

Revolutionary Photography

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In the decade following the Russian Revolution of October 1917, photography became a particularly important medium for creative experimentation and research in the Soviet Union, especially amongst those innovative artists who had previously been associated with the avant-garde, a development that was firmly related to the new ideology. As early as 1921, El Lissitzky had pointed out that in post-revolutionary Russia, traditional types of art were no longer relevant: “The (painted) picture fell apart together with the old world that it had created for itself. The new world will not need pictures. If it needs a mirror, it has the photograph and the cinema.”¹ At this point, Lissitzky’s primary allegiance was to Suprematism, but his ideas concerning the suitability of photography for the proletarian state dovetailed with the opinions of Aleksei Gan, the theorist of Constructivism, the movement that in 1921 had completely abandoned making works of art in favour of designing useful objects for the new society.² In 1922, Gan suggested that film, and by extension photography, should now replace painting as the art forms appropriate for the new proletarian society, stating, “And everything previously done in an amateurish way by the arts of painting, sound and movement with the aim of organizing our emotions is now automatically done by the extended organs of society—through technology, and in this specific case, by the cinema.”³

The Bolsheviks shared the avant-garde’s enthusiasm for cinema and photography, but did not go as far as regarding these media as total replacements for painting. Lenin’s Directive on Cinema Affairs of January 17, 1922, stipulated that, “Not only films, but also photographs of propaganda interest should be shown with the appropriate captions.”⁴ The decree reinforced earlier government measures such as the nationalization of the film and photographic industry (1919) and the founding of a Higher Institute of Photography and Photographic Techniques (1918) to train photojournalists.⁵ Official support for photography bolstered the assumption of Lissitzky, Gan, and other avant-garde figures that, because the photograph was created by a machine and could be mass-produced without losing its unique qualities, it was pre-eminently suited to be the art form for the working class, itself the social product of industrial development. The avant-garde’s ideological commitment to the new state and to photography as a proletarian art form, combined with an inventive approach to the photographic processes themselves and an intense interest in formal experimentation, all inspired the innovative and extremely



fig. 1 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Dive (Pryzhok v vodu)*. 1934. Gelatin silver print, 1934–50, 11 3/4 × 9 5/16" (29.9 × 23.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1826.2001)

fig. 2 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Dive (Pryzhok v vodu)*. 1934. Gelatin silver print, 1934–39, 11 11/16 × 9 3/8" (29.7 × 23.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1827.2001)



fig. 3 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)*. 1918. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 31 1/4" (81.9 x 79.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist, through Jay Leyda



fig. 4 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Girl with a Leica (Devushka s Leikoi)*. 1932–33. Gelatin silver print, 11 13/16 x 8" (30 x 20.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1828.2001)

powerful images produced by Soviet photographers during the 1920s and 1930s.

The avant-garde figures who now embraced photography did not approach the medium as professionally trained photographers, but as artists who wanted to probe its potential in the same way that they had previously investigated painting and sculpture. Having experimented with abstraction and discarded traditional concepts of art, they were now intent on exploring the means of manipulating material as well as the nature of the material itself—whether that was paint, canvas, metal sheets, or camera film and photographic paper—so that they could exploit the way color and form, tone and texture, line and volume, solid and void could all convey subliminal messages to the viewer. In rejecting established methods, traditional approaches, narrative, and recognizable subject matter, these artists naturally treated the camera as an instrument to be explored for its own possibilities as well as for its potential to convey ideas. Their approach to the photographic process—not just the selection and construction of the image but also the way the camera was used in terms of lenses, apertures, and exposures—was subject to experimentation, just as the final print was regarded as a forum for further manipulation. These artists were geared toward innovation, and both this attitude towards the creative act and the

materials that were involved were fundamental to the way that they approached photography.

Aleksandr Rodchenko epitomizes this approach. He took his first photograph in 1924, adapting to photography many of the devices and practices that he had developed in his abstract paintings, three-dimensional constructions, collages, and photomontages. He had often worked in series, producing numerous canvases devoted to one motif, such as the line. Similarly, he used the camera to create a sequence of photographs devoted to a single subject, exploring it from different angles (as in the *Dive [Pryzhok v vodu]* images of 1934; figs. 1 and 2)⁶ and sometimes in different situations, light, and weather conditions. He tended to treat the components of a photograph as if they were abstract elements to be arranged at will on a flat canvas. Likewise, Rodchenko's use of light to intensify relationships between forms in sculptures as well as his play with textures in paintings such as *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)* (1918; fig. 3) are equally evident in his photographs, such as *Girl with a Leica (Devushka s Leikoi)* (1932–33; fig. 4).⁷ The tactic of employing oblique, high, and low angles in his photographs (as in the *Dive* pictures) reflects the diagonal arrangements of some of his paintings, while his collapsing of the space and flattening of the objects also makes the compositional process closer to that utilized in painting.

