

Figure 13. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Composition no. 64 (Black on Black)*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 74.5 cm. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery.

# Faktura

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## The making of the Russian avant-garde

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Every art [*technē*] is concerned with bringing something into existence, and to think by art is to investigate how to generate something which may or may not exist and of which the [moving] principle is in the producer and not in the thing produced; for art is not concerned with things which exist or come to be of necessity, nor with things which do so according to their nature, for these have the [moving] principle in themselves.

*Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. Hippocrates Apostle (Boston: D. Reidel, 1975), p. 104 (bk. Z, 4)*

When people fall silent, stones will begin to speak.

*Old saying, reported in Vladimir Markov [Voldemars Matvejs], Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh: Faktura (St. Petersburg: Soiuz Molodezhi, 1914)*

Like its cognates *facture* and *fattura*, the Russian word *faktura* stems from the Latin *facere* (to make). In conventional Russian usage today, *faktura* refers to the way in which the work of art has been made, its material constituents worked. The *faktura* of an easel painting, for example, is the particular character of its maker's manipulation of the medium: the energy or reticence of brushstroke, the solidity or liquidity of pigment, the opacity or transparency of surface. When translated into English, however, *faktura* is most often rendered as "texture." While not incorrect, this rendering narrows the word's meaning to only the end result of the process of making, thereby suppressing its significant emphasis on that process itself. Because the latter emphasis is shared by its cognates, it seems reasonable to suggest that when translating *faktura* as it

is now deployed, "facture" is preferable to "texture." But if the word's translation today presents certain difficulties of a hermeneutic nature, these are greatly exacerbated when we consider *faktura* as a *historical* problem, which is the concern of the present essay.<sup>1</sup>

Without doubt, *faktura* was one of the central topoi of vanguard artistic practice and theoretical speculation in Russia in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is first found in the lexicon of visual artists in the early 1910s. From there, it was rather quickly taken up by Futurist poets and Formalist theorists.<sup>2</sup> Between roughly the years 1912 and 1922, *faktura's* meaning within the visual arts underwent significant transformation in two major respects. The first order of transformation was a matter of materiality: in the early 1910s, *faktura* primarily signified the working [*obrabotka*] of a *surface*. A decade later, however, the critic Nikolai Tarabukin stated in his 1923 book *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (Toward a Theory of Painting): "we . . . call the [very] working of the *material*, *faktura*."<sup>3</sup> In addition, Tarabukin asserted that "the material [now] dictates form to the artist, and not the other way around,"<sup>4</sup> thereby broaching a second order of transformation having to do with the problem of artistic subjectivity. With the transfer of the will to form (or the generative or "moving" principle) to the material

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1. Several critical essays have opened the discussion of *faktura* to historians of twentieth-century art more generally: Yve-Alain Bois, "Malevitch, le carré, le degré zéro," *Macula* 1 (1976):28–49; Margit Rowell, "Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura," *October* 7 (Winter 1978):83–108; and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (Fall 1984):83–120. For a brief survey of the term, see Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Faktura," in *Velikaia Utopiia* (Moscow: Galart, 1993), pp. 746–747.

2. On the significant interrelationship of the literary and visual arts with regard to the problem of *faktura*, a subject that I cannot broach in the present essay, see Aage Hansen-Löve, "Faktura, Fakturnost," *Russian Literature* 27 (January 1985):29–37, which is drawn from id., *Der Russische Formalismus* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978), pp. 93–98.

3. Nikolai Tarabukin, *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (Moscow: Vserossiiskii proletkul't, 1923), p. 33. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

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itself, *faktura*, once constituted as the very locus of artistic subjectivity, was reconfigured as the site of its explicit erasure. In the pages that follow, I will trace the process of *faktura*'s inextricably double transformation.

In devoting a chapter of *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* to an elucidation of the concept, Tarabukin conceded that "the problem of *faktura* [was] as old as painting itself." Nevertheless, he insisted upon its unprecedented specificity in recent Russian art, insofar as contemporary artists had "isolated" it as one of their chief concerns.<sup>5</sup> His colleague Nikolai Punin, a leftist critic and great proselytizer for Vladimir Tatlin, had similarly reported that young artists now considered their first priority to be *faktura*—that which "originates . . . from the purely material elements of [the] work [. . .] of art," but which cannot be reduced to the matter of surface alone.<sup>6</sup> Others went still further. In 1920 Viktor Shklovskii, a theorist of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOIAZ), in addressing himself to Tatlin's sculptural production, defined *faktura* as the ontological condition of art itself, as the very factor that differentiates art from not-art: "*Faktura* is the main distinguishing feature of that particular world of specially constructed objects, the totality of which we [call] art." This ontological condition determined, in turn, the task of the contemporary artist: the creation of a "palpable object—a *faktura*-object [*veshch' fakturnuiu*]," as opposed to a work in which the medium was subordinated or made "transparent" to its symbolic function.<sup>7</sup>

A quasi-neologistic impulse seems to have underscored the introduction of *faktura* into vanguard discourse in about 1912, since the word's purchase within the realm of aesthetics was altogether absent from the then-most-recent edition of the authoritative explanatory dictionary of Vladimir Dal'.<sup>8</sup> I would argue

that *faktura*'s advent within avant-garde circles was closely connected to a desire to resist the existing Russian term for the painter's mode of execution—*manera* (manner, style)—on the grounds that *manera* subordinated the materiality of production to the authorial subject orchestrating that production. The contemporary painter and writer Voldemars Matvejs, whose 1914 book on the subject I will be discussing, warned against the reduction of *faktura* to *manera*: "many people mistakenly understand by [the concept of] *faktura* only [that of] manner."<sup>9</sup> Historically, such reduction or subordination had been the norm. In the practice of connoisseurship, for example, "facture" had played a supporting role to "manner" in the assigning of previously unattributed pictures to individual artists. The Russian avant-garde, by contrast, rejected any such association of *faktura* with manner or style, thereby further distancing the Russian term from its now erstwhile western European cognates.

The same quasi-neologistic impulse that attended *faktura*'s advent continued to characterize the concept through the course of the ensuing decade with the result that the word's meaning, significance, and function never fully stabilized during the avant-garde period. In the present essay, I will distinguish five moments in *faktura*'s vanguard trajectory between 1912 and 1922. The first, second, and fifth are primarily textual; the third and fourth, sculptural. The first moment comprises *faktura*'s articulation as a modernist discourse of surface autonomy in avant-garde manifestos published before the October Revolution of 1917. I will focus on a 1912 essay by the Cubofuturist painter and poet David Burliuk. The second moment centers around Voldemars Matvejs's contemporaneously written book-length apologia for what we might now call "world" *faktura*, *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh: Faktura* (Principles of Creativity in the Plastic Arts: Faktura), in which Burliuk's narrowly modernist polemic is displaced by a veritable phantasmagoria of non-Western and old Russian kinds of *faktura*. Despite the privilege both Burliuk and Matvejs afforded the materiality of the object, however, they each continued to depend—although not always consistently, as we shall see—on the notion of *faktura* as the trace of individual artistic

5. Ibid., pp. 27–28.

6. *Pervyi tsikl leksii* (First Cycle of Lectures) (Petrograd, 1920), trans. Igor Serebriakov in Anna Kafetsi, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde 1910–1930: The G. Costakis Collection*, 3 vols. (Athens: National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 627, 628.

7. Viktor Shklovskii, "O fakture i kontrrel'efakh" (On Faktura and Counter-Reliefs) (1920), reprinted in his *Gamburgskii schet* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1990), p. 99, trans. (modified) in Larissa Zhadova, *Tatlin* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 341.

8. Vladimir Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka*, 3d ed., ed. Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (St. Petersburg: M. O. Vol'f, 1903–1909). Volume 4, containing the entry for *faktura*, appeared in 1909. The entry is entirely given over to the specialized commercial meaning of the word borrowed from the French for bill or invoice ("facture").

9. Vladimir Markov [Voldemars Matvejs], *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh: Faktura* (St. Petersburg: Soiuz Molodezhi, 1914), p. 9.

subjectivity. *Faktura*'s third and fourth moments, by contrast, were based upon the erasure of that trace, through the transfer of agency in the production of form from artist to material. While textual evidence for this dramatic resignification of *faktura* may be found already in Matvejs's book, it became explicit in artistic practice only in *faktura*'s third moment—Vladimir Tatlin's sculptural work of about 1914–1917. The fourth moment occurs in Aleksandr Rodchenko's production of *Spatial Constructions* in the aftermath of the Revolution, in which *faktura* as the erasure of the work of art's producing subjectivity found its most extreme expression.<sup>10</sup> *Faktura*'s final transformation took place in the drafting of the inaugural position statement of the Constructivist Group in Moscow in 1921.

My aim, then, is to reconstruct something of the complexity of *faktura*'s significance for the Russian avant-garde. This historical significance was partially lost in the word's official codification at mid-century in the state-authorized dictionaries of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, wherein *faktura* was defined as either "the nature of the working, [or] the structure, of any material," or "a distinguishing feature of artistic technique in works of art."<sup>11</sup> While these explanations include the first part of Tarabukin's definition quoted above, they bypass the second, and hence also *faktura*'s profound volte-face with regard to the problem of subjectivity. *Faktura*'s avant-garde trajectory is extraordinary, I would argue, in that it internalized *within the term itself* the complete reversal—or, in fact, the destruction—of its original significance as the trace of the artist's presence within the work of art.

## I

The earliest avant-garde statements on *faktura* are found in pre-Revolutionary manifestos and apologies published by Cubofuturist, Neoprimitivist, and Suprematist artists, such as David Burliuk, Natal'ia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Aleksandr Shevchenko,

Ol'ga Rozanova, and Kazimir Malevich.<sup>12</sup> These "fakturists"—if we can adopt Tarabukin's expression for artists explicitly engaged with the problem of *faktura*<sup>13</sup>—privileged the materiality of the pictorial surface over its illusionistic capacity to simulate depth. Or rather, they privileged the depth or substance of the surface itself, explicitly contradicting its conventional association with qualities of sheerness, flatness, and insubstantiality. For the critic Punin, "surface . . . [was] a kind of material: painted, possessing dimensions, volume and texture, it can be fluid or hard, brittle or resinous, elastic, dense and heavy, and like any other material it searches for its form."<sup>14</sup>

In its initial formulation, *faktura* signified a working of the surface that declared, self-reflexively, the autonomy, self-sufficiency, and autotelism of its own materiality now liberated from the task of representation. In a 1919 survey of the international phenomenon of Futurism, Roman Jakobson, a theorist of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, connected the avant-garde's new emphasis on *faktura* to the "emancipation of painting from elementary illusionism." In evident reference to Cubist painting, *papiers collés*, and constructed sculpture, Jakobson wrote: "*Faktura* no longer seeks any sort of justification for itself; it becomes autonomous, demands for itself new methods of formulation, new material. Pieces of paper begin to be pasted on the picture, sand is thrown on it. . . . cardboard, wood, tin . . . are used."<sup>15</sup> It was precisely this autonomy, Tarabukin's "fakturists" asserted, that had been suffocated by so-called mimetic modes of art-making (Academicism, Realism, and Symbolism),

12. See the manifestos translated in John Bowl, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 41–135. See also the inaugural text of Russian Formalism, Viktor Shklovskii, *The Resurrection of the Word* (St. Petersburg, 1914), trans. Richard Sherwood in *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts*, ed. Stephen Bann and John Bowl, Twentieth-Century Studies, nos. 7–8 (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), pp. 41–47. A first version of this text was presented by the young student of philology in December 1913, at the Futurist-infested Stray Dog nightclub in St. Petersburg no less.

13. See note 3, p. 28.

14. Nikolai Punin, *Tatlin (Against Cubism)* (Petrograd: IZO Narkompros, 1921), excerpt trans. in Zhadova (see note 7), p. 391.

15. Roman Jakobson, "Futurism" (1919), trans. Stephen Rudy in Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1987), pp. 29–30.

10. I should note, in advance, that my argument will not be that there were no more authorial subjects—the figure Rodchenko cut for himself in Moscow in the early 1920s was nothing if not authorial—but rather that his discourse was driven by the pursuit of its own erasure.

11. *Slovar' sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo iazyka* (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademia nauk SSSR, 1964), s.v. "faktura," vol. 16, col. 1217–1218.

wherein the representational function of the material had led to the repression of the fact of the work's *sdelannost'* ("made-ness"). "Color and *faktura*," Malevich wrote in 1916, "are of the greatest value in painterly creation—they are the essence of painting; but this essence has always been killed by the subject."<sup>16</sup>

The most substantial discussion of *faktura* within a modernist frame was published by David Burliuk. A middling poet and an even more middling painter, Burliuk was nevertheless a great Futurist provocateur and entrepreneur. Entitled simply "*Faktura*," Burliuk's essay was included, along with his reflections on Cubism, in *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (A Slap in the Face of Public Taste). *Poshchechina*, the inaugural miscellany of Russian Futurist manifestos and verse, was published collaboratively in December 1912 by Burliuk, his fellow poet-painter Vladimir Mayakovsky, and the poets Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksandr Kruchenykh.<sup>17</sup> The miscellany's title, shared by its now-famous opening manifesto, announced its authors' desire to *épater le bourgeois* by throwing "Pushkin, Dostoevsky, [and] Tolstoy . . . overboard from the Ship of Modernity." It closed with a warning of the imminent onslaught of the "Self-sufficient (self-centered) Word," a phonic and graphic entity devoid of any referent, an object in itself.<sup>18</sup>

In Burliuk's essay "Cubism," which consolidated a series of controversial lectures given in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1912, he made the same assertion with regard to painting: "Painting became art only in the 20th century. . . . Yesterday we did not have art.

