1921

The members of the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture define Constructivism as a logical practice responding to the demands of a new collective society.

1920–1929

On December 22, 1921, Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958) presented a paper entitled "On Constructivism" to her colleagues at the Inkhuk—the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture, a state research institution founded in May 1920 under the auspices of the Department of Fine Arts (IZO) of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). It had been almost a year since the first director of the Institute, Wassily ▲ Kandinsky, had resigned, his psychology-based program being rejected as obsolete (if not plain counterrevolutionary) by a swarming group of newcomers marching behind Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956).

As salaried employees of the state, the avant-garde artists and theoreticians who made up Stepanova's audience had to follow bureaucratic routine and keep a stenographic record of the animated discussion that followed the talk. From this we can discern that what was at stake that evening in December 1921 was less the retrospective account of Constructivism offered by Stepanova than the anxious question it prompted about the future: how will the Soviet artist justify his or her existence once he or she has voluntarily abandoned any artistic activity but is yet without the technical knowledge essential for industrial production? (Note the gender qualifiers here: there was perhaps no other artistic movement in the first half of the century where women exerted such a powerful role.)

The Marxist critic Boris Arvatov (1896–1940), soon to become one of the most vocal hard-liners of Productivism, aptly summed up the historical weight of the moment. The artist will not be of any use to industry until he acquires some education in a polytechnic institute, he remarked, but his work nevertheless has a function at the ideological level:

> *It's Utopia, but we have to say it. And every time we say it we will be avoiding dogmatism and will not be shading our eyes and we'll be saying that this is real, and necessary, and nobody will reproach us for it. We have to explain the great thing that this doctrine [Constructivism] has brought. It's true that the situation is tragic, like any revolutionary situation. This is the situation of a man on a riverbank who needs to cross over to the other side. You have to lay a foundation and build a bridge. Then the historical role will be fulfilled.*

▲ 1908, 1913

At the end of 1921, the Constructivists were at a crossroads. Since the spring of that year, Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP), characterized by a partial return to a free market, had been gradually replacing the centralized planning that had presided over Russia during the civil war, a system that had directly benefited members of the artistic avant-garde as a reward for their early and enthusiastic support of the Revolution. The Constructivists knew that the days of the Inkhuk as they had shaped it—as a place where they could freely conduct their "laboratory experiments"—were over, and they embraced the changes to come. The bridge mentioned by Arvatov (that between "art" and "production") had long been on everyone's mind (its necessity had already been advocated with great rhetorical flourish in the pages of *Iskusstvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune], the official journal of IZO published from December 1918 to April 1919), but one could now feel a distinct acceleration. A month before Stepanova's talk, following a call by Osip Brik, a former ▲ member of Opoyaz, for them to transfer out of the jurisdiction of Narkompros into that of the Ministry of the Economy, the Inkhuk Constructivists had collectively decided to abandon "easelism" and to shift to "production." (The word "easelism" derives, of course, from "easel painting" but it was used to describe any kind of autonomous art object, including sculpture). Among the group, the most radical proponents of the Productivist program were even predicting the end of art altogether: Arvatov's bridge had to be built to reach the other side, but it would have to be destroyed as useless once this heaven had been attained. To a large extent, this remained wishful thinking, and the concerns that were vented during the December 1921 evening would eventually be proven to be well founded. But if the glee with which the Constructivists had endorsed their resignation as artists now rings of something like a manic denial, it certainly could not have looked in any way suicidal at the time. There was a logic to their self-immolation which constituted the climax of a whole year of experimentation.

"The first monument without a beard"

The birth of Constructivism came as a direct response to Vladimir Tatlin's model for the *Monument to the Third International*, often simply called his *Tower* [**1**]. Commissioned in early 1919, the

▲ 1915

model was unveiled in Petrograd on November 8, 1920 (the third anniversary of the October Revolution), before being shipped to Moscow, where it was re-erected in the building hosting the VIIIth Congress of the Soviets at the very moment when Lenin's plan for the electrification of Russia was being debated. From the detailed pamphlet written by the critic and art historian Nikolai Punin and published on the occasion of the work's presentation, and from numerous declarations by the artist himself, we know that, while the model was a large wooden sculpture of between 18 and 21 feet high, the finished monument was to have been a huge metal-and-glass construction some 1,300 feet high—a third taller than the Eiffel Tower, at the time the tallest building in the world and a feat of engineering Tatlin had greatly admired during his trip to Paris before World War I. The most striking element of Tatlin's celebrated design was its tilted structure consisting of two dovetailing conical spirals and a complex web of oblique and vertical slats that framed four geometric glass volumes suspended on top of each other within its slanting core. Each of these volumes was supposed to be an independent building housing a different branch of the Comintern (the Soviet organization in charge of "spreading the revolution" to other countries), and each would rotate at a specific pace. The revolution of the lowest and largest volume, a cylinder destined to house the International's "legislative assemblies," was to take a year; that of the second volume, an oblique pyramid for the executive branch, would have lasted a month; that of the next

