

Aleksandr Rodchenko : [brochure] June 25 to October 6, 1998, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Date

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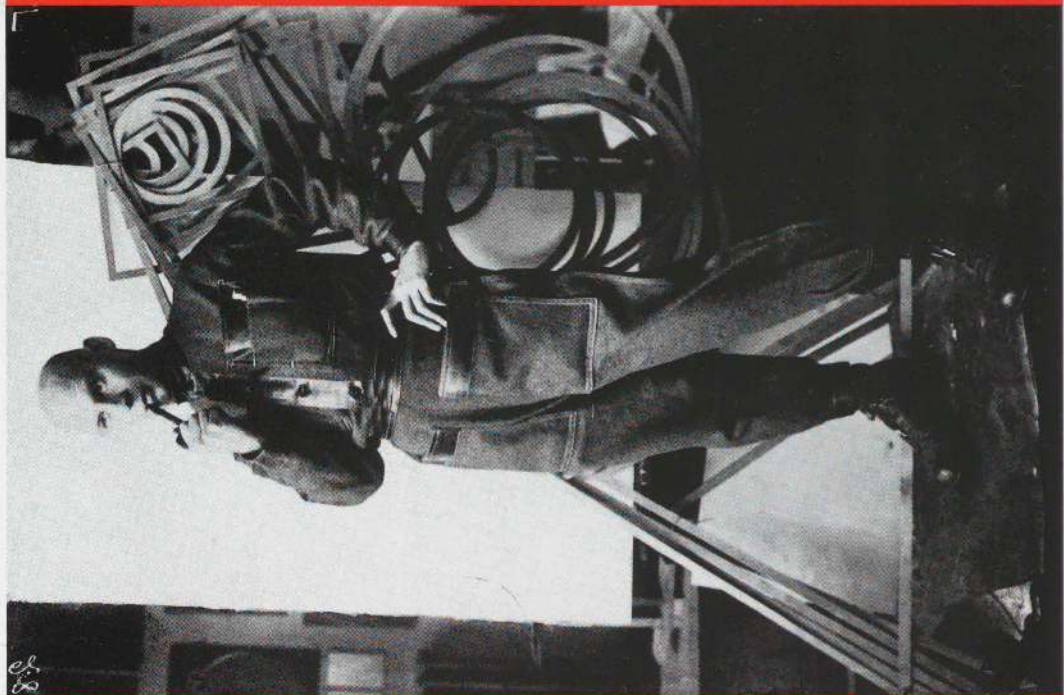
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ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO

June 25 to October 6, 1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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THE END OF PAINTING

In Moscow in September 1921, Rodchenko exhibited three monochromatic canvases: *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Blue Color*, and *Pure Yellow Color*. Years later he recalled, "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation."

The three paintings realized a key imperative of modernist art: to pursue formal investigation to its logical end. Achieving this, Rodchenko renounced painting and turned resolutely to new forms of art as instruments of social progress. This bold stroke soon led him to outstanding achievements in a wide range of design and in photomontage and photography.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

In early 1921, the Bolsheviks found themselves in control of a thoroughly devastated country. To revive the economy, Lenin temporarily suspended the extreme measures of the civil war and instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP), which permitted limited capitalist competition. Under NEP, government enterprises such as Dobrolet (the airline), GUM (the department store), and Mossel'prom (the grocery concern) were obliged to compete in the open market. This circumstance provided Rodchenko with an opportunity to address a mass public, and between 1923 and 1925 he created more than 150 advertising and packaging designs for these and other state companies (fig. 3). While he was conscious of the paradox of using capitalist-style advertising to fight capitalism, his ads deftly promoted both commerce and Communist ideology.

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 was one of the greatest upheavals of the twentieth century. Its leaders envisioned a new society, thoroughly reshaped in accordance with their radical program of social justice. A small group of advanced artists soon embraced this vision and sought to create new forms of art that would help bring the new society into being. Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956) was among the most talented of these artists. This exhibition is the first in the United States to present a comprehensive overview of his work.

