Tower for 2012 Olympics reprises Monument to the Third International

A comment on Tatlin in London today

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The announcement and photograph of the tower design for London's 2012 Summer Olympics are mysteriously evocative. This slanting, twisting steel structure, designed by sculptor Anish Kapoor (born 1954), reprises the ghostly memory of the *Monument to the Third International*, an unbuilt 1920 project of Vladimir Tatlin.

Here capitalism calls on communism, and the Soviet Revolution is resurrected by a billionaire. The 377-foot red spiral, called *Orbit*, is funded primarily by ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker, employing 300,000 workers globally. Lakshmi Mittal is its head; he is the world's eighth richest man.

The *Monument to the III International* was a major work by the Ukrainian-born, Soviet artist Vladimir Tatlin, one of the founders of an early Modernist movement known as Constructivism. Tatlin was one of the *avant-garde* abstract artists—Malevich, Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Goncharova were contemporaries—involved in "leftist" political groups in Russia before the 1917 Revolution, who received commissions and positions after it from supportive officials. Their early abstract line drawings and paintings materialized later into three-dimensional projects for radio stations, newsstands, and spiky monuments like Tatlin's tower.

Tatlin's *Monument* was commissioned in 1919 to be an administrative and propaganda center for the Communist Third International, for a site in either Moscow or Petrograd. With a strong diagonal movement overall, it consisted of a central axis united with a iron framework of two spirals, enclosing and supporting glass-gridded structures in the shapes of cylinder, cone, and cube. In these spaces party members would hold meetings to accomplish world revolution, the tower to exemplify in its very form the strength, dynamic energy, and openness of Communism.

Kapoor's London tower, called *Orbit*, seen only in a computer generated image, employs metal strips painted red, spiraling upward, enclosing public observation decks. It will cost about $24 million. ArcelorMittal will supply the lattice-like steel strips.

Anish Kapoor is an Indian-born London resident who has created outdoor sculptures for sites worldwide. His public architecture includes the 2004 *Cloud Gate*, a huge bean-shaped metal orb, in Chicago, the *Sky Mirror*, originally for Nottingham, England, later temporarily seen in New York, as well as the "mind boggling" sexual subway entrance in Naples, Italy. He also shows small sculptures in galleries.

Kapoor has not been questioned about the Tatlin likeness, busying himself refuting accusations of competition with the 1889 Eiffel Tower, only a Chunnel ride away. The two towers have similarities: both utilize painted metal strips in an open, lattice-like grid; both support a central core with habitable spaces. Kapoor has said it would be "terribly arrogant" to compete with the French tower.

Trotsky, for one, did not care for Tatlin's project in the 1920s, a view that one is not obliged to share. After

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noting that Tatlin was one of the "originators of gigantic projects," he suggested that the artist "has still to prove that he is right in what seems to be his own personal invention, a rotating cube, a pyramid and a cylinder all of glass." Trotsky leveled against Tatlin's project the same criticism that he had made against the Eiffel Tower. He called Tatlin's tower even "less satisfactory" than the Eiffel, which he criticized as an "exercise," being only "an extremely rational use of material," but having no useful purpose. He found the Tatlin tower "cumbersome and heavy." "What is it for?" he asked. ("Revolutionary and Socialist Art," *Literature and Revolution,* 1923)

It will be worth watching to see if this first version of the *Orbit* project undergoes changes during construction, and if the Olympic rings, which some see embedded in the ironwork, are refined. The Tatlin tower seen in period photographs shows the spiral unfolding with a burst of power from the base to the top and beyond—very different from rings around a stick.

Kapoor has made complicated large-scale projects in the past, undertaking huge engineering challenges. His *Marsyas* was a gigantic three-part red skin stretching 150 meters long; it is named for the Greek mythological figure that Apollo skinned alive. It was installed at the Tate Modern in 2003, so Londoners were familiar with his monumental work before awarding him the Olympic commission.

Kapoor speaks eloquently about his function of "bringing to expression" not his own views, but allowing other perceptions to surface through encounters with his work. He alludes to a more "poetic existence." And this is possible. His gallery sculptures, such as *Resin, Air, Space*, seem to come from another world: his work allows materials to capture space, reflect it, or even transfix part of the ether.

On the commercial level, Kapoor recently accepted a commission to design a ring for the luxury jewelers, Bulgari. His interpretation of its B.zero1 ring is currently being sold at their store on 57th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. It is made of stainless steel and pink gold, with the company logo around the top. It sells for $940. A saleslady pointed out to me Kapoor's "typical curves" and shiny reflective surfaces, and they are there.

Kapoor's great gifts enable him to move easily between forms and jobs and countries. But how and why he conceived the London commission as a Constructivist tower, so different from his bulbous orbs and bodily shapes, is a mystery. Kapoor has spoken about "elongation of the moment" resulting from encounters with his works. It could be that while he succeeds in today's world, he unwittingly recalls the Tatlin moment of conviction and possible change.

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