Filozofski vestnik | Volume XXXV | Number 2 | 2014 | 157–174

Aleš Erjavec*

Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge

1.

Between 1905 and 1930 in Europe the radical artistic trends—the avant-garde movements—also represented "the spearhead of modernity." The most radical and politicized among them were Italian futurism and Russian constructivism. Others, such as Dada (as a radical but primarily non-politicized movement), the early surrealism, and the less radical expressionism, cubism, Bauhaus, and De Stijl, although they didn't limit their "revolutions" to style and technique, they nonetheless didn't depart from the realm of art and didn't cross the line between art and "life." What therefore distinguished the radical ("politicized," "extreme," "social," "aesthetic") avant-garde movements from the rest of the avant-gardes was that the former programmatically demanded "that art move from representing to transforming the world."[1] What this meant can be illustrated by comparing cubism and Italian futurism. In their time both were considered "revolutionary," but in different ways. Let us take the case of Italian futurism:

> Life was to be changed through art, and art to become a form of life. The Futurist project of innovation encompassed all aspects of human existence, and was conceived as a total and permanent revolution. What was [in 1915 in a manifesto by the same name] called "Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe" was aimed at a transformation of mankind in all its physiological and psychological aspects, of the social and political conditions in the modern metropolis.[2]

To sense the difference between futurism and cubism and thereby between pronouncedly politically radical and artistically radical avant-garde let us consider the following description of cubism offered by the previous cubist painter, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Cubism, claimed Rivera, was

---

1 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, translated by Charles Rougle, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 14.

2 Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996, 47.

* Institute of Philosophy, SRC SASA, Ljubljana

> a revolutionary movement, questioning everything that has previously been said and done in art. It held nothing sacred. As the new world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries, and was creating out of the fragments new forms, new objects, new patterns, and—ultimately—new worlds.[3]

Cubism too, argued Rivera, strove to realize the "creation of new worlds," but we of course also sense that these "worlds" were those of the mind and not of the material historical and social reality: they were limited to art and didn't extend beyond it, into "life." Italian futurism—to continue this parallel reading of two very different strands of avant-garde art from a century ago—in contradistinction to cubism fused art and life. To see how this futurist perspective differed from that of cubism, let me quote from an article by the futurist Giovanni Papini which was published in the journal *Lacerba* on December 1, 1913. The reader should note that although Papini mentions art, the stress in his article is on "life" to which "art" is obviously either subordinated or which constitutes only its segment:

> I am a Futurist because Futurism signifies a total appropriation of the modern civilization with all its enormous wonders, its fantastic possibilities and its horrible beauties. [...] I am a Futurist because I am tired of Byzantine tapestries, false intellectual profundity, [...] of harmonious rhymes, pleasant music, pretty canvases, photographic painting, decorative, classical, antique and ambiguous painting. [...] I am a Futurist because Futurism signifies love for risk-taking, for danger, for what didn't attract us for what we have not tried, for the summit that we didn't expect and for the abyss that we have not measured. [...] I am a Futurist because Futurism signifies a desire for a greater civilization, for a more personal art, for a richer sensibility and for a more heroic thinking. I am a Futurist for Futurism signifies Italy as it was in the past, more worthy of its Future and its Future place in the world, more modern, more developed, more avant-garde than other nations. The liveliest fire burns today among the Futurists and I like and I am boasting that I am and remain among them.[4]

---

3 Quoted in David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910 – 1990,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, 11.

4 Quoted in Giovanni Lista, *Le Futurisme. Manifestes, Documents, Proclamations*, Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1973, 91-92.

A similar statement can be found in Tatlin: "What happened from the social aspect in 1917 was realized in our work as pictorial artists in 1914 when 'materials, volume and construction' were accepted as our foundations."[5] If in Italy the change implemented by futurism produced among futurists such as Papini a novel sensibility, a new "distribution of the sensible" (Jacques Rancière) then for Tatlin too, radical art such as constructivism had already became a *fait accompli*, to be followed by the social upheaval, i.e. the October Revolution.

