Constructivist Book Design: Shaping the Proletarian Conscience

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We . . . are satisfied if in our book the lyric and epic evolution of our times is given shape. —El Lissitzky[1]

One of the revelations of this exhibition and its catalogue is that the art of the avant-garde book in Russia, in the early decades of this century, was unlike that found anywhere else in the world. Another observation, no less surprising, is that the book as it was conceived and produced in the period 1910–19 (in essentially what is known as the Futurist period) is radically different from its conception and production in the 1920s, during the decade of Soviet Constructivism. These books represent two political and cultural moments as distinct from one another as any in the history of modern Europe. The turning point is of course the years immediately following the October 1917 Revolution.

The Russian Futurist movement of poets and painters is often compared to the better known Futurist movement in Italy. Yet Russian Futurism, as discussed elsewhere in this catalogue, emerged in a different context, corresponded to other objectives, and was broader in its sources and scope than its Italian counterpart. In the context of poetry or the printed text, both movements endeavored to free the written word from the Gutenberg legacy,[2] often replacing traditional linear syntax by dynamic clusters of verbal and visual signs (fig. 1). However, Russian Futurist books were anti-orthodox in a manner that goes far beyond the limited production of Futurist books in Italy. As a brief reminder, Russian

Futurist books were unconventionally small, and whether or not they were made by hand, they deliberately emphasized a handmade quality. The pages are unevenly cut and assembled. The typed, rubber- or potato-stamped printing or else the hectographic, or carbon-copied, manuscript letters and ciphers are crude and topsy-turvy on the page. The figurative illustrations, usually lithographed in black and white, sometimes hand-colored, show the folk primitivism (in both image and technique) of the early *lubok*, or popular woodblock print, as well as other archaic sources,[3] and are integrated into and integral to, as opposed to separate from, the pages of poetic verse. The cheap paper (sometimes wallpaper), collaged covers, and stapled spines reinforce the sense of a handcrafted book. The nature of these books, printed, with few exceptions, in editions of several hundred copies, was furthermore determined by a penury of paper and of technical resources.

These books, created by Futurist poets and painters living in the same communities and sharing the same ideals, show the exuberant and irrational vitality and improvisation that characterized all their activities, from their Futurist "soirées" or poetry readings, to their street demonstrations to their easel paintings and transrational poetry. Produced in multiple copies, these small volumes were also designed to transmit a subversive message to the world at large. Yet in view of the limited means of production, it was a small world at best. Notwithstanding this fact, through all their mediums and

manifestations, the Russian Futurists attempted to transform the definition, perception, and function of art.

The many faces of the Futurist book, as it emerged and flourished in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Tiflis, and elsewhere in Russia, are brilliantly illustrated in the Judith Rothschild Foundation collection exhibited here. These collaborations between artists and poets are unique in the history of the designed or illustrated book. Yet starting about 1919–20, these unequaled experiments and individual voices would be virtually stilled, and the book, as well as all other manifestations of artistic activity, would be redefined as a vehicle of a collective ideology, to be anonymous in style and societal in purpose.

One cannot insist enough on this distinction between Russian Futurism and Soviet Constructivism. Whereas the first sprang spontaneously from the intensely irrational, deliberately eccentric, and indeed anarchistic life of the poets and painters, the second was determined by a political and social ideology dictated by official sources, and a normative production program. Despite the fact that the original leaders of Constructivism were initially painters, they turned their backs on easel painting, something the Futurist painters did not do. Indeed the Futurist painters' manner and imagery remained intact in their books, which were simply another vehicle for diffusing their message. Conversely, Constructivist books show an attempt to establish and propagate a standardized, rational, visual language, considered more appropriate to the sociopolitical preoccupations and industrial production techniques that would represent the Communist world. In this context, the role of the artist would also be recast as a catalyst for social change, conceived first as a "worker," comparable to the proletarian worker, and eventually as a "constructor" or "engineer." The notion of art as the expression of individual genius was officially proscribed, and replaced by an art that would be politically effective, socially useful, and mass-produced.

With a view to developing a new aesthetic and training artists to serve art's new societal function, two important institutions were set up by official decree in 1920: the INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture), within which the scientific and theoretical bases of Constructivism were formulated; and the VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops), which consisted of studios for training "highly qualified master artists for industry." [4] The faculty of both institutions included at one time or another most of the avant-garde painters and architects of the period. Among them were Liubov' Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and the architect Aleksandr Vesnin who, at their 1921 exhibition *5 x 5 = 25* (pp. 184, 185), proclaimed the death of painting. Others, who came and went at one or the other institution, included Vasily Kandinsky, Aleksei Gan, Vladimir Tatlin, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Gustav Klutsis, to mention only these.[5] Although the debates and instruction in the early years reflected the participants' original vocations, these would be distilled into a theory and practice intended to support the needs and purpose of Communist society. The

Fig. 1. **FILIPPO TOMMASO MARINETTI**. *Les Mots en liberté futuristes*. 1915, printed 1919. Letterpress, 10 3/16 x 9 1/4" (25.9 x 23.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Jan Tschichold Collection, Gift of Philip Johnson.

underlying doctrine was that of the effective "organization of materials," a premise that extended to society in general and indeed to all aspects of human life. The proposed curriculum consisted of a systematic investigation of the fundamental constituents of visual expression, from line, color, and form, to space, light, texture, and volume. This program was implemented in the VKhUTEMAS workshops through the analysis of specific materials and the study and application of production techniques. In retrospect, the VKhUTEMAS has often been seen as a Soviet Bauhaus. Ironically, the projects realized by its students rarely achieved the ultimate phase of industrial production, due to a lack of materials and advanced technology.

Theoretically and practically, Constructivist goals went through many modifications as both of these institutions underwent transitions and upheavals, and the major players changed. [6] Nonetheless, the overriding aim remained constant: to generate objective methods for the rational ordering of materials so as to create practical, economical, and mass-produced objects of everyday use. Such a program, based on a political ideology and elementary formal, structural, and technical codes, engendered a methodology that could be easily taught, and, although it could be variously interpreted (a kind of *ars combinatoria*), it was not to be transgressed.

