

"Constructivism's Negotiation"

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Despite the evolving techniques and choice of media of the early Russian Constructivists, their overall goals remained primarily the same: to help form the new society after the October Revolution, to integrate art into everyday life, and to separate themselves from the bourgeois art of the past by performing an utilitarian function. So why did the Russian Constructivists' work change so much and manifest itself in such different forms, from painting and sculpture to book covers, furniture, advertisements, and photography? There are, of course, many factors that effected the path of Constructivist work to a variety of degrees, but it is my contention that the Constructivists were responding actively to the changing political and economic environment of the period to reach and shape the collective consciousness at a given time. This involved a reaching out to the mass audience, but also a desire to educate and raise it up. They were revolutionaries seeking to help create a utopia through their craft. They were adamant supporters of the October Revolution and wanted to continue the socialist revolution it initiated. However, they found that even amongst those they supported their artistic vision had to be defended, fought for, and compromised in order to withstand the changing times. That they were forced to negotiate while remaining steadfast in their ideals and that they never reached the lofty goals that they set for themselves of having their

designs mass produced has prompted some to call their work a failure. But their adaptation should not be viewed as a failure, so much as a negotiation of their situation and an utilization of the opportunities they had while maintaining their goal of constructing a post-revolutionary society. It is the negotiating of this victory, the adaptation to circumstances, that this paper will focus on, grounding itself in particularly with the work of Alexander Rodchenko and his collaborators.

In the past, many historians have not connected Constructivism with politics, seeing it predominately in the light of an international, modernist abstraction movement. According to John Bowlt, "the most dangerous rumor concerning the Russian avant-garde has to do with its alleged support of radical politics, and radical political philosophy in general."¹ Bowlt makes the distinction between the support of specific "politics" and the idea of a general "political philosophy" and this distinction is important. Of the former, it is true that it would be difficult to find a member of the Russian avant-garde making explicit political alignment with a specific group, due to the changing political milieu of Russia in the twentieth century. It would seem that it is this lack of specific declaration that has led historians to say the Constructivists were not motivated by political beliefs. But if there is little specific political

support, their documents are full of the political philosophy that motivated them.

In his "The Initiative Individual in the Creativity of the Collective" of 1919, Vladimir Tatlin begins by asserting "The initiative individual is the collector of the energy of the collective."² Given that this is written in the Soviet Union after the October Revolution, one can connect Tatlin's statement and the socialist idea of the individual working for the good of the collective. This is supported by a point he makes further on:

Art, always being connected with life at the moment of change in the political system (change of the Collective-Consumer), and being cut off from the collective in the person of the artist, goes through an acute revolution. A revolution strengthens the impulse of invention. That is why there is a flourishing of art following the revolution, when the inter-relationship between the initiative individual and the collective is clearly defined.³

Those asserting that the Russian avant-garde was not active politically would emphasize Tatlin's statement that the artist is "cut off from the collective," yet he states revolution effects art, strengthening invention and clarifying inter-relationships. The political revolution of the Soviet Union in some ways encouraged the Constructivists and clarified their audience. But, though the Constructivists wished to help form the new man

¹ Bowlt, John, "The Old and New Wave," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 16, 1984, 28.

² Tatlin, Vladimir, "The Initiative Individual in the Creativity of the Collective," reprinted in Harrison and Wood's *Art in Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 309.

in the new society, to be the "initiative individual" of the collective, they were often times disconnected from the workers that they wished to reach.

As Tatlin demonstrates, the artists were aware of their relationship with their audience and wished to work for the collective, not for a single bourgeois patron. In this, there was a break from the past avant-garde by creating a work for the collective, for the masses. This is seen in a text by Rodchenko from 1920, who by this time had been collaborating with Tatlin for five years, in which he states "Down with art as a precious stone in the midst of the squalid life of the rich. Down with art as a precious stone in the midst of the dismal and dirty life of the poor.... Work for life and not palaces.... Work in the midst of everything and with everyone."⁴ Rodchenko's writing carries a tone of disdain for class structures and emphasizes that art should be a part of everyday life for all, not an escape but integrated into life as a useful part. This again suggests the socialist idea of collectivism, especially given that it was written in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union. However, if this is not explicit enough, there is Alexei Gan's call for "All hail to the Communist expression of material building!"⁵ This is a clear link between art as construction and the new dominant

