

## Revolutionary Art: The Bolshevik Experience\*

Several months after the October Revolution, Anatolii Lunacharskii, newly appointed as head of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (NARKOMPROS), reported to a meeting of artists and sculptors: "I have just come from Vladimir Ilich



*"Memorial Obelisk for the Great Socialist Thinkers and Revolutionaries," Moscow. Photo from 1920s. The obelisk was first erected in 1913 to commemorate the sixt jubilee of the Romanov dynasty. It was transformed into a Bolshevik monument by engraving on it these names: Marx, Engels, Liebknecht, Lasalle, Bebel, Campanella, Meslier, Winstanley, Thomas More, Saint-Simon, Vailant, Fourier, Juarès, Proudhon, Bakunin, Chernyshevskii, Lavrov, Mikhailovskii, Plekhanov.*

[Lenin]. Once again he has had one of those fortunate and profoundly exciting ideas with which he has so often shocked and delighted us. He intends to decorate Moscow's squares with statues and monuments to revolutionaries and the great fighters for socialism."<sup>1</sup> Lenin had told him that this plan for "monumental propaganda" was for long his cherished idea.<sup>2</sup> It was to be public art that wrote history onto urban space. The masses would *see* history as they moved through the city. The revolution entered the phenomenal world of the everyday.

Innovative in Lenin's idea was the adaptation of a nationalist art form for socialist ends. Whereas in the nineteenth century, monument-building became an obsession of nation-states as a means of celebrating (and creating) their own particular pasts, Lenin's monuments evoked an *international* heritage. The twenty-one Russians on the list of approved "fighters for socialism" included

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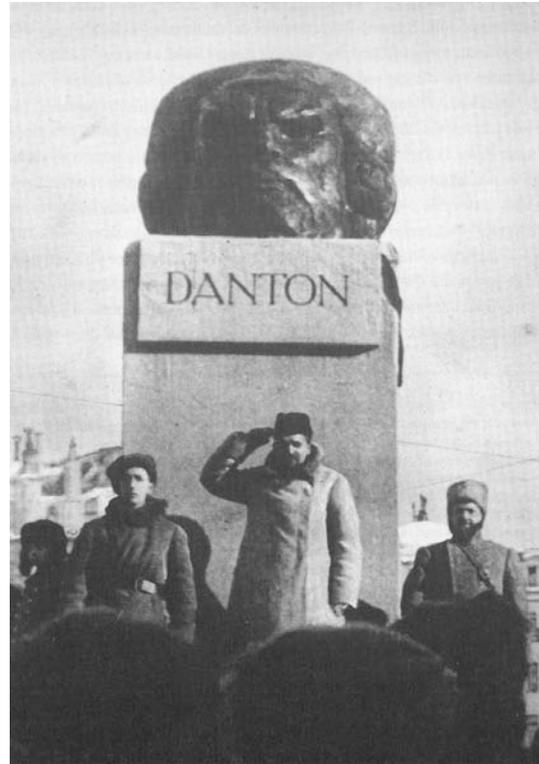
• Based on material from Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

1. Cited in Christina Lodder, "Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda," *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992*, eds. Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 19.

2. Lodder, "Lenin's Plan," *Art of the Soviets*, p. 20.

many assassins or would-be assassins of royalty—not the category usually memorialized by national regimes. There were 19 Europeans, half of them French, among them a cluster of Revolutionary heroes: Danton, Marat, and Babeuf; later, Robespierre was added. Cultural figures were among the "revolutionaries," including Heinrich Heine and Frédéric Chopin. Paul Cézanne's name was seriously considered.<sup>3</sup>

Material was in short supply.<sup>4</sup> Statues were hastily built out of plaster or cement,



Andreev, Nikolai, "Statue of Danton," Moscow, 1919.  
The image is from a propaganda film about Lenin.

3. There does not seem to have been any concerted effort to place these figures in a particular sequence, chronological or otherwise; nor were the monuments placed in spatial relation to each other in any particularly meaningful fashion. Rather, these "heroes" were brought into the present as a constellation that suggested a new historical narration, connecting figures of the past across national and occupational, and even political boundaries. The ecumenicalism of the list was striking. Among the Russians were the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, whom Marx had criticized repeatedly, and (after his death in May 1919) the social revolutionary, Georgii Plekhanov, who in 1903 had accused Lenin of "bonapartism," confusing dictatorship *of* the proletariat with dictatorship *over* the proletariat. The Germans included (besides Marx and Engels) the recent Communist martyrs Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Also named were the Italian nationalist Garibaldi, the English utopian socialist Robert Owen, the French utopian theorists Charles Fourier and Saint-Simon, and a handful of ancient European fighters against tyranny (Spartacus, Gracchus, Brutus). (Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989], pp. 89-90). By August 1918 the list of those considered "worthy of sculptural attention" had been extended to 66 (Lodder, "Lenin's Plan," *Art of the Soviets*, p. 20). The name of the French painter Paul Cézanne appeared on an early list, but was crossed off by government officials "at the top" (Vasilii Rakitin, "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers," *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* [New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992], p. 31).