What characterizes Italian futurism and Russian constructivism and distinguishes them from cubism is that they form complete worldviews and strive to affect extra-artistic life of the national or class community, while cubism remains limited to the domain of art in the sense that it is characterized by autonomy and the ensuing institution of art. To understand what that means, it suffices to remember the lesson of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. Duchamp's intention when introducing in 1915 the ready-mades was to subvert the institution of art—to show, by bringing a urinal or a bottle-rack into an exhibition, that it is the context that makes a work into an artwork and not the other way around—an ambition in which he totally failed, for these objects, instead of serving as prime examples of non-art were swiftly assimilated into the realm of art. Or in the words of Duchamp: "I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into the faces of [the public] as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty."[6]

One would think that the two poles of avant-garde art—namely Italian futurism and Russian constructivism on the one hand and cubism or expressionism on the other—would cover the variety of artistic options developed by the early (also called "classical" or "historical") avant-gardes from a century ago, but this was not the case, for even more radical varieties of politicized or radical avant-garde movements that questioned the legitimacy of further existence and creation of art were soon developed. Aleksei Gan thus in 1922 claimed:

> Our Constructivism has declared uncompromising war on art, because the means and properties of art are not powerful enough to systematize the feelings of the

---

[5] Vladimir Tatlin, quoted in John E. Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism*, London: Thames and Hudson 1988, 206.

[6] Quoted in Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in art since 1945*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1989, 11.

> revolutionary milieu. It is cemented by the real success of the [October] Revolution and its feelings are expressed by intellectual and material production.[7]

In other words, constructivism wanted—independently of the events in New York triggered there at about the same time by Duchamp's ready-mades—to eliminate art as a bourgeois invention, believing that a new society, that of revolutionary communism, required new expressive means, among which there was no place for art, for it was considered to be an obsolete part of an obsolete bourgeois society and therefore of an obsolete period in human history. To replace such past art, the constructivists went into two directions: one was productivism—the designing of useful everyday objects such as stoves and warm clothes—while the other continued the tradition of machine aesthetics (associated with anarchism) elaborated already in the nineteenth century when a whole philosophy of industrial aestheticism developed—a tendency realized also in the Arts and Crafts movement (1860-1910) and later continued in Bauhaus.

> In much Western scholarship, at least, Constructivism has become an integral part of the historiography of the October Revolution and tends to be appreciated almost exclusively as an immediate result of the new political order and to be granted an inordinate primacy in the development of early Soviet culture. All the more surprising, then, is the fact that Constructivism produced very little of permanence. It was a movement of built-in obsolescence, of ready-to-wear and throw-away, of designs often intended for multiple and mass consumption, of theories, statements, and projects which left behind a precious, but very scant, legacy of material objects. In other words, in remembering the icons of the Constructivist process, and Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (**Figure 1**) is an obvious specimen, we realize that Constructivism is now celebrated more for what it did not create than for what it did.[8]

In the opinion of Aleksei Gan, constructivism was both a Soviet and a Western invention, but the two varieties were not the same. The distinction between them

> hinges precisely on the concept of art. Gan argued that, for the West, Constructivism was merely the name given to the new artistic trend. "They [the West] simply

7 Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm*, Tver 1922; quoted in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 338.

8 John Bowlt, "5 x 5 = 25," unpublished manuscript.

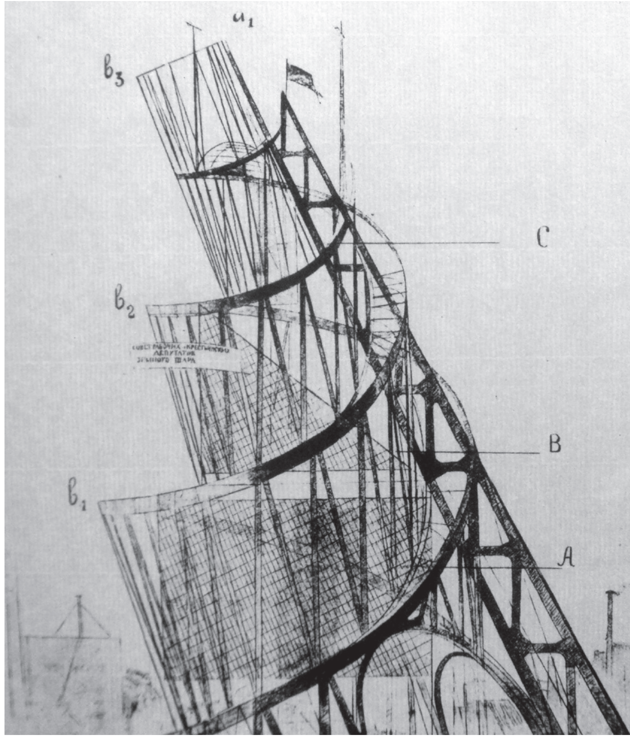

Figure 1: Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, 1919-20.

