Bolshevism and the avant-garde artists (1993)

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The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932, *at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (September 25, 1992–January 3, 1993) in New York City, was a major artistic and political event. In response, the* Bulletin *newspaper, a predecessor of the* World Socialist Web Site, *published a seven-part article by arts editor David Walsh, devoted to the issues raised by the exhibition, in February-March 1993. The piece was later republished in the* Fourth International *magazine, Volume 20 Number 1, Winter-Spring 1994.*

As the article indicates, the show was originally planned in 1988 when Mikhail Gorbachev was still in power in the USSR. By the time the massive exhibition went on display in New York and other cities, the Soviet Union had collapsed and the organizers made a concerted effort to use the occasion as a means of discrediting or marginalizing the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The 800 items on show, however, told a very different story, of the vibrancy of post-Revolutionary intellectual and artistic life, and the great impetus to creative activity provided by the first seizure of power by the working class in history. The show created considerable interest in the general public, attracting more than a quarter of a million visitors.

The massive exhibit of Russian and Soviet avant-garde artistic work on display from September 25 to January 3, 1992, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932,* deserves considerable attention and study. It is of great interest both for the aesthetic quality of the work itself and from the standpoint of the innumerable historical and intellectual questions it raises.

The purpose of this article is not to review the formal qualities of the art as such, but to consider the relationship of those artists generally identified with Russian Futurism and Constructivism to the revolutionary workers state and the tasks it confronted, and the implications of that relationship for the artists' work. [1]

The aim is to address a number of questions: What was the reaction of the left artists to the taking of power by the working class? What was the attitude of the new revolutionary regime to the artists? Was there a "Bolshevik" tendency in art? How was the role of art in the construction of socialism conceived of by the artists and by the revolutionaries? What is the significance of this history for the present period?

The attempt to answer these questions involves, in part, an examination of the unavoidable contradictions and conflicts that arose as artists from the petty-bourgeois bohemia attempted to grapple with the reality of a social revolution, and disciplined, highly-trained proletarian revolutionaries attempted to grapple with the artistic process, in which the unconscious and the irrational play such a significant role.

One figure, more than any other, was able to grasp and master the contradictions of both fields of activity: Leon Trotsky. In considering the artists and art of this period and their relation to the October Revolution, one is reminded forcefully that penetrating answers to some of the most difficult problems were advanced nearly 70 years ago in Trotsky's writings and remarks.

As we shall see when we examine the contents of the Guggenheim catalog, it was impossible to mount such an exhibit, even in the present political atmosphere, without confronting as a central question the role of Trotsky and his appreciation and critique of early Soviet art. How that confrontation actually took place is a matter that will have to be considered.

The exhibit consisted of some 800 paintings, sculptures, architectural models, stage designs, photographs and posters. Dozens of the artists whose work was included merit and in many cases have received their own individual exhibitions and been the subjects of specialized studies. This is some of the most influential work carried out this century.

The show was originally planned in 1988 at a time when Mikhail Gorbachev was in power and *glasnost* was on the lips of every bourgeois commentator. The exhibit was organized by the Guggenheim in conjunction with the State Tret'iakov Gallery in Moscow, the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and the Schirn Kunsthalle of Frankfurt.

The very title of the exhibit, *The Great Utopia,* is indicative of the general attitude of the exhibitors to the artists and their work. In their preface to the show's catalog, the Guggenheim's director and deputy director write: "The term 'utopia' carries with it the spirit of the avant-garde's project to place art at the service of greater social objectives and to create harmony and order in the chaotic world around them. Given the course history has taken in Russia in the twentieth century, 'utopia' also has connotations of impracticality; idealism is good in theory, but not in practice" (preface in the exhibit's catalog, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* [New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992], p. x).

Officials at the Russian museums, in their introductory comments, strenuously attempt to distinguish the art from the revolution and its political and social implications. They write: "In a political sense, this exhibition comes perhaps too late. Since the early 1980s, the idea of romantic underpinnings to the revolution has lost popularity. Yet the artistic might of this era, with its gathering of creative energies and investigations, has continued to hold its ground against more short-lived political ideologies and economies. It is therefore that much more important for the public to be able to see for the first time the breadth of Russian avant-garde art without a background of political fervor—to see it in peace and to be able to measure fully its place in the development of art in our world" (preface in the catalog, p. xiii).

These two arguments—(1) that the very notion of art contributing to the changing of reality (or the very notion of changing reality in a progressive fashion at all) was*utopian***,** and (2) that there was no connection between the revolution and the burst of creative energy which took place in the 1910s and 1920s—are best refuted by the exhibition itself.

In the first place, it documents the extraordinary, almost superhuman, and eminently "practical" achievements of the October Revolution in a number of spheres of human activity. If there were no heritage of the revolution other than the accomplishments of the period 1917-1923 in the fields of culture, education and social planning, it would stand vindicated by history.

Practical contributions of the revolution in the field of art included, among many others, the establishment of the State Free Art Workshops in the autumn of 1918. According to a Russian art historian, this meant that

"for the first time in its history art education in Russia was based on the principles of freedom and democracy" (Natal'ia Adaskina, "The Place of Vkhutemas in the Russian Avant-Garde," an essay in the catalog, p. 284).

There were as well the activities of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), the creation of Obmokhu (the Society of Young Artists) in 1919 and its exhibitions, the creation of the Vkhutemas (Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops) in 1920, out of which much of the most experimental work evolved, the work of Kazimir Malevich's Unovis (the Affirmers of the New Art) group in Vitebsk, the establishment of the ground-breaking Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow, the work of the Constructivists and the Production artists, and the efforts by a great variety of artists to contribute to the cultural and intellectual uplifting of the working class and Soviet masses.

But the opposite of "utopianism" is not simply "practical" achievement. In addition to their paintings, poems and sculptures, the Soviet artists contributed, through their theoretical work, to an understanding of objective reality and how its truth might be uncovered. However misguided some of the conclusions which they drew might have been, there is no question that the work carried out in the field of aesthetics in the early years of the October Revolution represents an extremely rich body of knowledge. Much of that work, of course, lay buried for decades as a result of the crimes of Stalinism.

The second argument—that political life and the revolution itself were incidental to the artists' work—is so intellectually shallow and dishonest that it almost defies a response. In the first place, the artists involved, of the most varied predilections and temperaments, embraced the cause of social revolution and communism. They did so with many initial equivocations and difficulties (we will discuss that question below), but the fact is they identified themselves with the revolutionary workers state.

An anticommunist Russian art critic, Igor Golomshtok (*Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China* [New York: Icon Editions, 1990]), notes that the list of Soviet émigrés "does not include even one of the champions of the radical transformation of the world through art" (p. 20).

When one encounters such works as Pavel Filonov's *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat,* Boris Ender's *Portrait of Karl Liebknecht,* Natan Al'tman's *Petrocommune,* Gustav Klutsis's *Project for a Construction for the Fifth Anniversary of the October Revolution,* El Lissitzky's *Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg),* Aleksandr Vesnin's *Proposal for a Monument to the Third Congress of the Communist International*—all nonrepresentational works—one is confronted with a process that surely cannot be ascribed to "coercion."

It is perfectly true, of course, that the first work of artists such as Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Liubov' Popova predates the October Revolution itself. This is advanced as an argument against considering the 1917 revolutionary overthrow as a decisive event in their careers.

This superficial view ignores the complex relationship of culture and political life that had developed internationally over an entire historical epoch. The Russian Revolution was not merely a product of a spontaneous upsurge of the working class onto which were grafted a few Bolshevik slogans. Nor did the work of the Russian Futurists, Suprematists and Constructivists emerge simply because these artists had the opportunity to view a few canvases by Picasso, Braque, Matisse and others. [2]

The October Revolution was itself the product of an international struggle for the highest principles and ideals, which took place over a period of decades, including a struggle on the cultural and aesthetic fronts. Conversely, the turning inside out of artistic forms in the first decades of the century would have been inconceivable without the challenge thrown down to capitalist society, intellectually and practically, by socialism and the working class. That the revolution itself provided an impetus for artistic experimentation is hardly an issue for debate.

Much of the work in the exhibit was stunning. The greater part of the exhibit was devoted to nonrepresentational painting of the Futurist, Cubo-Futurist, Suprematist and related schools. The artists involved, influenced by a combination of artistic, social and scientific revolutions, attempted to make a decisive break with previous trends. There was an awareness, at the center of their work, that it was necessary to reconsider society, man and art in the face of vast, rapid and global changes.

It is not possible within the scope of this article to review the exhibit in any detail, but certain pieces, artists and entire tendencies stand out.

Any consideration of Russian and Soviet art has to recognize the contribution of Malevich (1878-1935) and the Unovis group, including Lissitzky (1890-1941), Il'ia Chashnik, Nikolai Suetin and others. After working through all the major European and Russian trends, Malevich, in the midst of World War I, abandoned completely figurative, representational painting for "non-objective" work. At the O.10 exhibition in 1915, he dismayed critics with his Suprematist *Black Square*—a painted black square in a painted white frame.

According to Malevich " 'reality' lay concealed behind the world's objective envelope, and this envelope had to be torn open and the shackles of *predmetnost'* (objectivity) and *razum* (reason) broken in order to ensure the appearance of a new 'Realism'..." (quoted in Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Unovis: Epicenter of a New World," an essay in the catalog, p. 59).

Chashnik's *The Seventh Dimension: Suprematist* and his *Color Lines in Vertical Motion* demonstrate an enormous talent. His *Cosmos—Red Circle on Black Surface* (1925), for example, is an extraordinary work. A giant red circle (sun, planet) hovers in blackness (sky, atmosphere). Under it on the painting's surface floats a Suprematist-like structure (space station), lines and rectangles arranged horizontally across a central bar. The Suprematist craft—delicate, outweighed, pale in color—is seemingly directed toward the gigantic, perfect red sphere. The enormity of the task, the terrifying emptiness of the universe, the flimsiness of the vessel, are clear to the viewer.

The work of Rodchenko (1891-1956)—painter, Constructivist, designer, photographer—was also prominent in the exhibition. His paintings from the *5 X 5= 25* exhibition in 1921 stood out in particular. Rodchenko also took the path of "non-objective" work. The exhibition includes his "black on black" paintings from 1918; *Hanging Spatial Construction* (1921)—one of the first Constructivist works; an advertising poster: "Shouldn't We Produce Pencils We Can Use?" (1923); book covers; film posters; textile designs and a number of extraordinary photographs from the late 1920s.

The Great Utopia included the body of work produced by a remarkable group of women artists, a powerful indication of the social revolution's liberating effect, including Popova (1889-1924), Olga Rozanova (1886-1918), Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), Nadezhda Udal'tsova (1886-1961), Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaia (1888-1963), Antonina Sofronova (1892-1966), Vera Ermolaeva (1893-1938), Nina Kogan (1889-1942) and Ksenia Ender (1894-1953).

Rozanova's *Non-objective Composition* (1916) and Popova's *Space-Force Construction* (1920-1921) were particularly striking.

