

Colorless Field: Notes on the Paths of Modern Photography

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There is something suspicious about painters' love for photography. All these Ernemann cameras in the hands of Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy, or Rodchenko. Of course, without a plastic processing of the frame, and therefore without artistic taste, there can be no good film.

—Ilya Ehrenburg, *Materialization of the Fantastic*, 1927¹

In the Tenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism, in 1919, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Kazimir Malevich contended with black-on-black and white-on-white canvases, respectively, as if splitting Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) into two parts. Malevich defined his use of color in *Black Square* as “new color realism,” a reductive system of color, its exit “from painterly mixture into independent entity—into construction as an individuum of a collective system and individual independence.”² At the end of 1918, Rodchenko concluded: “Malevich paints without form and color. The ultimate abstracted painting. This is forcing everyone to think long and hard. It's difficult to surpass Malevich.”³ To this Rodchenko added at the outset of 1919, “Color died in the color black, and now it plays no role. Let the brush-stroke die out, too. I am bringing composition to light.”⁴ Initially resisted by Malevich's colleagues, *Black Square* eliminated what Vladimir Markov, in his definition of *faktura* (“facture”), called “the resonance of the colors” and what non-objectivists called *tsvetopis*, accomplished using animated brushwork and signifying artistic originality.⁵ In contrast, Malevich arrived at what Varvara Stepanova termed “mechanized *faktura*,” based on the straightforward application of paint.⁶

This shift from color to colorless painting marked a turning point in the avant-garde's attitude toward the disseminative tools of non-objective forms and placed the means of their distribution beyond simply aesthetic values. In that sense, Stepanova's remark that *Black Square* “was not a painting but rather a new style . . . a graphic scheme in the form of a square” was accurate and resulted in series of black-and-white linocuts by both her and Rodchenko (fig. 1).⁷ Malevich's album of lithographs, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (1920), similarly manifested a secession from author-controlled painting to the mechanical reproduction of the Suprematist lexicon. “One cannot speak about painting in Suprematism,” concludes Malevich in a short introduction to this seminal publication.⁸ This swift retreat from the concept of a unique work of art to the mechanization of the creative process was obviously instigated by



fig. 1 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Constructivist Composition*. 1919. Linoleum cut, printed in black, 6 3/4 x 4 5/16" (15.8 x 11 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Riklis Collection of McCrory Corporation

post-revolutionary slogans, which called for a broader dissemination and effective utilization of non-objective forms as the new universal language.

That the relatively new medium of photography might serve well in this capacity is evident in the work of Malevich's student Gustav Klutsis, who in 1919 made three versions of *Dynamic City* (fig. 2), mapping the steps of development from a non-objective color painting to a black-and-white photograph. He repeated the non-objective painting *Dynamic City* and added photographs of skyscrapers and

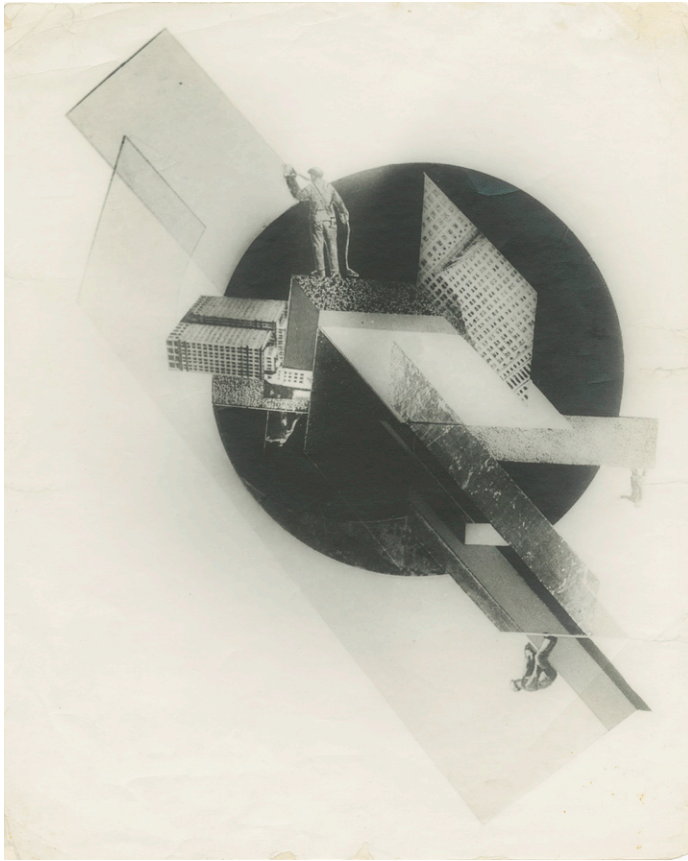


fig. 2 Gustav Klutsis. *Dynamic City*. 1919. Gelatin silver print, 11 5/8 x 9 3/8" (29.6 x 23.8 cm). Courtesy Galerie Priska Pasquer, Cologne. © 2014/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

construction workers, explaining this transition from non-objective to photographic representation within the context of expanding the formalist concept of *faktura*: "Here a photograph is applied as a material of *faktura*, performing a function of a contrast like other elements of *faktura* (glossy, matte, rough, transparent, enamel, paper, etc.)."⁹ He thus gave non-objective forms a sense of materiality and iconographic concreteness. The next step was photographing the *photocollage* and turning its color into a colorless field. Rodchenko moved along a similar path of reducing color's expressive role in his three "smooth boards," painted in the primary colors red, yellow, and blue using the technique of "mechanical covering with paint."¹⁰ From this purification of a color field, he proceeded to figurative collages whose compositions were structured in the shape of his non-objective compositions, such as *Number 47 (Board)* (1917). These were printed in the inaugural issue of *Kino-fot* (Cine-photo), the short-lived weekly magazine founded by critic and designer Aleksei Gan. A collaborator with Malevich and Rodchenko on the newspaper *Anarkhiia* (Anarchy) as well as the cofounder with Rodchenko and Stepanova of the First Working Group of Constructivists in

1921, Gan was largely responsible for synthesizing the radical theory and formal principles of non-objective art, which had by then split into Suprematist and Constructivist camps. His seminal treatise *Constructivism*, published in 1922, which claimed that the modern mechanical revolution had rendered prior aesthetic practices obsolete, reveals Malevich's influence on the definition of Constructivism as the ideology of "mass action," agitating for participatory aesthetics and emphasizing the importance of process over results.¹¹ Similar to Klutsis, Gan redefined for the Russian modernist era the concept of *faktura*, which he claimed no longer focused on the surface but was concerned with the overall working of materials, as manifested in film and photography. Gan illustrated his editorial statement "Cinematographer and Cinematography" in *Kino-fot*'s first issue with Rodchenko's *Number 47*, thereby communicating his view that cine-photo practices are rooted in the genealogy of non-objective art.¹² In support of this intention, Gan printed two texts: Ludwig Hilberseimer's "Dynamic Painting (Non-objective Cinematography)" and Dziga Vertov's "We: Variant of a Manifesto." Hilberseimer claimed that abstraction was "a universal language" and that its inquiries into the relationship between "the spatial and the temporal" gave the Swedish artist Viking Eggeling and the German artist Hans Richter the impulse to tackle this problem "by means of a radical application of the new technique—cinematography."¹³ Vertov, stressing his distance from cinematic realism, settled on the border between abstraction and realism attained by the mechanization of human beings, or the humanization of the machine. He was committed to operating the camera according to the rules of geometric syntax and urged artists "to flee out into the open, into four dimensions (three + time), in search of our own material, our meter and rhythm."¹⁴

In *Kino-fot*, Gan persistently demonstrated the relatedness of Rodchenko's non-objective production to filmic discourse and to the collective formalism of Vertov's documentary series *Kino-Pravda* (Cine-truth). In particular this concerned Rodchenko's three-dimensional *Spatial Constructions*, which Gan illustrated in several issues and retitled "Spatial Things," thus suggesting possibilities for their practical application. Rodchenko, who designed several *Kino-fot* covers, immediately identified with Gan's prescription for a Constructivist practice that emphasized the potential of his spatial constructions entering into and organizing social space. As a result, Rodchenko submitted some of his standardized "Spatial Things" to the service of the fourteenth installment of Vertov's *Kino-Pravda*. Categorized by Vertov as a "cine-thing . . . that generates itself," the power of these newsreels lay in their paradoxical dichotomy: while being a source of factual information, Vertov wanted them to be "constructed optically."¹⁵ Within this factographic body of "optical threads," conventional titles would only be disruptive, so instead Rodchenko constructed optical mechanisms using the grids of his spatial constructions, within