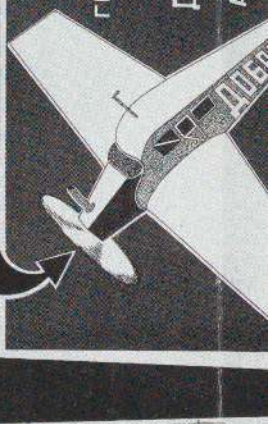
THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

The Romanov dynasty, which had ruled Russia for three centuries, collapsed during World War I, in February 1917. The October Revolution, led by Vladimir Il'ich Lenin and his Bolshevik Party, overthrew the democratic Provisional Government that had arisen after the abdication of the tsar. The Bolsheviks, soon calling themselves the Communist Party, set out to impose a dictatorship in the name of the working class. They emerged victorious in early 1921, after three years of bloody civil war. At the end of 1922 they renamed Russia's empire the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Technological progress was the cornerstone of the Communist social program, and it became a principal goal of Joseph Stalin, who won the struggle for power that followed Lenin's death in January 1924. In 1928 Stalin launched his First Five-Year Plan of rapid industrialization and forced collectivization of agriculture, which exacted a great human cost. He ruled a brutal totalitarian state until his death in 1953. In the course of the 1930s millions of Russians were jailed or executed, and independent art was subjected to state control.

ВСЕМ... ВСЕМ... ВСЕМ..

ТОТ
НЕ
ГРАЖДАНИН
СССР
КТО
ДОБРОЛЕТА
НЕ
АКЦИОНЕР



THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

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THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

A distinctly Russian avant-garde had taken shape in the decade before the Revolution. Responding to recent innovations in Western Europe, talented young artists led by Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin created bold and original styles of abstract art. Born in St. Petersburg in 1891, Rodchenko attended art school from 1910 to 1914 in provincial Kazan, where he emulated styles that had been popular at the turn of the century. He enthusiastically joined the avant-garde upon moving to Moscow at the end of 1915 and soon made his mark at *The Store*, an exhibition organized by Tatlin in March 1916.

The Revolution forced Russian artists and intellectuals to make difficult political choices, and many chose to emigrate. Rodchenko and many other members of the avant-garde soon sided with the Bolsheviks, who welcomed their support. Thus it was that a tiny, gifted, obstreperous group, whose sophisticated art was unknown to the vast majority of the Russian people, set forth their own artistic ideals as the vanguard of Communist culture—and in the process created a unique and lasting body of art and theory.

EXPERIMENT AND INNOVATION

The years 1918 through 1921 were a period of intense creativity in Rodchenko's art. Establishing a practice that would persist throughout his career, he worked in discrete series, each of which explored a single formal premise through a number of permutations.

In harmony with the revolutionary goal of an ordered, technologically advanced society, Rodchenko strove for an objective, impersonal art, stripped of description and narrative, and devoid of spiritual or metaphysical trappings. Taking as his point of departure the abstract vocabulary of Malevich and Tatlin, he isolated individual qualities of painting and analyzed them in successive series: the planar surface of the work, its *faktura* (the treatment of its material and texture), the density and weight of color, the complete absence of color (in the *Black on Black* series), and line (fig. 1).



3. Advertising poster for the state airline Dobrolet. 1923. Lithograph. 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (35.2 x 46 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously. The text reads, "Everyone . . . Everyone . . . Everyone . . . He who is not a stockholder in Dobrolet is not a citizen of the USSR. / One gold ruble makes anyone a stockholder in Dobrolet!"

LEF

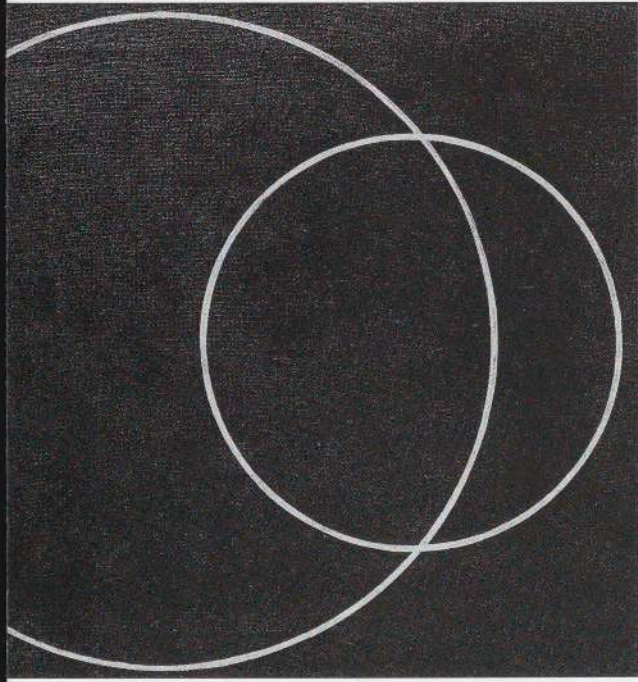
NEP ended the initial privilege that the avant-garde had enjoyed within the new cultural institutions, forcing them to compete more actively with other artistic groups. In response, in 1923 they founded the Left Front of the Arts, or Lef, which was led by poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and included (among others) filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov and stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Rodchenko designed all of the covers of the group's magazines—*Lef* (1923–25) and *Novyi Lef* (New Left, 1927–28)—and contributed extensively to their contents.

