



# The Politics of the Avant-Garde

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*I don't know how radical you are or how radical I am. I am certainly not radical enough; that is, one must always try to be as radical as reality itself.*

—Lenin

After many decades of occlusion, the art of the Russian avant-garde is now widely available, presented with a clarity and scope which must once have seemed impossible. There are monographs on each of the major figures, and for some artists more than one. Extensive international exhibitions of their works have been mounted. These have been accompanied by surveys revealing interconnections in the work of major and minor producers alike. Linked to such exhibitions, where once a scrap of misinformation about Constructivism sufficed, weighty catalogues have become indispensable. Certain key documents are available in a variety of collections, frequently standing as monuments in their own right to the ferment of intellectual activity that accompanied the avant-garde practice. Furthermore, the main contours of the institutions both formal and informal which exerted such a decisive influence upon individual production have been filled in to an extent which even a decade ago must have seemed unlikely: reorganizations at Vkhutemas (the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops), debates at Inkhuk (the Institute of Artistic Culture); we even know how many carriages the agit trains had, not to mention where they ran and what function they fulfilled. Scholarly articles regularly appear in a range of journals, often linked to detailed doctoral investigations. Metaphors of trickles, floods, even avalanches are inadequate to describe a collective enterprise of almost military dimensions to lay bare the trammled soul of Soviet avant-gardism. If present trends continue, by the end of the century Moscow will be as academically well trodden as Montmartre. Yet this is a century for most of which Russia has been a kind of intellectual dark continent, probed, if at all, by hostile Kremlinologists rather than sympathetic students of a vivid cultural constellation. Are we not lucky, then, that the tenebrous coils of prejudice are finally being parted? And, of course, all this work, from encyclopedic summation to diligently unearthed fragment, *is* valuable, the very stuff of intellectual advance. Why, then, the rustle, the murmur, the thickening, the steady coagulation of the sense of a Problem?

It is, after all, simply put. With notable exceptions, studies of the Russian avant-garde have become, in a Kuhnian sense, “normal science.” And yet the work to which it adverts is anything but. This is not an insignificant matter, though it is not a very widely acknowledged one. It is a problem that has always existed and that has never gone away but just seems to have become invisible. Like some otherwise defenseless creature in a hostile environment, the question of the politics of the avant-garde has blended into the tangled undergrowth of facts and names, research grants, footnotes, and scholarly paraphernalia. Yet there are sharp teeth lurking here, and narrow eyes peering through crevices in the piles of documents. And it is precisely these eyes, both menacing and beautiful, which constitute the attraction in the first place. The revolutionary avant-garde is not of interest for its normativity. Aleksandr Blok wasn't joking when he summoned Europe to the “bright feast of peace and brotherhood and labor” with the “strings of a Scythian lyre”: “Are we to blame if your rib cages burst / beneath our paws' impulsive ardor?” Blok's warning could doubtless be written off as a romantic evocation of the Revolution's most backward aspects—all slave girls, wild horses, and Asiatic jubilation—when the Revolution was really about tractors and planning. But a revolution is a revolution, and the academic researcher padding noiselessly through carpeted libraries or, indeed, faxing documents from one international center of learning to another would do well to remember that Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Dziga Vertov, Gustav Klutsis, and the rest, working in conditions of privation to begin with and harsh censorship later, were all, without

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*Simplified model of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International in a street demonstration, Moscow, ca. 1927.*

exception, explicitly committed to working-class revolution—out of which a new order of international socialism would arise. One should not overlook the paradox that the very research which progressively reveals the contours of the Soviet avant-garde is predicated on the historic defeat of the avant-garde's social vision. By whom, by just which forces, is not quite so easy to say. To echo the sentiments of a thinker little acknowledged in these late days of cultural studies: "What is to be done?"

It is an irony upon a paradox that in setting out to answer the question, in attempting to clarify the politics of the avant-garde, there is no other starting point than this unglamorous one, this place where we are. Our starting point consists of these apparent conclusions, this pile of books, this trail of articles: not, after all, the soul of revolutionary Petrograd but the "soul" of the bourgeois academy. The Russian avant-garde, Constructivism, Socialist Realism even, are what they have been made to mean in these pages, in the play of their silences and their affirmations. To ponder the paradox is, in effect, a question of resistance: resisting various normalizations enforced by the history our own culture is writing.

It is quite clear that one of the central factors that has fueled historians' widespread desire to confront the Soviet avant-garde—either positively or negatively—is its proximity to the Russian Revolution. This is so obvious that it sounds almost strange to insist upon it. In the days before such claims lost their vogue, E. H. Carr said that the Revolution had been the source of more profound repercussions than any other historical event of modern times. Be that as it may, the Revolution has been the source of greatest controversy in modern times at the level of interpretation: interpreters range from the inhabitants of the most ethereal superstructures to the state planners and military strategists at the other end of the spectrum. This controversy's sheer scale has increasingly drawn art historians into its orbit, though motives have, of course, varied. On one side there has been what amounts, more or less, to a myth of buried treasure: avant-garde artworks from the heroic period that have lain in attics and basements for decades being led blinking into the light of modern scholarship. For historians of this persuasion, ideology has probably counted for little next to the glamour of the quest, which can range from a tomb-robbing lust for gold in its darker reaches to an honorable desire to shed light on a lost but incontrovertibly significant chapter of twentieth-century art. For other historians, the ideological factor has surely played an important role. Confronted in their own productive lives, within and without the academy, by institutional orthodoxies requiring resistance, they find that the art of the most thoroughgoing of all moments of resistance holds a powerful attraction. Thus for both left-wing and liberal historians, the relation of the avant-garde to the Revolution has, in different ways, been a prime motivator: either to recover the work from burial by the Revolution understood as closure or to restore that work as evidence of the Revolution's heroic challenge to orthodoxy and stasis across the board of human endeavor, before its rapid eclipse.

For all that, the precise nature of the avant-garde's relationship to the Revolution has tended to remain underinvestigated. This is the case despite the increasing detail of particular studies, as well as the enormously deepened understanding of the avant-garde's technical innovations—even when these latter have been read in terms of their significant connection to the revolutionary project of social emancipation. That is to say, as the historical account has developed both extensively and intensively, the question of the

politics of the avant-garde has been left relatively underresearched.

This is due, in part, to the simple fact of gaps in the historical record. Until the 1970s, little enough was available empirically. As recently as 1983, what gave Christina Lodder's *Russian Constructivism* its benchmark status was preeminently the fact that nobody had previously brought such information to light. To know who said what at Inkhuk in 1922, let alone be able to fit it into a context of debate on key technical and theoretical issues, marked of itself a qualitative advance. The silence cannot be laid wholly at the door of ignorance, however. It is, to a greater degree, reflexive: it has to do with the ideological commitments and blindnesses, interests and silences (sometimes explicit, more often implicit, if not deeply buried) of the collective academic psyche in the liberal-bourgeois educational institutions of the late-capitalist West. For all its epochal status, outside the ranks of a few specialists the historical shape of the Russian Revolution is little enough known; and for each lacuna in the record there is a pathology of mistrust, uninterest, and fear to account for it.

The manner in which the avant-garde's political alignments have been represented in the literature may be generalized under three headings, though these have changed over time and, obviously, been subject to inflection. The hegemonic response, until recently at least, has paradoxically been to dissociate the avant-garde from involvement with revolutionary politics. This "disengagement" thesis can adopt various forms. Traditionally, Constructivism, in the sense of an avant-garde art practice that was transmuted into a more direct cluster of interventions into daily life under the rubric of "art into production," was simply ignored. What "Constructivism" tended to mean was an international subvariant of abstract sculpture within a broadly Modernist tradition, associated with artists, such as Naum Gabo, who had left Russia shortly after the Revolution. Limited and misrepresentative as this now seems, it is sobering to recall that it was probably the dominant view from the 1930s to the 1970s—let us say, from Alfred Barr's brief and ambiguous homage to Lef (the Left Front of the Arts) in 1928 to Camilla Gray in 1962. Even major figures like Rodchenko were little known, others like Klutsis not at all; and the relations of such work to an intellectual and political program simply fell outside the scope of what passed for the history of modern art. Dark days, then, whose end is not to be regretted. It would, however, be unwise to celebrate a passage into light.

A small selection of quite recent examples will suffice. John Bowlt has established a reputation at the head of his field largely through his efforts to establish the density of this period of Russian artistic culture, the coexistence of a variety of different strands of art practice. The lasting benefit of his enterprise has undoubtedly been to relativize Western art history's tendency to become fixated upon the Soviet avant-garde in a narrow sense, (mis)construing it as a precursor of postwar, principally American, vanguard art; and, by contrast, to place the work of that wing of the avant-garde in a perspective of other trends ranging from the realistic to the fantastic. The price of this pluralism, fueled, one may speculate, by the détente politics of the 1970s, has, it seems, been to bend the stick too far in the other direction and depoliticize the avant-garde *tout court*. "Perhaps the most dangerous rumor concerning the Russian avant-garde has to do with its alleged support of radical politics, and radical political philosophy in general." This was written by Bowlt in 1984. Chapter and verse surely no longer need to be given. Yet for an author deeply familiar with the writings of that avant-garde to advance such a claim at that late date is remarkable and must, one assumes, be motivated by considerations concerning the

social relations of art quite discrete from the substance of the historical record itself.

For their part, surely, Rodchenko, Klutskis, Lissitzky, Maiakovskii, and others could not have been clearer about their commitment to the Revolution and to the task of building a new society. Take only the simplest example: the program of Lef itself. Maiakovskii in a letter of 1923 charges his correspondent to remember “the purpose for which we have united our efforts,” which he then defines as “*communist art* (as part of com-culture and communism in general!).”<sup>2</sup> There is a threefold articulation here: a Communist art—quite a specialized thing, which by Maiakovskii’s own admission has not yet been fully developed and which it is the business of Lef to promulgate; the relation of this to a wider Communist culture—which is to say, something akin to Marx’s “superstructure,” the range of institutions both formal and informal wherein social consciousness organizes itself and in which “art” per se is only a part; and then a relation of this to Communist society, by which Maiakovskii obviously means a social mode of production, the “base,” which will underwrite the achievement of the other two. This is highly schematic. But it is also programmatic and not at all incidental to the project of Lef—which is, in its turn, central to what we mean when we speak of the “Soviet avant-garde” at all. Examples could, of course, be multiplied.

All this makes it difficult to entertain claims about the avant-garde’s political virginity. Yet the thesis is not confined to American authors, who have, after all, suffered a uniquely depoliticized intellectual tradition. Andrei Nakov offers an example of one European variant in a study of Rodchenko which simply omits mention of factors ranging beyond the formal and technical—an omission which is the more surprising given the artist’s own frequent invocation of a sociopolitical dimension to his work.<sup>3</sup> Such exclusions—sins of omission, as it were, rather than commission—might be defensible on grounds of relevance, space, and so forth. Not so the stance of the Russian historian Vasilii Rakitin: “In practice the artists who were practitioners of the 1920s left agit-art, a Rodchenko or Lissitzky, have much less in common with leftist sociological hypotheses than has been supposed.”<sup>4</sup> This is not a claim that there is *no* relationship, just that it is not central to the avant-garde project; it is not, however, the simple omission of a set of determinations, as in the previous instance, but an explicit thesis about the relation of the avant-garde to revolutionary politics—and the relation it claims is one of relative disinvolvement. Yet throughout the twenties, Lissitzky’s writings are replete with references to the value of art residing in its relationship to the community, and to the requirement that artists abandon a conventional sense of artistic work and participate in the development of new forms of community to achieve the goal of a classless society. This endeavor is held to have serious repercussions, moreover, in that it results in the opposition of other, more conservative, artists to the left project: “New space neither needs nor demands pictures—it is not a picture transposed on a surface. This explains the painters’ hostility towards us: we are destroying the wall as the resting place for their pictures.”<sup>5</sup> This “new space” is linked to a conception of a modern world, a world whose modernity, furthermore, resides not merely in new technology but in new social relations. “It is to the social revolution rather than to the technological revolution” that the basic elements of Lissitzky’s work are tied.<sup>6</sup> In 1930, he published a whole book to this effect with the unambiguous title of *Architektur für eine Weltrevolution* (*An Architecture for World Revolution*). After several years’ residence in the West during the midtwenties, and in marked contrast to those like Gabo who could not leave the Soviet Union fast enough after

the Civil War ended and Bolshevik power was consolidated, Lissitzky went back to Russia because, as his wife put it: “There were tasks of a special kind awaiting him. He was needed in his homeland; the Soviet Union needed all his knowledge, his experience, his art.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a case, let us put it no more strongly than that, for the partial determination of the avant-garde by the example of the successful Bolshevik Revolution. The argument against this relies almost completely on the Soviet avant-garde’s roots in a prerevolutionary avant-garde art movement, on the one hand, and its relationship to postwar West European developments in architecture and design during the 1920s, on the other. The existence of these relations does not, however, refute the specificity of the conjuncture of the avant-garde and the Revolution within the Soviet Union. It is a peculiar kind of history which wants to claim almost as a point of principle that the one set of connections debars the other, yet such has been the disposition of hegemonic art history: to emphasize connections compatible with the overall aegis of notions of art’s autonomy—even on this most unpromising terrain—and systematically to disregard theoretical, ideological, political orders of relation. As such, this is more a problem of Western art history and *its* institutional-political conjuncture than anything to do with the historical terrain it claims to conjugate.

That there are powerful motivating factors behind the “severance” thesis does not make it any more robust. What those factors are can be gleaned from Rakitin’s argument. He needs to play down the avant-garde’s relation to revolutionary politics precisely because of the overarching virtue he attaches to the avant-garde; and, concomitantly, because of the vice associated with Sovietization. Thus, the avant-garde is “an energetic free force”; it requires for its practice “the participation of free active persons.” As such, it is “thoroughly alien to the Soviet model of life.”<sup>8</sup> Rakitin does, at least, have the excuse of being Russian and, therefore, having been constrained for at least part of his career by the closures of the Stalinist system. The same cannot be said of “liberal” West European and American intellectuals whose work remains within the purview of their own culture’s official ideology.

The clear line linking Rakitin and other East European “severance” theorists to their Western liberal counterparts is the identification of the Bolshevik Revolution with the monolithic Soviet system of the Cold War. A simultaneous attraction to an adventurous abstract art and repulsion from a totalitarian political system lead to the strategy of divesting the former of its political commitments. The two most common variations on this strategy are, first, the displacement of the sociopolitical impulse to the margins of a practice seen as primarily determined by formal and technical considerations that it shares with similar practices elsewhere. And, second, when that argument becomes too weak to sustain, the notion of “utopianism.” The members of the avant-garde are interpreted as innocents caught up in the revolutionary turmoil, mistaking its motivations for their own, and then being badly burned by the consequences of their mistake once the “real” politicians managed to divert some of their will-to-power to the sphere of culture. Neither of these arguments is completely without foundation: that is precisely what lends them their specious plausibility and accounts for their longevity in a political-intellectual conjuncture which wants them to be true. Thus, to invoke Maiakovskii once again: the reason Maiakovskii offers for forming Lef is indeed that the political leadership’s attentions are no longer going to be completely absorbed by the exigencies of War Communism; and the artistic left, as a consequence, has to organize itself and get its version of the cultural task inserted properly into the debate which is about

to ensue. This is not in itself “utopian,” however; quite the contrary.

Utopianism is a resort of historians who want to ensure there is absolutely no passage between Kazimir Malevich, for example, and—let us say—Leonid Brezhnev, as the symbol of the Soviet order at the moment of production of most cultural-artistic histories of it. For American historians in particular, the potency of this system of passages and disjunctions must have been enhanced by the cultural prestige of the exiled Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and his emphatic assimilation of the Stalinist dystopia to Bolshevism per se—an endemic trait of liberal thought throughout the period, but given significant reinforcement by the horse’s-mouth effect of the wave of post-1960s literary dissidents in general and Solzhenitsyn’s American exile in particular. Utopianism itself, it may finally be noted, has been inflected in two different directions according to the demands of the account. Thus, either we have the blissful innocence and otherworldliness of artists whose very openness and suggestibility lead to their being raped by the Marxist politicians as soon as they can find the time (subtext: art should avoid politics, then and now) or, in the case of those who appear to have persisted in their association of art with the Revolution, we encounter a construction of willful naïveté, a tempting of fate, a dangerous kind of utopianism purblind to the true nature of the realpolitik it entertained; these people are paraded as a lesson on the dangers of playing with such fire in the first place, for inviting it, as it were, into the house of art (subtext, of course, the same).

There is probably even today a sense in which this image of a “protean avant-garde,” either innocent of or childishly infatuated with revolutionary politics and subsequently crushed by the totalitarian Marxist power which has continued to disfigure the twentieth century almost to its end, remains the most widespread view of the Soviet constellation of the early twenties—with Lenin the ruthless leader whose iron shadow fell across a generation of free spirits, a generation whose eccentric vitality has, however, continued to grace liberal culture even as it was anathematized by Marxism’s pathology of control.