This background is useful to the understanding of Constructivist book and poster design, which, in the early 1920s, was governed by principles of material integrity, functional expediency, and societal purpose. These priorities, conceived according to rigorous political directives, and addressing a vast and largely illiterate audience, could only be realized through the use of a standardized visual vocabulary. The end result was a revolution in graphic design that was among the earliest and most radical in the Western world. However, it is important to stress that this expression of modernism

may be seen virtually as a by-product of the Soviet purpose. The primary objective was the dissemination of the utopian promise of social transformation and a collective culture. A comparison of Soviet graphic design with contemporaneous movements emerging in Europe and the United States shows that whereas the basic vocabulary—space, color, typography—and a will to rationalize visual culture were identical, the context was entirely different. Western European graphic design was internationalist, as opposed to nationalist, and reflected the values of capitalism (fig. 2). Free expression and democratic egalitarianism, individual experience, material comfort and prosperity, as well as the reality of advanced technology were the motivating factors for social, economic, and stylistic change. In other words, the capitalist dream was different, as was its targeted audience. Consequently Western European graphic design developed in the arena of commercial advertising for a consumer market, whereas Soviet design was based on an ideological commitment to reshape the proletarian conscience.

Despite the Soviet program that sought to replace individual expression with a collective, anonymous idiom, as this exhibition shows, artists managed to interpret the system in a variety of manners, either by honoring its objectives, or by stretching or transgressing its boundaries. In this context, Rodchenko and Lissitzky are exemplary of two distinct approaches: one that attempts to work *within* the system, the other that appears to work *around* it. Both artists invented a distinctly personal and original style that in each case reflects a Soviet adaptation of the basic tenets of twentieth-century graphic design.

Rodchenko began his career as an "Art nouveau" painter, showing a predominant interest in the abstract decorative patterning of that genre. His late exposure to Futurism, in 1914, precluded his participation in Futurist activities. That same year he moved to Moscow and, by 1915, he was already experimenting with a purely abstract vocabulary, producing works with compass and ruler, and emphasizing flatness and monochromatic color fields (fig. 3). Simultaneously, he encountered Tatlin and Vesnin, who aroused his interest in materials and architecture. Between 1915 and 1917, Rodchenko pursued not only his painterly experiments but applied the same abstract principles to utilitarian objects and, in 1918, to geometric spatial constructions.

Rodchenko's early and radical departure from the spatial illusionism intrinsic to conventional painting practice and his precocious invention of an abstract formal language help to explain his seamless transition to Constructivism. Indeed, as one of the founding members of INKhUK, he contributed to the elaboration of the theoretical tenets of Constructivism. His early (1921 and 1922) covers for the proto-Constructivist books, *Transrational Language* and *Transrationalists* (pp. 186, 187), show his rigorous commitment to flatness, linear constructions, and experiments with texture, through linoleum cut and collage. His later work in graphic design may be seen as one of the purest applications of Constructivist theory and methodology.

Rodchenko's approach to ordering materials so as to obtain a maximum visual impact through an economy of means is visible in his earliest printed book covers from the period 1923–25. His designs are straightforward and concise. His palette is deliberately restricted to two (or occasionally three) flatly applied hues, chosen for contrast and legibility. The titles were set in large block characters, printed either from existing wood or metal typefaces or, more often, from letters he drew or made himself. The sans-serif characters, printed in either a positive (dark on light) or a negative (light on dark) mode, are uniform (without expressive modulations) and evenly spaced, according to a horizontal, vertical, or perpendicular grid. In his most representative style, Rodchenko left little in the way of an empty ground, and never conceived it as an active void, as would Lissitzky or some Western European graphic designers. His surfaces are generally densely filled with colored panels and/or a bold lettering, orthogonally organized in a flat, compartmented, and well-balanced whole.

A few examples serve to illustrate Rodchenko's method and the resulting aesthetic. His cover for Nikolai Aseev's *Selected Verse* of 1923 (p. 189) shows the author's name in black, spelled out from top to bottom on a vertical medial axis, and overlaid on the book's title, printed in large orange block letters. Although the title's lettering (*Izbran)* is turned ninety degrees (reading from bottom to top), it is also aligned on a central axis and virtually fills the surface plane. The choice of orange for the book's title sets off the author's name in relief, and contributes to the legibility of each. The unusual introduction of lower-case characters within the author's name transforms the angularity of the upper-case letterforms into a softened poetic flow, suggestive of the book's poetic content. The period after the author's patronymic, echoing the period after the first initial, suggests a break between author and title, and contributes to the symmetry and stability of the design.[7]

In *Mayakovsky Smiles, Mayakovsky Laughs, Mayakovsky Jeers* (1923; p. 189), Rodchenko divided the whole surface of the cover into six roughly equal horizontal bands. The absence of black, the alternating colors of green and red, and the negative printing (in white) of the handmade letters, create a sense of levity such as that proposed by the title. The equal space allotted to each word produces an even rhythm which is fortuitously broken by the shorter word "laughs" (*smeetsia,* in the fourth line) in which the letters must be expanded to fill the frame, and in so doing "dilate" the overall design.

Other examples of Rodchenko's pure Constructivist style may be seen in the catalogue covers for L. S. Popova's 1924 posthumous exhibition and for the two catalogues for the USSR section of the Paris International Exposition of Decorative and Modern Industrial Arts of 1925 (p. 191). In all three cases, the large sans-serif characters are evenly sized and spaced, and set predominantly in the negative, a device that "highlights" the closely set flat planes of color. These works show more clearly than did the earlier ones how Rodchenko generally framed out (and thereby contained)
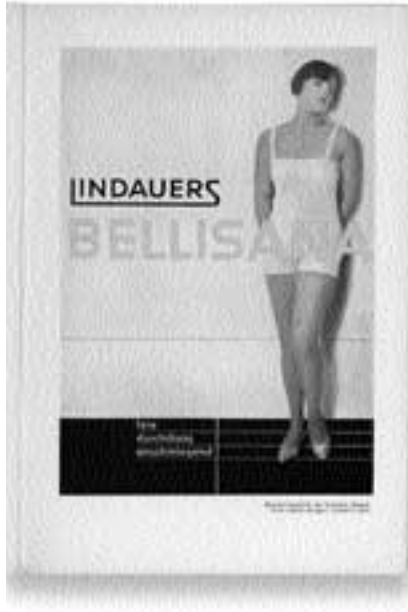

Fig. 2. **JAN TSCHICHOLD**. *"Lindauers Bellisana."* c. 1920s. Advertisement

his design, never running his color to the edges. Symmetry, balance, and a vertical medial axis, strongly contrasted saturated planes separated by linear reserves of white, as well as a symbolic reference to content define Rodchenko's classic style.

