

## The Crisis of Representation and its Reference to Mediation – Russian Constructivism as a Point of Departure

“From Representation to Construction”: this was the title selected by the Working Group for Objective Analysis for a book project that was never completed. The plan had been to create an anthology of drawings and statements documenting a four-month working process in early 1921, during which the boundary between composition and construction was intensively explored. The title of the unpublished compendium is a good indicator of the general framework in which the 'social avant-gardes' located their artistic, institutional and political ambitions.<sup>1</sup> For our current purposes, I would like to call this framework the “crisis of representation.”

Be it as it may that the crisis of representation often appears today as a new nexus of problems to be addressed, and the critique of representation as a movement stemming from postmodernism, its onset, as those of many other crises, can be pinpointed in the early twentieth century – even if it and most others emerged under other names. The insight that traditional ascertainment of our relation to reality was in need of fundamental correction was one shared by scientists of the broadest range of disciplines and ideological orientations: Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Helmholtz, Cassirer.

A supposed congruence between existing entities and the terms designating them was no longer tenable. Cassirer stated that “a completely new perspective on the relation between thinking and being [...] ensues from the way of thinking of critical philosophy. The 'object' that had previously served as a known premise now became that which was to be searched for.”<sup>2</sup> The paradise of the purely unmediated was forever gated shut. The interaction between “I” and world could no longer escape the process of taking form. Silja Freudenberger thus summarized the central points and obligations emerging within this crisis of representation:

1. The notion of a divine perspective is nonsensical.
2. The mimetic concept of knowledge and representation must be abandoned.
3. There can be hardly any underestimating of the role of specific determinations (conceptual, cultural, social) within the constitution of the world and findings that represent it.”<sup>3</sup>

At this point it is worth remembering the warning Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has issued against confusing the two meanings of 'representation'. While acknowledging a connection between them, she distinguishes nonetheless “representation as *speaking for*, as in politics, and representation as re-presentation as in art and philosophy.” Post-structuralist literature – Spivak cites Foucault and Deleuze as examples – too greatly neglects this distinction.<sup>4</sup>

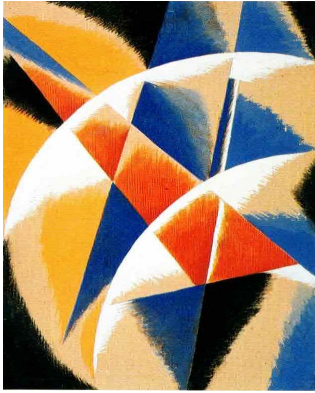
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This essay originally appeared in German as *Die Krise der Repräsentation und ihr Bezug zur Vermittlung* in: Rahel Puffert, *Die Kunst und ihre Folgen. Zur Genealogie der Kunstvermittlung* (Bielefeld, 2013), pp. 150-158. An earlier version of this English translation by Michel Chevalier appeared in *Rab-Rab. Journal for Political and Formal Inquiries in Art Issue 2, Volume B* (Helsinki, 2015), pp. 111-117. This 2024 version is supplemented by six illustrations, and amends editorial mistakes in the 2015 publication.

1 Maria Gough: *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005), p 57.

2 Ernst Cassirer: *Goethe und die mathematische Physik. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Betrachtung*, as quoted in: Freudenberger, Silja, *Repräsentation: Ein Ausweg aus der Krise*, in: Silja Freudenberger/ Hans Jörg Sandkühler, eds.: *Repräsentation, Krise der Repräsentation, Paradigmenwechsel. Ein Forschungsprogramm in Philosophie und Wissenschaften* (Frankfurt/M. 2003), pp. 71-102, especially p 75.

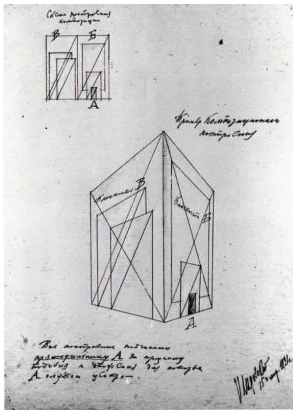
3 *Ibid.* p 76.



