Rodchenko's art and fate: the experiment continues

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Aleksandr Rodchenko, an exhibit at The Museum of Modern Art New York City, June 25-October 6, 1998; Kunsthalle Dsseldorf, November 6, 1998-January 24, 1999; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, March 6-May 24, 1999

The first comprehensive US retrospective of the remarkable Russian and Soviet artist Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956) is currently on display in New York City. The exhibit will subsequently travel to Germany and Sweden.

One of the great artistic talents of the twentieth century, Rodchenko carried on innovative work in the fields of painting, sculpture, collage, photography and design (book and magazine covers, advertising and posters), among others. He gained an international reputation in the early 1920s, came into conflict with the Stalinist bureaucracy and its hangers-on later in the decade and lived out the last 20 years of his life in obscurity and isolation. He wasn't shot--he was merely silenced and excluded.

The current show does a number of things at once. From the historical point of view, it broadens and deepens one's understanding of an extraordinary generation of Russian artists. It reminds one as well of the tragic fate of art and artists at the hands of Stalinism. The exhibit inevitably raises numerous aesthetic and formal problems. And it brings before a substantial audience a collection of serious and beautiful works.

Rodchenko was born in St. Petersburg. His father, the son of a serf, worked backstage at a theater and his mother washed clothes. In the early 1900s the family moved to the provincial city of Kazan where Rodchenko later attended art school. He met his lifelong companion, Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), a remarkable artist in her own right, at the Kazan School of Fine Arts in 1914. After attending a lecture and performance in February 1914 by the Futurists David Burliuk, Vasilii Kamenskii and Vladimir Mayakovsky, he became an adherent of the Futurist movement. Rodchenko moved to Moscow in 1915 and had his work, line and compass drawings included in an exhibition organized by Vladimir Tatlin in March 1916, along with Kasimir Malevich, Lyubov Popova, Alexandra Exter, Nadezhda Udal'tsova and Tatlin himself.

Rodchenko was one of the minority of Russian artists who identified himself with the new revolutionary government after October 1917. He went to work in 1918 for the Moscow bureau of the Section of Visual Arts (Izo) of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). He was eventually named head of the Museum Bureau of Izo, and of its most important Moscow institution, the Museum of Painterly Culture. The Museum Bureau acquired nearly 2,000 works of modern art by more than 400 artists over the next several years; it also organized 30 provincial museums.

After a number of years of apparently purely formal investigations of line, color and texture, Rodchenko made an abrupt about-face in 1921 and identified himself almost exclusively thereafter with the applied arts and art in the service of social change. Thus began the adventure known as Constructivism. A discussion of the intellectual and psychological underpinnings of that movement is outside the scope of this article. Taking it at face value, Constructivism rejected "artistic inspiration," proclaimed the death of representation in art and declared that henceforth "we should only make, process, and construct."

This ultimatistic component of the Constructivist outlook was opposed by Marxists. Leon Trotsky noted, "To reject art as a means of picturing and imaging knowledge because of one's opposition to the contemplative and impressionistic bourgeois art of the last few decades, is to strike from the hands of the class which is building a new society its most important weapon."

Whether one approves of the Constructivist work or not, I think it would be wrong to view Rodchenko's sharp turn in 1921 as a sign of weakness, much less opportunism. On the contrary, his ability to work in a radically different mode, while maintaining the same essential aesthetic ferocity, seems to me a proof of the exceptional cultural resources at his disposal.

From the mid-1920s onward Rodchenko devoted himself increasingly to photography. It seems appropriate that an artist so precise and technical in his approach to the external and internal world, and so hostile to a pious attitude toward the cultural past, would have taken up an activity which, as Peter Galassi writes in an interesting essay in the exhibition catalogue, is "at once an art and not an art."

If Rodchenko hoped, consciously or not, that his entry into a field like photography, which has an "objective" and "realistic" element built into it, would somehow forestall conflicts with the increasingly bureaucratized regime, he was to be set straight. Galassi notes in his essay, "Rodchenko and [his friend and colleague filmmaker Dziga] Vertov were true believers in the Revolution, in its promise of freedom and a new world, and they threw themselves into it with headlong, almost childlike abandon. This was the ideology of their work. By the late 1920s, however, it was an interpretation of Revolutionary ideology that those in power could not much longer allow others to hold."