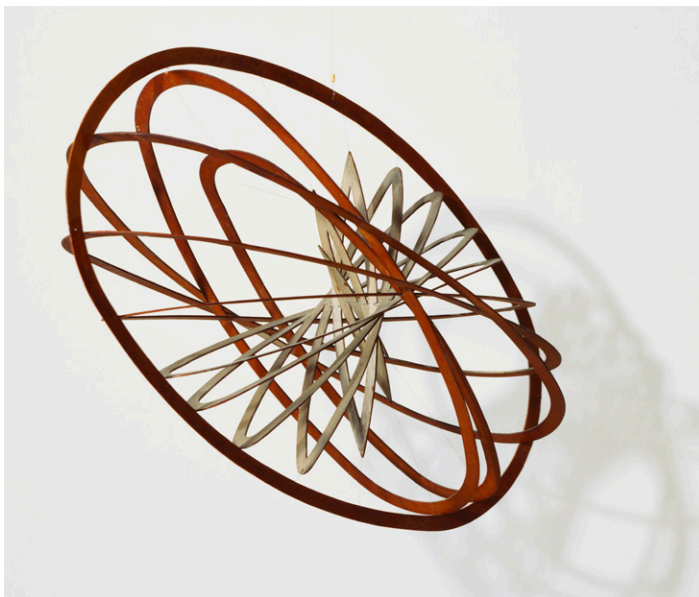


fig. 5 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Spatial Construction, no. 12*. (*Prostranstvennaia konstruktsiia, no. 12*). c. 1920. Plywood, partly painted with aluminum paint and wire, 24 × 33 × 18 1/2" (61 × 83.7 × 47 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquisition made possible through the extraordinary efforts of George and Zinaida Costakis, and through the Nate B. and Frances Spingold, Matthew H. and Ema Futter, and Enid A. Haupt Funds

fig. 6 Aleksandr Rodchenko. Photomontage illustration in Vladimir Mayakovsky. *Pro eto. Ei i mne* (About this. To her and to me). Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe, 1923. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

Rodchenko's skill in manipulating space in *Girl with a Leica*, the *Dive* pictures, and other photographs probably benefitted from his work with sculpture, such as his series of hanging constructions of 1920, which he had created by cutting concentric rings of a single shape out of a sheet of plywood and then rotating the resulting forms in space to create a three-dimensional entity (fig. 5). His inventiveness in orchestrating space may also have been stimulated by his work with photomontage, for which he selected and removed photographic fragments from their original contexts and recombined them in a creative play with pictorial space, scale, and viewpoint, as in his illustrations for Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem *Pro eto. Ei i mne* (About this. To her and to me) of 1923 (fig. 6), where he created a fluid space, disregarding gravity, and distorting the proportions and scales of observable reality.

Rodchenko's use of unusual angles distorted spatial relations and made his subjects difficult to read, compelling the viewer to engage at length with the image. In one *Dive* picture (see fig. 2), he shot the diver from below against the sky, flattening the space and dramatically foreshortening the figure, reducing it to a circular shape placed asymmetrically in what is an essentially abstract composition. It is difficult to read the image and decipher the diver's physical and spatial orientation. For the literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, this process of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) was integral to the aesthetic process of creation and viewing. Shklovsky wrote, "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."⁸ In the enigmatic *Girl with a Leica*, Rodchenko employed shadows to obscure the woman's face and angles to distort the spatial relationship between the objects in the photograph and between the photograph and the viewer. In other images, such as those of machines, he often focused on one small part or fragment of the whole.

Before this, the practical and theoretical basis for these compositional devices had been developed by Dziga Vertov while shooting his *Kino-Pravda* (Cinema-Truth) newsreels. Vertov took great care over the composition of each frame, which is evident in an untitled photograph of around 1927–28 (which may have been actually taken by his brother and cameraman Mikhail Kaufman) (fig. 7). Here the low angle emphasizes the upward thrust of the factory chimney, and the electricity cables and pylon evoke the progress of industrialization, which held the promise of a socialist future. In 1923, Vertov had emphasized the camera's capacity to generate new types of images: "I, the machine, show you the world as only I can see it. I emancipate myself . . . from human immobility. I am in constant motion. . . . My path leads to a fresh perception of the world."⁹ Rodchenko was clearly aware of Vertov's ideas, because he had produced the intertitles for the thirteenth issue of *Kino-Pravda*, in 1922, and both men were associated with the avant-garde journal *Lef*.¹⁰ Moreover,

we know that Rodchenko frequently used cinematic 35mm film, which he would have acquired through his friendship with Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, or the filmmaker Esfir Shub (the wife of his fellow Constructivist Aleksei Gan). These film contacts were especially important during the 1920s when Rodchenko did not have access to the photographic laboratories of the big publishing houses and had to develop his film in the small darkroom that he built in his apartment.¹¹ Other avant-garde photographers were in exactly the same position. Sergei Senkin transformed his room in a communal flat into a darkroom at night, while Boris Ignatovich, who had no permanent address, devised a portable darkroom.¹²

Rodchenko concentrated on manipulating the camera in relation to a particular subject prior to taking a photograph. In 1927, he was accused of formalism¹³ and "limiting photography's aims to those that once belonged to painting."¹⁴ In response, he formulated his ideas concerning photography, emphasizing his use of the worm's- and bird's-eye views in his quest to educate the eye of Soviet man.¹⁵ Many of his subsequent shots featured an explicitly political subject, as in *Demonstration* (1932; fig. 8), or sports parades or individual sportsmen, whose prowess projected the ideal of the new

Soviet man. The Bolsheviks considered that sporting success and physical perfection demonstrated the triumph of the revolution, the efficacy of socialism, and the achievements of the Soviet state.

In contrast to Rodchenko, Lissitzky was more concerned with working with the photographs once he had taken them, an approach that corresponds to what he seems to have understood as *fotopis'*. Although the term is often translated as "photography," it can also be rendered as "painting with photographs" or "photographic painting,"¹⁶ which seems to be the meaning suggested here by Lissitzky's statement:

*The language of photography is not the language of painting, and photography possesses properties that are not available to painting. These properties reside in the photographic material itself and it is essential for us to develop them in order to make photography truly into an art, into fotopis'.*¹⁷

In a series of photographic works, Lissitzky did precisely this, exploiting the properties of the "photographic material itself" and building up his images from a "truly virtuoso



fig. 7 Dziga Vertov. *Untitled*. 1927-28. Gelatin silver print, 1927-32, 5 ¼ × 3 ½" (13.4 × 8.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Abbott-Levy Collection funds, by exchange (MoMA 1894.2001)



fig. 8 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Demonstration*. 1932. Gelatin silver print, 1932-35, 11 ½ × 9" (29.6 × 22.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1825.2001)