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rodchenko, Alexander, "Slogans," reprinted in Harrison and Wood's *Art in Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 315.

politics of Russia. He follows: "*Tectonics* emerges and forms itself on the one hand on the characteristics of communism, and on the other on the expedient use of industrial materials."⁶ There is an emphasis on construction, the "industrial," and the "expedient," with the avant-garde wishing to separate themselves from traditional bourgeois art, as these are qualities not normally associated with traditional high art, but with mass production.

In the days leading up to the October Revolution, the Constructivists were responding to the strikes and political tumult that built up to the Revolution by creating a break that was both political and aesthetic. In the late nineteenth century, Russian art had taken its cues from Paris, but with the strikes and rebellion in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, the avant-garde decided they no longer wished to follow the West, but wished to use it as a point from which to leap forward. Mikhail Larinov and David Burliuk developed the idea of *factura* in their respective manifestos of 1912, and soon after the Constructivists would develop the qualities of *factura* during their Laboratory period. *Factura* is a word that has no direct corollary in English, and was defined in several ways during the early twentieth century, generally meaning the ideology of

⁵ Gan, Alexei, *Constructivism*, reprinted in part in Harrison and Wood's *Art in Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 319.

construction for a work in the formal sense, or the justification for construction, a necessity in creating a socialist culture. The *faktura* artist shows the material life through the forms he creates by using and having a concern for modern techniques, processes, and materials. It would be remiss not to see this in terms of the growing industrialization of Europe, of which the avant-garde knew and would have felt Russia's lagging. As Buchloh states, "*Faktura* is therefore the historically logical aesthetic correlative to the introduction of industrialization and social engineering that was imminent in the Soviet Union after the Revolution of 1917."⁷ By 1921, the Constructivists wanted to submit their "'laboratory' results to functional testing in architecture and the applied arts (as at the *Eleventh State Exhibition: Works of the Union of Applied and Industrial Artists* in May 1919...)." ⁸ It was in 1922 that Rodchenko exhibited his three paintings of primary colors and his *Hanging Constructions*, marking a complete incorporation of the technical means of production into the work and proclaiming the end not only of the development of *faktura* principles but also of painting itself. So when Alfred Barr of New York's Museum of Modern Art sojourned to the Soviet Union in 1927 in search of new

⁶ Rodchenko, Alexander and Varvara Stepanova, "Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists," reprinted in Harrison and Wood's *Art in Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 318.

⁷ Buchloh, Benjamin. "Faktura to Factography." *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Richard Bolton (ed.), Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989, 53.

painting, he was disappointed to find that Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Sergei Tretyakov had ceased painting altogether.⁹ The Constructivists were distinguishing themselves from past art by utilizing scientific investigation, something not associated with tradition but with the new and innovative, to extract principles from art to be used in the construction of new objects that would help shape the new society. 1922 marked the completion of the investigation and called for an implementation.

Contemporaneously, War Communism was successfully drawing a line between the old society and the new Soviet society. The October Revolution had been successful and War Communism was to solidify the Revolution and promote its extension throughout the world. The avant-garde supported War Communism, and it in turn supported the avant-garde. Though both Lenin and his Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky favored traditional art to the modern, the avant-garde was given free license. The war economy grew into a strict discipline over society, with Lunacharsky harnessing the arts as a way of shaping the collective consciousness. He, with Lenin, knew that "ingrained cultural expectations and behavior patterns were as difficult an obstacle to political transformation as the structure of the old

⁸ Strialev, Anatoli, "The Art of the Constructivists: From Exhibition to Exhibition, 1914-1932," in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932*, New York: Rizzoli International, 1990, 28.