1 • Vladimir Tatlin, First model of the *Monument to the Third International* in the former Academy of Arts, Petrograd, 1920. Wood, height c. 548.6–640 (216–252)

▲ 1914

Soviet institutions

As had been the case during the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, finding a name for a new institution, or renaming an old one, became highly charged political acts in revolutionary Russia, from the very first days of the February 1917 insurrection to Lenin's rise to power in October 1917 and well into the Stalinist era that followed his death in 1924. And the baptismal frenzy of the young Soviet state did not only affect official organizations, but also the many avant-garde groups that had multiplied in the teens, during the heyday of Cubo-Futurism. The absurdist monikers of these prerevolutionary groups (such as Knave of Diamonds, The Donkey's Tail, Tramway V) still smacked too much of the Symbolist past they had been intended to mock. A new linguistic form had to be devised to signify that a radically new era was beginning, and for both the Bolshevik power and that small fringe of the intelligentsia that immediately put itself at its service, the acronym became the prime signifier of such a *tabula rasa*. It was both economical and "poetically" unfamiliar.

The political nature of this linguistic device was established early with the coinage of Proletkult (for "Proletarian Culture") in 1906. Although this organization worried Lenin to the point that by 1909 he had excluded its leader Aleksandr Bogdanov from the Bolshevik party, it was only after the "ten days that shook the world" that it took real stride. But the new government countered its rise by founding an umbrella department, the Narkompros (for "People's Commissariat of Enlightenment"), headed by the liberal Anatoly Lunacharsky, whose domain encompassed cultural affairs, propaganda, and education, and under which all artistic groups—including the recently created Komfuts (for "Communist Futurists")—had to be subsumed. In January 1918, IZO, the visual arts section of Narkompros, was created and placed in Petrograd under the supervision of David Shterenberg, a well-traveled, francophile, eclectic modernist painter who did his best to satisfy the diverse tendencies of the Soviet avant-garde as well as reorganize all art museums of the USSR. His deputy in Moscow was Tatlin.

Among the many new institutions launched by Narkompros were the Svomas (for "Free State Studios"), founded in 1918 and replaced in 1920 by the Vkhutemas ("Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops"), which can be characterized as the Soviet equivalents to the Bauhaus, the design school that had recently opened in Germany; the Inkhuk (for "Institute of Artistic Culture"), founded in Moscow in 1920 (its first director was Kandinsky, soon evicted by Rodchenko) and its pendant in Petrograd, the Ginkhuk, where Malevich took refuge after the close of his own school in Vitebsk, Unovis ("Affirmers of the New Art") in 1922. Even after the restoration of private business by the NEP in 1921, the government's hold on cultural affairs did not falter, neither did its penchant for acronyms: in 1922, the Inkhuk became part of the Rakhn ("Russian Academy of the Sciences of Art"), where it quickly lost its edge, and the AKhRR ("Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia") began its steady ascent, which would end up ten years later in the brutal establishment of "Socialist Realism" as the official line in all the arts.

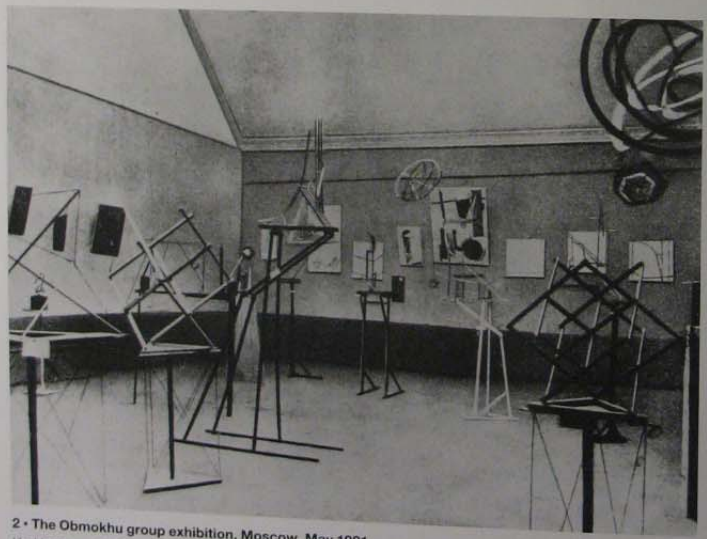
volume, a cylinder for the propaganda services, would have taken a day; and that of the uppermost volume, a small hemisphere added late in the elaboration of the project, would have presumably lasted an hour.

