
From Faktura to Factography

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From Fairtrade to Faircopy

BENJAMIN H. D. RICHMOND

As the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr largely determined the goals and policy of the institution that was to define the framework of production and reception for the American avant-garde-works. In 1917, just prior to the founding of the museum, Barr traveled to the Soviet Union. This was to have been a survey mission, like the one he had just completed in Weimar Germany, to explain current avant-garde production by artists working in the new revolutionary society. What he found there, however, was a situation of seemingly unmanageable conflict.

On the one hand, he witnessed the extraordinary productivity of the original modernist avant-garde practitioners in terms of the number of its participants, both men and women, and in terms of the variety of modes of production: ranging from Malevich's less representational work through the Laboratory Period of the constructivists, to the Lef Group and the emerging production program, as well as agitating theater and avant-garde films intended for mass audiences). On the other hand, there was the general awareness among artists and cultural disseminators that they were participating in a final transformation of the modernist vanguard aesthetic, as they irrevocably changed those conditions of art production and reception inherited from bourgeois society and its institutions. Thus, now, there was the growing fear that the process of that successful transformation might be altered by the emergence of totalitarian repression from within the very system that had generated the foundation for a new socialist collective culture. And last of all, there was Barr's own professional disposition to search for the most advanced, authentic avant-garde as precisely the museum where that social group vanishes as dissolvable itself and its special and activities in order to assume a different role in the newly defined process of the social production of culture.

These conflicting elements are clearly reflected in the diary that Barr kept during his visit to the Soviet Union:

... went to see Rodchenko and his talented wife. . . . Rodchenko showed us an appalling variety of finger-suppression paintings

*W. Laidlaw: Photomontage for analogues accompanying
Soviet Pavilion at Venice Exhibition, Calgary 1968*



fascinated by the earliest geometrical things I have seen, 1935, done with compass (= compass, compass rose, patterns, book designs, photographs, line-art, etc. etc. He has done no painting since 1922, devoting himself to the photographic work of which he is a master. . . . We left after 11 p.m. — an excellent evening, but I must feel some painless if possible!"

But Raut was no more interested in his march for painting during his visit with El Lissitzky: "He showed me books and photographs, many of them quite ingenious. . . . I asked whether he painted. He replied that he painted only when he had nothing else to do, and as that was never, never."¹

And, finally, in his encounter with Sergei Tretiakov, it became clear that there was a historical reason for the frustration of Raut's expectations. For Tretiakov articulated the position these artists had adopted in the course of manufacturing their aesthetic thinking in relation to the emerging industrialization of the Soviet Union: the program of productionism and the new method of literary representation/production that accompanied it, *khudozhestvo*. "Tretiakov," Raut's diary tells us, "seemed to have had all interest in everything that did not conform to his objective, descriptive, utopian/idealized ideal of art. He had no interest in painting since it had become obsolete. He no longer writes poetry but confines himself to reporting."²

This paradigm-change within modernism, which Raut witnessed from the very first hour, did not make a strong enough impression on him to affect his future project. He continued in his plan to lay the foundations of an avant-garde art in the United States according to the model that had been developed in the few two decades of this century in western Europe (primarily in Paris). And it was this perseverance, as much as anything else, that prevented, until the late '60s, the program of productionism and the methods of photographic production from entering the general consciousness of American and European audiences.

In 1938, when Raut's experiences in the Soviet Union were incorporated in the extraordinary exhibition *Culture and Alliance Art*, his encounter with productionism was all but unacknowledged. This is particularly astonishing since Raut seems to have undergone a conversion towards the end of his journey, one which is not recorded in his diary, but which he publicly expressed upon his return in "The Left and Soviet Art," his essay in *The Nation* published in the fall of 1938. Surprisingly, we read in this article, illustrated with two photographs of Lissitzky's exhibition design for the 1938 Paris exhibition in Cologne, the following, rather propitiatory appraisal of the ideas and goals of the Left Group:

1. Alfred Raut, "Western Front 1927-1938," *Studies*, no. 7 (Fall 1971), p. 22.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

The *Lef*'s story thus, a symptom, more than an expression of a flesh culture or of post-revolutionary man, it is a courageous attempt to give to art an important social function in a world where from one point of view it has been proscribed for that function. The *Lef* is limited by men who are slaves of Materialism, who have a certain advantage over the Alexander rule of the West—the variation winds, the artistic word juggler and those moulds who practice conformity over the human variety of Matisse, Louis Philippe or St. Thomas Aquinas. The *Lef*'s story is the illusion that man can live by bread alone.⁴

But various European and American interest in the modernist avant-garde refused to confirm the implications seen so clearly by René. Instead, what happened at that moment, in the process of reception, was what had been described in 1926 by Boris Aronson, schooling with Stuart Glass, Sergei Tretiakov, and Nikolai Tardukhin made up the group of post-impressionist theoreticians. Aronson wrote about the painters who refused to join the production, "Those on the Right gave up their positions without resistance. . . . Either they stopped painting altogether or they emigrated to the Western countries, in order to spend Europe with home-made Russian Cubism or with pseudo-folkloristic paintings of their country."⁵

It is against this background that I want to pursue the following questions: Why did the Russian avant-garde, after having evolved a modernist practice to its most radical stages in the post-synthetic nihilist work of the suprematism, constructivism, and Lakonism Period artists, apparently abandon the paradigms of modernism upon which its practice had been based? What paradigmatic changes occurred at that time, and which paradigm formation replaced the previous one?

For the sake of brevity and specificity I will limit myself to what follows in a discussion of only some aspects of the respective paradigms that generated the crucial concern for *Jahann* in the first period, and that made *Jahann* the primary method in the second period of Russian avant-garde practice.