Although revolutionary codes and a desire for visual and emotional impact privileged the colors red, white, and black[8] occasionally in later years, when content seemed to require it, Rodchenko experimented with other palettes. The turquoise and terra-cotta used in *Spain, the Ocean, Havana, Mexico, America* (1926; p. 191) are traditional for evoking Spanish and "new world" cultures.[9] The rhythmic asymmetry within the grid echoes the skewed geometry of archaic forms, reinforced by the slightly stilted, splayed lettering that Rodchenko drew himself. The cover for *The Chinese Girl Sume-Cheng* of 1929 (p. 193) is another case in point. Its exotic palette (turquoise and purple), stick-form lettering, and "chopstick" motifs suggest an oriental context and content. The empty white ground, unusual for Rodchenko, sets off the idea and effect of a spare calligraphy.

Indeed, in the late twenties, Rodchenko loosened his palette and experimented more freely with structure and texture, in manners he had not exploited earlier. This may be seen in the "trembling" letterforms, choice of colors (turquoise and brown), and flocking technique on the cover for Vladimir Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug* of 1929 (fig. 4). In general, the works from the late twenties and early thirties appear less static and austere. The integration of ideogrammatic symbols, such as arrows, or the splaying of letterforms, as seen in the letter "I" or "and" in *There and Back* (1930; p. 190), or the optically vibrating diagonals and "telescoped" title (suggesting an amplified voice) of *Orator* (1929; p. 193) are dynamically effective and appealing. By this time, Rodchenko had several years of magazine (*LEF, New LEF*; pp. 209, 236) and advertising work behind him,[10] in which bold graphics, pictograms, and ideograms addressing a targeted audience were essential. These experiences surely heightened his understanding of the psychological manipulation of audience response through the ordering of graphic materials.

As we can see, Rodchenko's graphic work was governed by the Constructivist program: to organize material, reflect content, produce a visual impact, and be economically and mechanically mass-produced. Theoretically and practically, the relatively uniform grids, letterforms, and color codes could be easily applied and generally understood. Ironically, despite the Constructivist ethos to produce a collective and anonymous aesthetic, a fully mechanized technology was not available to totally erase the artist's individual interpretation and his or her hand, so that although Rodchenko excelled in his implementation of the methodology, his designs are immediately recognizable as his own. In other words, his adherence to the visual strategies of Constructivism nonetheless gave birth to a personal style.

Lissitzky's approach to abstract graphic design is quite distinct from that of Rodchenko. This is logical, in that his origins and his experience were singularly different. Lissitzky's Jewish background and his association with Suprematism propagated a metaphysical dimension that his Constructivist colleagues denied. Moreover, the many years he spent abroad put him in a more distant relationship to orthodox Constructivism.

In formal or visual terms, Lissitzky's early experience with Jewish book design (see fig. 5 and pp. 136–39) initiated him to the expressive potential of a modulated pen-and-ink line, or (in this case Hebrew) script, something he would capitalize on in his later typographic experiments. His encounter with Malevich in 1919 in Vitebsk would be decisive for his subsequent artistic development, both as concerns his *Proun* paintings (1919–23) and his book and poster design. The influence of Suprematism is seen not only in his formal motifs, but in his spatial configurations, which show superterrestrial abstract forms floating in an active and infinite void. A trained architect, Lissitzky had a sure understanding of three-dimensional space, which generated his axiometric depictions of interlocking volumes. This training is also evident in the draftsman's precision (and precision instruments) with which he organized his two-dimensional surfaces.

The two earliest examples of Lissitzky's mature graphic work included here, the covers for Malevich's *On New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed*, and for a brochure *Committee to Combat Unemployment,* were both executed in 1919 in Vitebsk. Quite different from each other in conception and objectives, both nonetheless propose a new visual and spiritual vocabulary.

It is useful to compare *On New Systems in Art* to Malevich's earlier book *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: New Painterly Realism* of 1916 (p. 147). Although Malevich placed a black square on the cover of the earlier book, it has none of the inherent energy of Lissitzky's later design. Malevich's cover shows the typical layout and mechanical type of a conventional publication. Conversely, Lissitzky's circle and square motifs are unevenly silhouetted and framed, and positioned slightly off center. The tension set up by this subtle asymmetry is heightened by the eccentric placement of the small horizontal, vertical, and diagonal handwritten inscriptions. This combination of a deliberately crude drawing style and an expressive handwriting, with none of the traditional focus on title or author, appears at first glance to echo the poetic anarchy of early Futurist books. However, this was the cover of a pedagogical treatise, and Lissitzky's design had a didactic purpose: to jar the reader's ingrained perceptual habits and initiate him or her to a formal language that expressed an indeterminate and dematerialized world view.