> call the new art Constructivism," he asserted. He particularly singled out [two of his fellow Constructivists] Ehrenburg and Lissitzky for blame. "The basic mistake," he stressed, "of comrade Ehrenburg and comrade Lissitzky consists in the fact that they cannot tear themselves from art." Gan stressed that the Russian Constructivists had dispensed with art and that it was the Revolution which ensured that this would happen.[9]

In a society thoroughly permeated with political ideology, such as that of Russia of the twenties, art shared the destiny of this society. What distinguished the western notion of art from that of the former socialist countries was the latter's social and political context in which there was no art market. "Art becomes politically effective only when it is made beyond or outside the art market—in the context of direct political propaganda. Such art was made in the former Socialist countries."[10]

---

9 Lodder, *op. cit.*, 237.

10 Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008, 7.

Let us take two examples of art that could be called "propaganda" or political, but which could equally well be described as creating and erecting a new artistic paradigm which was inextricably linked to political purpose. The first is the mentioned *Monument to the Third International* commissioned in early 1919 by the Department of Fine Arts and to be erected in the center of Moscow. "During 1919 and 1920 [Tatlin] worked on it and built models in metal and wood with three assistants in his studio in Moscow. One of these was exhibited at the Exhibition of the VIIIth Congress of the Soviets held in December 1920. 'A union of purely artistic forms (painting, sculpture and architecture) for a utilitarian purpose' was how Tatlin described it."[11] The monument, resembling a leaning Eiffel Tower, was to be three times as high as the Empire State Building, with its glass body moving at different speeds: the cylinder once a year, the cone once a month and the cube on the top once a day with a continuous flood of political and propaganda activity going on inside it and emanating from it. "Unfortunately the project never got further than the models which Tatlin and his assistants built in wood and wire. These models came to be a symbol of the Utopian world which these artists had hoped to build. In many ways it is typical of their hopes: so ambitious, so romantic and so utterly impractical."[12]

Another such work was El Lissitzky's poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919). It is this poster that will be the focus of this essay.

> The poster as a whole, besides being a work of political propaganda, [...] also exhibits an overt aesthetic function. Its simple graphisms convey an excess of signification. Pure ideological statement and pure aesthetic object never meet in a single space. [...] In the case of the poster [...] the aesthetic effect engendered by pure geometric forms augments the ideological effect of the written statement, and vice versa. The image and the narrative exist in two distinct spaces. They merely intersect, producing in our perception not a unified effect, but a doubled or parallel impression—a binary effect.[13]

---

[11] Camilla Grey, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863 – 1922*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1971, 225.

[12] *Ibid.*, 226.

[13] Aleš Erjavec, "Introduction," in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Aleš Erjavec, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 44.

In Soviet Union such works flourished until the late twenties when the agit-prop "factography" replaced the avant-gardist "Faktura."[14] Already from the early twenties on, especially Lissitzky and Rodchenko discarded their previous artistic avant-garde modernist endeavors to turn to political education and state propaganda, with Rodchenko becoming the editor of the magazine *USSR in Construction*. It is from within this context that Benjamin Buchloh poses a question resembling that of Boris Groys:

> Why did the Soviet avant-garde, after having evolved a modernist practice to its most radical stages in the postsynthetic cubist work of the suprematists, constructivists and Laboratory Period artists, apparently abandon the paradigm of modernism upon which its practices have been based? What paradigmatic changes occurred at that time, and which paradigm formation replaced the previous one?[15]

In the West the answer to this question remained obscured by grouping much (or all) such later Soviet avant-garde work under the rubric of political propaganda.