Jahann was first defined in the Russian context in David Burliuk's Sovietist manifesto, "A Step in the Face of Public Taste," of 1912, and in Mikhail Larionov's "Keynote Manifesto" of the same year. In the works of Malevich from 1913-1915 *Jahann* was a major pictorial concern, and even at that time for painters such as Lissitzky, Popova, and Rozanova, who had their origins in syncretic culture and who had been profoundly influenced by Malevich's suprematism. Further, it remained the central concept in the constructivist de-

⁴ Alfred Barr, "The *Lef* and Soviet Art," *Twentieth Century Art* (1938), pp. 267-270.

⁵ Boris Aronson, *Art and Revolution*, Munich, Walter Verlag, 1968, p. 38. All translations from the German, unless otherwise noted, are by me.

jects produced by Rodchenko, Tatlin, and the Constructivists, sometimes referred to as the Laboratory Constructivists. During an extremely fertile period of approximately seven years (from 1922–1929) the essential qualities of *zhiznennye* were acquired, refined, and developed further by the individual members of that avant-garde.

By 1929 it seemed to them that they had brought to their logical conclusion all the major issues that had been developed during the preceding fifty years of modernist painting. Therefore the central concern for a self-referential pictorial and sculptural production was abandoned after 1928—gradually at first, then abruptly—to be replaced by the new concern for Geographic and production practices that are indicative of a more profound paradigmatic change.

Futurism

Attempts are being made in the recent literature to construct a genealogy for the Russian vanguardist concern for *zhiznennye*, claiming that it originates in Russian icon painting. Vladimir Markov's 1974 essay "Icon Painting"—after Barlett and Larionov the third to address *zhiznennye* explicitly—had established this specifically Russian source, arguing that "through the resistance of the colors, the sound of the materials, the assimilation of textures [*zhiznennye*] we call for people to beauty, to religion, to God The real world is introduced into the world's creation only through the assimilation and incarnation of real tangible objects and this seems to produce a conflict between two worlds, the inner and the outer"⁶

6. For Andrei Zhelez, in his essay "Materiality, it seems, is played out!" (*Materiality, no. 1* [1974], pp. 28–35), gives an excellent survey of the original discussion of the question of *zhiznennye* among the various factions of the Russian avant-garde. More recently Sergei Shchegolev took issue with critics such as Markov's text, quoted here, that had not been mentioned by him. In any case, as Shchegolev argued, it is pointless to attempt a genealogy since the many references in the platform were applied simultaneously and often independently to one another.

As early as 1912 the question of *zhiznennye* is discussed by Mikhail Larionov in his "Supremacy Materiality," where he calls it "the matter of painting," arguing that the "transformation of colors, their density, their persistence, their depth, and how *zhiznennye* would among the truly monumental the highest degree." A year later, in his manifesto "Landscape" he argues that "every painting consists of a colored surface, in *zhiznennye* this is, the condition of the colored surface, its clarity and the manner that you receive from these two aspects." After in 1914 we find Sergei Rodchenko *zhiznennye* consisting between a colored pictorial surface *A* and a differential pictorial surface *B*. The description of a painted surface can be: 1) "Density, 2) Mass, and 3) Luminosity. I have carefully examined Michelangelo's *Ecce Homo* and I thought: *zhiznennye* various textures." . . . One can say that *zhiznennye* is typically Russian." Actually one is entitled "Materiality," but also young, numerous references to the phenomenon of *zhiznennye* in the writings of Vladimir, for example, where he calls Chagall the inventor of a "new dimension of the pictorial surface," or where he juxtaposes the three with the notion of painting. The concern for *zhiznennye* still arises here around 1928, as it evident from Popov's statement that "the nature of painted surfaces is *zhiznennye*." Even writers like Boris Zaslavskii, concerned with visual and plastic phenomena, were engaged in a discussion of *zhiznennye*, as in the case of Roman Jakobson in his essay "Futurism," identifying it as

But the specifically Russian qualities of *zhizn'* are nonetheless challenged by other strands of this production. For the religious-transcendental function assigned by Markov to the word *zhizn'* is just as close to the material pursuit of collage aesthetics as defined in 1934 by, for example, George Braque. Braque argued, "Thus was the great adventure—the collage opened simultaneously, but they were completely independent of each other." Similarly, Tsiolkovskii's request in 1933 that "the eye should be put under the control of itself" is not that so Duchamp's famous statement that he wanted to abolish the supremacy of the retinal principle in art. And, in the contemporaneous discussions of the term, any references to specifically Russian or religious functions are not rapidly perceived to maintain the credibility of Markov's argument. Already in 1936 Tsiolkovskii wrote a definition of *zhizn'* that would remain valid for the entire period of Lohotansky constructivism to follow. "The form of a work of art," he declared, "liberates from two fundamental pressures: the material or mechanical (color, sounds, words) and the construction, through which the material is organized in a coherent whole, acquiring its artistic logic and its profound meaning."¹