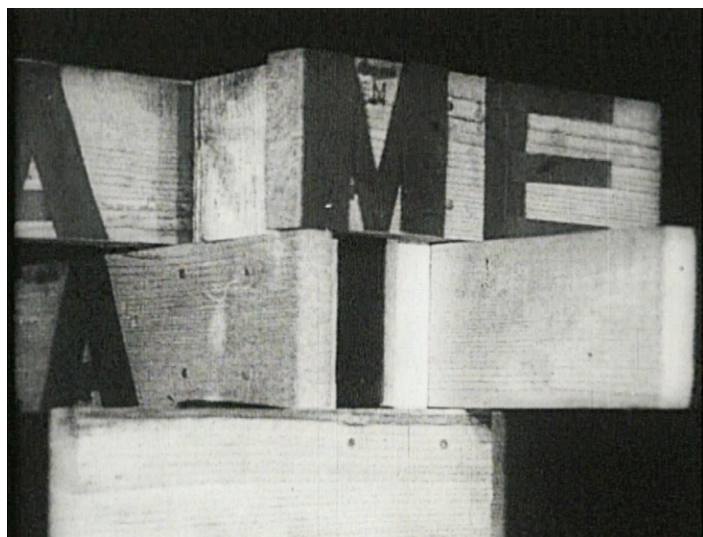
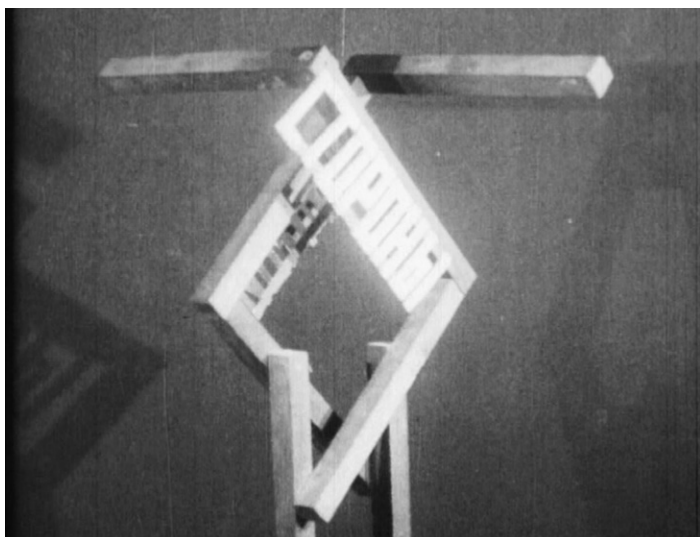


fig. 3 Stills from *Kino-Pravda* (Cine-truth), no. 14, by Dziga Vertov, showing titles by Aleksandr Rodchenko. 1922. 35mm film, black and white, silent, 13 min. (approx.). Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive, Krasnogorsk. Courtesy Margarita Tupitsyn

which he inserted written elements made using the novelty of Constructivist type (fig. 3). This automatically reduced the narrative parameter of the titles and turned the stills with Rodchenko's title designs, which included wall shadows, into fragments of abstraction within the main body of *Kino-Pravda's* factography.

In the fall of 1922 in Berlin, Rodchenko's black-on-black and Malevich's white-on-white paintings appeared in the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* (First Russian Art Exhibition), which was a seminal event in introducing the art of Soviet Russia to the West. In particular, Rodchenko's *Composition no. 86 (Density and Weight)* (1919) is a remarkable confluence of black, gray, and white. The color white arrests the viewer and infiltrates the layers of the two other pigments like a ray of light striking a dark room. Besides these monochromatic canvases, Malevich and Rodchenko sent black-and-white prints to Berlin, marking the beginning of a post-painting era in their non-objective practices. More than anyone in Berlin, the leftist Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy responded to Rodchenko and Malevich's non-objective radicalism, the defiance of expressive painting, reduction of color, and adoption of mechanical methods in the distribution of non-objective forms. The Russian show, however, was not Moholy's first exposure to revolutionary Russian art. He was in close contact with the members of the Russian avant-garde living in Berlin: he had collaborated with Ivan Puni (Jean Pougny) on "Manifesto of Elemental Art" and regularly debated the principles of Constructivism with Lissitzky.¹⁶ By 1922, Moholy himself was already practicing non-objective painting with a particular emphasis on geometric form and color, and he had insisted in his *Book of New Artists* (published with Lajos Kassák and featuring

the work of Malevich as well as Vladimir Tatlin) "on the importance of Russian art in the international art scene."¹⁷ His *Construction in Enamel 2 and 3* (1922), made in a factory and out of industrial materials, reflected his awareness of Constructivist and Suprematist aesthetic systems that had been presented earlier that year by Béla Uitz in the avant-garde journal *Egység* (Unity). But it was Malevich's introduction to his album *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, which was reprinted in the September issue of *Egység*, in addition to Malevich's and Rodchenko's black-and-white palette on display at the Russian exhibition, that I believe was instrumental to the "dying of color" in Moholy's work.¹⁸ Malevich spoke about color's disappearance into white and said that the white square allowed him to substantiate "world-building as 'pure action.'"¹⁹ Moholy's simultaneous viewing at the Russian show of Rodchenko's *Spatial Construction no. 10, 11, and 12* (1920–21), in which light served a similar function to Malevich's white and gained the added property of motion, was no doubt equally influential (Rodchenko alternately titled the series of constructions "Surfaces Reflecting Light"). Moholy's fascination with Constructivist/Suprematist color theory and practice coincided with his decision to experiment with photograms, for in them "the color pigments of painting were . . . replaced by the gray tonal values," and light was positioned as a new "medium of plastic expression."²⁰ For Moholy, Malevich's investment in the color white was translated into "the display of light," a shift he immediately theorized in his text "From Pigment to Light" (1923–26) and later put into practice in his *Light-Space Modulator* (1930).²¹ This is how he expressed his inquiry into this subject:

What is the nature of light and shade?
 Of brightness—darkness?
 What are light values?
 What are time and proportion?
 New methods of registering the intensity of light?
 The notion of light?
 What is color (pigment)?
 What are the media infusing life with color?
 What is color intensity?²²

By 1923, non-objective art in Russia had been significantly politicized and subjected to functional ends—a condition not readily evident at the Russian exhibition in Berlin. Moholy's own awareness of this fact crystallized when he met the poet and artist Vladimir Mayakovsky and the formalist critic and theorist of production art Osip Brik that year in Berlin.²³ The two men were editors of *Lef*, which had recently published its second issue and had quickly gained influence as a mouthpiece of productivist theory and a visual source of its practice. The editorial of the second issue, titled "Comrades, Organizers of Life!" exhorted: "So-called Artists! Stop color-patching on moth-eaten canvases. . . . Give new colors and outlines of the world."²⁴ The fact that this text was translated into both German and English suggests that the editors arrived in Berlin with copies to distribute. Moholy confirmed to Brik that Rodchenko's spatial constructions had

influenced him; seeing *Lef* and talking to Brik undoubtedly served to acquaint him thoroughly with the shift that had taken place in the theoretical underpinnings of Rodchenko's work.²⁵ Brik's text "Into Production!," published in the first issue of *Lef*, for example, was entirely dedicated to Rodchenko's Constructivist designs, with Brik describing the artist as a "non-objectivist" who "became a constructivist-productivist" and elucidating the shifts in the concepts of color and form, which now were defined not by "aesthetic thinking" but by an "object's function."²⁶

Also appearing in *Lef*, in the second issue, was George Grosz's text "About My Work," which gave the journal's productivist point of view additional international relevance. Grosz detached himself from Expressionism and painting and joined the productivist agenda associated with the principles debated at Moscow's INKhUK (Institute of artistic culture) and articulated in such publications as Gan's *Kino-fot*.²⁷ "I defy paint and draw a line individually-photographically; construct in order to attain sculpture-ness," Grosz wrote. "Stability, building—sport, engineer, machine. A control over a line and form is introduced. The point is not to conjure the expressionist wallpaper on a canvas. Thingness and clarity of an engineer's drawing is a more instructive painting than an uncontrollable babbling of Kabala, metaphysics, and holy ecstasy."²⁸ Two of Grosz's images are printed alongside the text under the title "Works of the Constructivist