> The problem with this criticism, is that criteria of judgment that were originally developed within the framework of modernism are now applied to a practice of representation that had deliberately and systematically disassociated itself from that framework in order to lay the foundations of an art production that would correspond to the need of a newly industrialized collective society.[16]

The intent of these Russian avant-garde artists was to effect—or to take an active part in—a "'double revolution' by redefining revolutionary art practice so that it became revolutionary social practice as well."[17] As Victor Margolin claimed, "The ambition of the artistic-social avant-garde [...] was to close the gap between discursive acts, which were confined to postulation and speculation, and pragmatic ones, which involved participation in building a new society."[18] It was for this rea-

---

14 See Benjamin Buchloh, "From *Faktura* to Factography," *October* 30 (Autumn 1984), and Yve-Alain Bois, El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* (April 1988): 161-181.

15 Buchloh, "From *Faktura* to Factography," 85.

16 *Ibid*., 108.

17 Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy Nagy. 1917-1946*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 3.

18 *Ibid*.

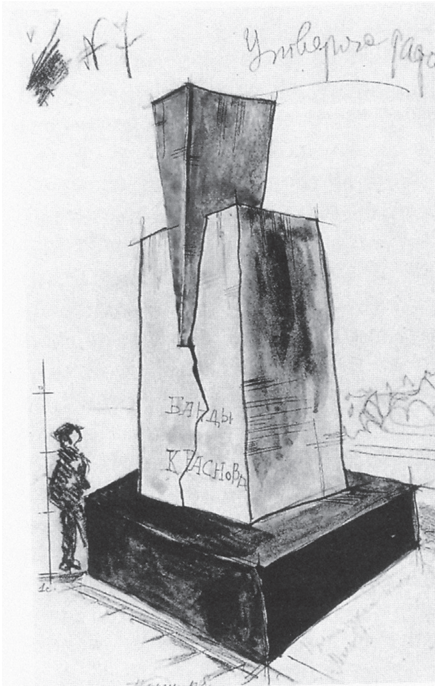

Figure 2: Nikolai Kolli, "Project for a monument commemorating the victory over General Krasnov," 1918.

son that Lissitzky could write in his diary shortly before he died, in 1941, that in "1926 my most important work as an artist began: the design of exhibitions."[19]

From the early twenties on many Russian avant-garde artists decided to take an active part in the building of the Soviet state. They considered such an endeavor to be a personal as well as an artistic continuation of their previous futurist, Suprematist or other avant-gardist artistic work: for them classical painting and traditional art forms have attained their final developmental form before 1917 and had nothing more to offer to the new society or to the new art. This view coincided with Walter Benjamin's fascination with the Soviet revolutionary cinema and its technique of montage; cinema not only demolished aura, but offered a collective experience, with montage—a technique related to the earlier avant-garde practice of collage—offering an Adornian "resistance" when compared with the products of Hollywood film industry.

[19] Buchloh, *op. cit.*, 102.

2.

In his book on public monuments Sergiusz Michalski discusses an unrealized “Project for a monument commemorating the victory over General Krasnov” from 1918, which was proposed by the constructivist architect Nikolai Kolli (1894-1996). (**Figure 2**) This “was,” claims Michalski, “the first fully abstract political public monument in the world. This piece consists of a black pedestal from which rises a white stone, splintered at the top by a red wedge. A peculiar word play was intended here, since it had been by means of the red (*krasnij*) wedge that the ‘bands of Krasnov’ had been defeated.”[20]

> Kolli’s project—continues Michalski—was deftly plagiarized by El Lissitzky in his famous poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920), (**Figure 3**) which showed a white circle (for the White Guards) being pierced by a red wedge, thus broadening Kolli’s play on words. But the sequence of transformations and ripostes did not end here. In the fall of 1920, the famous avant-garde artist Malevich and his students erected a plywood monument to the October Revolution in Vitebsk which depicted a circular form splintered by a wedge.[21]

Red wedge also represented the Bolshevik army emblem.

In 1921 Walter Gropius developed what resembled an expressionist monument that was to honor victims of the working-class in a putsch in Weimar. It immediately brought to mind Lissitzky’s work. Later Kandinsky used the same motif and the image of the “wedge” to criticize Bolshevik symbolisms. These variations of the basic theme—white circle and the red wedge, supplemented with a few words to the same effect—witness that there must have existed some profound reasons why the whole composition met with such a widespread and positive response.