4. This lack of material was to be turned into a democratic advantage, as "the public would be allowed to give their judgement on the merit of the work before some were converted into more permanent materials such as bronze, granite or marble" (Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks*, vol 1: *The Crisis of Renewal, 1917-1924* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), p. 59. Lunacharskii wrote that the monuments should be "modest, and let everything be temporary" (cited in Vladimir Tolstoy et al., eds., *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918-33* [New York: The Vendome Press, 1990], p. 13).

replacing monuments from the Tsarist era that were just as hastily disassembled.<sup>5</sup> Time mattered. The meaning of history was being constructed. If the Bolshevik victory in St. Petersburg was to be more than an urban coup, it needed to assume the mantle of sovereign legitimacy presently claimed by the provisional government, established after the February Revolution and abdication of the Tsar. The Russian people had already been proclaimed "free citizens" in the Western, bourgeois-democratic sense; the "new era" had allegedly begun.<sup>6</sup> When the Bolsheviks led the crowd that forcefully evicted that government, headed by Kerenskii, from the Tsar's Winter Palace, nothing less than world history was called upon to legitimate the act. The October events were to be understood in a sublime context, not merely as a case of catching up with the West, but of superseding it, advancing the world-revolutionary tradition to its highest culmination. Without this interpretation, the Winter Palace storming was vandalism, and the overthrow of the existing government was treason.<sup>7</sup>

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5. In response to acts of vandalism during the early days of the Revolution, Lunacharskii issued an appeal to "Protect the Property of the People," and appointed artists to a Commission for the Preservation of Monuments that had the power to decide which of the Tsarist monuments were to be saved on account of their artistic value. (See Hubertus Gassner, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," *Great Utopia*, p. 301.) The issue of monumental propaganda took on increased significance in the context of the Civil War, as Trotsky wrote, "particularly in the outlying areas": "We must say...if the bourgeois breaks through the front and comes here, he will sweep away that monument together with the Soviet power and all the achievements we have won" (cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 56-57).

6. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 37. The Provisional Government adopted as its national anthem the Workers' Marseillaise, "*Otrezemysya ot Starovo Mira*" ("We Renounce the Old World").

7. The Provisional Government severely damaged its own legitimacy by resuming the European war, thereby provoking mass street demonstrations in St. Petersburg on July 4, 1917, which turned violent. Lenin agreed to speak to the demonstrators but warned them that it was still too early for armed insurrection.

It is “history” that legitimates political revolution.<sup>8</sup> The structuring of history as a narrative discourse transforms the violent rupture of the present into a continuity of meaning. One has to imagine the tenuousness of the situation. With the expected workers' revolution in Europe delayed



indefinitely, Lenin counted the days for proof that the Bolshevik victory could outlast the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871. Why, when even fellow-Marxists believed a period of bourgeois democracy in Russia was a historical necessity, should the Bolshevik splinter group gain hegemony, not only of the political discourse, but of the cultural discourse as well? Mass support existed

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8. Historical progress along a developmental trajectory is not the only possible form of revolutionary time. The French Revolution looked backward to ancient Rome for its historical model; seventeenth-century English rebels appealed to Biblical time. Both required what Benjamin referred to as "a tiger's leap into the past" (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], p. 261).

*"[W]e people are the children of the sun, the bright source of life; we are born of the sun and will vanquish the murky fear of death" -- Maxim Gorky, Children of the Sun (1905).<sup>9</sup>*

*Lenin told the British science fiction writer, H.G. Wells, who interviewed him in the Kremlin in 1920, that if life were discovered on other planets, revolutionary violence would no longer be necessary: "Human ideas -- he told Wells -- are based on the scale of the planet we live in. They are based on the assumption that the technical potentialities, as they develop, will never overstep 'the earthly limit.' If we succeed in making contact with the other planets, all our philosophical, social and moral ideas will have to be revised, and in this event these potentialities will become limitless and will put an end to violence as a necessary means of progress."<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Gorky, cited in Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams* p. 42.

for the October events, but it was not of a single mind. Millennialists, avant-gardists, and utopian dreamers of every sort were eager to interpret the revolutionary future as their own. Bolshevism needed to speak for all of these people, structuring their desires inside a



historical continuum that, at the same time, contained their force. In the process of being inserted into the temporal narrative of revolutionary history, the utopian dimension of a wide variety of discourses was constrained and reduced.

Such discourses abounded in Russia (and among Russians in exile) in the decade before the Revolution. It was, then as now, the turn of a century, and the pulse of culture was an alternating current of imagined endings and new beginnings. In a country still inadequately connected by rail, flying machines real and imagined were invested with transformative social meaning. The country's World-War I bomber, later developed by Igor

Sikorsky, was named after Ilya Moromets, the Russian fairy-tale giant who awoke after forty years in possession of colossal strength.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 170. (The bomber was developed by Igor Sikorsky, who later emigrated to the United States and become one of its leading aviation engineers.) A veritable "aviation mania" took hold among workers and peasants after the Bolshevik Revolution, particularly the young. Voluntary clubs of air enthusiasts were promoted by the Air League (OSOAVIAKHIM) founded in 1923, which had a membership of fifteen million by 1934. The Soviets established a civil air fleet in 1921 (renamed Aeroflot in 1932) contemporaneous with (government-owned) Lufthansa and Air France, and (privately-owned) Pan American in the U.S. The exhortation "Workers, Take to the Air!" was used in campaigns to raise funds for financing new aircraft, which depended to a surprising degree, if we are to believe the sources, on voluntary contributions. "Some peasants reportedly were so impressed by the gallant fliers of Aeroflot that they contributed part of their crops -- rye, oats, wheat, and even suckling pigs -- to be converted into cash for flying machines" (Kendall E. Bailes, "Soviet Civil Aviation and Modernization, 1923-1976," Robin Higham and Jacob W. Kipp, eds., *Soviet Aviation and Air Power: A Historical View* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), p. 176).

