

Lecture Notes

Syllabus 2/14-16 – CONSTRUCTIVISM

CONSTRUCTIVISM:

- A movement growing directly out Revolutionary enthusiasm, fervor, idealism and Utopianism
- Developed out of synthetic cubism (synthetic cubism stopped painting/drawing and sculpting and began assembled/constructed art)
- In Realist Manifesto, Gabo talks about blossoming of new culture and era with Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Lenin had returned from exile and a new government being set up = **Communism:**
 - **Economic explanation for some of the inequities leading to strife as a result of the Industrial Revolution and a proposal for a more equitable economic system**
 - principles derived from Karl Marx' Communist Manifesto (1860's??)
 - equality of all people based on the ownership of the means of production
- Naum Gabo and brother Anton Pevsner left Russia in protest after Stalin's repressive communist regime took over (by 1924 or 25). Stalin didn't see a place for Avant Garde experimentation and promoted an art instead that art should be in service of the people

ALEXI GAN: "Constructivism" reserve reading:

- Looked at effects of industrialization and said it has not made life better for the people. He looks at the ill effect of the machine under the current economic structure and returns to Marxist theory (prob why Stalin threw him in prison). Says machines aren't bad but they have led to a disorganized system of labor and production which is a problem.
- Champions **social technology** – taking technology with labor and organizing it into an egalitarian productive system where everybody works for the good of all.

LASZLO MOHOLY NAGY: "Constructivism and the Proletariat" option reserve reading:

- Celebrates the spirit of our time and our age which is technology and the machine. All are equal with the machine. (Everybody can make uniform, mass-produced products.) Opposite of Gan.

1st kind of Constructivism: "INTERNATIONAL CONSTRUCTIVISM" (REALIST)

What does Gabo mean by Realism (Realistic Constructivism)?

- There was a new reality artists were trying to express: **SPACE and TIME** are the only forms upon which life is built, therefore art must be constructed around these.



- **01_and_02_First Constructed Head – 1915 – Naum Gabo**

- Demonstrates how influenced Gabo and Pevsner were by Cubism (constructing things and putting them together) and by Futurist sculpture (Boccione’s open form so you can see inside)

Constructivists fascinated by **plastic and glass**. Not only because they’re a **modern new technology**, but because of their **transparency** allows us to see through it. (solving problem Picasso had with Glass of Absinthe, or Boccioni’s Development of a Bottle in Space)



- **03_Portrait of Marcel DuChamp – 1926 – Anton Pevsner**



- **04_Column – 1923 – Naum Gabo**
 - Glass and metal and plastic. Model for new utopian vision of architecture for the future.



- **05_Mask – 1923 – (celluloid and metal) – Anton Pevsner – plastic compound**



- **06_Projection into Space – 1938-39 - Anton Pevsner**



- **07_Linear Construction #1 – 1942-3 - Naum Gabo**
 - Using Constructive elements to create forms in space



- **08_Untitled Green Stripe – 1917 - Rozanova**
 - “Faktura” = “making of.” How can you construct with paint? Faktura represents an attitude toward paint: the notion that art has to be all about “plastics” (physical substance of the painting), a focus on the actual substance and making of the image; the physical paint makes the image, constructed with the surface of the canvas, not an expression of the artist.

2nd kind of Constructivism: “PRODUCTION ART”: visual organization of simple formal elements to communicate as clearly as possible to the masses



- **10_Corner-Counter Relief – 1915 – Vladimir Tatlin**
 - Tatlin influenced by Braque’s Paper Sculpture. “Art should be real time, real space and real materials” (for Tatlin that means the stuff of the people, not Gabo’s fancy plastics etc.)



- **09_Paper Sculpture – Georges Braque**



• **11_ & 12_ Monument to the Third**

International (model) 1919-20 - Tatlin

- 2 years after Revolution
- Artists increasingly called upon to produce art in service of the people
- Commissioned to design model of enormous revolutionary structure to house the third big meeting of world communist leaders
- Tatlin not architect so it could never be actually built so it was a Utopian propaganda tool but caused much interest
- Model was 15' tall, wood and glass with 3 geometric shapes
 - 3 geometric forms - Square, Cone, and Drum on axes
 - Bottom – Gen Assembly; rotate once/year
 - Middle – Smaller, rotated once/month
 - Top – Smallest, Office of Information (Propaganda) Rotated once/day.