It was Camilla Gray with her book *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922* that in 1962 introduced Russian avant-garde to the Western public, including the work of El (for “Lazar”) Lissitzky. In her view Lissitzky’s 1919-20 poster was linked to his abstract material bodies, the “prouns” the first of which was also

[20] Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments. Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997*, London: Reaktion Books, 1998, 112.

[21] *Ibid.*, 113.

Figure 3: El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (Street Poster), 1919-20.

made in 1919. "A poster of his of 1919," muses Gray, "reading 'Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge', is an amusing illustration of those 'leftish artists' contribution to Bolshevik propaganda. "[22]

How did Lissitzky himself view the poster? Most certainly within the framework of his desire to partake in the avant-garde's attempt to redefine revolutionary art practice and to transgress the limits of art, moving into the territory of industrialism and constructivism. Benjamin Buchloh used this peculiarity of Lissitzky's "art" to point out the dividing line between Western modernism and Eastern avant-garde such as constructivism, a gap that even today continues to remain wide and unbreachable, in spite of existing for almost a century. Hal Foster asks himself whether already then "Barr understood that Constructivist practices

[22] Grey, *The Russian Experiment in Art*, 1971, 254.

spoke to a historical rupture in the mode of production, not to the historicist logic of the institution of art. In any case,—continues Foster—MoMAist logic soon demanded the displacement of a heterogeneous, collectivist Constructivism by a Western Cubistic-constructive tradition."[23]

Lissitzky's 1919-20 poster remained half way between Suprematism and constructivism and even if it was an abstract work it nonetheless also contained explicit and implicit figurative representations as well as written text. In the opinion of Christina Kaier, Lissitzky's 1919-20 poster contains also explicit sexual imagery: "The floating geometric forms of Lissitzky's Suprematist composition represent not only the penetration of the White Guard front by the Red Army, but the fantasy of the complete penetration of traditional Russian social life by the invigorating sharpness of Bolshevik ideology."[24]

It was to this motif that Lissitzky turned in 1929 when creating the stage design for the play *I Want a Child* by Sergei Tret'iakov. Here is the resume of the play:

> In *I Want a Child*, an unmarried party member named Milda, whose extensive public organizing work to benefit the collective leaves no time for marriage or children, suddenly realizes that she wants to have a child. As an agronomist well-versed in eugenics as well as Leninism, Milda decides that the prospective father must be of 100 percent healthy proletarian stock. Rationalist and antiromantic, she searches out an appropriate specimen. [...] She offers him a contract stating that after conception she will make no claims for his support of her or the child, nor will she ask him to play the roles of husband or father in any way. [...] Their son is raised communally in collective Soviet children's institutions. [...] In the play's conclusion, set four years later in 1930, [the father] catches a glimpse of his son when the child wins first prize in a "Healthy Baby" contest—displayed as an object of collective consumption, rather than of traditional, individual parental pride.[25]

[23] Hal Foster, "Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism," in: *Art Into Life. Russian Constructivism 1914-1932*, Seattle: The Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1990, 246.

[24] Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions. The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005, 260.

[25] Kiaer, *op. cit.*, 245.