⁹ Buchloh, 50.

economic system."¹⁰ Lunacharsky's plans often did not include the avant-garde as an integral part, but he was appreciative of their enthusiastic support as demonstrated in Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* as a project for Lenin's Monumental Propaganda program. As a student of the Enlightenment and a fond supporter of the intelligentsia, Lunacharsky allowed the avant-garde to work freely, believing that "once artists reconciled themselves with the revolution they could not help but reflect its greatness."¹¹ And reconciling "themselves with the revolution" was not a problem for the artists who wished to escape tradition. As Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote, "To accept or not to accept? There was no such problem for me (and other Moscow futurists). It was my revolution."¹² The success of the October Revolution had been a success for the avant-garde who supported it and its break with the past. War Communism seemed to be continuing this victory towards a new society, and so it, too, was an encouraging victory for the avant-garde, which was a dominant force in culture. Anatloi Strigalev goes as far as to call it the "period style."¹³

The end of the civil war in 1921 brought an end to War Communism. In March of 1921, the New Economic Policy (NEP), was implemented at Lenin's urging. Lenin wished to replace the

¹⁰ Cooke, Catherine. *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture, and the City*. London: Academy Editions, 1995, 19.

¹¹ O'Connor, Timothy, *The Politics of Soviet Culture*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983, 68.

¹² Woroszylski, Wilktor, *The Life of Mayakovsky*, trans. by Boleslaw Taborski, New York: Orion Press, 1970, 185-186.

"revolutionary approach" of War Communism to build socialism with a "reformist approach," as he said, "not to *break up* the old social economic system—trade, petty production, petty proprietorship, capitalism—but to *revive* trade, petty proprietorship, capitalism while cautiously and gradually getting the upperhand over them."¹⁴ This revival meant a new entrepreneurial class of middlemen and managers, which the avant-garde resented as it meant a resurgence of class division, a resurgence of traditional values, and, with these, a growth in the conservative, puritan, and anti-modern sentiment that had been present since the Revolution.

The new conservatism that emerged during the NEP hindered the avant-garde's efforts at continuing the Revolution. The result was a general feeling of disdain for the NEP amongst the Constructivists, compiled by the rising of class stratification that ran counter to their agenda. The rise in class distinction and conservatism seemed to be steps backwards to the Constructivists who sought to continue in the production of a new life by creating radical new objects that would shape it. New designs for furniture and other pieces embodied strength and strength of character, efficiency, and demanded their users be active, responsive, and creative. The works put forth a sparse,

¹³ Strigalev, 17.

¹⁴ Lenin quoted in Tucker, Robert, *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*, Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987, 57.

proletarian lifestyle in contrast to a soft and opulent bourgeois lifestyle favored by the many conservatives.¹⁵

Where the Constructivists had felt supported by the victories of War Communism to go into production, the artist-constructors now found it difficult to put their new objects into mass production. They attempted to form close ties with factories, however, these attempts were mostly unsuccessful. This frustrated Constructivists like Tatlin who, in a lecture, "expressed his dissatisfaction with authorities who did not really support his endeavors in industrial concerns."¹⁶ Paul Wood, in his essay "Politics of the Avant-Garde," explains that there are two possible reasons for the failure to put Constructivist designs into production: one, that the idealistic artists' designs were impractical and eccentric, and two, that it was the new entrepreneurs who were more concerned with making money than creating a new society and so were not apt to experiment.¹⁷ There is of course no definitive answer and some projects were overly optimistic and others doomed by the conservatism of the manufacturers, and all projects contained these two elements to various degrees. In trying to avoid the old and create new ideas, the Constructivists' ideas were often innovative to the extent of eccentricity, and though some

¹⁵ Margolin, Victor, *The Struggle for Utopia*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, 98.