At the core of Lef thought was the principle that artistic forms were themselves vehicles of ideology, and so the creation of a new society required the creation of new forms. Also central was the conviction that revolutionary art required the active participation of the viewer, who would be transformed by the effort of interpreting the work. Rodchenko's work of the 1920s—in design, photocollage, and photography—was a sustained effort to put these ideas into concrete practice.

PHOTOCOLLAGAGE

Like the Dadaists in Germany, who began to explore photocollage in the wake of World War I, Rodchenko embraced it as an alternative to painting. Assembled from the lively illustrations of the mass media, photocollage could in turn address a mass audience through photomechanical reproduction. Rodchenko employed the new medium in much of his design work and in illustrations such as the ones he made in early 1923 for Mayakovsky's poem *About This, or It* (*Pro eto*) (fig. 4). With their abrupt



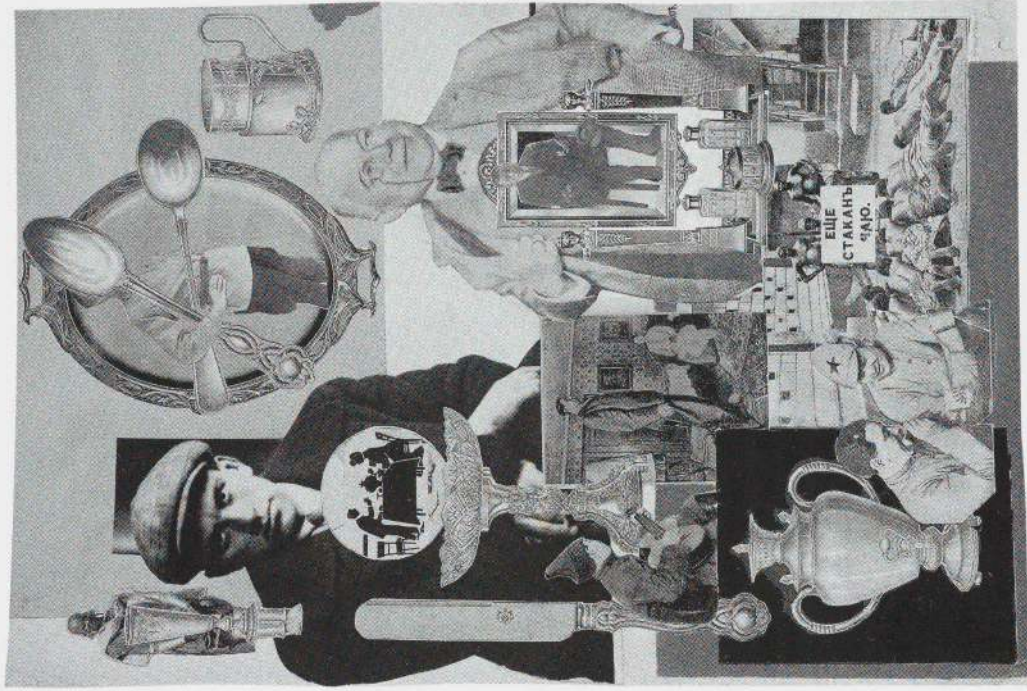


1. Construction no. 127 (Two circles) [Konstruktsiya n. 127 (Dva kruga)], 1920. Oil on canvas. 24 1/8 x 20 1/8" (62.5 x 53 cm). The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Department of Private Collections, Moscow

Beginning in 1918, Rodchenko quite literally extended his two-dimensional experiments into three dimensions. His *Spatial Constructions* expanded the vocabulary of sculpture by incorporating the surrounding space into the work. Regrettably, only one of these constructions survives, from a series in which Rodchenko cut a simple geometric form—a circle, a square, an oval, and so forth—into concentric bands of regular width. He then fanned out the bands to articulate a complex spatial volume (fig. 2).



juxtapositions and stunts in scale, his collages evoke the vivid imagery and poetic leaps of Mayakovsky's verse.



4. Maquette for an illustration for About This (Pro eto), a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1923. Cut-and-pasted printed paper, gelatin-silver photographs, ink, and gouache on cardboard. 14 3/8 x 12 3/8" (37.5 x 32.5 cm). State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow. The following lines from the poem are visible in the collage: "ЕЩЕ СТАКАНЪ ЧАЮ."



