

ART: RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM

DYNAMIC AESTHETIC OF A REVOLUTIONARY ERA

TEXT BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

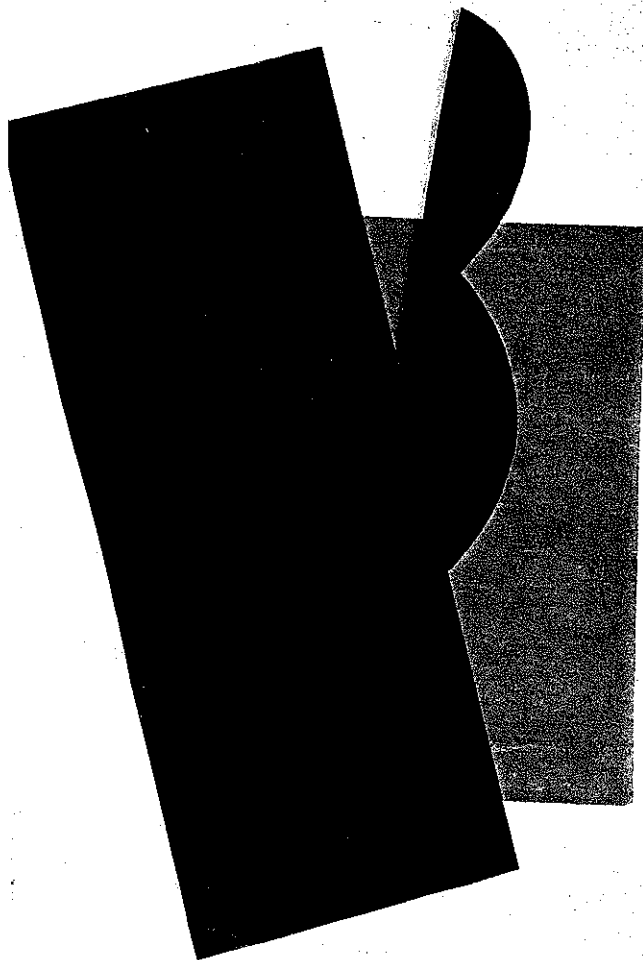


Construction, Alexander Rodchenko, 1919. Oil on canvas; 24" x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Before abandoning easel painting for photography and design in 1920, Rodchenko turned to Constructivism, an avant-garde movement based on nonobjective form and rooted in Cubism. Rodchenko, who believed in "a total lack of any stylization according to the tastes of the past," created geometric abstractions whose ruler-straight edges and projecting planes give the illusion of three-dimensionality. Rachel Adler Gallery, New York.

IT WAS, AT LEAST AT THE beginning, the era when the czars were still wearing ermine. Fabergé Easter eggs were the reigning aesthetic of the day. Yet one astounding group of Russians found beauty in an intensely modern way of seeing: machined, streamlined, naked compared to what had preceded it. The Constructivists—men and women alike—stripped art bare and sent the forms flying. These spirited visionaries dared to extol the power of the unadorned circle, the tapered triangle and ruled lines that represented nothing but themselves. They did so both with the traditional media of painting and with materials that were frankly the stuff of engines and building parts.

To get their modern bearings, the founders of Constructivism had first gone to the cultural centers of Europe, where new ways of visual thinking were flourishing as they could not in Moscow until the revolution. In 1909 Naum Gabo, then nineteen years old, left his homeland for Munich, where he met Wassily Kandinsky and attended a major exhibition of Cubism. He also saw the latest art on his frequent travels to Paris, where he visited his brother Antoine Pevsner, another key Constructivist. (Gabo had changed his name to avoid confusion.)

In Paris, Pevsner was exposed to Cubist sculpture, which greatly nourished his own work. He was strongly influenced by Alexander Archipenko, whom he befriended, and by an exhibition of the Italian Futurist Umberto Boc-



LEFT: *Composition*, Vladimir Pavlov, circa 1921–22. Oil on canvas; 24½" x 17½". In the 1920s leading Constructivists taught at the Vkhutemas art school in Moscow, where Pavlov studied under Rodchenko. Barry Friedman Ltd., New York. ABOVE: *Painterly Architectonics*, Liubov Popova, circa 1917. Collage on paper; 16½" x 12". Popova's conviction that "all that is superfluous and of no artistic value must be omitted" is reflected in her works on paper, as well as in her stage designs and fabrics. Leonard Hutton Galleries, New York.



cioni. El Lissitzky, another prime mover behind Constructivism, sought his aesthetic schooling in Darmstadt, Germany, which was then a lively art center. He also traveled to Brussels, where he met with Henri van de Velde, and to Paris, where he searched out "architecture—that is to say, art in its highest sense: mathematical order."