Yesterday it was the means, today it has become the end. . . . It has begun to live for itself."<sup>19</sup> Burliuk declared Cubism the most "shocking" (that is, radical) of recent trends because it had been the first to discover a planar rather than linear or colorist way of analyzing nature.<sup>20</sup> This discovery had led, in his opinion, to an unprecedented attention to the planarity of the pictorial surface, particularly to its fragmentation and dislocation. Burliuk credited Cubism with the invention of a new set of pictorial rules or axioms—a "Canon of Displaced Construction"—which had overthrown the "Academic Canon" of harmony, symmetry, construction, and line as contour.<sup>21</sup>

Contemporaneously with the Cubists' discovery of the plane, Burliuk argued, "the whole immeasurable significance of *Faktura* in painting has . . . now been realized."<sup>22</sup> In his essay devoted specifically to *faktura*, he declared that in contemporary painting, *faktura*—by which he meant the materiality of the surface—was now an "end in itself [*samotsel'iu*]," whereas earlier it had been merely "Incidental [*Sluchaino*]."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, while Burliuk was explicit about his investment in *faktura* as a symbol of both individual liberty and artistic subjectivity,<sup>24</sup> this conviction did not develop into a full-blown discussion of *faktura* as the trace of artistic presence. Obsessed with the trace itself, rather than that to which it traces (whether referent or producer), Burliuk's priority was to evaluate the object itself: "The Object of rapture" was to be found, henceforth, neither "in the soul of the beholder nor that of the maker, but in [the very object] itself."<sup>25</sup>

The *faktura* of the work of art, rather than its subject matter, was the "ground [*pochvu*] upon which the viewer's most subtle feelings develop,"<sup>26</sup> precisely because *faktura* stimulates the gamut of human sensory perception—not only vision but also the haptic and

16. Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism* (Moscow, 1916), trans. in Bowlt (see note 12), p. 123. On Malevich's relationship to the problem of *faktura*, see Bois (see note 1), esp. pp. 37–40.

17. Nikolai Burliuk [David Burliuk], "Faktura," in *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (Moscow: G. L. Kuz'min and S. D. Dolinskii, 1912), pp. 102–110; id., "Kubizm," in *ibid.*, pp. 95–101, trans. in Bowlt (see note 12), pp. 69–77. Although signed by David's youngest brother, Nikolai (also a poet), the essay was written by David himself (see Bowlt [see note 12], p. 69). Further page references will be given for "Faktura" to the Russian original and for "Kubizm" to Bowlt's English translation.

18. David Burliuk et al., "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu," in *Poshchechina*, trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, ed. Anna Lawton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 51–52. Arbitrary capitalization occurs throughout the miscellany—a graphic device deployed for the purposes of what Shklovskii would call, in 1917, "defamiliarization [*ostranenie*];" I have maintained the device in quotations.

19. Bowlt (see note 12), p. 70. On Burliuk's lecture tours, see *ibid.*, pp. 69–70; Jeremy Howard, *The Union of Youth: An Artists' Society of the Russian Avant-Garde* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 136–140; and A. V. Krusanov, *Russkii avangard, 1907–1932*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996), vol. 1, p. 208.

20. Bowlt (see note 12), p. 74.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

23. See note 17, p. 106.

24. *Ibid.*; Bowlt (see note 12), p. 75.

25. "Faktura" (see note 17), p. 103.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

olfactory senses. Burliuk cites, but only in order to contradict, the (apocryphal) story of Rembrandt's warning to viewers who came too close to his painting: "don't smell it, don't smell it—it stinks [*voniaet*]."27 (A decade later, Tarabukin similarly rehearsed this commonplace prohibition against approaching the picture surface too closely for fear that the illusion it creates would dissolve into mere brushstrokes: "Thinking of the broad stroke of his own manner, Delacroix said, 'One should not smell the painting.'")28 For the Russian avant-garde, such warnings, beginning with Vasari's remarks about Titian's late style29 and endlessly repeated thereafter, repressed the , even the carnality, of the surface. It is precisely because "it stinks" that one should inhale deeply, Burliuk urged, for painting is but an art of "the aromas of color."30 Smelling the brushstrokes is a way of "feeling" the painting's palpability, rather than "seeing" the illusion it creates. Burliuk proposed the "topographical exploration of the picture," of its "wonderful, secret, little countries, where mountains, ravines, [and] abysses . . . are combined,"31 a topography belonging not to the painting's subject matter, but rather to its material substance. (Jakobson later recalled that when he visited museums with Burliuk, the latter's preoccupation with the "nagging *faktura*" of particular pictures was "quite out of the ordinary.")32

Asserting that the history of art must be, henceforth, "methodical" rather than anecdotal, Burliuk proposed a new "classification of works of art by *faktura*," rather than subject matter or genre.33 To this end, he invented an elaborate "Petrography of Painting" in which the study of "Surface [*Poverkhnost'*]" was classified by

category, sub-category, and sub-sub-category, covering the gamut of all possible painterly surfaces. The problem of surface, according to Burliuk, could be divided into two issues: on the one hand, the "type" of picture surface, and on the other, the "structure" of this surface. The "type" of picture surface may be smooth or rough. If smooth, the surface may be either brilliant (with various gradations of brilliance therein) or matte. If the surface is rough, it may be "splintery," "hooked," "earthy," or "blistered." (Burliuk's own preference was for the ornery; he later described the *faktura* of his own paintings of this period as predominantly "hooked, blistered, and splintered.")34 Then the "structure" of such surfaces may be classified as "granular," "fibrous," or "schistose."35 In each case, a given surface, and its structure, was understood to be homogeneous or at least unified in character.

Engaging this eccentric taxonomy, Burliuk sought to differentiate the two giants of French modernism—Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne, both gurus of his own formation as a painter. He defined the surface structure of Monet's *Rouen Cathedral* (1894), a painting that he had studied in Sergei Shchukin's residence that winter, as "fibrous":

Just under the glass, were growing kinds of moss—delicately colored in subtle orange, lilac, yellowish tones: the paint seemed to, and really did, have roots to its threads—they stretched upward from the canvas *recherché* and aromatic. "Fibrous structure (vertical)," I thought, "the delicate threads of strange and wonderful plants."36

Monet's surface was thus "organic," a living surface. Cézanne's surface structure, by contrast, was "inorganic." In a petrographic redescription of Cézanne's layering of squared-off brushstrokes (explicit in the late painting *Mont Ste-Victoire* [circa 1905–1906] in Shchukin's collection), Burliuk defined the structure of Cézanne's surfaces as "schistose": "colored stones:

27. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

28. See note 3, p. 29.

29. See Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. 1, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 458: "[Titian's] last works are executed with bold, sweeping strokes, and in patches of colour, with the result that they cannot be viewed from near by, but appear perfect at a distance."

30. "Faktura" (see note 17), pp. 102–103.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

32. Roman Jakobson, "A Futurian of Science," in *My Futurist Years*, ed. Bengt Jangfeldt and Stephen Rudy, trans. (modified) with an introduction by Stephen Rudy (New York: Marsilio, 1997), pp. 28–29.

33. "Faktura" (see note 17), pp. 102, 105. In both 1912 essays, Burliuk's explicit target was Aleksandr Benua (Alexandre Benois), an artist and theorist of the fin-de-siècle World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*) movement, and an influential and conservative critic, art historian, and arbiter of taste.

34. Burliuk, "Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista" (1929–1930), in *Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista: Pis'ma, Stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii Fond, 1994), p. 142. On Burliuk's delectation of raw matter more generally, see Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer* (1933), trans. Bowlt (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), pp. 45–46, 51.

35. "Faktura" (see note 17), p. 105.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–106. The translation of this quotation is by John Bowlt in *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930: New Perspectives*, ed. Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980), p. 130.

schists sliced with a sharp sword.<sup>37</sup> Burliuk's petrography, in sum, was a kind of poetic positivism directed toward the systematic production and delectation of the materiality of a surface liberated from representation.

For many readers, the Russian avant-garde's earliest formulation of *faktura* will seem to resonate very directly with Clement Greenberg's much more familiar mapping of modernism's ontological project in terms of medium-specificity (that is to say, in terms of an investigation of those material properties specific to painting alone). As is well known, Greenberg's critical enterprise, beginning in the late 1930s and continuing ever more stridently thereafter, flattened the dialectical nature of modernist pictorial endeavor into a comparable opposition of formal and semantic values.<sup>38</sup> Russian *faktura* does not depend, however, upon any ahistorical, retrospective grafting of the American critic's account. Building upon the legacy of late-nineteenth-century writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Russian artists and critics advanced precisely such a modernist polemic in the 1910s and early 1920s. For example, in Tarabukin's second important book of 1923, *Ot mol'berta k mashine* (From Easel to Machine), one finds the blunt assertion that ever since the Salons of the 1860s, "the saturation of the canvas with painterly content [has lain] in inverse proportion to [its] degree of thematic content."<sup>39</sup> However, for Tarabukin, unlike for Greenberg, the modernist trajectory engendered by Manet was, by the early 1920s, in a state of "crisis." The only possible resolution to this crisis, the Russian critic argued (in accordance with the Constructivists, as we shall see), was a total break with that trajectory itself—the rejection of the realm of the aesthetic altogether.<sup>40</sup>

37. "Faktura" (see note 17), p. 106. In a similar spirit, Malevich described Cézanne as "the inventor of a new *faktura* of the pictorial surface," quoted in Bois (see note 1), p. 37.

38. For Greenberg's most explicit early articulation of modernism's ontological project, see "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7, no. 4 (July–August 1940):305, 307–308; for his later, "triumphalist" (as Tom Crow once put it) articulation of this project, see "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961):101–108.

39. Tarabukin, *Ot mol'berta k mashine* (Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1923), p. 5.

40. It is true that, in the 1948 essay entitled "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," Greenberg veered a little toward Tarabukin's position in his confrontation with Jackson Pollock's so-called all-over procedure. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 221–225. As scholars have demonstrated, however, Greenberg utterly recoiled from

In any case, if for Burliuk the problem of *faktura* had stemmed from his need to come to terms with French modernism, other artists emphasized the roots of the problem in non-Western traditions, particularly those identified as Russian, such as the icon. In both essays in *Poshchechina*, Burliuk had mentioned such forms (which he called, approvingly, the "barbaric Folk arts"), but only in passing.<sup>41</sup> Burliuk's neglect of this issue was no doubt calculated to provoke his erstwhile allies, such as Larionov, Goncharova, and Shevchenko, who had recently come to insist upon the greater significance of indigenous traditions over French imports in the development of contemporary Russian art. This is not the place to open a discussion of this important polemic. Suffice to say, the problem of *faktura* was also enmeshed in a long-standing debate in Russian intellectual circles between Slavophiles and so-called Europeanizers.<sup>42</sup> From 1912 onward, contemporaneously with the advent of *faktura*, the avant-garde (including also its apologists) divided into factions precisely along the lines of this debate.<sup>43</sup>

## II

The most interesting discussion of *faktura* from a broadly Slavophile point of view was Voldemars Matvejs's book-length study of the problem, *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh: Faktura*.

any such suggestion of a break within the modernist tradition in his own later revision of his critical enterprise.

41. Bowlit (see note 12), pp. 76–77; "Faktura" (see note 17), p. 108.

42. The Slavophile movement, dating to the 1830s, sought to establish a national identity and culture in opposition to that imported from the West by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century. Somewhat paradoxically, the movement was in part stimulated by western European Romanticism, with its validation of local, regional, and national traditions, in opposition to the universalist claims of Enlightenment thought.

43. As Andrei Kovalev notes, among the staunchest defenders of the avant-garde were young art historians whose field of specialization was the reevaluation of old Russian art. "Samosoznanie kritiki: iz istorii sovetskogo iskusstvoznaniia 1920-kh godov," *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 26 (1990):358. (The earliest writings of Punin and Tarabukin, for example, were studies of icon painting.) This partly accounts for the otherwise rather surprising conjunction in Punin of Slavophilia and avantgardism (the latter being more usually associated with Europeanizers), a conjunction that underscores the critic's configuration of Tatlin's "origins" exclusively within old Russian tradition (that is, Rublev), rather than in relation to Western European precedent (that is, Picasso). See Punin (see note 14), pp. 347–348, 389–393.

Matvejs was a Latvian painter and critic who wrote in Russian under the pseudonym Vladimir Markov. His manuscript was drafted in fall 1912, contemporaneously with Burliuk's essay, but its publication was delayed until January 1914.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Burliuk, Matvejs was no Futurist, neither as a painter (his most "avant-garde" work was Symbolist), nor as a critic (he believed that contemporary art, with regard to the question of *faktura*, had almost nothing to offer). For Matvejs, *faktura* was a problem exemplified not so much by French modernism as by ancient, non-Western, and old Russian forms and methods of art-making. Although it lacked the ontological drive of mainstream modernism, Matvejs's polemic may nevertheless be construed as modernist in a much broader sense of that phenomenon, insofar as he argued that the rejuvenation of contemporary art could only occur through the cultivation of an awareness (but not imitation) of the diversity of "world" *faktura*. During the period in which he was researching and writing *Printsipy*, as well as related books on African sculpture (*Iskusstvo negrov*) and the art of Rapanui (Easter Island) (*Iskusstvo ostrova Paskhi*), Matvejs was a painting student at the Academy of Art in St. Petersburg. He was also a member of the Union of Youth (*Soiuz molodezhi*) in St. Petersburg, a broadly inclusive avant-garde artists' society, which published a journal and various texts, including Matvejs's *Printsipy*, and organized numerous exhibitions of, and debates about, contemporary art.

Matvejs certainly acknowledged the historical subordination of *faktura* to the task of representation: "When," under Academic prescription, "the surface of a picture is painted thickly and unevenly . . . these . . . points . . . [of] thickness . . . strictly correspond to definite objects in nature, but they are absolutely incidental [*sluchainy*] with regard to the surface of a picture and . . . are absolutely unmotivated [*ne motivirovany*]." <sup>45</sup> Worse still, within the various schools

of Realism, *faktura* is "reduced to nothing."<sup>46</sup> But Matvejs's conception of *faktura* transcended both Burliuk's polemic against *faktura*'s subordination to mimesis and his exclusive preoccupation with the medium of easel painting. *Faktura* is equally manifest, Matvejs argues, in sculpture and architecture, and indeed in all media wherein the material or materials used (whether pigments, sounds, smells, or lights) produce a perceptible "noise [*shum*]." <sup>47</sup> The existence of "noise," and hence *faktura*, is predicated upon the autonomy of the work's individual material elements<sup>48</sup>—*faktura* lies not in their unification but in their cacophony. Matvejs's "noise," as I understand it, is the static interference that interrupts or impedes the communicative function of visual and other signs, thereby drawing one's attention to, or indeed seducing one by, the surface or material properties of the object.