Accounts of that stripe have been hegemonic. A second broad category emerged, however, to challenge hegemonic certainties as part of that general contestation trading variously under the titles of critiques of Modernism, the social history of art, and the new art history in the later 1970s and the 1980s. Here for the first time serious investigations not only of the individual arts but of interconnections among them begin to appear, tellingly stimulated more by developments in film and literary theory than in art history per se. The result has been a range of reconceptualizations away from crudely conventional assertions of the autonomy of art—though not, it should be said, thereby away from a necessary focus on the formal. Needless to say, the orthodox account of the avant-garde’s distinction from politics and this series of radical re-readings have not evolved neatly, one from the other. Rather, the contestation between them has effectively constituted the field during recent times, setting the register within whose compass our qualitative leap in the understanding of the avant-garde has taken place. The upshot has been a field transformed out of all recognition, dedicated most often to re-reading the extraordinary series of technical radicalizations which fundamentally constituted the revolutionary avant-garde of the 1920s, revealing that avant-garde as an unparalleled site of the committed scrutiny and transformation of all the norms of bourgeois cultural practice. The excavation of the full scope of the work of Rodchenko, Vertov, Klutskis, Vladimir Tatlin, Maiakovskii, and Lissitzky, not to mention the related theoretical perspectives of Osip Brik, Viktor Shklovskii,

Valentin Voloshinov, and others, has achieved that rare thing: the eruption of the historical work into the practical conjuncture of the present. It would not be going too far to say that a culture has been recovered—a culture, moreover, that is still revolutionary with respect to our own. Nothing has more vividly thrown into relief the tragic conjunction of the technically extraordinary and the socially and politically regressive within our own culture than this revealed constellation of practices in the fifteen years or so after the October Revolution.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this concentration, the relation of this spectrum of work to the October Revolution has not been the focus of such close scrutiny as the contours of the work itself. Needless to say, the aforementioned ideologically motivated sanitizing of the avant-garde has been eclipsed. But the nature of the avant-garde’s revolutionary affiliations has, for the most part, continued to be read at the level of a general platform enabling the plethora of technical innovations. That said, Yve-Alain Bois, for example, has mapped his reading of Lissitzky’s geometrical investigations back onto a sociopolitical context.<sup>9</sup> At their best, such readings have aspired to conjoin the semantic and social revolutions of the Soviet avant-garde, at least as a point of principle. In so doing, they are an effective counterweight both to depoliticized accounts of avant-garde art and to orthodox political histories which neglect the dimension of the social production of meaning.

Lodder’s account overturned many assumptions about the nature of Constructivism, indeed it started from the premise that “no satisfactory overall account”<sup>10</sup> existed. She was, nonetheless, able to devote little space to siting that avant-garde within the revolutionary process. As might have been expected, the consequence, therefore, was a certain asymmetry in her account: innovatory analyses of the aims of the avant-garde and the organization of its institutions, yet reliance upon conventional assumptions about its context. One of Lodder’s premises was the ultimate failure of Constructivism; a tragic, even a grand failure, but a failure, nonetheless. This failure is signaled by a retreat from aspirations to intervene in—even to “organize”—building the new world, to small-scale contributions to the spheres of graphic design and theater. Even the turn to photography in the later twenties is read as an attempt to claw back some ground from the increasingly dominant “Realist” painting groups like AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia).

The implicit premises here are three, and they are of course not Lodder’s alone but the conventional wisdom. First, “the Party” and its preference for a Realist art. Second, the grounds of this preference in Realist art’s supposed popularity and accessibility to the uneducated masses, an accessibility which cuts both ways—as an expression of the people’s unschooled interests and as a conduit for the Party’s preferred messages. Third, economic scarcity, which underpins this symbiosis between an authoritarian Party and a conservative people. Thus the Vkhutemas experiment was “aborted” because of “the material circumstances in which it operated.”<sup>11</sup> More than that, the “principal reason” advanced by Lodder for the failure of Constructivism as a whole is “the material poverty that dominated all Soviet activity in the 1920s.”<sup>12</sup> No adequate account of Soviet developments in the 1920s could, of course, avoid the economic aspect. But what tends to be overlooked is the extent to which economic questions did not arise as “brute” facts. This may seem alarmingly to underestimate what it is to lack the equipment to produce goods, or what it is to experience famine. The point remains, nonetheless, that the economic dimension is continually implicated in a process of political direction and decision making. If the economic and social wreckage of the War Communism period could sustain

the high levels of activity of the revolutionary avant-garde, there is no specifically economic reason why such activity could not be sustained later in the decade. The reasons for the increasing effectiveness of criticism of the erstwhile avant-garde, ultimately amounting to its marginalization and suppression, are more complex; and the "failure" is not Constructivism's alone.

What is at issue is a far wider "failure": the failure of the October Revolution itself. The failure of Constructivism or, indeed, of the "left front" of art in general is best regarded as a symptom of this larger defeat. It is as well to be clear on this point. In both the foregoing accounts of the avant-garde—explicitly in the depoliticized version and at least implicitly in the qualitatively more sophisticated account wherein the avant-garde is powerfully determined by the Revolution—the tendency is, at bottom, to view the avant-garde as victim of the Revolution's success. The implication is that the avant-garde found a space to operate in the heady days immediately following the Revolution, when a mixture of euphoria, chaos, and the leadership's preoccupation with other matters offered a loophole. Seizing its opportunity, the avant-garde became briefly dominant. Once the revolutionary ship was stabilized, however, the authoritarian Party showed its true colors and, as part of the drive to extend its control, suppressed the avant-garde. The realpolitik of building up an industrial base in a backward country meant that the avant-garde became, at best, a sort of luxury when there was no provision for luxuries and, at worst, a vestige of prerevolutionary bourgeois culture which had to be extirpated from the nascent workers' state. It must be said that, once again, there are elements of truth in this explanation: there *was* suspicion of the avant-garde's bourgeois antecedents, and so forth. But the cumulative effect of such accounts, despite their moments of truth, is misleading—skewed by an interpretation of the Revolution which, it is increasingly evident, is itself an ideological construct. What gives this construct its force is, of course, that it has constituted the ideology of *both* competing world-power blocs. For equal and opposite reasons, the bureaucratic monolith in the USSR and the liberal-capitalist democracies in the West have sought to underwrite a continuity between the October Revolution and the state system that succeeded it. To develop this point here would be to get ahead of the story; suffice to say at present that the three constituents of the avant-garde's failure, as offered even in "revisionist" accounts—the monolithic Party, the backward people, and economic dearth—are themselves in need of considerable investigation and revision.

Even Benjamin Buchloh's compelling account of the avant-garde's evolution "from *faktura* to factography" betrays elements of this questionable perspective—though his argument is somewhat the reverse of Lodder's.<sup>13</sup> While for Lodder economic scarcity set the agenda, Buchloh, if anything, overestimates the extent to which it had been conquered, yet in so doing demonstrates fundamentally the same perception of the Revolution's aims. One of the virtues of Buchloh's account is that it acknowledges the self-consciousness of the Constructivists' transformation out of a bourgeois avant-garde art group in the changed conditions post-October; furthermore, this transformation is treated in terms of a focus upon the audience for their work. That is to say, the revolutionary self-transformation of the avant-garde is not treated as merely the result of some internal dynamic but conclusively presented as determined by a sense of its task: whom it is addressing, and what has to be done to consolidate and encourage that new constituency. It is here, however, that Buchloh seems to go astray. The basic problem is a repeated overemphasis on industrialization as if this were an achieved

condition from the moment of the Revolution. Thus, in a passage clearly referring to the immediate postrevolutionary situation of War Communism (when Lissitzky displayed his Suprematist hoarding *Stanki depo fabrik zavodov zhdut vas* [*The Factory Benches Await You*, 1919–20] outside a factory in Vitebsk), Buchloh speaks of "the new audiences of industrialized urban society in the Soviet Union." Ironically, postrevolutionary society was in the process of becoming considerably less industrialized than it had been even under czarism as production was wrecked and the working class itself bled dry by the Civil War. Elsewhere, this time in a discussion of the NEP (New Economic Policy) period, and specifically of avant-garde responses to the reassertion of tradition under NEP, Buchloh refers to an art production addressing "the needs of a newly industrialized collective society"—this at a time when Russian society, as a matter of policy, was neither industrialized nor collective. Factography as it developed in the late 1920s certainly took place in an atmosphere when industrialization, ultimately in the shape of the First Five-Year Plan, came on the agenda. Yet it did not become enshrined as an absolute until 1928 or even 1929. Thus, in a discussion of *faktura* (density) during the so-called "laboratory period," circa 1918–21, Buchloh's reference to "the introduction of industrialization and social engineering that was imminent in the Soviet Union after the revolution of 1917" certainly seems premature. That industrialization of a certain type—not of the sort which actually came about at the end of the decade—may have been required by Constructivism merely underlines the significance of such a gap between requirement and reality.

There are two possibilities here. One is that Buchloh's wider history is insufficiently differentiated, but of no consequence because it doesn't affect his account of developments within the avant-garde. The other is that a tendency to misread the productive context does indeed have some bearing on an explanation of artistic developments which, after all, sets out with the intention of situating them in a dialectic with society and production rather than treating the latter as a passive backdrop to the art. It is this second possibility which I shall go on to explore below. But first, this schematic survey of characterizations of the sociopolitical alignments of the avant-garde requires completion.

Just as the "severance" thesis of liberal dominance came to be challenged by revisionist accounts which for the first time revealed the extent of the avant-garde's project of participation in the revolutionary process of building the new society, so recently there is evidence that a third kind of account is emerging. This is not so surprising as it might seem. Both of the foregoing accounts have themselves emanated from an academic-institutional conjuncture overdetermined by the conditions of the postwar settlement: the division of the world into two superpower blocs. In terms of a structural logic, if not always of strict chronology, it may be possible to ascribe the "severance" and "revisionist" accounts to distinct moments in that period: in brief, to pre- and post-1968. The reemergence of a second Cold War during the Reagan/Thatcher/Brezhnev period tended to give renewed emphasis to perspectives more at home in the earlier phase, just as it threatened to marginalize the revisionisms which for a period after the radicalizations of the late sixties, and during the period of détente, threatened to become hegemonic at least in the social sciences and the newly sophisticated cultural studies departments of Western higher-educational institutions. Since the mid-1980s, and reaching at least a temporary climax in 1989 (whether this proves to be a plateau before even greater upheavals remains to be seen), this map has been redrawn. A condition which appeared to be—or perhaps more accurately, felt as if it were—permanent, has dissolved into history; and

official talk, at least, is of a "new world order." One of the main accompaniments to the sound of the Berlin Wall coming down has been the clatter of intellectuals of a variety of persuasions typing out the obituaries of socialism/Communism/Marxism. One of the darkest stars in this dubious intellectual constellation has been Francis Fukuyama's thesis of the end of history, a kind of right-wing Postmodernism in its evocation of a boring future in which the grand narratives of emancipation have expired, but a thesis which nonetheless offered a rerun of Daniel Bell's "end of ideology" claim from the 1950s.<sup>14</sup> The affirmative side of Fukuyama's elision of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and the socialist tradition *tout court* was an assertion of the permanent realization of liberalism. In fact, the "end of history" consisted specifically in wall-to-wall liberalism, albeit of a conservative, State Department hue. The foundations of Fukuyama's thesis have, since its publication, been subject to criticism, and in the wake of the Persian Gulf War skepticism has accrued mightily about the credentials of George Bush's "new world order." Notwithstanding this, however, the Fukuyama argument is an indication of the new lease on life which the rhetorical death of Marxism et cetera has given to voices which want nothing to do with revolution—neither English nor French nor, of course, Russian; nor, one might add, cultural.

A side effect of the collapse of the Soviet empire in the field of cultural history has been the opening up of a hitherto largely dormant field: the culture of the Stalin period. Much of this work promises, of course, to be of exceptional value, as it brings to light the complexities of that which has heretofore been written off, for the most part, as the ossified Other of Modernism, unworthy of scholarly investigation, the creature of a totalitarian bureaucracy with no compact or articulated identity—no history—of its own. One contested area which this development places on the agenda, however, is the relationship of the avant-garde of the 1920s to the official art of the Stalin era. The traditional option of a pristine, apolitical avant-garde subordinated to a totalitarian political agenda having been somewhat abrogated by those revisionist histories which revealed the extent of the avant-garde's politicization, the question now poses itself the more starkly: what is the relationship of those politics to the politics of Socialist Realism and Stalinism?

One of the key issues here, which falls beyond the scope of the present essay, concerns the political perspective of revisionist-left histories themselves. Suffice to say that for the majority of the left, Stalinism has presented a major ideological, as well as a moral and political, problem. The glaring discrepancy between conceptions of a "presently existing socialism"—positively or negatively inflected according to the author's devotion to the Communist Party tradition—and the realities of the bureaucratic nightmare that Stalinism actually was, coupled with the fact that the bureaucracy systematically denied access to all kinds of information about its own constitution and history, ensured that the question of Stalinist culture did not get addressed. The demise of that system, combined with the renewed boldness of the ideological wing of the apparently victorious, economically liberal/politically conservative capitalist formation in what E. P. Thompson once called the "Natopolitan" countries, has given a new lease on life to denunciations of Stalinism, while reducing any need to be scrupulous in depicting its antecedents. When even the Western Communist parties are competing to distance themselves from the October Revolution (and the legacy they themselves have systematically misconstrued), what historian of art is going to be in a position to be able—let alone to want—to delve into the occluded byways of Russian politics in

the 1920s? That sense of a loosening of restraint, albeit often for negative reasons, on the scrutiny of Stalinism, plus the fact that a great quantity of historical data on the Stalin era is only now becoming available, means that the question passed over in silence by those histories which gave back to the avant-garde its political dimension is now close to the center of concern. Moreover, the contours of an answer are being provided, too. To borrow a term from media studies, our situation on the threshold of a "new world order" offers a preferred reading of that order's defeated opponents. If "severance" was one motif for the avant-garde's relation to politics, a motif redrawn as *cohabitation* by left-revisionist histories, the new neoconservative perspective can be given in one word: complicity.

Not all such accounts are, of course, of a piece; this "map" is only schematic, and the epithet "neoconservative" may not always be wholly justified. Thus, to take only two authors: Boris Groys in a stimulating and suggestive argument treats Socialist Realism as a sui generis cultural formation, whereas Igor Golomstock in a palpably rebarbative text is concerned to reduce it to the status of merely one manifestation of a "totalitarian art" that also includes the products of Italian Fascism and German Nazism.<sup>15</sup> Both, however, in a diametric reversal of arguments for the political innocence of the avant-garde, are concerned to draw connections between it and the ostensibly very different art of Socialist Realism.

Golomstock's case involves more than a hint of guilt by association. In an ironically symmetrical replay—of all things—of Georg Lukács's denunciation of the Expressionist avant-garde for weakening the resistance of the bourgeois humanist tradition to Fascism, Golomstock despairs of the avant-garde for smoothing the path of totalitarianism. It should be said that this is not Golomstock's main focus—which consists in the claimed isomorphism of Stalinist and Nazi art. But a central plank of such a claim is the assertion of continuity between the Bolshevik Revolution and the Stalinist bureaucracy. As his teleological argument has it: "a totalitarian regime disguises itself in revolutionary garb during its first stage of development." In line with this political claim, a "continuity" thesis is asserted in art. The committed wing of the left avant-garde—Tatlin, Rodchenko, Klutssis, Lissitzky—become totalitarians *in nuce*. "Many features" of the avant-garde's artistic ideology "were later incorporated into the foundations of totalitarian art." Citations from 1920s avant-gardists are deployed to prove that "the first calls for the strict administration and central administration of the arts" came from "the revolutionary avant-garde themselves," and thence that the avant-garde "first elaborated a totalitarian ideology of culture." The slippage in the argument is notable. In fact, Golomstock inserts a disclaimer in his argument to the effect that it would be wrong to overstate the avant-garde's responsibility for totalitarian art, since that is just what Socialist Realist theoreticians themselves claimed about the avant-garde vis-à-vis Nazism, as part of establishing their own distance from it. The disclaimer does, however, ring somewhat tokenistically in the face of the multiplicity of claims to the effect that it would be "illegitimate, however, entirely to deny the role of the avant-garde in the formation of the totalitarian artistic ideology." A supposedly conventional antithesis (our first, "hegemonic" interpretation above) is invoked wherein "these two decades [i.e., the 1920s and 1930s] appear to be antagonistic epochs" according to a list of binary oppositions: "freedom and slavery, dynamism and stasis, development and stagnation, etc." By thus absolutizing the supposed "oppositions," it becomes easier to take a "realistic" step back and claim a "hereditary link" between the revolutionary avant-garde and the Stalinist apologetics of Socialist Realism.

The thrust of this argument in Golomstock's case is clearly grounded in a valorization of Western liberal democracy—not surprising, since he is in voluntary exile after a blighted career within the Stalinist system. The point is not so much to question the allegiances imposed by a trammled biography as to note that in the present conjuncture of its publication, Golomstock's thesis dovetails with the wider triumphalism of Western official readings of the revolutions of 1989. In this connection, there is, in fact, an explicit sense in which the historical continuity thesis is offered as a dire warning to contemporary artists who evince a renewed openness to art's sociopolitical dimension. Artists inclined to a critique of Modernism may be tempted by a "nostalgia" for "art's lost social role" to "flirt, albeit unconsciously, with totalitarian aesthetics."