Following their journeys abroad, they all eventually returned to Moscow around the time of the Russian Revolution to become part of the new order. In this, they followed the example of Marc Chagall and Wassily Kandinsky, other expatriate Russians who had returned home.

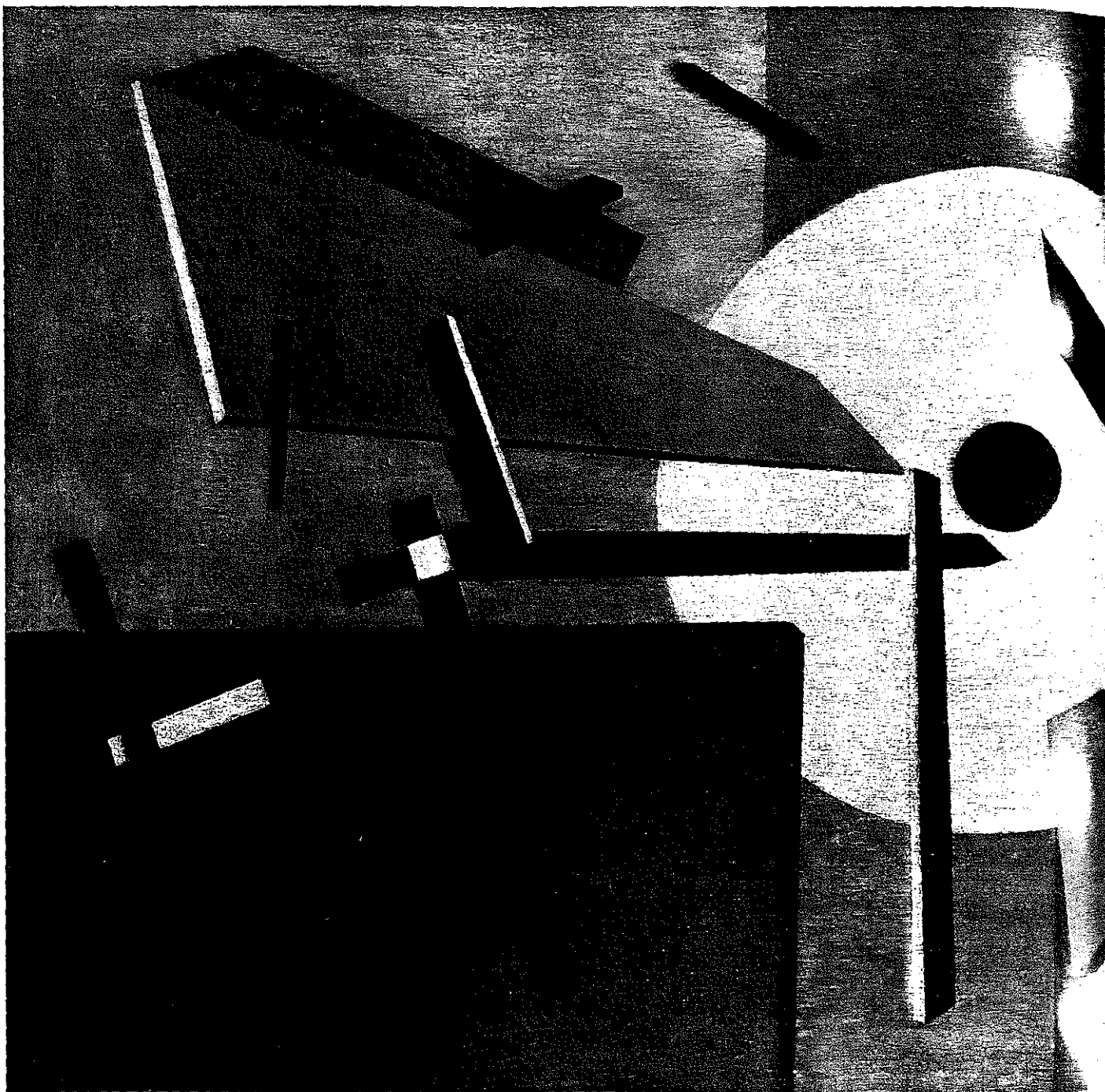
Kandinsky, slightly older than the others and regarded by many as the inventor of abstract art, was considered the "presiding genius" of all the pioneering young painters. After his return to Russia in 1915, he quickly found ways

to fit in with the new society that had taken over in his homeland. In 1918 Kandinsky became a professor at the Moscow Academy of Fine Arts and a member of the People's Commissariat for Education. The next year he became director of the Moscow Museums of Pictorial Culture, in charge of the reorganization of picture galleries throughout the USSR. In 1920 he was made a professor at the University of Moscow, and in 1921 he founded the Academy of Arts and Sciences, by which point he was responsible for restructuring art education throughout the Soviet Union. Only a year later Kandinsky left Russia