The brilliant Tatlin was represented by his "reliefs," sculptures composed of iron, copper, wood, rope, aluminum, zinc—Cubism (although he publicly rejected the trend) in three dimensions.Unfortunately, none of Tatlin's paintings was displayed at the Guggenheim because he had already given up painting by 1915. In addition to his reliefs, his costume and set designs for the theater, his prototypes of men's and women's clothing and sketches for teapots and creamers were on display.

Also prominent was the work of the relatively unknown Klutsis (1895-1938). His art was represented in a variety of fields: painting, designs for screens, stands and "Radio-Orator No. 5," posters, book covers and window designs.

In addition, the exhibition contained several remarkable paintings of

Filonov (1882-1941), which, in their tribute to natural form, opposed the geometries of the Suprematists and Constructivists. The film posters of the Stenberg brothers, Vladimir (1899-1982) and Georgii (1900-1933), stood out, as did the work of Ivan Kliun (1873-1943), a painter from a slightly older generation, and the work of the Projectionists, a group of younger artists who came of age in the mid-20s.

The Great Utopia also contained sections devoted to Soviet architecture, textile design, porcelain, graphic design and photography.

The exhibitors did their best to portray the first years of the consolidated Stalin regime as a direct continuation and natural outgrowth of the early years of the revolutionary regime, but the art speaks for itself. There is a world of difference between the unforced, almost anarchic quality of the work from 1918-1923 and the posters, for example, that begin to appear in the late 1920s, exhorting workers or collective farm members to fulfill industrial or agricultural plans. Particularly ominous is Gustav Klutsis's poster *For the Building of Socialism under Lenin's Banner* (1930) in which an unintentionally sinister Stalin looms behind Lenin's head. Stalin also appears, on his own, in Klutsis's *The Victory of Socialism in Our Country Is Guaranteed* (1932).

A simple endorsement of the work on display and the acknowledgement of its beauty and intellectual force are surely not adequate at this point in history. The artists themselves would certainly not have proceeded in such a manner. They were divided into tendencies that disputed furiously among themselves on an entire range of aesthetic and social questions.

There has been a predilection to adopt an uncritical attitude toward the Soviet artists and their work. There are a number of reasons for this. First, their fate, for the most part tragic, produced for an entire historical period a natural (and correct) tendency to defend them retroactively against the denunciations of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Klutsis died in the purges. Left art critic Nikolai Punin, the husband of poet Anna Akhmatova, was sent to a labor camp in the late 1930s. Roy Medvedev writes: "It would be hard to list all the writers arrested and destroyed in 1936-39" (*Let History Judge* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1989], p. 446).

Malevich died in 1935, after years in which his work was either ignored or reviled as "formalist" and "decadent." Lissitzky attempted to become a loyal Stalinist, but his artistic conscience prevented him from joining the school of "Socialist Realism." He simply faded away. Rodchenko ceased serious work after the early 1930s, at one point turning on his own work and destroying 10 canvases. Tatlin, one of the most extraordinary creators of the twentieth century, worked almost exclusively in theater design after 1934. According to a biographer, "The end of his life was very hard. And when he died there were only seven or eight of us at his funeral" (Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova [ed.], *Tatlin* [New York: Rizzoli, 1988] p. 439).

Second, Stalinist repression and Western indifference or hostility to these artists, under international conditions of political reaction, shrouded their work in obscurity to a large extent, thereby making any examination, critical or otherwise, a difficult task. Under the very contradictory conditions of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the breakup of the postwar order, the artists and their work have emerged in recent years from that obscurity.

Paul Wood's "The Politics of the Avant-Garde"

Broad and far-reaching issues are raised by a number of the essays which appear in the exhibit's catalog and which, in one way or another, contribute to a critical approach. The first essay in the catalog, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde" by Paul Wood, attempts to address a problem which is of great interest to Marxists: the relation between the artistic work of the avant-garde and their politics and, more specifically, the possible correlation between the artistic avant-garde and the Trotskyist Left Opposition.

Judging from the sources he quotes approvingly, Wood travels in state capitalist (the British Socialist Workers Party) and Pabloite circles. His essay, which contains some valuable material, is nevertheless informed by the outlook and imbued with the atmosphere of petty-bourgeois radicalism.

Wood speaks of the apparent irony that the recent and sudden availability of the art of the Russian avant-garde coincides with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Characteristically, he addresses himself to the "academic researcher" and suggests that he or she "would do well to remember that Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Dziga Vertov, Gustav Klutsis, and the rest, working in conditions of privation to begin with and harsh censorship later, were all, without exception, explicitly committed to working class revolution—out of which a new order of international socialism would arise" (ibid., pp. 12).

He continues, "One should not overlook the paradox that the very research which progressively reveals the contours of the Soviet avant-garde is predicated on the historic defeat of the avant-garde's social vision" (ibid., p. 2).

It is revealing that Wood identifies the collapse of the Soviet state with the historic (perhaps final) defeat of the perspective of "working class revolution" and "international socialism."

He then discusses the different approaches art historians and critics have traditionally taken toward the Soviet artists and their politics, dividing the former into three general categories.

First, Wood describes those who subscribe to the "severance" theory—i.e., critics who simply dissociate the avant-garde from revolutionary politics. He quotes the well-known art historian John Bowlt, who wrote in 1984: "Perhaps the most dangerous rumor concerning the Russian avant-garde has to do with its alleged support of radical politics, and radical political philosophy in general" (ibid.). This piece of bourgeois wishful thinking is disputed by historic fact, including the declarations of the artists concerned.

The second approach, which Wood terms "revisionist," developed in the late 1970s and the 1980s under the general heading of a critique of Modernism and a new social history of art. Christina Lodder in her *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), a groundbreaking work in many ways, attributed the failure of the Russian avant-garde to the "success" of the revolution. She takes as her premises the existence of a repressive party and its preference for a Realist art, Realist art's supposed popularity and accessibility to the uneducated masses and the harsh material circumstances that aborted artistic experimentation.

Both of these approaches take as their starting point the greatest lie of the twentieth century: that Stalinism was the inevitable outgrowth and continuity of Bolshevism. The first approach regards the revolution as an incidental (and tragic) event, which represented an interruption in the evolution of the artists' work. It takes for granted that Leninism and Stalinism form one nightmarish continuum.

The second, more sophisticated approach attempts to draw connections between the aims of the social revolution and the artists, but considers the entire enterprise, somewhat regretfully, a failure. It suggests that the "masses" are inherently philistine and their rise to power is incompatible with experimental art. Stalinism, the implication goes, is what the population either desired or deserved.

The third argument also advances the falsehood that Stalinism equals Bolshevism, but in an even more sinister form. The new approach, manifested in the work of figures like Boris Groys and Igor Golomshtok, essentially accuses the avant-garde artists of complicity with Stalinism or responsibility for its repulsive offspring in the field of culture, Socialist

Realism.

Groys, in *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), asserts Socialist Realism's "identity with the avant-garde era" (p. 125) and "the unity of their fundamental artistic aim" (p. 126). The reactionary émigré Golomshtok, in his *Totalitarian Art* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), writes: "If the principal characteristic of totalitarianism is that it proclaims its ideological doctrine as both uniquely true and universally obligatory, then it is the artistic avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s who first elaborated a totalitarian ideology of culture" (p. 21).

Unraveling this piece of reactionary idiocy would take more time than it's worth, but a few things can be pointed out. Golomshtok has adopted the view, first propounded in the 1930s by ultra-lefts, of the identity of Stalinism and fascism and taken it one step further. He has apparently managed to identify an ideological doctrine that produces totalitarianism.

Taking the sweeping and occasionally monomaniacal declarations of the Futurist artists at face value, he draws a direct connection between them and the brutal Stalinist system of authoritarian dictates. To utilize the artists' excesses in the immediately postrevolutionary years, against which Lenin and Trotsky strenuously fought, as proof of their responsibility for the crimes of the 1930s is the height of dishonesty. That some of the "left" arguments were utilized by spokesmen for the bureaucracy at a later period and for different purposes is a separate matter, which we will consider below.

Golomshtok's real intent is to vilify any outlook that claims it is possible to cognize objective truth, suggests that the world can and should be altered and insists that art has a role to play in that process. He, unlike the more liberal-minded critics, has no intention of forgiving Mayakovsky,[3] Tatlin and others for their support of the revolution. Nor will he dismiss their declarations of support for Communism and world revolution as incidental or accidental.

In the second part of his essay, Wood points to the "decline" of the avant-garde after the end of War Communism—the revolution's "heroic" phase—and the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921, reports on its dissatisfaction with the rising bureaucracy and attempts to correlate the activities of this variegated artistic tendency with those of the Trotskyist Left Opposition. Specifically, Wood links the renewed "left" activity in the arts with two "waves" of opposition to the bureaucracy, 1923-1924 (the formation of the Left Opposition) and 1926-1927 (the creation of the Joint Opposition).

He points legitimately, for example, to two reports given by Tatlin in November 1924 on the work of his Section for Material Culture at the Ginkhuk (State Institute of Artistic Culture) in Petrograd. In these reports, Tatlin "set his defense of a planned approach to the design of material culture in a context of 'anarchy' reigning in production" (Wood, p. 13). Wood suggests that there was a "natural" affinity of the avant-garde artists for the Opposition at this time because of the latter's insistence on economic planning.

After declaring that he doesn't want to suggest that "Lef was in any simple sense a cultural 'reflection' of the Left Opposition," Wood proceeds to do precisely that, only not "simply." (Lef, an acronym for "Left Front of the Arts," was the name of the journal published by the group, founded in 1923, which represented the general outlook of the Futurists.)

Wood states that the "avant-garde, the left front, is thus related to the Left Opposition. It is so, however, not as a reflection but as kind of relatively autonomous equivalent...it was its 'historically logical aesthetic correlative'" (ibid., p. 17).

Wood asserts that "on at least four grounds the left front of the arts can be read as the cultural correlative of the predominantly Trotskyist Left Opposition: in terms of hostility to NEP; in terms of a commitment to planning; in terms of a requirement for a level of working class prosperity to consume the goods produced; and in terms of a requirement for industrial democracy to provide an environment in which the artistic-constructor/engineer might function" (ibid.).

There is truth to the proposition that the left artists in general were hostile to the growth of the bureaucracy. And there is no lack of evidence of the sympathy of individual artists for Trotsky personally. Both before and after the revolution, his writings on literature and politics carried enormous weight in intellectual circles. Much of this history has been suppressed by Stalinist and bourgeois historians.

We know, for example, that the experimental theater director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, was very close to Trotsky, that Sergei Esenin, the imagist poet who committed suicide in 1925, admired him highly, that poet Osip Mandelstam made warm comments about Trotsky which were suppressed, etc.

Nevertheless, one must reject Wood's basic thesis. It has two fundamental problems.