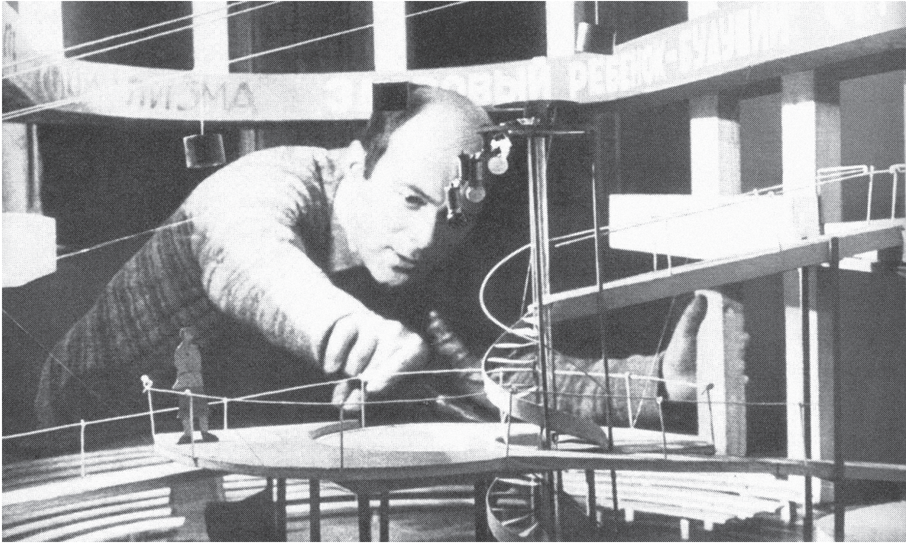

Figure 4: El Lissitzky, Set for the play *I want a Child*, 1929.

For the stage design of the play *I want a Child* (**Figure 4**) Lissitzky employed elements from his poster of ten years before, recycling the composition and its main elements—only now they functioned in a very different setting. On a 1929 photograph we thus see "Lissitzky leaning into the model of his stage set to adjust the fragile railing around a glass circle."[26] Tret'iakov's play is suspended between a tragic existential human situation personified by the circumstantial father on the one hand and Milda's eternally one-dimensional world of satisfaction and contentment.

The continuous strength and persuasiveness of Lissitzky's work lie in the combination of the image and the text, that is, the narrative. Such creative gesture of synthesizing the pictorial and the discursive elements which are simultaneously kept apart by an unbridgeable void, can be viewed both in Lissitzky's poster from 1919-20 and in his 1929 stage design. There is something enigmatic in the white circle, the red wedge and the narrative that accompanies them, something that prevents us to regard the work from a single vantage point—the ideological, for

---

[26] *Ibid.*, 263-64.

example. The work offers what I have designated as the “binary effect,”[27] comparing the nature of its impact to Fichte’s dialectics, a dialectics that consists of thesis and anti-thesis without these two elements ever meeting in a common or shared space. From this viewpoint Lissitzky’s work seems to represent an instance of socialist modernism. It creates or builds upon an abstraction but one that at the same time possesses an excess of signification and one that carries an evident heteronomous content which is paradoxically revealed precisely through the use of abstract forms.

In his “Study of Ideologies and Philosophy of Language” from 1929 V. N. Voloshinov makes an important observation as regards the notion of ideology. In his view, “All manifestations of ideological creativity—all other nonverbal signs—are bathed by, suspended in, and cannot be entirely segregated or divorced from the element of speech.”[28] This statement, evoking in a single gesture a paraphrase of Marx and Althusser, is dependent also on Lenin’s essay “What is to be Done?” from 1902, in which Lenin makes the distinction between the bourgeois and proletarian ideology. The prime location of ideology is the word. Or in Voloshinov’s own words, “The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence.”[29] It is this same notion of ideology that is so very present in Lissitzky’s poster: political ideology does not hinder the artistic potential of the poster it instead enhances its aesthetic effect, for it is expressed through a combination of colors which, although possessing a secondary signification they nonetheless also evoke asbstract meaning and create an aesthetic effect.

In the spring of 1968 Jean-François Lyotard held a seminar at Nanterre devoted to political posters. He was particularly interested in the work under discussion in this talk, namely in Lissitzky’s “Street Poster”—as the poster discussed in this essay is also known. In my earlier book *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, too, I commented on Lyotard’s interpretation of Lissitzky:

> The poster as a whole, besides being a work of political propaganda, also exhibits an overt aesthetic function. Its simple graphisms convey an excess of significa-

[27] See Erjavec, “Introduction,” *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, 44-46.

[28] V. N. Voloshinov, “The Study of Ideologies and Philosophy of Language,” in *Tekstura. Russian Essays on Visual Culture*, eds. Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 8.

[29] *Ibid.*, 6.