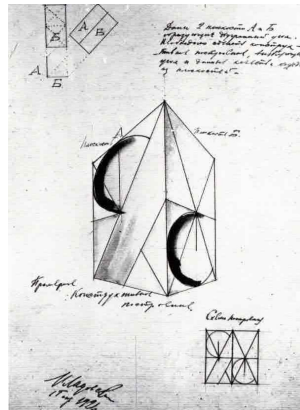
Lyubov Popova, *Composition*.  
1921  
(Costakis Collection, MOMus, Thessaloniki)<sup>5</sup>



Lyubov Popova, *Spatial Construction*.  
1921  
(Tret'yakov Gallery, Moscow)<sup>6</sup>



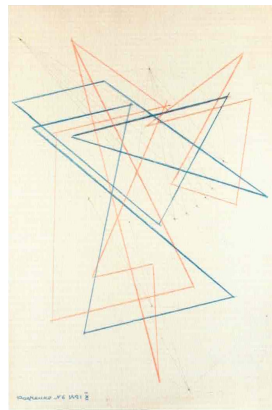
Nicolai Ladovsky, *Example of a Composed Structure*.  
1921  
(Costakis Collection, MOMus, Thessaloniki)<sup>7</sup>



Nicolai Ladovsky, *Example of a Constructive Structure*.  
1921  
(Costakis Collection, MOMus, Thessaloniki)<sup>8</sup>



Alexander Rodchenko, *Architectural Composition*.  
1919  
(Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow)<sup>9</sup>



Alexander Rodchenko, *Construction*.  
1921  
(Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow)<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, the focus will remain on the second definition: depictive representation as reproduction of something previously thought. In painting and sculpture, the crisis of representation implies firstly the definitive refusal of any merely depictive function for these media. A turn to intensive “foundational research” relative to functions and effects of the respective media is the next logical step.<sup>11</sup>

As Arnold Hauser formulates it, the turn to non-representational means was “a change which, in some respects, forms a deeper incision in the history of art than all the changes of style since the Renaissance,” adding that “there had always been a swinging to and fro between formalism and anti-formalism, but the function of art being true to life and faithful to nature had never been questioned in principle since the Middle Ages.”<sup>12</sup> The avant-gardists' awareness of this epochal break is manifest when Ljubow Popowa notes that “the analysis of the formal components of art, which has emerged as a goal of artistic activity in the last decade, implies a crisis for representational art.”<sup>13</sup> Maria Gough, as well, stresses that the skepticism in our recent decades of “radical breaks, epistemological shifts, and other ruptures of great magnitude” should not cloud our reading of that time. In November 1921 the Constructivists did indeed all give up painting, many of them shifting their activity, more or less, to industrial production or devoting themselves to photographic techniques.<sup>14</sup> These steps by the Constructivists stood however at the end of a chain of consequences arising from a calling-into-question of painting. The turn to abstraction meant anterior functions of art could be dissolved; and it drove a search for new social anchoring. The thorough break with tradition did not stand outside of a sense of historical awareness, however. On the contrary: what the many essays and notes from the era demonstrate is that their authors sought to construct a place themselves within a specific historical development. In other words, to legitimate and steer their newly-found approach with the aid of a logic of historical development.<sup>15</sup> From today's perspective, such genealogical extensions could be understood as answers to the new challenge of legitimating one's work. Maria Gough describes this challenge to the Constructivists while keeping in mind one of their motivations:

“[...] if the nonobjective painter's initial task was to get rid of the referent in painting, his or her next task is to determine the logic or principle by which this new 'painterly content' will be organized. [...] The problem of construction is, in short, a problem of motivation: how to prevent this newly emancipated painterly content from free-falling into the merely arbitrary arrangement of random pictorial elements.”<sup>16</sup>

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4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: *Can the Subaltern speak?* in: Cray Nelson/ Lawrence Grossberg: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, Illinois, 1988), pp. 271-313, especially p 275. Here, Spivak criticizes Deleuze and Foucault in their assertions that there is no longer any representation and that intellectuals' role is no longer to speak for a group or the masses. Both assertions are a misreading of political realities and merely serve to rid intellectuals of their task of speaking out for the weak and the oppressed. They also overlook the very different forms of political representation: advocacy, defense, leadership, spokespersonship are all just as possible as demagoguery or abuse of power.

5 and 6 Illustrations excerpted from Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska, eds., *Art Into Life. Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (New York, 1990), p 89.

7 and 8 Illustrations excerpted from *Ibid.*, p 90

9 and 10 Illustrations excerpted from Peter Noever, ed., *Alexander Rodchenko. Inventory of Space* (Vienna, 2005), p 41 and p 34.

11 A step taken with a high degree of analytic precision. Not only was, for example, the painted image disassembled into its components parts (color, surface, form), only to then be reexamined as these were brought back together, but also the history of painting was studied from new culture-scientific, sociological, and semiotic perspectives.