In the first place, the identification of a particular artistic-literary current with the Left Opposition equates art and politics in a thoroughly incorrect manner. The Left Opposition was not simply a group of like-minded individuals who were disturbed by the growth of inequality and the suppression of inner-party democracy. The Opposition was the continuator of genuine Bolshevism and Marxism, the representative of the interests of the international working class.

Wood ignores Lenin and Trotsky's oft-stated rejection of all efforts by literary groups to be named the officially sanctioned "Communist art." Trotsky wrote: "And at any rate, the Party cannot and will not take the position of a literary circle which is struggling and merely competing with other literary circles.... If it is not possible to determine the place of any given group today, then the Party as a Party will wait patiently and gracefully. Individual critics or readers may sympathize with one group or another in advance. The Party, as a whole, protects the historic interests of the working class and must be more objective and wise" (*Literature and Revolution* [New York: Russell and Russell], pp. 218-219). This is a question we will return to more than once.

Furthermore, Wood, by "lining up" the left artists with the Opposition in this schematic fashion, ignores the difference, even conflict, between two methods of cognizing the world: the Marxist-scientific and the artistic. That the sympathy of the artists for the revolution was not automatically translated into participation in the activities of the Opposition does not indicate, for example, approval of Stalinism or its dogma of "socialism in one country."

The very process by which the artist cognizes the world, through images; the close link of his or her realm to sense perception, immediate impressions and emotions; and the greater role of intuition and the unconscious in artistic work—this almost guarantees that the artist "lags behind" the politics of the day. The "reward" is that the extraordinary artist divines and reveals truth that goes beyond the immediate struggles.

A question occurs to Wood: "If indeed Lef was a kind of correlate to...the Left Opposition [which we have just suggested is a false premise], why did not the latter embrace it?" (Wood, p. 17). He concludes, through a brief examination of Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* and Nikolai Gorlov's *Futurism and Revolution*, that "what could have been a constructive dialogue" (ibid., p. 19) between the avant-garde and the Opposition had, in fact, begun.

It is in the course of his consideration of *Literature and Revolution* that Wood's ignorance and the "asses' ears" of his petty-bourgeois world outlook truly emerge. He describes Trotsky's work, in the jargon of the postmodern critic, as the "main site" of the "historical confrontation between the avant-garde and the Left Opposition."

Trotsky devoted 60 dense and thoughtful pages to the problems raised by Futurism and Formalism. Prefacing a reference to Trotsky's critical remarks on Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem *150 Million* and Tatlin's

Monument to the Third International, Wood remarks condescendingly, "It has to be remembered that Trotskii was not an art critic and, at this date, was not overly familiar with the products of the European avant-garde.... Given the unfamiliarity of that avant-garde's devices and the threat these must have posed to a consciousness raised on the norms of Enlightenment/classical culture, it is Trotskii's bias in favor of toleration rather than dismissiveness that deserves our attention" (ibid., p. 18).

Clearly, *Literature and Revolution* and its "tolerant," but critical, bias does not satisfy Wood. He is particularly unsettled, one senses, by Trotsky's remark that Futurism is "in some respects, a Bohemian revolutionary offshoot of the old art...." *(Literature and Revolution,* p. 13).

Searching for more uncritical admirers, Wood happens on the writings of Nikolai Gorlov, an Old Bolshevik, who wrote a pamphlet in 1924 entitled *Futurism and Revolution.* Wood asserts that Gorlov "is more perspicacious than Trotskii about the relations of existing art with bourgeois society. In particular, his technical grasp of the avant-garde's innovations exceeds Trotskii's...." (Wood, p. 18).

Trotsky refers to Gorlov's work in *Literature and Revolution,* stating that it "violates a historic perspective and identifies Futurism with proletarian poetry" (p. 144). At the same time, he praises the pamphlet for "thoughtfully and weightily" summarizing the achievements of Futurism in art and form.

Gorlov's work (included in *The Futurists, the Formalists and the Marxist Critique*, [London: Ink Links, 1979]) is valuable in regard to its analysis of Mayakovsky's poetry in particular. It suffers, however, from an oversimplified and uncritical identification of Futurism with Bolshevism.

Gorlov, in a typical effusive comment, states: "The futurists struck against the taste (and therefore, the life-style) of the bourgeoisie, while we Bolsheviks struck against their order" (ibid., p. 191). Again: "The futurists, as I've already said, made the same revolution as we Bolsheviks, but made it from the other end" (ibid. p. 194).

The actual relation between Futurism, and the avant-garde in general, and the October Revolution is very much an issue in Trotsky's work. The complex social and artistic issues involved, and their profound treatment by Trotsky, were not grasped by Gorlov, and Wood is incapable of even referring to them.

In *Literature and Revolution,* Trotsky provided his readers with a detailed and critical overview of Futurism, not simply taking the often extravagant, if entertaining, claims of Mayakovsky and his colleagues at face value. He explained that Futurism was a European phenomenon that reflected, from a sociological point of view, the contradictory development of capitalist society beginning in the mid-1890s.

While Europe experienced two decades of unparalleled prosperity, elaborating "new standards, new criteria of the possible and impossible," and urging "people towards new exploits" (*Literature and Revolution,* p. 126), official society continued to move in the same stagnant channels.

"The armed peace...the hollow parliamentary system, the external and internal politics based on the system of safety valves and brakes, all this weighed heavily on poetry at a time when the air, charged with accumulated electricity, gave signs of impending social explosions. Futurism was the 'foreboding' of all this in art," he wrote (ibid.).

Russian Futurism

When critics or admirers, such as Nikolai Gorlov (*Futurism and Revolution*, 1924), attributed so much significance to Futurism's violent protests against bourgeois life and morals, Trotsky pointed out they were simply revealing their ignorance about the evolution of literary tendencies. "The French romanticists, as well as the German, always spoke scathingly of bourgeois morality and philistine life. More than that, they wore long hair, flirted with a green complexion, and for the ultimate shaming of the bourgeoisie, Theophile Gautier put on a sensational red vest" (*Literature and Revolution* [New York: Russell and Russell], p. 128).

He did suggest that the interrevolutionary period (1905 to 1917) which had given birth to Russian Futurism had provided it with certain advantages: "It caught rhythms of movement, of action, of attack, and of destruction which were as yet vague" (ibid., p. 129).

But the decisive event in Futurism's evolution was not a literary or artistic one, but the "workers' Revolution in Russia" which "broke loose before Futurism had time to free itself from its childish habits, from its yellow blouses, and from its excessive excitement, and before it could be officially recognized, that is, made into a politically harmless artistic school whose style is acceptable" (ibid.).

The fact that the revolution caught the Futurists while they were still a persecuted, youthful group pushed them in the direction of the working class and socialism. But, Trotsky hastened to add, "Futurism carried the features of its social origin, bourgeois Bohemia, into the new stage of development. In the advance guard of literature, Futurism is no less a product of the poetic past than any other literary school of the present day" (ibid., p. 130).

It is this, of course, that Paul Wood ("The Politics of the Avant-Garde," in the exhibition catalog, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* [New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992]) does not want to hear. His entire effort is aimed at smoothing out, eliminating the distinction between petty-bourgeois bohemia and Bolshevism.

In a profound passage, Trotsky criticizes the Futurists for their purely negative attitude toward the artistic past. "The call of the Futurists to break with the past, to do away with Pushkin, to liquidate tradition, etc., has a meaning in so far as it is addressed to the old literary caste.... But the meaninglessness of this call becomes evident as soon as it is addressed to the proletariat. The working class does not have to, and cannot break with literary tradition, because it is not in the grip of such a tradition. The working class does not know the old literature, it still has to master Pushkin, to absorb him, and so overcome him" (ibid.).

(It is well to review these words in the light of efforts by the most extreme of the so-called multiculturalists, who have all the weaknesses of the Futurists and show no sign of their strengths, to write off in an antihistorical fashion much of bourgeois culture as "white," "male," "European," etc.)

Trotsky explains the usefulness of the Futurists' breaking with the closed-in circles of the intelligentsia, who have nothing left to say, but adds that "it is not necessary to make a universal law of development out of the act of pushing away" (ibid., p. 131).

Trotsky points out that Marxists live in traditions, "and we have not stopped being revolutionists on account of it. We elaborated and lived through the traditions of the Paris Commune, even before our first revolution. Then the traditions of 1905 were added to them, by which we nourished ourselves and by which we prepared the second revolution" (ibid.).

So while the "October Revolution appeared to the intelligentsia, including its literary left wing, as a complete destruction of its known world ... To us, on the contrary, the Revolution appeared as the embodiment of a familiar tradition, internally digested.... We stepped into the Revolution while Futurism fell into it" (ibid., pp. 131-32).

Trotsky described Futurism in this objective fashion not to condemn it on the basis of its adherents' social origins, much less to dismiss it as a literary current. Far from it. He is not exercising "toleration," to use Wood's word (a very revealing word), but considering how Futurism can enter "into the new art, not as an all-determining current, but as an important component part" (ibid., p. 132).

Of course, Trotsky, to the great unhappiness of the competing avant-garde tendencies, refused to confer on Futurism or any other "little artistic factory" the title of Communist Art, Proletarian Poetry, or Official Representative of the Artistic Interests of the Working Class. Such categories did not and could not exist. He conceived of the various vital and "genuinely revolutionary" groupings as contributors to the creation of socialist culture, which could only be created on an international scale through patient struggle, including the mundane task of raising the cultural level of the oppressed masses.

In essence, Wood, along with all petty-bourgeois commentators on Soviet art, of both right-wing and left-wing varieties, can only conceive of the revolutionary party in one of two ways: as an instrument of repression or the passive and uncritical ("tolerant") ally of the bohemia. He cannot grasp the notion that Trotsky was attempting to utilize Marxism creatively as a weapon with which the world and ideas are changed, that he was entering into a historic dialogue with Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vladimir Tatlin and the Constructivists in order to contribute to their artistic work.

The objections Wood raises to Trotsky's critique of Mayakovsky are as misleading, or simply ignorant, as they are condescending. Wood describes the Bolshevik leader's reaction to Mayakovsky as the "*cri de coeur* of one whose categories are being brought into question without his having the resources adequately to reply" (Wood, p. 18). In the process, Wood glosses over, for his own political reasons, one of the most significant points Trotsky made in *Literature and Revolution.*

Wood's "cri de coeur" remark is simply absurd and malicious, as are all his condescending comments; Trotsky was perhaps the greatest representative in history of the Marxist school of literary criticism, which itself incorporated what was most farsighted in the aesthetic criticism produced by the bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Following the path marked out by world historic figures such as Hegel, the great Russian critic and revolutionary democrat Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848), Marx and Plekhanov, Trotsky brought to his examination of literary trends the most profound understanding of the relationship between art and social life. His analysis of the significance of the different artistic trends in the wake of the October Revolution is historical materialism at its richest and most flexible.

One is not obliged to agree with every one of Trotsky's individual comments. That is hardly the point. But Wood, a petty-bourgeois critic or academic, is attempting to ward off intruders. He rejects the very right of Marxists to offer their critical evaluations. He writes: "Trotsky's somewhat rotund categories failed to mesh fully with the avant-garde work which came under his review" (ibid.). This might be translated as follows: "Marxism is too vulgar and crude a tool to utilize in such a delicate operation as the consideration of avant-garde art. Leave that to the specialists—people like me!"