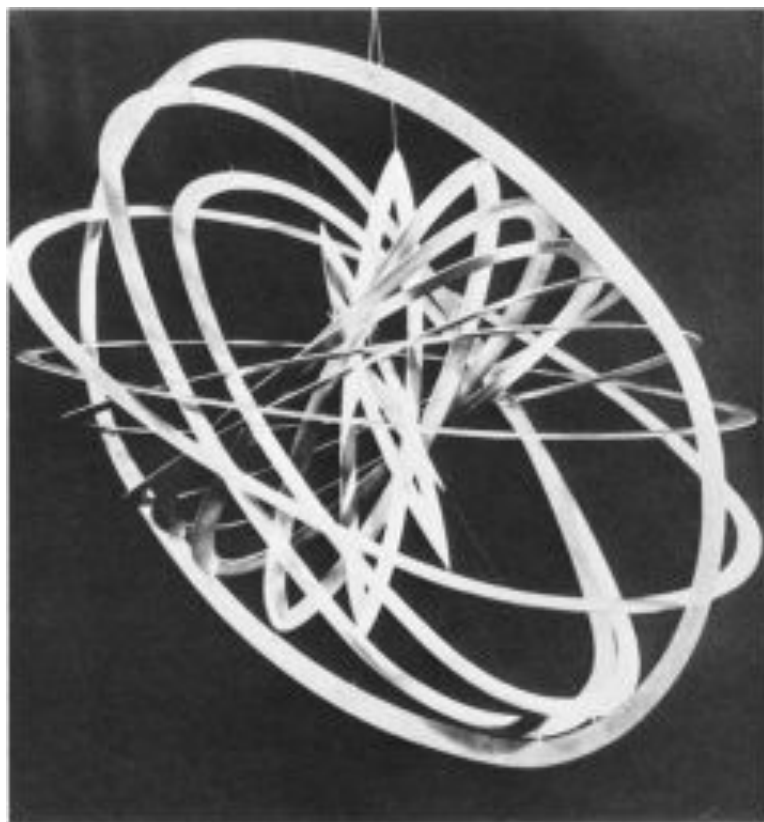
What qualifies the concept for *zhizn'* as a paradigmatic Russian idiosyncrasy is at the same time born previous concerns for form in the works of the artists and writers in western Europe in the same decade. Systematic concern in which the constructivists were paramount in investigation of pictorial and sculptural construction, as well as the principal interaction with the viewer they generate. The equation between color, sounds, and words established by Tsiolkovskii was no longer the utopianistic call for grammar that one could still hear at this time from Kandinsky and Kupka. Running parallel with the formation of structural linguistics in the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the Opyat Group in Petroburg in 1925 and 1926 respectively, the constructivists developed the first systematic phenomenological grammar of painting and

one of the main strategies of the new poetic collectivities who were concerned with the "uplifting of the procedure: therefore the material construction of *zhizn'* is no longer such a paradoxical, a literary construction. It requires new methods of formation and new materials."

Quite unlike the traditional idea of *zhizn'* in painting, where the material function of a painter's hand operates on the non-materiality of the pictorial production, and where the hand becomes in the same time the subject of the production is the identifying signature (as the guarantee of authenticity, it justifies the painting's exchange value and contributes to aesthetically assessed), the new concept for *zhizn'* in the Soviet constructivist emphasizes precisely the mechanical quality, the materiality, and the transparency of the painter's production from a perspective of empirical/visual perception. It demonstrates and dissolves not only the chasm for the authenticity of the spiritual and the transcendence in the painter's creative act, as well, the sublimation of the exchange value of the work of art that is founded on it by the first.

For the discussion of the Markov discourse and a generally important essay on the general system of *zhizn'*, see also Sergei Boreil, "Markov: 'Zhizn': From *Faith* to *Form*," *Isis*, no. 2 (Winter 1988), pp. 140.

1. Mikhail Tsiolkovskii, *Arkhiv-stil'm*, Novykh Shtetov Le-Chang-Lien, 1971, p. 102, cited in Boreil, n. 2.



Alexander Rodchenko, *Orb Weaving Construction*
(Orbitum Reflecting Light), 1927.

sculpture. They attempted to define the separate material and practical qualities by which such constructs are constructed with the same analytic economy used to analyze the interrelationships of their various functions—what Baudouin would call the *synagogistic axis*—which are equally relevant for the constitution of a perceptual phenomenon. Furthermore, they acknowledged the appearance of visual sign production, that is, production procedures as well as the results of these procedures. It was precisely the systematic nature of this investigation that led Baur in 1927 to see “an appalling variety of things” in Rodchenko’s work.

When, in 1929–31, Rodchenko arrived more or less simultaneously at his sculptural series *Weaving Construction* (a series sub-titled *Surface Reflecting Light*) and at the approach *Four Colors, Red, Yellow, Blue*, he had developed a logical conclusion: that separation of color and line and that integration of shape and plane that the cubists had indicated with such enthusiasm. With some justification he declared, “This is the end of painting. There are the primary colors. Every plane is a plane and there will be no more representation.”¹⁸

18. Alexander Rodchenko, “Working with Shakhovskii,” manuscript 1930, published in excerpts in *Four Painting in Groups*, exhibition catalog, Leningrad, Galerie Gerasimov, 1961, pp. 170–71.

Even at this point in Rothko's development *figures already meant more than a signifier and programmable suspension of time and drawing from painting and color, more than the compression of planes with their actual support surface, more than emphasizing the necessary self-referentiality of pictorial signifiers and their contiguity with all other syntagmatic functions.* It already meant, as well, more than just the object's shift from virtual pictorial/sculptural space into actual space. We should not take the reference to *Daylight Redding Light* as anything less than an indication of the potential involvement of these artists with materials and objects in actual space and the social processes that occur within it.

Painters also meant at this point, and one for Rothko's alone, incorporating the technical means of construction into the work itself and linking them with existing conditions of the development of the means of production in society at large. At first, this happened on the seemingly banal level of the tools and materials that the painter employs—tools that will cause considerable shock thirty years later with regard to Pollock's work. In 1947 Rothko explained his reasons for abandoning the traditional tools of painting and his sense of the need to mechanize his work:

Therefore the picture ceased being a picture and became a painting or an object. The brush gave way to new instruments with which it was convenient and easy and more expeditious to work the surface. The brush which had been so indispensable in painting which was used toward the object and its substitutes became an inadequate and expensive instrument in the new non-objective painting and the poem, the relief, the drawing pen, the compass replaced it.¹⁷

The very same conviction about laboratory technology is conveyed in Rothko's systematic experimentation with pictorial surfaces as bases or immediate results of specific procedures and materials: marble and reflective paint are juxtaposed with earth grounds, varnishes and oil colors are combined with highly textured surfaces.

It is this technologic of Rothko's experimental approach that seems to have prevented aesthetic comprehension by even longer than did Duchamp's most advanced work of 1913, such as his *Three Standard Stoppage* or his study-matrix. With its emphasis on the material compression of the sign with its signifying practice, on the causal relationship between the sign and its referent, and its focus on the indexical status of the sign, Rothko's work has defined a necessary level of meaning-making.¹⁸

17. Alexander Rothko, exhibition catalogue at the exhibition of the *Exhibition Technique in Moscow*, 1951, cited in Graham Baskin, *Rothko*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1970, p. 44.

