

**UTSIIA!**

**RATSIIA!**

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1. Leon Trotsky, "Proletarian Culture and Proletarian Art," in *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 155.

2. On the analysis of museum visitorship, see the documents in Iu. U. Fokht-Babushkin, ed., *Publika khudozhestvennykh muzeev i vystavok v Rossii: Sotsiologicheskie svitedel'stva 1920–1930-kh godov* (Aleteiia, 2014). On "bibliopsychology," see N. A. Rubakin, *Psikhologiya chitatelia i knigi: Kratkoe vvedenie v bibliotekskuiu psikhologiyu* (Kniga, 1977). On theater spectators, see, for example, M. B. Zagorskii, "Kak reagiruet zritel'?" *Lef*, no. 6 (1924); and A. P. Borodin, "O razlichnykh priemakh izucheniia teatral'nogo zritelia," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* 9 (1925).

## When the Bolshevik Revolution convulsed Russia in October 1917, it was not clear whose cause it served.

Although Communist Party propaganda was unequivocal about the identity of its addressee—the proletariat—this political entity was anything but evident. First, the industrial working class was scarce in this largely agrarian country and became even more endangered as a result of the civil war that ravaged Russia's economy over the next five years: when the Bolsheviks finally took control of the nation in 1922, Russia's industry had fallen to 30 percent of its prewar capacity. What is more, from the perspective of Marxist theory, the proletariat was technically not a class at all but rather the social force that abolishes class affiliation as such to establish for the first time in history the conditions for a truly universal subjectivity. A universal subject, however, can have no inherent identity. As a result, one could neither define the beneficiary of the Bolshevik revolution theoretically nor manifest it empirically.

This absence resonated in the arts of the period. The mass organization Proletkul't (Proletarian Culture) was founded in 1917 with a mandate to develop the culture, habits, and lifestyle for this missing subject, yet many remained skeptical that this could be done. None other than Leon Trotsky concluded in 1923 "that there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any."<sup>1</sup> Haunted by uncertainty over the social identity of art audiences, researchers at the time mobilized experimental methods to contour this mysterious addressee: visitors to museum exhibitions were scrutinized and dissected according to every possible parameter, from gender and age to education and profession; consumers of the printed word were subjected to analysis according to a new research field dubbed "bibliopsychology"; and theater spectators

were photographed and filmed, their physical reactions correlated to responses that were collected in written surveys distributed after the performances.<sup>2</sup> These experiments delivered a picture not of sociocultural homogeneity but of multiple, dynamically intersecting interests and identities. The Soviet subject was not singular.

Reopening these vexing questions about audience identity and practices of cultural reception one century after October 1917, *Revolutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test* explores early Soviet life through a series of exemplary spaces of experience. Following the premise that subjects are physically and socially defined through constant interaction with their environments, the book examines nine spaces that were used to interpellate Soviet citizens—the battleground, the school, the press, the theater, the home, the storefront, the factory, the festival, and the exhibition—and concludes with thoughts on the paradigm of demonstration itself, exemplified by the ubiquitous image of Lenin's outstretched arm. In emphasizing the ways in which visual production was shown and shared, this book seeks to redefine art of the early Soviet period by considering its metabolic exchange with the people and spaces around it.

The wide variety of objects addressed in these pages attests to the range and pluralism of expression explored by postrevolutionary makers. From paintings to dinner plates, every class of object needed restructuring; activities as disparate as brushing one's teeth or building monumental public works were freighted with symbolic as well as practical significance. Very few moments in history exhibit a cultural output comparable in its diversity, resourcefulness, or sheer frenetic energy. If, as Evgenii Polivanov claimed in 1931, the process of linguistic evolution accelerates exponentially when more social groups are given access to means of expression and encounter each other in the field of language, one could assert a similarly causal relationship between creolization and



3. Evgenii Polivanov, "Revolutsiia i literaturnye iazyki Soiuzna SSR," in *Za marksistskoe iazykoznanie* (Moscow, 1931), pp. 73–94. Bruno Latour has made the same argument about creolization and technoscientific invention in *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993).

4. See Shklovskii on the necessity for artists and authors to have a "second profession," Viktor Shklovskii, "O pisatele i proizvodstve," in *Literatura fakta*, ed. Nikolai Chuzhak (Federatsiia, 1929), pp. 189–94; and *Tekhnika pisatel'skogo remesla* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1930).

