

Catalogue and Book Reviews



TATLIN: NEW ART FOR A NEW WORLD

Gian Casper Bott, David Walsh, Simon Baier, Anna Szech,
Dmitrii Dimakov, Nathalie Leleu, Roland Wetzel, Maria
Lipatova, Yevgraf Kipatop, Jürgen Harten.

6 June -14 October 2012

Museum Tinguely, Basel; Hatje Cantz £35

250 pp. Many mono & col. illus.

With chapter resumé in Russian

ISBN 978 3 9523990-1-9

Vladimir Tatlin was one of the great artists of the Russian avant-garde, a leader who, along with Kazimir Malevich, dominated artistic life from the mid-1910s until the late-1920s. In 1914, he was the first artist in Russia to produce three-dimensional, abstract constructions, which he called counter-reliefs and which were built up using real materials like sheet metal, various kinds of wood, plaster, and rope. He rapidly liberated these structures from the wall, suspending them diagonally across the corners of a room so that they existed fully in space, interacting dynamically with the environment. Three years after the October Revolution of 1917, he exhibited his *Model for a Monument to the Third International* – a spiralling framework, soaring into space at the angle of the Earth's axis and enclosing rotating forms – which has inspired generations of radical artists, acting as a beacon of utopian aspirations and an icon of revolution. Between 1929-1932, Tatlin developed his *Letatlin* (based on the Russian verb *letat* ie. *letati* and the artist's name) an extraordinary flying machine or air bicycle, with which human beings could take to the air and pedal their way through space under their own power. Of all these amazing and inventive works, very few exist today: less than a handful of counter-reliefs have survived, and only one

version of the *Letatlin*, which is housed at the Russian Federation Air Force Museum at Monino, 40 kilometres from Moscow. Of the original monument, there exists not a trace.

Since so few of Tatlin's avant-garde works survive, one might wonder how any exhibition could hope to capture and convey the power and depth of his achievements. Of course, the answer is - with immense difficulty. Nevertheless, despite these enormous obstacles, the Tinguely Museum in Basel produced an exhibition that documented Tatlin's career and managed to give the audience a real taste of the artist's creative attainments. For the patience, perseverance and imagination that the curatorial staff displayed, we must all (art historians and the general public alike) be truly grateful. They brought together the surviving works, along with original photographs and documentation, as well as some reconstructions and items from Tatlin's later design work, including his theatrical projects.

Not surprisingly, the show began with the paintings that Tatlin produced before he embarked on his experiments with the counter-reliefs. The most innovative of these were produced under the impact of Western movements such as Fauvism, explored through the prism of native Russian traditions like the icon and the *lubok* (popular prints) in the style that is usually called Neo-Primitivism. Although Tatlin did not paint a large number of these works, they are powerful and expressive. The monumental *Large Nude*, for instance, is an exceptional painting, with its bold curvilinear delineation of a sitting figure which occupies the frontal plane of the painting. It was produced using only red, ochre and blue pigments, with the addition of a few black lines to indicate shadows and white highlights to evoke a sensation of three-dimensional form. The flatly applied colour, the stylised highlighting and the rhythmic curves are strongly reminiscent of traditional Russian icon painting, although the bold use of colour recalls the work of Henri Matisse and canvases like *The Dance* and *Music*, which Tatlin would have seen in the Moscow mansion of Sergei Shchukin.

There was undoubtedly a bold leap from these paintings to the reliefs that Tatlin started to make in May 1914, on his return from a brief visit to Paris (which included a trip to Picasso's studio). Unfortunately, the rich pictorial and textural qualities of these works, which are evident from photographs, are not always present in the extant works, some of which have suffered over time, such as the relief from the Costakis Collection,

which has clearly lost some vital components. Two of the least controversial reliefs are the 1917 relief from the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the *Corner Counter-Relief* from the Russian Museum, which is a 1925 replica made by Tatlin after a 1915 original. The *Corner Counter-Relief* is an exciting work consisting of apparently interlocking sheets of metal, which are suspended on ropes across a corner. The construction seems to float in space, defying gravity and recalling billowing sails.