Tatlin and his friends (most notably Punin as his official spokesman) developed three lines of argument in favor of the actual construction of the monument on its projected, vast scale. First, as opposed to the eyesores erected in various places to commemorate the Revolution, it would definitively be "modern" (the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky celebrated the project as "the first monument without a beard"), which meant for Tatlin that it was in strict obedience to the principle of the "culture of materials" (that is, of "truth to materials") he had been developing in his sculptural ▲ reliefs of 1914–17. Second, it was to be an entirely functional, productivist object (Mayakovsky also called it "the first object of October"), surpassing, in yet another sense, the Eiffel Tower, whose principal use was as a radio antenna. Third, like all public monuments, it was conceived as a symbolic beacon: it spelled out "dynamism" as the ethos of the Revolution.

At the Inkhuk, the formation by Rodchenko and his friends of the Working Group of Objective Analysis, which precipitated Kandinsky's demise as director, had preceded by just a few weeks the unveiling of Tatlin's monument. Given the enormous attention that this project received in Moscow at the time, it is not surprising that the Working Group focused on the issues it raised. The fact that it was an experimental design unlikely ever to be built (although it was declared technically possible by a team of Soviet engineers) did not deter them—on the contrary, the very fact that a project could have such an impact was an encouragement to pursue "laboratory work." Bracketing for the moment the concern for production and functionality, the members of the Working Group concentrated on the model's two other aspects, its "truth to materials" (or *faktura*) and its symbolic dynamism (or tectonics), which were seen by Rodchenko and the others as being contradictory in Tatlin's project. They felt that at the material level, and contrary to Tatlin's argument, nothing justified the formal use of a spiral and the appeal to an age-old iconography. The Monument was a romantic affair, they argued, elaborated by a lone artist in the secrecy of his studio and with the traditional tools of his craft; its formal organization remained an indecipherable secret that reeked of "bourgeois individualism": it was not a construction but an authorial composition.

The construction/composition debate

But those terms were too loose and had to be properly defined: from January 1, 1921, to the end of April, the Working Group conducted a lengthy debate centering upon the very notions of construction and composition. Each participant had to demonstrate, by means of a pair of drawings, what they understood of these two opposing words. Except for the drawings of Nikolai Ladovsky (1881–1941) and Karl Ioganson (c. 1890–1929)—both proposing as "construction" what would be labeled much later a "deductive structure," that is, a formal division of the surface that is predicated by the material properties (shape, proportion, dimension) of that very surface—the resulting portfolio is somewhat disappointing. Either the opposition was confused by a change of technique (*sfumato* for composition, sharp edge for construction) or by the evocation of a change in medium (a sketch of a painting versus that of a sculpture); or, especially in the case of Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982), construction was simply understood as anything with a machine look. But the written statements



2 • The Obmokhu group exhibition, Moscow, May 1921
Karl Ioganson's *Study in Balance* can be seen on the extreme left.
▲ 1914