12 Arnold Hauser: *The Social History of Art, Volume 4*, (London, 1990) (originally published 1951), p 210.

13 Liubov Popowa, in: Magdalena Dabrowski, ed., *Über Zeichnungen, Ljubow Popowa. 1889-1924*, (Munich, 1991), p 157.

14 Gough (2005), p 9.

15 One may here compare, for example, Hans Arp/ El Lissitzky, eds.: *Die Kunstisten*, Baden 1990 (1925), or El Lissitzky: *K. und Pangeometrie*, in: Lissitzky-Küppers (1992), pp. 353-358.

16 Gough (2005), p 27.

The crisis of representation has a far-reaching epistemological dimension. It carries with it an increase in freedom insofar that the equivalency of original and copy becomes less important as a criterion in many areas of life and knowledge. A sense of this change is to be read in the questions raised by Freudenberger:

“If we are not representing the world as it is, in our everyday or scientific knowledge, what are we doing? And what can representation be, under these circumstances? When theories of representation are refuted, what are then the possibilities, conditions, and limits of cognition? How does one distinguish between knowledge and non-knowledge, between better and worse depictions of the world? When the world-as-such is not theorizable, how can one even speak of depictions? And what is actually the status of what is depicted?”<sup>17</sup>

The last of these questions raise the issue especially of what function art may have: what intended purpose can an artist be following if the point is no longer to refer to an extra-artistic reality via the produced artifact, to depict reality in one way or another? Far from being aloof thinking-games, Lissitzky's *Prouns* proved that the abstract image yielded by an avant-garde perspective could serve a further purpose – as an experiential chance to become aware of actual notions and configurations of space, be they one's own or potential ones. From today's perspective, Lissitzky's *Prouns* mark out this transition: from that of a pictorial concept locating the observer at a fixed point of view, to one situating her or him in a spacial arrangement. Whereas both the space of picture and observation are static in the former, the latter places the content of the picture in a relation of direct dependency on the observer. It is not pictorial content which is represented, but axes and materials (in this case: colors and forms; words or tones would also be possible) with which and in the midst of which one sees; put at disposal and thus made available. The picture is no longer coextensive with the tableau or the canvass, but has to a certain extent freed itself from its support.

The support merely backs up a process of seeing. It sets into motion the onset of picture(s). The *Prouns* are a case-study of a change in the function of art and concomitant change in reception. And the second meaning of representation resurfaces at just this point. Michael Lingner describes these changes as a given when “the concept of finalization aims not for an autonomy of art, artist, or work, but rather a realization of autonomy *through* art.” Here, the task of art is not to represent or symbolize autonomy – or, let us say, to exercise independent decision-making – but instead the goal is to offer art as a medium for the practice of self-determination.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Constructivists, the path leads from composition to construction, and then to the organization of relations in which the former-viewer is implicated. Artistic work is endowed with an utopian dimension in the Cassirerian sense:

“The great assignment of utopia is that of achieving space for the possible, instead of surrendering to the conditions of our current day and age. It is symbolic thinking which leads people to overcome their natural inertia and gives them a new faculty, the ability to form their own universe.”<sup>19</sup>

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17 Silja Freudenberger: *Repräsentation: Ein Ausweg aus der Krise*, in: Silja Freudenberger/ Hans Jörg Sandkühler, eds. *Repräsentation, Krise der Repräsentation, Paradigmawechsel. Ein Forschungsprogramm in Philosophie und Wissenschaften* (Frankfurt, 2003), p 76.

18 Michael Lingner: *Krise, Kritik und Transformation des Autonomiekonzepts moderner Kunst. Zwischen Kunstbetrachtung und ästhetischem Dasein*, in: Michael Lingner, Pierangelo Maset, Hubert Sowa, eds.: *ästhetisches asein, Perspektiven einer performativen und pragmatischen Kultur im öffentlichen Raum* (Hamburg, 1999), pp. 25-45, especially p 40.

19 Ernst Cassirer: *Versuch über den Menschen. Einführung in eine Philosophie der Kultur* (Hamburg, 1996) (originally published 1944), p 100.