With the sudden popularity of science fiction translated from the West (works by Edward Bellamy, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells), leading Russian writers began to create their own other-planetary worlds, as the first successes of airborne flight propelled imagination into outer space. Interplanetary travel was a preferred form of social utopian expression. Alexander Bogdanov's two-volume epic, *Red Star* (1908) and *Engineer Menni* (1913), anticipated history by describing a Marxist-communist society existing on Mars.<sup>12</sup> Maxim Gorky developed a theory of Godbuilding (*bogostroitel'stvo*) whereby the masses would become God, creators of miracles and immortal.<sup>13</sup> The pre-war generation discovered and made famous the writings of Nikolai Fëdorov, a nineteenth-century librarian whose cosmological speculations predicted an immortal humankind comprised of the technologically resurrected bodies of the dead, inhabiting a socially harmonious, interplanetary space.<sup>14</sup> Fëdorov envisioned a moral universe transformed through social-utopian applications of science (cloud-seeding, solar heat, travel by electromagnetic

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12. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams* p. 30. Bogdanov became head of Proletkult in 1917.

13. From Maxim Gorky, *Confession* (1907), the text that coined the term Godbuilding, cited in Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 103. Lenin was (and remained) opposed to Godbuilding, but the idea had Lunacharskii's support. He and Gorky were members of the Capri group of Marxist exiles before the War that also included Bogdanov. Lenin denounced Bogdanov's conception of cultural revolution as the way to socialism in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909). But he was conciliatory toward Lunacharskii, who rejoined Lenin's good graces and the Party just after the Revolution (see Timothy Edward O'Connor, *The Politics of Soviet Culture: Anatolii Lunacharskii* [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988], pp. 10-13).

14. According to Fëdorov's *Philosophy of the Common Task*, "Death is, one may say, anaesthesia, which is accompanied by the total dismemberment of a corpse, decomposition and dispersal of matter. Collection of the dispersed particles is a question of the cosmo-telluric science and of art, consequently a task for men, while the putting together of the assembled particles is a question of physiology, histology, the sewing together, so to say, of the bodily tissues of fathers and mothers which is a task for women..." (cited in Ludmila Koehler, *N. F. Fedorov, The Philosophy of Action* [Pittsburgh: Institute for the Human Sciences, 1979], p. 19). Each unique human body decomposed into dust after death, but each could be rebuilt "by matching all the molecules of a similar pattern. Since the molecules would be scattered throughout the universe, man would have to colonize distant planets in order to find their particles. This colonization would also be necessary in order to accommodate all the resurrected as the work progressed" (Ayleen Teskey, *Platonov and Fyodorov; The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer* [Amersham, England: Avebury Publishing Company, 1982], p. 19.)

energy). Among his supporters were a number of intellectuals, including Konstantin Tsiolkovskii, who became the founding scientist of Soviet rocketry, and later emigrated to the United States.<sup>15</sup>

All kinds of social fantasies were sparked by the new industrial technologies. The futurist poetry of Aleksei Gastev, a metal worker and political agitator before the war, described with passionate enthusiasm the new, industrial machines as an animate force with human beings their collectivized extension.<sup>16</sup> Vasilii Kamenskii, who was himself an aerobatics pilot, composed "ferro-concrete poems" out of words suspended like airplanes in space that influenced Kasimir Malevich's Suprematist paintings of geometric forms suspended in space.<sup>17</sup> Artists of the avant-garde gave expression to the changed anthropology of modern life in forms and rhythms that left the perceptual apparatus of the

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15. The list included Gorky, Bogdanov, Gastev, Maiakovskii, Khlebnikov, and Platonov, all of whom appreciated Fëdorov's ideas, while they were not without criticism. The philosopher's more cultic disciples called themselves "Biocosmists," adopting as their slogan "Immortalism and Interplanetism." When the young Tsiolkovskii met Fëdorov, the latter gave him to read Jules Verne's novel *An Air Voyage Across Africa* (Koehler, *Fedorov*, p. 81). For Tsiolkovskii's connection to the avant-garde, see Michael Holquist, "Tsiolkovsky as a Moment in the Prehistory of the Avant-Garde," John E. Bowlit and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