In Lissitzky's brochure cover for *Committee to Combat Unemployment* (p. 151), the artist creates a more pictorial dynamic field in which the floating two-dimensional and three-dimensional motifs suggest a utopian architecture. The vertical thrust of the composition is reinforced by the diagonal and curved handwritten notations. Although there is no explicit reference to a subject or content, the message is ideologically precise. We are in the presence of a new world in construction, a

Fig. 3. **ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO**. Line and compass drawing. 1915. Pen and ink on paper, 10 $^{1}/_{16}$ x 8 $^{1}/_{16}$" (25.5 x 20.5 cm). A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow

Fig. 4. **ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO**. *The Bedbug* by Vladimir Mayakovsky. 1929. Letterpress cover, 7 $^{5}/_{8}$ x 5 $^{5}/_{16}$" (19.4 x 13.5 cm). Ed.: 3,000. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation (Boris Kerdimun Archive)

Fig. 5. **NATAN AL'TMAN AND EL LISSITZKY.** *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures by Jewish Artists.* 1917. Letterpress by Lissitzky, 6 1/4 x 4 1/2" (15.9 x 11.4 cm). Ed.: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

world of spiritual renewal, with the vector of upward motion stretching beyond the curve of the globe.

Lissitzky's later graphic work, while it shares certain ideals and visual premises of orthodox Constructivism, developed mostly outside the Soviet Union. Although he taught architecture on two occasions at the VKhUTEMAS, much of his time, between 1921 and 1926, was spent in Western Europe. Aside from his sojourns in Western sanatoriums (for tuberculosis), he was allowed to travel freely, his fluency in German making him an apt spokesman for modern Russian art abroad. During his travels, Lissitzky met most of the major non-objective artists and graphic designers active at the time, including members of the Bauhaus. Whereas it has sometimes been suggested that Lissitzky's mature graphic style may have been influenced by his Western colleagues, it is now generally accepted that it was the opposite that transpired. In fact, the radical transformation of Bauhaus graphic design under László Moholy-Nagy in 1923 (introducing greater clarity but also emphasizing dynamic asymmetry) is attributed to Lissitzky's influence.

Lissitzky was also friendly with members of the Dada group, in particular Kurt Schwitters and Hans Arp. Although their "revolutionary" stance was quite different from his own (theirs being more sociocultural than ideological), he was sensitive to their freedom, iconoclasm, and sense of play, their interest in organic processes and biological systems, and their general rejection of social and artistic conventions. The German Dadaists' free-wheeling use of typography was already advanced by this time (Lissitzky's close contacts with the Dada group began in 1922), and it has been argued that his collaborations with Schwitters on the journal *Merz* produced a cross-fertilization or mutual exchange of fantasy and more rigorous geometric design. Finally, Lissitzky found production facilities and techniques in Germany that were far superior to those in Russia.

Lissitzky's book cover designs between 1922 and 1923 are noteworthy for a graphic design based essentially on typographic invention. Whether the cover surface shows a fluidly deployed line of energy (*Bird without a Name: Collected Verse 1917–1921*; p. 197), or an asymmetric yet balanced construction (*Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Mystery" or "Bouffe"*; p. 197), or a combination of both (*Object*; p. 196), it is the typography that determines, shapes, and orders the layout of the composition. His type fonts of immensely varied sizes, shapes, and weights produce an optical, phonetic, and semantic resonance. For Lissitzky, a text should be "optically" expressive, a visual carrier of the "strains and stresses" of the phonetic voice.[11] This typographic representation of verbal and emotional content is what defined the book, in Lissitzky's eyes, as a highly "functional" object.

Despite the diversity of Lissitzky's book covers from 1922–23, consistent elements make them recognizable as a personal style. The first is that the whole surface/cover exists as an empty ground, extending to the edges and suggesting an infinite extension in space. The lettering and geometric motifs appear to float in front of this spatially undetermined plane. The dynamic asymmetry of each composition, whether organic or tectonic, is nonetheless balanced or resolved. In almost every case, the typeface is different, selected for each specific book. The combination of varied shapes, sizes, and weights of typeface creates a rhythmic effect that is heightened by the use of positive, filled (dark on light) characters in unbroken sequence with negative, transparent (light on dark) characters. Often the lettering is accompanied by a single colored or shaded geometric motif. His palette during this period is usually (but not always) limited to black, white, and a half-tone, as opposed to contrasting hues.

Although it may seem fastidious to try to determine the common denominators in such a variety of designs, this exercise helps to clarify Lissitzky's fundamental differences with orthodox Constructivist practice. Constructivist design, as we have suggested, corresponded to a rational method and a reductive formal vocabulary adapted to produce a standardized aesthetic for mass communication. Conversely, Lissitzky's manner of working corresponded to a looser system, based on the optically expressive potential of the printed word, and in which he freely manipulated typefaces and accents in relation to the content of each book. To take a few examples at random, all published in 1922: the block lettering and planar elements on the cover of *Object* (p. 196) project a pronounced objectlike quality; the cover of *Rabbi* (p. 197) elicits a resonance to Jewish culture, not only through the shape of the letters but also in the stark patterning in black and white,[12] whereas the hairline graphics and delicate lyricism of *Bird without a Name: Collected Verse 1917–1921* (p. 197) suggest the dematerialized movement of a bird taking flight.

These books, like most of the others from the early 1920s exhibited here, were published outside the Soviet Union, and in particular in Berlin, where the technical resources were rich and varied. The sophisticated type fonts and printing techniques available there meant that Lissitzky, unlike Rodchenko (with a few exceptions), did not have to draw or handcraft his letterforms himself. His most famous typographically functional book is, of course, his 1923 conception for Mayakovsky's volume of poetry, *For the Voice* (p. 194), it too produced in Berlin. Whereas the cover is a superb example of Lissitzky's familiar system, using a typographic structure accompanied by expressively evocative graphic motifs, it is on the inner pages, and in particular, the opening page of each poem, that one discovers Lissitzky's extraordinary inventiveness in the use of letterpress typography. From the exclusive resources of the compositor's typecase (fonts, rules, curves, circles, wavy lines, symbols), he invented bold red and black pictograms, mixing letters and abstract motifs, to visually project the exuberant and exclamatory nature of Mayakovsky's poems. Furthermore, since Mayakovsky's volume of poetry was meant for recitation,[13] Lissitzky's invention of a thumb-tab index for ease in finding each poem epitomizes the notion of the book as a functional object.[14]

The Lissitzky-Mayakovsky collaboration on

For the Voice provides insights into their personal relationship to Soviet culture and ideology. Both men were intensely committed to the Soviet renewal of society, but they did not adhere to a literally political, methodical, or utilitarian art. Although they believed in "functionalism" and mechanical production, they rejected the Constructivists' programmatic rationalization of the creative process and defended the importance of creative intuition. Their art would revolutionize the collective conscience through its break with past traditions, and it would be functional through the invention of accessible and mass-produced forms. For example, in *For the Voice*, Mayakovsky's poem dedicated to the "Third International," accompanied by Lissitzky's geometrically abstract design of a hammer, sickle, and the roman numeral III, [15] illustrates the approach of each: the optical and phonetic impact of the artistic form and poetic verse is primary; nonetheless the underlying political message is explicit and perfectly clear.