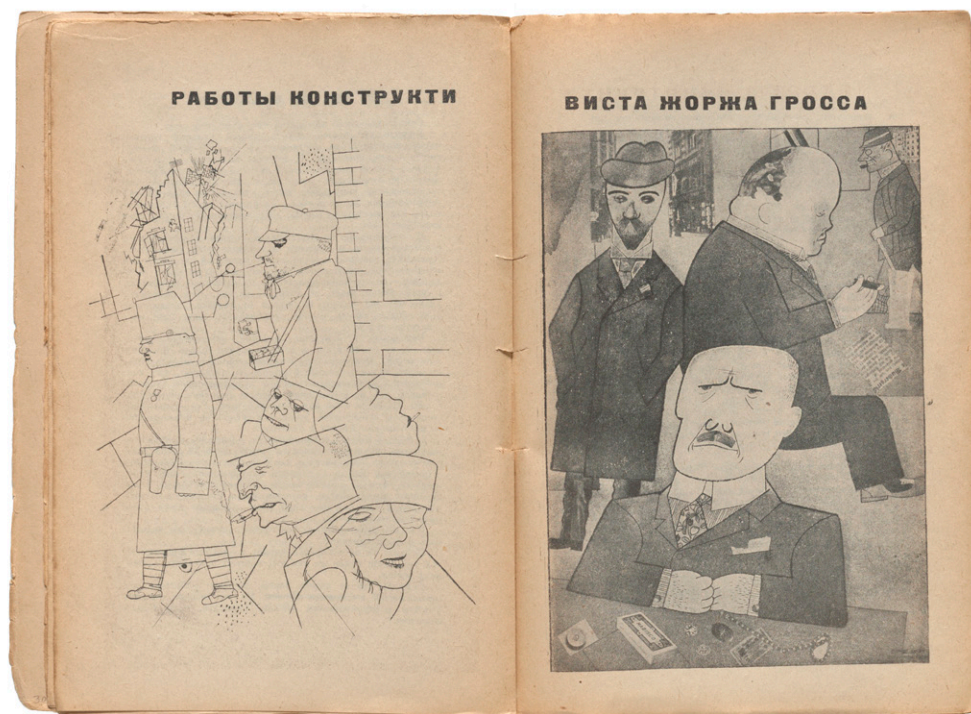


fig. 4 George Grosz. Two works by the artist reproduced to accompany his article "K moim robotam" (About my work). *Lef*, *Zhurnal levogo fronta iskusstv*, no. 2 (1923). Book with letterpress cover, page: 9 ¼ × 6 ½" (23.5 × 15.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation. © 2014 Estate of George Grosz/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

George Grosz" (fig. 4). One is his typical primitivized depiction of greedy and alienated Berlin capitalists; the other brings together a more diverse group of Berliners whose images, some cropped, are rendered using straight lines, which in turn interconnect the negative spaces of the drawing. This drawing explains why Grosz is here called a "Constructivist," for in the Constructivist lexicon a controlled straight line became the prime spoiler of the composition-based personal styles that are often associated with a curved line. Rodchenko, Lyubov Popova, and Aleksandr Vesnin, who all made line constructions in paintings and drawings, immediately recognized line to be an organizing structure of urban chaos (as in Grosz's work) as well as a primary element of Constructivist architecture. Rodchenko associated his first line paintings with the process of "bringing composition to light" and soon spoke of "new realism . . . flowing out of Linism into the field of object creation, a completely new understanding of the object after the abstractness of non-objective work."²⁹ For Rodchenko (and for Grosz, as is evident from the above-cited text), figuration, controlled by the arrangement of lines, manifested itself in cinematic and photographic practices. "Photography will be playing a significant role; already now much better and cheaper to be photographed than painted," Grosz stated.³⁰ He concluded his text with yet another attack on Expressionism, already condemned in Moscow art circles by the productivist critic Boris Arvatov, as well as with words of agitation for communism and proletarian art. For his part, Moholy-Nagy had also signaled his sympathies to such arguments, in his left-leaning politics and by ending the Bauhaus's Expressionist agenda when he became the instructor of the school's foundation course.

Given Moholy's keen interest in the contemporary theories and art issuing from Russia, it was inevitable that he would contact Rodchenko directly, which he did at the end of 1923. In his letter, Moholy asked Rodchenko to provide material about Constructivism, expressing his doubts that the Constructivist theories of Naum Gabo and Lissitzky, whose works were also featured in the Russian art exhibition in Berlin, "relate[d] to all Russian artists."³¹ Underplaying the value of the individualized Constructivist formulas, Moholy stressed his interest in collective creativity, urging Rodchenko to involve friends and colleagues in answering his questions so that instead of "individual excursions into separate issues" Moholy would receive back "something all-encompassing, something that describes the overall characteristics of new Russia."³²

By the time Rodchenko received Moholy's letter, he had most likely already seen a handful of Moholy's photographs warmly autographed to Mayakovsky. Critic and collector Nikolai Khardzhiev confirms that Mayakovsky ultimately received five photographs in total, likely three by the end of 1923.³³ One of these, a white swan photographed against a black background (fig. 5)—titled *Weißer Wölbungen auf Schwarz* (White curves on black) in *Moholy-Nagy*:



fig. 5 László Moholy-Nagy. *White Curves on Black*. c. 1923. Gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 x 7 1/4" (24.3 x 18.4 cm). Collection of the State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow. © State Mayakovsky Museum. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild Kunst, Bonn

60 *Fotos*, Franz Roh's 1930 book on Moholy—was most likely Mayakovsky's own selection. It undoubtedly reminded him of his literary invention of the semi-human creature "Man-Goose," which was the title of his traveling notes in Europe in 1922. "Man-Goose," he explains, "has a great advantage: 'an elevated neck.' It sees farthest. It sees only the most important things. And accurately arranges the relationship between significant forces."³⁴ Khardzhiev, who was Malevich's friend as well as a collector, describes Moholy's image in a style that evokes the black-and-white paintings by Malevich that he was particularly keen to acquire: "As if glowing with its whiteness . . . the image of a swan is built into a blackened and seemingly bottomless rectangular piece of paper."³⁵

Another of Moholy's photographs that Mayakovsky brought back to Moscow was his portrait of the poet himself (fig. 6). This is significant because Rodchenko began his career in straight photography with a series of portraits of the poet in the summer of 1924, which chronologically follows Moholy's example, perhaps suggesting that it was Moholy's



fig. 6 László Moholy-Nagy. Portrait of Vladimir Mayakovsky on the cover of Roman Jakobson and D. Sviatopolk-Mirskii. *Smert' Vladimira Maiakovskogo* (Death of Vladimir Mayakovsky). Berlin: Petropolis, 1931. Letterpress, 7 ⁹/₁₆ × 5 ³/₈" (19.2 × 13.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

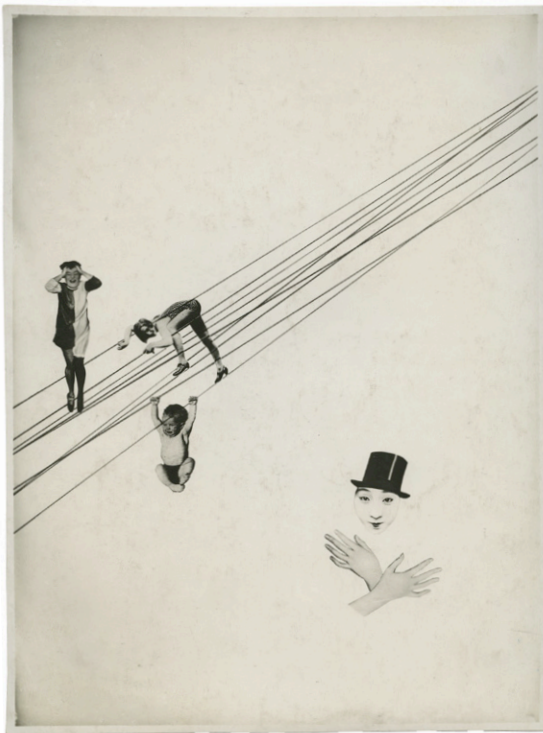
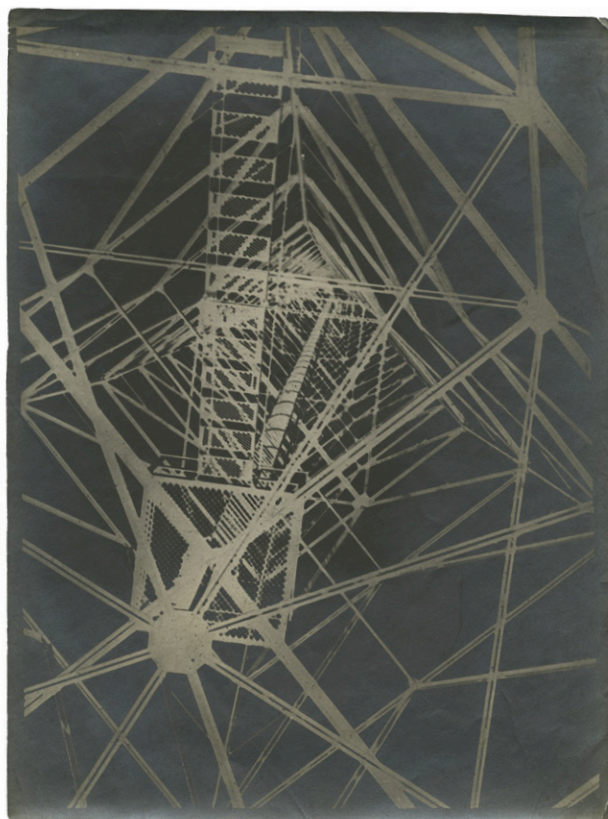
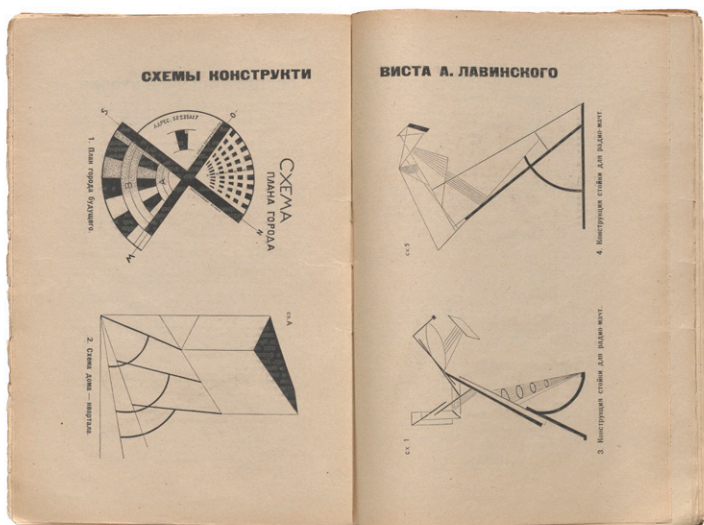