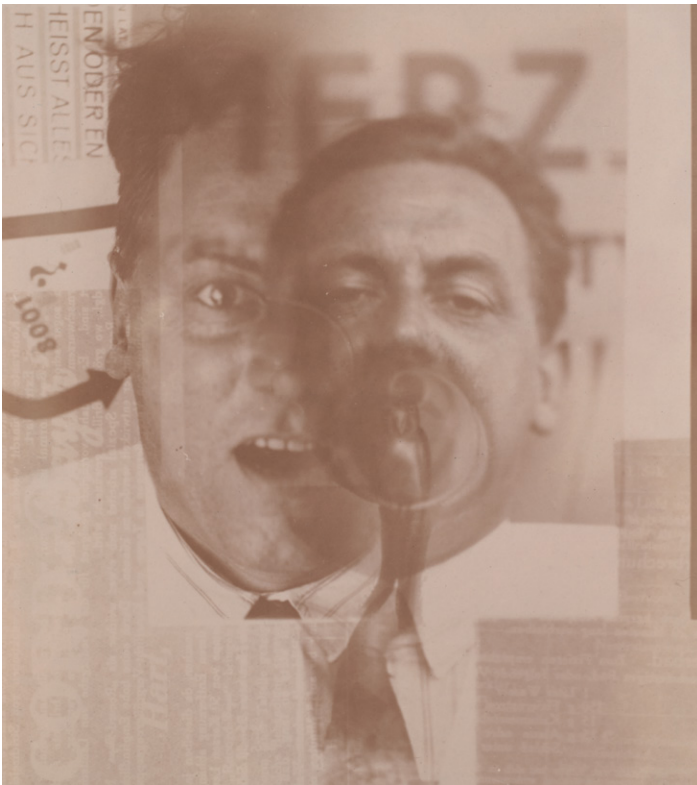


fig. 9 El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky). Kurt Schwitters. 1924. Gelatin silver print, $4\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{4}$ " (10.8 × 9.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1763.2001). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

deployment of various darkroom techniques, often in unprecedented combinations, including double printing, sandwiched negatives, the use of photogram elements and the creation of multiple generations of prints.¹⁸ His montage portrait of Kurt Schwitters (fig. 9) demonstrates this approach. The basic structure combines two images of Schwitters's face at different scales.¹⁹ One shows Schwitters against the word "Merz" (signifying the concept, as well as his journal). His mouth is shown in various positions, suggesting that he had been talking during the photograph's intentionally long exposure. The addition of the parrot over the mouth evokes the notion of irrational verbal utterances, which were integral to Dada performances. The other image contains rectangular elements and a fragment from the cover of the "*nasci*" issue of the journal *Merz* (1924), on which the two artists collaborated and in which Lissitzky emphatically rejected his previous emphasis on the machine and instead stressed the close relationship between nature and science, the organic and the technical.²⁰ The resulting portrait of Schwitters captures his connection with Dada while alluding to his brief partnership with Lissitzky and their shared ideas.

The same aspiration to convey an aesthetic idea while using similar photographic methods and means underlies

the composition inscribed and titled $N^2ATUR + T^2ECHNIK + K^2UNST = \sqrt{-1} = i$ (1924; fig. 10), which Lissitzky undoubtedly made around the same time. The image combines several elements, including a shot looking up through the framework of an engineering structure, probably the Eiffel Tower.²¹ This fuses with a photogram of two leaves (chestnut and poplar) and the rectangular construction of a Lissitzky Proun. The overlays provide a central pivot (as well as a symbolic fusion of technology and nature), around which the composition seems to turn, just like one of Lissitzky's Proun paintings, which he regarded as links between painting and architecture and which he often suggested could be viewed from all sides. The overall effect suggests growth and reflects Lissitzky's definition of *nasci* on the cover of the journal as "everything that develops, moves and is generated through its own power." The use of the square root of minus 1 relates to his 1925 article "*K. und Pangeometrie*" (A. and pangeometry), in which he stated, "A [art] is an invention of our spirit, a complex whole, combining the rational with the imaginary, the physical with the mathematical $\sqrt{1}$ with $\sqrt{-1}$."²² The mathematical formula may also be connected with Lissitzky's projected book of 1924, provisionally entitled $1=i$, an equation that, for the biologist and natural philosopher Raoul Francé, expressed a perfect state of identity, balance, integration, and harmony.²³

This photograph encapsulates Lissitzky's concept of art as a fusion of the biological and the technological. The image's biographical or documentary quality is similar to *Self-Portrait (The Constructor)* (1924; fig. 11) as well as to the



fig. 10 El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky). $N^2ATUR + T^2ECHNIK + K^2UNST = \sqrt{-1} = i$. 1924. Gelatin silver print with black ink, $6\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{7}{16}$ " (15.8 × 11.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1762.2001). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



fig. 11 El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky). *Self-Portrait (The Constructor)*. 1924. Gelatin silver print, $5\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ " (13.9 × 8.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange (MoMA 1764.2001). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

photograph of the artist with his set for Sergei Tretyakov's play *Khochu rebenka* (*I Want a Baby*).²⁴ Lissitzky assembled *Self-Portrait* (*The Constructor*) from numerous components, much as he built up the portrait of Schwitters. As a self-portrait, it vividly evokes the artist's "rationalized artistic practice," uniting eye, hand, and compass.²⁵ In contrast to this formal and aesthetic complexity, the snapshot of Lissitzky working on his set (fig. 12) is a straightforward photograph that conveys an emotional and political engagement through the artist's expression as well as the appearance of the word "socialism" (СОЦИАЛИЗ[М]), which is part of the slogan around the balcony: "A healthy child is the future builder of socialism."²⁶ Lissitzky may have taken the photograph using a timer, although it is also possible that it was the work of Tretyakov, who was a keen photographer, or Grigorii Miller, who originally owned this particular print.²⁷ Lissitzky had completed the model (now in the A. A. Bakhrushin Theatre Museum, Moscow) by April 1929, which would seem an appropriate date for the image.²⁸ The play controversially confronted the issues of sex, gender roles, and eugenics in the new society.²⁹ Vsevolod Meyerhold intended to stage it as "an illustrated discussion which the spectators would be free to interrupt," so Lissitzky designed a "laboratory environment,"³⁰ comprising an auditorium with a central, multilevel structure, including a transparent stage and moving lights.³¹ In the photograph, the angle of Lissitzky's face implies a conversation between the artist and his creation, and his expression suggests tenderness and intimacy. As a document, the image reflects Tretyakov's argument that "Photography is not just a stenographer; it also explains."³²