Art is inaugurated as a field of experiment, one that offers space in order to test out the possible. Not in order to just offer in an impossible location these possibilities as the unrealizable other, but to occur as a situation in which the possible is situated in the now, as the only possible means of experience, one which cannot yet be established with any permanence. And it occurs as prototypical rehearsal of realizations on large scales.<sup>20</sup>

“It becomes apparent that also museums must by no means be moribund undertakings. It all depends on which hand can get the right handle in order to bring the material to life. It is especially important in Germany, where expressionism was long established as the new painting, that for once a governmental instance remember the times in which we are living, and keep deployed the entire complex of questions which abstract painting implies.”<sup>21</sup>

With this timely reflection in 1929, Siegfried Giedion presents a good example of what it is to 'apply' art. In review of the Dresden International Art Exhibition he describes Lissitzky's contribution as an extension of the latter's notion of the picture (*Proun*) as a “connecting station between painting and architecture.” But he does not leave it at a recognition of an artistic feat. His understanding is that Lissitzky's proposition draws attention to what is possible in an exhibition context while encouraging us to draw our conclusions from this insight. This point cannot be stressed enough: the Russian avant-garde did not only bring to bear the influence of the institution on the social meaning of the individual art work. The fundamental insight that art has a social dimension raised the even more pressing question, by inference, of what consequences to the structure of the institution stemmed from art as a social praxis. Like Foster, Benjamin Buchloh has shown that it was the criteria that modernism is usually blamed for – ones that take a lofty stance against change – that prevented the avant-garde advance of new art forms from ever being acknowledged. From today's perspective, it is ever more clear that the crisis of representation is inseparable from questions being raised about reception and mediation:

“With sufficient historical distance it becomes clearer that this fundamental crisis within the modernist paradigm was not only a crisis of representation (one that has reached its penultimate status of self-reflexive verification and epistemological critique). It was also, importantly, a crisis of audience relationships, a moment in which the historical institutionalization of the avant-garde had reached its peak of credibility, from which legitimation was only to be obtained by a redefinition of its relationship with the new urban masses and their cultural demands. [...] In the early 20s the Soviet avant-garde (as well as some members of the de Stijl group, the Bauhaus, and Berlin dada) developed different strategies to transcend the historical limitations of modernism. They recognized that the crisis of representation could not be resolved without at the same time addressing questions of distribution and audience.”<sup>22</sup>

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20 Michel Foucault defines utopias as “fundamentally unreal spaces”, as “society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down.” Michel Foucault: *Andere Räume*, in: Karlheinz Barck et al. eds.: *Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik* (Leipzig, 1992), pp. 34-46, especially. p 39. [English version: *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, translated by Jay Miskowic]

21 Siegfried Giedion: *Lebendiges Museum*, in: Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, ed. *El Lissitzky. Maler Architekt Typograf Fotograf. Erinnerungen Breife Schriften. Übergeben von Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers* (Dresden, 1967/1992), p 383.

22 Benjamin Buchloh, *From Factura to Factography*, in: Annette Michelsen/ Rosalind Krauss/Douglas Crimp/Joan Copjec, eds. *October. The First Decade* (Cambridge and London, 1987), p 88.

The avant-garde critique of the social status of art was both dramatic and far-reaching. It inverted previous relations of commissionship (be it of churches, crowns, or states). The role of art was no longer to be (explicitly) defined from outside. Nor was art to be understood, as the l'art pour l'art apologists did, as something free of purpose. Instead, those artists aware of their fundamental anchoring within society started to formulate their own "social purpose" as far as possible. In this process that followed they also formulated demands and expectations relative to their audience and began to organize their relationship to the latter. The avant-gardists escaped that kind of arbitrariness that emerges when art is rooted back again in "artistic personality." The battle in the socio-political realm against the rule of an arbitrary order stemming from the élites – this battle was seen to correlate with a skepticism towards the artistic personality as sole pattern of justification. At the same time, the pairing of artistic with technical and scientific research often did not aid immediate understanding among the potential addressees and audiences. A fact that may seem in contradiction with the synchronous aim of a communication as wide and effective as possible. The alternative – an adherence to the conventions of familiarity and recognition – was for the avantgardists a specious withdrawal from an achieved level of cognition as well as a paternalistic adoption of an already overcome standard. Extending this thought, a mediation which interconnects all intermediary steps, and one which may help the many in making cognitive gains, can only be an ongoing, distinct, and parallel proposal.

Such a mediation cannot be the substitute for the level of complexity of a statement which, once attained, must be taken note of. In other words: the provocations and efforts of a learning process can be just a little reduced as the pleasures that stem from it, given that one is not seeking to minimize the emancipatory gains of these processes. In Buchloh's case, these considerations are not read as political demands which have been attached to art, but as a consequence of the crisis of representation which in the early twentieth century channeled much effort and reflection. As a result of this crisis, the concomitant relation to recipients as well as to questions of distribution and address are *genuine artistic questions* and no marginalia.