(It is certainly telling in this connection that Wood fails to make a single reference to the professional literary critic who was closest intellectually and politically to Trotsky, Aleksandr Voronsky, the editor of the literary magazine, *Red Virgin Soil.)*

Wood suggests that Trotsky had "critical difficulties" with Futurism. Based on a reading of his essay, one must conclude that Wood had even greater difficulties with *Literature and Revolution.* He arrogantly ignores Trotsky's detailed analysis of Futurism's origins and evolution, and harps on quite secondary matters in relation to Mayakovsky's work.

Whatever his attitude to Trotsky's work as a whole, one would think that a "leftist" might demonstrate a measure of humility, at least pause and consider with some degree of seriousness the conceptions being advanced.

In his comments on Mayakovsky, Trotsky makes an extremely important observation on the relation between the artist's conscious and unconscious. The socialist revolution seized Futurism and the avant-garde, Trotsky explained, and pushed it forward. "Futurists became Communists. By this very act they entered the sphere of more profound questions and relationships, which far transcended the limits of their own little world, and which were not quite worked out organically in their soul. That is why Futurists, even including Mayakovsky, are weakest artistically at those points where they finish as Communists" (*Literature and Revolution*, p. 146).

With considerable insight, Trotsky pointed to this fact—that the problems of the revolution were not "organically worked out in [his] soul" (ibid.)—as the root of the weakness of Mayakovsky's "political" poems.

As he explained in his May 9, 1924, remarks, published as *Class and Art* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), "The heart of the matter is that artistic creativity, by its very nature, lags behind the other modes of expression of a man's spirit, and still more of the spirit of the class. It is one thing to understand something and express it logically, and quite another thing to assimilate it organically, reconstructing the whole system of one's feelings, and to find a new kind of artistic expression for this entity. The latter process is more organic, slower, more difficult to subject to conscious influence" (p. 7).

This was not an indictment. It was a blunt assessment of a historical problem and an artistic and personal dilemma for figures like Mayakovsky.

These were artists who, so to speak, embraced the revolution as an intellectual-political concept, but had not absorbed it into their bone and marrow and could not, therefore, dissolve it into their poetry.

This is not an insignificant matter. Of course it doesn't disturb Wood because there is no conflict between his version of "Marxism" and a bohemian or academic existence. He cannot conceive of the necessity of the sort of critical and painful reworking of oneself and one's work that Trotsky is referring to.

Wood intends to leave the reader with the impression that Trotsky was simply too imprisoned in "Enlightenment/classical culture" (in other words, insufficiently *au courant)* to do justice to Mayakovsky's poetry or even, by implication, his sensibility.

Perhaps. But he should at least have the honesty to cite Trotsky's comment on *A Cloud in Trousers*, Mayakovsky's marvelous prerevolutionary paean to love, women, bohemia and, most of all, himself: "After all, 'A Cloud in Trousers,' a poem of unrequited love, is artistically his most significant and creatively his boldest and most promising work. It is even difficult to believe that a thing of such intense strength and independence of form was written by a youth of twenty-two or twenty-three years of age. His 'War and Peace,' 'Mystery Bouffe,' and ' 150 Million' are much weaker, for the reason that here Mayakovsky leaves his individualist orbit and tries to enter the orbit of the Revolution" (*Literature and Revolution*, p. 157).

How could anyone consider this any less than the friendliest and most rewarding sort of criticism?

Trotsky's comments on Mayakovsky are directly linked to a later passage in *Literature and Revolution*, in which he summarizes his conception of the role of the party in relation to art: "The Marxian method affords an opportunity to estimate the development of the new art, to trace all its sources, to help the most progressive tendencies by a critical illumination of the road" (ibid., p. 218).

The swift degeneration of the Bolshevik regime and the international workers movement from 1924 on prevented that "critical illumination" from bearing fruit. It was another fifteen years before Trotsky could address himself to these questions again, under immeasurably more difficult conditions.

By that time, the Russian avant-garde artists had long since succumbed to Stalinism, physically or morally. As for Mayakovsky, that "enormous talent," he had taken his own life in 1930, a victim of the official struggle for "proletarian culture." As Trotsky wrote in an obituary, Stalin's

officially sanctioned cultural regime had "become simply a system of bureaucratic command over art and a way of impoverishing it" ("The Suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky" in *Art and Revolution*, edited by Paul N. Siegel [New York: Pathfinder, 1992], p. 176).

Simply on the basis of this brief examination of Trotsky's work, one can see that the identification of Futurism as "Bolshevism in art" is a fiction, and a pernicious one in two senses. First, it is an attempt to shove Bolshevism, retroactively, although for very contemporary reasons, into the swamp of radicalism. Second, it is an effort to divert or block any effort to challenge the conceptions of present-day artists and critics.

At a time when a section of the intelligentsia will inevitably react to the cultural stagnation and perhaps look to Marxism for a way out, Wood and his ilk are there to greet them and either turn them back, or introduce them to that variety of cynical radicalism that masquerades as "Marxism" in petty-bourgeois and academic circles.

Political evolution of the Russian avant-garde

Many of the artists whose work is included in the Guggenheim exhibit belonged to the Constructivist tendency. Before we turn to an analysis of Constructivism, including Trotsky's comments on the subject, it might be useful to consider concretely the political evolutions of the Russian avant-garde artists.

In another substantive essay published in the Guggenheim exhibit's catalog, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," Hubertus Gassner discusses, among other issues, the ideological stances of the avant-garde groups.

In the wake of the February 1917 revolution, which ousted Tsar Nicholas and turned the state over to the Russian bourgeoisie, a Union of Art Workers was established encompassing all fields of artistic activity. Its "left bloc," Gassner reports, was under the leadership of individuals such as Mayakovsky, painter Natan Al'tman, art critic Nikolai Punin and theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold.

The left bloc, calling itself the Freedom for Art Federation, published a declaration in March 1917—against the new government's planned Ministry of Fine Arts—in both the Menshevik and (pre-April) Bolshevik daily papers. The proclamation was signed by twenty-eight artists, including Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin and Nadezhda Udal'tsova.

The federation summed up its essential demands in a pamphlet distributed on Petrograd streets March 21: "Freedom for art—abolition of government tutelage. Complete decentralization of cultural life and autonomy for all institutions that will be funded by the municipal authorities. Establishment of an All-Russian Artists Congress. Abolition of all academies, which shall be replaced by art schools responsible for the training of art teachers. Replacement of patronage by public support through subsidies and grants" (quoted by Gassner, p. 300).

While he distorts the reality, in order to emphasize the supposed "anti-intellectual" propensities of the masses, Gassner correctly points to a growing crisis of the bourgeois intelligentsia in the period leading up to the October Revolution:

"With the radicalization of the masses in the summer of 1917, the crisis among artists and intellectuals intensified.... 'Intellectual' and 'bourgeois' became synonymous in the minds of the radicalized masses. Artists—and all the members of the intelligentsia—suddenly saw themselves denounced as enemies of the working class and ranked among the 'superfluous persons' of the detested past. The break between the insurgent masses and the intelligentsia culminated in the October Revolution. The ousting of the Provisional Government and the Bolshevik takeover gave most intellectuals outside the radical leftist parties such a shock that they remained silent for several months or passively boycotted the new rulers" (Gassner, p. 301).

In fact, when People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky extended a well-publicized invitation to Petrograd artists to come to the Smolnyi Institute to discuss prospective cooperation a few days after the revolutionary insurrection, only six persons showed up: the poet Aleksandr Blok, the publicist Larisa Reisner, painter David Shterenberg, Al'tman, Meyerhold and Mayakovsky—and the last-named broke off relations with the Bolsheviks shortly afterward and took off for Moscow.

The more conservative, pro-Kerensky intellectuals stayed away because of their obvious hostility to the Bolsheviks. They hoped the revolutionary government would be overthrown in a matter of days or weeks. Many of the extreme left artists refused to cooperate with the new regime because of their anarchist inclinations and their reservations about collaborating with government institutions of any kind.

Six months later, after the official establishment of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts) in January 1918, Al'tman, Punin and composer Artur Lur'e were obliged to travel to Moscow in an effort to win the cooperation of artists there. In an appeal published in *Anarkhiia (Anarchy)*, they specifically called on "comrades Mayakovsky and Tatlin" to cooperate with the new government.

Tatlin was elected by the Moscow Professional Union as its delegate to the Moscow Council of Workers and Soldiers Deputies on November 21. But, as Gassner points out, he, "like many other avant-garde artists, was politically closer to the anarchists than to the Communist Bolsheviks. On March 29, 1918, he published an appeal in *Anarchy* urging 'all my confederates... to enter the breach I made in obsolete values' so that their minds could 'embark on the path of anarchism'" (ibid., p. 302).

As mentioned, Mayakovsky (who was probably the closest of all to the Bolsheviks), after his initial meetings with Lunacharsky had grown impatient and left Petrograd. In Moscow, he and two old friends—painter David Burliuk and poet Vasili Kamenskii—opened the Kafe poetov (Poets' Cafe). The three of them formed the Federation of Futurists and in the one and only issue of their *Futurists' Newspaper* declared that "Futurism" was the aesthetic counterpart of "socialism/anarchism" and that only a "revolution of the psyche" could liberate workers from the shackles of obsolete art.

The cafe was a hangout, according to Ilya Ehrenburg, for "a crowd that did not exactly deal in poetry—speculators, women of doubtful reputation, young people who called themselves 'Futurists'..." (quoted by Gassner, p. 303). The cafe was closed down by the revolutionary government on April 14, 1918.

Both Tatlin and Rodchenko had worked in the Activist Group of the Moscow Association of Anarchist Groups. On April 2, 1918, *Anarchy* published a salute to Rodchenko, Ol'ga Rozanova, Udal'tsova and others among the avant-garde: "With pride we look upon your creative rebellion.... We congratulate the creator Rodchenko on his spirited three-dimensional constructions of colored forms..." (ibid.).

The "fiercest of all the anarchist fervor" came from the pen of painter Kazimir Malevich in a series of articles he wrote for *Anarchy* between March and July 1918. In Gassner's words, "The artistic principle of non-objectivity served him as a starting-point for a nihilistic ontology which negated material reality as well as any form of state" (ibid.).

Malevich blasted those who collaborated with the new regime and declared "our ego" to be "supreme." In a typically florid passage he wrote: "The banner of anarchism is the banner of our ego and like a free wind our spirit will billow our creative work through the vast spaces of our soul" (quoted by Gassner, p. 304).

In light of their political histories and sometimes strident comments, it is remarkable that over the course of the following year virtually all of the

significant “left” artists, including Malevich, Tatlin and Rodchenko, agreed to cooperate or work directly for one or more of the new revolutionary state’s institutions.