fig. 7 László Moholy-Nagy. Untitled. n.d. Gelatin silver print (photomontage), 8 ⁷/₈ × 6 ¹¹/₁₆" (22.5 × 17 cm). Collection of the State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow. © State Mayakovsky Museum. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

modernist portrait of the Russian avant-garde's key ideologue that pushed Rodchenko toward straight photography at that particular point.³⁶ The third of Moholy's presents to Mayakovsky appears to reverse this trace of influence. It is an example from Moholy's photoplastic series (fig. 7), which synthesizes the formal elements of the Constructivist works included in the first issue of *Lef*. Among those were Rodchenko's photomontage illustrations for Mayakovsky's poem "Pro eto" (About this); like Moholy's works, Rodchenko's photocollages achieve absurdist plots by means of paradoxical juxtapositions and shifts in scale. Furthermore, the space in Moholy's photomontage is wired with lines that organize the urban space in a similar way to the architect Anton Lavinsky's drawings for his project "City on Springs," which in *Lef* illustrated Arvatov's article "Reified Utopia" (fig. 8).³⁷ Like Moholy-Nagy, Lavinsky employed linear structures as a way of redirecting the estrangement of modern urban living toward the internally organized collective. This kind of linear organization of urban space (also adopted by Grosz) was close to Moholy's current interests, for it demonstrated an internal reciprocity between painting, three-dimensional objects like Rodchenko's spatial constructions, and fantastic models of Constructivist architecture. Photoplastic art was Moholy's answer to Rodchenko's concept of translating non-objective Linism into "new realism," whose equivalent at that time had become precisely the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement in Germany.

Two more prints of fragmented iron lattices that Moholy-Nagy gave to Mayakovsky would come later (figs. 9, 10), and these show an intriguing affinity of perspective to photographs that Rodchenko made around the same time. The first Moholy image is of the Eiffel Tower. In 1925, both Moholy-Nagy and Rodchenko attended the World's Fair in Paris, and although their visits did not overlap, both reacted similarly to the tower's grand lattice structure, which came close to monuments the Constructivists had proposed, notably Tatlin's tower.³⁸ As one looks at Moholy's fragmentary close-up of the Eiffel Tower, these words by Rodchenko come to life: "I remember when I was in Paris and saw the Eiffel Tower for the first time from afar, I didn't like it at all. But once I passed very close to it in a bus, and through the window I saw those lines of iron receding upward right and left; this viewpoint gave me an impression of its massiveness and constructiveness."³⁹ Camera recordings of new optical experiences of spatial complexity, along with the illusion of movement resulting from the observation of modern architectural structures, were an extension of the formal effects achieved in non-objective paintings, such as Lissitzky's *Prouns* and Klutskis's *Dynamic City* (the latter's photomontage version [see fig. 2] included unmoored skyscrapers and construction workers balancing across the axis of the central circle). Klutskis encouraged the viewer to look at this photomontage from all sides, pre-dating Rodchenko's 1927 dictum that "photography . . . should surely undertake to show the



Left, top:

fig. 8 Anton Lavinsky. Two works by the artist reproduced to accompany the article "Oveshchestvlennaiia utopia" (Reified utopia), by Boris Arvatov. *Lef. Zhurnal levogo fronta iskusstv*, no. 1 (1923). Book with letterpress cover, page: $9\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$ " (23.5×15.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

Left, bottom:

fig. 9 László Moholy-Nagy. Untitled (*Eiffel Tower*). c. 1925. Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{5}{8} \times 7$ " (24.5×18 cm). Collection of the State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow. © State Mayakovsky Museum. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Above:

fig. 10 László Moholy-Nagy. Untitled (*Berlin Radio Tower*). c. 1927. Gelatin silver print, $9\frac{5}{8} \times 7$ " (24.5×18 cm). Collection of the State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow. © State Mayakovsky Museum. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

world from all vantage points, and to develop people's capacity to see from all sides."⁴⁰ Certainly Moholy continued working in this spirit, as is evident from the last of his images to end up in Mayakovsky's possession, which bears a striking similarity to his photograph of the Eiffel Tower. This one of Berlin's Funkturm (radio tower) was likely taken in 1927, the year after the tower was completed, and presented to Mayakovsky during his trip to Berlin in May.⁴¹

Upon his return from Paris in 1925, Rodchenko embarked on street photography. He began by photographing the eight-story brick building with balconies that housed

him and other instructors at the VKhUTEMAS (Higher art and technical studios). The resulting photographs (fig. 11), united in the series *Building on Miasnitskaia Street*, serve as reification of Rodchenko's often abstracted architectural fantasies that he had executed during his association with the *Zhivskul'ptarkh* (Painting-sculpture-architecture) collective in 1919 and 1920.⁴² His own estimation of new photographic representation reflects this tendency toward abstracted architecture: "In the first photos there was a return to abstraction. Photographs are almost non-objective. At the head, there were compositional tasks."⁴³ The Miasnitskaia



fig. 11 Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Balconies*. 1925. Gelatin silver print, 11 ⁷/₁₆ × 9 ¹/₁₆" (29 × 23 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Rodchenko family

Street series revealed that Rodchenko's current interest in optical instabilities coincided with those of European photographers. Proof of this lies in two photographs Moholy printed in his seminal volume *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (*Painting, Photography, Film*) (1925): published on back-to-back pages in the second edition, in 1927, were Albert Renger-Patzsch's factory smokestack (fig. 12) and his own *Balconies* in Dessau (fig. 13). Both shot from below, the photographs created an impression of "massiveness and constructiveness," giving a strong international relevance to Rodchenko's objectives.

No matter how much Moholy was fascinated by what was going on in Russia, his contacts there were limited due to the language barrier and the difficulties inherent in exchanging correspondence and artworks. So regardless of his wanting to get firsthand information and not entirely trusting the distant perspective of Russian expatriates, he continued to follow the developments of Russian Constructivists living in Europe. Lissitzky, who stayed in close contact with his Russian avant-garde colleagues as well as advancing his own program, presented Moholy with another opportunity to affiliate with the Russian program

and construct a fruitful dialogue. In the beginning of 1924, Moholy sent Lissitzky a letter in Paris asking him to participate in the Bauhaus book series with the *Figurine Portfolio* printed by the Kestner Society in 1923 and to donate a copy to the Bauhaus library (Moholy said he was even willing to buy it at a discount).⁴⁴ A hybrid between Suprematist and Constructivist formal lexicon on the theme of Aleksei Kruchenykh's libretto for the 1913 futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, the portfolio boldly abstracted and mechanized the human figure. Moholy's interest in the *Figurine Portfolio* is understandable when one compares it to his own six lithographs, also printed by the Kestner Society in 1923. These compositions are almost intentionally similar to Lissitzky's, but except for the one with a red background, they are devoid of color, as if to demonstrate Moholy's shift to photography and his conviction that "a general influence of various factors pushes, virtually undetectably, our contemporaneity to colorless, to gray. The tempo of our contemporary life takes away paint; from constant hurry, from fast movement — all pigments mix into gray."⁴⁵

