

# Art in America

## *Revolution Under Review*

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View of the exhibition "Revolution Every Day," 2017-18, at the Smart Museum of Art. Photo Michael Tropea.

Exhibitions about the visual culture of the Russian Revolution tend to fit a common mold. Inflected with a Cold War perspective, such shows present the Soviet avant-garde as an experiment whose failure is manifest not only in the suppression of bold new artistic movements but also in the violence the new state unleashed against its own people. This approach was inaugurated by "Masterpieces of the 20th Century," organized in 1952 by Guggenheim Museum director James Johnson Sweeney, who was previously a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. A project of the Congress for Cultural Freedom that appeared at the Tate Gallery in London and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, the exhibition featured works primarily from MoMA's collection of European modernist painters—such as Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian—who had been branded "degenerate" in Nazi Germany and blacklisted in the Soviet Union. Emphasizing by contrast the freedom of the arts in liberal democracies, this pointed framing obscured the original social and political revolutionary drive of abstract art, aligning it with artistic and cultural institutions of capitalism instead.

"Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde 1912-1930," a 1978 exhibition at MoMA that roughly coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, positioned the Russian avant-garde in similar terms: as a bold experiment in art that was suppressed by Stalinism. "A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde," on view at MoMA last year, the centenary of the Revolution, repeated this decades-old approach. It presented masterworks of Futurism, Suprematism, and Constructivism from MoMA's remarkable collection (the largest trove of Russian avant-garde art outside Russia) like exotic animals securely confined to their cages at the zoo: objects of interest that are no longer dangerous.

None of this art wanted to be in a museum. "Death to art!" artist and theorist Aleksei Gan proclaimed in his 1922 Constructivist manifesto.<sup>1</sup> Constructivist art was supposed to destroy itself in order to enter a new life as architecture, furniture, and book and poster design. Many

of the pieces that were on view at "A Revolutionary Impulse" have the energy of self-destruction about them. Aleksandr Rodchenko's Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black), 1918, one of the last works he made on canvas before switching to three-dimensional constructions, shows two black curving shapes on a flat gray disk, with whiteness at the edges suggesting a brighter disk that is almost entirely obscured. It conveys the eschatological resonance of a solar eclipse. While MoMA's wall text reminded us of the artists' disruptive intentions—a desire to erase the boundary between art and life, an urge to break the social conditions that enable the sale of individual works of art—the works were nevertheless presented as singular masterpieces.

T.J. Clark calls out the "simplemindedness" of other centenary exhibitions in London: the Royal Academy's "Revolution: Russian Art 1917-32" and the British Library's "Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths." The Royal Academy exhibition included a re-created display of Malevich's work from the 1932 Leningrad exhibition "15 Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic." Clark compares the historical reconstruction to a "theme park" for its pristine hanging and lighting. Another gallery at the Royal Academy featured a slideshow of mug shots of Gulag prisoners, produced in collaboration with Memorial, an organization that preserves records of victims of Stalin's Terror. The small, darkened room, as Clark grimly points out, was at the exhibition's end, right before the gift shop. From Clark's account, one might conclude that museums tend to oversimplify the Revolution and fetishize both its creative output and its "tragic outcome" in service to the market.<sup>2</sup>

But narratives are shaped by contemporary tastes and ideas as much as by historical contingencies. While MoMA and the Royal Academy continued to employ the "failed experiment" narrative, other centenary exhibitions on view last year placed much greater emphasis on the aspirational aspects of avant-garde visual culture by applying unconventional curatorial approaches to evoke the urgency and potential felt by revolutionary artists. The most striking of these was "Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test" at the Art Institute of Chicago, which highlighted models and proposals, centering viewer attention on the public sites where the works were meant to be encountered. "Revolution Every Day," an ode to the potential of the new Soviet woman at the Smart Museum in Chicago, reactivated Soviet poster art by bringing the feminist ambitions of Bolsheviks into conversation with contemporary video works that tackle the cultural politics of race and gender. Through experimental exhibition-making, both of these shows overcame the paradox of presenting the avant-garde art as revolutionary in wall texts while aestheticizing it in the context of museum display.

Matthew Witkovsky, curator of "Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!," discussed his intentions in an essay in *Artforum* addressing other centenary exhibitions, such as the Royal Academy show (which he says "killed off the avant-garde in a hurry") and "Imagine Moscow: Architecture, Propaganda, Revolution" at the Design Museum in London (which, to the contrary, "resisted the widespread pressure to create endgame narratives").<sup>3</sup> Rather like the curators at the Design Museum, Witkovsky wanted to present models and sketches as prototypes, "to avoid the pitfalls of populist moralizing on the evils of communism (or rosy nostalgia over its hopes and dreams)."<sup>4</sup> Works were organized according to ten sites of their initial or intended display: the battleground, the school, the press, the theater, the home, the storefront, the factory, the festival, the cinema, and the exhibition.

The spatial rather than temporal framing refreshingly interrupted the familiar teleology of Soviet history. The focus on environments allowed Witkovsky to enact the ambition of testing

art through lived practice that fascinated the artists of the day.