Matvejs surveys a tremendous range of diverse *faktura* culled from visits to ethnographic and painting collections both in Russia and during his travels in Europe each summer.<sup>49</sup> Typically with regard to this material, he reverses or even resists altogether the received cultural hierarchies—low/high, East/West, ancient/modern, "primitive"/"civilized," manual/mechanized, unskilled/skilled, crude/sophisticated instruments of production, old/new. In a single passage he analyzes both fashion and Byzantine sculpture;<sup>50</sup> in another, Tver' honey cake and bas-relief.<sup>51</sup> All manifestations of *faktura* were, in theory, equally valid. Some, however, were more equal than others. The ambition of Matvejs's phantasmagoria was not to provide an encyclopedia per se, but rather a polemic against *faktura*'s impoverishment in Western and contemporary art. To that end, he returns the reader again and again to one form in particular—icon painting—which he opposes to easel painting.<sup>52</sup> Insofar

46. Markov (see note 9), p. 69; Lasko (see note 45), p. 510.

47. Markov (see note 9), p. 2; Lasko (see note 45), p. 495.

48. Markov (see note 9), p. 54; Lasko (see note 45), p. 506.

49. See Howard (see note 19), p. 210. It should be noted, particularly in the context of the present journal, that Matvejs's tremendous enthusiasm for ethnography far exceeded his resources and training in this area.

50. Markov (see note 9), p. 18; Lasko (see note 45), p. 499.

51. Markov (see note 9), pp. 20–21; Lasko (see note 45), p. 499.

52. Markov (see note 9), pp. 31, 46, 48, 49–53, 54, 59, 60, 62; Lasko (see note 45), pp. 502, 504, 505–506, 509. For an informative survey of the status of the icon in the Russian avant-garde, see Margaret Betz, "The Icon and Russian Modernism," *Artforum* 15, no. 10 (Summer 1977):38–45.

44. Evidence drawn from Matvejs's correspondence dates the book's composition to fall 1912; see Irina Arskaia, "Matvei i Tatlin," in *Chlenia Matvei: Sbornik dokladov i materialov po istorii latyshskogo i russkogo avangarda*, ed. Irena Buzhinska (Riga, Latvia: Memorial'nyi Muzei Teodora Zal'kalna, 1991), p. 127.

45. Markov (see note 9), pp. 47–48, trans. Maria Laasko in Anna Kafetsi, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde 1910–1930: The G. Costakis Collection*, 3 vols. (Athens: National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1995), vol. 2, p. 505. For further page references, I will cite both Markov's Russian text and Laasko's translation (which I have usually modified, often substantially).



as the icon rather than the French modernist easel picture is the privileged form of painting in his book, Matvejs offers an alternative genealogy for the advent of the avant-garde's interest in *faktura*.

Since the last years of the nineteenth century, icons had increasingly come to be perceived as aesthetic objects, and no longer exclusively as objects of religious devotion. In the course of their relocation from ecclesiastical to museological institutions, controversy had arisen over their cleaning and restoration. In "energetic cleaning," Matvejs argued, "the *faktura* of an icon is lost for centuries. . . . Cleaned icons seem scratched, as if they attempt to follow Western European painting. . . . in short, icons are disappearing."<sup>53</sup> He conceded that the process of darkening over time may have obscured the icon's true colors but suggested that it had also served, thereby, to preserve them. Besides destroying the icon's original *faktura*, cleaning also destroyed what we might call its "age-*faktura*" (adapting Alois Riegl's concept of "age-value"). That is to say, for Matvejs, the "tarnish" and the "dirty accumulation of drying oil and soot" were also part of the icon's *faktura* ("I remember darkened St. Georges with such a unique dark surface, such shimmering of brown and gold, dressed in gold and silver").<sup>54</sup> The process of aging was inextricable from the icon's material substance and, hence, intrinsic to its *faktura*.

The icon was superior to the easel picture in a number of ways. First, its heterogeneity of materials—gold leaf, precious and semi-precious stones, silver casings, even pearls—affords a greater richness of "noise." By contrast, the homogeneity of oil painting drowns out the "noise" of the material: "in easel painting, materials seem to sink in the common binding material."<sup>55</sup> Second, the icon mixes high and low, and resists the modernist easel picture's will to unity: "they are decorated with haloes, shoulderbands, inlays, the painting itself with precious stones, metals, etc., all that destroys our modern concept of painting."<sup>56</sup> Matvejs's conception of *faktura* was thus more than a question of surface, or even material for that matter: it was, in fact, a principle of differentiation (heterogeneity, noise) as opposed to homogenization or what he calls

"leveling."<sup>57</sup> This opposition was, in turn, mapped squarely onto two others: Russia versus the West and ancient versus modern. Hence, the only modern western European examples that Matvejs notes in concluding his chapter on the "Selection of Materials"—Picasso's collage techniques and Futurist sculpture—are dismissed as summarily as they are introduced: "such selections cannot be compared to the plastic selections inherited from ancient times."<sup>58</sup> This dismissal was constitutive, given the author's Slavophile ambition, for it was precisely these Europeans who were the first, among contemporary artists, to have worked explicitly with the heterogeneity of materials that Matvejs was championing, a fact with which he had been directly confronted in Paris the summer before drafting *Printsipy*.<sup>59</sup>

Matvejs correlates the leveling of material difference in easel painting with the kind of cultural leveling or homogenization that the "internationalization" of such painting had produced. Neoclassicism, imported into Russia in the early eighteenth century during the Petrine reforms, was Matvejs's chief target, but also under fire was the then-current circulation of European modernist styles. Such internationalization results, Matvejs argued, in modern painting's "monotonous tone quality [*kamerton*, lit., "tuning fork"]."<sup>60</sup> By contrast, the icon preserves cultural difference—it is authentically Slavic (of course, in order to make this argument, Matvejs had to suppress the fact of the icon's origins in Byzantium).

Although Matvejs celebrated the plethora of world *faktura*, he was a cultural relativist when it came to production itself. Pleasure in *faktura* was transcultural ("the love of *faktura* is inherent in us"),<sup>61</sup> but each *faktura* was nontransferable and therefore inadmissible to imitation. In opposition to Larionov and Shevchenko, who lauded transcultural appropriation and refused to concede even the possibility of such a thing as a

53. Markov (see note 9), p. 52; Lasko (see note 45), p. 506.

54. Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," *Oppositions* 25 (1982):31–34; Markov (see note 9), p. 53; Lasko (see note 45), p. 506.

55. Markov (see note 9), p. 54; Lasko (see note 45), p. 506.

56. Markov (see note 9), p. 54; Lasko (see note 45), p. 506.

57. Markov (see note 9), pp. 43, 69; Lasko (see note 45), pp. 504, 509.

58. Markov (see note 9), pp. 62–63; Lasko (see note 45), p. 508.

59. In a 1912 letter from Paris, Matvejs described Picasso's latest work (which he had purchased for the Union of Youth) as "garbage [*drian*]," in comparison to the extraordinary African and Polynesian sculpture that he would have much preferred to buy but could not on account of insufficient funds. Arskaia (see note 44), p. 126; Howard (see note 19), p. 136.

60. Markov (see note 9), p. 66; Lasko (see note 45), p. 508.

61. Markov (see note 9), p. 35; Lasko (see note 45), p. 503.

"copy,"<sup>62</sup> Matvejs believed that every *faktura* was historically, nationally, and culturally specific: "History has demonstrated that a tone quality achieved by one people cannot be attained by another. . . . every people, every town, every village has its own tone quality."<sup>63</sup> Further, *faktura* is the trace, even the signature, of its producer: "Every person has his own nature . . . which is absorbed by the material used by this person as a creator, like a sponge. . . . [it is] like handwriting. . . . we must recognize individuality as a factor which unconsciously gives a striking tone quality to creative work."<sup>64</sup> Heterogeneity or differentiation, both in terms of materials and as a metaphor for cultural specificity was thus, in Matvejs's view, a cardinal principle of *faktura*.

A second major principle that may be extrapolated from Matvejs's book is what could be called materiological determination, although this is rather less straightforward. On the one hand, in accordance with his cultural relativism, Matvejs presents many examples wherein there is no "organic" connection between the *faktura* (here signifying "surface" or even "form") and the material from which it is constituted: for example, the ways in which different cultures coil hair or ornament the human body (as much with perfume, jewelry, and stoles as with body piercing, tattooing, and scarification).<sup>65</sup> The absence of such an organic connection is also emphatically manifest, Matvejs suggests, in the wonderfully perverse discordance between material and the task of plastic expression in any *Kunstkammer*: "flower bouquets composed of butterfly wings and fish scales" and "images of saints painted in the membrane of egg

whites" (a reference to icon painting in tempera).<sup>66</sup> As a further example of the lack of an essential relationship between *faktura* and the material, Matvejs cites the very contingency of an object's surface, as is demonstrated when one object is subordinated to another, such as the way that "after rain, pebbles gleam like pearls,"<sup>67</sup> and not like pebbles.

On the other hand, Matvejs asserts precisely such an organic connection in the opening pages of *Printsipy*: "Material is the mother of *faktura* [*Material—mat' faktury*]," he writes, playing on the common root shared by the Russian words for "material" and "mother."<sup>68</sup> In his discussion of sculpture, this maxim is developed into a full-blown principle of "leaning [*prislonenie*],"<sup>69</sup> which is diametrically opposed to the discordancy of material and form cramming the *Kunstkammer*. By "leaning," Matvejs explains, he means the artist's "communication with the material, adaptation to the material, dependence on the material" in the generation of form.<sup>70</sup> The material, or rather the form of the material (because there is no material without form, as Punin would point out,<sup>71</sup> determines the form of the work of art. In the stone sculptures of "America, Guatemala, and Florida," for example:

[a] block of stone is taken and transformed into a likeness of man or animal by a few skillful moves. The general form of the stone remains almost intact; all the forms of the human or animal body, and their movements, are subordinated to the form of the stone. . . . sometimes only a few essential lines are incised and the stone is brought to life. [Thus] the saying is true that *when people fall silent, stones will begin to speak*. . . .

Ancient people made statuettes from the teeth of mammoths and the bones of deer and horses, and because of the hardness of the material or the primitiveness of their instruments, ancient craftsmen "leaned" on the form of the material, so [that] the forms were predetermined in advance by the essence of the material. . . . Thus, the material often directly *dictates* a certain form and prohibits others. . . . [The ancient craftsman's purpose] was not to break [the material], nor force his way through it, but rather to emerge from it, adapt to it, slide along it, carefully work it [emphasis added].<sup>72</sup>

62. In 1913 Larionov championed "everythingism [*vsechestvo*]," a form of eclecticism based upon the assumption that style can be detached from the historical context of its emergence and redeployed: "We declare," he wrote in a manifesto penned with Goncharova, "that there has never been such a thing as a copy and recommend painting from pictures painted before the present day. We maintain that art cannot be examined from the point of time. We acknowledge all styles as suitable for the expression of our art." "Rayonists and Futurists: A Manifesto," trans. in Bowlit (see note 12), p. 90. See also Aleksandr Shevchenko, *Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements* (Moscow, 1913), trans. in Bowlit (see note 12), p. 46.

63. Markov (see note 9), pp. 65–66; Lasko (see note 45), p. 508.

64. Markov (see note 9), p. 64; Lasko (see note 45), p. 508. The connection of "free creation" and the unfettered expression of the self is one of the chief subjects of an earlier essay by Matvejs. See Vladimir Markov, "The Principles of the New Art," *Soiuz molodezhi*, no. 1 (April 1912) and no. 2 (June 1912), trans. in Bowlit (see note 12), pp. 23–38.

65. Markov (see note 9), pp. 2–3; Lasko (see note 45), p. 496.

66. Markov (see note 9), p. 4; Lasko (see note 45), p. 496.

67. Markov (see note 9), p. 10; Lasko (see note 45), p. 497.

68. Markov (see note 9), p. 2; Lasko (see note 45), p. 495.

69. Markov (see note 9), pp. 13–15; Lasko (see note 45), p. 498.

70. Markov (see note 9), p. 13; Lasko (see note 45), p. 498.

71. See note 14, p. 391.

72. Markov (see note 9), pp. 13–14; Lasko (see note 45), p. 498.

Matvejs here sets forth, but only as one modality of *faktura* among several, the basic formulation of what we could call “materiological determination,” wherein the material determines the form, and the producer becomes the material’s cautious assistant rather than its “master.”

Matvejs then qualifies this essentialism in a very interesting way: the process of materiological determination does not always begin, in fact, with the “essence” of the material. On the contrary:

The wooden sculptures . . . which we find on Easter Island (Rapa Nui) are often bow-shaped. The reason for this is that there are few trees on the island and the sculptures were made solely from the wood of old boats, most of which were bow-shaped. And even though the islanders carved skillfully and had sharp obsidian knives, it never occurred to them to foist new, diametrically opposed forms upon the initial ones. Here the material and its form were the repository of a ready-made [*gotovykh*] general outline.<sup>73</sup>

The process of determination begins, therefore, with material in all its historical contingency: the artist depends upon and assists the material in the form in which he or she encounters it, whether natural or processed.

In sum, Matvejs adumbrates three major principles of *faktura* overall: materiological differentiation (heterogeneity), discordancy, and determination. Each is an equally significant modality of *faktura*. But the last—determination—is especially significant within the trajectory of *faktura* that I am tracing, because it sets into motion the process by which *faktura* came to double back upon itself with regard to subjectivity (although this cannot be said to have been Matvejs’s sole intent). Interestingly, however, none of the three principles was reflected in Matvejs’s own “vanguard” painterly practice, which was given over at the time to an unexceptional kind of Symbolism. Yet, in the years immediately after its publication, *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh: Faktura* became the standard reference work on the subject. Nikolai Punin, for example, drew substantially from it in a series of lectures on the new art that he presented in the aftermath of the Revolution, devoting his second and third lectures almost entirely to the problem of *faktura*

as Matvejs had formulated it.<sup>74</sup> *Printsipy* was also read, if only to be dismissed, by the Constructivists in 1921. Notwithstanding this dismissal, it was Matvejs’s book that had established new terms for the discussion of *faktura*, terms that moved the concept far beyond its initial significance within the discourse of modernist painting.