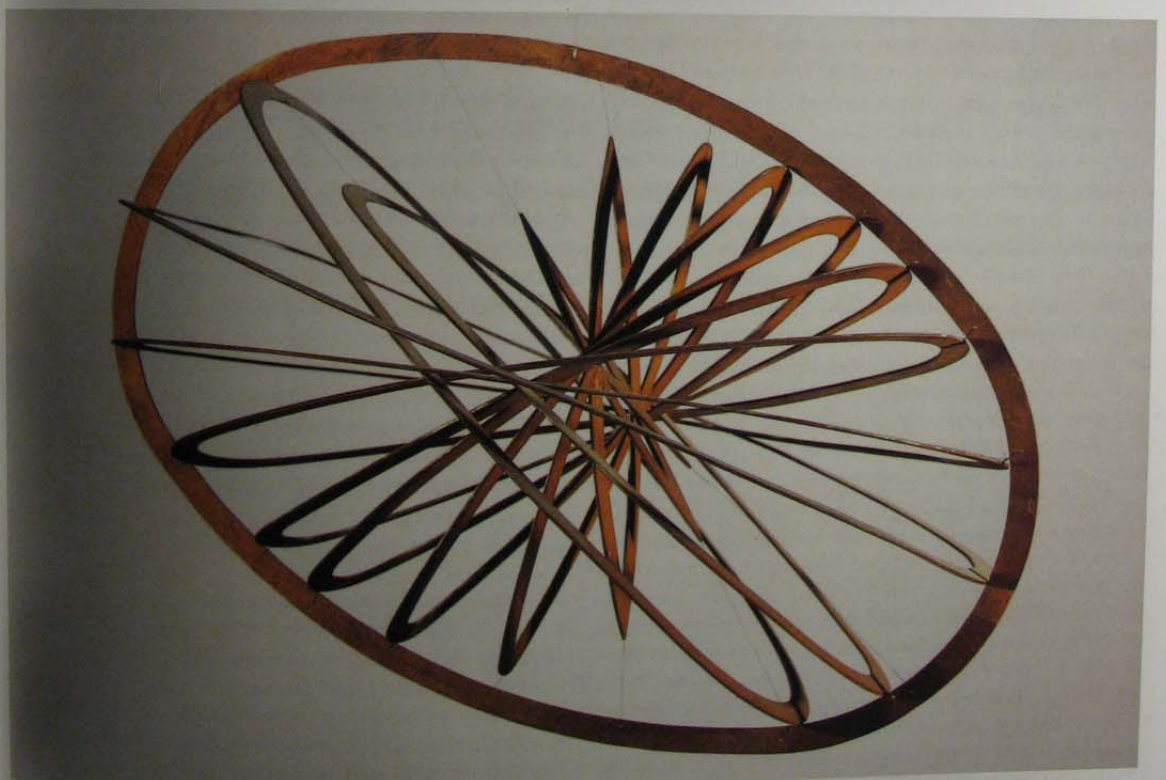
3 • Karl Ioganson, *Study in Balance*, c. 1921
Medium and dimensions unknown (destroyed)

and the many discussions that accompanied the production of these drawings are most enlightening. After much polemicizing, sometimes very harsh, a consensus was reached: construction was said to be based on a "scientific" mode or organization in which "no excess materials or elements" were involved. Or to put it in semiological terms, a construction was a "motivated" sign, that is, its arbitrariness is limited, its form and meaning being determined (motivated) by the relationship between its various materials (which is why it cannot borrow iconographical elements, for example), whereas a composition was "arbitrary."

This conclusion seems at first a rather meager result for four months of intense discussion, and the rhetoric of the debate was undoubtedly naive ("excess" = "waste" = "bourgeois epicureanism" = "morally condemnable"), but it is nevertheless from this lengthy forum that Constructivism as a movement arose: the term itself emerged during the debate, and Rodchenko quickly monopolized it, in March 1921, by forging with his closest allies the Working Group of Constructivists (it consisted of five sculptors or, rather, creators of "spatial constructions"—himself, Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetsky [1899–c. 1935], Vladimir Stenberg, and his brother Georgy [1900–33]—who were joined by Stepanova and, from outside the Inkhuk, the cultural agitator Aleksei Gan [1889–1940]). Gan, who had just been expelled from Narkompros for his extremism, was immediately put in charge of writing a Constructivist program, and a lot of debating among the Group evolved around his obscure terminology. Gan's confused and polemical prose (his book *Constructivism* appeared in 1922) is of no great help in assessing the thinking of the Group, and it is most unfortunate that this peripheral figure should have been assigned the central position of spokesman (it would prove particularly damaging, much later, when Stalin's commissars were on a repressive rampage, but it would also long distort the view of historians of the movement). Much more to the point is the artistic activity of the other founding members in the immediate aftermath of the construction/composition debate.