Judging from photographs, contemporary descriptions and Tatlin's own statements, the early reliefs were more concerned with inter-relationships of material than these two relatively late reliefs. The early reliefs were mainly represented at Basel by reconstructions, undoubtedly because the attribution and authenticity of other surviving reliefs is still being questioned, although they are very few in number, and it might have been instructive to have included them. Despite the meticulous attention to detail which Martyn Chalk and Dmitrii Dimakov have exercised in recreating Tatlin's reliefs, the results tend to be disappointing, especially when viewed, as here, in conjunction with some very revealing and eloquent early photographs documenting the reliefs. Speaking personally, these authentic photographic images tended to give the viewer a more profound understanding of the original works than the reconstructions, although these did provide a sense of scale and a point of comparison, forcing the viewer to examine both the works and the photographs closely.

Of course, reconstructions of *Tatlin's Tower* (as the *Model for a Monument to the Third International* is often called) and the *Letatlin* are inevitably more successful in conveying the artist's original intentions than reconstructions of the reliefs, perhaps because the scale is much larger, the form is clearer and the overall impact is less dependent on subtle nuances generated by material relationships, tones and textures. The recreations of the *Tower* and the *Letatlin* demonstrate the grandiose nature of the artist's conception as he moved from making works of art to designing artefacts for the new socialist environment. These two utopian projects really represent the high point of Tatlin's imaginative engagement with, and participation in, reconstructing the new society. After 1932 he returned to working for the theatre. This had been a continuous strand in his creative activity since the 1910s, represented at Basel by numerous sketches and designs, including his breath-taking painting for Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* of 1915, and his innovative sets and costumes (helpfully reconstructed here) for his production of Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* in 1923. In the 1930s, Tatlin also returned to painting, producing small-scale, highly textured works, some of which were also on display. These might seem to detract from the image of Tatlin as a fearless avant-garde innovator, but, in line with contemporary emphases on continuity, they provide a fuller picture of the artist's career than a more concentrated focus might have done. In this respect, they

enhance our understanding of Tatlin as an artist and a man, living through the horrific years of Stalin's Purges.

The exhibition was as comprehensive as it could be given the state of Tatlin's oeuvre, the difficulty of borrowing the *Letatlin*, and the paucity of surviving reliefs and other major works. The exhibits were beautifully displayed and captioned, while the catalogue provides excellent visual documentation of this exceptional show, with high-quality reproductions of all the exhibits on display, along with a biography and selected bibliography. Complementing these materials are a series of illuminating articles, covering all aspects of the artist's creative output, by the intrepid and erudite curator Gian Casper Bott, and scholars like David Walsh, Simon Baier, Anna Szech (who was an invaluable assistant curator), Dmitrii Dimakov, Nathalie Leleu, Roland Wetzel, Maria Lipatova, Yevgraf Kipatop and Jürgen Harten (who curated the ground breaking Düsseldorf exhibition of Tatlin's work in 1993). All these components make this an important and useful publication - an appropriate permanent document of this marvellous exhibition.

Christina Lodder
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ALEKSANDR DEINEKA [1899-1969] AN AVANT-GARDE FOR THE PROLETARIAT

Manuel Fontán del Junco, Christina Kaier, Ekaterina Degot,

Boris Groys, Fredric Jameson, Irina Leytes,

Alessandro De Magistris

7 October 2011 - 15 January 2012

Fundación Juan March, Madrid £68

437 pp Many col & mono illus

ISBN 9 788470 755927

It is sometimes convenient to characterise Russian art of the 1920s as consisting of two competing trends – abstraction and realism – avant-garde innovation and emerging Socialist Realism, which Clement Greenberg condemned as ‘Kitsch’.

The artists representing these two opposing tendencies are often regarded as mortal enemies. Yet the actual situation was far more fluid and comprised an extremely complex process of inter-action and accommodation between artistic approaches, philosophical ideas, theoretical formulations, groupings, individuals, and official requirements. The convoluted nature of artistic life during this period is particularly evident in the career of Aleksandr Deineka, who clearly embraced certain avant-garde values but adapted these to a more figurative idiom. In 1918 he was, in his own words, 'stuffing the purest Cubism into the potholes of Kursk'.

In the 1920s Deineka studied at the progressive Moscow Vkhutemas, and in 1928 along with avant-garde figures like El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Aleksandr Vesnin and others founded the October Group. Yet he eventually became a president of the Soviet Academy of Arts and produced numerous paintings with significant propaganda value. Just before his death in 1969, he was honoured with the title 'Hero of Socialist Labour'. This might sound like an artist who cynically 'bent with the wind' as Cullerne Bown put it, compromised his creative integrity, totally abandoned artistic modernism, and sold out to Socialist Realism and the Communist Party. But he didn't – or at least – not entirely.