Groys's argument differs from Golomstock's in its view of Socialist Realism as a specific formation, as well as in its acknowledgment of the paradoxical defeat of the avant-garde's intentions to transcend bourgeois art practice, which the contemporary interest of art museums and historians represents. Nonetheless, apropos the present argument concerning the politics of the avant-garde, he repeatedly asserts Socialist Realism's "identity with the avant-garde era," the "unity of their fundamental artistic aim." Despite appearances, Socialist Realism "put into effect practically all the fundamental watchwords of the avant-garde." Although it moved away from the avant-garde stylistically, "at the same time it continued, developed and in a certain sense, even implemented its programme." Clearly, these arguments require careful consideration. Outrageous as they might seem at first glance to sensibilities nurtured on the alleged otherworldliness of a Malevich, let alone the straightforwardly anti-Soviet credentials of a Gabo, there is once more a grain, though not a kernel, of truth to them. The issue revolves, of course, precisely around the Soviet avant-garde's self-transformation out of a Modernist-type embrace of the autonomy of art rooted in the narrowing of art to the realm of the aesthetic (where the aesthetic is understood in terms of a conception of the expression of emotion and concomitant distance from the cognitive or critical). It is this basic fact of an art being conceived in terms of a social rather than a purely aesthetic task which engenders the desire to curtail its emancipatory aura by reining it in as a precursor of Socialist Realism. Thus, Bois wants, rightly, to claim of Lissitzky's prouns that they are "abstract models of radical freedom."<sup>16</sup> Any such identification is clearly disrupted by an argument which postulates a one-way street from the avant-garde to the subservient, sometimes brutal, always formulaic art of the bureaucratic system.

Groys's key phrase is that Socialist Realism constitutes the "continuation of the Russian avant-garde's strategy by other means." The whole issue, by which I mean the thesis of continuity between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism *and* between the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalinism, centers on the constitution of "means" and "ends." For Groys, the "means" are, on the one hand, a highly idealized form of figurative painting and, on the other, a rhetoric of materialism. His claim is that the end which the avant-garde and Socialist Realism shared was the aspiration to change people's nature: either through a kind of narrative persuasion or by directly intervening in and changing their environments. Such a comparison is, it must be said, smoothed somewhat by the invocation of hyper-Productivists like Boris Arvatov. The wilder reaches of Soviet Taylorism, as represented by such as Arvatov, Boris Kushner, and Aleksei Gastev, are, it must be conceded, terrifying. They are not, however, truly representative of the left front of the arts as a whole. It is more than a little disingenuous to use them as a stick with which to

beat the avant-garde in general. But the question of shared "ends" runs deeper than this, and care is required.

The basic disposition to change people's habits, even the revolutionary desire to bring about a new kind of person living a new kind of life free from oppression and exploitation is, as it stands, too vague to legitimate the assimilation of the revolutionary avant-garde of the 1920s to the official state art of the 1930s. The question is, rather, whether their conceptions of a "new way of life," of "socialist man," and so forth, are the same. Equally important is whether the philosophical positions stood in the same relation to actual policies, insofar as the question of "ends" has two aspects: what they said *and* what they did. The main issue, nonetheless, is whether the ends of the October Revolution can be said to be the same as the ends of the Stalinist system of the thirties and after. Before debating the historical point, it is worth underlining that, for Groys, they are. In one particularly outspoken instance they are *de facto* identified: "... the October Revolution and its slogan of the total reconstruction of the country according to a single plan." There is obviously an overlap here with the arguments of Buchloh noted earlier. And once again the assumption is mistaken. The Bolshevik intention was not, initially, to build up an industrial planned economy in the national Russian state. It was to stimulate, to act as a bridgehead for, revolution in the already industrialized Western nations. Lenin repeatedly argued that "without such a revolution we are lost," and even that "the final victory of socialism in a single country is of course impossible."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he also judged that when the international revolution did occur, its Russian component would retreat to the second rank, only then slowly building itself up on the basis of aid from the developed countries. It was in complete opposition to this view—which is to say, the view of Lenin, Lev Trotskii, and the Bolshevik Party as a whole—that Stalin, as Carr has pointed out, as early as 1918 voiced skepticism about the international dimension of the Revolution and viewed it in a primarily Russian national context.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the effect of that one sentence in Groys's history is to collapse the international-socialist Bolshevik October into the Stalinist doctrine of "socialism in one country" and its achievement through the Five-Year Plans. It is worth noting that even this latter is an elision of no small order: the doctrine of "socialism in one country" in fact preceded the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan by the better part of five years and, indeed, was initially promulgated in the conditions of the New Economic Policy in 1924—the very social system which the Five-Year Plan overthrew.

The twin assimilation—of October to the Monolith, of Lef to Socialist Realism—receives a particular fillip from an observation made by both Groys and Golomstock. One of the most Orwellian encapsulations of the task of the Socialist Realist artist is that offered at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 by Andrei Zhdanov, quoting Stalin himself: writers were to be "engineers of human souls." This almost oxymoronic formulation produces a chilling effect and has come to stand as the hallmark of Stalinism's inhumanity and indifference to the individual. Both Groys and Golomstock argue for a continuity between the Constructivist project and this Stalinist conception of the artist. In Groys's case, the claim is rooted in a general invocation of the avant-garde concept of the "artist-engineer." His argument is that the utopian and unrealizable disposition of artists actually to shape the material form of the environment is nothing less than that which was taken over by Stalin and his cohorts—so that artists could now focus on the more manageable task of mind-fixing. What made the avant-garde's project "utopian" was that artists exceeded their brief by aspiring to affect the "base," an ambition Socialist Realism redressed by its focus on the "superstructure."



This is held to be its *realpolitik*. Golomstock's argument is essentially the same, except that he musters a quotation: Sergei Tret'iakov's image from the first issue of *Lef* (*Left Front of the Arts*), which Golomstock translates as "psycho-engineer." Tret'iakov's subsequent fate in one of Stalin's prison camps thus becomes a heightened instance of the avant-garde being devoured by the Frankenstein it helped to create, and by implication a grisly warning to any and all who find themselves attracted to the role of the "engaged artist."

The avant-garde notion of the engineer or constructor was part of an attempt to realign the practice of art with the business of socialist construction and to distance it from mysticism. As such, it partook of the central historical-materialist tenet that "social consciousness" is determined by "social being." To conflate this with the Stalinist panoply of repression and, by inference, with its well-known corruption of psychiatry in the treatment of dissidents owes more to Cold War ideology than to history. I would be naïve to claim that there were no points of contact among the avant-garde, the Revolution, and Stalinism. But how such a relation is conceived matters greatly. In marked contrast to the foregoing, Victor Serge wrote: "It is often said that 'the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning'. Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs—a mass of other germs—and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in a corpse—and which he may have carried with him since his birth—is this very sensible?"<sup>19</sup>

Distinct, on the one hand, from traditional claims of the Soviet avant-garde's relative political "innocence," and quite unequivocally dismissive, on the other, of any virtue attaching to its commitment to revolutionary politics, these arguments add a new dimension to the political meanings ascribed to the avant-garde. Coming when they do, they in a powerful sense complete the continuity thesis about Bolshevism and Stalinism. Long the staple of Western ideologists, this claim has often seemed to find its most vivid and persuasive rejoinder in the transformative élan of the revolutionary avant-garde. The effect of these interpretations, in the climate of the "new world order," is to close off that loophole in liberal-conservative ideology for good.

II

The foregoing survey of existing interpretations of the politics of the postrevolutionary Soviet avant-garde, cursory and schematic though it has been, reveals a deficiency. Only accounts in the second broad category (which I have dubbed the "revisionist" histories, in order to distinguish them both from the previously dominant sanitized or apologetic constructions of an apolitical art movement and from the recently emergent, conservatively inflected histories which play upon a claimed complicity with Stalinism as part of a wider project of burying affirmations of social revolution, the collective, and planning)—only these offer an adequate account of the institutions, debates, and formal and technical strategies of the avant-garde. "Only" is, of course, a relative term here. Such accounts have formed the central ground of interpretation of the avant-garde in recent years. But now that the situation in Russia has changed so fundamentally, there is no guarantee that this will remain the case. The identification of the Stalinist system with socialism has been so prevalent that the system's fall can, and perhaps will, contribute more readily to the displacement of social radicalism from the academic agenda than to the regeneration of such concern, which, in more propitious circumstances, the removal of one of its main

obstacles might have permitted. Even those otherwise fruitful "revisionist" accounts, however, have not, on the whole, tended to place avant-garde developments securely within the wider context of debate and struggle which, in the 1920s, *was* the process of sustaining the Revolution and building the new life. On the other side, it goes almost without saying, the orthodox political histories have, for their part, devoted scant, if any, attention to artistic debates.<sup>20</sup> An obvious question arises, therefore. Is it possible, at present, to offer a more positive interpretation of the politics of the avant-garde which may situate it in a nuanced account of the postrevolutionary political process: more nuanced, that is, than a conception which, for all its detail, tends to see the Revolution as a species of natural force, an eruption whose lava flows into a variety of distinct spheres, only to harden into Stalin's iron *realpolitik*—another "natural" outcome of revolution in a backward country.

There is no small paradox in the readiness of liberal historians to ascribe a kind of determinism to postrevolutionary political history, as though a hardening of the arteries was the only possible outcome for the Revolution. Yet the 1920s in fact witnessed a contested political process the outcome of which was not certain. It has been argued that one reason why Trotskii failed adequately to oppose Stalin at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923, when the latter's power was far from established, let alone consolidated, was that Trotskii simply could not bring himself to take Stalin's threat to his own status and the gains of the Revolution seriously: "No contemporary, and he [Trotskii] least of all, saw in the Stalin of 1923 the menacing and towering figure he was to become."<sup>21</sup> If so, the miscalculation itself is dramatic enough. But what it indicates, more generally, is that *Stalinism* as a system represented a position won from the defeat of other perspectives. Russia in the 1920s witnessed a continuing struggle over the balance of forces, economic, political, and cultural—a struggle intensified by the uncertainties of the international situation—rather than a royal road to the cult of personality.

When speaking of the politics of the avant-garde, it is fundamental to retain this sense of a political process. For the greater part of the period, however, there were no forces that resembled political parties in the contemporary Western sense. The Mensheviks and Right SRs (Social Revolutionaries), having been banned in June 1918 for association with "notorious counterrevolutionaries," had been rehabilitated later that year and early in 1919 and continued to exist throughout the Civil War, though their support eroded and both were effectively harried out of existence by the war's end. This coincided with the banning of organized fractions within the Party at the Tenth Congress in 1921. The situation at this point was grave: the war economy had extended a kind of military discipline over the whole of society, which was now in a pulverized condition; the Kronshtadt revolt had just been put down, at terrible cost; and massive controversy over the adoption of the New Economic Policy was threatening to tear the congress apart. Carr comments that the General Resolution on the Unity of the Party "seemed necessary and reasonable at the time."<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, this decision came back to haunt the opposition to Stalin during the twenties, the problem being that the very organization of oppositional forces—even if in the cause of democratization—broke the rules and could be claimed, therefore, to violate Soviet democracy. The political process which took place, consequently, comprised more or less illegitimate formations, always subordinate to the state power, and increasingly so as power was concentrated further under the control of the centralized apparatus. This is not to say, however, that these formations were *ipso facto* marginal, or sectarian, let alone counterrevolutionary. Far from it: the main

oppositional grouping's central claim was defense of the legacy of October against increasing deviations and retreats.

Given this state of affairs, one is extremely unlikely to find in the historical record evidence of artists' explicit political commitments in any party or neoparty sense. In fact, any such commitments are, with the exception of a few general references to the Communist Party itself, as rare as they are in the documents of the Western avant-garde. This is presumably the origin, and one reason for the longevity, of claims for the apolitical nature of the Soviet avant-garde: one will search in vain for discussion of the political programs of Nikolai Bukharin or Trotskii, or indeed for extended discussion of specific political doctrines such as "socialism in one country" or even the Five-Year Plans (which do, of course, receive mention, but at most as *faits accomplis* rather than as specific political strategies). It may be useful in this regard to distinguish between a relatively organizational sense of politics and a more diffuse sense of political ideology. For if there is an absence of political commitment in the former sense, the record is saturated with examples of it in the latter.

The major artists and theorists without exception place their formal and technical innovations squarely on the basis of the sociopolitical achievement of the October Revolution. Undoubtedly, most of these figures developed their characteristic technical innovations in the period before the Revolution. From 1912 onward, however, with the Lena goldfield massacre, that period was in some respect itself one of rising political militancy—which contributed to the cultural climate. But more to the point, October gave these artistic developments a political focus and in so doing further transformed them. The result was a specific conjunction, a union even, of the formal and the political: an avant-garde practically transformed by a wider social revolution.<sup>23</sup> Such a conjunction was sustainable only as long as the Revolution itself and its own subsequent existence and prospects bore the marks of the wider restrictions and redefinitions undergone.

The salient feature of the Bolshevik Revolution, in a word, was that it was *extraordinary*. It is arguable that the 1920s in Russia marked a particularly hideous form—or rather forms, for there were distinct stages—of normalization. It may be objected that there was nothing "normal" about forced collectivization and mass famine. But two things should be remembered. First, collectivization and the parallel industrialization program of the later decade were not the first response of the Soviet government to the need to rebuild the country. And second, however concentrated their particular form in Russia, increasing state interventions in the economy came to constitute the norm for all developed nations in the capitalist crisis of the 1930s: in Germany, Italy, and Japan, obviously, but also in the United States and Great Britain, levels of intervention both domestically and in international trade reached new heights. In the end, the building up of a national economy with its own industrial base was normal in a way that breaking the weakest link in the chain of international capitalism and proceeding to use that bridgehead to stimulate breaks elsewhere, was not.

The two emblematic works of revolutionary art belong to a period when commitment to the revolution was able to be, so to speak, homogeneous. Tatlin's model for the *Pamiatnik III-emu Internatsionalu* (*Monument to the Third International*, 1919–20, fig. no. 1) and Lissitzky's *Klinom krasnym bei belykh* (*Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1920, plate no. 138) both emanate from circumstances which, if scarcely constituting a "glorious dawn," nonetheless were self-consciously heroic. For Blok, events were epochal on a scale transcending even that of the French Revolution, and bore comparison only with the very beginnings of our tradition—which is to say, the start of the

Christian era.

One of these emblematic works is three-dimensional, the other two-dimensional; both, however, transgressed their framing norms, of sculpture and of painting, respectively: one moved from constructed reliefs in the direction of architecture, the other from Suprematist painting in the direction of mass-produced posters. Both construct their primary message—of commitment to the all-transforming international socialist revolution—through an equivalent transformation of norms at the levels of perception and technique. It is this attempted integration on which their emblematic status depends as on nothing else, transcending the failure of either properly to be realized. They were, in fact, perhaps unrealizable. It is what one might call their materialistic idealism, emanating from a situation where the utopian seemed to be ingrained in reality—where heaven seemed to roll up like parchment, as Shklovskii wrote—that confers the resilience they have shown as images of twentieth-century revolution, that connotes so strongly the positive side of socialism, when so much that has been claimed in the name of that concept has been brutal and barren. It is both their success and their failure—and the marker, perhaps, of a wider success and failure than their own—that these unrealizable projects stand at the high-water mark of that union of social and aesthetic transformation toward which they must have seemed, at the moment of their making, only a first step. Both were produced in what later became defined as the "first period": that period of revolutionary upturn caused by World War I and its aftermath. It was marked domestically by War Communism and the struggle to secure the Revolution, and internationally by the founding of the Third, Communist, International to seize the moment and promote the extension of the Revolution on a worldwide basis. These spheres formed the respective contexts of Tatlin's and Lissitzky's interventions.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of these and similar works, given the general disrepute into which the Revolution has fallen—as an antidemocratic coup d'état, for example—is the unproblematic nature of the avant-garde's commitment to the October Revolution. Maiakovskii later wrote: "To accept or not to accept? There was no such problem for me (and other Moscow futurists). It was my revolution. I went to the Smolnyi. I did everything that was necessary. Meetings began."<sup>24</sup> The avant-garde's dominance in the cultural field in these early years was not uncontested, either from within Party ranks or by Proletkul't (Proletarian Culture) or by more conservative artists. It did, however, exist, and the slogans about organization were backed up by action. Tatlin was not one for overextended rehearsals of intent; his record, however, speaks for itself. Tatlin's desire for a unified artists' organization, expressed as early as 1914, could have remained avant-gardist rhetoric. The Revolution, however, as well as putting into circulation the slogan of "building the new life," offered a variety of ways for doing so. Tatlin, in addition to his involvement with Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), organized the Union of New Tendencies in Art, an umbrella organization of left artists in Petrograd. This union, the Academy of Arts, and Ginkhuk (the State Institute of Artistic Culture) were the Petrograd equivalents of the avant-garde's institutional bases and organizations in Moscow, such as Vkhutemas and the First Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk. This ground is fairly well trodden. But without overemphasizing the avant-garde's prominence—which then tends to cause problems in accounting for its later tribulations—it is worth recognizing the depth of organizational and institutional, as well as theoretical, commitment to the practice of building the new life. The

conditions of War Communism seemed dramatically to draw a line between the new life and what had gone before.

Conventional forms of class distinction and the bourgeois individualism connected to them were occluded by the enforced collectivity of the struggle to sustain the Revolution.

These conditions did not, however, last forever; and it is in the moves away from them that it becomes possible to speak of a rather different sense of a politics of the avant-garde. It is worth underlining, though, the way in which War Communism framed the project of Constructivism, of "material culture," and of "art into production." Still more fundamentally, however, War Communism constitutes the siting of the whole ethos of a single-minded bending of effort to one end, of suspicion toward all vestiges of the past—particularly anything related to a discredited sense of opulence, which included, of course, aesthetic contemplation, indeed anything carrying with it the stigma of leisured existence. Heroization of the Red Army, a total commitment to the security of the Revolution against the still extant White threat, and, in consort with those defensive tasks, the positive sense of a new world to be built from the ground up all militated against the toleration of revanchism.<sup>25</sup> The greatest single factor working in favor of the October Revolution was, of course, that it had been successful; audacity and courage broke through the hollowed-out protocols of the old. And now War Communism, apparently against even greater odds, had won again. As such, it was also a victory for the culture of the avant-garde, which, alone among the intelligentsia, had supported the Revolution. To the avant-garde, in the process of thinking its way out of bourgeois art for art's sake and formal experimentation into an integrated program for deploying the lessons of that past toward the building of the Communist future, the message must have been clear: "Press on." In sum, then, the major works of the avant-garde's new project of "art into production," that which defined both its distance from an art of contemplation and its commitment to participation in the wider revolutionary project, were in place by the end of the Civil War. But War Communism was something very like a Pyrrhic victory.