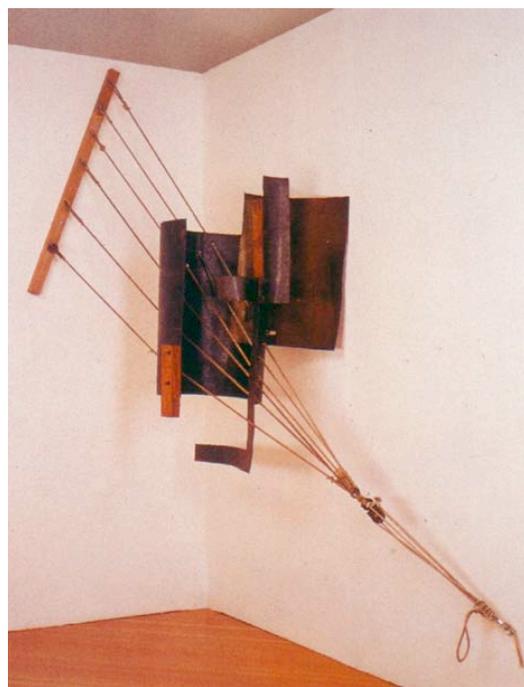
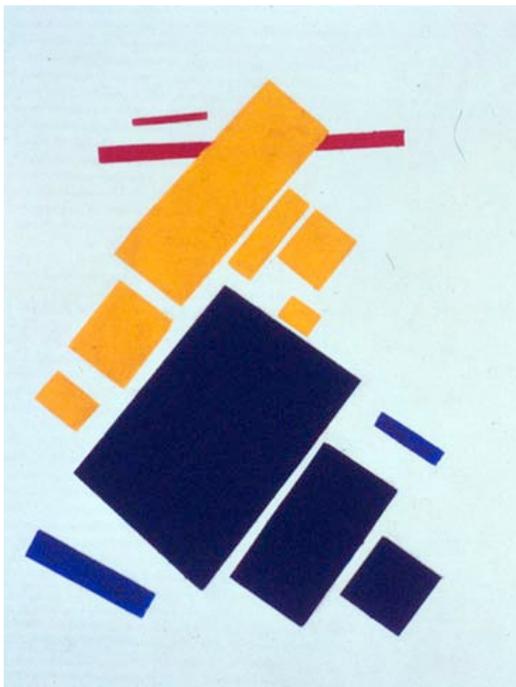
16. "The crowd steps in a new march, their feet have caught the iron tempo./ Hands are burning, they cannot stand idleness.../To the machines!/ We are their lever, we are their breathing, their impulse" (Aleksei Gastev, "The Factory Whistles" ["Gudki"], 1913, trans. Kurt Johannson, *Aleksej Gastev: Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age* [Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1983], p. 76).

17. The aviator is a major figure as well in the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun* performed in St. Petersburg in December 1913, with libretto by the *zaum* poet Aleksei Kruchenykh and music by Mikhail Matiushin; Malevich designed the lighting, stage sets and costumes. The opera was rethought as an "electromechanical show" by El Lissitzky in 1920-21, who designed its "plastic organization," producing a folio for it that was published in Hannover in 1923. *Victory over the Sun* was restaged with meticulous historical detail to the original production in Los Angeles 1983, and videorecorded. The opera tells of the capture of the "cheap and pretentious" sun, symbol of rationality and the "old order," by "Futurelandmen" who then journey to the "10th land" where despite extreme disorientation it is "easier to breathe." While there is nothing of realism in the opera, it "seems to have derived from an actual eclipse of the sun that took place in 1913" (see Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks*, vol. 1, pp. 12-13; also El Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, trans. Erich Dluhosch [Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1984], p. 136).



Lenin's sense of a science of the future. A manifesto of 1913 praised the greatness of the present epoch, "one that has known no equal in the entire history of the world," in terms of "the whole brilliant style of modern times -- our trousers, jackets, shoes, trolleys, cars, airplanes, railways, grandiose steamships,"<sup>19</sup> objects in motion that "embody a mass of moments in time" (in Malevich's words<sup>20</sup>), rather than political actions that progress *through* time. When the avant-garde proclaimed: "The future is our only goal,"<sup>21</sup> they were expressing a desire to break radically from past art in its traditional forms, but what was to come remained an open category. Indeed, the artworks were themselves openings in both a temporal and a spatial sense. Vladimir Tatlin's pre-revolutionary "counter-reliefs," objects composed of metal and wood, were hung unframed as "real materials in

Malevich, Kazimir. "Suprematist Painting: Aeroplane Flying," 1915. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



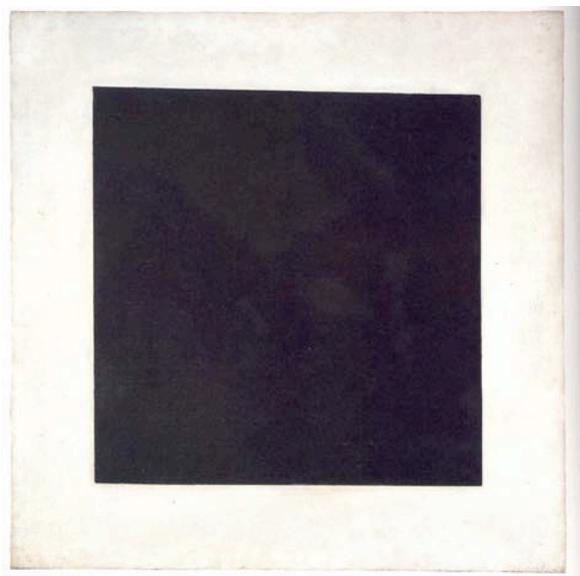
Tatlin, Vladimir, "Counter-Relief," 1914-1915. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

19. Natalya Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, *Rayonists and Futurists: A Manifesto*, 1913, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 89. [Rayonist is spelled elsewhere Rayonnist (Camilla Gray) and Rayist (Great Utopia)]