This transformation is all the more striking when one considers the political and economic conjuncture at which it took place. Nineteen-eighteen was unquestionably the most difficult year for the revolution. Trotsky wrote the following about the summer and spring of 1918: “At times, it seemed as if everything were slipping and crumbling, as if there were nothing to hold to, nothing to lean upon. One wondered if a country so despairing, so economically exhausted, so devastated, had enough sap left in it to support a new regime and preserve its independence. There was no food. There was no army. The railways were completely disorganized. The machinery of state was just beginning to take shape. Conspiracies were being hatched everywhere” *(My Life* [New York: Pathfinder, 1970], p. 395).

In January 1918 the Bolshevik regime was in the midst of peace talks with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk. In February, with no agreement signed, the Germans began an offensive. In March a humiliating treaty was signed by the representatives of the Soviet government. The Left Communists, led by Nikolai Bukharin, objected strenuously to the peace and demanded a “revolutionary war.”

In April 1918 the anarchist clubs were raided and some six hundred people, including both ideological anarchists and criminal elements, were forced to hand over their arms. The Left Social Revolutionaries openly agitated against the Bolsheviks and one of their members assassinated the German ambassador Mirbach in July in order to prompt war between the two countries. In August Left SR Fanya Kaplan fired two bullets at Lenin in Moscow, nearly killing him. Bolshevik Central Committee member M.S. Uritsky, one of those responsible for leading the struggle against counterrevolution, was assassinated in Petrograd on August 20, 1918.

Thus the best elements among the petty-bourgeois bohemia were won to the side of the new state precisely at the point that the latter was in combat with, among other forces, various forms of anarchism and pseudo-revolutionary “leftism.” It would be misleading to think this was simply a matter of the artists’ discretion being the better part of their valor.

Bolshevism demarcated itself once and for all during this period as a tendency representing the international interests of the working class in opposition to phrasemongering, petty-bourgeois radicalism. It was this unequivocal political demarcation and the seriousness and flexibility with which Lenin and the Bolsheviks went about their efforts to construct a new life which won the artists’ allegiance.

What Trotsky wrote in 1923 in relation to the Left Social Revolutionaries could be applied to the avant-garde bohemia as well: “The revolution is highly skilled both in separating men from one another and also, if need be, in bringing them together. All the most courageous and consistent elements in the Left SR party are now with us” (*The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed,* Vol. I: *1918* [London: New Park Publications, 1979], p. xxvii).

Having been won, with whatever hesitations and vacillations, to the side of the Bolsheviks, the most far-seeing artists threw themselves into a variety of activities, under conditions of extreme privation. Rodchenko, in April 1918, wrote an appeal “To the Artist-Proletarians,” which gives some flavor of the period.

He wrote: “We, who are in a worse situation than the oppressed workers, are workers for our livelihood as well as creators of art. We, who live in holes, have neither paint nor light nor time for creating. Proletarians of the paintbrush, we must unite, must establish a Free Association of Oppressed Artists, must demand bread and studios and our existential rights” (quoted by Gassner, p. 307).

Mayakovsky painted and supplied verse for more than 2,000 posters put out by ROSTA (the Russian Telegraph Agency). The posters were designed to raise the political consciousness of the workers and peasants during the Civil War. His subjects ranged from the simplest—how to clean one’s rifle, how to sew on buttons—to the most complex—how to destroy the forces of the White generals, how to build socialism.

Malevich taught at the new State Free Art Workshops beginning in October 1918 until the autumn of 1919, when he joined the Popular Art School in Vitebsk and began to organize Unovis. He, Tatlin, Rodchenko and Wassily Kandinsky were all involved in the work of the Museum Department of Izo Narkompros, which established thirty-six museums of contemporary art in the space of two years.

Tatlin became one of the leaders of the Moscow Board of Izo Narkompros. El Lissitzky wrote that in Vitebsk he and Malevich, among other activities, “painted a 16,000-square-foot canvas for a factory celebration, decorated three buildings, and created the stage decorations for the festive meeting of the factory committee in the city theater” (quoted by Gassner, p. 304).

Tatlin and Malevich both prepared texts for a multilingual journal entitled *Art International*, which unfortunately was never published.

The relations of the avant-garde artists and the revolutionary authorities were by no means without friction, as we will discuss in more detail somewhat further on. According to Gassner, “As early as 1919, the Moscow Soviet publicly objected to the participation of the ‘Futurists’ in the decoration of the revolutionary celebrations” (ibid., p. 305).

Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova wrote their “Manifesto of the Suprematists and Non-Objectivists” at the beginning of the same year, in which they declared: “Emphatically we praise the revolution as the only motor of life.... We painted our furious canvases amid the jeers and laughter of the bureaucrats and petit bourgeois who have fled. Now we repeat to the so-called proletariat of former servants of the monarchy and intellectuals who have taken their place: We will not give in to you. In 20 years, the Soviet Republic will be proud of these paintings” (quoted by Gassner, p. 305).

It is not within the scope of this article to consider the different artistic schools in Russia which expressed sympathy with the aims of the revolution. In particular, it is necessary to exclude from consideration, for our immediate purposes, the tendency identified with Malevich, and turn our attention to those who became identified with Constructivism and the slogan of ? 0;bringing art into life.”

It would be a vulgarization of Marxism, and simply wrong, to identify the Malevich group as an “idealist” tendency and its opponents as “materialists,” although this is very much what the latter would have liked to believe. The reality is much more complicated than that. In fact, Malevich, from his standpoint of absolute idealism (the nonexistence of the object, the world as pure sensation), made some extremely valid points against the utilitarian excesses of Constructivism, as did Kandinsky.

It’s equally true that the Unovis group members, despite the cult-like, Utopian commune atmosphere that apparently prevailed, did not simply have their heads in the clouds. The artistic followers of Malevich involved themselves in numerous practical undertakings, from the decoration of towns to the design of teapots.

There was also a considerable degree of overlapping, intellectually and even stylistically, between the various groups. In one fashion or another they all, or nearly all, went through the requisite stages of Cezannism, Cubism, Cubo-Futurism and “non-objective” work. Lissitzky, a future coworker of the most ardent Constructivists, was a devoted colleague of Malevich in Vitebsk. (In 1922, he even declared that Unovis was one of the two groups which “claimed Constructivism.”) A non-specialist observer from our time might be forgiven if he or she considered Tatlin, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Liubov’ Popova, Stepanova, Rozanova and Malevich all members of one multisided tendency.

Nor, frankly, was there any lack of individual ambition and “supreme ego” in the disputes. The famous fist fight between Tatlin and Malevich, if it in fact took place, was certainly grounded in different artistic

perspectives, but it also no doubt involved the question of who was to rule the artistic roost. Tatlin's friends, according to Vasili Rakitin's "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers" paint a picture—full of sympathy—of a 'holy fool of Futurism,' a man suspicious to the point of absurdity, to the brink of phobia. He openly suspected Malevich of artistic espionage.... Tatlin erected something like a tent, but one that could be locked, in the middle of his studio.... God forbid Malevich should see what he was up to and get ahead of him" (exhibition catalog, p. 29).

All this notwithstanding, there were very definitely differences of substance, which put this or that tendency or individual in a more advantageous social, psychological or even, so to speak, physical position to address some of the problems posed by the revolution and the revolutionary epoch. For our purposes we need to examine the origins and development of Constructivism, particularly as its proponents somewhat grandiloquently claimed to base themselves on the principles of Marxism.

Excesses of the avant-garde

A section of the Soviet avant-garde artists, particularly the most youthful, undoubtedly felt an urgent need to enter as directly as possible into the flow of the revolution and into the life of the revolutionary class, the proletariat.

It is not accidental that one of the impulses in the direction of Constructivism came from the work carried out by the Society of Young Artists, Obmokhu, which developed out of the First Free State Art Workshops in 1919-1920.

The second Obmokhu exhibit in May 1921 is generally considered to be Constructivism's first public manifestation.

But even prior to that, a great deal of consideration had been given to the role of art under the new revolutionary workers state. On November 24, 1918, for example, Izo Narkompros organized a conference in Petrograd on the subject of whether art was a "temple or factory."

The list of speakers included People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, art critic Nikolai Punin, literary critic Osip Brik and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. According to Hubertus Gassner ("The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," in the exhibition catalog), Punin, in the course of his speech, "distinguished between the activity of the bourgeois artist, who merely designed ornaments and decorations, and the activity of the worker, who treated 'material' to create 'things"' (Gassner, p. 305).

Punin "expected a 'new era in art' if the artists followed the lead of the workers and began to produce 'things.'"

By 1919 Punin was criticizing painter Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism, by implication, as merely decorative. The future of art belonged to artist Vladimir Tatlin's "culture of materials." The latter believed strongly in the life of the properties of materials: elasticity, weight and tension, etc. He advocated "the aesthetics of real materials in real space."

Tatlin called his workshop at the State Free Art Workshops (where he started teaching in the spring of 1919) the Workshop of Material, Volume, and Construction. But it was not Tatlin who took Constructivism to its logical conclusion.

Others followed enthusiastically in Punin's footsteps. It seemed obvious, the complex problems of art and the new society were solved! Brik, in the periodical *Art of the Commune*, defined artistic works as "things" and raised the slogan—"Not idealistic fog but the material things!"

Before considering the worst excesses of Constructivism and Production art, including attempts to organize artistic work along the lines of the industrial principles of Henry Ford and Frederick Winslow Taylor, it is necessary to make several observations.

First, the artistic reaction against prewar art, identified with sentimentality, overblown language and decoration, as well as against Expressionism, identified with petty-bourgeois psychologizing and breast-beating, was an international phenomenon. The October Revolution, however, had taken hold of the Russian avant-garde and added entirely new elements.

Second, in the intractable conditions that existed in the Soviet Union by 1921, artists, who came in general from middle class backgrounds, had compelling objective reasons to question their traditional role. They were determined to prove that they were neither ivory-tower dreamers nor cafe hangers-on. They worked under conditions in which the masses faced famine, pestilence and general economic ruin after seven years of imperialist and civil war, and the Bolsheviks and the most conscious workers were demonstrating heroic self-sacrifice. The artists themselves posed the question of "how today's artists justify their existence."

Third, a great many artists were inspired—and one must use the word "inspired"—by the Bolshevik emphasis on industrialization and modernization. Lenin's famous "Communism equals Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country" became a watchword for an entire layer of artists. They stood, in Trotsky's words, "for technique, for scientific organization, for the machine, for planfulness, for will power, for courage, for speed, for precision, and for the new man, who is armed with all these things" *(Literature and Revolution* [New York: Russell and Russell], p. 145).

They devoutly wished to play a part in overcoming Russia's backwardness, with its "laziness ... dreaminess ... lachrymosity..." (ibid.).

These factors can explain, if not excuse, the (hopefully) facetious comments made by Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, graduates of Obmokhu: "They [artists] are good for nothing. They should be treated in the same way as the Cheka treats counterrevolutionaries" (quoted by Gassner, p. 299).