### III

In taking the then-contemporary reevaluation of the icon as an *aesthetic* object one step further, by affirming it as a material object of heterogeneous composition, Matvejs’s *Printsipy* found its most important interlocutor in Vladimir Tatlin. Between April 1914 and 1917, Tatlin produced an extraordinary body of sculptural work to which he gave the generic names “Painterly Reliefs,” “Counter-Reliefs,” and (notably vis-à-vis Matvejs), “Selections of Materials.”<sup>75</sup> In this work, Tatlin moves away from Burlin’s conception of *faktura* as a matter of surface (or even the depth or materiality of surface), redefining it as the working of three-dimensional materials such as wood, as well as the nontraditional sculptural materials of iron, glass, and tin. More crucial, Tatlin’s sculptural production was based upon principles of differentiation and determination—two of the three principles of *faktura* adumbrated by Matvejs. In partial adherence to the principle of materiological determination, I would argue, Tatlin explored for the first time the shift in agency that would eventually turn the meaning of *faktura* on its head. The evidence for my argument lies in the artist’s sculptural production itself—Tatlin was extremely laconic and rarely discussed his work in print.

Until his 1914 breakthrough, Tatlin was a painter assimilating the formal and compositional lessons of

74. Punin even borrowed Matvejs’s term “noise,” which he felt “define[d] the concept [of *faktura*] rather precisely,” despite its “subjective” associations; see *Pervyi tsikl lektsii* in Anna Kafetsi, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde 1910–1930: The G. Costakis Collection* (Athens: National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1995), pp. 627–630 (“Lecture 2,” and “Lecture 3”). As a board member of the new cultural bureaucracy of the Bolshevik government (IZO Narkompros), Punin was able to arrange for the posthumous publication in 1919 of Matvejs’s *Iskusstvo negrov*.

75. Tatlin’s expression “*Podbory materialov*” shares the same meaning as Matvejs’s “*Nabory materialov*,” namely, “Selections of Materials.” Matvejs died unexpectedly in May 1914, precluding any response to Tatlin’s reliefs, which were exhibited for the first time that same month.

73. Markov (see note 9), p. 14; Lasko (see note 45), p. 498.

European modernism (chiefly, Matisse's post-Fauvist painting, Picasso's "primitivist" canvasses of 1906–1908, and a Salon version of analytical Cubist painting) and Russian icon painting. A formal *mélange* of such sources dominated Tatlin's practice from 1911, the time of his arrival in Moscow from Penza, until early 1914. The main characteristics of his pictorial production were: contraction of spatial depth; reduction of chromatic range; opacity of pigment; and simplified, scaffolded, or curvilinear articulation of figures and overall compositions.

Very abruptly in the spring of 1914, however, Tatlin redirected his interest in European precedent away from the painterly problems of Cubism (such as had been discussed by Burliuk in 1912) to the then most recent work of Picasso—constructed sculpture. This shift was the direct result of his now-legendary encounter with Picasso's (and perhaps also Braque's) constructions and installations in Paris in early April 1914 (late March by the old Russian calendar).<sup>76</sup> Tatlin acknowledged this debt in his *Painterly Relief* ("Bottle") (1914) (fig. 1), which unequivocally "cited" an installation that he later recalled having seen in Picasso's rue Schoelcher atelier: a still-life ensemble mounted on the studio wall in fall 1913 that included the *Guitar*, a cardboard maquette for Picasso's first construction (fig. 2). In his own work, Tatlin explicitly reiterates Picasso's triad of elements, meshing of the bottle, and play on convexity and concavity. A reproduction of this installation, along with three other constructions by Picasso, had been published by Apollinaire in *Les Soirées de Paris* in November 1913, and thus was already in circulation before Tatlin's visit.<sup>77</sup> As Magdalena Dabrowski suggests,

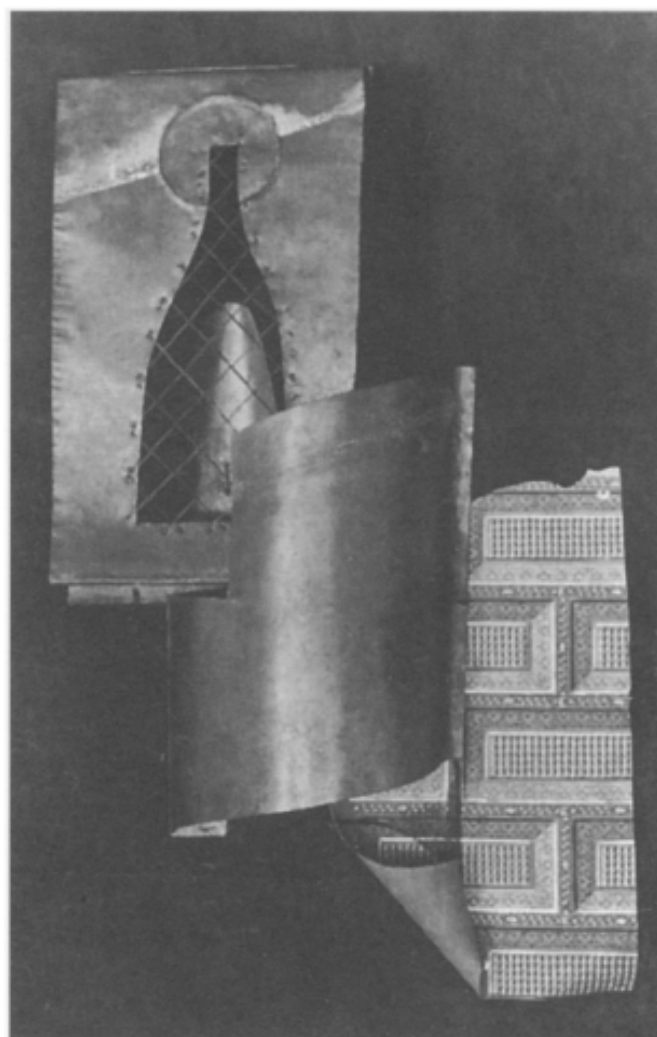


Figure 1. Vladimir Tatlin, *Painterly Relief* ("Bottle"), 1914. Wood, tin-plate, cardboard, wallpaper, shoemaker's last (?), enamel and oil pigments, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Courtesy of DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

76. On the fact that Tatlin's trip to Berlin and Paris took place in 1914 (and not in 1913 as previously thought), see Anatolii Strigalev, "O poezdke Tatlina v Berlin i Parizh," *Iskusstvo*, nos. 2–3 (1989), cited in Arskaia (see note 44), p. 133, n. 6. See also Magdalena Dabrowski's contribution to, and summary of, this issue in her "The Russian Contribution to Modernism: 'Construction' as Realization of Innovative Aesthetic Concepts of the Russian Avant-Garde" (Ph.D. diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1990), pp. 46–50.

77. *Guitar and Bottle*, first published under the title "Still Life" in *Les Soirées de Paris* 18 (November 1913):13, reproduced in Pierre Daix and Joan Rosselet, *Picasso: The Cubist Years, 1907–1916* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1979), cat. no. 633. The installation appears at upper right in a photograph of the rue Schoelcher studio taken between 1914 and 1916; reproduced in William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), p. 53.

it is likely that Tatlin had encountered these reproductions prior to his journey abroad.<sup>78</sup>

What else might Tatlin have seen at 5 bis, rue Schoelcher? In fall 1913, Picasso had returned to making constructed sculpture, which, along with the *papiers collés*, had been the radical innovation of the previous year. Most of the second series comprised still-

78. Dabrowski (see note 76), pp. 46, 49.

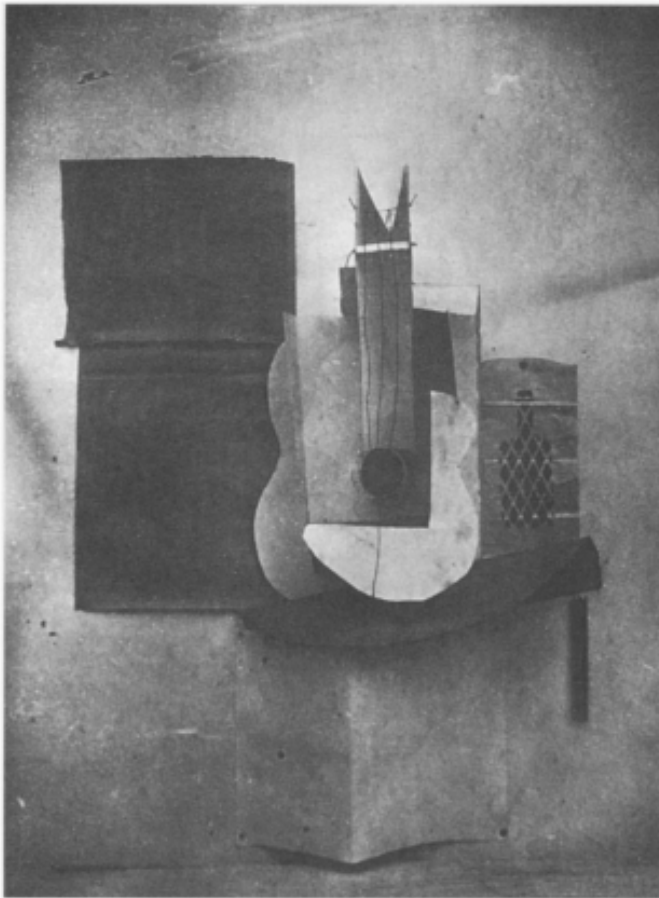


Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Guitar and Bottle*, fall 1913. Cardboard and paper, 102 x 80 cm. No longer extant. Photo: Galerie Leiris, Paris.

life relief assemblages in wood (instead of the cardboard and paper of the inaugural series), enclosed within some kind of frame, wall-mounted, and more or less planar in articulation (fig. 3). In spring 1914, Picasso produced a third series of still-life constructions, now in painted wood and tin, more three-dimensional, and less hermetic (fig. 4). It is more than probable that Picasso was working on this third series when Tatlin arrived in April. Another work that Tatlin may well have seen during the same trip was Georges Braque's (only documented) paper-and-cardboard installation—a still life assembled upon a “table” wedged into a corner of his Hôtel Roma studio—completed sometime after February 1914 (fig. 5).

Although one cannot say precisely what Tatlin saw in Paris (besides the installation with the cardboard *Guitar*),

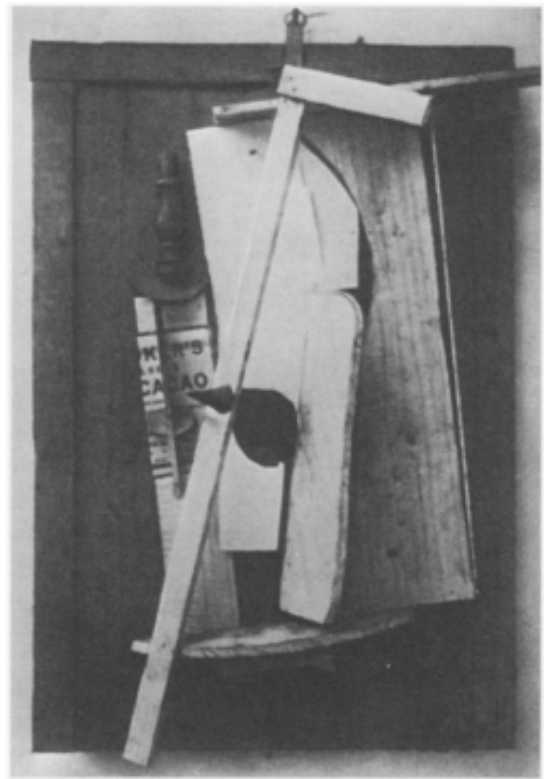


Figure 3. Pablo Picasso, *Bottle and Guitar*, fall 1913. Wood and collage, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Galerie Leiris, Paris.

Picasso's constructed sculpture, rather than the wealth of experimentation in other media in which the artist was then also engaged (such as *papiers collés* and the mixing of sand, sawdust, and even ash into oil pigment), had the most profound impact upon him. Explicitly indebted to Kru masks (formerly thought to be Grebo) in his collection, Picasso's constructions crossed the boundaries of painting and sculpture as they had been established within the Western tradition.<sup>79</sup> Bronze and stone were replaced by nontraditional, “low,” found, and often ephemeral materials. The traditional processes of carving and modeling were bypassed in favor of cutting, folding, assembling, and constructing. The human figure was neglected in favor of the modest still life.

79. See Yve-Alain Bois, “Kahnweiler's Lesson,” in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 65–97. On Monni Adams's recent attribution of the masks to the Kru people, see *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, ed. Tom Phillips (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1995), p. 465.

More than any other aspect of Picasso's work, these constructions enabled Tatlin to envisage for the first time a synthesis of the two traditions of his early formation. They offered a compelling example of precisely the hybrid mode of painting/sculpture characteristic of the icon, whether in its "internal" materiality (due to the encrustation of its surface with precious stones, or the stamping or embossing of the wood with patterns prior to painting), or as a result of materials added later (such as casings or votive offerings). In this regard, the profound significance of Tatlin's Parisian encounter was very likely to have been further inflected by the contents of *Printsiipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh: Faktura*, which had appeared just a month or two before the artist went abroad, and which he most probably read.<sup>80</sup> But Tatlin's interest in indigenous tradition was not wrapped in the rhetoric of Slavophilia that pervades Matvejs's book. In Picasso's studio, Tatlin was free to find the point of intersection between Paris and Moscow that had hitherto eluded him (and which Matvejs had acknowledged but dismissed)—a shared *material heterogeneity*—the first of the two principles of *faktura* operative in his sculptural production.