The New Economic Policy was adopted in March 1921 at the Party's historic Tenth Congress. NEP, a government-promoted reintroduction of capitalism in order to restart the shattered economy, could not have been more unlike War Communism. Centralized control of all areas was replaced by the fostering of private entrepreneurship. The working class, though numerically small, had been hegemonic in the worker-peasant alliance that allowed the Bolsheviks to oust the Provisional Government that had replaced the unlamented Romanov dynasty in February 1917. After the Civil War, with not only the bourgeoisie but also the proletariat socially atomized, the peasantry were the only social class to emerge relatively intact. NEP was summed up in Bukharin's advice to the peasantry: "Enrich yourselves." Which is to say, the balance of forces shifted from planning to that which is nowadays usually dubbed "enterprise," but for which the terms "greed" and "self-seeking" often do just as well. The balance shifted from town to country and from proletarians not just to peasants but to the "Nepmen," the new entrepreneurial class of merchants and middlemen which NEP brought into being—or rather, released from the amber into which they had been set by October and War Communism. NEP society was the dominant social formation in the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s, unlike both the heroic revolutionary period which preceded it and the increasing centralization of the Five-Year Plans which followed. In fact, it was out of the political contestation, the victories and defeats of NEP, that the Five-Year Plans were born. It has been convincingly argued, for

example, by Michael Reiman, that what one might call the culture of the Five-Year Plans, rudimentary at first but growing in scope, was an ad hoc response to the eventual crisis of NEP, rather than the result of any long-term strategy, let alone a logical or predetermined outcome of the Revolution itself.<sup>26</sup> By 1927–28, the Revolution was, in any case, pretty much ancient history, there to be deployed behind whichever group was powerful enough to annex it and its prestige to its own particular program. From 1921 to about 1928, the conditions of NEP, not the crucible of War Communism in which it had been formed, were the operating conditions of the erstwhile avant-garde.

The attitude of the avant-garde toward NEP is, therefore, a matter of some importance to clarifying its politics. And, indeed, in a scattered but relatively consistent commentary, a position emerges. This is partly born of antipathy to a way of life in which, as Serge noted, "classes are growing up around us again." Thus Vertov, writing in 1926: "We have not come to cinema in order to feed fairy tales to the Nepman and Nepwoman lounging in the loges of our first-class movie theaters."<sup>27</sup> This was no fantasy. It finds corroboration in the diary kept by Walter Benjamin of his trip to Moscow. On a visit to the theater in December 1926, he notes, "a waft of perfume greeted me as I entered," and he continues: "I did not see a single communist in a blue tunic, but there were several types who would not have been out of place in any of George Grosz's albums."<sup>28</sup> This situation points to a second strand in the avant-garde's response to NEP. For it was the emergence of these new social layers and their considerable emphasis upon consumption that provided one important basis for the reinflation of those traditional approaches to art-making and the social role of art which had been eclipsed in the revolutionary period. The avant-garde was opposed both to NEP's reemergent social stratification and to the opening this afforded to more conservative types of cultural practice.

It is a commonplace of art history that the avant-garde was unpopular due to the "innate visual conservatism" of the population at large.<sup>29</sup> Avant-garde commentators themselves, however, offer a description of a more contested site. Stepanova said that photomontage was popular in workplaces and offices.<sup>30</sup> Brik, while he acknowledged the difficulties experienced by the Constructivists, implied a distinction between the relationship of the new techniques to workers' experience in production and the antipathy of the NEP bourgeoisie, with its preference for conventional notions of art as a luxury good.<sup>31</sup> More explicitly, Vertov remarked upon the new lease on life given to fictional films that "recall the old 'artistic' models just as Nepmen recall the old bourgeoisie."<sup>32</sup> At the same time, however, he also discerned a response along class lines, noting how *Kino-pravda* (*Cinema-Truth*) newsreels "are boycotted by film distributors, by the bourgeois and semibourgeois public" yet "shown daily in many workers' clubs in Moscow and the provinces with great success";<sup>33</sup> and he went on devastatingly to turn the tables on the new societal "normalization": "If the NEP audience prefers 'love' or 'crime' dramas that doesn't mean that our works are unfit. It means the public is." Fit or unfit for what, is the question; and it has only to be raised for the answer to be clear: it was the project of building a new collective society that was foundering under NEP conditions. As Shklovskii put it: "The great passion of Lef . . . was a desire to participate in the making of a new life."<sup>34</sup> Yet Serge repeatedly notes how under NEP "symptoms of bourgeoisification" became prevalent, how "money lubricated and befouled the entire machine just as under capitalism," how "by and large, order was returning"<sup>35</sup>—and whom this suited.

Vertov's advertising films for Mossel'prom (the Moscow

Agricultural Industry) and GUM, the state department store, were echoed in the mid-1920s by the various advertising and packaging projects undertaken by Rodchenko and Maiakovskii. In the light of our own sleek consumer economy, these frequently appear no more than quaint, yet in the context of NEP it is a serious point that Rodchenko, Maiakovskii, and Vertov were committing their expertise to the state sector. There were degrees of emphasis: Vertov, as remarked above, condemned crime films, while Rodchenko successfully designed covers for Marietta Shaginian's "Jim Dollar" detective stories. But this does little more than indicate that there was room for diversity within an overall avant-garde commitment to the legacy of the Revolution and struggle against its perceived betrayal under NEP. The evidence is in the state-sector advertisements, the candy wrappers with little verses promoting industry, and posters for "social responsibility" programs such as Rodchenko's *Knigi (Books)* for a literary drive in 1925. These are quite distinct from the emphasis on private enterprise and profit which had gained ground. And, should it need underlining, a *politics* was at stake here.

Politics is not simply a matter of committees. In a revolutionary situation, or during an attempt to sustain a revolutionary perspective, all social activity contains a political dimension, and this includes areas which bourgeois culture fences off as the province of private taste—as, paradigmatically, areas of freedom from politics. In 1936, one of the first things George Orwell noticed when he arrived in revolutionary Barcelona was people's clothes. There were virtually "no 'well-dressed' people at all." Nearly everyone was in "rough working-class clothes."<sup>36</sup> Though it has obviously on occasion been a signifier of political meaning, clothing, at least in this practical sense, has not normally been perceived as a site of political meaning, at least not until very recently. Yet in 1924 Tatlin produced his famous designs for a stove, a coat, and a suit. These are frequently treated as eccentricities, without a hope of going into production, at best an index of utopianism and, as such, evidence of the head-in-the-clouds mentality of "impractical" artists, whatever their Productivist rhetoric. Such an explanation is normative with respect to a cultural division of labor. The situation can, however, be read differently, as intentionally disruptive of such norms—a possibility which the orthodox assumption closes down. Tatlin and his colleagues did attempt to form working relations with organizations for the mass production of goods and textiles, but were generally unsuccessful. Larissa Zhadova quotes a contemporary observer, K. Miklashevski, to the effect that Tatlin, in a lecture, "expressed his dissatisfaction with authorities who did not really support his endeavors to work in industrial concerns."<sup>37</sup> This is to say, it was the "authorities" who appeared to frustrate the artist-constructors in their attempts to turn art into production, not the sheer impracticality of the projects in the first place. And these were managers of NEP concerns whom it behooved to make a profit rather than build a new society. As Maiakovskii commented in the first issue of *Novyi Lef (New Lef)* in 1927: "Market demand has become for many people the measure of value as far as cultural phenomena are concerned."<sup>38</sup> Serge spoke of the sometimes austere morality of Bolshevism, the egalitarianism of early Soviet society.<sup>39</sup> In like manner, the historian Selim Khan-Magomedov has noted as one of the key components of life after the Revolution which framed Constructivism "a marked asceticism in the habits, clothing, and official and social life" of the revolutionaries, as distinct from "the behavior of the social elite that had been reborn with the NEP."<sup>40</sup> Brik noted of Rodchenko's Constructivist design work that "artists turn their back on him. Irritated factory managers reject him. The petit-bourgeois goggles . . ."<sup>41</sup> Tatlin produced a montage contrasting his suit with bourgeois lounge

suits, a contrast which is explicitly linked by Zhadova to NEP conditions. His captions claimed the new clothing "satisfies hygienic requirements and lasts long," whereas the other is "unhygienic and they wear it only because they think it is beautiful."<sup>42</sup> The contrast is perhaps a little stark for us. But what it implies is that Tatlin's is a piece of work less the product of unworkable eccentricity than of a refusal of NEP conditions at the level of clothing: a refusal of the reassertion of a bourgeois, market-fixated mechanism of fashion, and a determination to design for "this man [who] is a worker and will use the object in question in the working life he leads."<sup>43</sup>

Constructivist interventions in the field of practical design in the mid-1920s remained on a relatively small scale. There was perhaps more activity in the fields of theater and graphic design, but still it fell far short of the aspiration to frame a new way of life with a "culture of materials" which would dialectically help to precipitate a new consciousness, new kinds of social individuals who would themselves go on to live and, in turn, transform that new life. It is all too easy to see this failure, from the dubious vantage point of our own monopoly-capitalist economies, as a result either of the idealism of the projects themselves or the impatience of those "really" leading the revolutionary process for such luxuries when more basic products were required. There is obviously some truth in this—it has the ring of the way the world works. But the picture is complicated by the specific nature of the social formation which replaced War Communism and which gave renewed breathing space to social stratification and motivations more often associated with the bourgeois past. Small wonder that "building the new life" foundered in a society which powerfully foregrounded the reinstatement of elements of the old one. Constructivism in these conditions, trying to push ahead with the sociopolitical transformation put on the agenda by the October Revolution but subsequently marginalized by the New Economic Policy, had more the quality of a rearguard than an avant-garde action.

Benjamin was frequently drawn to comment on the situation obtaining both in literature and in the society at large. Only a day or two after his arrival in Moscow in 1926, he is noting "the political news: members of the opposition removed from important positions," a situation which he immediately links to "the Party's reactionary bent in cultural matters. The leftist movements which had proved useful during the period of wartime communism are now being completely discarded."<sup>44</sup> The effect of NEP for the Constructivists was obviously mixed. War Communism had saved the Revolution, but the militarization of society had wrecked the revolution's social base. NEP had saved the economy, and offered a more normal framework of legality for everyday civilian life, but at the cost of increasing stratification and the occlusion of the whole vision of a socialist society based in the working class. In such a situation, then, what was it for Maiakovskii to write, in 1925, "To build a new culture a clean sweep is needed. The sweep of the October revolution is needed"? Certainly, the significance of an appeal to October during NEP was far from univocal. For Serge's "fat shopkeeper enriched by the sale at speculative prices of articles manufactured by our socialist industry" it was time to breathe a sigh of relief that order was being restored and the dark days of 1919 put behind for good.<sup>45</sup> It is unlikely he would have apostrophized October's new broom other than to pay lip service to the origins of a new status quo. It was a different matter for the avant-garde. In 1923 Nikolai Aseev commented, "the waves of NEP were already rolling overboard in the revolutionary ship." One had to "hold onto the balustrades in order not to be swept into the sea of obscurantism and philistinism." In particular, "the honesty of those people who

were the first artists to have reacted positively to the appeal for the participation of the intelligentsia in the October revolution was considered suspect, and their value was constantly questioned."<sup>46</sup>

In such a situation, the attempt to press ahead with the program of "art into production" took on a specific coloring. Framed in 1921 by Aleksei Gan "in terms of the essential distinctive features and requirements of communism,"<sup>47</sup> when those "features" were extrapolated from the now abandoned War Communism, the very sense of "production" which art was to be directed "into" had undergone significant change. At the very least, rather than a universal rhetoric, "art into production" now connoted a specific view, one with its own history, built out of an acceptance of certain assumptions and a concomitant rejection of others—which latter were, moreover, in play as a new status quo at the level both of a market-oriented economy and an increasingly approved conventional art practice. Under NEP, that is to say, "art into production" signified in a system of differences: it was unlike other assumptions about art and about production. In May 1924, right in the middle of NEP, Tatlin offered a synoptic statement of what was still the task in his lecture on "Material Culture and Its Role in the Production of Life in the USSR": "to shed light on the tasks of production in our country, and also to discover the place of the artist-constructor in production, in relation to improving the quality both of the manufactured product and of the organization of the new way of life in general."<sup>48</sup> To an extent, of course, all shades of opinion spoke of the "new way of life," but for the Constructivists in general and Tatlin in particular this was an assertion of continuity with October and, indeed, with that prerevolutionary work which for them prefigured the social and political revolution. It was a restatement of such a perspective. As Tret'iakov later wrote, Lef had been formed "in the conditions of the New Economic Policy . . . Lef means Left Front, and Left Front implies opposition to any other front."<sup>49</sup> Khan-Magomedov has commented on this period: "Rodchenko's activity in the field of commercial graphic art was closely bound up with straightforward political propaganda . . . Many of the book and magazine covers designed by Rodchenko were really, despite their small format . . . political posters."<sup>50</sup> The question is, therefore: is it possible to be any more specific about these politics?

Dissatisfaction with NEP was not confined to the artistic avant-garde. That is, in fact, one of the central planks of this essay. An avant-garde art group in bourgeois society can, of course, withdraw into a specialized position which does not have any ready political correlation. That is the nub of claims for art's relative autonomy from society. It is not, however, to say that, even then, a politics cannot be legitimately attributed to such a grouping. In the case of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, however, various factors militate against concluding that such was the state of affairs. On the one hand, society was saturated with politics, anyway; on the other, the avant-garde actually aspired to an interventionist role. Their practice was not divorced from the political, or at least can be said to have had compacted into it a political dimension. The latter dimension is unlikely to have been the group's property alone, evolved by extrapolation solely from its own art practice or somehow preserved as a memory trace of the original "big bang" revolution. There is no reason why it should have been. The political process evolved, and different perspectives emerged as time went on. It is relatively improbable that a small-scale cultural grouping could have maintained a stance fundamentally at odds with the political order of the day if that order was otherwise in receipt of homogeneous support. It is far more likely that, in such a situation, its program would

have been marked by retreats into more orthodox forms of artistic activity paralleling the wider sociopolitical retreats. It can, of course, be argued that Constructivism did undergo significant revision, for example, in the use of uncut photographs in factography. But this can be seen more as a modification and adaptation of the program than as a straightforward retreat from it.

There was, anyway, an approach to art-making which came very rapidly to be identified with NEP, with the sponsorship of official bodies such as the trade unions and the army, and the provision of conventional portraits for the new bourgeoisie NEP threw up. This was AKhRR. The position of so-called Realist art in the various groups which sprang up from the end of the Civil War onward is considerably more complex with regard to the relations between its form and its content than is often recognized—even in the case of AKhRR itself, the most "illusionistic" of the groups, let alone others like Ost (the Society of Easel Painters), which offered a kind of combination of avant-garde technique and socially significant depicted subjects.<sup>51</sup> Be that as it may, the fact remains that throughout this period AKhRR was at odds with the avant-garde art-into-production tendency; that *it* tended to be identified with NEP; and that the avant-garde did not significantly retreat to more conventional forms of art practice. This suggests the existence of a countervailing political-ideological force in the culture which could enable and sustain distance from the new status quo.