In April 1928 Rodchenko first came under attack for "bourgeois formalism," principally because of the unusual angles at which he photographed his subjects. It is astonishing. The Stalin bureaucracy was not characterized by depth of thought. It was acutely sensitive, however, to anything that was alien or threatening to its dominance. Rodchenko's style, which included efforts to defamiliarize objects, to make them "strange," was thoroughly objectionable. Once the attacks began, they never stopped. Rodchenko admitted his "mistakes," carried on his work with no doubt a sincere resolve to mend his ways, but unfailingly he returned to his innovations. Aesthetic and intellectual principle absorbed in a period of revolutionary upsurge were too deeply sunk in his bones and marrow.

Some of the verbal assaults were too absurd to be taken seriously as aesthetic criticism in any meaningful sense of the term. Galassi observes that the debates were "poisoned by cynical self-preservation, as individuals and groups sought the favor of an increasingly totalitarian regime." For instance, Rodchenko came under fire for his series of photos of members of the Pioneer movement, girls and boys aged nine or ten to

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fourteen. The critic Ivan Bokhanov denounced one of Rodchenko's most famous pictures, a close-up of the determined face of one young girl: "The Pioneer Girl has no right to look upward. That has no ideological content. Pioneer girls and Komsomol girls should look forward."

The artist "spent the last two decades of his life isolated, bitter, confused, demoralized, and poor" (Galassi). In a diary entry written shortly after the end of World War II, he commented: "I'm absolutely unneeded, whether I work or not, whether I live or not. I'm already as good as dead, and I'm the only who cares that I'm alive. I'm an invisible man."

High aesthetic and intellectual level

A striking feature of the current exhibit is the extraordinarily high aesthetic and intellectual level with which Rodchenko approached a wide variety of undertakings. (This recognition does not of course determine *a priori* one's response to the art. That is a separate issue, which I will discuss briefly below.) Whether the artist is engaged in painting geometric figures in oil on canvas, designing letterhead for the Soviet state airline or photographing Moscow street scenes, one feels a profound intellect and an extraordinary sensibility at work. One senses that the decisions being made are not arbitrary ones, but result from aesthetic, philosophical and, ultimately, social considerations of a very serious kind.

The artist's grandson, Aleksandr Lavrent'ev, in an essay in the catalogue, takes note of Rodchenko's fascination with the progress of science and its implications. At an exhibition of his works in 1920, Rodchenko displayed an essay that read in part: "In each of my works, I do a new experiment, with a different valence from the one that came before it." He entitled the piece, "Everything is experiment."

Lavrent'ev notes that in this period Rodchenko "was trying to determine the laws of construction governing the physical world. The categories of space and time interested him less as philosophical concepts than as attributes of various astronomic, geometric, and psychological models of the world." He was seeking to uncover the "physical, biological, and conceptual building blocks of the world, the *prima materia* of its construction." The notion that the (infinite) number of points on any given segment of a line was equal to the number of points that made up the entire universe apparently filled Rodchenko with the hope that "his own [linear] constructions might allow him to gaze into the depths of time and space."

Whether this quasi-mystical search was somewhat misguided hardly seems the point. The ambition and sweep of the artist's aims move and astonish one. "I am so interested in the future," he wrote in 1920, "that I want to be able to see several years ahead right away."

Rodchenko was a remarkable individual, but concerns of equal seriousness animated a considerable number of Russian artists of the time. Opponents of Marxism point rather lamely to the fact that artists such as Malevich, Tatlin and others had begun important work before October 1917 as proof that the revolution was a negligible factor in the shaping of artistic life. Indeed to attribute all the accomplishments of the early 1920s directly to the Bolsheviks' taking of power, as earthshaking as that event was, would be reductionist in the extreme.

It might be more useful to consider individuals such as Rodchenko as the products *as well as the producers* of a revolutionary epoch, which found its highest expression in the October Revolution, an event that then provided an immense impulse to further experimentation and innovation. Stalinism might be viewed as a counterrevolutionary response to that historical development.

I have varying reactions to the different phases of Rodchenko's work and to the various media within which he worked. The paintings of geometric figures leave me cold, by and large, exquisitely executed as they are. In fact, much of his early easel work seems so severe that it hardly allows for an emotional response--as was no doubt intended. Before, however, one shouts at some of the pieces, "A little more human, please!", it might be well to consider the terribly difficult conditions under which the artist and his colleagues worked. (This is to leave aside for the purposes of this discussion unresolved ideological issues.)