One farewell to art

A key event is their participation in the second group show of Obmokhu (Society of Young Artists), in May 1921, which consisted mainly of "spatial constructions" [**2**]. Even though only two of these sculptures survive, this legendary exhibition is well documented. Neither the works of the Stenberg brothers, which resemble metallic bridges, nor the polychrome sculptures of

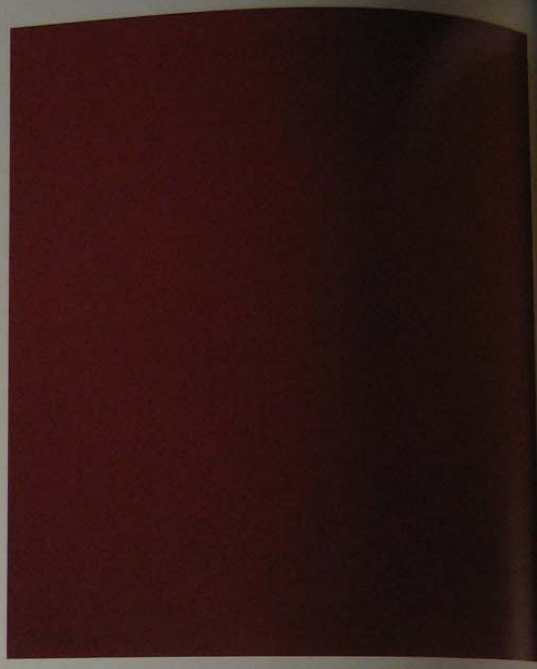


4 • Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Oval Hanging Construction No. 12*, c. 1920
Plywood, open construction partially painted with aluminum paint, and wire, 61 x 84 x 47 (24 x 35 9/16 x 18 1/2)

Medunetsky (one of which was bought by Katherine Dreier at the "First Russian Exhibition" in Berlin in 1922, and is today at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven) abide by the strict definition of construction proposed during the debate. The first do not go beyond Tatlin's conception of the "truth to materials"; the ▲ second are clearly indebted to Malevich's painting. But Rodchenko's suspended sculptures and Ioganson's "Spatial Cross Series" testify to the major step accomplished in a very short time. Both series of works were conceived as demonstrations of a "scientific" (which meant at this time dialectic, materialist, Communist) method: there was no a priori conception (no borrowed image); every aspect of the work was determined by its material conditions.

In the case of Rodchenko's suspended sculptures, a single sheet of plywood coated with aluminum paint was cut out into concentric shapes (either a circle, a hexagon, a rectangle, or an ellipse —the latter being the only surviving example of the series [**4**]). These were then rotated in depth to create various three-dimensional geometric volumes: the sculpture could easily be folded back into its original planar condition, thereby laying bare the process of its production. Ioganson's works exhibited the same pedagogical directness. In one of them in particular [**3**], set on a triangular base and consisting of three rods maintained in space through the tension of a connecting string, Ioganson attempted to give a visual and measurable form to the "excess" that every construction should aim to eradicate: the string was longer than required, but this "excess," clamped at the end of the tense loop and hanging limp, also had a demonstrative function (to lower the three pointed rods and thus transform the sculpture, one had only to release more of the string's slack). In other words, in contrast with the bourgeois artist's studio secrets, the sculpture's "logical" mode of production and deductive structure were heralded as a means of opposing the fetishization of artistic inspiration.

The same could be said of the modular sculptures that Rodchenko realized soon after the Obmokhu exhibition (each of which is made of equal-sized woodblocks, the plan sometimes being equal to the elevation). The formal logic that presides over these works, once again a deductive structure, is close to that enacted by the • Minimalists forty years later (Carl Andre would sing their praises when photographs of them appeared in the West). And it is not by chance either that such a logic should have had similar effects in both historical periods, no matter how dissimilar were the contexts of revolutionary Russia and late-fifties New York Bohemia as far as the status of painting was concerned. Carried to the extreme in this medium, the reductive direction upon which the Inkhuk Constructivist had embarked could only result in either the pure grid or the pure monochrome: within the parameters of abstraction, any other pictorial possibility would involve an opposition between figure and ground, thus giving rise to imaginary space, composition, ■ "excess." And just as Donald Judd would condemn painting for its incapacity to entirely shed illusionism, Rodchenko said farewell to this art after having shown his famous monochrome triptych at the exhibition "5 x 5 = 25" in September 1921 [**5**]: "I reduced painting



5 • Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*, 1921
Oil on canvas, 62.5 x 52.5 (24⅝ x 20⅝)

to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow," he later wrote. "I affirmed: It's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation."

Rodchenko's iconoclastic gesture quickly became a legendary landmark (nicknamed "the last picture," it is described as a ▲ turning-point by Nikolai Tarabukin, a former Formalist critic who had become the most astute ideologue of the Inkhuk group, in his 1923 treatise *From the Easel to the Machine*): with it a page of history had been turned, a point of no return had been reached. Analysis was no longer the order of the day: there was now no other possible path than to "enter production." Stepanova's December 1921 paper was a memorial service. The elaboration of a Productivist platform would be the central preoccupation of Rodchenko and his friends during the early months of 1922.

