

Rodchenko: The impact of revolution and counterrevolution

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“Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography” at the Hayward Gallery, London, until April 27

The current exhibition of photomontages and photographs by Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) at London’s Hayward Gallery is one of the most comprehensive retrospectives of his work ever held. Rodchenko’s life is a powerful reminder of the creative energy unleashed by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and how it was strangled by the Stalinist counter-revolution.

Rodchenko pioneered the use of photomontage in post-revolutionary Russia for book and magazine covers, posters and advertisements—working closely with the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who provided the literary input. The partnership became extremely successful with Rodchenko writing in his diary, “We had completely conquered Moscow and completely shifted, or rather, changed the old, tsarist-bourgeois-Western style of advertising for the new Soviet.”

The first room of the exhibition displays contain fine examples of these works including the haunting cover for Mayakovsky’s 1923 love poem *About That* and the striking film poster for *Cine-Eye*

In 1924, Rodchenko took up photography and was soon capturing a person’s character or a particular event in a new and unique way. The second room of the Hayward Gallery has many of these early pictures, which have become iconic images in the history of photography, including the intimate 1924 photograph *Mother* and the portraits of his friends and comrades in the “Left Front of the Arts” (LEF) such as *Mayakovsky* and *Osip Brik*, made all the more poignant by the fact they all, in one way or another, became victims of Stalin’s terror.

LEF, said Rodchenko, “as the avant-garde of Communist culture is obligated to show how and what needs to be photographed. What to shoot—is something every photo group knows but how to shoot—only a few know.”

For Rodchenko, “how to shoot” increasingly meant taking his photographs from unusual perspectives and angles—“from the top down,” the “bottom up” and “their diagonals.” He later explained how, in 1925 in Paris, “when I first saw the Eiffel Tower from afar. I didn’t like it at all. But once I was passing nearby on a bus, and when I saw the lines of the metal diminishing upwards, from right and left through the window, this perspective gave me the impression of the mass and the construction, which ‘from the navel’ creates only a gentle spot, the one we’re so sick of on all those postcards.” Several photos taken in the neighbourhood of Rodchenko’s small apartment in Moscow, including *Fire Escape with a Man* (1925) and *Assembling for a demonstration* (1928-1930), still demonstrate the thought-provoking manner of this way of taking photographs.

Rodchenko’s preoccupation with unusual perspectives and angles was derived from conceptions he began to develop in his youth. Prior to the revolution, Rodchenko attended art school in Kazan, where he met his lifelong companion, Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), and joined the Futurist movement led by Mayakovsky, David Burliuk and Vasily

Kamensky. He then moved to Moscow and took up painting, working alongside leading artists such as the Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin.

Rodchenko, who was one of the few Russian artists to identify fully with the new revolutionary government, became a leading proponent of Constructivism at the Moscow-based Higher Technical-Artistic Studios (VKhUTEMAS), where he taught from 1920 to 1930. He rejected “pure” art, saying it should be used for social purposes and the furtherance of the revolution. In 1921, he and Stepanova wrote the Productionist Manifesto, which declared the artist’s task was to “direct materialist, constructivist work towards communist ends.” Its slogans included, “Down with art, long live technical science” and “Destroy the last remaining attachment of human thought to art.”

In many ways, these conceptions mirrored those put forward by the supporters of “Proletarian Culture” (Proletcult), who were to form the core of the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Artists (VAPP) and who led the attacks on Rodchenko and LEF in 1928.

Both trends were criticised by Leon Trotsky who warned, “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.” He rejected the possibility of forming “proletarian art,” explaining that by the time the working class had had time to create a new culture, the conditions for the transformation to a classless society would already have developed. The new culture would be non-class and express universal human values of solidarity and equality.

Trotsky’s comrade, the literary critic Alexander Voronsky, warned the members of LEF that seeing art as “constructing” life rather than “cognising” it was a utopian conception that would make its adherents “slide into complete subjectivism” and end up seeing everyday life as only “banality, tradition and inertia.”

The exile of Trotsky in 1928 and the repression of the Left Opposition he led were accompanied by an assault on all forms of critical thought by the victorious Stalinist bureaucracy. Rodchenko was accused of “bourgeois formalism”—i.e. producing elitist art, which the masses could not understand. Particular venom was directed at his *Pioneers* (1928-1930) series of photographs, with one critic declaring, “The Pioneer Girl has no right to look upward. That has no ideological content. Pioneer girls and Komsomol girls should look forward.”

The magazine *Soviet Photo* accused him of plagiarising Western photographers. He tried to fight back, writing in *New LEF* magazine that it was “not just some stupid smear.... It’s a kind of projectile missile attacking new photography. Its goal in discrediting me is to scare photographers involved in new points [of view].”

He added, “There’s no revolution in the fact that instead of a portrait of a general, people have started photographing the workers’ leaders with the same photographic approach as under the old regime or under the influence of the artistic West.”

However, the constant attacks on Rodchenko made him begin “to think in incredibly gloomy terms,” and he even contemplated suicide. “What’s happening?” he wrote in his diary. “I support the Soviet power heart and soul, I work for it with belief and love and all my strength and suddenly we are wrong.”