¹⁶ Wood, Paul, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," in catalog for "*The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*," New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992, 11.

supported this eccentricity, its production was often viewed as impossible. As Osip Brik wrote in 1923, "It is a difficult moment for the Constructivist-cum-producer. The artists turn their backs on him. Irritated managers rejects him. The petit bourgeois goggles.... Much resolution and will power is required."¹⁸

Historians such as Christina Lodder have stated that Constructivism's inability to put works into mass production and movement towards smaller ideological contributions, such as, in the case of Rodchenko, through writings, advertisements, theater, and film, marked a retreat from their plans to shape the new society through the production of new, utilitarian objects.¹⁹ However, there is another way of seeing this retreat. Due to the political changes initiated by the NEP, the Constructivists found difficulty in carrying out their plan of integrating art into production. Some projects were successful, but as the artists met with various factory managers, they came to understand the difficulty of the execution of their plans in the political climate of the NEP. They realized that they needed to tailor their work, at least in part, to the NEP. While still emphasizing that new objects should be created that would help shape the revolutionary man, they began to utilize different

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Osip Brik quoted in Selim O. Khan-Magomedov's *Rodchenko: The Complete Works*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987, 171.

media to disseminate their ideas.²⁰ One such way was to teach, influencing the next generation of artists and craftsmen who would be designing the future objects of the society. Another was to design texts that would reach mass audiences, such as advertisements, books, and magazines.

To use an example, Rodchenko helped with the reorganization of the Inkhuk (the Institution for Artistic Culture within the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) and was the deputy head of the Metfak (Metalworking Faculty) of the Soviet design school in Moscow, the Vkhutemas (Higher State Art-Technical Workshops renamed the Vkhutein in 1927) from 1922 until its closing in 1930. He used the Metfak as an experimental laboratory, following the experimentation of the Constructivists' Laboratory period in developing qualities of *factura*, where he encouraged his students to create new types of objects and to design them for mass production. The objects were distinct from the decorative approach of earlier craftsmen, exemplifying a simple, proletarian style of life with a few being able to be produced efficiently by industrial means.²¹

During this same period, Rodchenko began to produce advertisements, book covers, and magazine layouts, with some of his earliest dating from 1922. The reorganization of centrally

¹⁹ Lodder, Christina, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 2.

²⁰ Buchloh, 60.

²¹ Margolin, 94.

controlled industries into autonomous units competing with private entrepreneurs meant an increase in advertising. As Mayakovsky noted: "not a single business, especially not the steadiest, runs without advertising."²² Artists were hired to produce ads, and Constructivists such as Mayakovsky and Rodchenko produced a great deal of these ads using the formal language developed in the Laboratory period, though mainly for the state trusts, like the state airline Dobrolet, the state grocery concern Mossel'prom, and the state rubber trust Rezinotrest. This is not to say that the Constructivists produced ads solely for the state sector to avoid supporting the NEP entrepreneurs, but only to emphasize that in these ads was a political dimension which surfaced in artists work to various degrees depending on their continuous allegiance to the October Revolution. One of the goals of the Constructivists was to help shape individuals by creating objects that encouraged an active, efficient user. By using ads to depict objects in action or surrounded by dynamic elements such as strong diagonals and arrows, they were able to encourage the same sort of user, and, by creating ads for state trusts, were able to support the idea of a Soviet state as opposed to supporting a rising entrepreneurial class. The production of ads, therefor, was a response to economics in a way allowing the Constructivists to reach out to a mass audience

²² Mayakovsky quoted in Margolin, 113.

through an accessible medium with a desire to educate their audience.

Major achievements in film were made in Russia at this time, and this seems fitting for, like the new Soviet society, film was a new medium with no tradition and appealed directly to the masses. And like other arts, it was harnessed as a means to an end at the service of Soviet construction and to destroy bourgeois society.²³ For the Constructivists, it represented a new way to disseminate ideas of a new society.²⁴ For instance, Rodchenko designed sets in films like *Zhernalistka*, consisting of an office and a study for a reporter working in a bureau of efficiency. All of the furnishings were convertible from one function to another, as his early work for production. Victor Margolin writes: "Rodchenko did not construct sets for *Zhernalistka* as fantasies. Instead, he tried to depict a new way of life."²⁵ Rodchenko also designed similar sets for theater, creating the furniture of the play *Inga* as minimal, efficient, strong, and collapsible to be contrasted with old bourgeois furnishings. Though these works, and his pieces produced in the *Metfak*, were not put into mass production, Rodchenko's ideas about objects reached the public and demonstrated a look to the near future when the new Soviet culture would be established.