Konstantin Medunetskii declared, "Art ends with us." Boris Arvatov, one of the experimenters with Taylorism and a Production artist, decided that "the end of culture" had come because industrial techniques had supplanted cultural techniques. Inasmuch as artists were "useless to industry and unable to be engineers," their position was declared "tragic" (ibid.).

The First Working Group of Constructivists was formed in March 1921. The group included Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, the Stenbergs, Medunetskii, Aleksei Gan and Karl Ioganson. They came together within the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) in Moscow around principles articulated by Rodchenko in January 1921: "All new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering and move toward organization and construction," and "real construction is utilitarian necessity" (quoted by Christina Lodder, "The Transition to Constructivism," an essay in the catalog, p. 267).

According to Lodder, in their draft program of April 1921, written by Gan, "the group proclaimed a new synthesis of art and industry. They wanted to relegate their purely artistic explorations to the role of 'laboratory work,' and to extend their experiments with manipulating three-dimensional abstract forms into the real environment by participating in the industrial manufacture of useful objects. They called the new type of activity that they envisaged 'intellectual production,' proclaiming that their ideological foundation was 'scientific communism, built on the theory of historical materialism...'" (ibid.).

In the course of the same year, Stepanova declared in a lecture at Inkhuk: "Once purged of aesthetic, philosophical and religious excrescences, art leaves us its material foundations, which henceforth will be organized by intellectual production. The organizing principle is

expedient Constructivism, in which technology and experimental thinking take the place of aesthetics" (quoted by Gassner, p. 299).

The conception of the artist as engineer and the insistence on the need to abolish "artistic instinct" in favor of "professionalism" were rejected by a number of artists in the avant-garde, including Wassily Kandinsky, Malevich, El Lissitzky and Tatlin himself, although his work had originally been held up as an example to follow.

Kandinsky, before his departure from the USSR, remarked in 1920: "Even though art workers right now may be working on problems of construction (art still has virtually no precise rules), they might try to find a positive solution too easily and too ardently from the engineer. And they might accept the engineer's answer as the solution for art—quite erroneously. This is a very real danger" (quoted by Lodder, p. 271).

According to Gassner, "Neither Tatlin nor Unovis [including Malevich and Lissitzky] was generally opposed to the artistic use of technological tools and materials. But unlike the Constructivists at Inkhuk, they rejected the mechanization of creative methods and the reduction of the creative process to rational operations" (Gassner, p. 307).

Malevich referred to the Productivists and Constructivists as "lackeys of the factory and production." He equated utilitarianism and Constructivism, which he disparaged as "subsistence art."

Tatlin declared, "The influence of my art is expressed in the movement of the Constructivists, of which I am the founder" (quoted by Vasili Rakitin, "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers," exhibition catalog, p. 34). But he rejected the Moscow group and its leading figure, Rodchenko.

Rakitin writes: "The Constructivists affirmed the model of a life which could be—for them, the form of art determined new forms of life. Tatlin criticized the Constructivists—the 'so-called Constructivists'—for their imitation, as it appeared to him, of contemporary style" (Rakitin, p. 34).

Rodchenko's transformation into an ardent Constructivist is particularly instructive. In January 1919 he affirmed his belief in "abstract spiritual creativity." In March of the same year he expressed his advocacy of Eastern over Western art during planning of the Museum of Painterly Culture. He declared: "Asiatic art is spiritual, was regarded with religious awe.... The West treats art lightly, in material terms; the East worships art, elevates it above everything else, does not make it utilitarian" (quoted by Gassner, p. 315).

As late as April 1919, in the catalog for an exhibit in which he exhibited his black-on-black paintings, Rodchenko assembled quotations from figures such as Young Hegelian anarchist/egoist Max Stirner ("That I destroy myself only shows that I exist") and poet Walt Whitman ("What invigorates life invigorates death"). Lissitzky, in a review of the exhibit, approvingly called Rodchenko an "individualist" who had started "the shift to the new materiality" with his black paintings.

A mere two years later, however, in March 1921, Rodchenko found it possible to write: "Construction is a thing or a task that is approached with a precise working schedule and in which all materials and all their specific components are organized and used according to their correct functions without adding anything superfluous. The correct approach to each space is construction." He added, disparagingly: "Composition is always an expression of individualism and everything individualism implies" (quoted by Gassner, p. 314).

The about-face undergone by Stepanova, Rodchenko's companion, can be measured in months. As late as October 1920, she defended, according to Gassner, "the 'miraculous'—in the sense of a transcendent quality—as an essential characteristic of art. At the same time, she strongly objected to the equation of mathematics and art: 'The Formalist approach now being pursued in art is a tribute to the materialism of our time. But none of us will ever subordinate art to mathematics'" (quoted by Gassner, p. 315).

By December 1921 Stepanova had been won to the opposite view: "The intellect is our point of departure, taking the place of the 'soul' of idealism. From this it follows that, on the whole, Constructivism is also intellectual production (and not thought alone), incompatible with the spirituality of artistic activity" (quoted by Gassner, p. 315).

Gassner attributes this transformation to organizational measures taken by the Bolsheviks, which resulted in the avant-garde artists losing many of their administrative posts. He suggests that this obliged them "to rethink their role and place in society for the third time, after the first crisis following the February Revolution and the second following October 1917" (Gassner. pp. 315-16). He quotes Mayakovsky in the winter of 1920: "We declare to hell with individualism, to hell with words and emotions ... so that we can even renounce our own personality.... The poet can't be forced but he can force himself' (quoted by Gassner, p. 316).

To digress slightly, the supposed fall from grace of the avant-garde in 1921, with the advent of the New Economic Policy, is taken by Gassner and, to a certain extent, by Paul Wood and others, as the beginning of the end for progressive art in Russia. This, of course, would substantiate the argument that it was not Stalinism, but Lenin and Bolshevism that were the architects of bureaucratic repression of the arts. This is thoroughly false.

Two quite distinct issues are being confused: the loss of the state "art franchise" and bureaucratic terror.

In the early days of the revolution the avant-gardists had won many government positions essentially by default, because, to their credit, they were one of the few tendencies in the intelligentsia to come forward and cooperate with the new workers state.

But one would have to indulge in wishful thinking to imagine that the former anarchists, many in full possession of "supreme egos," were, in all cases, either the most even-handed or tolerant administrators.

The Futurists, Suprematists, etc., represented one tendency, perhaps the most interesting, but nonetheless a minority tendency, which was exercising as much of a monopoly as it could over cultural and artistic life in the USSR.

In addition, they were not above silly provocations and pranks. Lunacharsky, according to Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: the Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), recounted with amusement a few years after the fact that in 1918 a couple of the Futurist "contributions" to the revolutionary celebrations had gone somewhat awry. One, which apparently placed Marx and Engels in a kind of swimming pool, had been nicknamed the "bearded bathers" by Moscow residents.

Gustav Klutsis, along with other young artists, chose to celebrate the first anniversary of the revolution by painting branches of bushes in prominent places in Moscow, including along the Kremlin wall, bright blue, and wrapping trees in silvery gauze. Unfortunately, the paint could not be removed, and Lenin, for one, was not amused.

Lenin's notorious anti-Futurist remarks and sentiments themselves have to be put in context. In May 1921 he wrote to Lunacharsky, "Aren't you ashamed to vote for printing 5,000 copies of Mayakovsky's '150,000,000'? It is nonsense, double-dyed stupidity and affectation." The same day, he wrote to M.N. Pokrovsky, "Let's agree that these futurists are to be published not more than twice a year and not more than 1,500 copies.... Could you find some reliable anti-futurists?" *(Collected Works*, Vol. 45 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970], pp. 138-39).

The bourgeois academics start twittering when they read these lines: "It's all downhill from here! Straight to the labor camps! What a monster Lenin was!"

These delicate souls should bear several things in mind. First, Lenin did not impose his personal distaste for Futurism and his self-professed conservatism in artistic questions on anyone. Rather, he opposed Futurism's "affectations" and rejected its claims to be THE poetry of the revolution.

Second, he was not proposing punitive measures. He was angered that,

at a time when paper production was down to one-eighth of what it had been before the war and 75 percent of the printing presses were immobilized for repairs (Robert A. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987]), so much time and space had been devoted to the work of one tendency.

Third, there is a real distinction between private utterances, (including ironic ones: e.g., Lunacharsky "should be flogged for his Futurism"), and Bolshevik policy.

Fourth, how many bourgeois regimes, not suffering from famine and civil war, publish the work of revolutionary avant-garde poets in either 5,000 or 1,500 copies?

In any event, when the Bolsheviks dropped their official state backing of the avant-garde in 1921, the former anti-statist artists became quite annoyed. In Trotsky's words, the Bolsheviks insisted that the avant-garde should "learn to stand on its own two legs, without any attempt to have itself decreed official by the government," and that the "new forms must find for themselves, and independently, an access into the consciousness of the advanced elements of the working class..." *(Literature and Revolution*, p. 160).

Adherence to world revolution

It was not the loss of official state backing, however, much less the threat of repression which inspired the self-inflicted "war" against individualism among Soviet avant-garde artists.

Objective events of a different character, which a philistine such as Gassner would scoff at, spoke very loudly to the artists and other sections of the intelligentsia: the worldwide revolutionary wave and the efforts to construct a new Communist international, as well as the terrible economic conditions in the USSR and the sacrifices referred to previously.

Undoubtedly there was a genuine recognition on the part of Mayakovsky, Rodchenko and others of the limitations of their previous anarcho-individualism. In addition, there was a simple recognition that the conditions of civil war were not conducive to the love lyrics that Mayakovsky, for one, had produced before 1914.

Mixed in with the well-intentioned renunciations was more than a small element of petty-bourgeois "over-compensation." But there was something else involved, besides the response to great events and an understandable class and psychological reaction. Essentially, these artists had embraced Bolshevism without having assimilated its essence. Infantile "ultra-leftism" was by no means unique to them.

Stepanova's reference to Formalism is not at all accidental. An appreciation of its outlook and its link to Futurism offers one of the keys to understanding the ideological basis of the violent transformations just referred to. A brief consideration of Formalism, ignoring for the moment its genuine contributions to literary criticism, is necessary.

Formalism held great sway over intellectual-artistic circles in Russia prior to and even after the October Revolution. The Russian Formalists, represented by Shklovsky, Jacobson, Kruchenikh and others, asserted the independence of the artistic element from the influence of social conditions. They reduced their task in literary criticism to "an analysis (essentially descriptive and semi-statistical) of the etymology and syntax of poems, to the counting of repetitive vowels and consonants, of syllables and epithets.... To [the Formalists] verbal art ends finally and fully with the word, and depictive art with color. A poem is a combination of sounds, a painting is a combination of color spots and the laws of art are the laws of verbal combinations and of combinations of color spots" (ibid., pp. 163-64).