Needless to say, the story of Constructivist graphics cannot be told exclusively through the examples of these two artists. As we have seen, Rodchenko and Lissitzky, each according to his beliefs and resources, pioneered the revolution in abstract graphic design that took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Yet, as this collection shows, many other artists working during this period invented their own graphic idioms in relation to the historical and cultural circumstances of the time. The diverse manners of implementing or transgressing an aesthetic system engendered by a unique political situation provide the texture and content of Soviet book design during this period. They further demonstrate its specificity in contrast to its Western European counterpart.

Although abstract graphic metaphors would continue to be explored throughout the decade of the twenties, in approximately 1923–24, this extraordinary activity, conceived to "reorganize" a collective sensibility, came under criticism, as being too abstract and esoteric for mass consumption. It was thought that a more "factual" expression would better serve the cause. This led to the promotion of film, photography, and photomontage, seen as more truthful mediums for disseminating the social and political realities of contemporary Soviet life. A study of the catalyzing role of film in the development of photography and photomontage goes beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that the film industry was nationalized in 1919, and gained immediate and widespread popularity. More specifically, the technical innovations in film construction (for example, montage) and the ideological syntheses that films proposed were fundamental to the development and acceptance of the mediums of photography and photomontage.

The Constructivist artist Gustav Klutsis was the earliest theorist of photomontage. In an anonymous essay published in *LEF* in 1924[16] entitled "Illustration and Photomontage," he wrote:

By photomontage, we mean the exploitation of photography as a visual medium. The combination of isolated photographs is to be substituted for the composition of graphic images. The rationale for this substitution is based on the fact that photography is the exact retention of visible facts and not their illustration. For the viewer, this precision and documentary fidelity endow the photograph with such a force of persuasion that no type of graphic representation can ever equal it. A poster on hunger composed of photographs of people suffering from hunger provokes a far greater impact than a drawing on the same theme . . . Photographs of cities, landscapes or faces move the viewer much more than paintings.[17]

In a later text of 1931, Klutsis further developed these ideas:

Photomontage . . . is closely related to the development of industrial culture and forms of art for mass propagation. . . . In the evolution of photomontage one may distinguish two directions. One emerged from American advertising. It is called advertising photomontage, is formalist in character, and has been particularly used by Western Dadaists and Expressionists. The second developed autonomously in the Soviet Union. . . . In its own right, it represents a new art of the masses, because it represents the art of Socialist Construction. . . .

The old disciplines in the visual arts (drawing, painting, graphic art), with their obsolete techniques and working methods, are insufficient to satisfy the demands of the Revolution as concerns the tasks of agitation and propaganda on a massive scale. Essential to photomontage is the exploitation of the physicomechanical forces of the camera (optics) and of chemistry, put to the service of agitation and propaganda. . . . *Art must be at the same high level as socialist industry.*[18]

Thus photomontage was heralded by Klutsis as the new artistic medium, both for its documentary truth and for its exploitation of advanced science and industry, two key themes of Socialist reconstruction. In Klutsis's first article of 1924, he singled out Rodchenko as a model, for his covers, posters, and works of propaganda and illustrations, citing, in particular, his collaboration with Mayakovsky on *About This: To Her and to Me* of 1923 (pp. 210, 211). This appears somewhat paradoxical in that Rodchenko's photomontage work prior to 1924 was focused on popularizing culture as opposed to directly serving propaganda. Rodchenko's photomontages for *About This,* Mayakovsky's love poem to Lily Brik, were poetic and content-driven, and totally unrelated to the "agitational" priorities described above. His 1924 photomontages for the covers of the small-format popular mystery series *Mess Mend or Yankees in Petrograd* (p. 212) provide a better sense of his use of the medium

Fig. 6. **ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO**. Poster for the film *Cinema-Eye* by Dziga Vertov. 1924. Lithograph, 35 ³/₄ x 26 ³/₄" (90.8 x 68 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously

Fig. 7. **GUSTAV KLUTSIS**. *The Dynamic City.* 1919. Photomontage, 14 ³/₄ x 10 ¹/₈" (37.5 x 25.8 cm). State Museum of Latvia, Riga

between 1924 and 1926. The cutout photographic figures and motifs distributed in a fragmented and surprisingly expressionist narrative over a colorful geometric ground give the impression of simultaneous cinematographic scenes "montaged" over an abstract Constructivist décor. The cinematographic reference is of course not arbitrary in that during the same period, Rodchenko was designing film titles for Dziga Vertov's newsreel films *Kino-Pravda* (*Cinema-Truth;* 1922) and "montaged" posters for his short-film series *Cinema-Eye* (1924; fig. 6).

Rodchenko's best photomontage work was realized after 1924, when he began to take his own photographs, which became a highly personal, expressive medium. The dramatic camera angles for which he became famous are closely related to contemporaneous cinematographic experiments. Although his adherence to Constructivist codes and a shortage of technology may be seen to have somewhat inhibited his purely abstract designs, the combination of this training, his exposure to the cinema, and his personal mastery of photography produced some of his finest works. The integration or overlay of his expressive black-and-white photographs with dynamic and boldly colored patterns is unequaled in the book covers of the early to mid-1920s (see pp. 214, 215). One could argue that it was here, as nowhere else, that Rodchenko found his true voice.