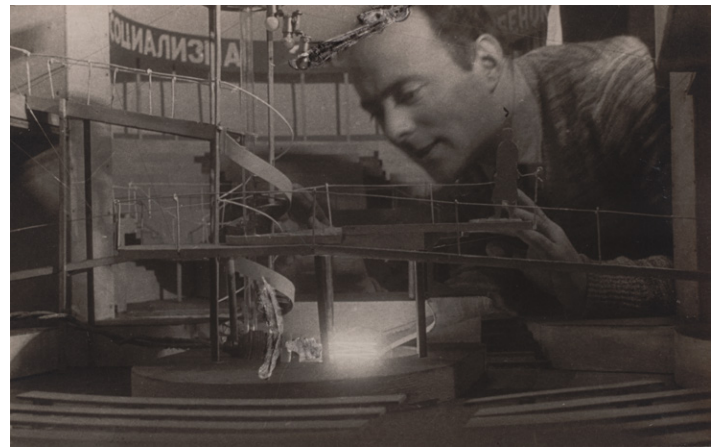


fig. 12 Unknown photographer. Untitled (*El Lissitzky Working on a Stage Design of Sergei Tretyakov's play "I Want a Baby" in the Meyerhold Theater*). 1929. Gelatin silver print, 1929–39, 3 1/4 × 5 1/16" (8.2 × 2.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA 1765.2001)

Rodchenko and Lissitzky's photographic works of the 1920s display a great degree of experimentation and innovation but little political content, although a socialist-commitment is perhaps implicit in their use of the medium itself. In contrast, Roman Karmen's 1927 photograph of Moscow combines a formalist approach with a strong ideological content (fig. 13). Visually, Karmen's image shares qualities with Knud Lönberg-Holm's photograph of New York's Broadway, reproduced in Erich Mendelsohn's 1926 book *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (*America: An architect's picture book*; fig. 14). Both images convey the excitement of the modern city at night—its vitality, dynamism, and the electrical illuminations that epitomized the new pace of everyday life. Both use diagonal compositions as well as long and double exposures in order to capture words and slogans in electric lights, and the moving headlights of automobiles. Both photographs were also set in the theater districts of the two cities: Broadway in New York and the area around the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. The similarities in composition and approach suggest that Karmen was aware of the earlier photograph. This is entirely possible since Lissitzky had enthusiastically reviewed Mendelsohn's book and had even used Lönberg-Holm's photograph as the basis for his own photographic collage *Record* (*Rekord*) (1926; fig. 15).³³ Karmen could have seen or acquired a copy of *Amerika* through his publishing contacts, notably with the journal *Ogonek* ("the small flame"), which had been printing his photographs since September 1923.³⁴ Karmen's photograph celebrates ten years of Communism—rather than featuring American advertisements (Candy, Central Theater, Dining and Dancing) it focuses instead on political slogans. "October" (ОКТАБРЬ) at the top left surmounts the roman numeral X and the dates 1917 and 1927, the word for "years" (ЛЕТ) along



fig. 13 Roman Karmen. *Moscow Illuminations Celebrating the Tenth Anniversary of the Russian Revolution* (*Moskva noch'iu v oktiabr'skie dni*). 1927. Gelatin silver print, 1927–39, 9 1/8 × 11 7/16" (23.2 × 29 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Abbott-Levy Collection Funds, by exchange (MoMA 1712.2001)

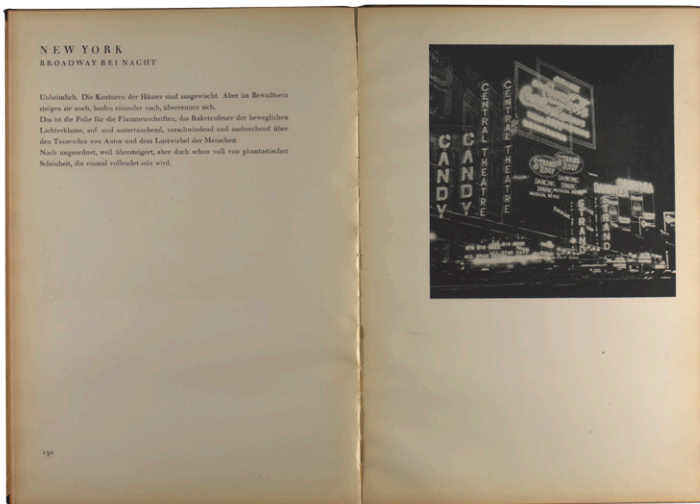


fig. 14 Knud Lönberg-Holm. *New York: Broadway at Night* (*New York: Broadway bei Nacht*). Page 150 in Erich Mendelsohn. *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (*America: An architect's picture book*). Berlin: Rudolf Mosse Buchverlag, 1926. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © The Knud Lönberg-Holm Archive from the Marc Dessauce Collection

fig. 15 El Lissitzky. *Record* (*Rekord*). 1926. Gelatin silver print, $10\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{13}{16}$ (26.7 × 22.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA 1966.2001). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



with the phrase “in the path of Lenin” (ПО ПУТИ ЛЕНИНА), and the name Marx (МАРКС), which is in smaller letters below. The slogan “The trade union is the school of Communism” (ПРОФСОЮЗ—ШКОЛА КОММУНИЗМА) is just visible beneath the dome of the building. Karmen made at least two photographs of these revolutionary illuminations, since this image and a companion piece, of the same subject from a slightly different angle, were both reproduced under the title *Moscow at Night during the Celebrations Marking the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution* (fig. 16).³⁵ Karmen explained:

*Night shots of the October illuminations in Moscow. The most interesting illuminations of the buildings on Sverdlov Square and Soviet Square were shot on one film. The shots of the illuminations required a long exposure—that is why the headlights of the passing cars produced lines of light on the film.*³⁶

Both photographs focus on the illuminated slogans decorating the Dom Soiuzov (House of Unions), on what is today the corner of Bolshaia Dmitrovka and Okhotnyi Riad (then called Prospekt Marksa or Marx Avenue). Whereas the companion piece was clearly taken from the other side of Theater Square (then Sverdlov Square), from a vantage point on Teatral'nyi Proezd looking towards Okhotnyi Riad, the Walther Collection photograph combines several exposures of various illuminated slogans, including those

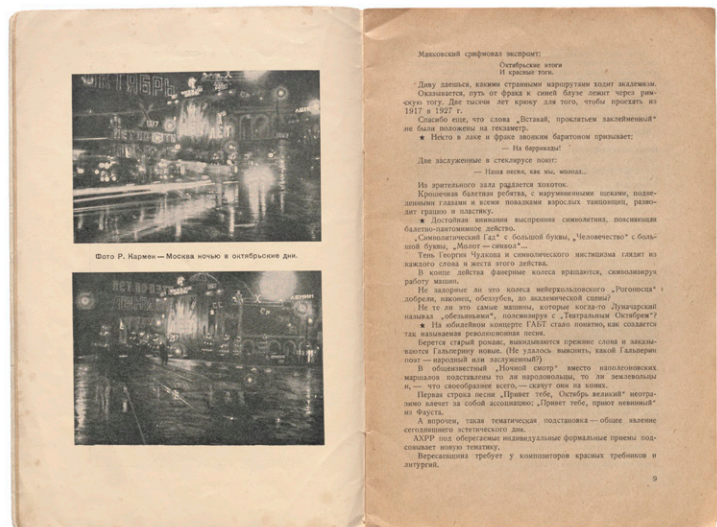


fig. 16 Spread from *Novyi lef*, no. 10 (1927). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Jan Tschichold Collection. Gift of Philip Johnson. Left: Roman Karmen. Two works titled *Moscow at Night during the Celebrations Marking the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution*. 1927

on Tver Square (then Soviet Square). The House of Unions was politically important. Formerly the House of Nobles (now the headquarters of the trade unions), it was where the Communist Party held its congresses and where Lenin had lain in state prior to his funeral in 1924. The choice of building and the prominent role of the illuminated political slogans suggest that Karmen may have been consciously instituting a dialogue with the American image. While Lönberg-Holm's photograph could be said to capture the energy of capitalist America, Karmen's evokes the dynamism of communist Russia.

For a Soviet audience, the medium of the illuminations was also the message; electricity and Bolshevism were intimately connected. It was Lenin who had initiated work on the plan for the electrification of Russia in February 1920 and coined the slogan "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country."³⁷ Lenin had stressed the vital role that electricity would play in uniting and industrializing the vast landmass of Russia, transforming everyday life and bringing both light and political enlightenment to the masses. Electric lightbulbs even became known as "Ilyich's lamps." As the article accompanying the reproduction of Karmen's photographs emphasized, "Like signposts, the slogans of the tenth Anniversary of October are showing the way to tomorrow."³⁸ Karmen's twin commitment to artistic innovation and communist ideology was central to this image and to his later documentary films about the Spanish Civil War, Vietnam, and Cuba.



fig. 17 Gustav Klutsis. *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, 1926–35, 3 1/2 × 2 9/16" (8.9 × 6.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Abbott-Levy Collection funds, by exchange (MoMA 1741.2001). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



fig. 18 Georgii Zimin. *Untitled (Montage with Self-Portrait and Building)*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, 1926–30, 3 11/16 × 3 1/4" (9.4 × 8.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA 1920.2001)

Gustav Klutsis shared Karmen's profound allegiance to communism and aesthetic innovation. A member of the Communist Party and a soldier in the Latvian Red Rifles Regiment, Klutsis produced photomontages celebrating Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda (1920), Lenin's life (1924), and the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32). These demonstrated his dexterity at orchestrating space and form, a skill that had been fostered by his Suprematist paintings (1919–20) and abstract constructions (1921). Like Rodchenko, he began to take photographs in 1924, but tended to use these for his photomontages and poster designs rather than regarding them as independent works for publication. An untitled image from 1926 (fig. 17) is probably an early self-portrait, although it may also have been taken by his wife, Valentina Kulagina.³⁹ It shows Klutsis with his cap on backwards indicating both his allegiance to the working class and his intention to go outside. He is holding a camera, his eye to the viewfinder, suggesting an affinity between man and machine but also making it clear that the camera is subordinate to the artist's eye.