2. Spatial Construction no. 12 (*Prostranstvennaya konstruktsiya n. 12*), c. 1920. From the series "Light-Reflecting Surfaces" (*Ploskosti otrazhivushchie svet*). Plywood painted with aluminum paint and wire. 24 x 32 1/4 x 18 1/2" (61 x 83.7 x 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 Springgold, Matthew H. and Erno Futter, and Enid A. Haupt Funds

As he pursued his own art, Rodchenko participated in lively debates that led him and others to found the Constructivist movement, which identified the systematic investigation of the material and formal logic of art with the creation of a new Communist society. For the Constructivists, the artist was no longer an intuitive spirit but a constructor or visual engineer.

NEW CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Rodchenko quickly rose to prominence in the new cultural institutions established by the Bolsheviks. In 1919 and 1920 he headed the Museum of Painterly Culture, whose systematic displays tracing the formal development of recent art anticipated the program of The Museum of Modern Art, founded in New York in 1929. In late 1920 he was appointed to an important teaching post at VKhUTEMAS (the Higher State Artistic-Technical Workshops), whose mission was to train the new breed of artist-technicians who would shape the environment of Communist society. He also played a leading role at INKhUK (the Institute of Artistic Culture), an artistic think tank where Constructivism was founded in March 1921.

4. Maquette for an illustration for *About This* (*Pro eto*), a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1923. Cut-and-pasted printed paper, gelatin-silver photograph, ink, and gouache on cardboard. 16 1/4 x 12 3/8" (42.5 x 32.5 cm). State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow. The following lines from the poem were printed below the illustration: "And the century stands / as it was / Unwhipped / domesticity's mare won't move."

WORKERS' CLUB 1925

The exhibition includes an approximate reconstruction of the Workers' Club that Rodchenko designed as one of the Soviet exhibits at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris in 1925 (fig. 5). His most ambitious achievement in functional design, the Club embodied revolutionary ideology not merely by granting leisure to workers but by reconceiving it as active and collective rather than passive and solitary. The Club served multiple functions, and most of them aimed at educating the worker through up-to-date information technologies. Rodchenko's spare, geometric designs evoke hygiene, rationality, and economy.



5. Photograph made by Rodchenko to document his USSR Workers' Club at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, Paris, 1925

public, and by 1927 it had become his principal occupation.

Rodchenko's left colleague, literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, had defined the fundamental aim of art as recovering the immediacy of experience by making the familiar seem unfamiliar. Many of Rodchenko's photographs accomplish this simply by departing from the habit of looking—and photographing—straight ahead. He intended to encourage people to see things from fresh points of view by doing just that in his photographs (fig. 7). His style of oblique angles and mobile perspectives, which extended formal principles he had first explored in his abstract paintings, helped to shape the vibrant photographic modernism that blossomed in Europe in the second half of the 1920s.

THE RISE OF STALIN

Soviet optimism of the 1920s was also marked by tension and uncertainty, and the oblique angles of Rodchenko's photographs can provoke anxiety as well as a sense of liberation. Stalin's consolidation of power at the end of the decade soon put an end to these ambiguities and to the relative openness of the NEP era. Beginning in 1928 the Soviet Union was wrecked by a cultural revolution which discredited independent thought and established a new Party bureaucracy loyal to Stalin. Rodchenko's art was attacked in the press as "bourgeois formalism."

In 1932 the Communist Party abolished all artistic groups, paving the way for a single union of artists under Party control and the establishment of Socialist Realism as the officially sanctioned style. The closing of VKhUTEMAS in 1930 had deprived Rodchenko of his principal source of income. With the exception of a few outstanding personal pictures, after 1932 his photography was largely confined to propaganda: sweeping scenes of the parades on Red Square (fig. 8) or pictures made on assignment for state magazines. The December 1933 issue of *USSR in Construction*, which he also designed, was devoted to his photographs of the building of a canal between the White Sea and the Baltic. The text explained that hard work on the canal redeemed men who had strayed from Communist ideals. In fact, it was the first of Stalin's major gulags, in which some 200,000 people died.

Despite Rodchenko's efforts to adapt to the new political climate, he was gradually relegated to the margins of Soviet culture and spent much of the last two decades of his life in frustrated isolation. He died in 1956, the year that Nikita Krushchev denounced Stalin's crimes.