> tion. Pure ideological statement and pure aesthetic object never meet in a single space, for this would destroy the perception and reception of each of them. The effect produced by the poster resembles visual paradoxes where, by changing our inner perceptual vantage form, we see the same object in a different way, or as a different object. In the case of the poster (and in many other works by the same artist or by Malevich) the aesthetic effect engendered by pure geometric forms augments the ideological effect of the written statement, and vice versa. The image and the narrative exist in two distinct spaces. They merely intersect, producing in our perception not a unified effect, but a doubled or parallel impression—a binary effect.[30]

If this is true, then we can claim that in the poster the image exists in one "reality" (or its dimension) and the discourse or narrative in another—in spite of both actually existing in a single visual space of the poster. It may thus be true, as Lyotard argued in his *Discours, figure*,[31] that a letter is a figure and a discourse at the same time, but perhaps even more could be said: that the discourse supplements and intensifies the effect of the image. This may be especially true when dealing with an image that is basically abstract. Already Camilla Gray noticed that after the introduction of "prouns," "Lissitzky's interest in lettering was soon combined with these new abstract compositions."[32] Lissitzky was obviously aware that a picture that contains an abstract pictorial and a concrete discursive component achieves its maximum aesthetic effect when the two elements exist in a tension which is in his poster furthermore strengthened by the dynamic positioning of the red wedge. Perhaps we could even claim that Rodchenko's, Moholy-Nagy's and Lissitzky's later constructivist photographs (such as those presented in the twenties and thirties in the journal *USSR in Construction*), just as in the case of Lissitzky's work under consideration, built on the same principle of dynamism of geometrical forms which instantly evoked the aesthetic effect. It was probably this abstract aesthetic property of constructivism that attracted the attention of the post-war Western artists.

The discursive ingredients of the image—the text—thus offers an explicit statement but one that avoids the simple ideological effect of ordinary political posters. Works such as these open up a territory between pure propaganda (be it ideo-

---

30 Erjavec, *op. cit.*, 44.

31 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1971.

32 Gray, *op. cit.*, 254.

logical or commercial, as created in the twenties by Mayakovsky and Rodchenko) and autonomous western art. If then indeed, Barr wanted to promote and retain the global place for western art, he really had, as he put it during his winter 1927-28 visit to Soviet Union, to "find some painters [in the USSR] if possible."[33]

3.

In this way Barr partook in a dispute that has still not been resolved, although it is one of the exemplary instances of simultaneous autonomization and heteronomization of art. According to western artistic standards, is art (or an artwork) such as Lissitzky's 1919-20 poster, "ideological" or "autonomous" art? I would argue that it is an instance of both: On one level it represents a pure propaganda gesture, even in its first appearance, i.e., in Kolli's initial sculptural project. On the other hand it has today drifted into the institution of art and has lost its ideological potential, retaining only the aesthetic one. What used to be regarded in 1920 as a work of political propaganda which simultaneously possessed an aesthetic function and existed in a space opposite that of the artistic autonomy and the institution of art, was after decades of historical assimilation transformed into a yet another instance of institutional art, thereby being assimilated, becoming essentially abstract and "beautiful"—becoming an object of a gaze similar to that despairingly evoked by Duchamp in relation to his ready-mades. Its textual component retains today only its visual aestheticized effect, this one being enhanced by the Cyrillic script. In this way the poster has undergone the processes that avant-garde art of the twentieth century underwent soon after its artistic and political successes and impacts. After World War II Lissitzky's poster turned from a specific avant-garde work of political propaganda into an assimilated modernist work more akin to western constructivism than to its original signification. Its context was gone so its ideological meaning was gone too.

The wedge and the circle started to reappear in Soviet Union and some other socialist countries again in the seventies, eighties and nineties of the previous century in works that were usually postmodern, namely ironic, referential and double-coded. In all instances these more recent versions of the circle and the wedge built upon what by now became the archetypal image associated with the October revolution. In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989

33 Quoted in Foster, *op. cit.*, 246.

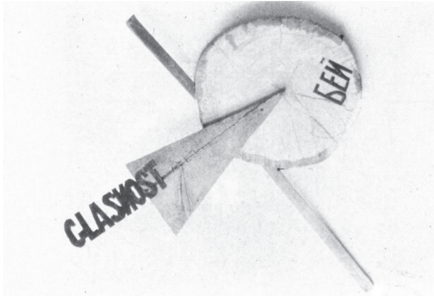

Figure 5: Leonid Sokov, *Plakat L. Lisickoga*, 1987.