20. Malevich (1916), cited in John Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 126.

21. Cited in Anatolii Strigalev, "Nonarchitects in Architecture," *Great Utopia*, p. 673.

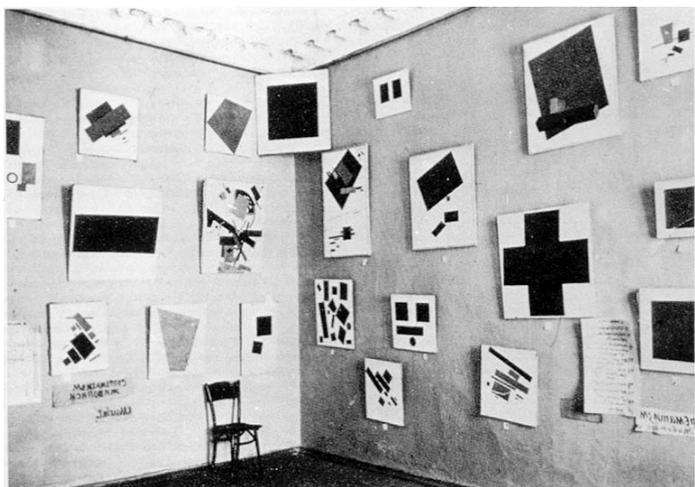
real space" in order to eliminate the separation of art from life and destroy the "perfect, private...and eternal world of the painting."<sup>22</sup> If Tatlin celebrated the forms and materials of modernity for their own sake, Malevich sought to express what was eternal within them. The latter boasted of having transcended space, advancing toward eternity rather than toward any temporally located goal. "Hurry up and shed the hardened skin of centuries, so that you can catch up with us more easily,"<sup>23</sup> he wrote in 1915, the year his pathbreaking geometrical painting, *Black Square* was



*Kazimir Malevich, Black Square, 1915. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. (top of room corner, in the position reserved for a religious icon in Russian homes), hung in "The Last Futurist Exhibition, 0.10," St. Petersburg, 1915-16. The painting Airplane Flying is in the bottom row, right.*

exhibited in "The Last Futurist

Exhibition 0.10."<sup>24</sup> But it was not along a linear course of history that he was racing. Rather, it was into a realm of metaphysical essences intuited out of the new technologies and urban perceptions, and consisting of pure forms and color masses, situated within



22. Gray, *Russian Experiment in Art*, p. 180. The term "counter-relief" evoked the analogy of "counter-attack" during these war years.

23. Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism* (1915), John E. Bowlit, ed. and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 135.

24. "Malevich considered that, at the sight of his black square `the sword will fall from the hero's hands and the prayer die on the lips of the saint'" (Boris Groys, "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde," *Laboratory of Dreams*, p. 202.). The *Black Square* was heralded by El Lissitzky as the "very source of all creative expression." (Lissitzky [1920], cited in Jane A. Sharp, "The critical perception of the 0.10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua," *Great Utopia*, p. 39).

mystico-utopian geometries of space. Malevich supported the Bolshevik Revolution but that did not alter his commitment to the "freedom" of "non-objectivism," which he called Suprematism, as his paintings of squares developed systematically from black, to red, to yellow, to the extreme-minimalist *White Square on White Background* of 1918.<sup>25</sup> He understood these artistic forms as going beyond "our endless progress" into an extraterritorial realm.<sup>26</sup> As he claimed in 1919: "I have torn through the blue lampshade of color limitation and come out into the white. After me comrade aviators sail into the chasm -- I have set up the semaphores of suprematism.... Infinity is before you."<sup>27</sup>

The "time" of the cultural avant-garde is not the same as that of the vanguard party.<sup>28</sup> These artists' practices interrupted the continuity of perceptions and estranges the familiar, severing historical tradition through the force of their fantasy. Progress for the early Russian modernists meant stepping out of the frame of the existing order – no matter whether toward the "beautiful East," back to the "primitive," or through to the "eternal."<sup>29</sup> The effect was to rupture the continuity of time, opening it up to new

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25. Malevich was elected as President of the Art Department of the Moscow Council of Soldier's Deputies in September 1917—before the Bolshevik victory.

26. "On New Systems in Art" (1919), in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915-1928*, vol 1, trans. Xenia Gowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. Troels Andersen (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968], p. 85).

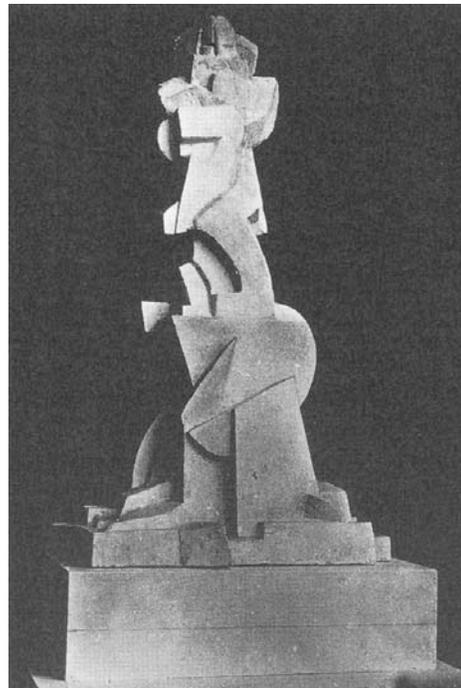
27. Kazimir Malevich, catalogue of the "Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism" (1919), cited in Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry*, pp. 171-72, cf. Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, p. 145.

28. I am making a philosophical distinction between *vanguard* and *avant-garde* temporalities, which the artists and political figures did not clearly recognized themselves. See Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995) for an insightful philosophical explication of the connection between temporalities and politics generally, and for that of the avant-garde in particular. I am indebted as well to discussions with Osborne for the argument made here.