Within a few weeks after his return to Moscow in late April 1914, Tatlin had produced a series of relief constructions in heterogeneous materials, including wood, cardboard, wallpaper, cloth, metal (zinc, copper, aluminum), and leather.<sup>81</sup> These substances, some found on the street, were assembled within and upon a containing ground (usually a panel) by pinning, screwing, sandwiching, and slotting (fig. 6), or by some other frankly revealed means of assembly. In May 1914, Tatlin opened his Ostozhenka street studio to the public with an exhibition of these works, which he called

80. This possibility has not been discussed in the literature, with only two exceptions as far as I know: Margit Rowell quotes Matvejs on the icon and briefly suggests the relevance of this tradition for Tatlin's assemblages of heterogeneous materials (see note 1, p. 94). Irina Arskaia has considered at greater length the formative role of Matvejs's book in Tatlin's 1914 breakthrough (see note 44, pp. 122–123, 127). Arskaia's argument is based upon circumstantial evidence, however, rather than any analysis of Tatlin's work per se. The stakes of the Matvejs–Tatlin connection for Arskaia have to do with the deflation of what she, following Punin, sees as the overblown significance attributed to Picasso in art-historical discussions of Tatlin's development (see esp. p. 132).

81. See Anatolii Strigalev and Jürgen Harten, eds., *Vladimir Tatlin Retrospektive/Retrospektiva* (Cologne: DuMont, 1993), cat. nos. 340–345.



Figure 4. Pablo Picasso, *Bottle of Bass, Glass and Newspaper*, spring 1914. Tin and oil paint, 20.7 x 14 x 8.5 cm. Paris, Musée Picasso. Photo: © R.M.N.-Picasso.

"Painterly Reliefs [*Zhivopisnye rel'efy*]" or, alternatively, "Selections of Materials [*Podbory materialov*]."<sup>82</sup>

These reliefs constituted the first step in Tatlin's reformulation of *faktura* as the working of material (rather than merely surface). The second step was the expansion of *faktura* to include also *empty* space, which was now redefined as a material integer ("I can look upon the sky as concrete material," Tatlin would later tell the Constructivists).<sup>83</sup> The assimilation of empty

82. See Anatolii Strigalev, "Retrospektivnaia vystavka Vladimira Tatlina," in *Vladimir Tatlin Retrospektive/Retrospektiva*, ed. Anatolii Strigalev and Jürgen Harten (Cologne: DuMont, 1993), pp. 25–26.

83. Vladimir Tatlin, at a meeting of the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) in Moscow in 1921, quoted in Selim Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannii konstruktivizm* (Moscow: Architectura, 1994), p. 210.



Figure 5. Georges Braque's studio at Hôtel Roma, 101, rue Caulincourt, with his only documented construction, after February 18, 1914. Paper and cardboard, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Laurens Archives, Paris.

space as sculptural material developed progressively, beginning with the transitional *Painterly Relief* 1915 (fig. 7), in which a triangular blade projects from a stucco-and-tar-encrusted panel, slicing into the viewer's physical space. Then, at the *0.10* exhibition held in Petrograd at the end of 1915, at which his rival Malevich launched his nonobjective art of Suprematism, Tatlin announced his transfer into what Punin would call the "dimensions of live experience,"<sup>84</sup> unveiling a series of twelve relief constructions to which he gave the name "Counter-Reliefs [*Kontr-rel'efy*]" (figs. 8–11). It was this series that consolidated Tatlin's professional reputation. (Even long after Tatlin had stopped making relief constructions, Mayakovsky referred to Tatlin as a "Counter-Reliefist," in order to distinguish him from the Constructivists, an appellation Tatlin could never abide.)<sup>85</sup>

The early Counter-Reliefs shown at *0.10* were parergonal plays on the conventional division between work and surrounding wall. In the *Counter-Relief with Chair Leg* (fig. 8), the material assemblage is pushed to the left to clasp the edge of the now-evacuated panel as though the assemblage were its frame; another assemblage screws itself into the wall, declaring the means of installation a part of the relief (fig. 9). But the major revelations of *0.10* were the *Corner Counter-Reliefs* (numbered 132 and 133 in the 1915 exhibition) (figs. 10–11)—great assemblages of materials strung between adjacent walls but otherwise entirely free of the supporting surfaces of wall or floor—"knots on a spider-web," Khlebnikov called them. Again, the means of installation—the ropes in no. 132 and wire in no. 133 that restrain these assemblages of gathering yet dispersing elements—are constitutive elements, as is the "empty" space against which the Counter-Reliefs surge. Here the "kontr" (counter) of their name has tremendous force: an exponential doubling (in the sense of reinforcing, enriching, deepening) of the once-frontal relief into "live experience," thereby disrupting, in a distinctly un-modernist (in the canonical sense) display of hybridity, the conventional demarcation of the realm of sculpture from that of life.<sup>86</sup> In Tatlin's suspension of

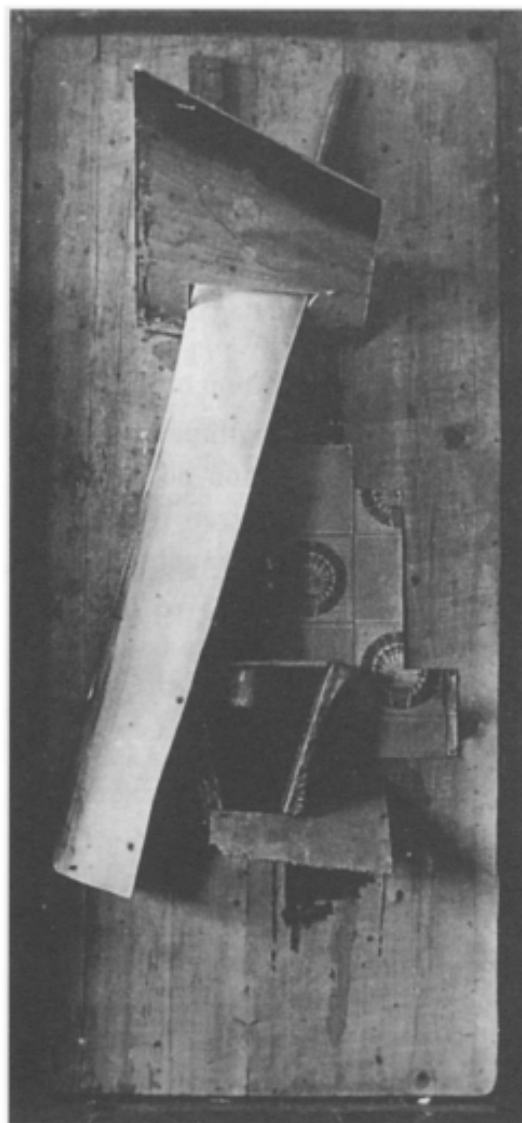


Figure 6. Vladimir Tatlin, *Painterly Relief*, 1914. Wood, metal, pigment and other materials, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Courtesy of DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

the relief across the corner, and his mixing, thereby, of such different orders of space (those of art and life), two further precedents must be noted: Picasso's assemblage

84. See note 14, p. 392.

85. Quoted in Zhadova, (see note 7), p. 393. Tatlin himself always refused to be called a Constructivist, preferring in the 1920s to be associated instead with what he called "the culture of materials."

86. This issue is addressed in Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), in which the author

establishes an alternative trajectory of modern sculpture that is predicated upon neither Lessing's space-time differential nor Greenberg's medium-specificity (see esp. pp. 53–56). On the problem of Western sculpture's "fear of real space," see also Bois (see note 79), pp. 75–77, 91.



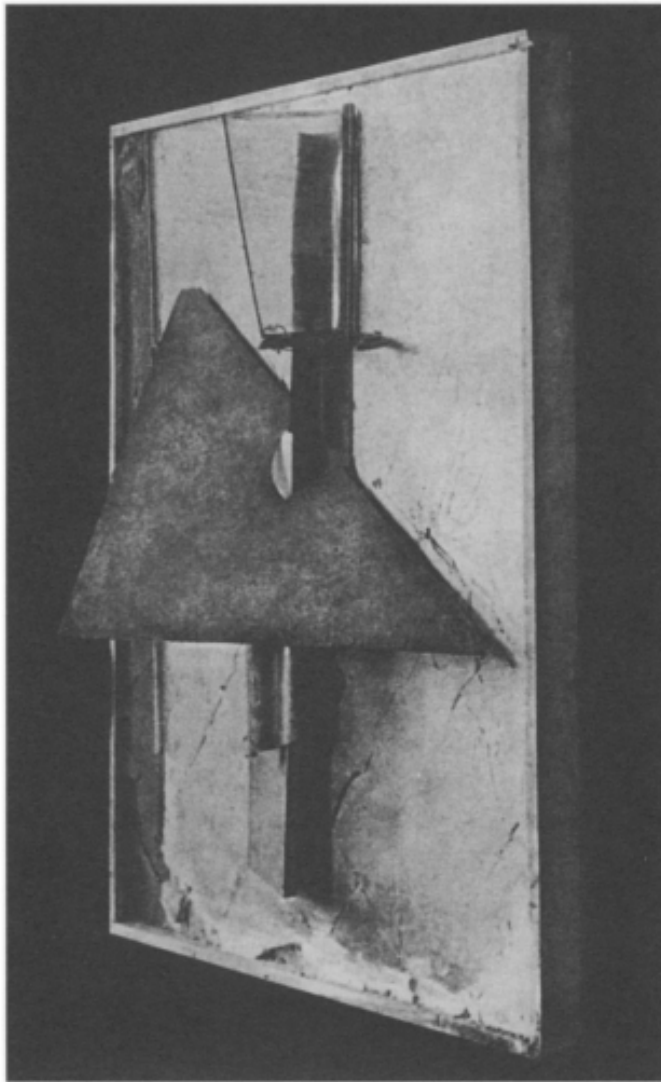


Figure 7. Vladimir Tatlin, *Painterly Relief 1915*, 1915. Wood, plaster, tar, glass, sheet metal, approx. 110 x 85 cm. No longer extant. Photo: Courtesy of DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

installation in his studio at 242, boulevard Raspail of early 1913 (fig. 12) and Braque's aforementioned corner installation (fig. 5).

With regard to Tatlin's articulation of the principle of *faktura* as differentiation through the production of material heterogeneity, the impact of Picasso's constructed sculpture was tremendous. But with regard to the other principle of *faktura* important to his work—materiological determination—there was a profound

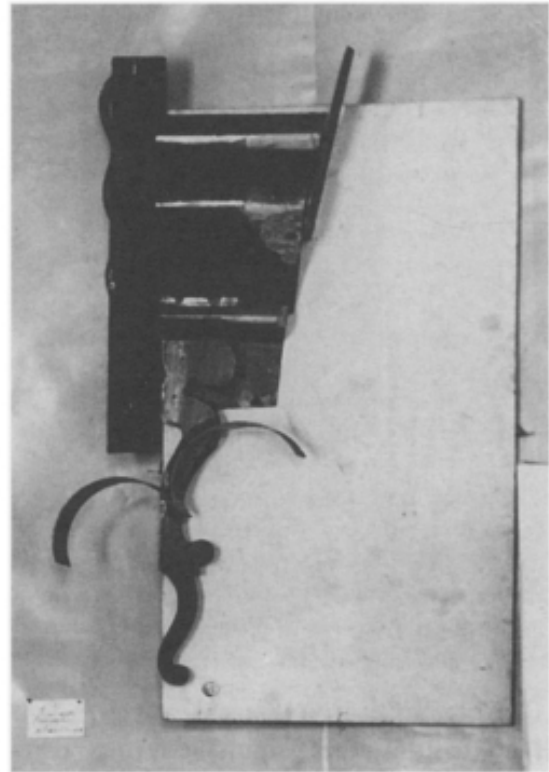


Figure 8. Vladimir Tatlin, *Counter-Relief with Chair Leg*, 1915. Wood, metal, and other materials, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Courtesy of DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

difference between the respective enterprises of the two artists. This difference was more significant than either the question of scale or the abstraction of Tatlin's reliefs in comparison with Picasso's still lifes. It had to do with the metaphorical force of Picasso's constructions, as opposed to the materiological determination of Tatlin's. As Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois have argued, Picasso's procedure in the *papiers collés* and constructed sculpture was premised upon an elaboration of the arbitrary nature of the sign (the "unmotivated" relationship of its two halves, signifier and signified), a linguistic discovery made by Picasso's contemporary Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>87</sup> Tatlin's

87. This argument is most exhaustively treated in Yve-Alain Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," and Rosalind Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), pp. 169–195, 261–286.

