino-pravda* newsreel.

From 1924 onwards he began to devote himself to photography (portraits of Mayakovsky, Aseev, Dovzhenko, his mother and others).

In 1925 Rodchenko took part in the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, preparing the Soviet pavilion and exhibiting his designs for a workers' club. He also contributed to the sections 'Street art', 'The book industry', 'Theatre' and 'Graphics'.

Over the next two years, he worked for the film industry, designing

furnishings, sets and costumes for the films *Moskva v Oktyabre* (*Moscow in October*), *Zhurnalistka* (*The Presswoman*), *Albidum*, *Kukok s millionami* (*The Doll with Millions*). He started the column 'Photography in the cinema' for the magazine *Sovetskoe kino* and wrote the article 'The artist and the "material environment" in feature films' for the same magazine (nos. 5-6, 1927).

In 1929 he worked on set-designs and costumes for Vladimir Mayakovsky's play *Klop* (*The Bed Bug*) at the Meyerhold Theatre and for the play *Inga* at the Theatre of the Revolution. In 1930 he held a course of photography lessons at the State Printing Works. In 1931 he did the set-designs and costumes for the show *The Sixth Part of the World*.

From 1928 to 1932 he collaborated on the production of A. Zharov's revue at the Music-Hall Theatre. During the same years he was the author of photographic reportages (*Moscow, Factory kitchen, Essay on a newspaper*, etc.) for the magazines *Daesh* and *Krasnoe studenchestvo*.

In 1931 he worked on set-designs and costumes for the film *Kem Byt'* produced by the Sovkino. In 1932 he produced sets and costumes for the show *Armia mira* at the Zavadsky Theatre.

In 1933 he was sent by the magazine *SSSR na stroike* (*The USSR Under Construction*) to cover the building of the White Sea-Baltic canal, out of which came the photographic album *The White Sea Canal*.

Between 1934 and 1938 Rodchenko, together with Stepanova, edited the photographic albums *15 years of Soviet cinema*, *Uzbekistan in 10 years* (Izogiz), *Moscow is rebuilt*, *The first cavalry* (Izogiz), *The Soviet air force* (Izogiz) and *Procession of the young* (in English, 1939).

In 1939 Rodchenko wrote his reminiscences of his work with Mayakovsky in *Rabota s Mayakovskim*. From 1935 to 1941 he painted a series of pictures on circus subjects. He worked on photographic features, on photographs of the sports parades in Red Square, and produced the series *Moscow* and *The circus*.

From 1938 to 1940 Rodchenko and Stepanova edited the photographic album *The Soviet state farm* (*Selzozgiz*). During the Second World War Rodchenko took refuge with Stepanova in the region of Molotov (at Perm and Ocher). In 1941-42 he worked in the workshop producing propaganda posters in Ocher. During these years he was working as a photoreporter for the newspaper *Stalinsky udarnik*. He also produced a series of Indian ink drawings inspired by S. Prokofiev's music *Transiency*.

At the end of 1942 Rodchenko and Stepanova returned to their old home in Moscow. From 1943 to 1945 they worked together on the photographic album *From Moscow to Stalingrad* (never published) and on setting up exhibitions for the *Sovinformburo*. Between 1943 and 1948 Rodchenko painted the series *Decorative compositions* (oils). In 1944 he was artistic director at the House of Technology in Moscow.

From the end of the war onwards he collaborated even more closely with Stepanova. Between 1945 and 1947 they edited the photographic albums *Twenty-five years of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan* (*Kazogiz*) and *Five years of work materials* (special edition).

From 1947 to 1955 he worked with his daughter, V.A. Rodchenko, on the photographic albums *10 years of Soviet literature* (never published) and *Sergo-Dzbugara* (special luxury edition). Over the same years he edited a series of monographic posters for the publishing houses *Iskusstvo* and *Goskultprosvetizdat* (*V.V. Mayakovsky, Leonardo da Vinci, Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Nekrasov, Belinsky* and others).

Between 1954 and 1955 they published the albums *300 years of the reunification of the Ukraine to Russia* and *Belinsky*, in collaboration with I.S. Lavrentiev (*Goskultprosvetizdat*).

Alexander Rodchenko died in Moscow on 3 December 1956.

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S.O. Khan Magomedov in Rodchenko's studio, 1980

The author, Selim Omarovich Khan-Magomedov, is a Soviet architectural historian and critic who has achieved an enviable record of championing the rehabilitation of modern Soviet architecture from the 1920s. He almost single-handedly launched the bold campaign in 1962 to revive the historical legacy of Soviet modernism. Magomedov's studies of modern Soviet architecture, institutions, and personalities represent an impressive body of work in the face of formidable odds and official resistance, and they are highly regarded in the West.

Born in 1925, Vieri Quilici teaches Architectural Composition in the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Rome. Since the sixties he has devoted himself to the study of the historic avant-garde movements in Europe, and of Russian constructivism in particular. His published works on the subject include *Architettura sovietica contemporanea* (*Soviet Contemporary Architecture*), 1965, *L'architettura del Costruttivismo* (*The Architecture of Constructivism*), 1968, 1978, *Città russa e città sovietica* (*Russian City, Soviet City*), 1976. He has staged the exhibitions "Architecture in the land of the Soviets, 1917-1933" and "Rodchenko — Stepanova. At the beginning of Constructivism". Since 1965 he has been a contributor to *Rassegna sovietica*.

**CONSTRUCTIVISM
PRODUCTIVISM**

'construction = organization
of elements'

'constructivist life is
the art of the future'

'down with art as a means
of escaping from a life
that is not worth living'

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