In a subsequent letter to Lissitzky, this one addressed to Locarno, a Swiss health resort where Lissitzky went to cure his tuberculosis, Moholy-Nagy again asked Lissitzky to contribute to the Bauhaus series of books, specifically to the one dedicated to international architecture, for which it was hoped Lissitzky would provide "photographs of the best examples of the new Russian architecture . . . we think that if this is not possible, we will print Tatlin's Tower," Moholy explained.⁴⁶ Lissitzky's letters to his wife, Sophie Küppers, reveal that at first he reacted in favor of Moholy's invitations. However, by autumn 1924, he concluded that Moholy's intention to represent other artists was only for the sake of enhancing the Bauhaus's achievements.⁴⁷ Lissitzky's enthusiasm towards Moholy declined further when, after his return to Moscow, he complained to Küppers about Moholy's "shameless" claim of authorship for the first abstract photograms, credit for which Lissitzky believed belonged to Man Ray.⁴⁸

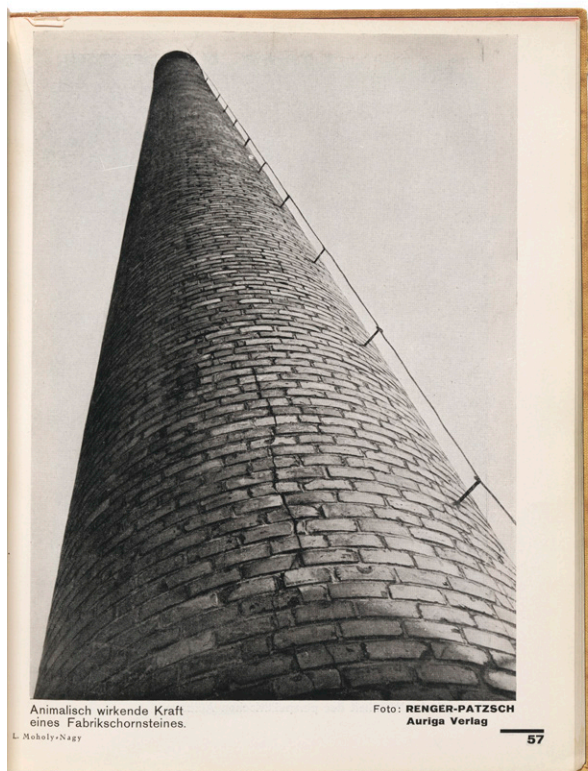
Why would Lissitzky, back in Moscow's politically charged atmosphere and preoccupied primarily with architecture, care about abstract photograms? In fact, while staying in Locarno, Lissitzky worked on advertisements for the Pelikan office supply company and used the photogram technique in many of his designs of ink jars, typewriter ribbons, and carbon paper. This upgraded a primarily experimental medium to a practical aim and made its spontaneous principles work toward the defamiliarization of the Pelikan designs' ordinary content. Lissitzky's aim to advance the photogram technique to utilitarian ends continued back in Moscow, where he was able in his first commissions to intensify the practical application of the photogram, something that Moholy and Man Ray did not do due to their working in an entirely different cultural context.

Lissitzky's path in making the ordinary appear strange via photography was not easy, for shortly before his return,

Soviet critics such as Arvatov and Nikolai Chuzhak proceeded to define photography and cinema as “ultra-representational art,” that is, “mass oriented, executed by a machine, and tightly linked with the material *byt* of urban industrial workers.”⁴⁹ The following year, the first Moscow Meeting of Left Front Workers brought together critics (Brik, Gan, and Chuzhak) and artists (Rodchenko, Klutskis, Kruchenykh, Sergei Senkin, and Vertov) who insisted on the eradication of realist painting as the “art of illusion” and argued that documentary cinema, *lef* photomontage, and architecture were the legitimate forms of the “art of life” and of “life-building.”⁵⁰ A year later, Brik’s essay “The Photo-Still Versus the Painting” appeared in the newly launched magazine *Sovetskoe foto* (Soviet photo), in which he emphasized the colorless nature of photography, stating that unlike realist painting, photography “does not distort the subject by giving it a *false color*.”⁵¹ Like Gan, Brik positions photography within a genealogy of modernist painting that includes Suprematism. In this respect, Brik makes the point that ex-modernist painters such as Rodchenko “rejected painting as a conscious choice, and they will fight for the photograph just as consciously.”⁵² In 1926, Brik, once again in accord with Gan, argued for the structural interdependence of

photography and cinema in his essay “What the Eye Does Not See,” specifically referencing Rodchenko’s Miasnitskaia Street series: “When you look at these photos, it is easy to imagine how a cinematic sequence could be developed here, what great visual potential it could have.”⁵³

It was in this atmosphere of an endorsement of straight photography as the new visual language of choice that Lissitzky decided to execute in the photogram technique for his first photographic commission, titled *Record*, a mural for an aquatic-sports and yacht club in Moscow. In several designs for *Record*, which are known in the West as *Runner* and *Runner in the City* (fig. 14), Lissitzky did not adopt Brik’s prescription for how to achieve a cinematic effect by repeatedly photographing the same site or object from different vantage points; that would remain Rodchenko’s device.⁵⁴ Instead, Lissitzky proposed a montage method that he dubbed *fotopis’*, a synthesis of cameraless techniques that he was determined to shift from the laboratory to utilitarian ends.⁵⁵ Along with Lissitzky’s iconic images, such as his self-portrait and a portrait of Hans Arp, *Record* was presented as an example of *fotopis’* at Moscow’s All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition, in 1927, and in his text that appeared in the exhibition’s guide, “Artist in Production,” Lissitzky explained the



figs. 12 and 13 Pages from László Moholy-Nagy. *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Painting, Photography, Film). Munich: A. Langen, 1927. Letterpress, page: 9 × 7 ¼" (22.9 × 18.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Jan Tschichold Collection. Gift of Philip Johnson. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Left: Albert Renger-Patzsch. *Animal-like Force of a Factory Chimney* (*Animalisch wirkende Kraft eines Fabrikschornsteines*). Right: László Moholy-Nagy. *Balconies* (*Balkons*)

meaning of his new term, undoubtedly mindful of Brik's "Into Production!" Like other critics and artists who surrendered to the productivist program, Lissitzky defined his photographic device as an antithesis to painting, and yet even on an etymological level he made sure that it stopped short of completely rupturing with modernist painterly canons.⁵⁶ *Fotopis*, "unlike painting, 'paints' its image by applying light directly onto photographic paper, using, depending on the task, negatives obtained by means of a camera, or direct impact of a light ray. On its way to photographic paper, it encounters objects of different transparency and obtains direct reflections of them."⁵⁷ Even without a cut-and-paste montage technique, the cinematic energy employed in *Record* (used to the same effect by Klutis and Senkin) is so tangible that the image appears animated.

Lissitzky's direct exposure to and participation in the international avant-garde meant that his contribution to photographic theory and practice in Russia after 1925 was crucial, synthesizing both Russian and European developments and exemplifying the dynamic cross-cultural influences that continued to be felt in both Russia and the West. Indeed, 1927 was a productive year in East/West communication: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who would soon become the founding director of the new Museum of Modern Art in New York, visited Moscow; Mayakovsky once again traveled to Germany; Rodchenko had a small exhibition of photographs at the Bauhaus; and Malevich had a major painting exhibition in Berlin, visited the Bauhaus, and met Moholy-Nagy. This interaction debunks the myth of the Russian avant-garde's decline after 1922 and speaks of its active role in the formation of international vanguard practices well into the 1920s.

Such was the case with Malevich, whose highly successful exhibition in Berlin, meetings with various avant-garde artists, visits to art schools, and nonstop reports to his Russian colleagues and students about his trip positioned him for several months as a conduit between East and West, with the consequence that his theories and oeuvre gained an even greater influence both in Europe and back home. The artist's well-charted path from figurative to abstract painting to the propagation of mechanical means of distribution for his non-objective production (now intensified by his interest in film) stirred discussions about mechanized versus manual production, the essence of which, I believe, was articulated in Ernő Kállai's essay "Painting and Photography."⁵⁸ Kállai specifically concentrated on the concepts of *faktura* that Russian modernists were famously preoccupied with, the relevance of which to contemporary debates in art was reinstated by Malevich's show.⁵⁹ Kállai's arguments spanned from supporting a "religio-transcendental function" of facture (associated with Markov's 1914 text) to claiming that non-objectivists like Malevich and Lissitzky were able to preserve a sense of facture even in their "mechanical gestures."⁶⁰ Kállai underscores the essential importance of facture for both creative and perceptive processes, while remarking that unlike photomontages—"hybrids between

painting and photography"—straight photography (or, in the productivist terminology, factography) is cleansed of facture.⁶¹ In conclusion, Kállai argues that the only "threat to painting" was "the moving photograph, that is, film," which if we return to Rodchenko's transition from his mechanically painted, "de-factured" 1921 triptych to standardized sculpture and finally to its application in the immaterial media such as Vertov's films, indeed confirms that the latter was the culminating point of the eradication of painterly values.⁶²

In his reaction to Kállai's article, Moholy-Nagy objected to the need to choose between painting and film, instead calling for "the advance of optical creation into all the places where it may legitimately go." "Today that means photography and film," he continued, "as well as abstract painting and play with colored lights."⁶³ His refusal to let painting go lands us on an important point of distinction between the fusion of non-objective forms and documentary films propagated by Gan and Rodchenko, and Moholy's goal of translating the abstract energy of painting and sculpture into motion. If we compare Rodchenko's application of his *Spatial Constructions* in Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* with Moholy's filming of his *Light-Space Modulator* in his *Lightplay Black-White-Gray* (1930), we see how the kinetic properties are used in the case of the latter for "optical creation" and in the case of the former for letting the abstract serve the factographic.