There were, in fact, two "waves" of such opposition. There had always been small oppositional groups even during the Civil War, but, with the exception of the Kronshtadt mutineers, these had been relatively marginal, and it is doubtful whether they exerted much gravitational pull. Circumstances changed, however, as NEP progressed. For some time, NEP, though apparently reasonably successful in the fundamental task of making the economy move again, had begun to generate its own problems. By 1923, largely because of the concessions to the peasantry, an imbalance arose between industry and agriculture. Industrial prices remained high because of the scarcity of manufactured goods. Conversely, agricultural prices were low, with the result that there was no incentive for peasants to sell their produce to the cities: they stood to make little from the transaction and there was not much in the way of manufactured goods they required to buy, anyway. Because of this "scissors" crisis, so named due to the way these divergent tendencies were represented on a graph, there arose again a serious threat to the worker-peasant alliance which NEP had been intended to bolster. Lenin was effectively inactive at this point (and would continue so until his death in January 1924), and the leadership of NEP fell to the "triumvirate" of Stalin (the Party Secretary), Grigorii Zinov'ev, and Lev Kamenev. An alternative proposal to cure the scissors crisis was put forward by Trotskii in April 1923 at the Twelfth Party Congress, a proposal which hinged on the concept of planning. As Isaac Deutscher has pointed out: "That planning was essential to a socialist economy was a Marxist axiom with which the Bolsheviks were, of course, familiar, and which they had always accepted in general terms. Under war communism, they imagined that they were in a position to establish immediately a fully-fledged planned economy . . . But after the introduction of NEP, when all efforts were directed towards reviving the market economy, the idea of planning suffered eclipse."<sup>52</sup> Faced with a retreat from the goal of a planned socialist mode of production, and with the concomitant decline in the social power of the working class relative to the peasantry, Trotskii now reintroduced the idea of "systematically broadening the scope of planning" with the ultimate aim of "thereby absorbing and abolishing the market."<sup>53</sup> Some sense of

the stakes involved can be gained from the argument of Trotskii's later article "K sotsializmu ili k kapitalizmu?" ("Toward Capitalism or Socialism?") of August 1925. NEP is there seen as both a combination of and a competition between these two "scissors" tendencies. Trotskii, however, notes that "if state industry develops more slowly than agriculture; if the latter should proceed to produce with increasing speed the two extreme poles [of] capitalist farmers 'above,' proletarians 'below,' this process would of course lead to a restoration of capitalism."<sup>54</sup>

In the cultural field, Tatlin wrote two reports in November 1924 on the work of his Section for Material Culture at the Petrograd Ginkhuk. That he had to do so, twice, is alone indicative of the pressure the project was coming under as the administration sought more biddable recipients for official funding.<sup>55</sup> But more to the point, Tatlin set his defense of a planned approach to the design of material culture in a context of "anarchy" reigning in production. This is, doubtless, in part an observation about design and production processes and the lack of headway being made by integrated "Constructivist" practice. But it also reads as a reflection on the more general productive conditions obtaining under NEP, and the absence of planning in the economy. Contemporary production, Tatlin noted, "in both town and country in all its manifestations," largely because of the continuing legacy of "industrial and domestic production inherited from the old world," was "in a state of anarchy." Production was "splintered into chance productive units," and experience as a whole was "abnormally individualized."<sup>56</sup> This abnormally individual experience of life and anarchic production process need to be set against the avant-garde's continued assertion of very different priorities. Their consistent appeal was to the notion of a "collective" way of life, a way of life which, moreover, needed to be "organized." Thus, the course which Rodchenko taught at Vkhutemas was envisaged in 1926 as producing a "new type of engineer" who would effect "the organization and rationalization of production."<sup>57</sup> Tatlin likewise viewed his role as that of the "organizer of everyday life" in an article of 1929. Quite contrary to these aspirations, daily life under NEP was, as Maiakovskii described it, a "way of life which has not been altered in almost any respect—the way of life which is now our worst enemy, which makes us bourgeois."<sup>58</sup> These arguments are consistent across the decade, yet under NEP, arguments about the need for organization and planned production would have been difficult for the Constructivists to sustain without examples of more concretely theorized programs in the political-economic sphere. Trotskii's proposals, however, although they came to constitute the cornerstone of a political program, basically went unheeded in 1923 by a Party organization which, in Deutscher's words, "considered NEP almost incompatible with planning," and thought it necessary instead to emphasize the "enterprise" economy's stability and longevity in order "to strengthen the peasants' and the merchants' confidence in it."<sup>59</sup>

Other developments were also afoot in the Soviet system. At the same time as the scissors crisis grew in the economy, the "blades" moving ever wider apart through the autumn, 1923 also saw the consolidation of the bloc of Party bureaucrats owing allegiance more to the central power structure than to the confidence of workers at the base. This led to a qualitatively new situation: an organization in which "alignments were temporary blocs around concrete proposals and issues" was replaced by one of "a permanent power caucus in the highest body of the party, whose purpose was to preserve control in its hands regardless of the issues at stake."<sup>60</sup> As the French socialist Boris Souvarine put it, the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was being replaced by the "dictatorship of the secretariat." In the summer and autumn of 1923, because of the

mixture of economic pressure and the lack of adequate avenues of political expression, a wave of industrial militancy struck Moscow and Petrograd, extending even to the possibility of a general strike: overall, the most powerful political challenge to the leadership since Kronshtadt. One result of this changed situation was the formalization and extension of the position broached by Trotskii at the Twelfth Congress in the Platform of the Forty-Six, a statement by a group of leading figures in the Party which criticized the authorities for their handling of the economy and the erosion of democracy. October 1923 is thus usually treated as marking the birth of the Left Opposition.

The pressure was sufficient, despite the ban on other parties and on oppositional groups within the Communist Party itself, to force the leadership to open up a debate in the pages of the press. The effect was swift, measurable not least by the doubling of *Pravda's* circulation. The greatest effect was felt in the army—which had been Trotskii's base since he reorganized it to defend the Revolution in 1918—but the Left Opposition was also strong in the youth organizations and in the universities and other higher-educational institutions. Despite this considerable support for the opposition at the system's roots, however, the newly functioning bureaucratic apparatus, which had been in gear since the Party Congress in the spring, was able to ensure that by the time the Thirteenth Party Conference came around in January 1924, a support which in terms of voting at district level was running at thirty-six percent (and which was possibly even higher in individual party groups, for which results were not announced) was converted into a mere three delegates at the conference itself. By the time of the Thirteenth Congress a few months later, in May, Trotskii had been effectively isolated—a process which was then repeated in the international organization at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in June.

This very process of reaction does, however, lend a certain support to the hypothesis of a relationship between the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s and the political Left Opposition. In the wake of the opposition's decline, 1924 witnessed a major purge of the institutions of higher education. It is well known that Vkhutemas was one of the major institutional sites of Constructivism—though, as Lodder has established, the Constructivist influence was by no means coherent across the institution as a whole. (It is only recently, in the work of Lodder and others, that a clear picture of the scope of Vkhutemas has been offered.) Vkhutemas was not, however, an isolated institution but part of a system of institutions of higher education, the VUZy, and in particular of institutions of higher technical education (the VTUZy).<sup>61</sup> The precise relationship of Vkhutemas, from 1926 reorganized as Vkhutein (the Higher Artistic-Technical Institute), to the other institutions of higher technical education is not clear. A relationship did exist, however, since the original decree by which Vkhutemas was brought into being concerned its role in the reorganization and reconstruction of production in the country at large: a task which was assigned to a wide range of practical and technical specialisms, not something confined to the one institution. (A case in point is the Rabfak [the Workers' Faculty], quite often mentioned in accounts of Vkhutemas as an avenue whereby workers without previous qualification could be brought up to a sufficient standard to allow them to continue with the new art and design education. Rabfaks, however, were part of a system, attached to all the VTUZy, not an egalitarian feature of Vkhutemas alone.) It would be unusual if there were no contact between the students at such institutions, particularly in a period with a high profile of ideological and political activity. One obvious avenue would be through Party meetings, but interaction

would also have taken place more informally, not least in cultural pursuits. Thus in Petrograd in May 1923, Tatlin put on a memorial performance of Velimir Khlebnikov's play *Zangezi*. Supporting actors were largely drawn from the student body, and Tatlin's account mentions, in addition to art students from the Petrograd Academy, students from the university and the Mining Institute, one of the VTUZY. These institutions (in marked contrast to the situation in 1917, it should be noted, when being a university student was synonymous with support for the Whites) contained a high proportion of actively involved Communist students, a "large majority" of whom, according to Sheila Fitzpatrick, were for the Trotskiist opposition in 1923–24.<sup>62</sup> In 1924, a surprising ten percent of all Party members were students, and half of them were in institutions of higher technical education. In Moscow, furthermore, students comprised no less than twenty-five percent of the Moscow Party organization. A student himself is recorded as having commented: "It was a golden time for the Trotskyite Opposition."<sup>63</sup> With the defeat of the opposition, however, a tremendous purge took place. Narkompros's own statistics give the figure of 18,000 students expelled, though Fitzpatrick argues that the actual numbers were more than double this. More to the point, most expulsions occurred in "the more sullied and overcrowded artistic, socio-economic and pedagogical VTUZY."<sup>64</sup> Given the scale of this activity, it seems highly unlikely that the avant-garde within Vkhutemas, self-consciously positioned as a "left" within culture at the cutting edge of a new way of life, and against that life's erosion by the bourgeoisifying tendencies of NEP—could have remained isolated from the wider oppositional debate during 1923 and 1924. In fact, far from remaining isolated, it is quite likely to have drawn support from the left-oriented students, beleaguered as its adherents apparently felt in the NEP environment.

Later in 1924, in September, Trotskii's *Uroki Oktiabria* (*The Lessons of October*) was published. His account of the October Revolution and its legacy was clearly intended to be relevant to the struggle in 1924. Having remarked that "up to the present time we lack a single work which gives us a comprehensive picture of the October upheaval," he commented: "It is as if we thought that no immediate and direct benefit for the unpostponable tasks of future constructive work could be derived from the study of October."<sup>65</sup> He obviously thought otherwise. October could be used as a lens to bring into focus the struggle against counterrevolutionary forces in the bureaucracy and conservative aspects of the "worker-peasant alliance," which latter NEP was considered to be. The book's effect was to unleash a second phase of the antiopposition campaign, the cumulative result of which was that by 1925, the opposition which had originated in 1923 had been effectively silenced. The principal marker of this defeat in the period which followed, and one which was to have incalculable effects on the future of socialism, not to mention on the legacy of the October Revolution—and, indeed, on the revolutionary project of "building a new life"—was the formulation at the end of 1924 of the doctrine of "socialism in one country." The Bolshevik Revolution had been international in scope. According to Trotskii's theory of "uneven and combined development," a revolutionary outbreak could easily occur in a backward country, and not just in a major industrialized nation which had gone through its capitalist phase, such as Britain or Germany. There was no question, however, of such a revolution being more than a holding operation to stimulate further revolutions in those advanced countries. There are numerous statements of the implications of this view, but Lenin's argument to the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921 is particularly clear: "Even prior to the

Bolshevik revolution, as well as after it, we thought that the revolution would also occur either immediately or a least very soon in other backward countries and in the more highly developed capitalist countries. Otherwise we would perish."<sup>66</sup>

When the revolutionary wave ebbed after 1921 and the capitalist system managed to stabilize itself, the Russian Revolution was obviously going to have to try to hold out for longer than had been intended. NEP was one response to this development. The central point is that NEP was a temporary measure until the capitalist crisis reasserted itself and the tempo of struggle rose again, yet it also transpired that NEP seemed in its own fabric to be turning away from this perspective. As NEP appeared to accommodate more and more to the norm, it was precisely the formation of the Left Opposition within NEP, as Naomi Allen has argued, which now took on the original project: "The existence of an organized Opposition would resist the free expansion of the bureaucracy, subject it to criticism, and perhaps retard its development long enough to keep intact the roots of the proletarian dictatorship until conditions for its existence improved."<sup>67</sup> Such an awaited capitalist crisis did indeed occur with the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the entry of the world system into profound slump during the 1930s, a slump which was only definitively terminated by the outbreak of World War II at the end of that decade. But by the time of the onset of the crisis at the close of the 1920s, the revolutionary movement had undergone profound change—and the main symptom was "socialism in one country." The idea of building up an independent industrialized state in Russia had been foreign to the Bolsheviks. It now became the central plan of policy—initially within the scope of the mixed, relatively unplanned, economy of NEP. Later, however, as NEP itself entered its terminal crisis, the stage was set for a "third period," which transformation is also important for understanding the later trajectory of the avant-garde.

For the moment, however, what should be noted is that the Left Opposition of 1923 and 1924, which had been crushed by 1925, began to rise again in a second incarnation in 1926. The paradoxical factor here was that those members of the triumvirate who had sided with Stalin to break the Left Opposition that was centered on Trotskii now began to fear the increasing concentration of power in the hands of the General Secretariat. In an abrupt about-face, Zinov'ev, with his power base in Leningrad, now joined forces with Trotskii to constitute a new and more powerful united opposition. By this time, Bukharin had become the main defender of NEP—of, as he famously put it, "socialism at a snail's pace"—and as such, Stalin's main ally against the opposition. This new opposition reached a peak in 1927, a peak, moreover, much higher than has often been thought. On the basis of new evidence, Reiman has argued that "the importance of the left opposition is often underestimated in the literature. It is considered an important current in Soviet ideological and political life, a kind of 'revolt of the leaders' . . . but many authors doubt that the opposition had any substantial influence on the mass of party members and even less on broader sections of the population. One can hardly agree with such views."<sup>68</sup> Reiman goes on to cite an impressive catalogue of opposition successes in various geographical regions, in sections of the organized working class in the major cities, and, once again, in the army and the higher education institutions. There is an international dimension here as well as a domestic one, which complicates the issue: just as the failure of the German revolution played a part in the formation of the opposition in 1923, so now the disastrous policies of the bureaucracy toward the revolution in China contributed to the force of the opposition in 1927.

Whatever the multiplicity of causes, the result was a rise in

mass meetings of industrial workers, underground strike committees, and suchlike. When a leading oppositionist, Ivar Smilga, was being got out of the way by assignment to a remote posting—quite a common tactic by the leadership—a crowd of two thousand people gathered, listened to speeches by Zinov'ev and Trotskii, and cheered Smilga to his train. Although the united/left opposition of 1926–27 aimed principally to promote the workers' resistance to the decline they were suffering under NEP, Fitzpatrick argues that "Opposition condemnation of NEP . . . probably did arouse a response among students."<sup>69</sup> There was also support in youth organizations. Overall, "opposition propaganda steadily grew in intensity. The opposition flooded party units with leaflets, pamphlets and other material contributing to a further decline in the Politburo's authority . . . By the end of July the situation in the party had taken fairly definite shape. The opposition succeeded in increasing its influence; it was beginning to think that a change in the party leadership might be attainable at the forthcoming 15th Party Congress."<sup>70</sup> Trotskii later estimated that in 1927 the opposition had 20,000 to 30,000 active members in Moscow alone.

Despite fierce internal conflicts among the leadership, culminating in the expulsion of Trotskii and Zinov'ev from the Central Committee, the opposition's influence continued to grow throughout the summer, leading to the publication in September 1927 of the *Platform of the Opposition*. This echoed many of the criticisms of NEP of the earlier opposition, citing the growth of money-commodity relations, increasing social stratification, and lack of democracy, and proffered as well a newer condemnation of the policy of economic autarky. The *Platform* runs to twelve chapters in some ninety pages. It notes that "there exist in our society these forces hostile to our cause—the kulak, the Nepman, the bureaucrat" and recommends a continuous struggle "on all sectors of the economic, political and cultural fronts."<sup>71</sup> A week after its publication, the *Platform* was banned. A major shift was necessary to implement the ban, requiring nothing less than that the leadership alter—that is, effectively break—the Party's own rules. The state security forces (the GPU), built up by the bureaucracy, were turned against the Party itself. Reiman comments: "Events quickly approached a climax. The opposition, mobilizing its considerable store of influence, tried to make a show of strength to turn the situation to its favour. During Leningrad's celebration of the 10th anniversary of the October revolution in mid-October 1927, the opposition suddenly received impressive support. Trotsky, Zinoviev and other oppositionists who found themselves by chance on one of the official reviewing platforms as the workers of Leningrad paraded past, found themselves the object of demonstrative greetings and cheers from the crowd of a hundred thousand."<sup>72</sup>

This situation was not allowed to repeat itself on the official anniversary of the Revolution on November 7th. Marches and meetings were broken up, speakers howled down. The GPU had entered fully onto the political stage, in consort with which another massive propaganda campaign was mounted. The October demonstration had proved to be the limit. The last demonstration by the Left Opposition took place on November 19, 1927. At the Fifteenth Party Congress, which opened on December 2nd, Trotskii along with seventy-five other leading members of the opposition was expelled from the Party. Next, Trotskii was informed by the GPU that he was to be deported under article 59 of the criminal code, which dealt with counterrevolutionary activity. But such a large crowd gathered on the proposed date, June 16, 1928—several in the crowd lay down on the railway tracks—that the authorities had to resort to deception. According to Carr's account, the departure was postponed for two days. Within twenty-four

hours, however, Trotskii's apartment was broken into by armed police; he was driven to an outlying, cleared part of the station and forced aboard a special train which then linked up with the express well away from Moscow. After a journey by truck and sleigh conveyed him another 150 miles beyond the nearest railhead, Trotskii arrived in internal exile at Alma-Ata, at "the extreme confines of the USSR," on January 25, 1928. A year later, he was expelled from the Soviet Union altogether. In Reiman's summary, "the basis for the existence of any kind of opposition whatsoever inside the Soviet Communist Party had been destroyed. From then on opposition was an unequivocal political crime bringing stern punishment in its train."<sup>73</sup>

The picture that emerges, then, is of a nearly seven-year period, extending from the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 to the Fifteenth Congress in December 1927, during which the political direction of the Revolution was in a continual process of negotiation and contestation. The end results were a shift in basic premise from the internationalism of 1917 to the doctrine of building "socialism in one country," and the concentration of power in the hands of a central bureaucracy led by Stalin. There were two great waves of opposition to this from the left, in 1923–24 and again in 1926–27. This opposition stood for a return to those principles of October which it perceived to be undermined by NEP: that is to say, an emphasis on socialism rooted in the working class, a reversal of social stratification, a re-assumption of planning in the economy, and increased democracy (as well as a complex international dimension with repercussions for the political policy to be pursued in places like Germany and China, and for the economic relationship of the Soviet Union to the capitalist world).

It had been common for the avant-garde in art at the time of the Revolution, and even before, to be referred to as left artists. Thus Tatlin was a member of the left bloc of the Union of Art Workers in Petrograd in the period between the two revolutions of 1917. He was also involved with the left federation of the Moscow Professional Union of Artists and Painters. The notion of an artistic left was quite prevalent, both as a form of self-description among artists to distinguish themselves from "bourgeois" tendencies and as a form of criticism by those, either close to the Party or laying claim to represent a "proletarian culture," who saw left art with its roots in the bourgeois avant-garde as occupying that space where petit-bourgeois individualism met anarchistic or libertarian "ultraleftism." This latter view must have received succor from Lenin's pamphlet critical of the council Communists and related groups, *Detskaia bolezn' "levizny" v kommunizme* (*Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, 1920.) (It is perhaps worth pointing out that the epithet refers less to the childishness or immaturity of the attitude per se than to the relative youth of the Communist movement which, as such, is given to wild enthusiasms and excesses that need to be stabilized.) The point is, the identification of the avant-garde as an artistic left, in a rather diffuse sense, was commonplace, somewhat after the manner in which the term "Futurist" was deployed.