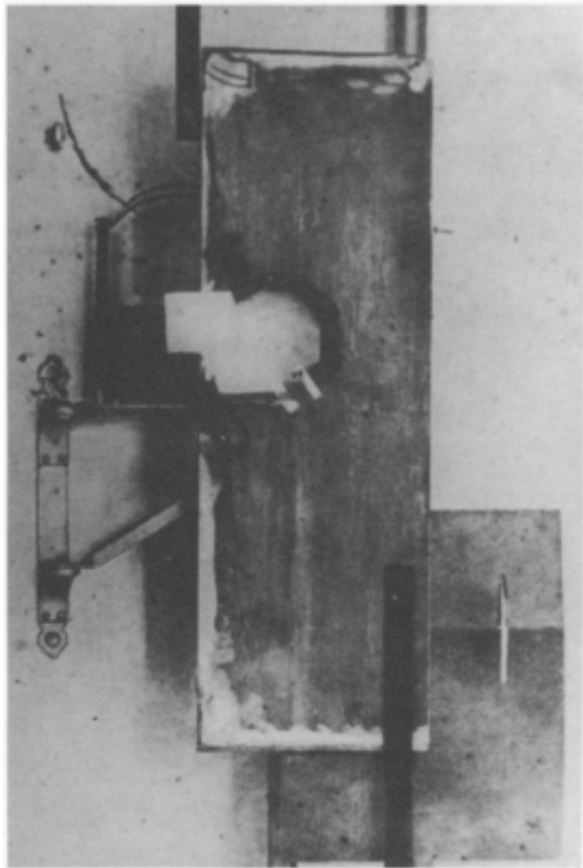


Figure 9. Vladimir Tatlin, *Counter-Relief*, 1915. Wood, metal, and other materials, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Courtesy of DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

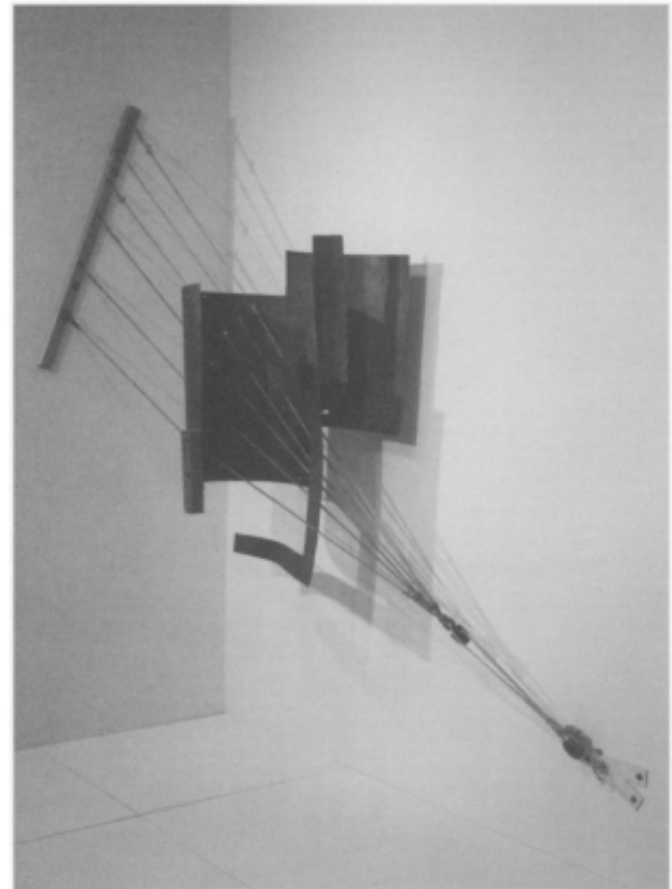


Figure 10. Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief*, no. 132, 1915–1925. Burnished sheet iron, copper, wood, rope, lashing components, 118 x 71 cm. St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum. Photo: Courtesy of DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

materiological enterprise, by contrast, belonged to what Bois calls a “discourse of motivation”—motivation being the logical antonym of arbitrariness within Saussure’s system—which runs through the history of late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century art, particularly that of abstraction.<sup>88</sup> Once “liberated” from the task of representation, Tatlin sought ways in which to

88. See Bois (see note 1), pp. 28–49; id., “Strzeminski and Kopro: In Search of Motivation,” in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 123–155; and id., “The Disparition of Gesture as a Gesture of Disparition” (unpublished lecture, Department of the History of Art, University of Michigan, 15 March 1997). On the problem of motivation within linguistics and semiology, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), pp.

justify his artistic practice, to prevent its slippage into the realm of a merely arbitrary manifestation of his individual will or subjective choice. In taking up the principle of materiological determination, Tatlin found a means by which to motivate his practice and, in so doing, developed a mode of production that might usefully be described as “indexical.” As the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce defined it, the “index” is a sign (the second within his tripartite taxonomy) wherein there exists a “real” or “physical”

130–132; and also Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Noonday Press of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), pp. 50–53.

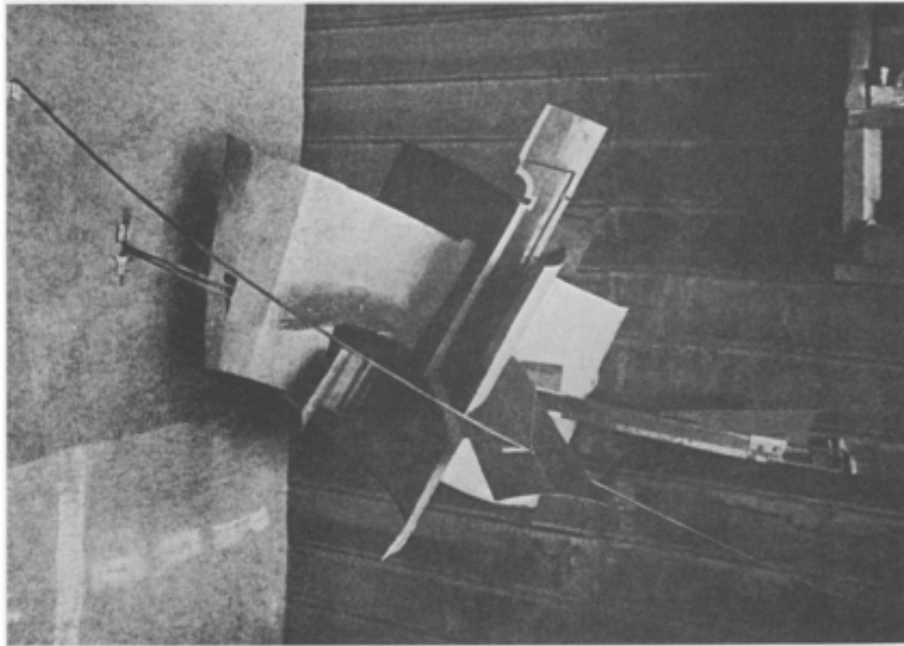


Figure 11. Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief, no. 133, 1915*. Aluminum and tin sheeting, oil pigment, priming paint, wire, fastening components, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Courtesy of DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

connection between the sign and its referent (a weathercock is an index of the direction of the wind; a footprint, an index of the foot that made it; a bullet hole, an index of the passage of the bullet).<sup>89</sup>

A comparison of *Bottle of Bass, Glass and Newspaper* of spring 1914 (fig. 4) and the central detail of *Corner Counter-Relief, no. 132* of 1915 (fig. 10) may help to elucidate the fundamental difference between Picasso's metaphoricity and Tatlin's indexicality. Picasso finds in the trash an empty tin can that once contained dried milk powder. He cuts, rolls, folds, and paints this discarded material into a still life. Upon a little tray formed by the base of the original can are gathered three objects. On its left, a bottle of Bass is clipped from the vertical extension of the can and painted with the brand's trademark red triangle. In the center, a portion of

tin is half-rolled, half painted, into a glass. Another section of tin is pulled to the right, painted, and then stashed back in between, as it were, as the front page of a folded newspaper. Subjected to the metaphoric force of Picasso's form-giving will, a single piece of garbage is thereby transformed into a café still life.<sup>90</sup>

But it was precisely this subjection of the material in the production of metaphor that was a problem for Tatlin. Mayakovsky later recounted (significantly, in the context of reporting upon his own visit to Picasso's studio in 1923) that Tatlin would always say: "Instead of mutilating the beautiful tin and iron . . . artists should provide them with form."<sup>91</sup> They should proceed, in

89. See C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols., ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), vol. 2 (1932), pp. 159–165, 170–172. See also Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1" and "Notes on the Index: Part 2" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 195–219.

90. Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake quote Picasso as once having said: "The sheet of newspaper was never used in order to make a newspaper. It was used to become a bottle or something like that. It was never used literally but always as an element displaced from its habitual meaning into another meaning." *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 77, quoted in Rowell (see note 1), p. 94.

91. See Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Semidnevnyi smotr frantsuzskoi zhivopisi* (Seven-Day Survey of French Painting) (1923), reprinted in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 13 vols. (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1955–1961), vol. 4 (1957), p. 246; (excerpt) trans. in Zhadova (see note 7), p. 393.



Figure 12. Pablo Picasso, *Construction with Guitar Player*, 1913. Assembled construction comprising *papiers collés*, guitar, table, bottle, and other objects. No longer extant. Photo: Cahiers d'Art Archives, Paris.

other words, according to the principle that Matvejs had called "leaning" or "dependence on the material" in the generation of form. The relevance of this principle to Tatlin's enterprise was stated explicitly by Punin in his little 1921 monograph on Tatlin: "Different materials tend to assume certain forms. . . . It is precisely the goal of the artist to find the forms to express their materials as completely as possible."<sup>92</sup> Among historians, Margit Rowell has discussed Tatlin's practice in this regard at length.<sup>93</sup> The ductility of the great piece of sheet metal in *Corner Counter-Relief, no. 132*, probably found battered on the street, for example, prompted Tatlin to further enhance its curvature, but only insofar as this could be accomplished without the application of heat—Tatlin was famous for his censure of the forge. Tensile materials such as wire and rope were pulled taut, solid wooden planks were sawn into smaller blocks but never carved. In other Counter-Reliefs, glass was cut into planes but never rolled (unless originally found that way). As in the case of the bow-shaped sculptures of Rapanui, Tatlin's materiological determinism had little to do with any putative essence of the material. Rather, Tatlin sought to foster the volition of the material—the urban detritus of an only barely industrialized city—as he found it. Reconfiguring himself as the material's assistant, Tatlin thereby partially effaced his own presence within the work, seeking instead to assist each material element in its self-volitional becoming form.

If the material heterogeneity of the icon was, as I have argued, an important point of reference for Tatlin in his move into constructed sculpture in 1914, Anne Duroe has suggested that its significance did not stop there. Although the icon certainly belongs to another category of sign within Peirce's tripartite division (that of the "icon," wherein the sign resembles its referent, as in, for example, portraits and onomatopoeias), Duroe argues that it nevertheless could be said to share in the indexical modality of vanguard *faktura* given the indexical relationship posited between the icon and its prototype in the theological writings of the Orthodox Church.<sup>94</sup> It may

be possible to suggest, therefore, that the icon was an important precedent not only for Tatlin's material heterogeneity, but also, interestingly, for his pursuit of an indexical mode of production.

In the end, however, Matvejs's principle of leaning only accounted for part of Tatlin's process. As the Polish Constructivist Wladyslaw Strzeminski pointed out, while Tatlin's individual elements were materiologically determined, their compositional articulation was not.<sup>95</sup> Strzeminski's point is driven home by the architect Vladimir Krinskii's experience of Tatlin's reliefs at the time of their exhibition: "It was all so ordinary that it could have been mistaken for some kind of trash," he later recalled. Yet, to his astonishment, he found that "the materials [were] composed [*sopostavleny*] in such a way that they suddenly [began] to speak. . . . trash material . . . [thereby] acquire[d] value."<sup>96</sup> The crucial point made here is that it was Tatlin's "composition" of this trash that enabled it to "speak" and thus secured its value. Therefore, while the generative principle of each heterogeneous element had been relocated in the material itself, the process of compositional accretion by which Tatlin then assembled these elements returned his endeavor to the arena of subjective choice. For Tatlin, this duality seems not to have been a problem, but it was precisely what bothered the Constructivists—as they saw it, Tatlin had gone only half the distance.

#### IV

Although Strzeminski's observation was made in 1928, and in another context, it astutely characterizes that which differentiated Tatlin's endeavor from the early or "laboratory" phase of Constructivism of 1920–1921.

95. Wladyslaw Strzeminski, "L'objet et l'espace" (1928) in id. and Katarzyna Kobro, *L'Espace uniste: Écrits du constructivisme polonais*, ed. Antoine Baudin and Pierre-Maxime Jedryka (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1977), p. 83. Strzeminski delineates two "stages" in the development of Constructivism. The first is what he calls the "cubism-facture" of Tatlin and other artists between the years 1912 and 1916, which, he argues, provided a "theoretical foundation" for the second stage—the Constructivists' experiments of 1919–1924. In the first stage, Strzeminski suggests, the union of material and form was sought; in the second, the elaboration of a "system" (or "construction") by which to interrelate the different forms thus derived. See also Bois, "Strzeminski and Kobro" (see note 88), p. 138.

96. Vladimir Krinskii, "Vospominaniia" (unpublished manuscript, n. d.), quoted in Anatolii Strigalev, "Vladimir Tatlin: K stoletiiu so dnia rozhdeniia," *Arkhitektura SSSR* 6 (1985):87.

92. See note 14, p. 392.

93. See note 1, pp. 93–95.

94. Anne Duroe, "Significant Moments in the Afterlife of Old Russian Icons: The Case of *Faktura*" (unpublished paper, Department of the History of Art, University of Michigan, April 1997). Duroe's hypothesis also challenges the traditional argument that the Russian avant-garde lost all interest in the icon once it had turned to indexical modes of production.

It was only in the work of laboratory Constructivists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and Karl Ioganson that the shift in agency inaugurated by Tatlin's reliefs reached its apogee. In their spatial constructions, the principle of heterogeneity dropped out altogether, and the pursuit of materiological determination drove the production process from beginning to end. Each artist contemporaneously developed a new indexical principle—modularity—as a means by which to motivate their constructions and thereby eradicate subjective choice. Because I have analyzed Ioganson's work elsewhere at length, I will focus my present discussion on that of Rodchenko.<sup>97</sup> Rodchenko's investigation of the principle of determination represented an attempt to resolve the problem of motivation, which was most immediately manifest in his struggle against the aesthetic position and institutional power of Wassily Kandinsky.<sup>98</sup> But the context of the Revolution also brought a new and crucial significance to his struggle: an alignment with those proselytizing, within the political arena, for the abolition of individual subjectivity in favor of that of the collective.

In grappling with the problem of *faktura*, Rodchenko restaged Tatlin's transfer from surface to material. Beginning with a series of nonobjective *Black on Black* paintings in early 1919 (fig. 13), Rodchenko returned the problem of *faktura* to the elaboration of surface texture, wherein *faktura* (that is, "working the surface") became his very *subject*. With regard to this series, the Constructivist Varvara Stepanova wrote in her diary in April 1919 that Rodchenko "has really demonstrated just what *faktura* is. . . . In the 'blacks,' there is nothing but painting. . . . their *faktura* . . . produces the impression that the work is painted with totally different materials."<sup>99</sup> By brushing the canvas in a variety of

different ways, Rodchenko "lay bare," both within each painting and across the series, how his manipulation of the otherwise constant black pigment altered its value and texture. A diversity of surface effects ("dry" matte, "wet" gloss, "luminous" metallic, "gritty" bitumen, "smooth" enamel), isolated from any semantic function or purpose, was thereby produced. Rodchenko conceived the Black series in explicit rivalry with Kazimir Malevich, who had just launched his near-monochromatic *White on White* canvasses.<sup>100</sup> While morphologically not dissimilar, there is a fundamental difference: Rodchenko's series was based upon a kind of positivist scrutiny of *faktura* that was directed against precisely the metaphysics of the absolute that had motivated Malevich. And, at the same time, in their "aridity [*sukhost'*],"<sup>101</sup> the Black paintings declared Rodchenko's utter aversion to Kandinsky's faith in the expressive function of the work of art as the revelation of the "inner necessity" of the artist's soul.