18. The technological dimension is of course that of G. B. Arneson as Reelbed Reelers but that

Further, this emphasis on the *praxis* position of painting was linked to a socially organized configuration, a structure that resulted in much from the commitment to systematic investigation as from the aspiration toward science with which artists wanted to associate their production. It is this sense of relationships that tied these essential features of the modernist paradigm eventually to the socially dominant modes of control and management of time and perceptual experience in the Soviet Union's rapidly accelerating process of industrialization.

Futurism is therefore the historically logical aesthetic corollary to the introduction of industrialization and social engineering that was imminent in the Soviet Union after the revolution of 1917. For that reason, futurism also became the necessary intermediary step within the transformation of the modernist paradigm as we witness it around 1920. When in 1921 A. V. Rodchenko, the leader of the Working Group for Objective Analysis (of which Rodchenko and Trepavnev were members), gives a definition of art production, his statement is strikingly close to ideas of Taylorism, social engineering, and organized consumption, as they became operative at that time in both western European and American society. "Art," he wrote, "is an informed analysis of the concrete tasks which social life poses. . . . If art becomes public property it will organize the consciousness and psyche of the masses by organizing objects and ideas."¹⁶

Finally, the notion of futurism already implied a reference to the placement of the consumeristic object and its interaction with the observer. To emphasize spatial and perceptual contiguity for mass collection—as hinted in Rodchenko's project for consumerism whose objective surface would attract their surroundings—artists, once again, to define the process of representation in purely material signs¹⁷ meant seemingly promoting its own representation without mediation (the old positivist's dream, as it was, of course, that of the early photographyographers). Contiguity is also incorporated in the visual potential of Rodchenko's *Moving Construction*, since this movement by air currents or touch literally involves the viewer in an endless phenomenological loop made of his or her own movement in the distinctive continuum.

In the discussions of the Group for Objective Analysis from 1921, construction was defined as the organization of the kinetic life of objects and materials which would create new movement. As such, it had been juxtaposed with the traditional notion of composition, as Vladimir Trepavnev defines it:

Composition is the contemplative approach of the artist to his work. Technique and industry have substituted art with the problem of

applied to it. Trepavnev's work in his essay "Notes on the Subject," *Iskusstvo*, nos. 7 and 8 (December and February 1925).

16. A. V. Rodchenko, cited in Vladimir Lazarev, "Analytical Suprematism," in *Abstract Rodchenko*, ed. David Rabin, (Miami: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 138.

17. Roden, "Notes," *passim*.

construction as an active process, and not a contemplative reflection. The "activity" of a work as a single entity is destroyed. The museum which was a treasury of this entity is now transformed into an archive.¹³

If these lines sound familiar today it is not because Sepúlveda's text had considerable impact on the thinking and practice of her peers, but rather because, more than ten years later, precisely the same historical phenomenon is identified and analyzed in a text that is by now rightfully considered one of the most important contributions to twentieth-century aesthetic theory. I am speaking, of course, of Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and the following excerpts might be compared with Sepúlveda's 1925 statement:

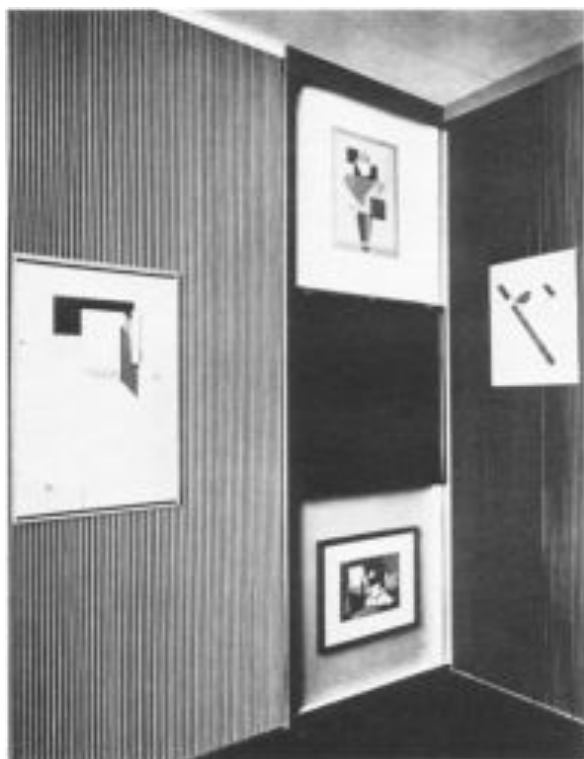
What they [the technicians] intended and achieved was a redundant destruction of the aura of their creations, which they regarded as reproductions with the very means of production. . . . In the decline of middle-class society, contemplation became a school for social behavior. It was replaced by observation as a variant of social conduct. . . . [Diads] like the apurcaru like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality. . . . [Thus the diads work restores the quality of tactility to the art of the present day, a quality which is important in the art of all periods in their stages of transformation.]¹⁴

The historical observations by Sepúlveda and their subsequent characterization by Benjamin have another corollary in the work of Lissitzky from the period 1923–25. Already in 1923 in his *Proclamation for the Greater Berlin Kunstgewerblich*, Lissitzky had transformed tactility and perceptual movement—still known in Rodchenko's *Playing Construction*—into a full-scale architectural relief construction. For the first time, Lissitzky's earlier claim for his *Point Paintings*, in essence as transfer motion from art to architecture, had been fulfilled.

