

Case Closed

The Art of Russian Revolution

MAURIZIO FAGIOLO

Like the other Futurists, he attempted a renewal of behaviour patterns, making himself up in the most extravagant ways; he used exaggeration as a technique in acting; along the lines of the 'Futurist soirées', he went on tours to spread his ideas. (But in 1914, Marinetti and his illusion of the creation of a Futurist international were to be very badly received in Russia). His poetry is based on dissonance, noise, and provocation — an aural more than mental disturbance. His first theater-piece was entitled *Vladimir Majakovskij*. (Ripellino has made a perfect analysis of the way in which it alternates confession with blasphemous violence). In 1913 Krucěnych published his «Declaration of the Word as Such» in affirmation of the idea of pure sound. «Words die and the world is eternally young. The artist sees the world new and like Adam gives everything its name».

Purity and matter

In the plastic arts, the terms of the dialectic are Malevič and Tatlin. Malevič refused all contact with politics and Tatlin was to close himself into a utopia. And yet (*purity and matter*) they represent two fundamental needs for renewal. In absolute minority, they went about their business and made no concessions to anybody. Culturally (even though Lenin probably couldn't have cared less), they were probably the only Bolsheviks. Malevič began his dynamic decompositions of figures and objects; it was in 1915 that he exhibited his first black square. Within the cultural revolution he followed an extreme line and was desperately a purist. He is also connected with Oriental mysticism. His Supremacism expresses «the supremacy of pure sensibility in art». «When I made my desperate attempt in 1913 to liberate art of the useless dead-weight of the object, I looked for refuge in the form of the square and exhibited a painting that represented nothing other than a black square on a white background. Away with images of reality, and away with ideal representations — nothing to remain except a desert. But the feeling of satisfaction that came with my liberation from the object carried me ever further into the desert, and finally to the point where the only thing authentic is feeling... This square that I exhibited was not an empty square but rather the sensibility of the absence of the object». The square became «the unframed, naked icon of my time». But this is also a partially evasive answer to alienation. In the mystical position of an Orthodox pope, Malevič commemorates an escape from reality. The absence of the object becomes icon.

Tatlin began as a painter, and then became passionately interested in icons, but in 1913 he started with his reliefs — diverse materials juxtaposed into various forms, and not to give the sense of pure constructions, but the sense of the very process of *constructing*. He went beyond Cubism and Futurism since, through his use of all possible materials, he discovered that the work of art is an alibi, and that it was necessary to arrive at a pure materialism.

In his «angular reliefs», he constructed blocks that actively occupy space, («Real material in real space»).

The work of art no longer existed; nothing was left except

the materials. In his activities as a teacher, Tatlin was to attempt to spread the notion of this «culture of materials». The war saw the formation of a unified front among all the different positions — Chagall's Orientalism, Punin's materialism, Lisickij's Constructivism, and the already discussed positions of Malevič and Tatlin. The only person to remain outside of the controversies was Kandinskij, who was then elaborating his own somewhat Oriental theory of abstraction. These were years of optimism, of disregard for the public, and also of internecine strife. The Futurist poets and painters professed contrasting and contradictory theories, and every now and then actually came to blows with each other. But by now we are in 1917. October brings the revelation that they are all working in the same direction in so far as the esthetic revolt, at least for a few years, was to come to coincide with the Revolution.

October

The Revolution finds everyone in agreement. «Let us tear the world from the hands of Nature and construct a new one that belongs to man» (Malevič). «What happened in 1917 in society had already happened in 1914 in art with the decision that our fundamental elements are matter, volume, and construction» (Tatlin). Majakovskij published an open letter to the worker and the «chronicle poem» *Revolution*. (But verses such as, «The streets are our brushes and the squares our palettes» show that the metaphors on the social revolution were always fundamentally esthetic in tone).