The Black series was followed by Line paintings (fig. 14), in which Rodchenko "mechanized" (the expression is Stepanova's)<sup>102</sup> *faktura* through the use of the instruments of the geometer (ruler and compass), thereby eradicating the individualizing gesture of the brushstroke. But the series was nevertheless still too dependent, Rodchenko felt, on individual will. So, in *Two Circles* (1919), he turned to pouring the pigment directly onto the canvas. This painting is now unfortunately lost, but the story Rodchenko told of its production is an instructive one. Having chosen to work with enamel paint, the artist realized that the pigment's liquidity would prohibit working at the easel with a brush, and so laid the canvas on the floor and poured. What fascinated Rodchenko was the radical reduction of his "interference" in the production of form—the circles—to the determination of only the point of the flow's beginning and ending—the rest was a "labor" of the liquidity of the pigment, the horizontality of the

97. See Maria Gough, "In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl Ioganson's Cold Structures," *October* 84 (Spring 1998):91–117.

98. The struggle between Rodchenko and Kandinsky took place within the Moscow INKhUK, of which the latter was founding director. Partially as a consequence of their struggle, the INKhUK entered into a four-month-long debate over composition and construction in the spring of 1921, which resulted, in turn, in the formation of the Constructivist Group.

99. See Varvara Stepanova, diary entry for 10 April 1919, in her *Chelovek ne mozhnet zhit' bez chuda: Pis'ma, Poeticheskie opyty, Zapiski Khudozhnitsy* (Moscow: Izd-vo Sfera, 1994), p. 88; trans. (modified) in Peter Noever, ed., *Aleksandr Rodchenko. Varvara Stepanova: The Future is Our Only Goal* (Munich: Prestel, 1991), pp. 124–125.

100. "To outdo Malevich is very difficult," Rodchenko wrote in a diary entry for 25 December 1918. *Opyty dlia budushchego*, ed. O. V. Mel'nikov and V. I. Shchennikov (Moscow: Grant', 1996), p. 70. On the Black paintings, see Stepanova's diary entries for 10 and 19 April 1919 (see note 99), pp. 88–90; and also Tarabukin's discussion (see note 3), p. 31.

101. See Stepanova's diary entry for 11 January 1920 (see note 99), p. 96.

102. Stepanova, "O Fakture" (see note 99), p. 174, trans. Wendy Salmond in Aleksandr Lavrent'ev, *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*, ed. John Bowlit (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), p. 177.

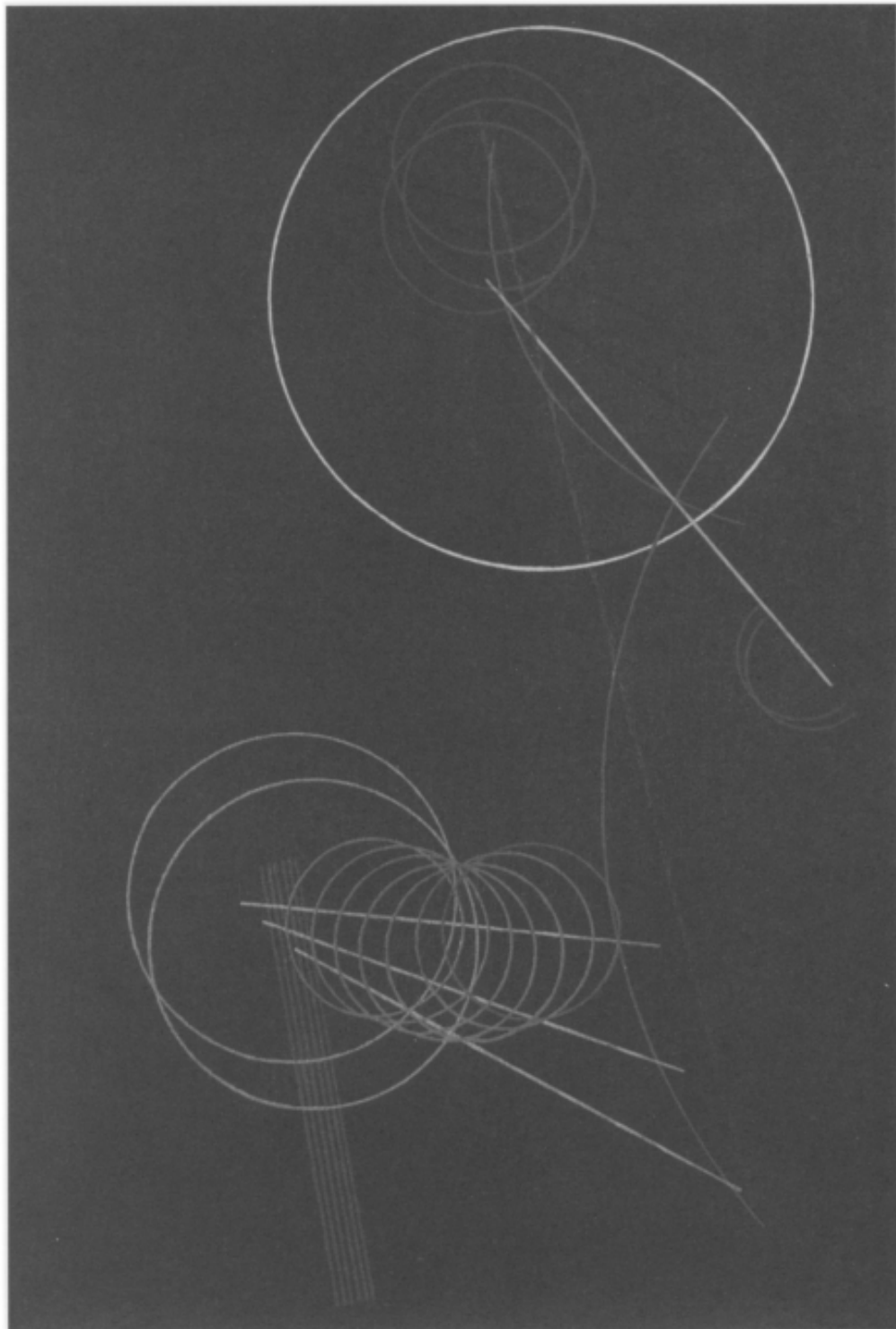


Figure 14. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Construction no. 106 (on black)*, 1920. Oil on canvas, 102 x 70 cm. Moscow, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Dept. of Private Collections.

field, and the force of gravity. "Material must always be used in the best possible way," Rodchenko remarked with regard to *Two Circles*, "[according to] its characteristic qualities."<sup>103</sup>

Yet, even with pouring, the materiological determination of form was only partial, because there still remained the problem of what Rodchenko called "the superfluous [*lishnii*] space in the plane of the canvas" that was generated by the division of figure and ground.<sup>104</sup> In order to engage the material condition of the ground (that is, "the construction of the entire work in accordance with the dimensions of the canvas"),<sup>105</sup> Rodchenko developed what might be called, in retrospect, a "nascent theory of deductive structure" (merging an expression from the historian of science Gerard Holton with another from the art historian and critic Michael Fried).<sup>106</sup> With this nascent theory in hand, Rodchenko moved *faktura* off the surface and into space once again. *Faktura*, as a principle of materiological determination, found its full articulation in his second series of Spatial Constructions of 1920–1921, of which no. 12 (fig. 15) is the sole example that survives in the original.

Each of the hanging constructions was produced in the same way. On a sheet of plywood, Rodchenko drew a geometrical figure with compass and ruler. He then repeated this figure to form a regularly diminishing pattern. The lines drawn were then cut, and the plywood "ribs" thus created rotated into space, thereby affording the once flat plane its three-dimensional volume. The construction's "origin" in an action (cutting) wrought upon a planar surface was never disguised. The position of the ribs in rotation would be fixed with wires, but these were removable so that the work could be collapsed back into a plane and stored away, archived.

103. Transcribed in Selim Khan-Magomedov, "Diskussiiia v INKhUKe o sootnoshenii konstruktssii i kompozitsii (ianvar'–aprel' 1921 goda)," *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika (Trudy VNIITE)* 20 (1979):48–49.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

105. *Ibid.*

106. The notion of a "nascent moment" or "nascent phase" in scientific work is discussed by Gerald Holton, *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 6–10. The concept of "deductive structure" was developed by Michael Fried in about 1963 in his analysis of the work of American abstract painters, in particular the black and shaped canvasses of Frank Stella. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. pp. 297–303, 316–323; *id.*, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965), esp. pp. 40, 46.

Insofar as the structure of the construction was deduced from the initial figure selected, only Rodchenko's first cut (determining the shape and width of the first rib) was the product of the artist's subjective choice.

Rodchenko's *Third Series of Spatial Constructions* (fig. 16), also dating to 1921, eradicated any vestigial relation to the surface, moving beyond the "literal" deductive structure to another indexical procedure—a principle of modularity. Each construction in the third series was generated upon the basis of a single modular unit (a piece of wood cut to standard dimensions), offering the possibility of potentially infinite expansion and variation but within nonrelational progressions.

By these indexical procedures—materiological determination and modularity—Rodchenko drove out Tatlin's heterogeneity of materials, as well as the compositionality of his mode of assembly. In the wake of this series, Rodchenko formulated his slogan "Nothing accidental, nothing not accounted for," which was seconded by his colleague Aleksei Gan: "Nothing accidental, nothing not accounted for, nothing as a result of blind taste and aesthetic arbitrariness."<sup>107</sup> The material no longer merely "tends to assume" certain forms, as Punin had suggested apropos Tatlin.<sup>108</sup> Rather, as Tarabukin expressed it in the phrase I quoted at the outset, "the material [now] *dictates* form to the artist" (emphasis added).<sup>109</sup>

## V

Rodchenko's laboratory Constructivism took the principle of materiological determination to such an extreme, however, that he would soon have considerable difficulty recognizing it under the name of *faktura*. For Rodchenko, the term was still tinged with notions of the surface and its Burliukian delectation—what he dismissed as mere *smakovanie* (savoring). In March 1921, Rodchenko and a number of other like-minded artists working in an "experimental" or laboratory vein—Varvara Stepanova, Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetskii, the brothers Iorgii and Vladimir Stenberg—formed, in collaboration with the agitator Aleksei Gan, a "Working Group of Constructivists." The self-appointed task of the group was to find a way to

107. Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver', Russia: Tverskoe izd-vo, 1922), p. 65.

108. See note 14, p. 392.

109. See note 3, p. 32.



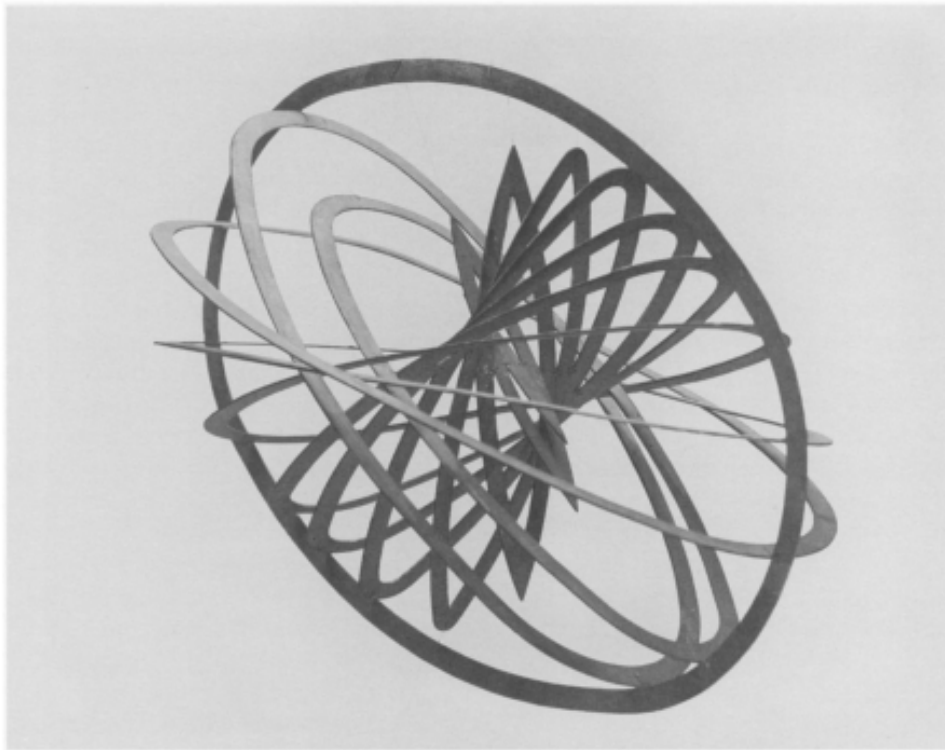


Figure 15. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Oval Hanging Construction no. 12*, circa 1920. Plywood, open construction partially painted with aluminum paint, and wire, 61 x 83.7 x 47 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art. Acquisition made possible through the extraordinary efforts of George and Zinaida Costakis, and through the Nate B. and Frances Spingold, Matthew H. and Erna Futter, and Enid A. Haupt Funds. Photo: © 1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

move Constructivism beyond the laboratory into the realm of the real; in that sense, the formation of the group marks the inception of the Constructivists' second phase, that is, their pursuit of an art of production. The first step in this new direction was the formulation of a "Programme," a manifesto-cum-position statement of their future collaboration.<sup>110</sup> It was within the context of this inquiry that *faktura* underwent its final transformation.

Gan prepared a draft of the programme, and the Constructivists spent the next two months (over nine

long meetings)<sup>111</sup> trying to elucidate the meaning and pertinence of his lexically rather inventive terminology. Of great ambiguity was Gan's basic maxim that "the task of the Constructivist group is the Communist expression of material structures"; still more confounding was his troika of Constructivist "elements": *tektonika* (tectonics), *konstruksiia* (construction), and *faktura* (later he called these elements "disciplines").<sup>112</sup> Rodchenko vigorously protested Gan's inclusion of *faktura* within the programme:

110. See "Program of the Constructivist Working Group of INKhUK," trans. James West in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery of the University of Washington, 1990), p. 67.