In contrast, Georgii Zimin's *Untitled (Montage with Self-Portrait and Building)* (1926; fig. 18), also known as *Self-Portrait, Railway Tracks and Platform*, possesses a wider ideological reference. Zimin was trained as a graphic artist,⁴⁰



fig. 19 Lyubov Popova. *The Traveler*. 1915. Oil on canvas, 56 × 41 ½" (142.2 × 105.4 cm). Norton Simon Art Foundation, Pasadena, Calif. © 2014 Norton Simon Art Foundation

and his interest in light and movement became manifest in his photographs of dancers, while his photograms of the 1920s consist of prosaic items like screws, scissors, or pliers, organized as autonomous shapes on the paper.⁴¹ This abstract approach to real objects is reflected in this image, which compositionally combines a circular and pyramidal form, while the fusion of the head, the image of a station platform, and the railway tracks going off into the distance evokes the notion of a journey or memory of a journey. Trains were redolent of the modern age, and the Italian Futurists' enthusiasm for the subject had found creative responses in Russia with Natalia Goncharova's *Airplane over Train*, Kazimir Malevich's lithograph *Simultaneous Death in an Airplane and at the Railway*, and Ivan Kliun's constructed relief, *Landscape Rushing By*. All were produced in 1913 and refer to new ideas of time and space by combining objects from different spatial contexts within a single image. Lyubov Popova explored a more subjective experience of train travel in two paintings entitled *The Traveler*, both of 1915, which fuse figures with elements of trains and railway tracks, one of which (fig. 19) Zimin may have seen at her posthumous exhibition in Moscow in 1924.⁴²

After the Revolution, trains acquired enormous ideological and strategic importance. During the civil war (1918–20) they played a vital role in moving soldiers and armaments rapidly to where they were needed. At the same

time, propaganda or agit trains, like the Red Cossack and V. I. Lenin No. 1, traveled behind the front lines, disseminating the revolutionary message, distributing posters, and showing newsreels. In the 1920s, and especially during the First Five-Year Plan, when the Soviet regime was concerned with developing heavy industry and modernizing the country's economic infrastructure, the development of transport and the extension of the railway network was considered crucial. Trains operated as practical links between Moscow and the provinces, carrying materials, goods, and people to and from the newly emerging industrial centers. In this context, trains became symbolic of the revolutionary struggle and the dynamic qualities of Soviet construction. They epitomized the regime's aspiration to unite the country, abolish the divide between the cities and the countryside, and establish socialism.

Zimin's photograph clearly relates to these ideas. The buildings and platform indicate that the station is not a terminus but is on one of the main railway lines, linking the center and the periphery of the country, implying a continuous flow of traffic and journeys. Moreover, the young man is wearing a worker's cap, and his smiling face



fig. 20 Semyon Fridlyand. *In the Gallery* (GUM, State Department Store, Moscow) (*Auf der Galerie* [GUM, Staatliches Kaufhaus, Moskau]). 1927. Gelatin silver print, 1930–37, 8 7/16 × 6 5/16" (21.7 × 16.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Harold Edgerton, by exchange (MoMA 1671.2001)



fig. 21 Max Penson. *Assembling a Hydro-Generator at the Farkhad Power Station*. 1947. Gelatin silver print, 1947–50, 11 × 7^{13/16}" (28 × 19.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Marion C. Howe and Mr. Allan S. Chait, in memory of Ralph M. Chait, and the Farm Security Administration, by exchange (MoMA 1804.2001) © Maxime Penson

expresses optimism. The image evokes not only a physical journey towards a new city or industrial complex but also an ideological journey towards the future and the new world of communism. The young man is an individual, but in this respect he seems to typify the revolutionary enthusiasm and dreams of a whole generation.

Of course, the majority of photographers in the Soviet Union during the 1920s had not been members of the avant-garde, but were technically trained press photographers. Semyon Fridlyand, for instance, had started taking photographs after joining the photographic laboratory of the journal *Ogonek* in 1923.⁴³ He was a member of the *ROPF-Russkoe obshchestvo proletarskikh fotografov* (Russian society of proletarian photographers), which stridently criticized the avant-garde October group, to which Rodchenko, Klutsis, and Karmen belonged, and viciously attacked "formalism

that removes one from the profound dialectic disclosure of the social essence of phenomena."⁴⁴

Despite his criticism of October, Fridlyand absorbed formalist devices, which he combined with a strong ideological content,⁴⁵ as his photograph *In the Gallery* (*GUM, State Department Store, Moscow*) (*Auf der Galerie [GUM, Staatliches Kaufhaus, Moskau]*) of 1927 demonstrates (fig. 20).⁴⁶ A visually dramatic image taken from a low angle into the light, it shows the silhouettes of small figures walking across a thin bridge against the vast arch of the iron-and-glass roof, evoking sensations of light and space. Not surprisingly, Rodchenko and his colleagues pointed out the similarities between this and the works of Western and Soviet photographs labelled formalist by Fridlyand and his cronies.⁴⁷ Like them, Fridlyand is both celebrating modernity and the triumphs of contemporary engineering as well as using an unconventional angle.

Yet Fridlyand's photograph can also be read in strongly ideological terms. The visual unity of man and technology corresponds to the ideas underlying Soviet policies in which extensive industrial development was a prelude to the triumph of communism. The figures are moving in one direction, from left to right, suggesting progress towards the future, while the contre-jour effect reduces their individuality and accentuates their universality. The woman looks like a peasant with her kerchief and jutting skirt. The peaked cap on the man in front of her evokes the military, while the taller leading man seems to have the stance and clothing of a worker. Together they epitomize the social composition of the new order. Equally, they represent the new democratisation of consumerism. During NEP (the New Economic Policy), when the government was trying to resuscitate the economy and develop consumer consumption along socialist lines, GUM played a key role as a paradigm of the new type of retail enterprise that was accessible to every Soviet citizen. GUM's roof also evokes visions of the future socialist city of iron and glass about which Nikolai Chernyshevskii's heroine Eva dreams in his 1863 novel *Chto delat' (What Is to be Done?)*, and Aleksandr Bodganov's hero encounters on the socialist planet Mars in *Krasnaia zvezda (Red Star)* (1908).