It was, however, not until 1926, when he designed and installed in Dresden and Hannover what he called his *Demountable Room*—room-sized cabinets for the display and installation of the nonrepresentational art of his time—that one finds Sepúlveda's analysis fully confirmed in Lissitzky's practice. The vertical lattice relief-construction that covers the display surfaces of the cabinet and that changes color from white, through gray, to black according to the viewer's

13. Vicente Sepúlveda, quoted in Lucille Gray, *The House of Pain* (New York, Thomas and Nelson, 1971), pp. 198–99.

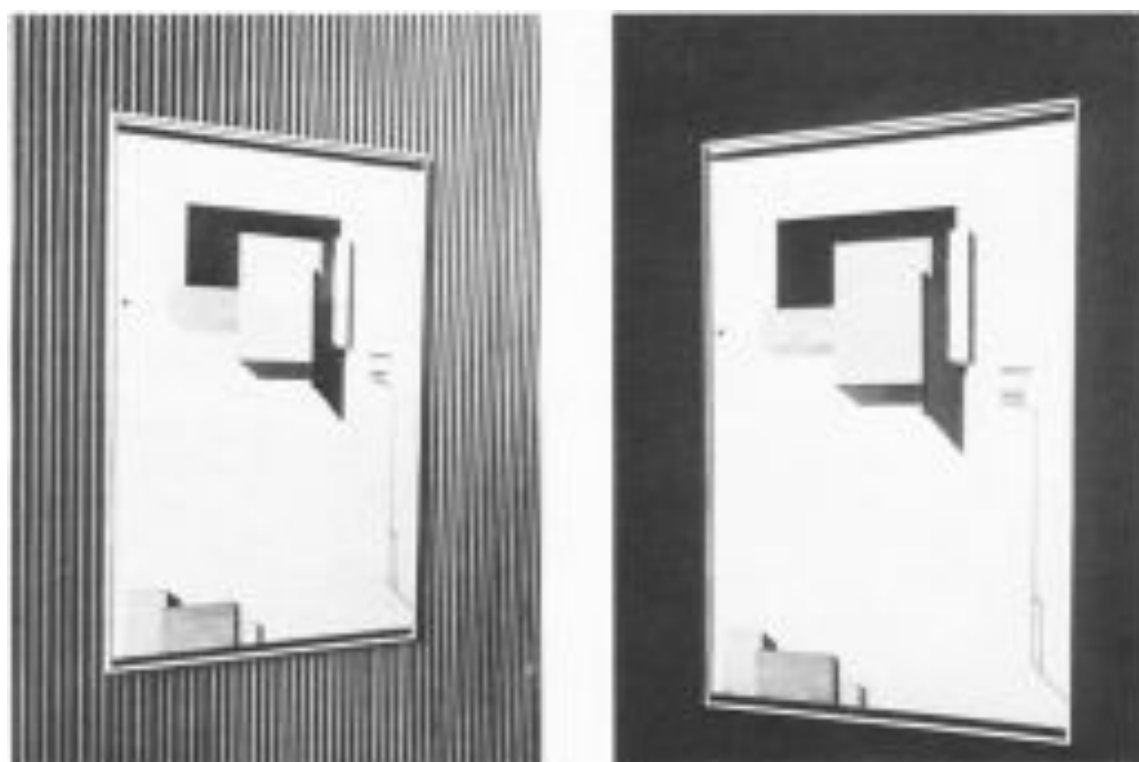
14. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Essays*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 129. The last sentence of this quotation, an italics translation, is taken from the second version of Benjamin's essay (my translation).



El Lissitzky, *Culture of Kinship No. 1: Homosexuals' Condominium, Moscow* (1935). (Installation view shows elements of El Lissitzky and some artists with recently joined. Works on display by Lissitzky, Schwitters, and Mondrian.)

position, clearly engages the viewer in a phenomenological exercise that defies traditional contemplative behavior in front of the work of art. And the malleable wall panels, varying in varying sized panels on display, to be shifted by the viewers themselves according to their momentary needs and interests, already incorporate into the display system of the museum the function of the archive that Negt and Kluge predicted with social display. In the late 1930s Lissitzky wrote a retrospective analysis of his *Condominium Plans*, and once again it is crucial to compare his ideas with those of both Negt and Kluge, in order to realize how developed and current these concerns actually were in the various contexts.

...traditionally the viewer was lulled into passivity by the paintings on the walls. Our construction design shall make the man active. This is the function of our room. . . . With each movement of the viewer in space for perception of the wall changes, what was white becomes



Ed Landis, *Floating Volume*, 1979. Installed in Ed Landis's Cabinet of Abstract Art. The two views indicate change from white to black depending on viewer's position.

black, and vice versa. Thus, as a result of human bodily motion, a perceptual dynamic is achieved. This play makes the viewer active. . . . The viewer is physically engaged in an interaction with the site just on display.¹⁴

The paradox and identical issue of Landis's work was, of course, that it had internalized a revolution of the perceptual apparatus into an otherwise totally unchanged axial institution, one that consistently reaffirms both the contemplative behavior and the sanctity of hierarchically seated works of art.

This paradox compromised the conclusion that had become apparent several years earlier when Landis had placed a compression painting, enlarged

14. Ed Landis, "Democratization," in Ed Landis, ed. *Signs: Landis Papers* (London, USA/Using the Room, 1982), p. 90.

to the size of an aspirational billboard, in front of a factory entrance in Vostok. This implies recognition in the formal sphere—that the conservative Soviet cinema laws would positively affect in its formalism—in its failure to communicate with and address the new audiences of industrialized urban society in the Soviet Union, became increasingly problematic in the eyes of the very groups that had developed conservative strategies to expand the framework of modernism. It had become clear that the new society following the socialist revolution (in many respects a social organization that was comparable to the advanced industrial nations of western Europe and the United States at that time) required systems of representation/production/distribution which would recognize the collective participation in the actual governance of production of social wealth, systems which, like socialism in the past or communism in the present, had established conditions of simultaneous collective uptake. In order to make an "an informed analysis of the concrete tasks which social life poses," as Brezhnev had requested, and in order to "fill the gap between art and the masses that the bourgeois tradition had established," as Brezhnev had called for, entirely new forms of audience address and distribution had to be considered. But around 1950 even the most advanced works among the nonofficialist oligo-constructions—by Rodchenko, the Brezhnev brothers, Tautou, and Medvedev—did not depart much further from the modernist framework of bourgeois aesthetics than the goal of establishing models of epistemological and aesthetic critique. No matter how radical, there was at least no more than a negation of the proposed conventions by which art had previously been produced and received.