²³ Hauser, Arnold, *The Social History of art, Volume IV: Naturalism, Impressionism, and the Age of Film*, New York: Routledge, 1999, 245.

²⁴ Margolin, 98.

Wood points out it would have been difficult for the avant-garde to sustain a position opposed to the NEP if there was not a political order of the day that held like views.²⁶ Such an order was manifested in the Left Opposition, formed around Leon Trotsky and a group of leading figures who criticized the NEP's economy and its uncompatibility with planning. Much of the Opposition's support came from the army, youth organizations, and universities, including institutes like the Vkhutemas, which, with the defeat of the Opposition, was stripped of 18,000 of its students in a series of institutional purges.

Concurrent with this rise of the Opposition is the rise of the Left Front of the Arts, which Mayakovsky formed around the magazine *Lef* in 1923. The magazine included a great deal of the avant-garde, with Rodchenko designing all of the covers. With the rise of the NEP and conservative cultural tastes, traditional forms of literature and art were gaining in popularity. Contributors to the *Lef*, or "the Bolsheviks of the Arts" as they called themselves, used the magazine as a point to rally around and a way to try to preserve their power which dwindled under the NEP. The magazine seemed to have an audience, with a first run in 1923 of 5,000, but by 1925, with the silence of the Opposition, the *Lef* published its last issue with a run of 1,500 copies.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Wood, 12.

Perhaps this decrease in the publication was due to dwindling funds, but if the magazine had sold well, the *Lef* should have had the funds to continue. To be clear, I am not suggesting here that the *Lef* found direct support-by-readership in the Left Opposition, only that the Constructivists were continuing to adopt to the political climate by producing work in a form that could have reached those of like minds. It is possible that the *Lef* found no readers in the Opposition and little support.

Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, published in 1925, is the closest document we have to the Opposition's view on art and its discussion of Constructivists' works, including Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, has been read by some as a rejection of Constructivism, and by others as an acknowledgement and acceptance.²⁷ But the discussion itself shows an awareness of Constructivist ideas, even by Trotsky who was by no means an art critic. The avant-garde had sensed in the rise of the Opposition that a growing faction of the population shared their views and so wished to make themselves available to it, using the magazine as a tool for spreading their ideas of forming the new society. This is further supported by the rise of the *Novyi lef* (the resurrection of *Lef* magazine) coinciding with the rise of the Second Opposition, both ascending in 1927 and falling silent in 1928 with the exile of Trotsky and demonstration of the state's

²⁷ Ibid., 16.

punishment for opposition. The Bolshevik's of the Arts saw the rise of the Second Opposition as a sign for a growth in the population of those who shared their views and so they sought to present themselves in an easily available and understandable form. The avant-garde utilized a form of publishing that could be consumed by multiple people simultaneously, a quality not found in traditional painting, furthering the work's rupture from the past.

The covers of the *Noryi lef*, like the covers of the *Lef*, were designed by Rodchenko, yet they contained a different style. While half of the covers of the *Lef* contained photomontages, the covers of the *Noryi lef* utilized straight photography, usually of just a single image. In Lissitzky's words, "The power of its expression made the worker and the Komsomol circle enthusiastic for the visual arts... Photomontage at its present stage of development uses finished, entire photographs as elements from which it constructs a totality."²⁸ This marks the last stages of the Constructivists' evolution from the factura experimentation in the 1910s to the unmediated representation of reality in photography, a process Benjamin Buchloh calls "faktura to factography."²⁹ "[I]t was a necessary strategy to implement the transformation of audiences that the artist of the Soviet avant-

²⁸ Lissitzky quoted in Buchloh, 64.

²⁹ Buchloh, Benjamin. "Faktura to Factography." *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Richard Bolton (ed.), Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.

garde wanted to achieve at the time."³⁰ The change in Constructivist activity stemmed from their desire to help shape the consciousness of the new man, and this required a consciousness of their audience and an ability to adapt their methods of conveying a message to that audience of how the new society should interact with objects.