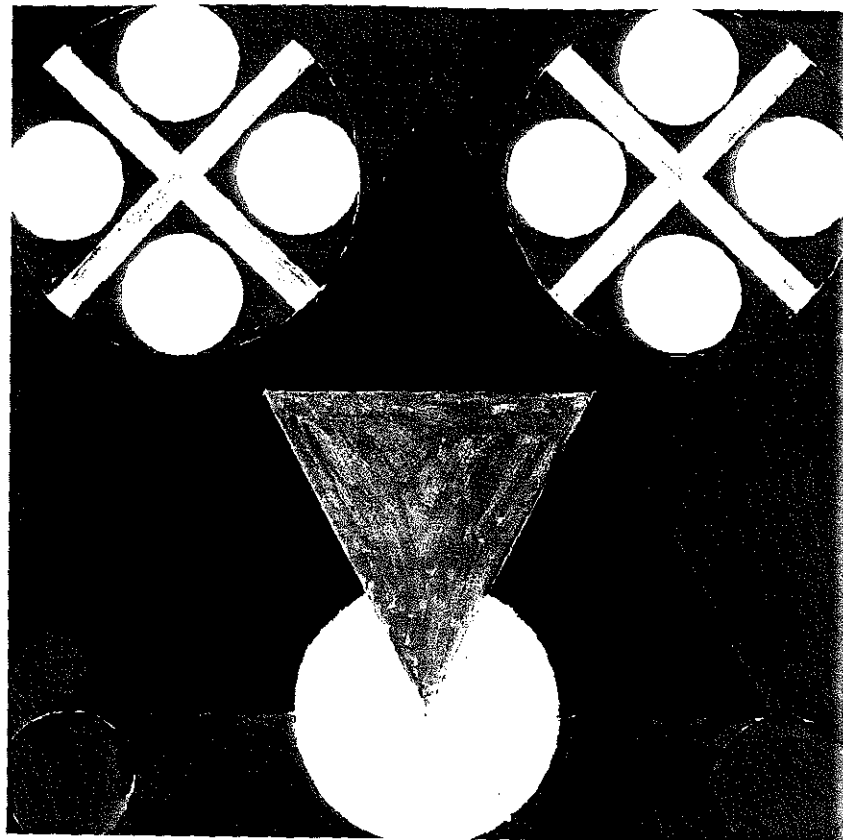
forever to go to the recently formed Bauhaus school in Weimar. But in that seven-year interlude back home he had made a tremendous impact by introducing various aspects of his pioneering abstract vision.

Gabo, Pevsner and Lissitzky were similarly bent on spreading the word about the new aesthetic they had discovered abroad. In 1937 Gabo explained both what their intentions had been when they returned to the Soviet Union and how their way of thinking had grown out of their exposure to modernism in Munich and Paris:

The immediate source from which the Constructivist idea de-



BELOW: *Composition*, Sergei Senkin, 1920–21. Oil on canvas; 20½" x 30½". After studying under Kasimir Malevich, Senkin cofounded the Workshop of Revolution at the Vkhutemas school in order to elevate the social influence of art. Barry Friedman Ltd., New York. RIGHT: *Design for a Textile*, Olga Rozanova, 1917. Gouache on paper; 13½" x 13½". An early Futurist and advocate of nonobjective art, Rozanova promoted the interrelationship of art and industry in her Constructivist works. Leonard Hutton Galleries, New York.



rives is Cubism. . . . The revolution which this school produced in the minds of artists is only comparable to that which happened at the same time in the world of physics. . . . All previous schools in art have been in comparison merely reformers, Cubism was a revolution. . . . Our own generation . . . had a dilemma to resolve, whether to go further on the way of destruction or to search for new bases for the foundation of a new art. . . . The basis of the Constructive idea in art lies in an entirely new approach to the nature of art and its functions in life. . . . It has revealed an [sic] universal law that the elements of a visual art such as lines, colours, shapes, possess their own forces of expression independent of any association with the external aspects of the world.

To achieve these goals and to find a place for their own forays into simplified, nonobjective form, Pevsner and Gabo had to figure out how to accommodate themselves to what was already going on. In 1913 Kasimir Malevich, another painter who had returned from abroad (he had been in Munich, where he exhibited with the Blue Rider group), founded Suprematism, a movement that considered nonobjective forms the essence of art. In 1915 Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko had also become members of the Suprematist group. But from the start they made it clear that their point of view was different from that of Malevich.