Things seem to be different, however, in the succeeding period. When Maiakovskii organized the Left Front of the Arts around the journal *Lef*, first published in March 1923, "left" was not a diffuse term but a label for a coherent grouping or, more likely, regrouping of forces intended to intervene in a changing situation. *Lef* lasted for seven issues and drew in most of the literary and artistic avant-garde at the levels of both practice and theory. It was quite a large magazine with a print run for the first issue of five thousand copies. Three thousand copies were printed of the third issue, and there were no less than four issues in 1923. There were only two, however, in 1924, and the



final issue, with a print run of only 1,500, came out early in 1925. Maiakovskii had, according to Brik, started to think about a new “organizational grouping” as early as the end of 1921, but the proposal was not worked out until a year later.<sup>74</sup> When the magazine came out in early 1923, the members of Lef referred to themselves as the “Bolsheviks of art” and quite explicitly saw their context as a situation where “now there is a respite from war and hunger,” i.e., the New Economic Policy. The authorities’ attention had previously been taken up with winning the Civil War. Now this was no longer the case, and time and resources could begin to be devoted to a variety of forms of reconstruction. However, the end of the Civil War and the introduction of NEP had given new strength to other cultural forces, such as figurative painting in the visual arts and a bolstering of more traditional forms (which Trotskii called “Classicism”) in literature. The “Bolsheviks of art” needed a platform in order to redress the balance which under NEP seemed to be tilting away from them. Thus it seems that internal and external dynamics came together at the beginning of 1923: respectively, the need to articulate a coherent and believable redescription of the left perspective for a “*communist art* (as part of com-culture and communism in general!)” and a context which offered some hope for that argument finding a resonance. There is no point in dropping pennies down a well; conversely, one does not print five thousand copies of a magazine intended to influence only one’s friends. Whatever it was that made the project of a Left Front of the Arts sustainable in 1923 clearly ebbed during 1924 and faded out altogether in early 1925. And there is no question of this being mere exhaustion on the part of Lef’s members. Rodchenko and Maiakovskii continued their advertising work for the state stores and organizations. Both flung themselves into work for the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* (*International Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative and Industrial Art*) in Paris. Rodchenko’s reading room for a workers’ club clearly embodied Constructivist-leftist principles, and Maiakovskii commissioned a new model of the *Monument to the Third International* from Tatlin—which Tatlin built in record time. It may be that there seemed to be more scope for an impact internationally than domestically, given what the Soviet cultural situation had become by 1925—with the added insurance policy that work celebrated abroad would be less susceptible to suppression at home.

At the end of 1926, Benjamin noted how the regime was “above all trying to bring about a suspension of militant communism, to usher in a period free of class conflict, to depoliticize the life of its citizens as much as possible”; “an attempt,” he wrote, “is being made to arrest the dynamic of revolutionary progress in the life of the state.”<sup>75</sup> This is not, of course, to say that everything was now lost. In a way, that is precisely the point: the situation was still contested. For all his registration of the changes taking place under NEP to the detriment of the left in both culture and politics, Benjamin was also able to appreciate the vitality which was still present in Soviet society: “Life here [is] so extraordinarily meaningful.” He goes on: “The entire scheme of existence of the Western European intelligentsia is utterly impoverished in comparison to the countless constellations that offer themselves to an individual here in the space of a month.” In a telling image, he likened life in the Soviet Union to conditions in the Klondike gold rush: “It is as insular and as eventful, as impoverished and yet in the same breath as full of possibilities.”<sup>76</sup> When he returned to Berlin, he was moved to comment that, with all its civilization, “for someone who has arrived from Moscow, Berlin is a dead city.”<sup>77</sup> Given this situation, one should then ask what it was that made *Lef* seem like a viable proposition again in 1927. And, having asked that question, one has to wonder why

*New Lef* folded again in 1928. What doors opened, and then closed, in 1927 and 1928? For the timing, again, is crucial. As has been noted earlier, Maiakovskii’s *New Lef* editorial spoke of the need to restart publication “because the situation of culture in the sphere of art has been completely messed up,” and cited the equation of market demand with cultural value as the main problem.<sup>78</sup> Yet there was nothing new in this. Vertov had been slating the “caste of parasites,” the “NEP shopkeepers” who “make drunkards of the proletariat using cinema-vodka” since 1923–24—since, in fact, the heyday of the first *Lef*.<sup>79</sup> What gave the spur to publish in January 1927 was that, despite the lack of a periodical, Maiakovskii perceived that “Lef has won and is winning in many sectors of culture.”<sup>80</sup> Which is to say, there appeared to be an upturn in the fortunes of the left, a new audience for a reformulation of Lef’s position. Once again, Benjamin notes the contradictory currents. On the one side, showing the weakness of the cultural left, is the fact that Grigorii Lelevich, a prominent figure on the proletarian journal *Na postu* (*On Guard*), was being sent away from Moscow at the Party’s behest—as we have seen was also the case with political oppositionists. On the other is Benjamin’s record of how Lelevich bemoaned the fact that his departure would cause him to miss a major speech to the Comintern by Trotskii, and how he also claimed that “the Party is on the verge of a turnabout.”<sup>81</sup>

Things like magazines and organizations do not ebb and flow arbitrarily. Their rise and fall are the function of a complex dialectic of forces, internal and external dynamics whose confluence *is* the organization or the publication. It seems incontrovertibly to be the case that the need for a defined left front in the arts was fueled by a requirement to contest the threatened hegemony of more conservative cultural forces. These forces, in turn, were fueled by NEP. For its part, Lef was related to the ebb and flow of a wider Left Opposition to NEP. As this Left Opposition fought the growing political influence of “the kulak, the Nepman, the bureaucrat,” so the left in the cultural field echoed the slogan with a perception of its own opponents as “rightist social strata, the intelligentsia and petty bourgeoisie.”<sup>82</sup>

This is not to say that Lef was in any simple sense a cultural “reflection” of the Left Opposition or, indeed, that the latter’s broad programs somehow overarched a more specific platform of the left in art. The *Platform of the Opposition*, all ninety-odd pages and twelve chapters, makes no mention whatsoever of art, literature, film, architecture, or culture generally; it is solely a political, socioeconomic document. Organizations of artists and writers, let alone the substantive beliefs they articulate, do not “reflect” political events. Such is not even an adequate statement of much maligned “vulgar” Marxism. Both political parties and cultural groups are superstructural with respect to an underlying economic mode of production. Nonetheless, a variety of shifting responses do occur between different, relatively autonomous spheres. In one of the many discussions among Asja Lasis, Bernhard Reich, and ordinary Russians in the sanatorium where Lasis was undergoing treatment, Benjamin notes almost wearily, “The issue was once again opposition within the Party.”<sup>83</sup> The key phrase is “once again”: the opposition was clearly a live issue. Not to relate the ebbs and flows of the left in art to the ebbs and flows of a more broadly constituted left, particularly in a situation such as that which prevailed in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, is to strip that cultural milieu of a whole dimension of its identity. One cannot help feeling that the persistent determination to do so has more to do with ideological shibboleths of our own culture than with any faithfulness to the revolutionary avant-garde. The reality of the Russian Revolution still threatens a capitalist system—a system both moral and economic—and

the more insistently it can be restricted in scope, rigidified, and made synonymous with the barbarism that supplanted it, the better, from such a point of view. To relate the avant-garde to a site of complex political (and social and moral) contestation is not, however, to reduce it to a reflex of that political struggle. The debates within the left front of the arts, within the various other institutions the cultural left inhabited, far exceeded in sophistication anything the political left ever generated about art, design, literature, or culture as a whole. Nonetheless, by its very nature that political left was alert to the practicalities of the situation in ways which often bypassed the artists, even though, ultimately, they were affected by them.

In terms, then, of the political spectrum of the Revolution and the NEP period, it appears fruitful to relate the erstwhile avant-garde, the left front of the arts, first of all to the ethos of October itself as this was worked out in the immediately postrevolutionary "heroic" phase of War Communism: planning, classlessness, rejection of the past, an almost tabularasa-like sense of building the new life from the bottom up, moving from analysis into synthesis. And then to relate it to the emerging perspective of a Left Opposition in which planning and workers' democracy remained priorities in the face of their erosion by the dominant forces of the New Economic Policy. The avant-garde, the left front, is thus related to the Left Opposition. It is so, however, not as a reflection but as kind of relatively autonomous equivalent. To borrow from a slightly different context Buchloh's felicitous rendering, it was its "historically logical aesthetic correlative." That is the claim of this essay: that on at least four grounds the left front of the arts can be read as the cultural correlative of the predominantly Trotskiist Left Opposition: in terms of hostility to NEP; in terms of a commitment to planning; in terms of a requirement for a level of working-class prosperity to consume the goods produced; and in terms of a requirement for industrial democracy to provide an environment in which the artistic-constructor/engineer might function.<sup>84</sup> Circumstantial evidence, such as the penetration of the institutions of higher education by the ideas and organization of the left, and the peaks and troughs of Lef's own activity, appears to support this argument. The alternatives, conversely, are less persuasive: that the avant-garde, even at the moment of October and in its aftermath, was devoid of a coherent political perspective. Or, if it may be said to have had a politics, that this was compatible with NEP.<sup>85</sup> For the reasons given above, neither seems likely. In addition to which, an opposing artistic grouping appears to have flourished under NEP conditions and to have been able relatively to marginalize the left avant-garde during the NEP period.

### III

Two principal questions remain concerning the politics of the avant-garde. I will address them in succession. First: If indeed Lef was a kind of correlate to, or at least can be said to have functioned in respect of some productive relationship with, the Left Opposition, why did not the latter embrace it? The relationship among Formalism, Futurism, and Marxism has been the subject of considerable debate, and the usual view is that the "Marxists" disapproved of the first two—of Formalism vehemently, for appearing to sever the link between art and society, and of Futurism for its roots in the bourgeois avant-garde, its impracticality, and its incomprehensibility to ordinary people.

A reconsideration might begin by arguing that the "comprehensibility" issue has been overstated and does not allow sufficiently for developments in the erstwhile avant-garde's position, notably the prominent role played by

montage and factography. There were also nuances to the avant-garde's concession that something valuable was being lost by abandoning "Art" *tout court* to the past. Distinctions emerged quite early between doctrinaire Productivist theorists and the more flexible members of Lef. Rodchenko exasperatedly remarked in an Inkhuk debate of April 1922 that "if we carry on discussing, there will never be any actual work";<sup>86</sup> endless attempts to clarify the theory, that is, would get in the way of what should be quite pragmatic responses to the demands of a changing productive context. Also, in an extraordinary allegory composed in 1925, Lissitzky wrote: "The term A[rt] resembles a chemist's graduated glass. Each age contributes its own quantity: for example, 5 drams of the perfume 'Coty' to tickle the nostrils of the fine gentry. Or another example, 10cc of sulfuric acid to be thrown into the face of the ruling classes. Or, 15cc of some kind of metallic solution that later changes into a new source of light."<sup>87</sup> This seems to be an elliptical proposition of three stages of art: the history of art since the Renaissance, in the service of the ruling class; art as an engaged, combative form of agitation and propaganda during the revolutionary period, against a class system; and, finally, art as a contribution to building the new world, a transforming element. The "metallic solution" may refer to practical design; the "new source of light" is, however, clearly more. As Lissitzky goes on to say: "This A[rt] is an invention of the mind, i.e. a complex, where rationality is fused with imagination."<sup>88</sup> Offering a different inflection to the continuing validity of a notion of art, Maiakovskii granted his famous "amnesty" to Rembrandt and acknowledged that, after all, the Revolution needed a sonnet as well as a newspaper. For his part, Rodchenko seems increasingly to have sought images produced in a modern, "mechanical" way that would jolt conventional perceptions of the world, rather than seeking simply to design new bits of it. Whether this is seen as a "retreat" or a development from a onesided initial position has much to do with the commentator's own perspective on and sympathy for the problems of a revolutionary art. The October group, formed as an umbrella organization for left artists in 1928, and as such one of the last attempts to frame a modified left position, likewise tried to effect a rapprochement between construction and design, on the one hand, and the production of images, on the other.<sup>89</sup>

It is worth recalling in this connection that the status of painting as a possible locale for radical cultural practice remains hotly contested to this day, and that the assumption that it was irrevocably tied to the past was widespread among the cultural left of the period and not confined to the Constructivists. Benjamin's essay of the mid-1930s, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"), is perhaps the locus classicus of the tendency. The aloofness of modern painting—with its rhetoric of an unlearned aesthetic sensitivity, so easily corrupted into apologetics for a social elite—has won it few friends among socialists. Vasilii Kandinskii's collapsing of socialism and historical materialism into the mire of bourgeois materialism and acquisitiveness is only one particularly glaring and uncontrite example. Painting's reactionary affiliations were not merely traceable to the "aura," as Benjamin termed it, in which unique works of art were bathed. The *institution* of avant-garde art was permeated by haut-bourgeois exclusivity and snobbishness—which is, presumably, what led Maiakovskii on his trip to Paris in the midtwenties to liken French artists, with the exception of Fernand Léger, to "slimy oysters." In such a perspective, the readiness of the left avant-garde to search for ways to democratize art, to render it useful to the revolutionary social project, rather than simply to bury

it and have done, takes on a rather different aspect.

Turning now to the central issue of the historical confrontation between the avant-garde and the Left Opposition, we can locate its main site in Trotskii's *Literatura i revoliutsiia* (*Literature and Revolution*).<sup>90</sup> This study, written mostly in 1923 and published in 1924, is contemporaneous with the first phase of the Left Opposition's ascendancy; as such, it is as close as one is likely to get to an authoritative Left Opposition theory of art. The text, particularly its passages on Tatlin's Tower, has been subject to cavalier quotation and excerpting, designed to prove how intolerant the Party leadership was of the avant-garde, how the walls were closing in even by 1924, and how the course was set for the final "Marxist" closure on free artistic experiment that was realized in the early thirties. In fact, any even moderately receptive reading of Trotskii's full text cannot fail to register its relative openness. Not the least interesting feature of it is that a figure with Trotskii's commitments should, at that period, devote a full-length treatment to this range of questions at all. As for the views he articulates: he is unequivocally critical of theoretical Formalism (not surprising, since it was unequivocally critical of Marxism), regarding it as a species of Idealism. However, in the spectrum of artistic tendencies reviewed, from aesthetically conservative positions, Symbolism, and the literary "fellow travelers" through advocates of a distinctive "proletarian culture," Trotskii repeatedly gives the benefit of the doubt, and indeed a kind of priority, to the Futurist-Lef nexus. What he will not do is accede to demands that the Party recognize any particular grouping, Lef included, as the authentic voice of Communist art. For Trotskii, socialist, let alone Communist, culture lies in the future. The shape it will take will be derived from a classless society that does not yet exist. In the period of the "proletarian dictatorship," the main criterion to be applied when judging a work of art is the extent to which it helps in the future realization of such a culture. When weighed in these scales, Lef, though found ultimately wanting by Trotskii, nonetheless comes out fairly well.

It has to be remembered that Trotskii was not an art critic and, at this date, was not overly familiar with the products of the European avant-garde, having had other things on his mind for most of the preceding two decades since the "dress rehearsal" of 1905. Given the unfamiliarity of that avant-garde's devices and the threat these must have posed to a consciousness raised on the norms of Enlightenment/classical culture, it is Trotskii's bias in favor of toleration rather than dismissiveness that deserves our attention. His relative openness to Modernist technical devices is marked—compared, for example, to Lukács's positions developed in the later twenties and thirties. Where Trotskii undoubtedly struggles is with post-Cubist techniques, broadly speaking, of collage-montage and construction. The most sustained discussions he offers in this respect are of Maiakovskii's "150,000,000" and Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. What is quite clear is that the "flatness" involved in post-Cubist work, literary as well as visual, its relative "all-overness," such that conventional compositional dramatics and focuses are denied, its suspension of narrative developments and climaxes, the abrupt shifts it employs rather than orthodox modulations, violated Trotskii's canon of judgment: "The principal fault of futurist poetry even in its best examples, lies in the absence of a sense of measure . . . [Maiakovskii's images] quite often disintegrate the whole and paralyze the action . . . the whole piece has no climax . . . The parts refuse to obey the whole. Each part tries to be separate," and so on.<sup>91</sup> Trotskii's weak arguments about function in his treatment of Tatlin's Tower are little more than the sculptural equivalent of his difficulties before Maiakovskii's

poem or, indeed, a painting. "What is it for" replaces "what does it represent" as the *cri de coeur* of one whose categories are being brought into question without his having the resources adequately to reply. As ever, the response is to deploy the criteria of the previously accepted paradigm as natural, indexed—according to the author's political disposition—to "competence" or to "popularity."