Taking advantage of Malevich's presence in Germany, Moholy asked him to respond to Kállai's text as well, and the significance of Malevich's response lies in the notable shift in his attitude toward "mechanical ways of production of plastic phenomena."⁶⁴ I believe this shift occurred as a result of the great critical and commercial reception of his paintings in Germany, work that had become peripheral for Malevich in Russia, as he was busy with theoretical teachings and utilitarian applications of Suprematism. Moreover, Malevich's defense of painting allowed him to distinguish Suprematism from the anti-painting agenda of the Soviet Constructivists, whose views had gained significant popularity in Germany. Thus, Malevich begins his article by saying that he "never . . . justified the mechanical, dead smoothness of the photographic viewfinder, and never had written against painting," even as he underscores the distinction between "Cézanne and the first phase of Cubism," for example, and the rational premise and mechanical techniques of Suprematism.⁶⁵ That being said, he goes on to emphasize his opposition to mechanical methods as they are specifically applied in Constructivist production: "materialization, mechanization, lithographization, photographization, simplification . . . are truly dangerous, inasmuch as the machine cannot express spiritual sensations, cannot be considered a good medium, when both brush and pencil are superlative to it in a technical sense, for through them various sensations can flow in all their force."⁶⁶ Yet neither, it is clear, does Malevich want to come across as retrograde. He concludes by supporting the technical innovations available to artists insofar as they are put into service of creating what he sees as legitimate art.



fig. 14 El Lissitzky (Lazar Markovich Lissitzky). *Record (Rekord)*. 1926. Gelatin silver print, 10 1/2 x 8 13/16" (26.7 x 22.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Thomas Walther (MoMA 1766.2001). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

"Thus photography like film, from my point of view, is the only technical new means, which painters must use, as they previously had used pig bristles, graphite, and paint."⁶⁷

Malevich must have felt he had hit upon an important line of argument, because in a letter sent from Berlin to his student Konstantin Rozhdestvensky, he seeks to ensure that his views are made known in Russia, taking credit for "exposing the emptiness" of the "rational utilitarianism" that "eradicated Art."⁶⁸ Then, a month and a half later, he returns again to the subject, this time writing to Kurt Schwitters: "A man will stay a man and a machine will not own him because [man] created [machine] for freeing his movements, for more important business."⁶⁹ Malevich's reevaluation of his painterly oeuvre in Berlin and his reluctance to endorse the view that film might supplant painting led him to abandon his plans to produce a non-objective film and instead to use cinematography as a new tool for promoting Suprematism (along with architecture). He embarked on writing a script titled "An Artistic and Scientific Film—Painting and Architectural Issues—Approaching the New Plastic Architectural System," and after watching Hans Richter's series *Rhythm* (1921–23) at the Bauhaus, teamed up with him to make a film based on his script.⁷⁰

As Malevich was popularizing Russian art in the West and making a U-turn to painting, Rodchenko, the key

practitioner of straight photography, was accused on the pages of *Sovetskoe foto* of plagiarizing German photographers. The magazine printed an anonymous illustrated letter accusing Rodchenko of copying the photographic devices and themes of Moholy-Nagy, Renger-Patzsch, and "D. Martin."⁷¹ Two of the accompanying images were Moholy's *Balconies* and the factory smokestack by Renger-Patzsch previously discussed, and, in fact, these were taken from *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, which had become available in Russia. Dates were intentionally omitted or indicated only where they worked against Rodchenko's favor. For his part, Rodchenko had nothing to hide: he had, in fact, reprinted the very same photos in the magazine *Soviet Cinema*, where he ran the photo section. In his bold response to this public attack, printed in *Novyi lef* (New left) (after *Sovetskoe foto* refused to publish it), he defies such notions as "the unique" and "a masterpiece," particularly in the case of such utilitarian and reproducible mediums as photography, and he specifically addresses the formal devices that he was accused of plagiarizing: "The most interesting viewpoints today are 'from above down' and 'from below up,' and we should work at them. I've no idea who invented them, but they've been around a long time. I want to affirm these vantage points, expand them, get people used to them. . . . How is culture to evolve if not by the exchange and assimilation of experiences and achievements?"⁷² Rodchenko de-individualizes these modernist viewpoints by saying they do not belong to any single photographer but are rather "ours"; hence, as one employs them in different social and political systems, there occurs what can be called "contextual formalism."⁷³ At the end of his response, Rodchenko credits Moholy-Nagy as "an extraordinary master" and "a man whom I value very highly," and yet he makes sure that the reader is aware of his own international reputation: "Moholy-Nagy, once a leftist, non-figurative painter, has asked me several times to send him my photographs. He knows them very well and he values my work. When we were both painting, I exerted a considerable influence on him, and he has often written about this."⁷⁴

Rodchenko's effort to emphasize his individual contributions to the development of modernist photography signals the first sign of his disappointment in the productivist program of collective thinking and production to further advance his realization that within the body of collective aesthetic devices, someone will always usurp individual credit. More significantly, it demonstrates that while there was much in the way of cross-cultural influence between the Russian and European avant-gardes throughout the 1920s, the paradigm of collectivism that underlay the Russians' efforts was never successfully transmitted to, or at least embraced by, the West. If in the context of a collective society the individual role of the artist was subdued for the sake of higher social goals, in Europe that role was enhanced, largely for commercial reasons. Rodchenko reiterates this conflict in his second response to the *Sovetskoe foto* incident,

in a text called “The Paths of Modern Photography,” which he also published in *Novyi Ief*.⁷⁵ Here he openly criticizes Moholy for his insistence on the authorial “I” and in speaking in the first person in his titles “How I Work” (*Kaki a rabotau*) and “My Path” (*Moi put*). Another example of this kind of a gap is the contretemps that surrounded the Moscow photo frieze for the Russian pavilion in Cologne’s *Die Presse* exhibition in 1928. Collectively produced, it was nevertheless signed by Lissitzky and Senkin upon its installation, prompting an angry reaction from Klutskis.⁷⁶

Rodchenko remained troubled by this divide, as personal attacks against him continued in the Soviet press and as he did not find his photographs in *Foto-Auge* (Photo-eye), the seminal 1929 book by Roh and Jan Tschichold that accompanied the equally important international exhibition *Film und Foto*, mounted in Germany. A decision to place Lissitzky’s *Self-Portrait* on the cover once again signaled a breach in the concept of collective anonymity. “Why are my photos never published in books?” Rodchenko asks in a preliminary draft of his letter to Tschichold.⁷⁷ The explanation, provided in Tschichold’s response and sent only in 1931, claimed that the exclusion was accidental, which again pointed to a slipshod subjective approach, rather than an objective one, to group exhibitions and publications: “In the album *Foto-Auge*, your works are omitted unintentionally. I am sending you a catalogue of an exhibition. In it there is a description of one of your works.”⁷⁸ The exhibition mentioned, I believe, is for the Russian pavilion at *Film und Foto*, which was organized by Lissitzky and Sophie Küppers, and accompanied in Germany by Vertov, by then a devoted friend of Lissitzky’s. Given that Rodchenko’s radical incorporation of non-objective vocabulary into the language of cinema chronologically coincided with Richter’s *Rhythm* series, his asking Tschichold to send him Richter’s book, which Rodchenko simply calls “Film,” betrays his worries about getting credit for his radical innovation, a desire that was intensified by Malevich’s collaboration with Richter and Lissitzky’s with Vertov in the late 1920s, which signified a shift from a general collective production to specific collaborations between individual artists.⁷⁹