5. Walter Benjamin, "On the Present Situation of Russian Film," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 14.

6. On the drive to test in modernity, see Avital Ronell, *The Test Drive* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 164.

invention in other symbolic fields such as art: the more inclusive and heterogeneous the body of art producers and audiences grew, the more rapidly Soviet society turned out one aesthetic innovation after another.<sup>3</sup> As some of the Russian Formalists liked to observe, the best art came not from purebred, specialized cultural producers but from those who combined professional identities and frameworks of experience that were normally unconnected. *War and Peace* could never have been written if Tolstoy hadn't also been an artilleryman, insisted Viktor Shklovskii.<sup>4</sup>

The Latvian Riflemen likewise included several artist-artillerymen, such as Gustav Klutskis (Gustavs Klucis) and Karl Ioganson (Kārlis Johansons): these avant-gardists were recognized in their dual functions, both guarding and exhibiting at the Kremlin in 1918, as Kathleen Tahk discusses in her essay "Battleground." The nascent Soviet government took another remarkable step, as Yve-Alain Bois points out in "School," when it mandated a working synthesis of museum, laboratory, and classroom settings in its arts institutions. The government also financed, at times lavishly, the mass commemoration days that Kristin Romberg analyzes in "Festival," operating, as she argues, under the theory that the dualism of "art" and "context" should be abolished in favor of an all-encompassing environment of "creation" (*tvorchestvo*).

Such an environment, and such recombinations or syntheses of prerevolutionary functions and institutions, would demand fluidity from citizens and objects alike. The portability of Constructivist furniture, examples of which are discussed by Masha Chlenova ("Theater") and Christina Kiaer ("Home/Storefront"), led its makers and users from the stage to the street or from the shopwindows of GUM, the department store that to this day faces Red Square, to the conventionally private space of the domestic apartment. Motion could also be encouraged within a single, discrete space of display, on the model of El Lissitzky's "demonstration space" (*Demonstratsionnaia*) in Dresden (pp. 284–85)—explained by Maria Gough in "Exhibition"—where walls of ribbed slats painted white on one side, black on the other, and gray on the front edge created a changeable aspect that shifted as the viewer walked through the space. Even recursive movement could become productive: the filmstrip and the conveyor belt, already expressed as one word in Russian (*lenta*), were conjoined at Aleksei Gastev's Central Institute of Labor (TsIT) into an ideal prototype of a feedback loop, according to Barbara Wurm ("Factory"). Similarly, Gough suggests in "Press" that Klutskis's many designs for media kiosks, widely illustrated in books and magazines but never actually built, succeeded as a chiasmus: "Drawings dedicated to the resolution of the distribution crisis encountered by the Soviet press in the aftermath of the October Revolution find their ultimate

realization in the display space offered by the press itself" (p. 84).

Klutskis's kiosks belong to the countless proposals for new modes of existence that came out of this brief diapason (as the Russians called it). The Soviet culture of invention was inherently also a culture of testing, called forth by an era of profound skepticism toward inherited knowledge and customs. Everything from the number of days in the week to conventions of child-rearing came under exacting scrutiny. This rigorous reevaluation extended as well to art and literature, whose prerevolutionary structures and idioms were similarly subject to interrogation. How would the geometric abstraction of Suprematism and the transrationalist language of Futurism, for example, fare outside the cloistral contexts where they had incubated before the war, when they now joined in the jostle and din of public life in the new Soviet republic? Could the arsenal of Constructivist devices, which had migrated from exhibitions and book covers to theater and clothing, be adapted, say, to instill physical hygiene and modernize labor habits? Russian art was put to the test, assigned new vocations and dispatched into uncharted territory. This universal testing was, in turn, facilitated by technologies of mass reproduction such as film, radio, and photography, which put new forms into circulation on a scale previously unimaginable: the introduction of these technologies inaugurated, as Walter Benjamin described it, "one of the most grandiose mass-psychological experiments ever undertaken in the gigantic laboratory that Russia has become."<sup>5</sup>

The tests were intentionally inconclusive—they were never meant to conclude. Whether we are considering Kseniia Ender's Constructivist fabric designs (pl. 63) or Nikolai Suetin's Suprematist porcelain (pls. 55, 197, 198), the results of these experiments should not be judged according to the criteria of success versus failure, viability versus sterility, efficiency versus waste. Cultural evolution never follows this Darwinist logic. Rather, Soviet art's incessant testing should instead be understood to indicate a collective process of learning whose final product was nothing less than a new perception of reality. Nowhere was modernity's "test drive"—that is, the drive to test—more palpable and prevalent than in the Soviet Union in the 1920s: in this "gigantic laboratory" for inductive experiment, testing became a strategy for discovering and inventing new frameworks for existence.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the examples of audience testing mentioned earlier reveal not just the desire to identify the Soviet subject but, more profoundly, the drive, or project, to shape this previously absent subject both socially and psychophysically.