The 1927–28 covers of the magazine *New LEF*

(p. 236) are more orthodox illustrations of Constructivist goals, their effectively organized formal language projecting a synthesis of aesthetic clarity and innovation and political/cultural meaning. The layout of the covers is characterized by a rigorous grid, flat bright colors, and distinctly lettered titles. The photographic elements are straightforward details of Soviet life, isolated, silhouetted, and enlarged for maximum visual and psychological impact. These dynamic black-and-white images, often details or fragments and sometimes diagonally tipped, set up a subtle tension in relation to the overall design.

Rodchenko's layouts for the magazine *Let's Produce* in 1929 (p. 237) show an increased emphasis on the photographic image as a vehicle of propaganda. The enlarged yet cropped close-up shots fill the frame, and at the same time fill the viewer's perceptual field, mesmerizing his or her attention by these powerful evocations of Soviet industrial or agricultural reality.

Two book covers of 1926 and 1927, *Syphilis* (p. 214) and *Materialization of the Fantastic* (p. 215), works of literature as opposed to propaganda, manifest more purely aesthetic experiments. The portrait-subject in each is modeled by a play of light and shadow, the first produced by underexposure, the second by a seemingly cinematic splicing technique. The ambiguous status of these human faces—reality or fantasy?—is reinforced by the colorful graphic incident in each, suggesting a lunar haze or sharp beams of light. These examples serve to confirm that the photographic medium liberated Rodchenko's creative voice.

Lissitzky's interest in photography during this period again shows a different orientation, and is closer to the concepts developing simultaneously in Germany (at the Bauhaus, for example). In his early work with photography, Lissitzky was less politically motivated (even in terms of seeking popular appeal) than was Rodchenko. Whereas in most of Rodchenko's photomontage work the photograph is focused, cut, and collaged in an image that represents primary content, Lissitzky was more intrigued by the mechanics of photography and the mysterious metaphors produced by dark-room experiments. Closer to Man Ray, whose photograms he admired, he was not interested in photography for its documentary truth, or as an index of reality, but explored it as an artistic technique for producing a "new vision," based on the texture, symbolism, and ambiguity it allowed. The cover of *Architecture of VKhUTEMAS: The Works of the Department of Architecture, 1920–1927,* (1927; p. 216), as that of *Notes of a Poet* (1928; p. 215) and again his layered self-portrait used by Jan Tschichold on the cover of *Photo-Eye* (1929; p. 216) bear this out. Each of these examples shows a veiled image, made from superimposed negatives, that is more textural than "truthful," more symbolic than factual, more ambivalent than clear. Lissitzky's use of photography as a design element is seen in his three architecture books—*France, America,* and *Russia* of 1930 (pp. 228, 229)—in which the photomontaged images are blurred and transformed into generic schematic structures. An emphasis on the curvilinear, the vertical, and the diago-
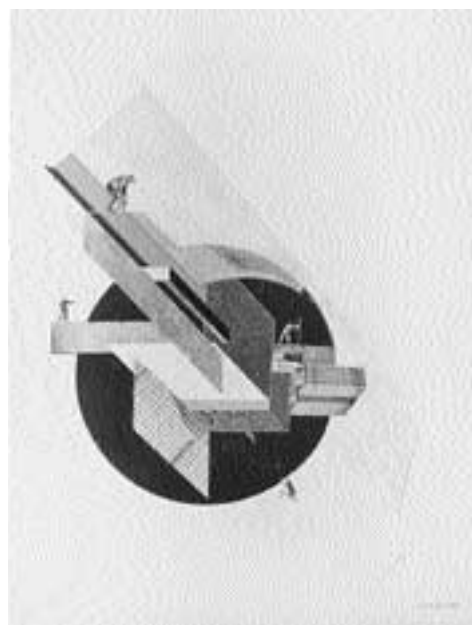
nal, respectively, creates symbolically eloquent abstract fields and shifting textured grounds.

The above descriptions make patently clear that photomontage was not a language of truth but a language of fiction. As an art form based on fragmentation, isolation, and the displacement of photographic images from their original "factual" function and context, it could not be truly expected to document reality. At the same time, it is this that would make it singularly appropriate to the needs of propaganda. Both photomontage and propaganda, by their very process and purpose, deform factual reality, deleting significant details in order to highlight others. The more successful artistically the photomontage, which is to say the more constructed its image, the farther removed it is from factual truth. Similarly, propaganda is a reconstructed relation of events that deliberately fabricates a mythology.

Whether conceived for popular cultural appeal or an agitational purpose, the aesthetic "untruths" of photomontage were sublimated into new truths during the early Constructivist period. Heralded as the new visual language, photomontage had many adepts, among them Sergei Sen'kin, Stepanova, Solomon Telingater, and others represented here. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the artist who believed the most unconditionally in the medium as a political instrument was Klutsis. A disciple of Malevich and colleague of Lissitzky, Klutsis was probably the first to introduce collaged photographic elements into a (in this case Suprematist) composition (fig. 7).[19] He was also photomontage's first theorist, proclaiming it as *the* medium of the new Soviet society.

Starting in the mid-1920s, Klutsis's photomontage work already shows a powerful and distinctive agitational style. Despite his defense of photography and photomontage for their "exact retention of visible facts," in most of these works the relationship to factual reality is tenuous at best. Klutsis's silhouetted photographic images, cut and displaced from their original context, are subsequently reorganized and recontextualized within an invented "tableau." The special issue of *The Young Guard: For Lenin,* dedicated to Lenin in 1924 (p. 235), shows prime examples of Klutsis's photomontage technique, complemented by an elaborate graphic style. The figure of Lenin in different guises is present in every plate, each time situated at an imaginary political event. An interesting aspect of these early propaganda works is that they depict Lenin not only as an emblematic leader exhorting the masses, but also as an ordinary citizen, in baggy suit, without heroic features. It is not Lenin as a unique, authoritarian, and concrete personality (as in later years Stalin would wish to be represented), but Lenin as a romantic, energetic force of everyman's revolution.[20] The inscribed slogans were "street" slogans, familiar but anonymous.