Trotsky traced Formalism, and its insistence on the aesthetic "factor," to its philosophical roots in Kantian idealism. He explained that the Formalists "do not look at the dynamics of development, but at a cross-section of it, on the day and the hour of their philosophic revelation. At the crossing of the line they reveal the complexity and multiplicity of the object (not of the process, because they do not think of processes). This complexity they analyze and classify. They give names to the elements, which are at once transformed into essences, into sub-absolutes..." (ibid., pp. 182—83).

As Trotsky explained, he addressed himself to Formalism in his book not only because it had significance in itself, but, above all, because of its philosophical hold over the Futurists and the avant-garde in general. "The paradox." he wrote, "consists in the fact that Russian Formalism connected itself closely with Russian Futurism, and that while the latter was capitulating politically before Communism, Formalism opposed Marxism with all its might theoretically" (ibid., p. 162).

Trotsky saw the task as separating the former Futurists, now politically and practically convinced by the Bolshevik program, from their idealist aesthetics. This proved, in a certain sense, to be a more complicated task than convincing them of the necessity of socialist revolution.

The attempt to reconcile the new allegiance to the proletariat with the old aesthetics explains, at least in part, the Constructivists' effort to rename themselves "intellectual workers." The Formalist rejection of the social and the psychological in favor of pure technique now took on a new guise and paraded itself as Communist irreconcilability.

Formalist coldness metamorphosed into "Bolshevik" hardness, without, however, passing through a stage of materialist realism. This perhaps explains why Rodchenko's statements, in particular, and his disdain for feeling and intuition often strike a false note.

A bourgeois scholar such as Christina Lodder becomes so confused by the issues and the claims of the artists themselves, that she can write (in "The Transition to Constructivism," catalog, p. 270) that Rodchenko "came to regard the creative act less as an expression of personal inspiration and more as a quasi-scientific investigation into the inherent properties of painting, such as tone, color, line, texture, and organization. *Far from being a Modernist assertion of the 'autonomy' of art,* such a standpoint represented an attempt, *akin to that of the Russian literary Formalists at precisely this time,* to reconceive art as a specialized, quasi-scientific activity and the artist himself as a species of worker." (Emphasis added.)

As Formalists, Rodchenko and his colleagues declared that the art object existed as a thing in itself, outside of society. As Constructivists, they declared that the work existed as a purely utilitarian object for society, outside of art.

Trotsky criticized the proponents of "art into life," of "art which does not embellish life, but forms it," on several grounds in *Literature and Revolution.* First of all, he pointed out their "utopian sectarianism." He declared, "Even when they mark out correctly the general trend of development in the field of art or life, the theorists of 'Lef ["Left Front of the Artists"] anticipate history and contrast their scheme or their prescription with that which is" (*Literature and Revolution*, p, 134).

More fundamentally, Trotsky objected to those who made an ultimatum out of the fusion of art with life. He wrote: "In other words, the poets, the painters, the sculptors, the actors must cease to reflect, to depict, to write poems, to paint pictures, to carve sculptures, to speak before the footlights, but they must carry their art directly into life. But how, and where, and through what gates?" (ibid., p. 136).

It surely did not require too much insight, he argued, to grasp that, as a result of Russia's economic and cultural poverty, "more than one generation [would] have come and gone," before it would be possible to form life entirely on the basis of art.

As we have seen, if Trotsky is responding to the more extreme Constructivists and Productivists, he is giving them more than the benefit

of the doubt. They were not, in fact, calling for the fusion of art with life on the basis of the former, but for the liquidation of art into everyday life in its existing form and at its existing level.

Tatlin was quite right to point out the element in Constructivism which amounted to an acceptance of, or pandering to, the accomplished fact. Kandinsky and Malevich were equally correct to argue that Constructivism's worship of the existing state of technology and engineering linked it with vulgar positivism and utilitarianism.

In any event, Trotsky powerfully defended art against its leftist detractors: "To reject art as a means of picturing and imagining 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" (ibid., p. 137).

He asked, what did it mean to deny experience and psychology? "In what way, on what grounds, and in the name of what, can art turn its back to the inner life of present-day man who is building a new external world, and thereby rebuilding himself? If art will not help this new man to educate himself, then what is it for? And how can it organize the inner 1ife, if it does not penetrate it and reproduce it?" (ibid., p. 138).

Trotsky compellingly rejected, as well, the effort to reduce art to an intellectual formula: "A purely logical approach destroys the question of artistic form. One must judge this question not with one's reason, which does not go beyond formal logic, but with one's mind, which includes the irrational, in so far as it is alive and vital. *Poetry is not a rational but an emotional thing..."* (ibid., p. 143). (Emphasis added.)

What sort of artist, one might ask, throws art out the window as soon as new and historic demands are made on it? What had artists been struggling for if not this sort of opportunity and responsibility? If one dismissed art as useless to solve great problems, then why should it be bothered with at all? What then would art be "for?"

The extreme Constructivist position, in effect, denied that art produced *objective* knowledge and aided human beings in their cognition of reality just as science did, although, of course, by other means and with different results.

It reduced art to a plaything, a luxury item, an activity of parasites. One can see the connection between Kantianism and the artists' guilty consciences. Rodchenko and his colleagues underestimated and lacked confidence in their own activity. They weren't certain, in their heart of hearts, that they hadn't been wasting their time.

"Proletarian culture"

The theory and practice of Proletarian Culture, its intersection with Futurism, and the usage made by the emerging Stalin bureaucracy of the avant-garde's leftist errors and confusion must be addressed at this point.

The origin of the Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations (Proletkul't) is quite interesting, and far different from the superficial image one has of the movement. Proletkul't was in fact an independent organization, founded in Moscow only weeks before the Bolshevik revolution. It was the brainchild of Aleksandr Bogdanov. [4]

The target of Lenin's famous polemic, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Bogdanov was, in many regards, a remarkable individual—scientist, science fiction writer, theoretician—but he was philosophically an enemy of Marxism. An "ultra-left" in the years of reaction following the defeat of the 1905 revolution, he attempted to reconcile the idealist theories of physicist Ernst Mach with Marxism.

Bogdanov rejected materialism, asserting that "the elements of physical experience" were identical to "psychic experience," i.e., sensation. In other words, he rejected the notion that the material world was primary to thought, and ridiculed as vulgar, mechanical materialism the notion that the mind "reflected" the external world. On the basis of his neo-Kantian outlook he developed theories on culture and society, including the notion of the autonomy of the spheres of politics, economics and culture.

The essential theory of Proletkul't ran as follows: "Any class needs culture, not merely as a reflection of its ideals and aspirations, but actually as the primary means of organizing its experience toward desired ends; the proletariat has no culture of its own, for economic and political struggles have consumed all its energies; bourgeois culture is clearly unsuited to the task of organizing the psychology of the proletariat; therefore, the proletariat must and can develop its own culture. It was assumed that given a few lessons in basic craftsmanship, anyone could become a proletarian artist" (Maguire, p. 157).

Bogdanov, as a component part of his theory, advanced the view that the working class had to undergo a cultural/psychic rebirth before it would be ready to enter into the realm of socialism. He laid great stress on the need to undo the submissive habits of the past and to transform attitudes, customs and especially authority relations.

It was not accidental that Bogdanov, who had not, like his former co-thinkers Lunacharsky and Pokrovsky, rejoined the Bolsheviks, opposed the October Revolution as "premature." He wrote, some time after the revolution, "And if [Proletkul't] were beyond one's strength, the working class would have nothing to count on, except the transition from one enslavement to another, from under the yoke of capitalists to the yoke of engineers and the educated" (quoted by Sochor, pp. 185-86).

In the sphere of practical politics, his theories amounted to a kind of liberal wishful thinking, an abstract preaching of communist ethics and a substitution, as one critic put it, of "the actual, existing Russian worker" with a "fantasized model of a worker."

Bogdanov actually developed a kind of replacement for the Ten Commandments, which he called "Laws of the New Conscience:" (1) There shall be no herd instinct. (2) There shall be no slavery, (3) There shall be no subjectivism of either a personal or group nature, etc.

Proletkul't supported the Bolshevik regime and was granted semiofficial status as an organization for the cultural education of the working class, although Bogdanov had far greater ambitions for it. The organization from the outset shared with Futurism a fierce hostility for the culture of the past. Some argued, at its founding conference in Petrograd, "that all culture of the past might be called bourgeois, that within it—except for natural science and technical skills (and even there with qualifications) there was nothing worthy of life, and that the proletariat would begin the work of destroying the old culture and creating the new immediately after the revolution" (quoted by Sheila Fitzpatrick in *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970], p. 92),

Proletkul't prided itself on its pure proletarian bloodlines. It criticized Lunacharsky and the Bolsheviks for making use of bourgeois specialists. Bogdanov envisioned a Workers University and a Workers Encyclopedia, making the analogy between the Bolsheviks' task and that of the French Encyclopedistes in the eighteenth century.

Wishing away the current extremely low level of economic life in Russia, or ignoring it in accordance with his theory of cultural autonomy, Bogdanov declared: "We are immediate socialists. We affirm that the proletariat must now, immediately, create for itself, socialist forms of thought, feeling and daily life, *independent of the relations and combinations of political forces"* (Sochor, p. 148). (Emphasis added.)

In the field of art education, Proletkul't, as far as one can tell, carried out some useful work. It established studios which were open to workers and young people. In 1920 it claimed 400,000 members, of which some 80,000 were enrolled in studios.

But this was work of a preliminary kind, inevitably characterized by a

low level of technical proficiency. Proletkul't received the support of Nikolai Bukharin, who explicitly praised its theatrical efforts, for example, for their "crudeness" and "amateurism." Lunacharsky retorted with the remark that as far as he knew there was "no primitive ABC of Communism," a reference to Bukharin's well-known work.

Lenin kept a watchful eye on Bogdanov's activities and vigorously rejected his organization's efforts to usurp the role of Lunacharsky's education department, the trade unions and the party itself. On December 1, 1920, the party issued a letter, sharply opposing the claims of "futurists, decadents, supporters of idealist philosophy hostile to Marxism and ... mere idlers, renegades from the ranks of bourgeois publicists and philosophers" to determine the nature and direction of proletarian culture (Fitzpatrick, p. 186).

In opposition to the Proletkul't conception, Lenin wrote, "We do not hold theUtopian view that the working masses are ready for a socialist society" (quoted by Sochor, p. 170). He chided Bogdanov and his co-thinkers for "dilating at too great length and too flippantly on 'proletarian' culture. For a start, we should be satisfied with real bourgeois culture; for a start we should be glad to dispense with the crude types of pre-bourgeois culture, i.e., bureaucratic culture or serf culture, etc." (quoted by Sochor, p. 172). As a result of this political criticism, Bogdanov removed himself from Proletkul't in 1920 and devoted the rest of his life to scientific work.

In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky categorically rejected the conception of a distinct "proletarian culture." He explained the fundamental falsity of the analogy that the Proletkul't theoreticians established between the bourgeois revolution and the proletarian revolution:

"The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. We frequently seem to forget this.... The development of bourgeois culture began several centuries before the bourgeoisie took into its own hands the power of the state by means of a series of revolutions" (*Literature and Revolution* [New York: Russell and Russell],p. 186).