While Rodchenko appeared to be losing faith in the ultimate triumph of the collectivist approach, Moholy-Nagy was trying to position himself as a believer. Always as well informed, perhaps, as anyone in the West of the Russians’ paradigm shifts, Moholy produced the film *Marseille* (1929), which in its formal articulation of the modern city followed Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which was shown in Germany during *Film und Foto*. The factographic *Marseille* stood apart from Moholy’s obsession with the enhancement of abstract forms by means of cinematography that he pursued in his other experiments with film; in other words, Moholy, unlike Rodchenko, was not able to (or simply did not want to) fuse the non-objective with the factographic. A year after *Marseille* was released, Moholy demonstrated his keen awareness of the gap between the two contexts of

aesthetic production in Russia and Europe that increasingly manifested itself in his letter to Sovkino (the Soviet film agency), asking for cooperation while complaining that “in capitalist countries any similar inquiry would be considered improper.”⁸⁰ The letter arrived when Moholy’s name was no doubt familiar in Soviet cultural circles: his portrait of Mayakovsky had appeared on the cover of *Death of Vladimir Mayakovsky*, printed in Berlin in 1931 (see fig. 6), and *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* was translated and published in Moscow a year earlier. Paradoxically, its original title was changed to *Painting or Photography*, which not only titularly omitted the subject of film but also provoked the reader to choose between, rather than synthesize, the two mediums. As such, Moholy’s request to collaborate with Sovkino probably came across as unsuitable, and was therefore declined, putting to doubt his chance of ever visiting the country of his political and artistic fascination (he never would). With a hyped emphasis on the collective, and an ever-strong determination to keep his Russian connections intact, Moholy wrote to Vertov in 1932: “You most likely think that I don’t keep my promises. However, this damn Berlin not only does not allow me to find peace and quiet, but I can’t even sit down and write a letter. With the letter I am sending you is a promised review, as well as several photos and newspaper clippings. Perhaps you could report about this to your comrades. A film and a small documentary, *Marseille*, are being shown right now in the cinema (with success). I am waiting with curiosity for your next project and am sending you and your comrades, greetings. Your Moholy-Nagy.”⁸¹

In reality, the experimental and internationally oriented path of non-objective artists from painting to photography and film was ending. The October Association’s photography section, headed by Rodchenko, was dispersed in 1932, and the Bauhaus closed in 1933. This loss of support from a like-minded community was followed by the subjection of photographers to the pressure of work commissioned and controlled by state and private sponsorship, returning photographers to a solitary existence. In 1932, Rodchenko walked the streets of Moscow, shooting his series about the city, and the following year he traveled alone to the remote and brutal construction site of the White Sea Canal. Lissitzky, crippled by tuberculosis, was losing his mobility and spent much of his time either in bed or in a distant sanatorium. In the face of the Nazis’ rise to power, Moholy fled to London, where he was often mistreated by the demands of private sponsors. Both Rodchenko and Moholy did return to abstract painting in the 1940s (Moholy also produced abstract photographs), only now their painting was neither reductivist in form and color, nor in search of application and dissemination by mechanical means. Instead, their painting was an overtly subjective practice that signaled the return of painting and abstraction to the autonomous state.

1. Ilya Ehrenburg, *Materializatsiia fantastiki* (Moscow: Kinopechat', 1927), p. 8. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Russian sources are by the author.
2. Kazimir Malevich, "Suprematism," in *10-ia Gosudarstvennaia vystavka. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i Suprematism* (Moscow, 1919), p. 16.
3. Aleksandr Rodchenko, entry of December 25, 1919, in Alexander Lavrentiev, ed., *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future; Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 88.
4. Rodchenko, entry of August 31, 1919, in *ibid.*, p. 92.
5. Vladimir Markov, *Printsypy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh. Faktura*, cited in Margit Rowell, "Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura," *October* 7 (Winter 1978): 94. The neologism *tsvetopis* is formed from *zhivopis* ("painting") with a replacement of *zhivo* ("animated") with *tsvet* ("color") to suggest a pure operation of color. About the controversy between Malevich and other non-objective artists regarding Malevich's paradigm shift of color, see Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 9–13.
6. Varvara Stepanova, "Faktura," in *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda: pis'ma, poeticheskie opyty, zapiski khudozhnitsy* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994), p. 174.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
8. Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka* (Vitebsk: UNOVIS, 1920), reprinted in A. S. Shatskikh, ed., *Kazimir Malevich: stat'i, manifesty, teoreticheskie sochineniia i drugie raboty, 1913–1929*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), p. 189.
9. From Gustav Klutis's notes written on a paper to which the photograph *Dynamic City* is attached. It is now in the collection of The State Museum of Art, Riga, Latvia.
10. Rodchenko, "A Laboratory Passage through the Art of Painting and Constructive Spatial Forms toward the Industrial Initiative of Constructivism, 1917–1921," in *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future*, p. 125.
11. Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver, 1922), p. 18.
12. Gan, "Kinematograf i kinematografiia," *Kino-fot*, no. 1 (1922).
13. Ludwig Hilberseimer, "Dinamicheskaiia zhivopis' (Bespredmetnyi kinematograf)," *Kino-fot*, no. 1 (1922): 7.
14. Dziga Vertov, "My. Variant manifesta," *Kino-fot*, no. 1 (1922): 11; trans. by Kevin O'Brian in Annette Michelson, ed., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 7.
15. Vertov, *Iz nasledii: stat'i i vystupleniia*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Ezenshtein Center, 2008), p. 493 n. 25, 52.
16. László Moholy-Nagy and Ivan Puni, "Aufruf zur elementaren kunst," *De Stijl* 4 (October 1921). For Moholy's discussions with Lissitzky at the time, see Ehrenburg, *Men, Years, Life*, vol. 3 (London, 1963), p. 13.
17. Eleanor M. Hight, *Moholy-Nagy: Photography and Film in Weimar Germany* (Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley College Museum, 1985), p. 12.
18. Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka*, repr. in Shatskikh, ed., *Kazimir Malevich*, p. 189.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
20. Renate Heyne, "Light Displays: Relations So Far Unknown," in Heyne and Floris M. Neusüss, eds., *The Photograms. Catalogue Raisonné* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), p. 28. Moholy-Nagy, "Light — A Medium of Plastic Expression" (1923), in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Moholy-Nagy: An Anthology* (New York: A Da Capo Paperback, 1970), p. 117.
21. Moholy-Nagy, "From Pigment to Light," in Kostelanetz, ed., *Moholy-Nagy: An Anthology*, p. 33.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 31. In this text, Moholy echoes Rodchenko and Malevich's negation of the importance of brushwork, saying "the subjective manipulation of a tool is lost" (p. 33). Like them as well, he emphasizes "the development of . . . standard language" and speaks of the "mechanical and technical requisites of art" as being "of primary importance" (p. 33). Such statements would find immediate application in Moholy's non-objective black-and-white woodcuts and lithographs, which are formally similar to those of the Constructivists and Suprematists.
23. This trip by Vladimir Mayakovsky, in addition to his subsequent trips to Germany, was an important source of information in Weimar Germany about Russian experiments with photography. See A. N. Lavrentiev, *Rakursy Rodchenko* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1992), p. 78.
24. "Tovarishchi — formavshchiki zhizni!," *Lef*, no. 2 (1923): 7.
25. Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda*, p. 225.
26. Osip Brik, "V proizvodstvo!," *Lef*, no. 1 (1923): 105.
27. Even as leftist artists in Germany distanced themselves from Expressionism in the early 1920s, the First Universal German Art Exhibition, which was mounted in Moscow and Leningrad in 1924, was overwhelmingly Expressionist. Yet there were notable exceptions, including seven of Moholy-Nagy's works, among them *Nickel Construction* (1921) and his enamel panels (1923). Together with Walter Gropius, Moholy represented the Bauhaus, the school that the Russian organizers of the show most closely identified with, as is evident from the description of it in the introduction to the exhibition's catalogue: "Bauhaus's main goal is to educate not artists for 'a salon' but people able to participate in the transformation of the everyday, as well as production processes, and not in the role of aesthetes-decorators but practitioners-constructors. The most consistent in this direction are young teachers of the school Gropius and Moholy-Nagy, Schlemmer and Muche." *1-ia vseobschaia germanskaiia khudozhestvennaia vystavka* (Moscow and Leningrad: Mezhrabpom, 1924), p. 15.
28. George Grosz, "K moim rabotam," *Lef*, no. 2 (1923): 30.
29. Rodchenko, entries of January 1 and January 15, 1919, in *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future*, pp. 88, 95.
30. Grosz, "K moim rabotam," p. 30.
31. Rodchenko, *Stat'i. Vospominaniia. Avtobiograficheskie zapiski. Pis'ma* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1982), pp. 117–18.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Nikolai Khardzhiev asserts, however, that Mayakovsky and Moholy did not meet until 1924, although he concedes that "the circumstances of the meeting between the great poet with the Hungarian artist-constructivist remain until now unclear." Khardzhiev, "Maiakovskii i Mogoli-Nagi" (1978), in Yurii Gerchuk, ed., *Laslo Mokhoi-Nad' i russkii avangard* (Moscow: Tri kvadrata, 2006), p. 84.