With collective historical distance it becomes clearer that this fundamental crisis within the modernist paradigm was not only a crisis of representation (one that had resulted in problematic 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 conflict, from which legitimation was only to be obtained by a redefinition of its relationship with the new urban masses and their cultural demands. The Western avant-garde experienced the same crisis with the same intensity. It generally responded with conservatism in traditional modes—the "Fagetti's Circle"—and the subsequent alignment of many of its artists with the aesthetic needs of the fashion in Italy and Germany. Or, other factions of the Paris avant-garde responded to the same crisis with an increased affirmation of the unique status of a high-art avant-garde, trying to resolve the contradictions of their practice by reaffirming blatantly elitist conventions of personal representation. In the early 1950s 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. Architecture, utilitarian product design, and photographic photography were some of the

practices than the Soviet state could consider capable of establishing these new modes of simultaneous collective reception.¹⁴ Aronson gives a vivid account of the gradual transition from the modernist position to the Russian avant-garde to the ideographic and utilitarian aesthetic:

The first to refuse were the representational, headed by Kandinsky, who could not evaluate extensive progress. Then the representational, headed by Malerich, protested against the murder of the sanctity of art, since they were convinced of the complete self-sufficiency of art. They could not comprehend any other form of art production but that of the easel. . . . In 1920 the Institute for Artistic Culture, which had once united all the Left artists, broke up. Shortly thereafter the Institute started to work under the banner of constructivism. After a long process of adhesion, after an obscure fight, the group of non-representational constructivists crystallized within the group of the Left (Tatlin, Rodchenko, and the Olessoffo-Group), who based their practice on the investigation and treatment of real materials as a transition to the constructive activity of the engineer. During one of the most important meetings of the Institute a resolution was passed unanimously to break off with the self-sufficient constructivists and to take all measures necessary in order to engage immediately with the industrial revolution.¹⁵

Photomontage: Russian Futurism and Constructivism

The relatively late discovery of photomontage and collage techniques seems to have functioned as a transitional phase, operating between the fully developed modernist villages of the conventions of representation, which are akin to constructivism, and an emerging awareness of the new need to circulate some representation for a new mass audience. Neither Lissitzky nor Rodchenko produced any photomontage work before 1922, and only as late as 1923—when these artists had already pushed other aspects of postcard pictorial and vulgural problems further than anyone else in Europe (except, of course, for Duchamp)—did the collage technique proper enter their work at all. It seems credible that in Ivan Ouspensky-Krein, a disciple of Malerich and a collaborator with Lissitzky, was the first artist to transcend the purity of representational painting by introducing some photographic fragments into his supramat

14. The problem of the creation of conditions of simultaneous collective reception is dealt with in an essay by Friedrich Schlegel, "Quadrats und Quadrate: Simultaneität und Formen der Vielperspektivität," *Das Ende der Dichtung und Theorie der Sprache*, Munich, Schönermann-Möser, 1974, pp. 102.

15. Aronson, *Issue*, p. 81.

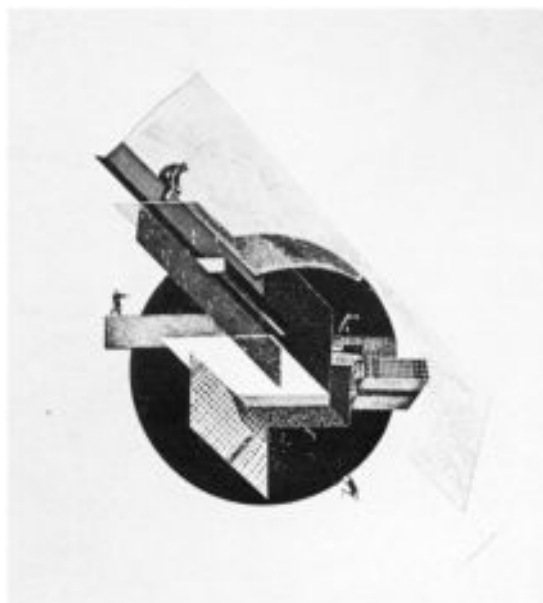
work in 1913, the very date that Hearfield and Crona, Himmelman and Ellick have claimed as the moment of their invention of photomontage.

Since by 1913 photomontage was widespread and commonly used in both advertising and commercial photography, the question of who actually introduced the technique into the transformation of the modernist paradigm is unimportant.¹⁸ What is far more crucial is in what way the artist(s) who might very well have simultaneously "discovered" the technique for their own purposes (quite independently of one another) related to the inherent potential and consequences of the introduction of [photographic] source imagery at precisely the moment when artistic representation had seemingly been dismantled and definitively abandoned.

Assessing his claims to priority, Klotz also articulates the essential difference between the Berlin type of photomontage and that of the Berlin dadaists when he writes in 1931:

There are two principal tendencies in the development of photomontage: one comes from American publicity and is explored by the

18. The two books that trace the history of photomontage to its source in the history of photography and the history of emerging advertising technology are Robert Taftworth, *Photomontage Imagery and the Origins of Photomontage* (Fig. 1 and 12, *Artforum*, September/October 1976, pp. 34-35, unpag. Klotz, which more specifically addresses the origins of photomontage as an emerging technique, a John Berry, *Imagined Cities: The Composite Photographic Image and the Construction of Landscape Ideology* (in *Journal*, Spring 1985, pp. 30-31).



