

mehr à la mode als Panofskys Weiterentwicklung. Die verspätete Rezeption seiner Arbeit in Deutschland in den siebziger Jahren brachte es mit sich, daß die zu diesem Zeitpunkt schon lautstarke Kritik an seiner Methode gleich mitrezipiert wurde. Auf dem Symposium wurde dieser Aspekt der Wissenschaftsgeschichte nur selten so ausgiebig behandelt wie in dem Vortrag von Willibald Sauerländer.

Ob der Versuch, durch Historisierung dem Wissenschaftler Panofsky Gerechtigkeit widerfahren zu lassen, einen Beitrag zur Diskussion der Virulenz seiner Thesen liefern kann, muß sich noch zeigen.

(Eine Publikation der Symposionsbeiträge ist in Vorbereitung.)

Stefan Grohé

Ausstellungen

SQUARING THE SPIRAL ON THE EXHIBITION OF RUSSIAN AND SOVIET AVANT-GARDE ART AT NEW YORK'S GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

THE GREAT UTOPIA: THE RUSSIAN AND SOVIET AVANT-GARDE,
1915-1932

DIE GROSSE UTOPIE: DIE RUSSISCHE AVANTGARDE 1915-1932

Frankfurt/Main, Schirn Kunsthalle (1.3.-10.5.1992). Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum (5.6.-31.8.1992). New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (25.9.-15.12.1992)

Exactly seventy years ago, the *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* opened in the newly renovated rooms of the Galerie van Diemen on Berlin's ceremonial main street, just meters from the embassy of the newly-recognized Russian government. Although the First Russian Art exhibition of 1922 was neither the first nor the most penetrating exhibition of Russian and Soviet modernism to be seen in the West, it did exert a profound and lasting influence on the course and meanings of modern art. Through the installation of more than one thousand paintings, graphics, posters, architectural and theater designs, portfolios, sculpture, porcelain, textiles, and other artifacts, this enormous display of modern and applied art afforded the West a (politically distorted) glimpse into the utopia – cultural and social – then being constructed in the new Russia. (For a consideration of the intentions, audience, and consequences of this 1922 exhibition in Berlin, see this author's article, „The *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* over the Politics and Presentation of Propaganda,“ in *Proceedings of the 1992 International Congress for the History of Art*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, forthcoming in 1993.)

Now, seventy years later, viewers of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's enormous exhibition, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, may rightly have a feeling of déjà vu. In the newly restored and

expanded spaces of the Guggenheim Museum, facing onto New York's ceremonial Fifth Avenue and just meters from the embassy of a new Russia, one encounters the largest exhibition of Russian and Soviet vanguard art since the 1922 exhibition in Berlin. (The *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* travelled from Germany to Holland in 1923 where it opened in the Stedelijk Museum. The original plans to bring the exhibition to the United States never materialized. By contrast, the present exhibition, first seen in Frankfurt, travelled to Amsterdam and finally to New York's Guggenheim Museum. Accompanying the exhibition in all three venues is a weighty, elegantly illustrated catalogue, the English version of which contains almost two dozen essays and weighs three kilograms.) Although numbering less than the approximately 1,200 exhibits shown in Berlin at the dawn of the Soviet age, the present exhibition displays at the end of the communist empire more than eight hundred paintings, drawings, watercolors, photographs, theater and architectural designs, porcelain, and other artifacts. Thus in scale, scope, and historical resonance, the two major exhibitions of Russian modernism are comparable.

The intention of the 1922 Berlin exhibition was to engender support for the new Russian regime. Through presenting a broad array and staggering number of exhibits, the organizers of the First Russian Exhibition sought to impress the Western public of the communist regime's acceptance of diversity, its promotion of innovative forms of expression, and its general encouragement of creativity. In essence, the strategy informing this display was to assuage, if not convert, doubting Western visitors of the vitality of life in the Soviet realm. Similar, if not exactly identical, considerations may have originally shaped the current *Great Utopia* exhibition. Planned under *glasnost* and endorsed by the last Soviet ministry of culture before the collapse of the Soviet empire, this exhibition sought to use culture as a means to persuade the West of the openness of the Soviet Union's late-communist society. Even though historical events have overtaken the initial Soviet planners, their original intentions may have been realized after all. For what was on view in Frankfurt, Amsterdam, and New York is an exhibition of unbridled optimism and heroic ambitions with but the faintest hint of the darkness that so soon descended on these would-be „new men“ and their dreams of utopia.

The Great Utopia presents an aesthetic survey of one of the most fertile periods in modern world culture. The enormous number of exhibits attests to the fervor of creativity and unrestrained energy, if inconstant talent, among the Russian (and collaborating Ukrainian, Belarussian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish) makers of modern art and life. Yet, we should not forget that the artists – and many of their contemporary apologists – were as much ideologically as aesthetically motivated. They aspired to articulate not merely new forms of aesthetic expression but to construct new social(ist) formations. Ironically, the regime that artists helped to create and which so many worked to support ultimately subverted the utopian society which the Russian and Soviet avant-garde incarnated. Indeed, up to its recent demise the Soviet state largely abjured abstract art and denigrated the lives of those who advocated it. Despite

the almost seventy-year period of Soviet disjuncture between the utopianism of avant-garde ambition and political reality, the exhibition largely avoids addressing consequential historical issues. Instead of analysis and assessment, the organizers have elected to present a brilliant display of inventiveness.

The Guggenheim exhibition is very much more than an introduction to the subject: by a presentation of dozens of well-known master works and hundreds of lesser-studied and hitherto little-appreciated works, the exhibition does indeed afford a representative portrait of the revolutionary age and its ambitions. Significantly, it doesn't gloss over the artists' aesthetic missteps in favor of a sanitized presentation of the masterpieces of Russian modern art. In each of the media displayed, the viewer is presented with the achievements as well as the failures of this period of intense optimism. By granting the visitor such broad access to the material, often drawn from remote provincial museums in the former Soviet Union, the exhibition encourages one to recognize that among the greatest accomplishments of this period of aesthetic revolution are works by under-appreciated artists (Sergei Sen'kin, Vladimir Lebedev, Kliment Red'ko, among others), and not merely canvases, objects, and plans familiar to a Western audience: the suprematism and late figurative canvases of Malevich, the counter-reliefs of Tatlin, the sculpture of Gabo, the „Prouns“ of Lissitzky, the heroic designs of Vesnin, the striking film posters of the Sternberg brothers, the formal experimentation of Rodchenko, Popova, and Stepanova.

Although such a vast survey of revolutionary art may be impressive in many settings, it is hard to imagine a more fitting venue than the Guggenheim Museum. Moreover, the installation, designed principally by Zaha Hadid, deftly complements and effectively orchestrates the sometimes unruly works on display.

Historically, all three venues of this travelling exhibition are appropriate: the Stedelijk and the Guggenheim, in particular, are rightly recognized for their long promotion of Russian modernism. For seventy years the Stedelijk Museum has been engaged with Russian avant-garde art. Through mounting numerous exhibitions, sponsoring catalogues and publications, sponsoring scholarly gatherings, and, perhaps most remarkably, securing the greatest concentration of Malevich paintings in the West, this museum has been at the forefront of scholarly study of this period. Likewise, the Guggenheim Museum has long been a major repository of Russian art, principally the work of Kandinsky, and during the 1970s and 1980s a major venue for scholarly exhibitions on various aspects of the Russian avant-garde: *Vasily Kandinsky, 1866-1944, in the Collection of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, 1972; *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the George Costakis Collection*, 1981; *Kandinsky in Munich, 1896-1914*, 1982; *Kandinsky in Paris, 1934-1944*, 1985. However, no museum is architecturally more in harmony with the intellectual tenor and aesthetic aspiration that undergirded this art than the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

The unintended correspondence between Frank Lloyd Wright's spiralling New York landmark and the gyratory historical path of the Russian avant-garde, as well as its best known architectural monument – Tatlin's utopian designs and

(reconstructed) model for the Third International (1920) were not shown in New York – carries throughout the installation. Indeed, the coincidence between building and exhibition is heralded even before one enters the museum proper; for as the visitor approaches the entrance, he encounters Wright's hallmark signature, the red square. This personal signature of the architect is echoed in the 1915 antecedent by Kasimir Malevich, whose *Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman in Two Dimension)* serves as the intellectual keystone of the exhibition. It appears appropriately as the catalogue cover and serves iconically as the opening exhibit. Thus, throughout the installation, as we shall see, one is ever in mind of the affinities between the idealistic vision of the American architect and the utopian ambitions of the Russian artists.

At the first turn in the Guggenheim's spiralling ramp, the visitor is inaugurated into the exhibition by encountering the two icons of suprematism and constructivism. Installed high in one corner is Malevich's *Red Square*; spanning another corner of this otherwise empty room is a reconstruction of Tatlin's evocative *Counter-Relief* (1914-15). The spirit of these two pioneering artists fills the space of the room and establishes the historical context and the emotional tenor for the rest of the exhibition. Although the room is bereft of other art works, it is not without art; for here again the building contributes signally to the drama of the installation. Embedded in the floor are Frank Lloyd Wright's circles, an effective and appropriate counterpoint to the rigorous hard-angled geometry of the father figures of suprematism and constructivism. Moreover, the room is opened up by a horizontal arcade of semi-circular cutouts which penetrates into the art-filled spaces beyond.

Emerging from this chapel-like space, one ascends the spiralling ramp, there to begin the scrutiny of the drama of Russian modernism which unfolds along the curving walls: cubo-futurism, suprematism, constructivism, productivism, theater designs, film posters, photography, architecture, textiles. Branching off the ramp at successive levels are corridors which lead into the museum's new galleries. Although more conventional in design than the historic Wright building, these new exhibition spaces are adequately suited to the size, number, and character of the Russian modern art. Here, however, the installation architect intrudes more emphatically than elsewhere. For example, in the Tower Gallery dedicated to the „0.10“ exhibition of 1915 and the slightly later work of, principally, Puni and Rozanova, Zaha Hadid, the architect responsible for the installation design, has decorated the walls and floors with suprematist forms. Art historically, this may not correspond exactly to the nature of the original „0.10“ show; but it does call to mind the notorious exhortation of Larionov and Goncharova to paint one's face with abstract designs as a means of affirming the new art while scandalizing the public. In today's Guggenheim, the shock value is diminished, but the historical resonance remains.

The several references in the installation to historical aspects of Russian modernism not represented in the displayed works themselves animate and broaden the viewer's intellectual engagement with the entire exhibition. For

example, one might recognize in the red panels, which snake up the museum's central spiral accordion-like, a tribute to a 1927 exhibition design by Gustav Klutis in which he suggests red folding panels as an effective solution for a temporary installation of modern art. Or to cite another example, one might reflect on the room in which pictures by Popova, Ekster, and Rodchenko are mounted on free-standing plexiglass panels and in which the black-painted back wall supports Rodchenko's black canvases. Here again, the installation team reveals its understanding of the subject: the plexiglass panels present to good effect the meaning of the rayonist-related paintings of Popova whose „lines of force“ extend beyond the material picture support into the immaterial reflections created by the plexiglass stands. Similarly, Rodchenko's preoccupation with dematerializing color and texture in his objective paintings is reprised through the installation which provocatively juxtaposes the black picture planes with the black wall of „reality“ on which the canvases hang.

The scope, installation, and the display of works long banished to inaccessible provincial storage are among this extraordinary survey's numerous strengths. The lack of accurate information on the descriptive labels, the absence of adequate identifying labels, the disparity between the wall panels and the works displayed, these are among the several serious shortcomings. Nonetheless, in a contemporary world where messages are communicated in sound and sight bytes, an exhibition which offers the spectator eight hundred items is a welcome counterbalance, even if the experience may be somewhat overwhelming and even if the installation may as easily occasion mental exhaustion as exhilaration. What is important to acknowledge, and what is effectively realized in this exhibition, is that one is afforded an imaginative projection into the ideated world of Russian modernist aesthetics and social planning. Thus, on display is more than stimulating new visions of painting, sculpture, graphic arts, theater, film, architecture, photography; instead we are given an opportunity to experience what was a radically new conception of the meaning, purpose, and morphology of modern life. This conception, and the art that promoted it, ultimately proved ill-suited to the world of harsh realities. However as a great aesthetic experiment, the Russian and Soviet avant-garde did confront heroically, if not always successfully, the essential issues facing contemporary art and modern life. In representing this crucial period of creativity, the Guggenheim Museum's *The Great Utopia* will have provided an enormous stimulus to further research and public appreciation of the accomplishments and failures of the avant-garde. By concentrating so emphatically on the aesthetic dimensions of Russian modernism, however, this most recent exhibition has, almost inexorably, validated the criticism engendered by the *First Russian Art Exhibition* of 1922: „What recent Russian art has to offer is not really an exhibition of art but rather an exhibition of art problems“ (Paul Westheim, in *Das Kunstblatt*, no. 11, 1922, p. 493).

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