The bourgeoisie was a cultured class before it took power. In the period of transition from capitalism to socialism on an international scale, "before the proletariat will have passed out of the stage of cultural apprenticeship, it will have ceased to be a proletariat" (ibid., p. 194).

The new human culture would be classless, Trotsky explained, and all attempts to create it prematurely by artificial, laboratory means, particularly in the conditions of backward, isolated Russia, were doomed to failure.

In passages that could have been aimed directly at Bogdanov's idealist conceptions, Trotsky wrote, "The proletariat is forced to take power before it has appropriated the fundamental elements of bourgeois culture; it is forced to overthrow bourgeois society by revolutionary violence *for the very reason* that society does not allow it access to culture" (ibid., p. 195). (Emphasis added.)

And: "This is just the same as saying with the Utopian moralists: before building a new society, the proletariat must rise to the heights of Communist ethics.... But are we not traveling in a vicious circle? How is one to build a new society with the aid of the old science [or culture] and the old morals? Here we must bring in a little dialectics" (ibid., p. 198).

Speaking of the possibility of a "proletarian science," for example, Trotsky explained that the working class finds within the old culture "certain points of departure, certain scientific methods which liberate the mind from the ideologic yoke of the bourgeoisie..." (ibid.).

The revolutionary class finds and makes use of certain objective advances within the old society, "taking them necessarily with the percentage of reactionary class-alloy which is contained in them. The practical result will justify itself generally and on the whole, because such a use when controlled by a Socialist goal will gradually manage and select the methods and conclusions of the theory. And by that time there will have grown up scientists who are educated under the new conditions" (ibid., p. 199).

This profound understanding of the relation of old culture to new was explicitly rejected by Bogdanov and not grasped by the avant-garde artists. This shared opposition to a materialist conception did not prevent the two tendencies from being, in general, bitter competitors in cultural circles.

David Shterenberg, the Futurist painter, addressed the Proletkul't adherents in these words: "You shout about proletarian culture. You have taken a monopoly on yourselves. But what have you done for all this time, when you have had every chance to act?... Nothing. You are an empty place" (quoted by Fitzpatrick, p. 123).

Proletkul't, for its part, declared: "Yes, Proletkul't struggles both with futurism and imaginism, and sees the influence of the dying bourgeoisie with its perverted tastes even in the Communist futurists" (quoted by Fitzpatrick, p. 238).

In 1923, however, the Proletkul't, by this time a declining movement, sought an alliance with Lef. There were certainly points of contact between the movements: "a progressive idea as the working model for art; the need to 'organize' the 'psyche' of the masses by means of art; focus on an ever-changing and future reality, instead of on static pictures of life; the idea that the artist is not a unique genius, but an expression of the collective will; a scorn for the art of the past—and most contemporary art as well—as 'passive,' 'contemplative,' and irrelevant to the tasks of the times" (Maguire, p. 155).

The old Proletkul't organization lost favor and declined as a result of the struggle carried out by the Bolsheviks against its idealist and Utopian conceptions. In December 1922, however, the *October* group was formed, claiming to be the sole representative of proletarian culture. It published *On Guard (Na postu).*

The Octobrists, under the leadership of Averbakh, Vardin, Lelevich, Rodov and Volin, quickly became identified with the Stalin faction and carried out a vicious campaign throughout the 1920s against any artistic or intellectual currents which stood out against the bureaucracy and its interests.

In the mid-1920s the theory of proletarian culture became something quite different from the conception Bogdanov had originally advanced. It became an adaptation to the prevailing unfavorable conditions and a complement to the theory of socialism in one country.

In May 1925 Bukharin explicitly declared that Trotsky, in his rejection of the very idea of proletarian culture, had made a "theoretical mistake," exaggerating the "rate of development of communist society, or expressed differently ... in the speed of the withering away of the proletarian dictatorship" (quoted by Sochor, p. 169).

A proletarian culture, Bukharin asserted, would be given the time to develop because the Soviet Union would be advancing toward socialism *in isolation* over an extended period of time. (Bogdanov had explicitly emphasized on several occasions that "socialism cannot be realized in any separate country.")

There is no question that the Futurist-Constructivists, as well as the early Proletkul'tists, provided certain slogans, issues and ideological weapons that were seized upon by the Stalinists and utilized against artistic production itself. The diatribes against inspiration, intuition, "soulfulness," "haziness," etc., were used to regiment and straitjacket the artists of a later period.

The scornful dismissal of bourgeois culture as reactionary trash and the rejection of all formal considerations were turned against all artistic innovation and independent thought.

Of course, it must be kept in mind that the fundamental cause of the bureaucracy's ascension to power lay in the unfavorable objective conjuncture: the defeat of the working class internationally and the

isolation of the Soviet Union. The excesses of the petty-bourgeois bohemian-turned-communist might have remained just that, excesses, except for the counterrevolutionary conditions that prevailed by the late 1920s.

In criticizing the conceptions of the Futurist-Constructivists, it must also be kept in mind that they had consequences not only for politics, but also for art. It is no more correct to blame "Socialist Realism" on the Constructivists than to blame them for the Stalinist tyranny.

Still, one must note that the reduction of art to intellect and construction, to agitation and the immediately comprehensible opened the door for a return to precisely the Naturalism and Realism that the avant-garde so despised.

In a profound letter, written to Meyerhold in April 1932, which Paul Wood quotes, Malevich made this extremely important point: "I am utterly convinced that if you keep to the way of Constructivism, where you are now firmly stuck, which raises not one artistic issue except for pure utilitarianism and in theater simple agitation, which may be one hundred percent consistent ideologically but is completely castrated as far as regards artistic problems, and forfeits half its value. If you go on as you are ... then Stanislavski will emerge as the winner in the theater and the old forms will survive" (quoted by Wood, in the exhibition catalog, p. 24).

Of course, something far worse than Stanislavsky's old naturalism triumphed.

Hopefully, the cursory examination of Constructivism and its ideological underpinnings offered above provides another portion of the response to Wood's attempt to mechanically equate the Trotskyist Left Opposition and the artistic avant-garde.

Stalinism cut off the political development of the most serious Russian artists and critics, as it did to layers of the intelligentsia attracted to the October Revolution throughout the world. The bureaucracy crushed out of existence the social atmosphere in which both a Marxist-scientific intelligentsia and a community of bold artistic experimenters could exist and fertilize one another's work.

The resolute defense of art by one of the principal organizers of the October 1917 insurrection and the former commander of the Red Army *against a section of the most advanced artists* is an irony which neither Wood nor any of his confreres are capable of commenting upon.

But then, in general, the concern for artistic reflection, psychological acuity and emotional life would get Trotsky indicted not only by the Constructivists of the 1920s, but by every self-respecting representative of contemporary semiotics, deconstruction, Postmodernism, etc.

Wood, in his essay on the politics of the avant-garde, has the temerity to contemptuously refer to Trotsky's outlook as "traditional humanism," by which, presumably, he means any concern whatsoever for the "human."

Such academics and petty-bourgeois theorizers are not interested in the development of art any more than they are in the development of the working class or socialism. Their concerns revolve around their reputations as the most daringly "left" of the "lefts" (so long as it doesn't oblige the slightest practical intervention in the working class), or the most Postmodern of the Postmodernists, or the most critical of the critics of Postmodernism.

There are as well the more mundane matters of full professorships, government grants for research and book publishing careers.

In conclusion, there are two brief points to be made.

First, we stand today unquestionably on the eve of social upheavals which will once again impel sections of the intelligentsia toward socialism and the working class.

"Art," Trotsky wrote, "cannot live and cannot develop without a flexible atmosphere of sympathy around it" *(Literature and Revolution,* p. 160). That atmosphere, one can say without a trace of exaggeration, exists nowhere on the planet today. Despite all the tragic difficulties of the epoch of the transition of capitalism to socialism, including catastrophic defeats and the resulting political confusion, it is inevitable that the most far-seeing intellectuals will place themselves in the camp of social revolution.

A critical evaluation of the Russian "experience" is not, therefore, an insignificant or academic matter. It is not possible, of course, to inoculate an entire social layer (particularly one which has barely begun to form) against a range of "infantile" and other kinds of disorders, but Marxists at least have the responsibility to equip themselves with some knowledge of past struggles over these complicated problems.

Second, despite the best efforts of the Guggenheim exhibit organizers and the international army of art critics to distort or render harmless the work on display in New York, its extraordinary brilliance and revolutionary energy, bound up with great events, shine through.

It reminds us of what human beings are capable of, inspired by great principles, thoughts and emotions, and what we ourselves are capable of.

One can imagine that the artists themselves were perhaps left a little dissatisfied and impatient with Trotsky's description of their work as "a significant episode" in the forming of a new art. But he meant to pay the highest tribute. He referred to the time in the future when human beings would live in a classless society, without exploitation or any of the social miseries of present-day life.

He suggested that Mayakovsky, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Liubov' Popova and all those artists who had adhered to the cause of the working class and socialism, enduring the greatest sacrifices, would have contributed to that future life and its culture.

"When that time," he wrote, "which is not immediate, will come, and the cultural and aesthetic education of the working masses will destroy the wide chasm between the creative intelligentsia and the people, art will have a different aspect from what it has today. In the evolution of that art, Futurism will prove to have been a necessary link. And is this so very little?" (ibid., p. 161).

Footnotes:

[1] Futurism: An artistic tendency that obtained its fullest expression in Italy and Russia. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), a poet-editor and subsequent Mussolini supporter, published the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters* in 1909. The Futurists invoked a Utopian vision of humanity invigorated by technical progress, particularly the new potentials for speed and harnessed energy. Motion itself was one of their chief subjects. [back]

Constructivism: An artistic tendency that emerged in the Soviet Union in 1920-1921. It stressed construction (technology, maximum utility, "scientific principles") versus composition (self-expression, intuition, individualism). One of its proponents declared that "real construction is utilitarian necessity."

[2] Suprematism: One of the first purely abstract trends in painting, identified with Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1878-1935). The first Suprematist works were exhibited in 1915. Malevich reduced his Suprematist "figures" to the pure plane, the square, circle and cross; he meant them to form the basis of a new artistic language that could express what he called an "entire system of world-building." [back]

[3] Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930): Outstanding Russian and Soviet poet, a sympathizer of the Bolsheviks as early as the 1905 Revolution. One of the strongest Russian adherents of Futurism. An early and ardent supporter of the October Revolution. After his suicide, he was turned into the official poet of Soviet society by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Trotsky devoted considerable attention to his work in *Literature and Revolution.* [back][4] Bogdanov, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich (1873-1928)—Russian Social Democrat, philosopher, sociologist and economist. He attempted to create his own system of empirio-monism, a variant of idealism, attacked

by Lenin. An ultra-left after the 1905 Revolution, Bogdanov left the Bolsheviks, establishing Proletkul’t weeks before the October Revolution of 1917. [back]