• **13_ & 14_ Functional Workers**

Clothing – 1918-19 – Tatlin

- Tatlin and Rodchenko decided to stop making art for the sake of art and to make more productive avenues to benefit society
- Clothing designed by Tatlin, modelled by Rodchenko



• **15_ A Triptych: Pure Colors, Red, Yellow, Blue –**

1921 – Rodchenko

- “The End of Painting” according to Rodchenko
- It’s as reduced and simple/pure as it gets. There’s nothing left to eliminate.
- Alexi Gan said “ ‘art’ is finished! – it has no place in human labor apparatus.” Defines ‘art’ as rarified objects of aesthetic value hung in museums and meant for upper class to enjoy. It doesn’t house people or provide practical things and it’s ‘finished’ because it has no place in today’s social structure of laborers – the human labor apparatus. What artist’s CAN do is **production art** which makes it available to ALL



- **16_Hanging Construction – 1920 – Rodchenko**
 - Concentric circles cut from same piece and hung from ceiling
 - Made of real materials, able to belong in real life because it could be hung in people's homes (real space)



- **17_Assembling for A Demonstration – 1928 - Rodchenko**
 - Rodchenko & Moholy Nagy fascinated by photography – incorporated real life and gave artist new possibilities for aesthetic manipulation
 - Reminiscent of Steiglitz Steerage about aesthetic composition of lines and shapes
 - Captures workers assembling in street for a demonstration. Makes interesting diagonal abstract composition. Making an aesthetic composition out of significant subject matter (workers assembling for a demonstration)



- **18_Advertising poster (Lenzig Books in all Branches of Knowledge – 1935 – Rodchenko**
 - Poster, periodical & book design becoming prominent for these production minded artists who wanted to make contribution to society and pursue avant garde art and design with a purpose
 - Combines photography with his poster
 - Propaganda! Woman is a productive worker – healthy, happy to proclaim The Message that Lenzig Books is a publisher who is producing books in all branches of knowledge for workers to come and read



- **19_Design for Sportswear – 1923 – Stepanova**

- Rodchenko's wife stopped painting 1919-20 and started to design clothing.
- Swept up in Utopian zeal of artist's producing work to visibly change society & help in the construction of a new society through art
- Designs for sportswear, presumably for Proletariat (workers, middle class)
- Colors designed on Constructivist principles – reduced palette – lots of contrast -- mostly red (idealistic color of Revolutionary Bolsheviks – The Reds), white, black.
- Not so practical as it was modern and new. Didn't catch on.



- **20_Workers Club model exhibited at the “International Exposition of Modern and Industrial Arts,” Paris – 1925 – Rodchenko**

- Designed this life sized model as part of the Russian Pavillion at the French International Exposition of Decorative and Industrial Arts in 1925 (like World's Fair)
- Rivalry between countries from mid 19th – early 20th century among European countries to show off their newest and most modern designs
- Never actually built
- Showcased everything new and modern for workers. Reading material available. Propaganda!
- No Communist Manifesto/Marxist readings allowed. After the Revolution when Lenin took over, the system/theory of pure Marxist Communist Manifesto was perverted to add a secret govt. superstructure to control rather than give power to the people.



- **21_Peasants and Workers Exhorted to Terrify the Bourgeoisie (after 1917) – Anonymous poster**

- Not abstract but very pictorial
- Women (equals in the Revolution)
- Very squared off forms, strong diagonal, predominant black,red,white colors
- See horrible Bourgeoisie – fat, bloated, conspicuously consuming fellow being put in his place by the workers



• **22_Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge (poster) –**

1919 – El Lissitzky

- One of most famous graphic designs of period
- Literally Red beats White: Red Russians (Trotsky's Revolutionary Bolsheviks) penetrate and beat the White Russians (Conservative Mensheviks). Mensheviks included many university professors, old aristocracy, and people who opposed the revolution.
- Epitome of Constructivist form in 2 dimensional design
 - Simple, non-objective geometric shapes
 - Heavy emphasis on diagonals to create dynamic composition
 - Basically An arrangement of striking formal elements
 - Ideologically loaded in this case



• **23_Fighting Lazy Workers – 1931 – Anon.**

- Workers make circle like a clock and hands of clock. Lazy workers have been out partying and are still in bed
- Message: Time's a-wasting! All should be mobilized in service of the revolution
- Basically hard-edged geometric abstract forms

Extras 1 – 4: Influence of Constructivism: Kandinsky's later years (Arnason 354-6)



We don't have to know the last 4 for this test but she's covering it now to get ahead.

KANDINSKY:

1 White Line No. 232 – 1920

Kandinsky's a Der Blaue Reiter artist here but already loose fields of color are becoming more organized and regular, hard-edged shapes according to new aesthetic principles of Constructivism.

2 Composition VIII – 1923 –

Produced from 1921-23. Left Germany and while in Russia got caught up in the aesthetic movement of Constructivism. By the time he got to the Bauhaus he had written book working out his two-dimensional theories “Point to Line to Plane” – he was still spiritual but not teaching it so much at the Bauhaus. (The Bauhaus synthesized a combo of DeStijl and Constructivism and started out in Weimar with two adversarial theories amongst faculty: Itten/Feininger-spiritual direction vs. Moholy-Nagy/Gropius-practical, production oriented aesthetic. Latter won when it moved to Dessau when Kandinsky joined. So Kandinsky basically kept his spirituality to himself in teaching.

3 Several Circles No. 323

Non-objective images. Color. Hard edges. Teaching importance of line, plane, direction, balancing and arranging elements to create dynamic composition of pure form and no recognizable images

4 Composition IX, No 626 – 1936

Kind of work he was doing by 1936 – influence of surrealism