29. All of these terms were used by members of the avant-garde in Russia at the time of the Revolution. See John E. Bowlt, ed. and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988). "Primitivism" was an anti-urban, anti-industrial stylistic tendency, but the Suprematist Ivan Kliun used it in a different sense, as the beginning of a new era: "We are all primitives of the twentieth century" (cited in Vasilii Rakitin, "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers," *Great Utopia* p. 26).

cognitive and sensory experiences. In contrast, the Bolshevik Party submitted to a historical cosmology that provided no such freedom of movement. Bolshevism's claim to know the course of history in its totality pressured a "science" of the future that encouraged revolutionary politics to dictate to art. Culture was to be operationalized. Its products would serve "progress" as the latter's visual representation. Once a certain cosmology of history was lodged in the imagination, even artists came to feel that it could not be otherwise. Artistic revolution came to be distinguished from political revolution, of which it was merely symptomatic. Constrained by the historical goal, revolutionary culture became sedate, conserving a past that appeared to lead meaningfully into the present, refusing new primitivisms that blurred the line of progress, appealing to the masses by means of conventional art forms in order to mobilize their movement "forward" in time.

*Boris Korolev's maquette for a statue to Karl Marx (1919). It was never executed, although there were no regulations of style for the monuments built under Lenin's proposal. Korolev was a co-director of the Moscow Union of Sculptors to which Tatlin, as head of Moscow's branch of IZO-NARKOMPROS, assigned the task of awarding commissions for the monuments, so that his proposal had authority behind it. The stylistic radicality of his Futuro-Cubist design cannot be denied, but its very strength gives palpable evidence of the non-identity between the two movements, avant-garde and vanguard. Historical progress toward socialism could not be read easily into this statue, and the fact that it's subject was Karl Marx hardly made the politics of the situation less problematic.<sup>30</sup>*



30. Korolev designed a statue of Mikhail Bakunin, considerably less radical in style than the proposed statue of Marx, that was in fact erected on Ploshchod Turgenyeva in Moscow, 1919. A wooden platform was built to conceal it from the public prior to the unveiling. "But some poor people in the cold winter days carried away the boards for firewood, and one fine morning, to the general consternation, the unveiled monument became visible, and the sight of it cause a real revolt of the populace" (cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 60. See also Lodder, "Lenin's Plan," *Art of the Soviets*, p. 25. Derided as a "scarecrow" by the press, it was demolished before a formal unveiling could take place.

The story, of course, is far more complicated than this condensed account implies. It was more than a decade before conventional art triumphed in the Soviet Union. Even then, at the height of Stalin's power, there was never a monolithic art or architectural style.<sup>31</sup> But the special position of the party as the vanguard of history meant that the possibilities, through an open temporality, of an *ungoverned* cultural revolution as the path to a new society became one of the dead ends of history. Like so many of history's failures, it merits serious consideration, as it is not always the most progressive social practices that succeed in time, but rather, those that impose themselves most violently.



There are countless possible stories about Bolshevik revolutionary culture. While heroes and villains abound in these narrations, few have engaged this site of the temporary convergence of political and cultural avant-gardes in order to rethink both art and politics in a revolutionary mode. Here, the concept of time may be useful, providing a key to unlock the antagonistic embrace of art and politics in this century—the repeating scenarios of art succumbing to politics or alternatively, politics aestheticized as art—freeing both practices to relate differently to one another.

The early Soviet state supported a variety of artistic tendencies resulting, indeed, in an "ambiguous pluralization" of intellectual life.<sup>32</sup> Proletarian cultural organizations -- theater workshops, art studios and literary circles -- had been founded along with militias and workers' councils at the factory and local levels before the Revolution. In 1917 these groups were centralized as Proletkult under Marxist intellectual leadership of Bogdanov,

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31. "[A]t no point between 1917 and 1937 did there exist in Soviet Russia a single 'typical' architect or architecture" (S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 9. For the great variety of artistic practice during this period, see Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks*, 2 vols.

32. Christopher Read, *Culture and Power in Revolutionary Russia: The Intelligentsia and the Transition from Tsarism to Communism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 94.

but this organization was and remained separate from both the party and the State.<sup>33</sup> Funding was provided for a variety of individual artists. The mystico-primitivist Marc Chagall was appointed director of the Vitebsk art school despite the apolitical nature of his work, which depicted Judaic and folkloric themes.<sup>34</sup> The painter and musician Mikhail Matiushin received state funding while continuing to paint nature-inspired, abstract canvasses emphasizing color and structural clarity that were, he claimed, a form of optical science.<sup>35</sup> Pavel Filonov founded his own school, "Analytical Painting," depicting

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33. Proletkult's intellectual and theoretical leader was Aleksandr A. Bogdanov, whose problematic relationship with Lenin went back to the pre-war years of their exile in Europe. Bogdanov was part of the *Vpered* (Forward) group and the Capri School during those years, that included Lunacharskii and Gorky. His Marxist philosophy differed significantly from Lenin's own, specifically in regard to the significance of proletarian culture for the realization of socialism. The slogan of Proletkult was "*korgavoye no svoye*" ("rough and ready but our own"). Bogdanov was not a member of the Communist Party. Proletkult, however, did receive NARKOMPROS funding as well as money from independent organizations. Lunacharskii (who rejoined the Bolshevik Party in 1917) was Bogdanov's brother-in-law (see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992], pp. 20-22).