Geisel House, The Dynamic City, 1917



Dadaism and Expressionism—the so-called photomontage of items; the second tendency, that of cultural and political photomontage, was rampant on the wall of the Soviet Union. Photomontage appeared in the USSR under the banner of LEP when non-objective art was already banned. . . . Photomontage as a new method of art dates from 1917 to 1928.¹⁹

The hybrids that Kluge, Lissitzky, and Brechtovska created with their first attempts at collage and photomontage reveal the difficulty of the paradigmatic transformation that is inherent in that procedure, and the concomitant marks, in the period 1919-25, for a solution to the crisis of representation. But beyond this, they suggest where the answers to these questions could have to be found, and they define the qualities and functions which the new procedures that begin today inside representation could have to offer. At the same time, it would seem that these artists did not want, on the one hand, to renounce any of the supreme modernist virtues they had achieved in their glorious and wilful

19. Gunter Rambow, *Portrait of the artist as collage maker* (Berlin, 1978, cited without date), *Photomontage*, London/New York, Garland, 1978, p. 31.

work, the transparency of construction procedures; the self-reflexivity of the pictorial signifying device; the efficient spatial organization; and the general emphasis on the utility, that is, the commercial nature of their representations. But, on the other hand, photomontage and photomontage reinforced one the aesthetic construct—as a medium when its aesthetic self-reflexivity and purification had systematically reduced all formal and material operations to purely technical signs—collected sources for a new, variety of representation, one that was mechanically produced and reproduced, and therefore—in a generation of media complicity—the more reliable. Looking at the photomontage work of 1923, such as Rodchenko's series (p. 33), or Haasman's work, one might well wonder whether the enthusiasm, willfulness, and quantity of the photographic operations and their juxtapositions were not in part motivated by their authors' relief at having finally broken the aesthetic ban on iconic representation. This, in essence, amounts to the Futurist camp's collage work, in which iconic representations ultimately disappeared, but which never made use of photographic or mechanically reproduced iconic images.

But the reflexivity of a need to construct iconic representations did not, of course, arise primarily from the need to overcome the constraints of modernism. Rather it was a necessary strategy to implement the transformation of modernity that the series of the Soviet avant-garde wanted to achieve at that time. "Photomontage," an anonymous text (attributed by some scholars to Rodchenko) published in *Lef* in 1924, not only traces the historic affiliation of photomontage's conglomerate image with the strategies of advertising, juxtaposing photomontage's technique and its iconic dimension with the traditional techniques of modernist representation, but also introduces the necessity of documenting representation in order to reach the new mass audience:

By photomontage we understand the usage of the photographic print as tools of representation. The combination of photographs replaces the composition of graphic representations. The reason for this substitution resides in the fact that the photographic print is not the sketch of a visual fact, but its precise fixation. The precision and the documentary character give photography an impact on the spectator that the graphic representation can never claim to achieve. . . . An advertisement with a photograph of the object that is being advertised is more efficient than a drawing of the same subject.³⁷

Unlike the Berlin dadaists who claimed to have invented photomontage, the authors of this *Lef* text does not disavow the technique's historic affiliation (and comparative engagement) with the dominant practices of advertising.

37. Anonymous, *Lef*, no. 4 (1924), reprinted in *1917-1928: From Paris, March 1917 to the end of 1928*, pp. 224 (my translation).

From Modernism to Mass Culture

In 1938 Lissitzky developed a theory of contemporary art production that not only associated aesthetic practice with the needs of collectives and nations (thus as prior determinants of the forms that production would assume), but also linked standards of aesthetic practice to distribution developments occurring in other communications media: books, graphic design, film. Although his beliefs were buoyed by the same naive optimism towards the enlightening power of technology and the media that would we years later find the ultimate relevance of Walter Benjamin's essay, Lissitzky's is not a mere "machine aesthetic." Rather, it is an attempt to establish an operative aesthetic framework that could focus attention simultaneously on the existing needs of mass audiences and on the available techniques and standards of the means-of-artistic-production. Like Benjamin in his later essay, Lissitzky considers aesthetic forms and their procedures of production in the light of history rather than in terms of universal concepts. Yet unlike Benjamin, he perceives the coming transformations as a product of needs and functions rather than as a result of technological change. The text is important to the clarification of Lissitzky's motivation in the following years, as he decided to abandon almost all traditional forms of graphic and photographic, let alone painting or sculpture, production, and to concentrate exclusively on those practices that could take the new "monumentality"—the conditions of simultaneous collective reception.

It is misguided to suppose that machines, i.e., the displacement of manual by mechanical processes, are basic to the development of the form and the figure of an artist. In the first place it is the consumer's demand that determines the development, i.e., the demand of the world means that provide the "commissions." Today this is not a narrow circle anymore, a few orders, but everybody, the masses.

What conclusions does this imply in our field? The most important thing here is that the mode of production of words and pictures is included in the same process: photography. . . . [In America] they began to modify the relation of word and illustration in response to the direct opposite of the European mode. The highly-developed technique of hand-set typesetting (handsome letter) was especially important for the development; this photomontage was born. . . . With our work the Revolution has achieved a colossal labor of propaganda and enlightenment. We ripped up the traditional book (one single page, magnified these a hundred times, . . . and stuck them up as posters in the streets. . . . The invention of mass printing made great works of art possible, but it has now lost its power. The cinema and the illustrated weekly have succeeded it. . . . The book is the most monumental art form today; no longer is it handled by the delicate hands of a bibliophile, but seized by a hundred thousand hands.