In 1918 Majakovskij wrote the theater piece *Misterija-buff*: «It is our great revolution condensed into verses and theatrical action. Mystery: what is great in the revolution; buff: what is ridiculous in it. The verses are the slogans of the mass-meetings, the howling, the prose of the newspapers; the action is the movement of mobs, the conflict of classes, the battles of ideas. A miniature of the world within the canvas of a circus tent». In order to leave the bourgeois theaters behind him, he discovered the fairs and the circuses. The distinction between the proletarians and the bourgeoisie was grotesque. The allegory was reminiscent of the Middle Ages. The text was staged by Mejerchol'd with Supremacist stage designs by Malevič. And then we find the appearance of the first difficulties. It began to be said that the text was incomprehensible for the proletarians, but the poet insisted and reran it on several different occasions and every time in a different way. («The revolution has dissolved everything; there are no more finished drawings, and there can be no such things as even a finished play. *Misterija-buff* is the structure of a play that gathers new incident about itself with every day that passes, that daily absorbs new facts». Majakovskij proposed a free and mobile theater, the *Flying Theater*, «a free organization of revolutionaries of the stage».

The festival of the revolution. We can recall the festival of 1918 that was organized by Al'tman and comrades — the square of St. Petersburg was filled with colossal geometrical constructions and enormous mock-ups of personages with placards in their hands (the archangels of the icons). We find ourselves in front of a sacred, heroic-revolutionary representation remarkably close to the popular festivals organized by the painter David immediately after the French revolution. In a decree from 1918 one can read, «Artists and writers are called upon, without delay, to furnish themselves with buckets of paint and to use the brushes of their trade to decorate the flanks, shoulders and visage of the cities, the stations and the constantly moving caravans of railway cars».

Propaganda. This was the new dimension of esthetics. For example, we can cite the «propaganda trains»: columns of rail-cars driven by artists and writers, agit-props of culture in every corner of Russia. The writings become a fact of decoration and decoration transforms itself into hieroglyphics that can be read by all. Primary forms and

simple colors — a renewal of the bases of visual language. *Symbolic architecture*. In Tatlin's «Monument to the IIIrd International», three superimposed volumes (cube, pyramid, and cylinder) rotate at different velocities. The spiral that wound its way into the sky was a symbol of the Liberation and simultaneously a mystical exaltation of matter (Sklovskij talked about «art of the iron age») along the lines of those compositions in which Tatlin wanted «to put the eye under the control of touch». And if the Eiffel Tower is the monument to Progress, Tatlin wanted to posit dynamic architecture as the monument to the Revolution. And then there are Lisickij's horizontal skyscrapers, obviously a reply to the USA in the form of a new skyscraper no longer a vertical defiance of the clouds, but horizontal, terrestrial, and red.

Towards a function of the esthetic

At the beginning of 1918 a «Section of the Figurative Arts» was founded within the context of the «People's Commissariat for Instruction». We find a kind of general headquarters of the avant-garde. In 1920, the positions became clearer. After the atmosphere of a period of great commotion, the need was felt for a period of reorganization. At this point it is necessary to speak of the Proletcult that was founded in 1906 on the basis of ideas such as the following: «Art is a social product, conditioned by social surroundings. It constitutes another means for the organization of labor. The proletariat must have an art of his class». Bogdanov was the theoretician who maintained the necessity of three paths towards socialism (economy, politics, and culture) in open conflict with Lenin.

Moscow was the scene of lively debates. One group remained attached to «artistic» positions — Malevič, Kandinskij, Gabo, and Pevsner held to the idea that art is a question of the spirit and thus divorced from industry and the work of the artisan even though Malevič intuited that art as such is useless. Another group — Tatlin and Rodčenko — sought to connect art with technology, to transform art into work and work into art. Kandinskij's program was rejected and what came to the foreground was Tatlin's «productive art» (even though, strictly speaking it is equally superstructural). New proposals came from Lisickij, who discovered the means of photography and typography (which were inherited, as it were, from the Futurist manifestoes); in 1920, he created his *History of Two Squares*, which was born as a children's book; in his work his *Prouns*, he combined Supremacism and Constructivism in utopian projects. Lisickij brought his new discoveries to the West, and always managed to be the press-secretary of Soviet Russia.