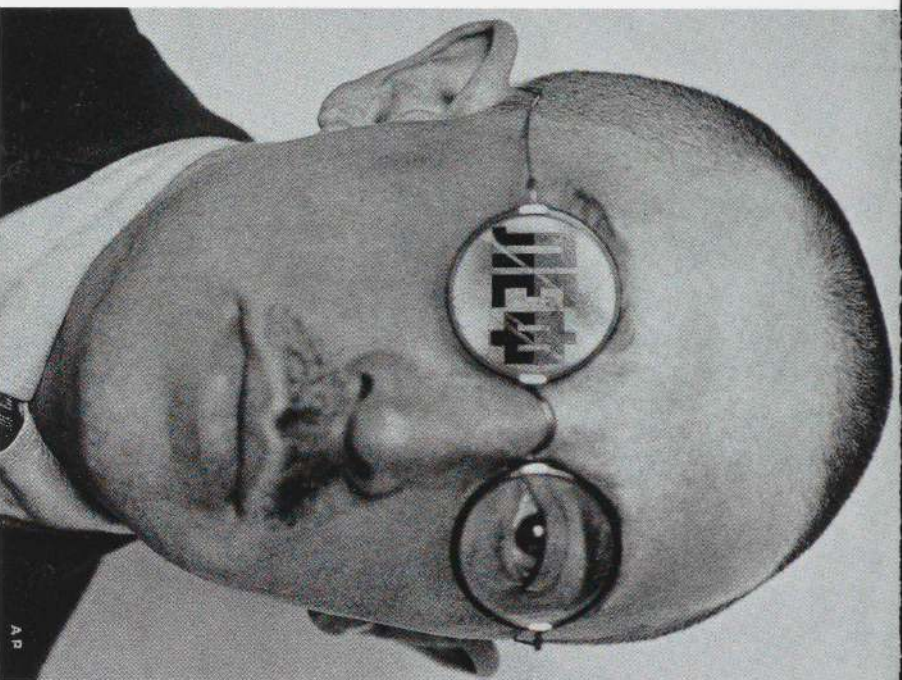


Top left: 6. Osip Briz, 1924. Unpublished illustration for the cover of the magazine *Unite!* Gouache on gelatin-silver print, $9\frac{1}{4} \times 7\frac{1}{8}$ " (23.6 x 18 cm). The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Department of Private Collections, Moscow.

Top right: 7. *Assembling for a Demonstration* [*Sbor na demonstratsiiu*], 1928–30. Gelatin-silver print, $19\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{1}{8}$ " (49.5 x 35.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. John Spencer Fund. Above: 8. *An Oath* [*Prisigol*], 1935. Gelatin-silver print, $16\frac{1}{8} \times 23$ ". A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow.

AFTERWORD

Closely linked to the Russian Revolution, Rodchenko is also a paradigmatic figure of the European avant-garde between the two World Wars. His dual commitment—to experimental modernism and to the ideals of the Revolution—led him to ask how art might be redefined in a progressive society. Ceaselessly reinventing himself and his work, he explored a great variety of mediums and expanded the boundaries of each of them. He inherited the prewar avant-garde's probing self-consciousness about the workings of art and representation then used it to challenge the insularity of avant-garde art. But just as Rodchenko's social engagement inspired his artistic innovations, it embroiled him in a great tragedy, as the utopian aspiration to create a better world instead yielded a violent dictatorship.



PHOTOGRAPHY

Rodchenko's photocollage work led him to make photographs of his own, beginning in 1924 with a series of powerfully directed portraits of Mayakovsky and other friends (fig. 6). He regarded photography as mechanical and objective and therefore socially progressive. Like graphic design, it appealed to him because through reproduction it could deliver his message to a broad public, and by 1927 it had become his principal occupation.

Rodchenko's left colleague, literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, had defined the fundamental aim of art as recovering the immediacy of experience by making the familiar seem unfamiliar. Many of Rodchenko's pho-



ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO is co-organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, Senior Curator, Department of Drawings, and Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, and guest curator Leah Dickerman, Assistant Professor of Art History, Stanford University.

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Aleksandr Rodchenko is on view at The Museum of Modern Art from June 25 through October 6, 1998.

ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO. Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, with essays by Aleksandr Lavrent'ev and Varvara Rodchenko. 9 1/2 x 12; 336 pages; 431 illustrations, including 230 in color. Cloth \$65. Paper \$32.50. Available in The MoMA Book Store.

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Cover: Rodchenko standing before dismantled hanging constructions, 1922. Photograph by Mikhail Koufman. A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow