

## CONSTRUCTIVISM

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To many critics in the 1920s modern art was anarchy, anarchy was Communism, and the mutilation of natural appearances – like the mutilation of the existing social structure – was anarchistic and communistic. The *New York Times*, for example, reprinted an article on the subject in their 3 April 1921 edition. The Reds in art, as in literature, the Cubists and Futurists and all their noxious offspring ‘would subvert or destroy all the recognized standards of art and literature by their Bolshevist methods’. Modern French art was saturated with the Bolshevist influence, another writer complained. And yet another that the ‘Red’ art politicians of Paris, Berlin and Moscow were ‘insanely bent on rooting out even the memory of the great of the past, for fear the vulgar proletariat might develop an aristocratic longing for . . . the majesty of the civilizations of the aristocratic past’.

Certainly, from David’s time at least, artists, leftists, were in many cases motivated as much by social and political aspirations as by purely formal ones. But until the occurrence of Constructivism, no movement in the evolution of modern art had been so thoroughgoing an expression of Marxist ideology or so intimately connected with a revolutionary communist organism. Constructivism was indeed ‘Red’ – despite the disclaimers with which quite understandably the proponents of avant-garde art defended themselves against the fanaticism of critics who did not bother to elaborate on the more subtle distinctions, to separate out the finer strands making up the complex fabric of modern art.

Constructivism was neither meant to be an abstract style in art nor even an art, per se. At its core, it was first and foremost the expression of a deeply motivated conviction that the artist could contribute to enhance the physical and intellectual needs of the whole of society by entering directly into a rapport with machine production, with architectural engineering and with the graphic and photographic means of communication. To meet the material

needs, to express the aspirations, to organize and systematize the feelings of the revolutionary proletariat – that was their aim: not political art, but the socialization of art.

Often, Constructivism was overtly propagandist in nature: sometimes by the placement of simple geometric forms in the kind of literary context which turned such forms into representations, or near representations, of actual objects; sometimes, as in poster design or in photomontage or in book and magazine illustration, fragments of the camera image provided the necessary and very concrete references to reality.

In El Lissitzky’s *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, a street poster made about 1920, the simple shapes convey the collision of the two antagonistic forces in revolutionary Russia, not with the narrative descriptiveness of traditional art but with the stark legibility and incipient symbolism which is so appropriate to the poster’s function. In his illustrations for a children’s book published in 1922, a charming serial called *The Story of Two Squares* [illustration 88], the elemental forms are converted by the context into representational configurations. Two squares, one black and the other red, hurtle towards the earth (a red circle) in which an architectural cluster (cubes and rectangles) rests. They see only chaos below (geometric forms in disarray). Crash! The red square scatters the lot and on a black square order is established by the red which maintains its vigil over all while the black square, smaller now, moves off into space. How many children (and adults) in the newly born socialist state were intrigued by this naïve but lucid symbolism is hard to know. But the use of such forms, reflecting a great sympathy with the technological world, is absolutely consistent with Lissitzky’s typographical principles of optical economy and the intrinsic expressiveness of the type forms and layouts and of course with the idea of Constructivism.

To the Constructivists, a new world had been born and they believed that the artist or, better, the creative designer should take his place alongside the scientist and engineer [illustration 89]. This was not a novel idea. Architects like Louis Sullivan and his student Frank Lloyd Wright, Henry van de Velde and the Futurist Antonio Sant’ Elia among others in the nineteenth and early twentieth cen-

turies had proposed, similarly, that it was not the artist, but the engineer who now stood at the frontiers of the new style. They eulogized simple shapes. They believed that buildings and objects should be freed from the ornamental excrescences and the accumulated barnacles of past art. They advocated the nude building, the purity inherent in elementary forms. New industrial materials and the machine, they said, contained within themselves a special beauty of their own. This architectonic primitivism was admirably reflected in the work of Alexander Rodchenko who from 1915 executed designs entirely with the rule and compass [illustration 90], later to throw himself wholeheartedly into the constructivist effort. To these artists, geometric forms, uniform areas of pure colours, had an aura of rational order about them and it was order that they wanted to impose on society.

We want 'not to make abstract projects, but to take concrete problems as the point of departure', wrote Alexei Gan, one of the theorists of the movement. Social expediency and utilitarian significance, production based on science and technique, instead of the speculative activities of earlier artists, were the first principles of Constructivism. A new social order necessarily brings to life new forms of expression, they believed; and Communism is based on organized work and the application of the intellect. Was Constructivism, then, entirely without art? Iconoclasts, they rejected the bourgeois preoccupation with the representation and interpretation of reality. They repudiated the idea of art for art's sake. The materialist direction of their work would, they believed, uncover new and logical formal structures, the innate qualities and expressiveness of the materials. And in the fabrication of socially useful things the very objectivity of the processes would further reveal new meanings and new forms.

What these artists proposed was consistent with Marx's contention that the mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual processes of life. Constructivists believed that the essential conditions of the machine and the consciousness of man inevitably create an aesthetic which would reflect their time. Two potent words were sequestered by constructivist theoreticians to demonstrate their dialectical creative process: tectonic and

factura; their synthesis resulting in constructive reality. Tectonic: the whole idea, the fundamental conception based on social use and expedient materials – the merging of content and form; factura: the realization of the natural propensities of the materials themselves, their peculiar conditions during fabrication, their transformation. In all likelihood, the modern nostrums about the 'integrity of the material' gained impetus from the terminology of the constructivist dialecticians.

As they aspired towards the unification of art and society, the Constructivists expurgated from their minds and from their vocabularies the arbitrary classifications which traditionally had imposed on art a hierarchic scale giving the supremacy to painting, sculpture and architecture. The idea of 'Fine Art' being superior to the so-called 'practical arts' was to them no longer valid. Appropriately, then, Constructivists like Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956) and El Lissitzky (1890–1941) worked in many fields. Tatlin taught wood and metal fabrication and in the Institute of Silicates, ceramics. His industrial designs included functional workers' clothes. He was concerned also with the cinema, for many years designed for the theatre, and he experimented with gliders. Rodchenko worked during a long career in typography, poster and furniture design and magazine illustration. He also distinguished himself in the field of photography and film. Lissitzky too was engaged in many sectors, notably architecture and interior design. Furniture, magazine illustration and layout, occupied him during much of his life. Similarly, other artists associated with Constructivism dispensed their talents in a multiplicity of ways.

Painting and sculpture were not entirely discarded. They were not ends in themselves according to the tenets of constructivist realism, but were parts of processes through which architecture or industrial products were fully realized. Lissitzky's conception of the *proun* points this up. *Proun* is an abbreviation from the Russian phrase which means something like 'new art objects'. This paradigm of constructivist realism was in its essence meant to convey the idea of creative evolution, beginning with the flat plane and more or less illusionistic renderings (a kind of architect's or designer's plan), followed by the fabrication of three-dimensional models, then

finally the total realization in the construction of utilitarian objects. Proun, simply, was a method of working, entirely in harmony with modern technological means. Through this forming process, all the essential elements of form: mass, the flat plane, space, proportion, rhythm, the natural properties of particular materials used, plus the demands made by the ultimate function of the object, should come to fruition in the final object itself. No doubt, Lissitzky's earlier training as an engineer and architect was instrumental in the resolution of this idea. In fact, he explicitly associates the procedure with that followed by engineers and architects.

Because of the formal characteristics of his designs, and because of his sympathy with some of Malevich's attitudes, Lissitzky is sometimes classified as a Suprematist. This, I think, is fallacious. The propensity for diagonals in his graphic work no more makes him a Suprematist than Mondrian's assertive horizontals and verticals make *him* a Constructivist. It is not a question of style. It is one of intention. Lissitzky may have embraced certain suprematist ideas, but his principal purpose, his whole manner of working, was allied to Constructivism. This is also clearly indicated in his writings. His guiding principle for architecture was that space was made for people, not people for space: 'we no longer want a room to be a painted coffin for our living bodies.' His concern with the material problems of existence is reflected in his speculations about the future. To mitigate the growing problem of vast accumulations of printed books, for example, he envisaged electronic libraries.

With the success of the October Revolution in 1917 these artists, tremendously enthusiastic, plunged into the task of creating an art of the proletariat, an art participating as they said in the expedencies of that revolution. In 1918, to celebrate its first anniversary, a gigantic re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd (the capital till that year) was organized by Nathan Altman with a cast of thousands: not trained actors it should be noted but, reflecting the concrete reality favoured by Constructivism, with non-actors, the ordinary citizens of Petrograd who, by involvement with that historic event performed from direct experience. The huge square was decorated, not only with heroically-scaled representations of workers and peasants, with figurative eulogies to the

victorious Red Army, but also with massive triangles, segments of circles, rectangles and other such elementary forms.

Perhaps the most appropriate symbol of the unification of painting, sculpture and architecture with the information and propaganda organ of the State, was Tatlin's extravagant synthesis, designed between 1917 and 1920, called the *Monument to the Third International* [illustration 91]. This complex was to be constructed in the form of a massive spiral which efficaciously conveyed the dynamism of the space age – a sanguine thrust into an unknown but promising future. The Empire State building, completed by 1931, is 1250 feet high. The height intended for the Russian structure is sometimes said to be at least that. Inside would hang a cylinder, a cube and a sphere containing meeting halls, offices and, at the very top, an information centre – all revolving at different rates of speed: one of the earliest examples of kinetic sculpture; kinetic architecture more accurately. Utilizing almost every technical means of communication then known – including a special projection device for throwing images on to clouds – news bulletins, governmental proclamations and revolutionary slogans would be dispensed daily, hourly, to the people. Tatlin's tower was a stupendous declaration of faith in a communist society. But for a large wooden model, it was never built.

Following the Revolution, plans for new architectural structures based on constructivist principles far outnumbered the buildings actually erected. Carried away by utopian visions, Russian architects and designers wanted literally to give the new society a new shape. Not to construct, they said, but to reconstruct. Often, as symbolic statements, their designs flagrantly disregarded the elementary requirements of the physical function and now remain, on paper, inspired encomiums to the new world – nothing more [illustration 92]. Those relatively few which were realized: workers' clubs, communal housing, schools, factories and exhibition buildings, were not accomplished without a great deal of anguish and frustration. And it is perhaps a poetic irony that the best known constructivist building surviving today is Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow. For to add to the economic disabilities of the infant Soviet, industrially they were centuries, not decades, behind time. Incredible stories have

been told about the technological poverty which, well into the thirties, paralysed many of the new attempts in manufacture and architectural construction. Often, for these modern buildings, logs instead of planks were delivered to the sites and these were cut, not with circular saws and electric planers, but with adzes. The technologically primitive legacy from Tsarist Russia impeded for a long time the realization of such advanced ideas. Tatlin's tower could not have been built without the greatest of difficulties, if it could have been built at all. Thus, the high ideals and emblematic geometry of Constructivism did not so much reflect *Russian* science and technique as it did that of the West. Lissitzky, writing in Moscow in 1929, made this clear: 'the technical revolution in western Europe and America has established the foundation of the new architecture.' He points specifically to the large urban complexes of Paris, Chicago and Berlin.

It was largely because of this infirmity that an intensive programme for training the artist-designer was, in 1918, initiated. New schools, Higher Art and Technical Workshops called *vkHUTEMAS* (from *Vishe KhUdozhestvenny Tekhnicheskoy Masterskoy*), appeared and the very utilization of such abbreviations, common enough in the new Russia, is to some extent an etymological demonstration of their sympathy with modern technocracy. Many of the Constructivists taught or had studios in the *vkHUTEMAS*. Naum Gabo not long ago described the curriculum of the Moscow workshops and the intensity with which the students engaged in ideological discussion; a part of their training which, he maintains, was ultimately of more importance than the actual studio teaching there. The programme for these schools was organized at first by Wassily Kandinsky. Based mainly on an amalgam of the ideas put forth in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, on Suprematism and on the incipient concepts of Constructivism known as the 'culture of materials', it later became the prototype for parts of the German Bauhaus course. In Russia it was however soon discredited. Free painting and sculpture were proscribed, as was the teaching of Kandinsky's somewhat metaphysical analyses of colour and form, and the course was reorganized with the emphasis placed on production techniques rather than artistic design. Disillusioned, Kandinsky and Gabo soon left Russia

to work in other countries where their ideas emphasizing the spiritual content of art were more readily accepted.

The ideological battles between those with suprematist inclinations and those who stood resolutely on constructivist principles were fought not with words alone but with the weapon of art itself. In 1916, Malevich fired a salvo of trapezoids with his *Suprematism Destroyer of Constructivist Form*. His *White on White* (c. 1918) was an affront to Rodchenko who counter-attacked that same year (the year the *vkHUTEMAS* were initiated) with his *Black on Black*. This painting symbolized the death of all isms in art, especially Suprematism. Trotsky and Lunacharsky had supported Constructivism but with the NEP in 1921, Lenin's New Economic Policy, Constructivism's usefulness was seriously questioned. Yet those artists – and Malevich – continued to work in Russia, though ultimately their influence there waned.

The vacuum left in easel painting by the suppression of the Petrograd Academy (which had been patronized by the Tsarist régime), by the rejection of Suprematism and by the refusal of the Constructivists to have anything to do with picture-painting, was filled during the mid-twenties by illustrators and naturalistic painters organized as *AKHR* (The Association of Artists of the Revolution), later, as *OST* (The Society of Easel Painters) and still later, by others: artists, socialist realists who convinced the authorities that they too had an important part to play in the building of an egalitarian society.

Among the few survivors of that revolutionary group of Constructivists is Naum Gabo who still advocates the principles of 'constructive realism' as he calls it. But Gabo was never wholeheartedly in sympathy with the central ideas of Constructivism and though he has been critical of Malevich's dogmatism, he nevertheless is closer in essence to his ideas and to those of Kandinsky than to the utilitarian concepts of the Constructivists. Gabo defends the constructive artist's use of elementary forms and the tools and techniques of the engineer. But lines, shapes and colours, he believes, possess their own expressive meanings independent of nature. Their content is based, not directly on the external world, but springs from the psychological phenomena of human emotions – something the

Constructivists could never accept. It is through enhancing one's spiritual life that the creative act, he says, contributes to material existence. The 'constructive idea' is not intended, he insists, to unite art and science, not to *explore* the conditions of the physical world, but to *sense* its truth. This, the Constructivists and their followers would say, was sheer romanticism and the sophism of abstract art. Constructivism, to give the term its original meaning, repudiates the concept of 'genius': intuition, inspiration, self-expression. Constructivism is didactic, it is physiologically rather than psychologically orientated, it is intimate with science and technology, it is concrete.

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## ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Charles Harrison

'What about the reality of the everyday world and the reality of painting? They are not the same realities. What is this creative thing that you have struggled to get and where did it come from? What reference or value does it have, outside of the painting itself?' – Ad Reinhardt (in a group discussion at Studio 35, 1950).

As a label for the different works of a particular generation or community of artists, centred on New York from the forties for at least a decade, the term 'Abstract Expressionism' is misleading, embracing as it does at one extreme the work of Willem de Kooning, which is rarely 'abstract', and at the other the work of Barnett Newman, which is not characteristically expressionist. The term has gained currency, however, and can therefore be assumed to be relatively neutral in use.<sup>1</sup>

One wants to establish a view of Abstract Expressionism which is broadly heuristic rather than dogmatic; a view which caters to a need for some reliable understanding of the painters' formal and technical concerns and of their relationships to previous art, without at the same time denying the possibility of insight into the painters' more general and 'metaphysical' notions of the significance of their actions and their assertions. One needs also to maintain some truth to a world which allowed the coexistence, and at certain levels the compatibility, of very different characters and characteristics: both Newman and De Kooning; both 'abstract' painting and figure painting; both deep seriousness and high vulgarity; both the deadpan and the sublime.

In so brief a survey of so wide a subject it is necessary to be selective and to find some bases from which to operate the selection. My approach to the subject is therefore predicated upon the conviction that the quality and originality of the art of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko establishes their precedence above that of other artists now custom-