The use of photographic panels or strips framing a nameless but not faceless mass of Soviet citizens is another of Klutsis's inventions that is extremely effective. A sea of faces integrated into geometric planes and ideograms creates a potent social and visual texture. Finally, Klutsis's use of abstract motifs, framing devices,

and ideograms in red and black organize and energize the ideological content. Among them, his arrows pointing up and down or in a rotational movement, his abstract schemas echoing his own projects for podiums and loudspeakers (fig. 8), and his diagonal bands that zigzag across a heterogeneous population, are visually and ideologically powerful and personal.

Klutsis, like Rodchenko, worked closely with the cinema in the late 1920s. He was a member of ARK (Revolutionary Association of Cinematographers) and ODSK (Society of the Friends of Soviet Cinema), and produced designs for film magazines and catalogues (p. 232). He had an intimate knowledge of Sergei Eisenstein's and Vertov's montage work and adapted montage techniques to his photomontages. In the late 1920s, he began shooting his own photographs, creating "revolutionary" mise-en-scènes with his friends that would serve as his raw material. Although his photomontages dealt exclusively with agitation or propaganda content up until 1930, his interpretations are sensitive and original.

It is interesting to note that one of Klutsis's models in the West was the German photomontage artist John Heartfield, and in this he was not alone (p. 238). A comparison of Heartfield's and Klutsis's works is useful to understanding the difference between German Dada photomontage (and Heartfield in particular) and its Soviet counterpart. Heartfield chose photomontage as a democratic "machine art" with which to wage an aggressive ideological war against the existing political and social capitalist values of Germany after World War I. His montaged posters and magazine illustrations project a brutally satirical and caustic attack on all forms of authority, targeting the hypocrisy and flawed leadership of modern society (fig. 9). The power and complexity of his images lay in a subtle dialectic of contradictions which it was left to the viewer to decipher.

Heartfield would state, in the pages of the magazine *Gefesselter Blick* in 1930: "New political problems require new means of propaganda. For this, photography has the greatest power of persuasion."[21] This statement rings strikingly close to that of Klutsis, quoted earlier. Yet the context and the solutions of the two artists could not have been more different. Soviet practitioners of agitational-political photomontage used their medium to glorify authority, its leaders, and its values. They could not afford to be critical, satirical, or negative. And, since the objective was to organize the "materials" of the Revolution and shape the proletarian conscience, only one level of reading/meaning was acceptable.

The October group, founded in 1928, was an association of artists committed to raising the cultural level of the working class and to organizing the collective way of life through the new technological means of the mass media.[22] Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Klutsis were among its members. Despite their ambitions to serve the official cultural program, as we have seen, the photomontage works of these three artists could hardly be perceived as anonymous vehicles of sociopolitical propaganda. On the contrary, each of them showed a sensitive and personal vision in the use of technology as a medium

Fig. 8. **GUSTAV KLUTSIS**. Maquette for *Radio-Announcer.* 1922. Construction of painted cardboard, paper, wood, thread, and metal brads, 45 ³/₄ x 14 ¹/₂ x 14 ¹/₂" (116.2 x 36.8 x 36.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection Fund

Fig. 9. **JOHN HEARTFIELD**. *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute; Little Man ask for Big Gifts.* 1932. Advertising poster, 18 3/8 x 13" (46.7 x 33 cm). Akademie der Künste, Berlin

for addressing the collective conscience. Nonetheless, in 1930, the October group artists were attacked by other more Realist schools (in particular, the AkhRR, or Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, founded in 1922) as being impersonal and mechanistic in their vision, and formalist, foreign, and arcane in their results.[23] From that time on, the Communist Party would determine the form and content of all published graphic work, and posters and book covers were subjected to rigid censorship at every phase of production. Enlarged portrait photographs of Stalin dominated virtually every image, representing him as a heroic figure of authority, as opposed to an abstract, energetic force and, ironically, one might say, as a czarist presence, as opposed to a "comrade" (fig. 10). The earlier collective slogans were eliminated, replaced by quotations from Stalin's speeches and tracts.[24] And the size and layout of the textual material overwhelmed what remained in the way of rigorously controlled and stereotyped images. Finally, in 1931, Stalin proclaimed that photography and photomontage were too cold, but more than that, *too truthful* in relation to a reality become problematic. Even straightforward documentary photography and the monumental "factographic"[25] photofriezes used in the streets and for trade exhibitions (p. 228) would become suspicious. It was decreed that photographic images be replaced by a "humanist realism" based on the reintegration of painting and drawing, in order to "soften" and retouch the reality of events and better serve the sociopolitical circumstances.

Fig. 10. **GUSTAV KLUTSIS**. *The Reality of Our Program.* 1931. Lithograph, 56 3/8 x 40 3/4" (143.2 x 103.5 cm). The Merrill C. Berman Collection

This brief discussion of the context and strategies that generated and governed Constructivist graphic design is admittedly vastly incomplete. It does not pretend to cover all the artists working at the time, nor to examine in depth their formal and technical achievements. The objective has been to try, through the study of specific examples in this exhibition, to clarify the distinctive traits of Soviet graphics and photomontage in the 1920s. It has also been to elucidate how Soviet artists worked within or around the conditions imparted to them. And finally, but in fact primarily, this collection and its exhibition draw attention to the extraordinary sociocultural role of the book.

It goes without saying that the printed book, ever since its invention, has been seen as a prime vehicle for diffusing information to the broadest possible audience. For this reason, both in its visual presentation and in its content, it represents an ideal index of sociopolitical and cultural circumstances. If we may allow ourselves a bold comparison, the Soviet emphasis on literacy may be compared to that of the sixteenth-century Reformation in Northern Europe. In both cases, literacy was not promoted as an end in itself, but as a means: to eradicate the oral traditions, irrational beliefs, and popular superstitions of a basically illiterate population, and replace them by a focused corpus of rules and ideas transmitted through the written word. Of course, aside from the historical contexts, which were vastly different, one essential distinction between these two cultural moments was the supreme authority being served: on the one hand, God and the Church, and, on the other, a secular State. But in both instances, the objective was to convert and subjugate a vast, undifferentiated society.