In many ways, Deineka epitomises the kind of proletarian artist that the Bolsheviks envisaged as creating a new culture after the October Revolution. He had impeccable credentials: his father worked on the railway, and Deineka himself fought with the Red Army in the defence of Kursk during the Civil War. In the early 1920s, during his studies at the Vkhutemas, he absorbed modernist values, and this can be seen in many of his subsequent paintings. In *Building New Factories* of 1927 and *The Defence of Petrograd* (1928), he adapted devices from avant-garde photomontage as developed by Rodchenko, Gustavs Klucis and Lissitzky to the medium of easel painting, playing with space, proportion and scale and using plain white grounds, reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist canvases. Although, in these and other works, Deineka propagated communist values by representing subjects that were favoured by the Party, such as the Civil War, contemporary military personnel, industrialisation, modern technology, and physical fitness, the compositions are carefully constructed so that the relationships between each element create pictorial tensions and impart an overall sense of dynamism. Deineka did not employ the detailed descriptive style based on nineteenth-century realism or the more conventional modes of pictorial construction that painters like Isaak Brodskii and Aleksei Gerasimov favoured. In *Future Pilots* of 1937, Deineka depicted the backs of three

fair-haired boys of different ages, sitting on a sea front, facing an expanse of sea and sky and looking at an aeroplane. The viewer in effect shares the boys' experience and senses their dreams and aspirations, while the boys' lack of individuality facilitates the identification process. Although the painting is almost abstract in its cursory delineation of just a few elements, it possesses a strong lyrical element that was typical for the artist's work of the 1930s.

Inevitably, Deineka was not immune to prevailing aesthetic values and ideological demands and he, like other artists, painted collective farms as places of joy and plenty instead of the starvation conditions that actually existed. As a sign of government favour he was sent as an official Soviet representative to the United States in 1934. He even managed to survive the oppressive atmosphere of the immediate post-war years, producing illustrative works that were far more pedestrian in terms of conception and execution than his work of the 1920s or early 1930s.

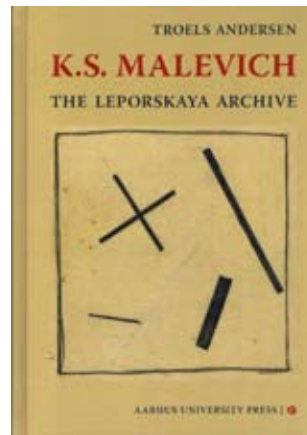
The 2011 exhibition devoted to Deineka's work chronicled his development in admirable detail, presenting it within the artistic context of the period, illuminating the intricacies of his creative trajectory and challenging certain assumptions about the 1920s and the subsequent development of art in the Soviet Union. The catalogue provides an impressive and worthy permanent record of the display. It contains a comprehensive biography, a thorough bibliography, a detailed list of exhibits, and it reproduces in fine colour almost every one of the 250 exhibits. In addition, there is an extensive and important collection of sixty-four translated texts, some of which are by the artist, but most of which relate to the wider artistic debates and issues of the period. These include Aleksei Kruchenykh's libretto for *Victory over the Sun* of 1913; various articles from *Iskusstvo kommuny* over the revolutionary period; statements by Anatolii Lunacharskii; extracts from Aleksei Gan's *Constructivism* of 1922; the statements of groups like OST (The Society of Easel Painters) and October; the 1932 Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organisations; and quotes from the important 1932 First All Union Congress of Writers. These translations are by scholars like John Bowlt, Charlotte Douglas and Erika Wolf, and benefit enormously from their detailed knowledge of the period.