34. Chagall, who had trained in Paris before the war, was back in Russia when the Revolution occurred, and stayed, sympathetic to Bolshevism's pledge to promote Jewish artists. He was appointed in 1918 Director of the School of Art in his native town of Vitebsk, where he continued his primitive-populist style, together with a group of Jewish artists from Vitebsk, Kiev and Odessa. In 1919 Chagall brought to the school El Lissitzky (also a native of Vitebsk, with whom earlier he had worked together on Jewish picture books) to become Professor of Architecture and head of the Applied Arts Department. Lissitzky was under the influence of Malevich, whom Chagall invited to the school in the summer of 1919. Malevich took advantage of Chagall's temporary absence to promote his own program, declaring Chagall's art and methods "old-fashioned" and irrelevant, and founding the collective UNOVIS in 1920. Contemporary scholars do not see this move as particularly sinister: "the legendary anecdotes about Malevich's persecution of Chagall prove, upon closer inspection, neither simple nor clearcut" (Shatskikh, "Unovis," *Great Utopia*, p. 56). In June 1921, Chagall's murals were featured at the Twenty-Third Exhibition of the Central section of IZO NARKOMPROS, shown in the hall of the State Jewish Kamernyi Theater in Moscow (see Aleksandra Shatskikh, "A Brief History of Obmokhu," *Great Utopia*, p. 265n). Despite this sign of appreciation by the new regime, Chagall left Russia shortly thereafter for Berlin, and later Paris.

35. See Evgenii Kovtun, "The Third Path to Non-Objectivity," *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), pp. 321-28. In 1913 Matiushin wrote the music for the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun* (see above, note 17). After the Revolution he directed the Department of Organic Culture at the Petrograd GINKhUK, where he worked on his system of expanded viewing, or "see-know" (*zorved*), which combined development of physical vision ("circum-vision") with that of spiritual intuition. "Referring to optical variables in nature (the housefly has a very wide radius of sight while the dog has a very narrow one), Matiushin maintained that human beings could expand their optical radius. He affirmed that the body contained



forms of the material world and its organic processes, making visible that which was in principle invisible, while affirming his loyalty to the Bolshevik regime due to his sincere belief in the "democratization of the arts" that Marxists proclaimed -- although what this meant was far from clear.<sup>36</sup>

Mikhail Matiushin "Movement in Space," 1918. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Fitzpatrick has written: "All Marxist intellectuals agreed, without even thinking about it, that proletarian culture had little or nothing to do with observable popular lower-class habits and cultural tastes."<sup>37</sup> But that fact did not translate into consensus concerning a positive program. Although there was a self-conscious search for proletarian recruits, the artists remained a separate group, or better, separate



Boris Yakovlev, *Transport is Being Laid*, 1923. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. (Or: *Transport Returns to Normal*).

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dormant optical reflexes on the soles of the feet and the back of the neck, and, basing his observations on private experiments, he proceeded to paint what he called landscapes from all points of view" (John E. Bowlt, "Body Beautiful," Bowlt and Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams*, p. 52). The Ender siblings (Mariia, Boris, Kseniia and Georgii) were all his students.

36. *Pavel Filonov: A Hero and His Fate*, trans. and ed. Nicoletta Misler and John E. Bowlt (Austin, Texas: Silvergirl, Inc., 1983), p. 25. Filonov, who immediately gave his support to the October Revolution and was sympathetic to the cultural ideas of Proletkult, "dreamed of organizing an entire network of museums that would display 'low' art forms such as *lubki* and oleographic prints, and his lifelong desire was to open a museum of his art exclusively for workers" (Nicoletta Misler, "Pavel Filonov, Painter of Metamorphosis," *Filonov*, p. 25). He was an influential and respected artist in the 1920s, establishing his school of Collective Masters of Analytical Art was well established in Leningrad and publishing his *Declaration of 'Universal Flowering'*. By the mid-thirties he was in disfavor and summoned repeatedly for questioning. His student Vasilii Kuptsov was also harassed by the authorities, and committed suicide in 1935.

37. Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, p. 21.

groups, endorsing the criterion of "social usefulness" (that distinguished their work from the bourgeois program of *l'art pour l'art*) without toeing any common artistic line. Among those vying for cultural hegemony (and state funding) there were key differences in intellectual position and hence in artistic practice. The AKhRR (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia) was a large, umbrella organization of easel painters founded in 1922 in opposition to the avant-garde's rejection of representational art. Its expressed goal was to document the "revolutionary impulse of this great moment of history" by depicting themes of industrialization, the October Revolution and the Civil War.<sup>38</sup> Connecting to nineteenth-century, populist tradition of the *Peredvizhniki* (Itinerants), these artists adhered from the beginning to a "realist" style of easel painting, defended in the post-revolutionary era for its accessibility to the masses (*massovost*), and providing a line of continuity between the pre-revolutionary past and the socialist realism of the 1930s.<sup>39</sup> But even AKhRR art differed widely in style, from Boris Yakovlev's quasi-

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38. This group has been largely overlooked by Western scholars, for whom the Russian revolutionary avant-garde is the seminal moment in art history. During the Cold-War period, the AKhRR realist style was lumped together with Stalinism and dismissed. Yet "AKhRR embraced more artists, produced more art and held more exhibitions than any other group" in the "turbulent years" of the 1920s (Brandon Taylor, "On AKhRR," Bown and Taylor, eds, *Art of the Soviets*, p. 51). AKhRR was begun in 1922 as an independent organization, financed in part by NARKOMPROS and with particularly close connections to the Red Army. Although it came increasingly under the sway of Party members among its ranks, it was not a Party platform: "On the one hand it is clear that AKhRR's programme (as well as its style) endeared it to military leaders who had close connections with centers of power within the Party and the government. Yet it is also true that in 1922 there was by no means an enforced 'line' on the arts... even though AKhRR's references to 'documentation' and to 'contemporary life' look like reflections of Lenin's preferences for an accessible, popular yet political style" (ibid., p. 55).