111. Stenographic records of four of these nine meetings have been preserved and transcribed, along with other related documents, in Khan-Magomedov (see note 83), pp. 89-112.

112. Gan (see note 107), p. 40.

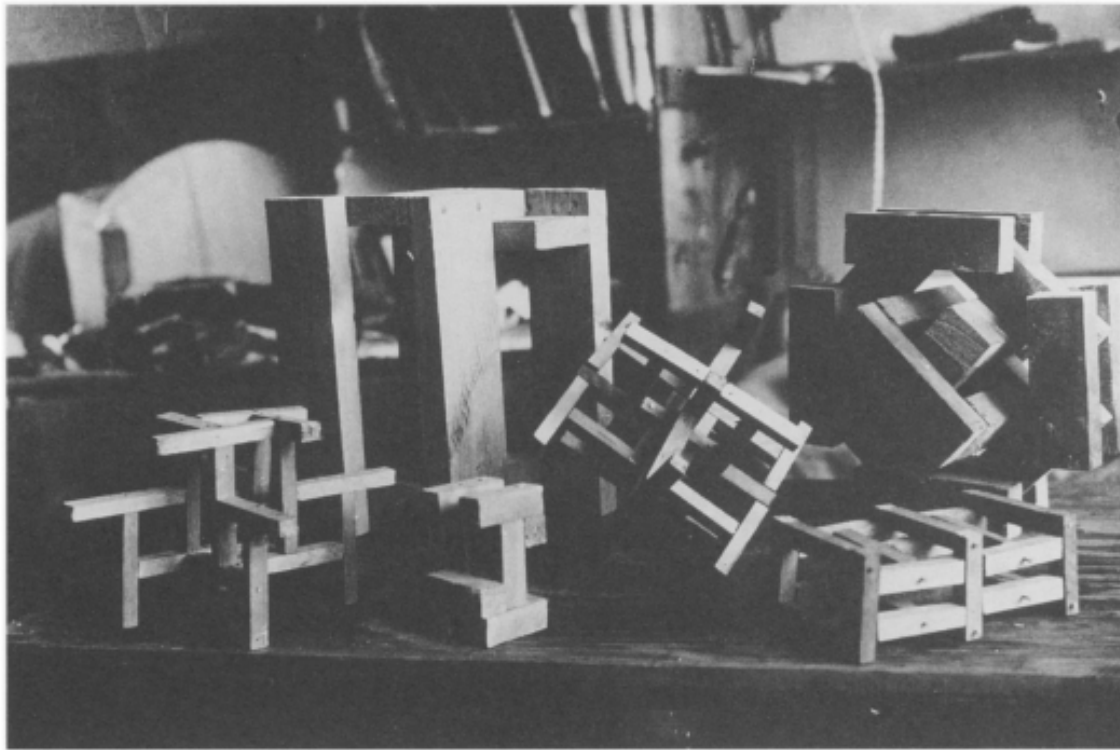


Figure 16. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Third Series of Spatial Constructions*, circa 1921. Wood, dimensions unknown. No longer extant. Photo: Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1924, © Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow.

I am against mentioning *faktura*. . . . We do not have the specific kind of *faktura* that arises with art. For us, *faktura* is now the material itself. We are not involved in working the surface. We are working with the material itself. The material has its own condition [*sostoianie*] and that condition is what is important to us. . . . Our new *faktura* is not the working of the surface but the deployment of material. . . . The savoring [*smakovanie*] of surfaces has already been gotten rid of and we are trying to work with material.<sup>113</sup>

In his protest, Rodchenko sought to acknowledge not only the gulf existing between Burliuk's petrography and laboratory Constructivism, but also the distance between his own Black paintings (working the *surface*) and his Spatial Constructions (working the *material*). By reassigning *faktura* to the matter of surface alone, however, Rodchenko suppressed Tatlin's intervention (not surprising, given the latter's status as a quasi-paternal authority figure). Despite this sudden and rather acute shortness of memory, Rodchenko's protest nevertheless

113. Transcribed in Khan-Magomedov (see note 83), pp. 100–101.

revealed an awareness that avant-garde *faktura* was now a concept with a history and an etymology, an awareness shared by his fellow Constructivists.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, the "condition of the material," which Rodchenko refers to as having taken the place of *faktura*, was nothing less than the very same principle of materiological determination

114. In the same discussion, Ioganson suggested: "The word *faktura* has become so terribly clichéd [*strashno zataskano*] that in order to decide whether or not to use it in the programme, we need to start by reconsidering the word itself: its precise meaning and its origins." Quoted in Khan-Magomedov, "Konstruktivizm: k probleme formirovaniia kontsepsii khudozhestvennogo konstruirovaniia," *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika (Trudy VNIITE)* 23 (1980):62. Or, as Iorgii Stenberg expressed it: "The most important thing is to formulate the question of *faktura* correctly. This means not conceiving of it as they used to whenever they would break the charcoal and exclaim 'Akh, what *faktura*.' Whereas now we would say—what a crappy [*skvernyi*] material this must be if it can be so easily broken." Quoted in Khan-Magomedov (see note 83), p. 102. Stepanova sets forth a table of *faktura*'s "historical evolution" in a long letter to Gan of January 1922. Stepanova, "O fakture" (see note 99), pp. 171–175, trans. in Lavrent'ev (see note 102), pp. 176–177.

that had underscored his own Spatial Constructions. Once Gan reiterated this fact—that Constructivist *faktura* was precisely such a working of material (and not merely of surface)—Rodchenko and the other members of the group finally agreed to *faktura*'s inclusion within the programme.

In order to convince his colleagues, however, Gan resorted to an industrial metaphor, likening the way in which the Constructivist works his or her material, to the way in which a foundry produces iron from mineral ore:

We have to give new meaning to [the] concept [of *faktura*]. . . . Let's take cast iron—an industrial material. So that an object can be made out of it, a production process works it, i.e. smelts it, pours it into molds and so forth—this whole process is also *faktura*, i.e., the working of material and not its surface. . . . And in so far as you are a constructivist, you are making *faktura* [*ty fakturish'*, lit., "you are fakturing"], i.e., you are working the material, and do not just treat its surface.<sup>115</sup>

On the face of things, Gan appears to be rehearsing the principle of *faktura* as materiological determination, but in fact, the metaphor of the foundry utterly contradicts this principle: the smelting of ore (essence) into slabs (form) would be, in the language of Matvejs, "breaking" the material, in Tatlin's, "mutilating" it, in Rodchenko's (in his laboratory phase), altering "the condition of the material." The subjection of the material in the industrial process is rather, I would argue, a metaphor for an altogether new conception of *faktura* wherein *faktura* becomes the instrument of two equally new ambitions: first, the expression of the ideology of Communism in particular; and second, the fulfillment of an a priori purpose or function. "Material that is consciously selected and used for a particular purpose . . . is what the [Constructivist] group calls *faktura*."<sup>116</sup>

Gan's loading of a now-erstwhile autotelic or materiologically fundamentalist concept with external "applications" generated some interesting new problems for the Constructivists on the brink of a major shift into industrial production. If form followed the exigencies of the material, then how could it at the same time follow those of utilitarian function? Furthermore, if, under the principle of materiological determination, the will to form (what Gan called the

"legislative function")<sup>117</sup> had already been transferred to the material itself, then how could the Constructivists intervene to shape the material with respect to ideology and function? The solution was to abandon the principle of materiological determination altogether. Stepanova puts this forthrightly in a text written in late 1921, in which she reveals that new Constructivist *faktura* has brought the trajectory of vanguard *faktura* to a close. In 1912, as we have seen, Burliuk had celebrated the fact that in contemporary painting *faktura* was now an "end in itself [*samotsel'iu*]," independent of any representational function. It was precisely such self-sufficient *faktura* that was rejected by the Constructivists en route to Productivism. "*Faktura* as an end in itself [*samotsel'*]," Stepanova now writes, "is a negative phenomenon since it is art for art's sake." It was not only Burliuk's *faktura* that Stepanova dismissed in late 1921, but also that of laboratory Constructivism: "Both the first collages and also the spatial constructions were based *only* on *faktura*."<sup>118</sup> That is to say, they lacked any external function.

In the Constructivists' programme for the future, therefore, *faktura* as a principle of materiological determination (form follows material) was replaced by a nascent functionalism (form follows function). This was *faktura*'s final transformation, after which it dropped out of vanguard discourse altogether. The complex trajectory of *faktura* that I have traced in this essay, comprising a series of shifts from surface to material, from arbitrariness to determination, from producer to produced, was rejected in late 1921 as mere aesthetics ("easelism [*stankovizm*]"), to make way for what Benjamin Buchloh has described as "a more profound paradigmatic change," namely, the avant-garde's shift in the mid-1920s to a "factographic" practice based upon technologies of mechanical reproduction and collective modes of distribution and consumption.<sup>119</sup>

\* \* \*

"The object of art is," wrote the late Meyer Schapiro in 1957 with regard to American abstract painting at mid-century, "more passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling. The painting

117. Quoted in Khan-Magomedov (see note 83), p. 102.

118. Stepanova, "Estetika" (see note 99), p. 171 (emphasis added), trans. (modified) in Noever (see note 99), p. 145.

119. Buchloh (see note 1), pp. 86, 95, and passim. See also Leah Dickerman, "Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1997).

115. Quoted in Khan-Magomedov (see note 83), pp. 101–102; see also Gan (see note 107), pp. 61–62.

116. "Program of the Constructivist Working Group of INKhUK" (see note 110), p. 67.

symbolizes an individual who realizes freedom and deep engagement of the self within his work."<sup>120</sup> For Schapiro, the brushstroke was the trace of the artist's "active presence" within the work, and a symbol of freedom—the last bastion, the last frontier of resistance, before the total eclipse of human creativity by standardization and industrialization. The trajectory of vanguard *faktura* that I have discussed began with somewhat similar sentiments. For Burliuk, a half-century before Schapiro, an evidently worked surface constituted the trace of a subjectivity liberated not so much from industrial standardization (although this was not an altogether insignificant factor) as from its historical suppression or indifferenciation under Academic or Realist prescription. But what is quite distinct is that Burliuk's emphasis on the very materiality of the surface in his petrography of painting invested the work of art with a kind of ontological substance of its own—the work constituted a second order of reality that was, as it were, only barely man-made, its material only barely instrumentalized. In this sense, we have already in Burliuk a glimmer of the shift in agency that would eventually turn *faktura* against itself. After Burliuk, *faktura* was, as we have seen, rapidly transformed into a principle of materiological determination: first adumbrated in Matvejs's text, then articulated in Tatlin's sculptural production, and finally stated definitively in Rodchenko's laboratory Constructivism.

The Russian avant-garde's transfer of the generative principle to the material, in the very name of *faktura*, constituted a tremendous attack on the concept of artistic subjectivity intrinsic to the classical definition of the work of art that is the epigraph of this essay. For Aristotle, the *location* of the moving or generative principle, or efficient cause, of production defined the difference between art and not-art. For a thing to be art, the driving force in the becoming of that thing had to be located in the producer; if located within the thing itself, as in a work of nature, or in a thing that is produced out of necessity as in a work of utility, that thing was not art.<sup>121</sup> Tatlin, and Rodchenko in his laboratory phase, sought in

the name of *faktura* to *overturn* this classical distinction by admitting to the realm of art a work wherein the generative principle was located in the material. For the Constructivist Group, by contrast, seeking to escape the confines of the laboratory for the realm of "practical activity,"<sup>122</sup> *faktura* was no longer a matter of overturning this distinction, but rather of *upholding* it so as to cross from one side to the other—from art to utility. That is to say, if the materiological determination of Tatlin and the early Rodchenko broached the concept of the "readymade," and thereby invoked *avant la lettre* Schapiro's nightmare of the eclipse of art by industrialization, this was done, nevertheless, in the name of art. The Constructivist Group, en route to industrial production in late 1921 and no longer concerned with "the object of art," whether of the easel or the laboratory, but rather with that of the "real," did so in the name of utilitarian function.

It might seem that *faktura* thus became, once again, merely "incidental"—that the Constructivists, in their productivist phase, drove *faktura* back to that very space of subordination wherein it was both incidental and instrumentalized. But the metaphor of the circle, and the inevitability of its closure, does not well describe *faktura's* vanguard trajectory. In another context, Riegl once wrote, "[t]he screw of time has seemingly turned all the way back to its old position, yet in reality it has ended up one full turn higher, and it is now removed by a deep furrow from that point at which it seem[s] once again to have arrived."<sup>123</sup> Within the Russian avant-garde's shifting understanding of the concept of *faktura* between 1912 and 1922, the deep furrow that irrevocably divided that which Burliuk sought to overcome from that which the Constructivists eventually struggled to embrace, was the process I have charted in this essay: the destruction of *faktura's* traditional significance as the trace of the artist's active presence. This process of destruction was essential, I would argue, to the very theorization of the Constructivists' shift into production. In other words, *faktura* had not circled, but rather, like the screw of time, it spiraled.

120. Meyer Schapiro, "Recent Abstract Painting" (1957), in *Modern Art, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), pp. 218–219. I have also benefitted from Bois's discussion of Schapiro's text in "The Disparition of Gesture" (see note 88). See also Richard Shiff, "Cézanne's Physicality: The Politics of Touch," in *The Language of Art History*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 137 and passim.

121. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Hippocrates Apostle (Boston: D. Reidel, 1975), p. 104 (Book Z, 4).

122. "Program of the Constructivist Working Group of INKhUK" (see note 110), p. 67.

123. Alois Riegl, "Late Roman or Oriental?" trans. Peter Wortsman in *German Essays in Art History*, ed. Gert Schiff (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 187. In this essay, Riegl defended himself against accusations that he had presented, in his *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie*, a "regression" hypothesis concerning the complex interrelation of Ancient Near Eastern and late Roman art.

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*Factura*



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