Complementing this documentation are essays by Manuel Fontán del Junco, Christina Kaier, Ekaterina Degot, Boris Groys and Fredric Jameson. Among these authors, Kaier provides the most closely focussed study of the artist's career, providing new information about his life and work, posing some penetrating questions, supplying some insights into his creative ideas, and presenting some stimulating

interpretations of Deineka's approach within the context of artistic life at the time. All the essays challenge certain established interpretations of artistic life in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, including the emergence and nature of socialist realism and its legacy. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given current art-historical fashions, there is a strong emphasis on continuities. This can be enlightening, as in Fontán del Junco's consideration of motifs related to technological developments in pre- and post-revolutionary art, Degot's consideration of mass distribution in Soviet art, and Groys' exploration of the philosophical ideas (which he convincingly links to Nikolai Fedorov's notion of the 'Common Task' of perfecting humanity) underlying the depictions of physical prowess. Inevitably, there is a whiff of Groys' earlier controversial thesis concerning the responsibility of the avant-garde in the emergence of Socialist Realism (*Total Work of Stalinism*, 1992) which emphasised the continuities between avant-garde ideas and the ideology of Socialist Realism, but placed less emphasis on other continuities, such as that between Stalin's policies and Lenin's various formulations concerning the function of art in the new society and its immediate role as propaganda, especially as articulated in his article concerning Party organisation and Party literature, published in *Novaya Zhizn*, No. 12 (13 November 1905). While continuities and similarities are important for understanding what factors underpin a particular historical situation or work of art, dislocations and differences can be equally significant. In his discussion of utopia and the nature of the Soviet Union, which he categorises as governed by 'modernisation', Jameson points out that, despite their visual similarities, Nazi depictions of physical perfection supported the notion of racial purity and the supremacy of the Aryan race, while Soviet images of the body beautiful suggest 'the proof of achieved modernity'.

Whether or not you agree with Groys or Degot who asserts that 'Without Malevich Socialist Realism is not possible', this is an exemplary catalogue – it not only represents a stimulating and wide-ranging book about the artist, but it also contains important information and valuable documentation about the period in which he worked.

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K. S. MALEVICH THE LEPORSKAYA ARCHIVE

Troels Andersen

Aarhus University Press 2011 39.95

Gazelle Book Services Ltd, UK

216 pp 608 mono numbered entries 20 col plates

ISBN 978 87 7124 011 5

The name of Anna Alexandrovna Leporskaya is well known to collectors and art historians interested in the work of Kazimir Malevich because she inherited boxes and boxes of the artist's drawings. Herself an artist and former student of Malevich, Leporskaya assisted Malevich in the mid-1920s in the classification and annotation of many of these drawings. Troels Andersen, who compiled and edited the four volumes of Malevich's writings in English in the 1960s and 70s, visited Leporskaya during these years and writes that she allowed him to photograph and catalogue this particular group of annotated drawings. In addition, Leporskaya gave Andersen access to many of Malevich's late drawings. These two groups of works, together with drawings that were formerly in the possession of Nikolai Khardzhiev which would have come from Anna Leporskaya, make up this catalogue of over 600 drawings, all of which were dispersed in the 1970s.

Particularly important is that Andersen has presented the annotated drawings according to Malevich's grouping and numbering system. This is a valuable contribution to Malevich studies as far as it goes, for although the entries are clearly organised, the idea and reasoning of the artist's system is not explained by Andersen.

These groups of drawings were registered in seven main categories: early, called "Academic Drawings", "Graphic Drawings", Knave of Diamonds ("Bubnovy Valet"), "Cubism", "Alogism", "Suprematism", and "Late Drawings". The notations on the drawings are in Leporskaya's hand and are in either pencil or green ink; most of them are numbered

within a group. For example, a Knave of Diamonds work may have, “Bub Val 38”, while a Cubist drawing will have, say, “Cub 20”. The value of such categories is that Malevich’s own identification of his stylistic groups is provided, and the numbering system, which is shot through with gaps, would reveal the missing drawings and the missing links in the stylistic groups. But the meaning of the system remains to be deciphered.

Malevich provided more information about the Suprematist drawings. Each one is given a number from 1 to 28, followed by a letter of the Latin alphabet, A to Z, but using only 16 of the 26 letters, apparently. The drawings, writes Andersen, were contained in envelopes on which the alphabet letters were written together with Malevich’s description of them. Thus, the drawings from the envelope of the letter L, for example, are described as “Suprematism Various constructions with the form of the cross (the principle (or emergence) of mysticism) – 10 drawings”. Although not mentioned by Anderssen, with this we are led directly to Malevich’s interpretation of Suprematism as he outlined it in a draft of a film for Hans Richter when visiting the Bauhaus in the spring of 1927. The outline was titled, “Suprematism. Phases of its Development”, and the phases were described as Suprematist “sensations”. Thus the lettering system complements and expands on the “Phases”, and this is very useful to the art historian once the connection is made, but this is not raised by Andersen.