- Khardzhiev's assumption is inaccurate, however, as Stepanova has documented, because Brik met Moholy during his only trip to Germany with Mayakovsky, and that was in 1923. Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda*, p. 225.
34. Mayakovsky, "Ocherki, Parizh (Zapiski Liudogusia)," cited in G. A. Antipova, "KinoFotoLudogus' Maiakovskogo," in *Kino Foto Ludogus* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi Muzei V.V. Maiakovskogo i Gosudarstvennyi tsentr sovremennogo iskusstva, 2013), p. 14.
35. Khardzhiev, "Maiakovskii i Mogoli-Nagi," p. 84.
36. The first portraits of Mayakovsky were, in fact, cinematic—he started acting in films in 1918.
37. Boris Arvatov, "Oveshchestvlennaia utopia," *Lef*, no. 1 (1923): 61–64.
38. While Rodchenko appears to have been in Paris for the opening of the fair, it seems Moholy did not arrive until August 22. Hattula Moholy-Nagy, email to Krisztina Passuth, January 10, 2014. I thank Krisztina Passuth, author of *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), for obtaining this information and for discussing some other issues related to the artist.
39. Rodchenko, "The Paths of Modern Photography," in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), p. 259.
40. Ibid., p. 257.
41. Moholy's photographs to Mayakovsky are untitled and undated, which causes a degree of uncertainty. Khardzhiev appears to have initially asserted that one of the tower images was of the Funkturm in Berlin, and that is confirmed upon visual analysis. In my correspondence with Ute Eskildsen, former head of the Department of Photography of the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, she agreed with this conclusion. Eskildsen, email correspondence with the author, January 16, 2014.
42. For more on the Zhivskul'ptarkh collective, as well as illustrations of Rodchenko's architectural drawings, see Tupitsyn, ed., *Rodchenko and Popova: Defining Constructivism* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), pp. 15–16.
43. Rodchenko, "Perestroika khudozhnika," cited in Lavrentiev, *Rakursy Rodchenko*, p. 20.
44. Moholy-Nagy, letter to El Lissitzky, February 26, 1924, Weimer, RGALI (Russian Archive of Literature and Art), Moscow, f.2361 op.1 ed.khr. 47.1.1.
45. Cited by Lavrentiev from the Russian edition of Moholy-Nagy's *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, in Lavrentiev, "Mohoi-Nad' i Rodchenko," in Gerchuk, ed., *Laslo Mokhoi-Nad' i russkii avangard*, p. 57.
46. Moholy-Nagy, letter to Lissitzky, February 26, 1924, Weimer, RGALI (Russian Archive of Literature and Art), Moscow, f. 2361 op.1 ed.khr. 47, 1.1–2.
47. Lissitzky, letter to Sophie Küppers, October 16, 1924, repr. in Küppers, ed., *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 53.
48. Lissitzky, letter to Küppers, September 15, 1925, in *ibid.*, p. 67.
49. Arvatov, "Utopiia ili nauka," *Lef*, no. 4 (1924): 18.
50. The meeting took place January 16–17, 1925. For the quotations here, see Viktor Pertsov, ed., *Reviziia levogo fronta v sovremenom russkom iskusstve* (Moscow, 1925), p. 112.
51. Brik, "The Photograph Versus the Painting" (1926), in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 214. I am proposing, however, to translate Brik's term *foto-kadr* to "photo-still" rather than "the photograph," since the latter erases the fact that Brik borrowed the term *kadr* ("still") from cinema in order to suggest that the kind of photography he promoted corresponded to contemporary cinematic practices.
52. Ibid., p. 217.
53. Brik, "What the Eye Does Not See" (1926), in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 220.
54. For images from *Record*, see Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 102–05.
55. Rodchenko also used the devices of a photogram, double exposure, and positive/negative technique, but he kept his results from such experiments out of press photography and in the realm of experimental teaching, book design, and "private" photography, such as portraits of friends. Rodchenko's positive/negative female portrait on the cover of Ehrenburg's book *Materializatsiia fantastiki* corresponds to the description of Rodchenko's teaching methods of cameraless photography by his VKhUTEIN student Sergei Urusevskii: "Soon we became so involved in this work that it became a sort of a game. And often coming back home, we continued to build fantastic compositions. . . . In this laboratory work we slowly understood what light and shadow is, a battle between black and white, understood the nature of photo material, the nature of photography." Urusevskii, "Neskol'ko slov o Rodchenko," *Soviet Cinema* 12 (1967): 104; quoted in Aleksandr Lavrentiev, "Mokhoi-Nad' i Rodchenko," in Gerchuk, ed., *Laslo Mokhoi-Nad' i russkii avangard*, p. 100. Based on Urusevskii's detailed descriptions, Rodchenko, unlike Moholy-Nagy, was not interested in abstract photograms.
56. Like the earlier discussed *tsvetopis*, *fotopis*' is a neologism based on the word *zhivopis* ("painting"), formed from two roots: *zhivo* ("animated") and *pis* (a root of "writing"). Lissitzky replaced *zhivo* with *foto*, thus creating a word that can be translated literally as "photo-writing" or "photo-scribing."
57. El Lissitzky, "Khudozhnik v proizvodstve," in *Vsesouznaiia Poligraficheskaia Vystavka: putevoditel'* (Moscow, 1927), p. 7.
58. Ernő Kállai, "Painting and Photography" (1927), excerpted in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 94–103.
59. Kállai reviewed Malevich's show in Berlin and, in general, "mentioned him often in his writings." While in Berlin, Malevich gave Kállai "a lot of art material" and was anxious to receive his review. See I. A. Vakar and T. N. Mikhienko, eds., *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: Pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, vol. 1 (Moscow: RA, 2004), pp. 193–95. For more on the Russian preoccupation with *faktura*, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October*, no. 30 (Fall 1984): 87.
60. Ibid., p. 87. Kállai, "Painting and Photography," p. 96.
61. Kállai, "Painting and Photography," p. 99. Also a good illustration of Kállai's arguments would be Klutskis's three versions of *Dynamic City*, which demonstrate a transition from painterly to collaged forms with *faktura* ultimately disappearing in a black-and-white print of the work.
62. Ibid. By 1926, the visual effectiveness and disseminative powers of film media were fully recognized by key non-objective artists who practiced photography, including Klutskis and

- Rodchenko, who worked for the film magazines *Cine-Front* and *Soviet Cinema*, respectively. Rodchenko was in charge of the photo section of *Soviet Cinema*, where he often printed photographs of European photographers, some of which he rephotographed from foreign publications.
63. "Response by Lázsló Moholy-Nagy" to Kállai's "Painting and Photography" (1927), in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 102.
64. Malevich, letter to Moholy-Nagy, April or May 1927, in Gerchuk, ed., *Laslo Mokhoi-Nad' i russkii avangard*, p. 100.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., p. 102.
68. Malevich, letter to K. I. Rozhdestvenskii, April 21, 1927, in Vakar and Mikhienko, eds., *Malevich o sebe*, p. 186.
69. Malevich, letter to Kurt Schwitters, May 10, 1927, in *ibid.*, pp. 189–90.
70. On the development of this collaboration, see Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film*, pp. 57–60, 89–93; and Timothy O. Benson and Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Malevich and Richter: An Indeterminate Encounter," *October* 143 (Winter 2013): 53–68.
71. This last photographer is misidentified in *Sovetskoe foto*. The photo credited to "D. Martin" actually belongs to the New York photographer Ira W. Martin (1886–1960), a leading member of the Pictorial Photographers of America. See Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 244 n. 1. I thank Mitra Abbaspour for providing this information.
72. Rodchenko, "Downright Ignorance or a Mean Trick?" (1928), in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, p. 246.
73. Ibid., p. 247.
74. Ibid.
75. Rodchenko, "Puti sovremennoi fotografii," *Novyi lef*, no. 9 (1928): 31–39. Translated in Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, pp. 256–63.
76. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 58–65.
77. Lavrentiev, *Rakursy Rodchenko*, p. 124.
78. Ibid.
79. This was most likely Hans Richter's *Filmgegner von heute — Filmfreunde von morgen* (Film haters today, film lovers tomorrow), which he wrote as a handbook for the *Film und Foto* exhibition, which he co-organized. It was a volume of short, thematically related texts, presented along with supplementary illustrations. Rodchenko also asked for Renger-Patzsch's book *Iron and Steel*, which compiles Renger's industrial photography that is formally similar to the visual reportage of Rodchenko that appeared in the journal *Daesh* throughout 1929.
80. Moholy-Nagy, letter to Vladimir Sutyrin, July 15, 1930, in Gerchuk, ed., *Laslo Mokhoi-Nad' i russkii avangard*, p. 97.
81. Moholy-Nagy, letter to Vertov, March 9, 1932, in *ibid.*, p. 99.

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