Awareness of the audience can be seen, for Rodchenko, in his work as early as his *Oval Hanging Construction* of 1921. The piece incorporates the viewer into it by appearing differently from various perspectives as the viewer circumambulates the piece. The same can be said of Lissitzky's *Proun* constructions that interact with the viewer's space. But at this time, even the most progressive pieces had not bridged "the gulf between art and the masses that bourgeois traditions had established."³¹ And with the rise of conservatism in the NEP bringing with it a revival of traditional art's popularity, the Constructivists had to find new ways to address the mass audience. In the way of magazines and publishing books, Constructivists utilized the photomontage as an expressive visual element. As Michael Hays states, "In his 1922 photomontages, Lissitzky revealed a set of techniques to address, ostensibly, a new mass audience."³² This marked a return to representation from the abstract painting that preceded this

³⁰ Ibid., 60.

³¹ Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold quoted in Buchloh, 56.

step. In the first issues of *Lef*, there was an attempt to use photomontage, that had been utilized in Soviet advertising since 1919 so the public was aware of it and could understand it. However, with the dwindling print runs of the *Lef* suggesting it was not received as well as anticipated, the *Noryi lef* shows a different technique utilized, one even more straightforward. This would seem to be a further attempt to be accessible to their audience.

This is not to say that all avant-garde followed this path. Gustave Klucis was still making photomontage in 1930 which contained disparate visual elements organized around the formal principles of the Laboratory period, and demonstrates less of a reaching out to the masses and more of a desire to raise the masses up to the artists' cultural level. However, as Richard Stites expresses in his *Soviet Popular Culture*, there was not a great response to these kinds of works, some audiences even expressing hostility when political propaganda "obstructed the flow of entertainment."³³ Stites continues that the masses did not respond "with enthusiasm to the language of montage because of its conceptual and stylistic difficulties."³⁴ Though Stites is referring here to montage in film as opposed to photomontage,

³² Hays, Michael, "El Lissitzky Meets Berlin Dada," *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets West, 1910-1930*, edited by Gail Harrison, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992, 185.

³³ Stites, Richard, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 40.

³⁴ Stites, 55.

artists like Rodchenko encountered the same difficulties in reception, despite photomontage's previous use in advertising. The complex compositions that derived from the Constructivists' early experimentation were often hard to understand for ordinary workers due to their innovative techniques.

During the twenties and thirties, many of the avant-garde came under criticism from proletarian organizations for not adhering to the ideas of proletarian art. These groups were banned by the Central Committee in April of 1932, however their influence continued to be felt. Rodchenko was often the subject of such criticism, being denigrated for his formalistic concerns that had their roots in his experimentation during the Laboratory period. Even his more straightforward photography was criticized: "Why does the pioneer [Rodchenko] look upwards? It is not ideologically correct. Pioneers and the youth of Komsomol must look ahead."³⁵ Much of this criticism stemmed from the continual association of the avant-garde art with the bourgeois art they took as a leaping off point as it appeared to be an expression of the individual and difficult to understand. This clearly frustrated Rodchenko, who sought to break from the past and create work for the new society:

We were for the new world, the world of industry, technology and science. We were for the new man, we felt him and we had no precise

³⁵ Khan-Magomedov, S. O., *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987, 236.

idea of the future. With our brushes, we did not fawn on the bourgeoisie who were on their way out. We did not paint their private houses, their balls and their estates. We were experimenters and we portrayed the world in our own way. We were not chewing over nature in our paintings, like a cow with its cud. We have created a new concept of beauty and we have expanded the confines of art. We have made posters, written slogans, and decorated squares and buildings. Even the typefaces, so precise and persuasive, were invented by us, and they are the ones that are still in use today... We made new objects whose utility no one questions any longer. But then... they attacked us - and how! - for being journalists, typographers, photographers, weavers, and commercial artists.³⁶

This response to criticism by proletarian organizations shows the disparity between what the artists believed they were doing and how they were perceived by many, and it would be this disparity that changes in media tried to overcome by making Constructivist work easier to understand.