Important, too, is that missing numbers and letters in the series may help with the identification of other drawings which may, or may not, be consistent within a group. Indeed, in his introductory texts, Troels Andersen places great emphasis on the problem of Malevich’s drawings generally because many, in his opinion, should not be attributed to the artist.

In addition to the drawings listed by Andersen, over 200 more drawings were included in the catalogue compiled by the Czech art historian, Miroslav Lamac, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and they appear in the Kazimir Malevich Catalogue Raisonné that is published under the name of Andréi Nakov. Andersen lists these drawings and states that they “should in my opinion not be considered part of Malevich’s oeuvre”.

In support of this, Andersen contends that the number of drawings said (“in the literature”) to have come from or were authenticated by the Czech art historian should be “denounced”. What he calls the “Prague drawings” were appearing in Western auction houses and exhibitions in the early 1970s and Andersen says that in 1971 he took photographs of them which he showed to Anna Leporskaya. He asserts that she said that they “did *not* come from her collection, *nor* did she consider them authentic”. Andersen also declares that Nikolai

Khardzhiev had been of the same opinion.

Andersen, then, seems to have been ignorant of the fact that Leporskaya had also allowed Miroslav Lamac to catalogue her collection in the late 1960s, and today refuses to admit this although it is stated openly by Nakov in the Catalogue Raisonné. Indeed, this Catalogue Raisonné was initiated by and is fundamentally (over 50%) the work of Miroslav Lamac to which the additions of museum and other works that could not have been known to the Czech art historian during the Soviet regime were contributed by Andréi Nakov.

The main reason that Andersen gives for making these bold declarations of fake drawings is, as he writes, that “none of the ‘Prague drawings’ were seen, registered or photographed by me during the years 1963-1971 when I worked for months with the archive.”

These were years of extreme surveillance by the Soviet authorities on Russians who had contacts with Westerners and, as everyone knew at the time, Anna Leporskaya was taking great risks by receiving art historians from Europe. She was known as much for her courage as for her utter discretion. Leporskaya would never say who had visited her and, with all her genuine graciousness, was also skilled at diplomacy and camouflage. To allow Troels Andersen to assume that he was in exclusive possession of Anna Leporskaya’s entire archive would have been a necessity for her but is clearly a supposition on his part, while to speak in her name, now 30 years since her death in 1982, is to assume an authority not known to have been bestowed upon him by Leporskaya herself.

I should add that I also visited Anna Leporskaya in Leningrad in the early and mid 1970s and once she covered the very large table in her studio with over 100 Malevich drawings for me to look at and study. I don’t remember that any of them had repertory numbers and this reveals that in compiling and classifying groups of drawings Malevich had made a particular selection to demonstrate specific ideas in his painting. Thus only some of his drawings have repertory numbers but in what proportion of the total is not known. In addition, I distinctly remember seeing on Leporskaya’s table drawings that Andersen says, “should ... not be considered part of Malevich’s oeuvre”.

So however interesting and important this publication, *The Leporskaya Archive* by Troels Andersen is in no way a complete compendium of the drawings of Kazimir Malevich that once belonged to Anna Leporskaya. As far as the catalogue goes it is good, but Andersen’s unabashed declaration of fakes goes contrary to the facts and reveals that his familiarity with what was in Leporskaya’s large collection of Malevich’s works on paper was only partial.

Patricia Railing
Artists • Bookworks



THE AESTHETICS OF ANARCHY

Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde

Nina Gurianova

University of California Press March 2012

\$49.95, £34.95

Hardcover, 360 pp 68 mono illus

ISBN 9780520268760

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Entering the stream of recent studies attempting to understand and explain the advent of modernism by calling it “anarchist”, Nina Gurianova interprets the creativity of the early Russian Avant-Garde poets and painters, 1910-1918, as an “aesthetics of revolt”, as she also calls it. The Futurist poets had been obliging in this, demonstrating it superbly in their 1912 declaration that they would “throw Pushkin overboard from the Ship of Modernity”.