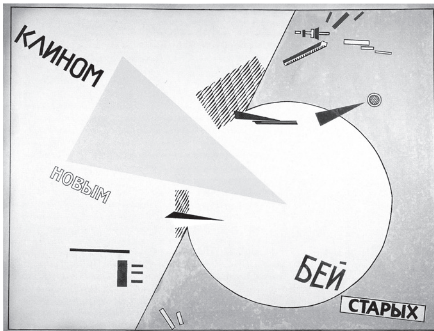

Figure 6: Afrika (Sergei Bugaev), *Anti-Lissitzky Series (Green)*, 1990.

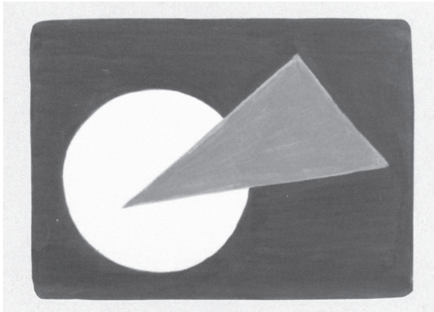

Figure 7: Huang Rui, logo for the "Stars" group, 1979.

Russian and Eastern European artists have thus sometimes evoked Lissitzky's abstract geometric design from his 1919-20 poster with the frequent postmodernist practice of quoting well-known historical works. What probably attracted them in Lissitzky's poster was its binary nature: the dualism of the aesthetic and the ideological,[34] the latter of them with the unfolding of time becoming increasingly aestheticized too. Nevertheless, the poster continued to contain a political potential, even if it now contained only sarcastic or ironic signification—as

[34] Another Russian artist from the eighties who uses the "binary approach" is Erik Bulatov.

in the work by Leonid Sokov titled *Lissitzky's Poster* (1987), where Gorbachov's "Glasnost" replaced the red wedge (**Figure 5**) or in the works by Afrika (Sergei Bugaev) where the same motif was used, starting with Afrika's "Anti-Lissitzky Series." (**Figure 6**) Works from the series bore titles such as *Blue Wedge Beats Pink*, or *Don't Beat Anybody with Anything* (1990).

Such examples are not to be found only in Russia or in Eastern Europe. In 1979 Huang Rui, a leading member of the Chinese "Stars" painterly movement, designed a logo of the "Stars" group. (**Figure 7**) Nothing exceptional, you will say—except that it was (apart from the blue background) a copy of El Lissitzky's poster from more than half a century before, namely of the poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*.[35]

Let me conclude by raising a few obvious questions: First: How did an artist such as Huang Rui who was basically a "modernist" in the seventies stumble upon Lissitzky's constructivist image, and found it congenial? Second: Why did Huang Rui think that a work that stood for the opposite of the autonomous art that he and his group were professing would suitably express and represent the nature or essence of the artistic orientation of the "Stars" group? It would seem that both questions would have to be posed to Huang Rui. Nonetheless, perhaps we can venture and attempt to answer them by ourselves. I think it is important that in the "Stars" logo the political statement is gone. What remains is the abstract geometric image that incessantly reveals, expresses and confirms the aesthetic potential of geometric forms—just like in Lissitzky's "prouns." It is this gesture of removing the political and ideological statement that turns the poster into an empty shell of aesthetic form and allows the militant statement of the poster to be finally transformed into the aestheticized artwork that Huang Rui could employ to express the spirit of the "Stars" group. Put differently, the avant-gardist and ideological signification of the street poster has with the removal of the ideological statement been transformed into a formalist work of art thereby confirming Voloshinov's statement about the ideological nature of discourse. Perhaps the incessant driftings of works such as Lissitzky's that lose their heteronomous nature and acquire (or retain) only their autonomous one, is what not only differentiates the original Lissitzky's work from that of Huang

[35] Cf. Huang Rui, *The Stars' Time. 1977 – 1984*, Beijing: Thinking Hands + Guanyi Contemporary Art Archive, 2007, unpaginated.

Rui's logo, but also separates Western modernism from its Eastern variety. Sokov's or Afrika's ironic exploitation of the symbolic capital acquired since 1920 by Lissitzky's Street Poster appears insignificant when compared with the impact made by the original or by Huang Rui's logo. They no longer "make ideology visible" (Althusser) and they are not ideology itself; instead they exist on razor's cutting edge separating ideology and politics from the beautiful and truth. "If man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom."[36]

[36] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, eds. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, 9.