To make matters much worse, Mayakovsky “abandoned” LEF and joined VAPP. Rodchenko explained, “Of course we understood that he would fight in all sorts of ways for us to join too, but, on the other hand, we knew that VAPP had torn Mayakovsky away from us—not in order to give him a broad creative expanse, and not so that all the Leftists would join VAPP, but for precisely the opposite reasons. We knew that there would be nothing for us to do in VAPP, nor for Mayakovsky either.”

“And that’s how it turned out.”

Rodchenko continued to help Mayakovsky with his retrospective show “Twenty Years of Work,” but the lack of interest shown by the press and VAPP leaders “poured oil on the fire of Mayakovsky’s feelings of loneliness.” On April 14, 1930, the poet, who had joined the Bolshevik party in 1908 at the age of 16, committed suicide.

In the same year, VKhUTEMAS was closed, and in the following year, the October group Rodchenko founded with the photographer Boris Ignatovich was also shut down.

By early 1933, Stalin’s policies had helped deliver the German working class into the hands of the Nazis and brought about the downfall of the Communist International as a revolutionary instrument. From 1934, the bureaucracy ruthlessly imposed its anti-artistic and anti-Marxist doctrine of “socialist realism,” sealing the fate of creative cultural life.

Rodchenko was not spared. He was forbidden to photograph independently and only allowed to cover military parades, sporting events (*Diving*) and the circus (*The Rhine Wheel*). His unique way of seeing the world still shines through.

Rodchenko was commissioned to carry out several photo-reportage projects for magazines such as *USSR Under Construction*, but they can only be described as propaganda exercises for the regime. One of the most infamous was the book *Belomor-Baltic Canal Named After Stalin*, which documents the construction of the 140-mile-long waterway in 500 gruelling days by political prisoners and convicts. An imprint of Stalin’s face adorns the front cover whilst inside are sanitised photographs such as *Workers Orchestra* where weary workers labour away in the depth of a lock whilst an orchestra plays above.

Rodchenko still manages to produce one of the most poignant pictures in the exhibition, *Girl with a Leica 1934*, which depicts his assistant, Evgenia Lemberg. Hidden by the half-light and meshwork enveloping her like a cage, the young woman whom Rodchenko had fallen in love with was to die shortly afterwards in a railway accident.

In 1935 the “Masters of Soviet Art” exhibition was held, but Rodchenko was only allowed to display his works on condition that he publicly denounce his “formalist” errors. To rub salt into the wound, his confession was printed in *Soviet Photo*, the magazine that had led the witch-hunt against him. It is terrible to see him write how he was “struck by the sensitivity and wisdom with which the re-education of people was conducted” during the building of the Baltic Canal before declaring, “Henceforth I want to decisively reject putting formal solutions to a theme in the first place and ideological ones in second place; and at the same time I want to search inquisitively for new riches in the language of photography, in order, with its help, to create works that will stand on a high political and artistic level, works in which the photographic language will fully serve Socialist Realism.”

Once Rodchenko made his confession, he was virtually ignored. He was plagued by poverty, hunger and ill health, and the threat of further political attacks hung over him. In 1940, Rodchenko wrote despairingly in his diary, “I think I have lived my life fairly pointlessly and without much calculation, and approaching old age I’ve turned out to be an eccentric,

not needed by anyone and not interesting to anyone. I don’t expect anything, I hope for nothing.”

In 1942, Rodchenko stopped photographing and decided to start painting again. It seems to have re-invigorated him. On July 30, 1943, he wrote in his diary:

“The painting has taken off!! But horrors!!! It’s leftist painting. And Lord Almighty, what a joy it is to be leftist.... To be myself after all these torments and counter to common sense. Not to break myself, to paint with pleasure!! What will be, will be!!! But I’ll die leftist and leave behind good works.”

At one point he writes mockingly, “Stalin—is a hero of Socialist Labour and marshal of the Soviet Union and Supreme Commander!” and concludes, “I’m a romantic. It seems that everything could have been done differently. Both the life of the USSR and myself....”

That last entry in Rodchenko’s diary is worth thinking about. It is in stark contrast to the conclusion reached by the exhibition’s curator, Olga Sviblova, that the Soviet government and the Russian avant-garde “danced together.” Both, she claims, believed “absolutely that they were working to change reality for the better, and that that change would arrive tomorrow. It was a big delusion, but they believed in it all the same.”

Sviblova’s statement is symptomatic of the main problem with the exhibition—its superficial treatment of the historical context of Rodchenko’s life and works. Nevertheless, she is to be congratulated for assembling such a comprehensive collection of pictures, and you should try and get along to see them.

About That
Cine-Eye
Mother
Mayakovsky
Osip Brik
Escape with a Man (1925)
Assembling for a demonstration (1928-1930)
Pioneers (1928-30)
Diving
<http://desibilasypitias.files.wordpress.com/2007/08/rodchenko2.jpg>
The Rhine Wheel
Workers Orchestra
Girl with a Leica 1934

See Also:

The forging of a new art: "New Art for a New Era: Malevich's Vision of the Russian Avant-Garde" At the Barbican Centre, London [16 June 1999]
Rodchenko's art and fate: the experiment continues [29 August 1998]



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