During the First Five-Year Plan photography became an important means of propaganda and was increasingly subject to official control. In 1928 the October group's founding declaration stressed its allegiance to the Communist Party and its conception of the artist as "an active fighter on the ideological front of the Proletarian Revolution."⁴⁸ Publications like *SSSR na stroike* (USSR in construction), on which Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Karmen all worked, promoted the vision of the new world, presenting photographs organized into innovative typographical layouts. Enmity between avant-garde photographers and proletarian photojournalists ostensibly ended with the 1932 government decree abolishing all independent organizations. In 1935 Rodchenko showed twenty-four photographs (including the *Dive pictures* and *Girl with a Leica*) in the exhibition *Vystavka*

rabot masterov sovetskogo foto-iskusstva (Exhibition of works by masters of Soviet photographic art).⁴⁹ In the catalogue, a previously hostile Leonid Mezhericher belatedly acknowledged Rodchenko's importance: "Few photojournalists have escaped his influence, even those who are opposed to the principles of his programme."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, as Socialist Realism became more entrenched, photography gradually reverted to more conventional strategies. Under the guidance of the Party, photographs became more sentimental, increasingly romantic, and closer to painting. The "staged photographic picture" replaced both October's allegiance to formalism's novel approaches and the ROPF's engagement with real life.⁵¹ The numerous portraits of Stalin warmly greeting his subjects epitomize the type of photographs that fulfilled official requirements, while reflecting the

government's view that style possessed ideological connotations.⁵² Saccharine and optimistic, such images promoted a view of Stalin and the Soviet Union that was completely fallacious but effective in responding to the general populace's need for fantasy rather than the grim reality of Stalinism, with its mass arrests, executions, and imprisonments. Despite this, occasionally images were taken that recall the experimental and dramatic shots of the 1920s. Max Penson's photograph of the Farkhad Dam being constructed in 1947 (fig. 21), for instance, with its oblique angle and focus on the machine rather than the workers, recalls images produced when photographic inventiveness and revolutionary commitment marched hand in hand and a brave new world seemed possible.

NOTES

1. El Lissitzky, "The Conquest of Art," *Ring* 109 (1922): 32–34; trans. Michael Steinlauf in Peter Nisbet, *El Lissitzky (1890–1941)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums; Busch Reisinger Museum, 1987), p. 61.
2. See the manuscript "Programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov," March 18, 1921, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow; trans. as "Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists" in Selim Omarovich Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), p. 290.
3. Aleksei Gan, "Kinematograf i kinematografiia," *Kino-fot*, no. 1 (August 23, 1922): 1; trans. in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 67–68.
4. "Vladimir Lenin: Directive on Cinema Affairs" in Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, p. 56.
5. Sergei Morozov, Anry Vartanov, Grigory Shudakov, Olga Suslova, and Lilya Ukhtomskaya, eds., *Soviet Photography: An Age of Realism* (New York: Greenwich House, 1984), p. 9.
6. The fact that the *Dive* series was exhibited at the *Vystavka rabot masterov sovetskogo foto-iskusstva* (Exhibition of works by masters of Soviet photographic art) in 1935 suggests that the *Dive* photographs were shot no later than 1934. Aleksandr Lavrentiev, *Rodchenko et le groupe Octobre* (Paris: Hazan, 2006), p. 50.
7. For the personal history behind the latter photograph, see Margarita Tupitsyn, "Aleksandr Rodchenko: *Woman with a Leica* or 'Letters not about Love,'" *History of Photography* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 172–87.
8. Viktor Shklovskii, "Iskusstvo kak priem," *Sborniki II* (Moscow, 1917); trans. in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3–24.
9. Dziga Vertov, "Kinoki. Perevorot," *Lef*, no. 3 (1923): 141; trans. in Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, p. 93.
10. For the relationship between Vertov and Rodchenko, see Peter Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Evolution," in Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), pp. 123–24.
11. See Lavrentiev, *Rodchenko et le groupe Octobre*, p. 52.
12. Ibid.
13. *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 4 (1927). Rodchenko's response, "Krupnaia bezgramotnost' ili melkaia gadost'?", is printed in *Novyi lef*, no. 6 (1928): 42–44; trans. in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 245–48.
14. [Sergei Tretyakov], "Ot redakttsii," *Novyi lef*, no. 12 (1928): p. 41; trans. in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 271–72.
15. See, for instance, Rodchenko, "Puti sovremennoi fotografii," *Novyi lef*, no. 9 (1928): 31–38; trans. Jamey Gambrell in Alexander Lavrentiev, ed., *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters and Other Writings* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), pp. 207–12.
16. The term *fotopis'* (ФОТОПИСЬ) is Lissitzky's neologism and is linked to the word *svetopis* (СВЕТОПИСЬ), or painting with light (used to describe the photographic process of heliography); the word for icon painting, *ikonopis* (ИКОНОПИСЬ); and the term for painting itself, *zhivopis* (ЖИВОПИСЬ). The German equivalent, *Fotomalerei*, appears in the inscription on the verso of Lissitzky's *Kurt Schwitters* (fig. 9).
17. El Lissitzky, "Foto (Fotopis')," *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 10 (May 15, 1929): 311; cited by Peter Nisbet, "Lissitzky and Photography," in *El Lissitzky 1890–1941: Architect, Painter, Photographer, Typographer* (Eindhoven: Municipal Van Abbemuseum, 1990), p. 66. For a full translation, see Lissitzky, "Photography (Fotopis')," in *ibid.*, p. 70.
18. Leah Dickerman, "El Lissitzky's Camera Corpus," in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), p. 159.
19. See Klaus Pollmeier, "El Lissitzky's Multilayer Compositions: A Technical Analysis," on this website, for a discussion of the making of Lissitzky's *Kurt Schwitters* as well as *NATUR + TECHNIK + KUNST = √-1 = i, Self-Portrait (The Constructor)*, and *Record (Rekord)*. I am greatly indebted to Pollmeier's analyses throughout this discussion.
20. See *Merz*, no. 8–9 (April–July 1924).