The books and periodicals produced in the years following the Soviet Revolution were oriented toward transforming the cultural sensibility of the masses. And to say that the artists and poets who produced them were inspired and energized by the perspective of creating a new collective culture would be an understatement, so great was their enthusiasm and belief. In this context, many of the books that appeared in the early post-revolutionary period (the poetry of Mayakovsky and Aleksei Kruchenykh, for example) were radically revolutionary in poetic form and content but largely hermetic to an untutored audience. Consequently, the idea of engaging artists to create a new—simple and direct—visual language for these book covers and layouts was in theory a logical initiative. Who but the most "revolutionary" artists of the period were better equipped to attract and shape the proletarian conscience through the unmediated impact of visual experience? However, this is where the story becomes more complex.

The remarkable publications brought together here were conceived and produced by some of the greatest artists and poets of the twentieth century. What they demonstrate is that art, by definition, cannot serve other truths than its own. Despite the engagement of these artists and poets in the service of an ideological system, despite their professed loyalty to its aims, values, and strategies, the only revolution they could honor and

express was artistic, as opposed to political. Whereas the historical situation required rhetorical statements of an explicit message addressed to a collective audience and ultimately to a passive viewer, the best of the artists and poets working during this period developed a visual and poetic language in which the political message was submerged or sublimated, and which demanded an active intellectual involvement to be understood.

Nonetheless, this utopian dream to propose artistic truths as political truths is what produces the dialectical tensions that define Soviet graphic design. The inherent contradiction between a populist purpose and a modernist aesthetic, a contradiction that could not and would not be resolved, creates the force and singularity of the Soviet style, and distinguishes it from the ideals and formal language of its counterparts in the Western capitalist world. The sad coda of this story is that with the advent of Stalinism in the early 1930s, these revolutionary metaphors of abstraction and photomontage would be totally suppressed, and replaced, first, by a photo-journalism or "factography," and then by the painterly illusionism of Socialist Realism. A political prosaism would be substituted for individual *poesis*, and the ideal of mass communication would be unequivocally fulfilled, as is seen in the final works in this exhibition.

NOTES

1 El Lissitzky, *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, Mainz, 1926/27, quoted in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Text* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 363.

2 See Janecek essay, pp. 41–49.

3 See Ash essay, pp. 33–40.

4 Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 112.

5 All of these artists are represented in this exhibition.

6 The history of these institutions and the changes in orientation under different directors may be loosely compared to those of the Bauhaus.

7 It is interesting to note that in Rodchenko's original maquette, the period after the patronymic is missing, and therefore was added later. See Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 206, pl. 129.

8 According to Darra Goldstein, "These colors had become symbolic of the Revolution's black night, white snows and red blood" (Goldstein, "Selling an Idea: Modernism and Consumer Culture" in Deborah Rothschild et al., *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998], p. 103).

9 This title traces Mayakovsky's 1925 trip to America on the ocean liner *Espagne* that crossed the "ocean," made a port call in Havana, and docked in Mexico, from where he traveled overland to New York City.

10 Between 1923 and 1925, after the founding of NEP (Lenin's New Economic Policy) in 1921, Rodchenko collaborated with Mayakovsky on advertising campaigns to promote the products of state-supported enterprises.

11 See El Lissitzky, "Typography of Typography," in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 359.

12 This pattern echoes the rhythmic black stripes on the borders of the white *tallith*, the traditional Jewish prayer shawl.

13 The Russian title has also been translated as *For Reading Out Loud.*

14 Lissitzky would use this device again in 1927 for a catalogue of the *All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition*, designed in collaboration with Solomon Telingater (p. 228)

15 This illustration shows a rare, if not unique, instance in this book in which Lissitzky handmade a motif (that of the curved C-shaped sickle) rather than using existing fonts.

16 First attributed to Rodchenko, it has since been argued that the text is by Klutsis. See Hubertus Gassner et al., *Gustav Klucis, Retrospectiva* (Stuttgart: Gert Hatje, 1991), Spanish ed., p. 307. Translation mine.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 308. Translation mine.

19 Klutsis's photomontage, *The Dynamic City,* dated 1919, is considered the first example of Soviet photomontage, and shows a dynamically abstract Suprematist composition into which have been integrated photographic fragments of buildings and workers' figures. It is parallel in date with the earliest photomontages of the Berlin Dada group—John Heartfield, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, and Hannah Höch—but of course it is very different in spirit. See *Gustav Klucis, Retrospectiva,* pl. 50.

20 See Hubertus Gassner, "Aspectos del fotomontaje," in *Gustav Klucis, Retrospectiva*, pp. 190–91.

21 Quoted in Jeremy Aynsley, *Graphic Design in Germany 1890–1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 167.

22 See Leah Dickerman, ed., *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917–1937. Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 32.

23 Ibid.

24 See Margarita Tupitsyn, "Escenarios de autoria," in Glassner et al., *Gustav Klucis, Retrospectiva*, pp. 261, 264–65.

25 See Benjamin Buchloh's remarkable essay, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (fall 1984): 83–118, for the definition and discussion of "factography" and Lissitzky's use of this photojournalistic medium at the 1928 Pressa trade fair in Cologne.

Note to the Reader

In the plate captions, all of the artists who worked on a book or other publication are listed
first, in alphabetical order. Titles are sometimes given in shortened form; full titles can
be found in the Checklist. The corresponding number of the Checklist appears in brackets at
the end of each caption. When titles of individual images are known, they have been
included either under the image or in a listing below the main caption. All titles have been
translated by The Museum of Modern Art's research team, except for El Lissitzky's *Of Two
Squares: A Suprematist Tale in Six Constructions* (pp. 153–55), for which we depended on
Patricia Railing (see Bibliography). Interior pages of some volumes are illustrated. If all
interior pages appear, the caption includes the phrase, "shown in entirety." All measurements
reflect page sizes, height preceding width.