The word, “anarchy” or “anarchist” is not used in its more common social and political meaning in this study, according to Gurianova, but in the dialectical “*archē* / *an-archē*”, “order / rejection of this order”. The Russian Futurists and then Suprematists were electing for a new order and in this they necessarily rejected classical and “bourgeois” artistic canons and the social and philosophical context to which they belonged. As the composer Thomas von Hartmann wrote in his article, “On Anarchy in Music” (1912 in *The Blue Rider Almanac*), creativity lies in the “discovery of new laws”, a new “*archē*” which, of course, is the opposite of “*an-archē*”. Old shoes are thrown away only after new shoes replace them. The Russian Avant-Garde artists created with new orders, even if they sometimes enjoyed expressing themselves outrageously, as “rejectors”. Having dared to reject the old, theirs was an aesthetics of “*archē*”, the discovery of new creative orders.

But this is not Gurianova’s thesis. “The principle of anarchy”, she contends, is “an open and diverse aesthetic phenomenon” in which the “Russian Futurists” were committed to an “anarchic aesthetic ideology”. To reject is not to create, and when

“anarchic” means to “challenge the old and to arrive at a new paradigm”, two essential notions have been collapsed into one, each of them losing their essential identity. In this, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy* is based at once on a contradiction of terms and on their obfuscation.

Only well into her study does Gurianova introduce something that would properly justify her basic proposition: the Russian philosophies of anarchy of the late 19th and early 20th Russia. This was the rejection of the ossified individual and the claim to personal freedom, something expressed by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Soloviev, Ivanov, Bakhunin, the numerous social and spiritual philosophers of the time, as well as by Nietzsche. Reading on into the chapters on poetry, performance and painting it becomes clear that Gurianova is often focusing on the psychology of the avant-garde creators who dared to be different. Now anarchy is equated with non-conformism and the claim to be individual, to be free. In this sense, the “aesthetics of anarchy” are the “aesthetics of the anarchist”. That would be the very reason the artists called themselves “futurists”.

In the chapters in which she considers artistic trends, Nina Gurianova refers to the artists’ “new creative aesthetics” among which she includes play and parody in poetry, the “word as such”, sound in the word, the flatness of primitive painting or of Suprematist colour, weightlessness in Suprematism, and so on. She generally associates these with “principles of freedom” interpreted as principles derived from opposition to former creative principles. But she goes no further to investigate the sources of the new laws of creativity other than by negation, rejection.

These chapters are syntheses of what is known about Russian Futurist poetry and provide useful consolidations of some of the major aspects of them, together with investigations into subject matter such as the “Game in Hell”. The same is true of the author’s approach to the artists’ engagement with the First World War in the numerous Futurist books produced at the time, a subject about which little has been published.

When she treats of the artistic trends, Nina Gurianova presents the artists rejecting received canons and the mentality that accompanied it, but she discusses their artistic devices and all that they engaged with as if they were deployed to these ends. There is the necessary anti-thesis to this thesis: the artists were discovering new orders, new “*archē*”.

When she treats of the artists’ engagement with the changes resulting from the October Revolution of 1917 and their writings in the newspaper, *Anarkhiia*, in particular, the author brings historical information in context with artistic activities in theatre and film that reveal new initiatives in the role of art in society.

The Aesthetics of Anarchy is actually a collection of interesting and sometimes original essays that raise questions for debate in

the historical context of the many socio-artistic phenomena that manifested in Russia between 1910 and 1918 – new solutions in poetry, performance, the audience, artists’ theories, engagement with arts institutions, political contexts and so on. When read outside of the misconstrued theory of anarchy that has been imposed upon it, the essentially historical theme of the chapters in *The Aesthetics of Anarchy* is able to stand out and its value asserted.

Patricia Railing
Artists • Bookworks



ALEXANDRA EXTER PAINTS

Patricia Railing

Artists . Bookworks, East Sussex, 2011

288pp c.400 colour illus £45.00

ISBN 978-0-946311-20-0

The artist Alexandra Exter was an important figure in the Russian avant-garde. A contemporary of those pioneers of abstraction Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, she worked alongside these men as an equal. Indeed, she was one of a coterie of Russian women artists who made an enormous contribution to the development of the theory and practice of abstract painting. Like Olga Rozanova, Lyubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova and Nadezhda Udaltsova, Exter was fearless in her pursuit of new approaches to the articulation of non-objective form on canvas. Before the October Revolution of 1917, she divided her time between Paris and Russia, studying, exhibiting and becoming a friend of the French Cubists and Italian Futurists. For those of her Russian colleagues who were unable to travel abroad, she was an invaluable source of insider information about the latest developments in France and Italy, regularly bringing news, publications and even Western works of art back to her Moscow home.