39. 1926 was the year of AKhRR's eighth Moscow exhibition, "Life and Being of the Peoples of the USSR," a "massive" event featuring 298 artists and displaying over 1,700 works (Taylor, "On AKhRR," *Art of the Soviets*, p. 61). Still, Taylor cautions against overestimating AKhRR's official endorsement: "By mid-decade, say 1926, it still seems to me far too early to say that AKhRR was *nothing more* than a reflection of official Party policy in the arts," ibid., p. 68). During the first Five Year Plan, AKhRR published an journal called *Art to the Masses*, which served as "a touchstone for 'official' revolutionary opinion and a guiding light for a whole generation of younger communists..." (Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 175). At the end of the decade, AKhRR's painting of flattering portraits of Red Army officers (who were often also Party Members) provoked criticism. AKhRR was dissolved along with all independent cultural organizations in April 1932, but many of its artists continued to thrive during Stalin's years.



Impressionist depiction of trains and tracks in the greatly acclaimed 1923 painting, *Transport is Being Laid*, to the propagandistic depiction by Nikolai Nikonov that same year of the *Entry of the Red Army in 1920 into Krasnoyarsk*.<sup>40</sup>

As for the artists of the original avant-garde, the very liveliness of their intellectual

debates after the Revolution, publicized in manifestos that circulated in journals like *Iskusstvo kommuny* (Art of the Commune) and *Lef* (Left Front of the Arts), led to shifting positions and multiple approaches.<sup>41</sup>

*"Our civic duty before mankind is to set down, artistically and documentarily, the revolutionary impulse of this great moment in history. We will depict the present day: the life of the Red Army, the workers, the peasants the revolutionaries, and the heroes of labor"*

-- Declaration of AKhRR, 1922.



Chagall, Marc. *Above the Village*, 1917-1918. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Nikolai Nikonov, *Entry of the Red Army in 1920 into Krasnoyarsk*, 1923. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

The continued rivalry between Malevich and Tatlin that dated back to the pre-Revolutionary period was not merely personal, but based on different ideas of artistic

40. A younger generation of easel painters, including Yuri Pimenov and Alexandr Deineka of the OST group, developed individual styles at the end of the decade with qualities that must be considered avant-garde. "Projectionists" (Alexandr Labas, Kliment Redko and Alexandr Tyshler) developed expressionist or surrealist techniques. Easel paintings sometimes expressed social criticism, as in Sergei Luchishkin's *The Balloon has Gone*, 1926. "In it, a child's red balloon has floated away, leaving him deserted in a chillingly bleak suburban landscape. Through an upper story window a hanged man is visible: apparently a suicide" (Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 2, p. 18).

41. *Iskusstvo kommuny* was the official journal of IZO, published in Petrograd from December 1918 to April 1919: "The journal was eclectic and not characterized by one set of aesthetic ideas" (Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 76). *Lef* has become well-known in the West, where its later, influential reception has given distorted impressions of its importance. Its circulation, never more than 5,000, dwindled to 1,500 in the last issue and ceased publication in 1925 "through lack of demand" (Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 183).

truth.<sup>42</sup> Just what constituted "communist" artistic practice was an issue fiercely debated among the master artists of the avant-garde and their students. They formed schools that included the Suprematist-oriented UNOVIS group (Affirmers of the New Art) founded by Malevich and Lissitzky in Vitebsk in 1920;<sup>43</sup> the Constructivist group founded in 1921 by Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova at INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow);<sup>44</sup> various groups in the Architecture, Ceramics, Metalwork and Textile faculties at Moscow's VKhUTEMAS (Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops replaced the State Free Art Studies in 1920); artists at Petrograd's GINKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture) under the direction of Nikolai Punin and later Malevich (where Tatlin and Filonov also taught); and the anti-hierarchical, masterless OBMOKhU (Society for Young Artists) at Moscow's First Free State Art Studios, whose members specialized in posters and agitational design, working as a group "without a supervisor" in order, in their words, "to combat the artists in authority who exploit young talents."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Vasiliï Rakitin, "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers," *Great Utopia*, p. 31. Tatlin was not interested in leading a group. He taught in the State Free Art Studios in Moscow and (after 1919) in Petrograd, where he was active in setting up the Petrograd GINKhUK, and for a short time he directed its Department of Material Culture, which was oriented toward the organization of life and mass production (see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 264).

<sup>43</sup> Malevich replaced Chagall as head of the Vitebsk art school in November 1919, and founded UNOVIS there the following spring. See Shatskikh, "Unovis: Epicenter of a New World," *Great Utopia*.

<sup>44</sup> The first head of Inkhuk was Kandinskii, who resigned in January 1921 when his program of "subjectivism" was rejected. Intense discussions culminated in the founding of Constructivist group that spring.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Shatskikh, "Brief History of Obmokhu," *Great Utopia*, pp. 260-61. This group, founded in 1919, was funded as an agit-production workshop by NARKOMPROS (beginning in September 1920), and received commissions for literacy posters, street decorations, slogan boards, etc. They worked as a collective, signing their works with the name of the organization (as did UNOVIS). OBMOKhU is most well known for its exhibition in Moscow in May 1921 (the second OBMOKhU exhibition, for long mistakenly presumed to be the third), which, along with numerous literacy posters and other utilitarian works, showed in a separate room the earliest products of the First Working Group of Constructivists of INKhUK (*ibid.*, pp. 257-65).