The inventiveness of Soviet art is often considered at odds with its propagandistic function. Fixed



7. Asja Lacis, quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Moscow Diary," *October* 35 (Winter 1985), p. 82.

8. Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov, "Velikodushnyi rogonosets," *Zrelishcha*, no. 8 (1922), pp. 12–13.

9. Building upon Aby Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*, the nonlinear temporalities of art's "afterlife" or "survival" have been most productively developed in Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (MIT Press, 2010). See also Georges Didi-Huberman's important essays on the subject of Warburg and afterlife: "The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology," *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (2002), pp. 59–70; and "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," trans. Peter Mason, in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*, ed. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 31–44.

10. *Eigenzeit*, or time proper to the individual artifact, is a concept central to the field of media archaeology, where it is used to challenge the linear perspective of traditional historiography. See the work of Wolfgang Ernst, especially "From Media History to *Zeitkritik*," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 6 (November 2013), pp. 132–46.

iconographies and schematic politics, however, were hardly a constraint in this period. The superficiality of the readymade language used in Klutskis's posters—quite in contrast to the force of the images—suggests, for example, that working with dictated subject matter can spur artists to more ambitious formal experimentation by liberating them from concerns with content. The Russians themselves pointed out that regime propaganda was no different from the advertising found in the capitalist West, except that the product in Soviet ad campaigns was the state itself (see pls. 192, 193, 207). The defining cultural impulses of the epoch, especially during the period of reconstruction that followed the ground zero of the civil war, were located not at the level of ideological thematics but in the material stratum where artists and engineers engaged. As the dramaturge Asja Lacis observed in the middle of the decade, the period after 1922 witnessed the "conversion of revolutionary effort into technological effort": "Now it is made clear to every communist that at this hour revolutionary work does not signify conflict or civil war, but rather electrification, canal construction, creation of factories."<sup>7</sup> Famously defined by Lenin as "Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country," Russian communism had from its earliest days promised two revolutions, one political and the other industrial, but during the era of reconstruction political impulses were overtaken by technological ones. Processes of construction and physical making superseded partisan crusading as the principal arena of revolutionary activity, causing artists and engineers to gain privileged status as experts in the politics of form. Better than any statesman, they understood the proclivities and restrictions of matter. They knew which human potentials and ranges of activity were enabled by certain objects and which ones these objects inhibited. Their ideological principles were fashioned out of fabric, wood, and chemicals: in the theaters they created models for the "stairwells and floors, walkways and passages that our muscles have to master"; and in research centers like Vasily Kandinsky's Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences, they tested the interface between pictorial forms and the human perceptual apparatus.<sup>8</sup> They knew best through which material forms the values and prospects of Soviet existence could be demonstrated—displayed, manifested, but above all, proven.

An antihistoriographic wager is perhaps the most important intervention that an exhibition of early Soviet art could attempt today. We want to chasten the impulse to align this culture with the familiar historical teleology that begins with the heroic events of 1917, proceeds through reconstruction and Thermidor, and terminates in the Stalinist terror of the 1930s. Rather than binding our chosen objects firmly to the fate of a miscarried revolution,

*Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!* allows for more skid and slippage between art and history. This decision underpins the book's division of material not into chronological phases or particular mediums but into overlapping spaces. The noncontemporaneous lessons and resources of art are especially valuable—and methodologically necessary—where they challenge and contradict overbearing linear narratives.<sup>9</sup> Organizing the artwork spatially—as an archaeology—illuminates a different, and notably less tragic, vantage on early Soviet culture. In place of an evolutionist framework, a host of lateral relations and resemblances comes into view, likenesses that cannot be explained in terms of simple genealogical influence. Permitted to inhabit its own artifactual temporality, the artwork drifts out of phase with the historical parameter of political exigency and enables alternative accounts of Soviet culture on this centenary occasion and into the future.<sup>10</sup>