The move to propaganda

But despite their enthusiasm and their willingness to "work in the factory," the Constructivists-turned-Productivists were to meet a depressing reality: in the New Economic Policy of Lenin they could no longer count on the blanket support of the state. To their great chagrin, their services were not welcome: they were either seen as an interfering nuisance by the new entrepreneurial cast of production managers, or derided as intellectual parasites by the workers. Stepanova and Liubov Popova successfully created a line of textile designs that were mass produced (these constitute perhaps the only

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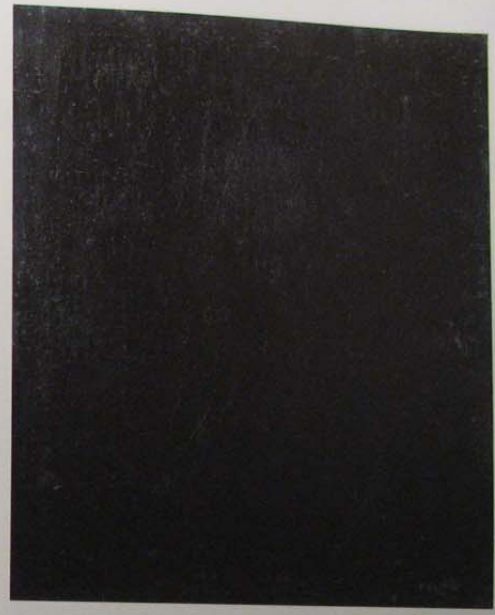

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the field of propaganda. If usefulness was the motto, and even if industry could not see a way to put artists to use, then they could at least be enlisted in advertising the Revolution (or even the objects produced, without their help, in state-owned factories). From the early twenties on, the creation of posters, theater sets, agitational stands, exhibition, and book designs became the chosen domain of the Constructivists, and with continuing success. As Tarabukin had predicted, their realizations in the ideological realm (that of imaging the Revolution) became their most important legacy. Rather than presiding over the production of objects, they had shaped the ideology of Production: they had found a niche, at last, within Soviet Russia's ever-intensifying division of labor.

FURTHER READING
Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska (eds). *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914–1932* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington; and New York: Rizzoli, 1990)
Maria Gough. "In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl Ioganson's Cold Structures," *October*, no. 84, Spring 1998
Selim Khan-Magomedov. *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, ed. Vieri Quilici (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987)
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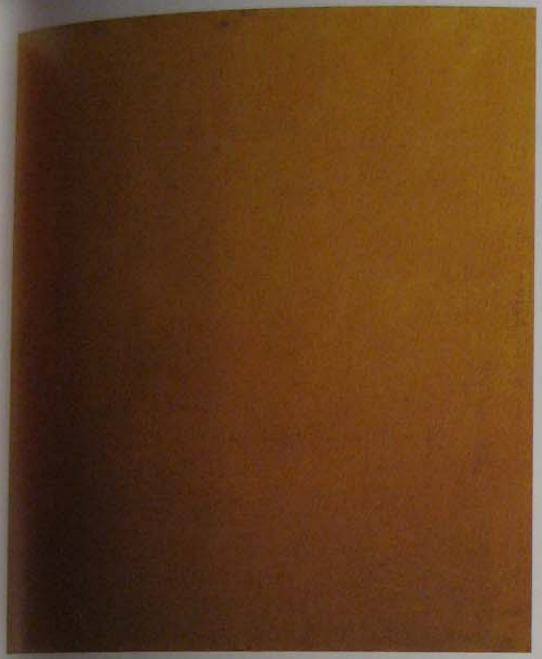

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However, the new ethos devised in early 1922 bore important fruits: not in the production of everyday functional objects, but in the field of propaganda. If usefulness was the motto, and even if industry could not see a way to put artists to use, then they could at least be enlisted in advertising the Revolution (or even the objects produced, without their help, in state-owned factories). From the early twenties on, the creation of posters, theater sets, agitational stands, exhibition, and book designs became the chosen domain of the Constructivists, and with continuing success. As Tarabukin had predicted, their realizations in the ideological realm (that of imaging the Revolution) became their most important legacy. Rather than presiding over the production of objects, they had shaped the ideology of Production: they had found a niche, at last, within Soviet Russia's ever-intensifying division of labor.

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