The "School" section of "Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!" partially re-created a landmark 1921 exhibition by the Society of Young Artists (OBMOKhU), in which the students and teachers of Moscow's Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) first tested the recently articulated principles of Constructivism in a series of sculptures. Witkovsky placed original artworks from the OBMOKhU show, such as Rodchenko's Spatial Construction No. 12 (1920), on loan from MoMA, alongside facsimiles of several other "spatial constructions" (Numbers 8, 10, 11, and 13) that are now lost. Rodchenko's Workers' Club, built as an installation for the Soviet pavilion at the 1925 Paris Expo, was reconstructed for the show's "Factory" section, as it was intended to be realized as a reading room and social space at a site of production. As a co-organizer of "Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!," the Moscow-based V-A-C foundation oversaw the creation of facsimiles and new constructions based on unrealized blueprints.

The foregrounding of models and proposals as well as lost works served as a means to avoid fetishizing the unique art object. Perhaps the most iconic new construction at the Art Institute was Gustav Klutss's Screen-Tribune-Kiosk. The artist drew it in 1922 as part of a portfolio of designs for outdoor agitational structures, which he subsequently depicted in his famous photomontages. The three-tiered object based on these sketches was a centerpiece of the Art Institute's show, towering twelve feet above visitors in the "Press" section. It had a screen for film projections on top, a dais to hold a speaker in the middle, and a kiosk with shelves for pamphlets and newspapers at the bottom. The projection screen, tilted down toward the viewer, showed Dziga Vertov's Kino-Week no. 17, a 1918 newsreel featuring a train leaving Moscow with visual materials and literature meant to rouse support for the revolution in the provinces. Installed within earshot, another Klutss object, Radio-Orator no. 7, played a gramophone recording of a 1919 speech by Lenin. The multimedia object, also sketched in 1922 but first constructed for the exhibition, consisted of two intersecting screens with the words "radio" and "orator" printed in Russian at the top, serving as an advertisement for the new technology. Two gramophone trumpets pointing in opposite directions amplified the sound. The re-created OBMOKhU exhibition in the next room provided a genealogy for Klutss's hybrid objects. This model-making served as a reminder that the Soviet experiment in art was a testing ground for new mediums of communication.

Where "Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!" took on environments and immersive experiences created by Soviet artists at the service of the new social order, "Revolution Every Day," organized by Robert Bird, Christina Kiaer, Zachary Cahill, and Diane Miliotes at the Smart Museum, focused on the educational aims of Soviet poster art. Posters by Maria Bri-Bein, Valentina Kulagina, and Natalia Pinus were shown alongside videos by living artists including Lene Berg, Olga Chernysheva, and Anri Sala. The contemporary work meditated on the potency of mass visual culture, utopian thinking, and the necessity of aspirational projections for enacting change.

We are trained to view Soviet posters with an ironic distance, as excellent designs that overpromise in service of a doomed cause. The curators of "Revolution Every Day" recovered one of the messages of the Bolshevik project by assembling posters that trace the creation of the image of the new Soviet woman as worker and activist.

There were no toothy smiles and pomaded hair, no over-the-shoulder glances making

coquettish eye contact with the viewer. The Soviet woman was to be a maker, not an object of consumption. In a Constructivist-inspired poster by Natalia Pinus, *Woman Delegate, Worker, Shock Worker* (1931), the woman looks down intently at her welding torch. Goggles and a headscarf obscure her features, and her body is covered entirely with protective clothing designed for labor. A wall text noted that a decree issued in December 1917 gave Soviet women rights equal to those of men in matters of family law. The right to vote and run for office soon followed, as well as the right to abortion, giving Soviet women more rights than women anywhere else in the world. Together, these posters present an unprecedented push for an assertive role for women in a society that had relied on their unacknowledged labor for centuries.

**The curators invited Chicago-based artist Cauleen Smith to respond to these images. The resulting video, *Three Songs about Liberation* (2017), draws parallels between the American Civil Rights movement and the October Revolution, highlighting the partial success of both and the continued urgency of their goals. (The work's title plays on that of Dziga Vertov's 1934 film *Three Songs about Lenin*, excerpts from which were shown near Smith's work.) In Smith's video, testimonies from Gerda Lerner's book *Black Women in White America* (1972) are read by three women at various locations on Chicago's South Side. The testimonies are reprinted in the exhibition catalogue, which, shaped as a Soviet daily calendar and filled with archival material, additional images, and critical essays, is an art object in its own right. One of the testimonies reads: "The bosses were always telling you some day you'll get to be a boss but you'll be dead and all your children be dead before you get to be a boss. I became a steward in the local union, mostly black women."<sup>5</sup> The importance of aspirational thinking in race and labor organizing is treated with no irony in this work. The artistic engagement with the commitment to social justice organizing presented in Smith's piece invites us to question, and shed, our habitual distance from the emancipatory promise that lives in Soviet poster art.**

Moving away from ironic and tragic approaches, the Chicago exhibitions signal a post-Cold War shift in the way Western museums frame the visual culture of the Russian Revolution. The story that begins with the revolutionary avant-garde's demise turns its ambitions into artifacts, their meanings determined by the failure of the larger social project. But decades after the dissolution of the USSR, there is no pressing need to defend the ideology of liberal democracies from the Soviet threat, and museums can frame the Russian avant-garde so as to enable both a consideration of the role of art in capitalist systems and the continuing struggle with class, race, and gender divisions. Both the anthropological approach of rebuilding environments at the Art Institute and the political collapsing of time to emphasize the resonance between the social aspirations of revolutionary and contemporary art at the Smart Museum gave the historical works on view an energy and interpretive flexibility that had been missing from their presentation for decades. This new positioning reactivated the visual artifacts of the Russian Revolution, returning them to the sphere of possibility in which they were originally devised.