21. See photographs of Lissitzky with Osip Zadkine in Paris (1912) and climbing the Eiffel Tower (1928), reproduced in *El Lissitzky 1890-1941*, p. 10.
22. El Lissitzky, "K. und Pangeometrie," in Carl Einstein and Paul Westheim, eds., *Europa Almanach* (Potsdam: Kiepenheuer, 1925); trans. Helen Aldwinckle in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, ed., *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968), p. 348.
23. See Peter Nisbet, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky," in Nisbet, *El Lissitzky (1890-1941)*, p. 30.
24. Sergei Tretyakov, "Khochu rebenka," *Sovremennaiia dramaturgia*, no. 2 (1988): 206-43; trans. Stephen Holland in Sergey Mikhailovich Tretyakov, *I Want a Baby*, ed. Robert Leach (Birmingham, U.K.: University of Birmingham, 1995).
25. Dickerman, "El Lissitzky's Camera Corpus," p. 153.
26. Lissitzky made this socialist content explicit when he combined a different photograph of himself and the set with a photograph of his baby son and the masthead of *Pravda*; see Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 62.
27. For information about Tretyakov's photography, see Erika Wolf, "The Author as Photographer: Tret'iakov's, Erenburg's and Il'f's Images of the West," *Configurations* 18, no. 3 (2011): 383-403. See Grigorii Miller, *What Is Svetopis? (Chto takoe sveto-pis')* (after 1928), Metropolitan Museum of Art (2005.100.853); reproduced in Margarita Tupitsyn, "After Vitebsk: El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, 1924-1929," in Perloff and Reed, *Situating El Lissitzky*, p. 189.
28. Nisbet, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky," p. 52 n. 102.
29. Sergei Tretyakov, "Chto pishut dramaturgi," *Rabis*, no. 11 (1929): 9.
30. Igor Terent'ev, "Khochu rebenka (plan postanovki)," *Novyi lef*, no. 12 (1928): 32.
31. El Lissitzky, "Der Innen-Aufbau des Theaters Meyerhold-Mosckau für Tretjakows 'Ich will ein Kind,'" *Das neue Frankfurt* 4, no. 10 (1930): 226; cited in Nisbet, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky," p. 40.
32. [Sergei Tretyakov], "Ot redaktsii," p. 42; trans. in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 271.
33. El Lissitzky, "Glaz arkhitektora," *Stroitel'naia promyshlennost'* 2 (1926); trans. in Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 221-26. Lissitzky wrote that the book "thrills us like a dramatic Film"; *ibid.*, p. 221.
34. See N. Kolesnikova, Galina Senchakova, and T. N. Slepneva, *Roman Karmen* (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1959); and Patrick Barbéris and Dominique Chapuis, *Roman Karmen: Une Légende rouge* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).
35. See *Novyi lef*, no. 10 (1927): 9.
36. "V nomere," *Novyi lef*, no. 10 (1927): 48.
37. Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 31, April-December 1920, ed. and trans. Julius Katzer (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), pp. 496-518.
38. S. T. [Sergei Tretyakov], "Zapisnaia knizhka. Otsenka khudozhestvennogo oformleniia desiatioktiabriia," *Novyi lef*, no. 10 (1927): 6.
39. See Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutss and Valentina Kulagina: Photography and Montage after Constructivism* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004), pp. 28-29.
40. See Georgij Zimin: *Zeichnungen, Lithographien und Photos aus den 20er Jahren "Skriabin in Lukins Tanz"* (Zurich: Victor Fedjuschin, Avant-Garde Art Agency-Gallery, 1992). Zimin graduated from the Vkhutemas in 1921. His illustrated album *Skriabin in Lukin's Dance* (1922) contains photographs and drawings in a decorative and sensual style.
41. See *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), plates 468-71.
42. The painting is visible in an installation shot of the show. See Angelica Z. Rudenstein, ed., *The George Costakis Collection: Russian Avant-Garde Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), plate 941.
43. Sergei Morozov, Anry Vartanov, Grigory Shudakov, Olga Suslova, Lilya Ukhtomskaya, and Valerie Lloyd, eds., *Soviet Photography: An Age of Realism* (New York: Greenwich House, 1984), 180.
44. S. Fridlyand, "Molchanie — ne vsegda zoloto," *Proletarskoe foto*, no. 32 (1931): 18, cited in Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 106.
45. He also made montages from several negatives, like *The Face of the Bourgeois Press*, published in *Ogonek*, no. 37 (1927), reproduced in Erika Wolf, "The Soviet Union: From Worker to Proletarian Groups," in Jorge Ribalta and Erica Witschey, eds., *The Worker Photography Movement 1926-1939: Essays and Documents* (Madrid: T. F. Editores, 2011), p. 35. Several of Fridlyand's montages were exhibited at *Pressa*, in Cologne in 1928; *ibid.*, p. 45 n. 8.
46. Reproduced in *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 11 (1927), and *Novyi lef*, no. 6 (1928).
47. *Novyi lef*, no. 6 (1928): 45.
48. "Okt'iabr. Ob'edinenie khudozhesvennogo truda. Deklaratsiia," *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*, no. 3 (March 1928): 73-74.
49. Lavrentiev, *Rodtchenko et le groupe Octobre*, p. 50.
50. Exhibition catalogue for *Vystavka rabot masterov sovetskogo foto-iskusstva* (Moscow, 1935), p. 97.
51. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph*, p. 154.
52. See, for instance, Boris Ignatovich, *Comrade Stalin with Pioneer Girl Mamlakat*, on the cover of *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 1 (1936).

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