During the fall of both the Left Opposition and the *Noryi lef*, the country under the NEP came into crisis. With major food shortages and strikes, the political leaders retaliated by forcibly taking food from the country for consumption in the city, measures similar to the militant rule of War Communism. The result was Stalin's turn on the right and the NEP, and the creation of the first Five Year Plan, with its emphasis on industry, modernization, and building of socialism in one country. The left turn by Stalin was welcomed by many of the members of the Left Opposition who supported the policy as they saw it as a long awaited implementation of left policy. With the support of the Left Opposition came the support of many of the

³⁶ Rodchenko quoted in Khan-Magomedov, 277.

avant-garde, willing to offer their abilities to the new concentration on industrialization. It is important to note two things here. One, the Constructivists had sought to unite art with industry, viewing the Laboratory period and experimentation as preparation for a time of industrialization. Stalin's emphasis on industry seemed to be such a time to utilize the research they had accumulated and designs they had created. And second, the Constructivists had always identified with the workers, they seeing themselves as constructors, and the new emphasis on the workers would have greatly appealed to them.

Yet, they were not workers, were not working in the factories and mines, and would not have experienced the exploitation of the workers that increased with the accelerated pace of industry. A quote from Lissitzky will demonstrate this: "in our century the factory has ceased to exist as a place of exploitation and as a hated institution. ...the factory has become the real place of education: the university for new socialist man."³⁷ Lissitzky would seem to be unaware of the situation that was, in reality, quite different from his beliefs. Some historians have suggested that Lissitzky and many of the Constructivists were unaware of the working conditions, or if they were aware of them, believed the Five Year Plan they

³⁷ Lissitzky, El, "The Club as a Social Force," *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, trans. By Eric Dluhosch, London: Lund Humphries, 1970, 57.

supported would ameliorate these conditions.³⁸ However, I have as much trouble believing the Constructivists were simply naïve under these circumstances as I do believing they were non-political innocents who were simply taken in by the October Revolution without a political philosophy of their own. This is not to say that the Constructivists were insensitive to the working conditions around them. Instead, I suggest that the Constructivists believed, as they had believed since the October Revolution, that industry was the key to building the new Soviet society. They had a vested interest in this industrialization as it meant a possibility for more of their designs to be placed into production, designs that would help better society. With the increase of industry, there was a need for the specialists being produced at the Vkhutein, which had recently been transferred to the jurisdiction of the Vesenkha, the Council of the National Economy. This meant that the students the Constructivists had taught were being placed in industrial positions. So not only was there a possibility for more of their designs to be put to use, but also a possibility for the students they taught to be put to use.

Also, in the years after Stalin came to power, the state took on a more central role in coordinating social commands than to which the avant-garde was accustomed. As Margolin states,

³⁸ Wood, 20.

"the design demands of the state reduced their control over what they produced, and we cannot be sure that the outcomes were completed as they envisioned them."³⁹ Past historians, like Groys, have gone so far as to describe art under Stalin as completely controlled by his totalitarian state, removing any statement an artist could make.⁴⁰ Others, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, believe the avant-garde had a more mutually beneficent relationship with the state, it supporting the various groups that supported it, as seen in the example of the Vkhutein above.⁴¹ To this, I would simply add that the artists' relation to the state, as it had always been, was more complex than a simple we-them opposition with the Constructivists often working in administrative capacities for the state. The above statement by Lissitzky concerning the factories "as the real place of education" was made while he was employed by the state as the Soviet Union's leading exhibition designer and just prior to working on *USSR in Construction*, when it was his job to portray the Soviet Union positively, often using exaggeration and hyperbole. The path of media that individual Constructivists would take was then not only governed by their desire to continue the Revolution, but was also governed, in part, by the state.

³⁹ Margolin, 165.

⁴⁰ Groys, Boris, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

⁴¹ Fitzpatrick, Sheila, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, 2-3.