The allocation of large sums of money permitted the purchase of works of modern art and the construction of museums throughout the country. In three years 36 museums were founded of which 26 remained at the stage of projects.

Kandinskij created the program for the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk): a perhaps somewhat too «Byzantine» conglomeration of his own didactics, Malevič's Supremacism, and Tatlin's «culture of materials». It is clear that the program could not have been accepted. After other attempts, we find the painter in Weimar in 1922 as a teacher at the Bauhaus, a reformist structure for the West, but something extremely moderate for anyone who had participated in the Revolution.

The theory of Constructivism is to be seen in alignment with the idea of a reconstruction after the revolution. The ideas are naturally contradictory in terms both of the artists and the phrases of the theoretician himself. Having decided that art is dead («Art is as dangerous as religion, as dangerous as the evasion of reality»), Gan declared his intention of passing «into the field of reality». Majakovskij believed in the objective construction of the word; Mejerchol'd adapted the principles of Constructivism to the

theater — for all concerned the problem was to give precedence to technology over style. The artist began to work in the factory: Rodčenko and Majakovskij did propaganda posters (typography + photography); Popova worked in the textile industry; Tatlin made projects for clothing and interior decorating. The breeding ground for new ideas was in part architecture and in part the theater. The dominating figure is the gigantic personage of Mejerchol'd, Majakovskij's alter-ego. His «Theatrical October» is the theorization of a form of theater as mass-meeting and propaganda; the theory of «bio-mechanics» gave a new dimension to the figure of the actor as both individual and collective at one and the same time. Eisenstein as well began as a theater director under his influence. But the true destination for a policy of production was naturally to be found in propaganda. All the various means (photomontage, geometric modules, and photographic instrumentation) could be used since the ends were clear and univocal.

Even Malevič became a part of the future. In his show in 1919 he announced the end of Supremacism and in fact declared to Pevsner that the cross in his most recent paintings was a metaphor of the death of painting. The manifesto of 1924 gives things a new turn; it creates projects for an architecture of the future and almost arrives at the proposal of space ships («The future is that part of today that has not yet been recognized»). When he went to teach at Vitebsk as a substitute for Chagall, he made interventions on the city as well. Eisenstein recalls that, «It was a strange provincial city made entirely of red, smoke-stained brick like so many of the cities of the western regions. But this one was stranger than the others. Here, in the main streets, a hand of white paint had covered the red bricks and the white background was splattered with green circles, orange squares, and blue rectangles. This is the Vitebsk of 1920. Its brick walls had been touched by the pen of Kazimir Malevič». The fields of research began to widen themselves. Here I refer to linguistics and the cinema. As early as 1914 a group of scholars had already founded the «Moscow Linguistics Circle», and here we find ourselves at the beginnings of a scientific structuralism. In his 1917 article-manifesto «Art as Procedure», Sklovskij arrived at the idea of an art without mysticism and of an almost positivistic research into the procedure of «manufacturing». (It is useless to underline the fact that here we are moving along the lines of Constructivism). As far as cinema is concerned, the field is both wide and complicated. Soviet cinema is still today the most well-founded of the century's esthetic researches. The first persons to deal with cinema (as in Italy) were the Futurist painters. Majakovskij was a fanatical propagandist for the cinema and worked in it at all the various levels of production (script, scenography, acting). After the Revolution he was to be one of the first to produce «Agit-films» and in 1922 he gave us his theory of the new cinema: «For you the cinema is a show. For me it is almost a concept of the world. The cinema is the introduction of movement. The cinema is a renewal of literature. The cinema is the destroyer of esthetics. The cinema is audacity. The cinema is a sports-man. The cinema is a diffuser of ideas». Dziga Vertov's most important manifesto appeared in Majakovskij's review *LEF*: the «kinoglaz» (the cinema-eye, the photographic lens, has a more acute power of perception than the human eye. The hero is no longer the individual but the truth. Vertov wanted to reopen the eyes of the passive public. In the editing of images drawn from reality and documentary reports he saw the «dictatorship of fact»). In polemics with the bourgeois cinema, he wrote, «The movie-show is the opium of the people... The movie-show and religion are instruments of death in the hands of capital». Eisenstein was close to Majakovskij in terms of cross-editing, the rapidity of his sequences, the alternation of the comic and the epic: the «editing of abstraction». In *Strike* and *October* he arrived exemplarily at the sensation of chorale: the absolute unity of the man.

the collective, and the environment. But it was Lenin who was to sum up the pure theory of cinema in a few words. On the First of May, 1918, Lenin discovered himself under the focus of the camera of Tissé, a camera-man of Sedish origins, and told him bluntly, «Don't film me, comrade, film the people».

The problem of an «esthetic society»

In 1923, Majakovskij created LEF (the Left-wing Front of the Arts) in an attempt at unification. He drew together the Futurist poets, the cinema and theater directors, the linguists and the production artists in an attempt to discover a function for esthetic research. But time was by now running short. The death of Lenin opened up a new direction (bureaucracy), and even previously there had been a refurbishing of bourgeois positions, something that had been denounced by Majakovskij himself. The Stalinist freeze (as has recently come to light) was already anticipated in the last period of Lenin's life. Some of the artists were to emigrate; Malevič survived on in isolation; Lunačarskij was liquidated and his Institute shut down. In the 1931 competition for the Palace of the Soviets, projects by Gropius and Le Corbusier were discarded in favor of the compromise of monumentalism. The «left-wing artists» paid dearly for their good faith, even though, by now, academic reaction was becoming the common idiom in all of Europe. This is a world that had already been envisioned by Majakovskij when he shot himself through the heart in 1930. «What I am doing is not a solution (and I don't advise it to anyone) by I have no other way out.. As one is accustomed to say, 'The case is closed'».

It is a risky endeavor to attempt to formulate a judgement on the entirety of the vast field of the Soviet *avant-garde*. But at any rate one must distinguish two parts of the problem. Is it possible to see art as a revolutionary dimensions? Can an art of revolution exist and can it have a function? Today it seems clear that art neither can nor knows how to make a revolution. The artist tends to be an individualist, or in the best of circumstances an anarchist. From Bogdanov to Marcuse it is a deviation to theorize a utopian social life based on the «esthetic dimension» — at least in the Occident. (Judgements on the Chinese «interrupted revolution» are to be withheld). At any rate the concept of an «esthetic dimension» is not as great a risk (since it is only an instrument) as the concept of an «esthetic society». Moreover, it is equally clear that the desire of many artists (even today) to feel themselves revolutionaries comes from a basically bourgeois deviation. «Only a few (and fairly incompetent) intellectuals can think that for the workers it may be sufficient to talk about the life of the factory and to remasticate what the workers themselves have already known for a very long time». (Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*) This judgment is prophetic of that other curious bourgeois deviation called «socialist realism».

Perhaps a proletarian art will come into existence (as it already exists, either consciously or otherwise, in some countries). And it is clear that its «values» will have to be measured according to new standards. The only thing that we can do (here and now) is not to confuse the revolution of artistic languages with art of the Revolution. But above all (and I ask this question as the end of what has been a necessarily schematic argument) are we truly sure that a rigorously proletarian society will still have a need for artistic expression (or, at least, for what we have understood till now by «art»)?

LA GALLERIA MULTIPLI DI TORINO
SEGNALA I SEGUENTI ALTRI CENTRI
DI GRAFICA.

THE GALLERIA MULTIPLI OF TURIN
RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING
GRAPHIC ART GALLERIES

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EDITION BISCHOFBERGER
EDITION RENÉ BLOCK
CASTELLI GRAPHICS
COLOPHON
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