While Malevich was a purist, Tatlin and Rodchenko took what they called the "constructivist approach," which was

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more functional in program. Malevich, Tatlin and Rodchenko were the best-known of the artists with whom Pevsner and Gabo became associated in 1917. But though the two brothers accepted Malevich's nonobjective goals, they found the austere forms and pure colors of Suprematism too limited. On the other hand, they felt that Tatlin's stance—termed "functionalist" or "productivist"—was too geared toward the merely useful. Tatlin was interested, for example, in designing an economical stove and an all-purpose suit of clothing. Gabo remarked, "Tatlin's group called for the abolition of art as an outlived aestheticism, belonging to the culture of capitalistic society." Gabo had no wish to concentrate on the production of utilitarian objects: "We were opposed to [imposing] these materialistic and political ideas on art."

While Tatlin is still considered a Constructivist, the other artists in the movement embraced the idea of producing art regardless of its social or political purpose. The chief participants in addition to Gabo, Pevsner, Lissitzky and Rodchenko were Varvara Stepanova (who was married to Rodchenko), Ivan Puni, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Pavel Mansurov and the brothers Georgy and Vladimir Stenberg. These artists shared Gabo's belief that "art will always be alive as one of the indispensable expressions of human experience and as an important means of communication."

Although they did not at first collaborate on a mutual program or belong to any structured organization, they had a shared credo and gravitated to one another's work. Then, in 1920, various combinations of these artists—most of whom were based in Moscow—began issuing manifestos. Tatlin, Rodchenko and Stepanova used the term *Constructivism* in explaining the aesthetics of their Productivist group. Gabo and Pevsner used the same term with their own spin in their *Realist Manifesto*. Lissitzky considered himself a proponent of his own variation of Constructivism.

He referred to his work as Proun—short for Pro Unowis—meaning a movement to establish new forms of art. As a group, they might have been called the Union of Constructivist Republics, with points in common but with a keen awareness of their own separate identities.

When it comes to paintings and works on paper, the vibrant, open compositions of the Constructivists suggest the dynamic movement of their three-dimensional work. With their animated juxtapositions of colorful forms, canvases and collages by artists like Popova, Senkin and Pavlov project the energetic force of Constructivist ideals. The influence of Picasso's Cubism is clear in these works. Picasso and Braque had liberated the notion of the acceptable materials of art by incorporating fragments of tickets, newspapers, cardboard, glass and wood into their collages, and the Constructivists took this approach into a new arena.

In his reliefs of 1913, Vladimir Tatlin simplified forms and removed references to subject matter. By the next year he was making "counter-reliefs" suspended by wire that virtually

Lissitzky was able to think of his abstract art as a political tool.

floated in space. His ultimate achievement was his 1919 *Monument to the Third International*, a complex spiral tower of structural steel. With an intended height of more than thirteen hundred feet, it was to be made of three nested parts that would rotate at different speeds. In 1920 a huge timber model of the monument was made in St. Petersburg. Tatlin's masterpiece was never actually built as its designer intended, but the concept and studies for it remain as examples of the apogee of Constructivist form.

Like Tatlin, El Lissitzky was able to think of his abstract art as a political

tool. In 1919, when he was working mainly in the geometric Suprematist style, he designed the first Soviet flag. The agenda of his Proun constructions, however, is more purely artistic. Although made in the traditional materials of painting and lithography, they seem to move in multiple directions at once. They are slightly unsettling, but they reflect the realities of the modern world to which they so strongly belong.

Rodchenko's compositions of interlocking circles and ovoids look a bit like transparent three-dimensional diagrams of Saturn and its moons. He also created soaring arrangements of taut, cantilevered steel rods that impart a feeling of tremendous energy to their machine-made components.

Popova took Constructivism into yet another realm. In 1922 she made a set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* at the Meyerhold Theater in Moscow. An assemblage of rotating wheels, windmills, ladders and slides, it seemed to declare that scaffolding itself could be beautiful. Here the essence of Constructivism is evoked by the questions that are raised. Why re-create ancient forms when we can exult in what has never been done before? Why be still when we can convey electric motion?

The degree to which the Constructivist artists integrated themselves into the new Soviet society determined whether they remained in Russia or again exiled themselves in favor of foreign lands more hospitable to pure modernism. Tatlin, Rodchenko and Lissitzky remained. Pevsner and Gabo, however, left.

"A revolution is imposed on the arts and on the emotions—it will discover a new world as yet scarcely explored," Pevsner once explained. "Thus we have arrived, Gabo and I, on the road to a new research of which the guiding idea is the attempt at a synthesis of the plastic arts: painting, sculpture, and architecture." The spirit behind that brave approach continues to live in the paintings and collages that survive as striking talismans of the Constructivist movement. □