Though working for the state, Lissitzky's work in exhibitions and on *USSR in Construction* contains a resonance of the October Revolution as the projects main purpose was to spread socialist ideas into other countries, a key step to continuing the Revolution internationally. Lissitzky is an excellent example of this continual commitment to international communication around socialist ideas, having left the Soviet Union in late 1921 for Germany and traveling a great deal between the two in the years that followed. There is little evidence that he went to Germany to win artists over to the Russian cause, as he, along with Ilya Ehrenburg, the first editor for *Vershch*, stated in an article they wished to remain "aloof from all political parties."⁴² In the same statement they said that they wished to use Constructivism "not, after all, to embellish life but to organize it."⁴³ Again, here is the suggestion of a political philosophy for social transformation rather than an expression of a specific politic. Lodder emphasizes Lissitzky's role in providing Germany and the Bauhaus, which she parallels to the Vkhutemas, with information on Russian art and outlines of teaching programs in the Architecture Department of the Vkhutemas.⁴⁴ She also describes Lissitzky as a conduit of information in the reverse; after his return to Moscow in 1925,

⁴² Lissitzky and Ehrenburg quoted in Margolin, 57.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lodder, "The VKhUTEMAS and the Bauhaus," 211.

"he assumed a role as an authority on western developments, publishing a series of articles on modern German architecture in Soviet journals in 1926. In addition, Lissitzky was appointed as the official consultant concerning foreign contacts for the Vkhutemas as a whole."⁴⁵ His later work in producing international exhibits and writing for an international magazine would certainly serve in the same capacities of internationally communicating socialist ideas.

In 1931, the year after the Vkhutemas closed, Rodchenko began to produce layouts for *USSR in Construction*, a magazine published for foreign distribution on the achievements of the Soviet Union, but was also released inside the country to bolster patriotism. Despite the shortages of the 1930s, the magazine depicted the steps made toward the culture of the future, representing life as it was and as it would be together. Rodchenko's first project was to document the construction of the White Sea Canal, using the more straightforward photographic style seen in the *Noryi lef*. As Margolin, Wood, and Buchloh all note, it would have been highly unlikely for Rodchenko to not have learned of the miserable working conditions of the prisoners brought to work on the canal, as well as the thousands who are said to have died of labor.⁴⁶ Yet the narrative Rodchenko depicts

⁴⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁴⁶ Buchloh, 74, Margolin, 186, and Wood, 21.

is overly positive, with images of workers laboring to the music of their own orchestras gaining the project supporters both in the Soviet Union and in the West. Rodchenko must have known the extent of his exaggeration; however, there would have been little he could have done as he could not have opposed Stalin's tactics. Lissitzky never had to face such a drastic discord between the events he was to describe and the positive light that was the policy of the magazine, and this is perhaps the reason he was able to continue propaganda work with enthusiasm. Rodchenko, on the other hand, resorted to the use of two styles in his later years, one for official policy, and another style which consisted of a return to the production of paintings for his own private purposes. Tatlin faded away from large projects, working mostly in the theater and also painting in private. Mayakovsky was perhaps the most disillusioned (and Wood has called the most insightful) saying before his suicide, "So the thing you've been fighting against for twenty years has now won."⁴⁷ With the growing realization of the actual situation of the workers under Stalin's Five Year Plans and their place in supporting it, many Constructivists, not including Lissitzky, quietly withdrew from their work as revolutionaries, knowing that opposition was a dangerous option, as would have been the sudden decision to stop work altogether.

⁴⁷ Mayakovsky quoted in Wood, 21.

But the decision by many of the Constructivists to withdraw should by no means be regarded as a failure. It is true they did not reach their lofty goals of creating a new Soviet society through the integration of art and life. Their way was made difficult not only by holding different views than their political comrades, but also by differing views amongst the Constructivists who were often times working in collaboration. As Margolin concludes, the result was "an art of negotiation in order to survive as circumstances changed."⁴⁸ Through the use of advertising, teaching, magazines, and other literature, they were able to spread their ideas of how the new society should operate and what sort of identity the new man should have. Through these means, they were able to shape the collective consciousness, and along the way, produce a number of new objects for that consciousness' use.

⁴⁸ Margolin, 251.