Not surprisingly, since she studied in France, Exter’s Cubist paintings show a profound understanding of the ideas underlying the style and are strongly reminiscent of work by

artists like Fernand Léger, Robert Delaunay and Sonia Delaunay, whom she knew well. While some of Exter’s Cubist canvases can appear rather tentative and do not seem to depart radically from Western prototypes, her abstract paintings demonstrate a bold and original approach to the orchestration of pictorial form. They are powerful and dynamic, using colour and shape to create a great sense of energy. These mature works are breathtaking. Precisely how Exter managed to produce such effects forms the substance of this book by Dr Patricia Railing.

In fact, this is a unique volume. Not only is it one of the first in-depth studies of Alexandra Exter in English, but it also focuses on the works themselves: the way that they are structured in terms of composition and colour, and the optical effects generated. Dr Railing analyses the works in great detail, examining the theory and practice of Exter’s approach to colour, elucidating the geometrical precision underlying the pictorial compositions, and relating the approach to the art discourse of the period. This type of profound investigation provides the reader with a real understanding of the process behind the making of these paintings, while the author’s probing remarks and focus on the nature of seeing and viewing actually make the reader look at the works themselves in a new way.

The book begins with Exter’s Cubist paintings, which the author deals with in two chapters: *The Still Life 1913-1915* and *The City 1910-1912*. She then examines the artist’s experiments with Futurism of 1912-1915. Exter, like many Russian artists, experimented with Cubism and Futurism concurrently, so that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible given the paucity of precise documentation, to discuss the works in a strictly chronological sequence. While the fusion of the two styles in Russia is often labelled ‘Cubo-Futurism’, Dr Railing illuminatingly considers Exter’s more Futurist-inspired works in relation to Delaunay’s theories of Simultaneity. Indeed, as the author shows, Exter’s approach bears striking affinities to Simultaneism. Clearly, these were an important set of experiments with colour, giving the artist a profound understanding of colour effects which she subsequently used to such stunning effect in the abstract paintings, beginning with the early works of 1916-1917 and concluding with the final works of 1924. In between, the author examines Exter’s many theatrical designs.

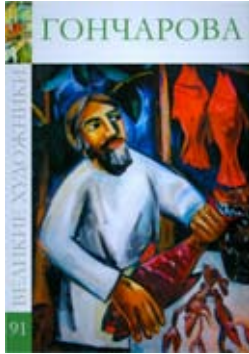
In addition to the main chapters, Dr Railing has included an extensive chronology of Exter’s life, incorporating a listing (with small illustrations) of certain significant paintings. This is incredibly useful. It supplies a great deal of historical information, while allowing the reader to compare and contrast paintings that possess a similar subject matter, and enabling him or her to identify small nuances of difference. At the same time, the sequence of reproductions vividly conveys the way that Exter’s oeuvre developed over the period, complementing the

chapters, which are more thematic, dealing with specific aspects of the artist's theory and practice, rather than describing any linear evolution.

Like the work by many figures of the Russian avant-garde, Exter's paintings have been much sought after in recent decades, and, as has so frequently happened with Malevich and Kandinsky, demand and high prices have resulted in a situation where numerous fakes have entered the market place, muddying the waters of collecting and scholarship. The issue of authenticity is complex and fraught with problems, especially when, as is the case with Exter who left Russia in 1924, there is very little documentation. In this situation, it is to be hoped that in-depth studies, like that provided by Dr Railing, will ultimately help to clarify the problems and resolve the matter. This may take time. Meanwhile, this book gives readers the information, insight and visual tools to reach their own conclusions.

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Catalogues and Books Received



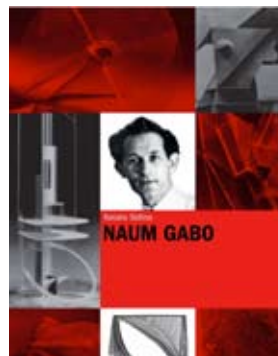
**NATALIA
GONCHAROVA**
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Moscow, 2011



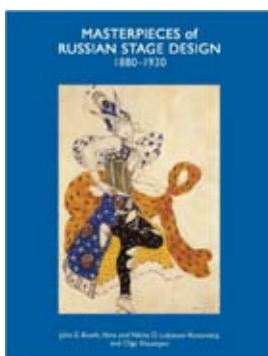
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