There is nothing unusual about this kind of critical difficulty, it is one of the effects of specialization in modern culture. (It is interesting that Trotskii adopts approximately the same kind of suspended judgment, underwritten by a fundamental concern for the security of the Revolution, for contemporary scientific developments.) Few enough could, in the early 1920s, write with understanding about Cubist devices. What Trotskii does is to try to rescue the impetus of the work, of which he approves, for a kind of traditional humanism from whose refusal as the stock-in-trade of normative art that "impetus," paradoxically, is derived. Little enough of this was clear at the time. For all his condemnation of "pure" Formalism in 1923–24, it is an intriguing question what Trotskii would have made, given his relative openness to and curiosity about avant-garde art, of the "social Formalism" of Mikhail Bakhtin, Pavel Medvedev, and Voloshinov which emerged in the mid- and late 1920s. This is one of those conjunctions, however, which the history of the twentieth century remaindered before it had chance to be born. As it is, Trotskii's somewhat rotund categories failed to mesh fully with the avant-garde work which came under his review. This is not, however, to place his arguments in a presumed continuum of suppression, an assertion which his status as leader of the political opposition to that "continuum" would contradict. Notwithstanding his critical difficulties with Futurism, some the result of relative ignorance, some fruitful and generative, Trotskii's overall assessment is clear: "Though remaining, in some respects, a Bohemian revolutionary offshoot of the old art, futurism contributes to a greater degree and more directly and actively than all other tendencies, in forming the new art."<sup>92</sup>

Trotskii's text, though authoritative, is not, however, the only one we have which sheds light on the attitude of the political Left Opposition to the avant-garde. Nikolai Gorlov, a prerevolutionary Old Bolshevik, allied in the early 1920s with Trotskii, wrote a reply to him, as well as a pamphlet running to sixty pages and entitled *Futurizm i revoliutsiia* (*Futurism and Revolution*).<sup>93</sup> Both were published in 1924, the former in *Lef*. In the words of the editor of a 1975 French compendium, Gorlov's pamphlet "represents an exemplary attempt (albeit an isolated one on the part of a politician)" to clarify the relation between artistic issues and "the new economic and social structures born of the revolution."<sup>94</sup> Gorlov is more perspicacious than Trotskii about the relations of existing art with bourgeois society. In particular, his technical grasp of the avant-garde's innovations exceeds Trotskii's, resulting in prolonged textual analysis of Maiakovskii's poetry based on the claim that "Futurism has emancipated the word."<sup>95</sup> He goes on: "It is time to understand that form and content are one, that the new content will inevitably be cramped in the old form, and that the old form has become for us a barrel organ on which you can play nothing but 'Farewell.'"<sup>96</sup> In Gorlov's compelling image, the left avant-garde, Futurism, constituted "the red army of words."<sup>97</sup>

This is not, of course, to imply that political supporters of the Left Opposition would necessarily be sympathetic to left art. There just is not such a symmetry between politics and aesthetics, then or now. Nonetheless, in the two examples we have of discussions of avant-garde art by Left Opposition figures there is no out-and-out rejection of the avant-garde.

Rather, the converse: there are the beginnings of what could have been a constructive dialogue with it. It is perhaps not irrelevant that Trotskii was to form a more explicit alliance with the leading representative of another left avant-garde over a decade later. André Breton's trajectory may shed an oblique light on what was not possible for the Soviet avant-garde.

#### IV

The second of the two concluding questions concerns the relationship of the left avant-garde to Stalinism. Of all questions, this is the most insistent at the present time, and is likely to continue to be so as Stalinist culture is opened up to scrutiny. The manner in which conservative accounts are already beginning to elide the differences between the two has been noted above. This dynamic in the scholarship of the present period sharply points up the need for the accurate historical positioning of the avant-garde, not least to recover and sustain its examples for radical positions in the present—positions which are likely to find themselves more rather than less beleaguered amid the liberal triumphs of any “new world order” than heretofore. In a study of Klutskis, Margarita Tupitsyn has recently described this issue as the big “off-limits” question.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, Bois's attention was inescapably drawn to it with regard to Lissitzky, where the question of continuity between the different phases of his career becomes urgent. Bois's answer was to claim significant *discontinuity*: “I therefore propose the following thesis: there is indeed a schism between . . . the ‘Brechtian’ Lissitzky and the ‘Stalinist’ Lissitzky.”<sup>99</sup> Bois saw this “schism,” furthermore, not as one between a formally pure avant-garde and an instrumentalist view of art but, importantly, as one “between two ways of conceiving the relations between art and ideology.” I believe that Bois is substantially correct in his suggestive analysis of the way in which technical radicalism can, and was intended to, function not purely aesthetically but as “a radical critique of the social order.”<sup>100</sup> His essential point is that Lissitzky was at first able to sustain a radical suspension of alternatives, to destabilize the spectator's spatial assumptions—as analogues for social assumptions—without replacing them with readymade solutions; but that, as the dictatorship grew in power, it overwhelmed this fragile possibility and inserted its own new/old closures into the sphere of graphic and ideological work alike. “As long as Lissitzky kept intact the utopian force of his (political) desire,” the radical project was sustainable; but “as soon as the circumstances closed off his utopian impulse,” he was faced with no possibilities other than silence or service.<sup>101</sup>

The foregoing discussion of the Left Opposition may have deepened understanding of the context which helped the avant-garde to sustain the transformative force of its political desire. In similar vein, it may help to know the precise nature of the “circumstances” which finally “closed off” this impulse—not least because such knowledge may suggest why, for some at least, service won out over silence. This is always, one suspects, going to be puzzling to those of a liberal cast of mind: how can avant-garde artists bring themselves to serve a totalitarian dictatorship? The answer can only be coercion! Conversely, to conservatives, that service confirms the iniquity of those who lend their support to violent revolution in the first place.

The preceding account can shed some light on this “inexplicable” transformation by once again situating the left front in art in terms of a wider left in the Soviet political process of the 1920s. The paradox is that the final defeat of the Left Opposition at the end of 1927 quickly seemed to be reversed as the policies of the left apparently rose phoenixlike from the ashes of opposition to become the Party leadership's

new official position. There is insufficient space here to dwell on this shift, but, in brief, what happened was twofold. Although some Trotskiists and in particular Trotskii himself remained opposed to the Stalinist bureaucracy—and were cast into outer darkness for it—others, and in addition those behind Zinov'ev, quickly turned around and sought readmission to the fold. Simultaneously with these political shifts, the economic contradictions of NEP finally came to a head. Some of the flavor of the situation comes out in a memorandum from Maksim Litvinov to Russian diplomatic representatives abroad, dated February 9, 1928: “In the last few days the economic situation, contrary to earlier expectations, has deteriorated sharply. Serious breakdowns in supply have already occurred on the food market which will probably force the workers' and peasants' government to start rationing the most important food items within the next few days . . . The situation is to be regarded as extremely serious . . . I repeat once again that the workers' and peasants' government is seriously concerned about the future course of events.”<sup>102</sup> Crisis in the countryside was matched by crisis in the cities. Major food shortages forced people onto the private market where prices were higher, which had the effect of producing *de facto* wage cuts. Consequently, strikes broke out. Added to this, old machinery in the factories was wearing out anyway under the drive to increase production, with the result that the condition of workers deteriorated. The circumstances of those who were unemployed was worse. The result was that “alcoholism, prostitution, ‘hooliganism’ and crime assumed frightening dimensions, amounting to a veritable social disaster.”<sup>103</sup> The leadership's response was to revert to the “extraordinary measures” of War Communism, which in this case essentially amounted to a war on the peasantry in the form of the forced extraction of food for the cities. This process involved the leadership around Stalin turning on its erstwhile NEP ally, Bukharin, who now assumed leadership of a short-lived Right Opposition dedicated to preserving NEP and the system of supports for the peasant. This turn against the right, and against NEP, and the rapid resumption of a rhetoric, if not yet a reality, of planned intervention in the economy—which then led quickly to the adoption of the Five-Year Plan proper and, concomitantly, to a renewed emphasis on industry rather than agriculture, i.e., on the worker rather than the peasant—conspired to convey an impression to only too willing oppositionists that the Party had finally seen the light and adopted the program of the left.

This impression was strengthened by a dramatic increase in propaganda against the new “right deviation,” as well as, once again, the pronouncement of a new line in the International. This referred to a “third period,” a period of new class antagonisms following on the period of stabilization to which NEP had been a response. The “third period” constituted a lurch to ultraleftism, an assertion of “class against class,” according to which, for example, social democrats became, rather than potential allies of Communists against capital, class enemies indistinguishable from Fascists as upholders of international capitalism. The rhetorical madhouse which the international Communist movement became—wherein that movement was effectively reduced to a tool of Russian foreign policy—was accompanied both in the Soviet Union and abroad by a renewed emphasis on “proletarianism.”

Many erstwhile Left Oppositionists now became the staunchest defenders of the new “left” turn—of militant proletarianism and, in particular, of the Five-Year Plan. That this allegedly left turn had nothing to do with either Bolshevik internationalism—its basis, after all, was the slogan of “socialism in one country”—or with improved conditions for the workers, escaped notice in the welter of propaganda in an

increasingly centralized political system which now lacked any place for dissent. Workers occupied center stage for propaganda. The point was, they had to. They were the ones who were making the sacrifices to build up the new autarkic economy: heroes of propaganda on the one (mythical) hand, victims of "primitive socialist accumulation" on the other (all too real) one. Contrary to appearances at the time, what was happening was far from an implementation of the left's policies in favor of a working-class-based socialist democracy; it was the final defeat of such a vision. Carr in his definitive history of the process speaks of a "counterrevolution." Deutscher calls it Stalin's "second revolution." Reiman refers to "a complex break with the meaning and essence of the social doctrine of socialism."<sup>104</sup> Alex Callinicos sums up the situation: "'Socialist' industrialization in the USSR was made possible not simply by the destruction of the peasantry but by the intense exploitation of the very class which in theory ruled the country and was supposed to be the main beneficiary of the changes involved."<sup>105</sup> Even Trotskii was not completely clear about what was going on. For most people, the wave of propaganda about the "third period," the left turn, and the great leap to build up a workers' state before it was crushed by the imperialists carried all before it. As Stalin put it in 1931: "The pace must not be slackened. We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must close this gap in ten years. Either we shall do it, or they will crush us."<sup>106</sup> If the left front of the arts was indeed influenced by the fortunes of the Left Opposition, it would not be entirely surprising to find committed avant-gardists throwing their technical expertise behind the institution of the Five-Year Plan.

One of the points which needs to be borne in mind here is the class position of artists and designers, not to mention theorists. They were not proletarians. They would not have experienced the sharp end of the exploitation mounting in the factories and mines. Quite the contrary: the misery in the countryside and the superintensification of productivity in industry would all have been mediated through the terms of the very propaganda campaign whose articulation *was* the site of the contribution of the designers. The chance to participate in the great leap revolved around belief in the official image (unless one wants to postulate mendacity of a degree which seems highly unlikely). A hint of the pressures and adjustments involved comes through in a comment by Laci to Benjamin shortly before he left the Soviet Union in January 1927. She claims he does not understand what is going on, and tells him how, shortly after her own arrival in Russia, she had wanted to return to Europe, "because everything seemed finished in Russia and the opposition was absolutely correct." What Laci is at pains to impress upon Benjamin, however, is that *she* had been wrong. Now she understands that things are changing. What is happening is "the conversion of revolutionary effort into technological effort." Now, "revolutionary work does not signify conflict or civil war but rather electrification, canal construction, creation of factories."<sup>107</sup> The ideology of "socialism in one country" and the way it was presented, as if a corner had been turned so that practical work on the new society could begin, seeped into the perspectives even of those who had originally been hostile to the turn events were taking. This is not to say that material circumstances did not count for something. At the very time during the First Five-Year Plan when industrial wages were falling by fifty percent, Stalin incorporated into his program systematic differentials in favor of managers and specialists. It is not unknown, after all, even in our own impeccable institutions of higher enlightenment, for hearts and minds to follow wage packets.

One of the key social roles in any system is that of

technician-specialist. The notion in a workers' democracy is that these individuals are controlled by the mass of workers through the organs of that industrial democracy. In a capitalist system, as, indeed, in the bureaucratic system operating by that time in the Soviet Union, their functions are, however, managerial. With the so-called Shakhty trial in 1928, which set the pace for the show trials of the thirties, a scare was unleashed against foreign specialists as "saboteurs." Concomitantly, the need for new "Soviet specialists" was proclaimed. It is probably in this context that it becomes possible to understand Rodchenko's enthusiasm for transferring jurisdiction of Vkhutein from Narkompros—which was now seen as hopelessly generalist and tainted with Anatolii Lunacharskii's old-fashioned liberalism—to Vesenkha, the Council of the National Economy and prime mover in the call for new Soviet experts. This is an instance of the way in which the situation in the late twenties, after all the difficulties experienced by the left under NEP, seemed to offer a new lease on life to the erstwhile avant-garde project of the "artist-constructor." When the first groups of Rodchenko's students graduated from Dermetfak (the combined Woodworking and Metalworking faculties) in 1928 and 1929, this was the context into which they fitted. Commentary on the event in the Constructivist-influenced architectural press enthused that "Until today our industry has had no specific core of specialists working on the rational construction of articles used in everyday life . . . Vkhutein has now begun to turn out specialists of this type."<sup>108</sup>

Given this kind of productive locale, it is unlikely that figures such as Rodchenko and Lissitzky saw through to the problems of the working class at the base of the system. Or, to the extent that they did, it is, conversely, very likely that they believed themselves to be involved in the amelioration of the workers' condition rather than the bolstering of the very system which oppressed them. Thus Lissitzky in his 1930 *An Architecture for World Revolution* explicitly accords to the architect the role of leading emancipatory force for the "new life," given the fact that, left to their own devices, the "masses . . . tend to be shortsighted as far as their own growth is concerned."<sup>109</sup> Without this idealization, both of the role of the architect/designer/engineer and of the nature of the society that was actually being built out of the crash industrialization and forced collectivization of the First Five-Year Plan, how could Lissitzky have written that "in our country the factory has ceased to exist as a place of exploitation and as a hated institution," and continue that, under the Five-Year Plan, "the factory has become the real place of education: the university for new socialist man?"<sup>110</sup> The myth by which they were completely carried away could not have been further from the truth. Quite the reverse of crucibles of socialist education, the factories were increasingly places of exploitation of the working class. No less a figure than Lazar' Kaganovich, one of Stalin's closest collaborators on the Central Committee, argued, somewhat at variance with Lissitzky's claim, that "the earth should tremble when the director walks round the plant."<sup>111</sup>

It is extremely difficult to think oneself into a situation of such contradictions, not that the system inhabited by Western academics today is free of its own. Klutskis, a Latvian as well as an Old Bolshevik—a potentially fatal combination in Stalin's Russia—became one of the most powerful graphic voices of the Five-Year Plans and an honored designer involved in work for international exhibitions. None of this prevented him from being arrested in 1938 and shot in a prison camp amid a purge directed not only against national minorities but, tellingly, against remnants of the Left Opposition (some of whom, with unlikely heroism, had continued to organize in the Gulag). Lissitzky survived. So did Rodchenko, who in 1930

documented the building of the White Sea Canal in characteristically dramatic, formally dynamic, photographs. The White Sea Canal has since been revealed as effectively a mobile forced-labor camp in which tens if not hundreds of thousands died. At the time, along with Magnitogorsk and Dneprostroi, it was one of *the* prestige construction projects. The myth was that previously antisocial elements underwent voluntary socialist reeducation, working to the music of their own orchestras and supervised only by a few benign Interior Ministry police. Western enthusiasts such as Louis Aragon were completely bowled over by the project, and in Aragon's case it was instrumental in confirming his break with Surrealism and Trotskiism and accession to an orthodox Communist position which he sustained for the rest of his life. What did Rodchenko see? What could he have done about it, anyway? It was not easy even to stop working in Stalin's Russia without drawing attention to oneself. And again, there is the question of belief.

This takes us a long way from the question of the artistic left front's relation to a political Left Opposition, and the distance doubtless increases as the 1930s go on. Yet such a range of possibilities, posed most starkly by the alternatives of a retreat into silence or an embrace of the official line, did confront the avant-garde at the end of the 1920s. Even the choice of "silence" was a relative one and depended, in part, on the resources an artist or designer needed in order to carry on practicing. Thus disfavor as experienced by the architect Ivan Leonidov did lead to silence. In Tatlin's case, his eccentricity may be thought to have increased with the *Letatlin* project (1929–32). Thereafter, he withdrew into work for the theater and a private—and apparently occasional—return to painting. Klutskis and Lissitzky, on the contrary, seem to have gone about the propaganda task with some enthusiasm. Rodchenko's work appears to have split into "official" graphic design, on the one hand, and his private, melancholy circus paintings, on the other. This resumption of the two wings of bourgeois "fine" and "applied" art stands as fair testimony to the failure of the project of the synthesizer, the artist-constructor, building the new society from a wholly original and specific practical position.<sup>113</sup> The most catastrophic and implacable recognition of that failure was Maiakovskii's. Just days before his suicide in 1930, he used the metonym of a candy wrapper to show how everything had gone wrong. Futurists had fought against Classicism, against the cultural values of bourgeois society. In this spirit, Maiakovskii himself and Rodchenko had worked for Mossel'prom and other state enterprises in an attempt to make new values fundamental to the daily life of the socialist society. Yet even in 1924, that daily life was unregenerated, sustained by the conditions of an economic policy which was allowing, even inviting, the old back in. The revival of the opposition in 1926–27 gave a glimmer of hope—sufficient, at least, to restart *Lef*. The apparent belated recognition of the left's policies by the leadership, and the formulation of the Five-Year Plans, carried many along with it. This conjunction stimulated the formation of the October group. Maiakovskii even tried once again to draw closer to proletarianism by seeking membership in RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), this time to little avail. By 1930, Maiakovskii saw that all had been a mirage. What had happened was not the belated resumption of the values of the left but the final emplacement of a social formation which would bury the left and its revolution for generations. At this moment, in a meeting, as a gesture of friendship, a woman gave Maiakovskii a candy, with a Mossel'prom label on one side and a picture of the Venus de Milo on the other.