"Our age wields an ax," wrote Trotsky. He remarked in the same work that "Art needs comfort, even abundance." Rodchenko was 22 when World War I erupted. The October Revolution and the civil war of 1918-1921 followed. We know that at the time he was painting his famous "Black on Black" works in 1918 Rodchenko lived in conditions of near-starvation. The Revolution, including its immense deprivations, was no doubt inspiring, but it also exerted a severe strain on the nervous system, the stability and soundness of which are more central to the artist's work than the scientist's or the political leader's.

By 1924 the degenerative disease known as Stalinism was working its way through the Soviet organism. In short, none of the great Soviet artists was permitted the luxury of an artistic life that developed organically and naturally. We have only magnificent glimpses of what they were capable.

Rodchenko's early pieces are formally brilliant, but a little unapproachable. To my mind, he began to come into his own in a more all-sided manner with his photomontage work. His illustrations for Mayakovsky's *About This (Pro eto)* (1923) are irresistible. He combined photos of the poet, the latter's love--Lily Brik, various items cut out of magazines and found the visual equivalent of Mayakovsky's anguished, tragicomic verses. Accompanying the lines, "I paw at my ears-- / in vain! / I hear / my / my own voice / the knife of my voice cuts me through my paws," for example, Rodchenko has arranged a 50-foot Mayakovsky standing gloomily on a bridge, arctic wastes, polar bears, another shot of the normal-sized poet with his heads in his hands and a boat apparently racing through icy waters.

The two artists joined forces during the NEP period to publicize a variety of state-owned companies and the goods and services they offered. The exhibit offers a delightful selection. Rodchenko designed the packaging, Mayakovsky wrote the copy. A box of Krasnyi Aviator (Red aviator) cookies, for instance, carried a message warning enemy armies about the invincibility of the Red air force. It concludes: "Our aviation rises higher. / We are propagating the idea everywhere / even on candies: / If the sky is ours / the enemy will crawl away like a crab." An advertisement for Trekhgornoe (Three peaks) beer in 1925 read, "Trekhgornoe beer drives out hypocrisy and moonshine."

Rodchenko created, in the words of one American visitor in the 1920s, "an appalling variety of things": book and magazine covers, bookmarks, jewelry for the state airline, film posters.... The exhibit includes a reconstruction of the USSR Workers Club which he designed for the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Dcoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris. (He also designed the cover of the Soviet catalogue for the exposition.) The club, in the words of one of the current exhibit's organizers, "was a new, post-Revolutionary entity, a communal site intended to offer both political enlightenment and rest and renewal at the end of the working day."

Rodchenko's photography makes up approximately half the exhibit. It is perhaps his greatest achievement. The "principle of counterpoint," as one critic has called it, seems to apply here. In a colder, more technical medium Rodchenko can permit himself to be his warmest, most human. His photographs of Mayakovsky from 1924, showing a glowering, intensely vulnerable man, are magnificent. So is the portrait of his aging mother, also from 1924.

Rodchenko's attitude toward the political issues of the day is unknown, at least to me. It is worth noting that he included photos of Trotsky on at least two of the twenty-five lithographic posters illustrating "The History of the VKP (b) [All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)]" he was commissioned to produce in 1925-26. One of his photos from 1927 is of a large stack of files piled on a desk, entitled "Down with Bureaucracy."

The exhibit includes selections from the series, "The Building on

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Miasnitskaia Street," his photos of Pioneers (1928-30), the AMO auto factory (1929) and the Vakhtan lumber mill (1930), and his coverage of the construction of the canal between the White and Baltic seas (1933), a project carried out by penal labor at great human cost.

I found two photos of Varvara Stepanova enormously expressive and poignant. The first, taken in 1924, shows a lively, brown-haired, round-faced woman holding a cigarette in one hand, her other hand on the back of her neck. She has something of a skeptical smirk on her face, as if to say, "Well, what do you think you're up to?" Her hair is unkempt and her clothes and face look a little grubby, although it may simply be the lighting. At any rate, she appears to be taking a break from her work

The other is from 1936. It is of the same woman, although you wouldn't know it to look at her. She is dressed for outdoors, in a cloth coat, with a hat pulled down over one eye. She is looking down. Her expression? It registers bewilderment, defeat, resignation. Light from a window behind the picture-taker falls on Stepanova in such a manner that its lattice-work casts a horizontal shadow across the center of her face and a vertical shadow down the left side of her body. She appears, in other words, to be behind bars. It is one of the most terrifying photographs I know of.

1924 to 1936--only 12 years--little more than a decade, but enough time for the bottom of the century to fall out.

This is a fascinating exhibit. Go see it, if it's anywhere near you.

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