The ridiculous little item was like a condenser for everything that had gone wrong: the "twenty years of work," as

well as the October Revolution, which had given that work practical focus, taken it out of the realm of the avant-garde cénacle, and appeared to offer it a world to work with. Maiakovskii's recognition was bleak: "So, the thing you've been fighting against for twenty years has now won."<sup>113</sup> His conclusion had a remorseless logic, matched perhaps only by Benjamin's later strictures about the need for the radical Communist intellectual to "denature" his work if necessary, to render it useless to all rather than usable by the enemy.<sup>114</sup> Maiakovskii was, in fact, used by his enemy when canonized as poet of the Revolution by Stalin in the mid-1930s in a grotesque about-face. Even Boris Pasternak, no friend of the Revolution, commented that this was Maiakovskii's second death, one for which he was not responsible. Not everyone was possessed of Maiakovskii's insight. The ideological power of the dictatorship was colossal. And the Five-Year Plans were, seemingly, successful: the Soviet Union built while the capitalist world largely stagnated. Designers had an important place, and were presumably gratified to serve what Lissitzky in 1930 still saw as the development of "a Socialistic society."<sup>115</sup> No one who has not taken up an oppositional position against the weight of a society's dominant readings should feel legitimated to criticize Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Klutskis, and others who designed for Stalin in the 1930s, particularly after Fascism became the main enemy. It was, though, a long way from October: closer, one might say, to the Berlin Wall than to Tatlin's Tower, both monuments in their own ways to Communism and what became of it. Now that the Wall has come down, international socialism may mean something again. Whether it does so or not is an open, yet concrete question: "open" as the Tower, "concrete" as the Wall; and as real as the relation of art and politics.

## Notes

I would like to thank Steve Edwards for encouraging me to complete this essay, and my editor Jane Bobko for her invaluable contribution to improving the manuscript.

Lenin's remark in the epigraph was made in Zurich during the First World War in conversation with a young Romanian Dadaist, Marcu. Quoted in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets* (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1951), p. xviii.

1. John Bowlt, "The Old New Wave," *New York Review of Books*, February 16, 1984, p. 28.
2. Vladimir Maiakovskii, letter to Nikolai Chuzhak, January 23, 1923, quoted in Wiktor Woroszyński, *The Life of Mayakovsky*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Gollancz, 1972), p. 315. Woroszyński's "biography" consists of a collage of quotations from the writings of Maiakovskii and his contemporaries.
3. Andrei Nakov, "Stylistic Changes—Painting Without a Referent," trans. Susan Spund, in David Elliott, ed., *Alexander Rodchenko*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1979), pp. 56–57.
4. Vassily Rakitin, "The Avant-Garde and the Art of the Stalinist Era," in Hans Gunther, ed., *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 185.
5. El Lissitzky, "Proun Space," in *An Architecture for World Revolution*, trans. Eric Dluhosch (London: Lund Humphries, 1970), p. 138.
6. El Lissitzky, "Basic Premises," in *Architecture for World Revolution*, p. 27.
7. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), p. 58.
8. Rakitin, "Avant-Garde and Art," p. 186.
9. Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America*, April 1988, pp. 161–81.
10. Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 2.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
13. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (Fall 1984), pp. 82–119.
14. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18.
15. See Boris Groys, "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde," in *Culture of the Stalin Period*, pp. 122–47, and Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China*, trans. Robert Chandler (London: Collins Harvill, 1990). All quotations that follow are from these two works. On Golomstock, see also Paul Wood, "The Retreat from Moscow," *Artscribe* 88 (September 1991), pp. 48–53.
16. Bois, "El Lissitzky," p. 175.
17. Lenin, in July 1918, quoted in Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern* (London: Bookmarks, 1985), p. 7.
18. E. H. Carr, *Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926–1929*, vol. 3, pt. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 1018.
19. Victor Serge, quoted in Peter Sedgewick, introduction to *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901–1941*, by Victor Serge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. xv–xvi. The passage is quoted again in Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 25. The opening chapters of this book contain further arguments for the discontinuity of Bolshevik Marxism and Stalinism.
20. A partial exception here is the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick: *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1978).
21. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 93.
22. E. H. Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin, 1917–1929* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 34.
23. On this shift, see Paul Wood, "Art and Politics in a Workers State," *Art History* 8, no. 1 (March 1985), pp. 105–24.
24. Vladimir Maiakovskii, quoted in Woroszyński, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 185–86.
25. In this connection, a word of caution is in order for those who leap to condemn Osip Brik for his probable involvement at this time with the Cheka. Whatever the state security organs later became, it was at that time a privilege to defend the Revolution against its enemies on a "front" which paralleled the actual fighting front of the Red Army. Feliks Dzerzhinskii himself is described by Deutscher (*Prophet Unarmed*, p. 85) as "incorruptible, selfless and intrepid," a complex figure who existed in permanent tension between the sordid demands of the Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle against a Counterrevolution and a "lofty idealism," which made him in his comrades' eyes a Savonarola of the Revolution. A similar austerity seems to have characterized Brik.
26. Michael Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The U.S.S.R. on the Eve of the "Second Revolution"*, trans. George Saunders (London: I. B. Tauris, 1987).
27. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (London: Pluto, 1984), p. 73.
28. Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth, *October* 35 (Winter 1985), p. 44.
29. David Elliott, introduction to Elliott, *Alexander Rodchenko*, p. 6.
30. Varvara Stepanova, "Photomontage," in Elliott, *Alexander Rodchenko*, p. 93.
31. Osip Brik, "Into Production," in Elliott, *Alexander Rodchenko*, pp. 90–91, 130–31. See also Osip Brik, "Mayakovsky and the Literary Movements of 1917–1930," in "Osip Brik: Selected Writings Presented by Maria Enzensberger," *Screen* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1974), pp. 35–118. See especially p. 69. I also discuss this point in my "Art and Politics in a Workers State." See especially pp. 114–15.
32. *Kino-Eye*, p. 13.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
34. Viktor Shklovskii, quoted in Woroszyński, *Mayakovsky*, p. 312.
35. Victor Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Monad Press, 1973), pp. 39–40.

36. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 9.
37. K. Miklashevskii, "Hypertrophy in Art," quoted in Larissa Zhadova, ed., *Tatlin*, trans. Paul Filotas et al. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 137 n. 35.
38. Vladimir Maiakovskii, quoted in Woroszylski, *Mayakovsky*, p. 415.
39. Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin*, pp. 57–58.
40. S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, ed. Vieri Quilici, trans. Huw Evans (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p. 99.
41. Osip Brik, quoted *ibid.*, p. 171.
42. Vladimir Tatlin, quoted in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, p. 143.
43. Vladimir Tatlin, quoted *ibid.*, p. 268.
44. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p. 11.
45. Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin*, p. 40.
46. Nikolai Aseev, quoted in Woroszylski, *Mayakovsky*, p. 299.
47. Alexei Gan, "On the programme and work plan of the group of Constructivists," quoted in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 92 n. 14.
48. Vladimir Tatlin, quoted in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, p. 252.
49. S. Tretyakov, "We Raise the Alarm," in "Documents from *Novy Lef*," ed. and trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1971–72), pp. 6off.
50. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 146.
51. See Paul Wood, "Realisms and Realities," in *Modern Art: Practices and Debates*, book 3, forthcoming.
52. Deutscher, *Prophet Unarmed*, p. 41.
53. Lev Trotskii, speech to the Twelfth Party Congress, April 20, 1923, quoted *ibid.*, p. 100.
54. Leon Trotsky, "Toward Capitalism or Socialism?" in *The Challenge of the Left Opposition*, ed. Naomi Allen, vol. 1 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), p. 322.
55. Tatlin's old rival, Malevich (at this time director of Ginkhuk), added his voice to the criticism of Tatlin's way of running his department.
56. Vladimir Tatlin, "Report of the Section for Material Culture's Work for 1923–1924" and "Report of the Section for Material Culture's Research Work for 1924," in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, pp. 254–57.
57. Editorial in *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 5–6 (1926), quoted in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 207.
58. Vladimir Maiakovskii, statement in discussion on Futurism with Proletkul't, 1923, quoted in Woroszylski, *Mayakovsky*, p. 317.
59. Deutscher, *Prophet Unarmed*, p. 100.
60. Naomi Allen, introduction to *Challenge of the Left Opposition*, vol. 1, p. 35.
61. Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, p. 3.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
65. Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October*, in *Challenge of the Left Opposition*, vol. 1, pp. 199–200.
66. Lenin, quoted in Irving Howe, *Trotsky* (London: Fontana, 1978), p. 79.
67. Allen, introduction to *Challenge of the Left Opposition*, vol. 1, p. 29.
68. Reiman, *Birth of Stalinism*, p. 19.
69. Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, p. 103.
70. Reiman, *Birth of Stalinism*, pp. 23–24.
71. *The Platform of the Opposition*, in Leon Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition*, ed. Naomi Allen and George Saunders, vol. 2 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1980), pp. 302–3.
72. Reiman, *Birth of Stalinism*, p. 32.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
74. Osip Brik, quoted in Woroszylski, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 311–12.
75. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p. 53.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
78. Vladimir Maiakovskii, quoted in Woroszylski, *Mayakovsky*, p. 415.
79. *Kino-Eye*, p. 48.
80. Vladimir Maiakovskii, quoted in Woroszylski, *Mayakovsky*, p. 415.
81. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p. 15.
82. "Declaration of the Constructivists," in "Documents from *Lef*," ed. and trans. Richard Sherwood, *Screen* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1971–72), pp. 25–58.
83. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p. 60.
84. This aspect is discussed further in Wood, "Art and Politics in a Workers State."
85. This is an area fraught with difficulty. Annette Michelson, in her introduction to *Kino-Eye*, cites Karl Radek's 1931 criticism of Vertov's *Entuziazm (Symphony of the Donbass)*. Radek had been an oppositionist who, since 1928, had thrown in his lot with the Stalinist bureaucracy. For Michelson, this conservative political turn, which constitutes "the place and position from which he was speaking," makes it "hardly an accident" that Radek was driven to dismiss Vertov's work (*Kino-Eye*, p. lviii). The case of Bukharin is interesting and arguably more complex. He is generally acknowledged to have been, along with Trotskii and Lunacharskii, one of the main Bolshevik figures who evinced an interest in and a sophisticated understanding of artistic developments. Yet Bukharin became an ally of Stalin's in promoting NEP from its outset; in the later 1920s, after the defeat of Trotskii, he was the figurehead of the Right Opposition on whom Stalin next turned. Initially, however, before the emergence of the splits under NEP, Bukharin had indeed been perceived as a leader of the left of the Party. There would be far-reaching implications for an argument that claimed that the ultimate failure of his peasant-oriented road to socialism found some prefiguration in a split between his aesthetics and his politics. Whereas in the case of the Left Opposition and Lef, although that relation is never fully articulated (to the detriment, it must be said, of the political project no less than the artistic one), a passage remained open: a passage through which there have moved such tensioned figures as Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht and



their descendants in the postwar period who have attempted to resist both the complete sundering and the complete implosion of art and politics.

86. Aleksandr Rodchenko, quoted in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, p. 115.

87. El Lissitzky, "A. and Pangeometry," in *Architecture for World Revolution*, p. 142.

88. Ibid.

89. A brief discussion of October's significance is offered in Wood, "Realisms and Realities."

90. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (London: RedWords, 1991).

91. Ibid., pp. 181–82.

92. Ibid., p. 50.

93. Nicholas Gorlov, "On Futurisms and Futurism: Concerning Comrade Trotsky's Article" and *Futurism and Revolution*, in *The Futurists, The Formalists, and the Marxist Critique*, ed. Christopher Pike, trans. Christopher Pike and Joe Andrew (London: Ink Links, 1979), pp. 169–80 and 181–242, respectively.

94. Gérard Conio, preface to Section 3 of Pike, *Futurists*, p. 162.

95. Gorlov, *Futurism and Revolution*, in Pike, *Futurists*, p. 211.

96. Ibid., p. 199.

97. Ibid., p. 211.

98. Margarita Tupitsyn, "Gustav Klutssis: Between Art and Politics," *Art in America*, January 1991, pp. 41–47.

99. Bois, "El Lissitzky," p. 167.

100. Ibid., p. 168.

101. Ibid., p. 175.

102. M. M. Litvinov, Deputy People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, memorandum to diplomatic representatives of the USSR, February 9, 1928, reprinted in Reiman, *Birth of Stalinism*, pp. 138–42.

103. Reiman, *Birth of Stalinism*, p. 55.

104. Ibid., p. 86.

105. Callinicos, *Revenge of History*, p. 32.

106. Stalin, quoted in Hallas, *The Comintern*, p. 123.

107. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p. 82.

108. *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura* 3 (1929), quoted in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, pp. 212–13 n. 48.

109. El Lissitzky, "The Club as a Social Force," in *Architecture for World Revolution*, p. 44.

110. Ibid., p. 57.

111. Lazar' Kaganovich, quoted in Callinicos, *Revenge of History*, p. 35.

112. I have not been able fully to address the relations of Malevich's work to the political perspective explored in this essay. Although it is, of course, distinct from Constructivism, I see no reason to suspect that his work radically violates the view presented here, at least for the greater part of the period investigated. His later work, however, does appear to pose specific problems. The prevailing tendency has been to dismiss his return to figuration as an oddity or a capitulation to the burgeoning forces of Social(ist) Realism. Major exhibitions

such as that at the Stedelijk Museum in 1989 have now surely buried this argument. I address the works briefly in my "Realisms and Realities"; so, too, does Charles Harrison in his "Abstraction," in *Modern Art: Practices and Debates*, book 2, forthcoming. In political terms, a question remains: what did it mean that Malevich turned again to depictions of peasant life at precisely the time of the forced collectivization of agriculture and the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class," as Stalinist rhetoric chillingly has it? Whatever the answer to this question, a recently published letter of April 8, 1932, from Malevich to Vsevolod Meierkhol'd makes clear that for him the return to figuration was not a break with the Revolution but a way of safeguarding it and preventing the return of Classicism and Naturalism:

*Painting has turned back from the non-objective way to the object, and the development of painting has returned to the figurative part of the way that had led to the destruction of the object. But on the way back, painting came across a new object that the proletarian revolution had brought to the fore and which had to be given form, which means that it had to be raised to the level of a work of art . . . I am utterly convinced that if you keep to the way of Constructivism, where you are now firmly stuck, which raises not one artistic issue except for pure utilitarianism and in theatre simple agitation, which may be one hundred per cent consistent ideologically but is completely castrated as regards artistic problems, and forfeits half its value. If you go on as you are . . . then Stanislavski will emerge as the winner in the theatre and the old forms will survive. And as to architecture, if the architects do not produce artistic architecture, the Greco-Roman style of Zyeltovski will prevail, together with the Repin style in painting (Kazimir Malevich, "Two Letters to Meyerhold," *Kunst & Museumjournaal* 6 {1990}, pp. 9–10).*

113. Vladimir Maiakovskii, quoted in Christopher Pike, introduction to *Futurists*, p. 19.

114. Walter Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, April 17, 1931, in Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Faber, 1982), pp. 231–33.

115. El Lissitzky, "Housing Communes," in *Architecture for World Revolution*, p. 42.

# The Great Utopia

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

*Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*

*State Tret'iakov Gallery*

*State Russian Museum*

*Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt*

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

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

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June 5-August 23, 1992

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

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### **Prefaces**

*Thomas Krens, Michael Govan*

x

*Vladimir Gusev, Evgeniia Petrova, Iurii Korolev*

xiii

*Jürgen Weber*

xiv

# Contents

## **The Politics of the Avant-Garde**

*Paul Wood*

1

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

*Vasilii Rakitin*

25

## **The Critical Reception of the 0.10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua**

*Jane A. Sharp*

38

## **Unovis: Epicenter of a New World**

*Aleksandra Shatskikh*

53

## **COLOR PLATES 1-318**

## **A Brief History of Obmokhu**

*Aleksandra Shatskikh*

257

## **The Transition to Constructivism**

*Christina Lodder*

266

## **The Place of Vkhutemas in the Russian Avant-Garde**

*Natal'ia Adaskina*

282

## **What Is Linearism?**

*Aleksandr Lavrent'ev*

294

## **The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization**

*Hubertus Gassner*

298

## **The Third Path to Non-Objectivity**

*Evgenii Kovtun*

320

## **COLOR PLATES 319-482**

## **The Poetry of Science: Projectionism and Electroorganism**

*Irina Lebedeva*

441

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

*Charlotte Douglas*

450

## **The Russian Presence in the 1924 Venice Biennale**

*Vivian Endicott Barnett*

466

## **The Creation of the Museum of Painterly Culture**

*Svetlana Dzhafarova*

474

## **Fragmentation versus Totality: The Politics of (De)framing**

*Margarita Tupitsyn*

482

## **COLOR PLATES 483-733**

## **The Art of the Soviet Book, 1922-32**

*Susan Compton*

609

## **Soviet Porcelain of the 1920s: Propaganda Tool**

*Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky*

622

## **Russian Fabric Design, 1928-32**

*Charlotte Douglas*

634

## **How Meierkhof'd Never Worked with Tatlin, and What Happened as a Result**

*Elena Rakitin*

649

## **Nonarchitects in Architecture**

*Anatolii Strigalev*

665

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

*Catherine Cooke*

680

## **Index of Artists and Works**

716