We shall be satisfied if we can conceptualize the epic and the lyric development of our times in our form of the book.²¹

The degree to which Lissitzky focused at this time on the question of audience as a determinant of form, and in the perspective of creating conditions for simultaneous collective reception, becomes even more obvious in the essay's at-first surprising equation between the reading space of the printed page and the space of dramatic experience in the theatre. According to Lissitzky the page laid its traditional layout and (typography) share conventions of confinement with the theatre – the prop-show as he calls it – where the spectator is separated from the performers, and the spectator's gaze is contained – as in traditional easel painting – in the central perspective of the proscenium stage. The revolutionary transformation of book design was parallel in Lissitzky's work to the revolution of the theatrical space, for example, as he would produce it in 1929 for Meyerhold's theatre and in several, open-stage constructions. Already in his 1922 book *On Two Squares* (reading lesson for children, as he called it), he said that 'the action unfolds like a film' and the method of typographical montage guarantees the facility of experiencing the reader's movement through time and space.²²

This integration of the dramatic experience of theatrical/theatrescape space and the perceptual experience of static signs of graphic/photographic montage and typography is successfully achieved in 1928 in Lissitzky's first major exhibition project for the International Press Exhibition, *Prosa*, in Cologne. Not surprisingly, we find on the first page of the catalogue that Lissitzky created to anticipate the design of the USSR Pavilion the announcement, 'Here you are in a typographic film-show the passage of the contents of the Soviet Pavilion.'²³

Rather than thinking of Lissitzky's involvement with the design of exhibition merely as a subordinated activity that remains marginal to the central concerns of his work (at least until, without considering these projects), it seems more adequate to see them, along with Lissitzky's subsequent involvement with the propaganda journal *VOSE in Construction*, as a logical next step in the development of his own work, as well as in the radical transformation of traditional aesthetic and art production as it had been occurring within the Soviet avant-garde since 1920 and the rise of productionism. We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of one of the last words Lissitzky wrote, shortly before his death in 1941, a title of autobiographical nature and activities, where the entry

21. B. Lissitzky, 'Open Book,' in *Artforum*, pp. 175–180.

22. 'Two-Square Book,' B. Lissitzky, *Reading Lesson*, (London, ed. by Nasser 1976), pp. 17–18.

23. Lissitzky, *Reading as Image Pavilion*, as an International Press Exhibition, Cologne, (Kunstverlag, 1928), p. 10.

under the year 1905 reads, "In 1908 my most important work as an artist began: the design of exhibitions."²⁴

In 1907 Lissitzky had been commissioned to install his first "constructivist" exhibition design in the Soviet Union, the exhibition of the Polygraphic Union, a relatively modest project in Moscow's Vostok Park. Unlike the 1905 design for the *International Contemporary Art Exhibition* in Dresden, or the earlier design for the *Kansenset Landbouwcongres* in 1902, this project was conceived and produced as a set for a trade show rather than an exhibition of contemporary art. Furthermore, it was the result of the collaboration of a group of artists.

Khark, the "inventor" of photomontage, Lissitzky's colleague and disciple from Vitebsk, whose book had struggled to come to terms with the legacy of Malevich's expressionism in 1915–16, was one of the collaborators in the project, as was Rafailov. Tefligovets, later to emerge as one of the major figures in the revolution of Soviet typographic design. It is in the catalogue of this exhibition—a book design project that was jointly produced by Lissitzky and Tefligovets—that we find Lissitzky's word "The Artist in Production."

This text is not only Lissitzky's own productive manifesto (*Shchitsbenka* and *Requiem*'s text, officially entitled "Production Manifesto," had appeared already in 1911, and Oleg Bol's manifesto "New Production" had appeared in *Lef* in 1923), but it is also the text in which Lissitzky develops most thoroughly his ideas about the use of photography in general and the function of photomontage in particular:

As a result of the social work of our epoch and the fact that artists acquired familiarity with new techniques, photomontage emerged in the years following the Revolution and flourished thereafter. Even though this technique had been used in America much earlier for advertising, and the Dadaists in Europe had used it to shake up official bourgeois art, it only served political goals in Germany. But only here, with us, photomontage acquired a clearly socially determined and aesthetic form. Like all other great art, it created its own laws of formation. The power of its expression made the workers and the Kansenset circles enthusiastic for the visual arts and it had great influence on the *Millionaire* and newspapers. Photomontage at its present stage of development was finished, entire photographs as elements from which it constructs a reality.²⁵

Lissitzky's 1907 text not only traces an astonishingly clear history of the technique of photomontage and its origins in advertising technology, but it also gives us a clear view of his awareness that the function of the technique within

24. Lissitzky, *Art and Ideological Creation*, 1958 (orig. in Russ., 1937), p. 133.

25. Lissitzky, "The Artist in the Production," *Art*, pp. 138.

the historical context of the Soviet avant-garde are entirely different from that of the Berlin dadaists, that the technique is only valid if it is based on the particular needs of a social group. That is to say, he discovers photomontage as a new artistic strategy that has value as artistic operation and instructional mode of representative participation. The nucleus of the inherent potential of photomontage, that is, the production of iconic, documentary information, already addressed in the arrangement set from 1914 of 1924, is fully developed in Lissitzky's definition of the functions of the technique in 1927: the morphology of the products of this technique has changed substantially by comparison with its original manifestations in 1919–25. These features that the techniques of photomontage had inherited from its origins in collage and the cubist critique of representativity were gradually abandoned. Also abandoned was the overlap of photomontage with the techniques of modern advertising. These techniques seemed to have generated, in the dada period, the extreme procedures of juxtaposition and fragmentation by which the origins in advertising were inverted and where the constructed artificiality of the artists destroyed the mythical nature of the commodity. This shift became apparent in the gradual return to the iconic functions of the photograph, deleting altogether the radical potential of the photograph (as still visible in Lissitzky's photomontage of the 20s) as well as the actual material structure of the agglomerated fragments of the photomontage itself, where the network of cuts and loss of joining edges and unmediated transitions from fragment to fragment was as important, if not more so, as the actual iconic representation contained within the fragment itself.

Thus, before, an essential feature of the modernist paradigm that underlay the production of the Soviet avant-garde until 1925, was replaced by a new concern for the photographic capacity of the photograph, supposedly rendering aspects of reality visible without interference or mediation. It was at this moment – in 1934 – that Rodchenko decided to abandon photomontage altogether and to engage in single-frame still photography, which transfigures montage through the explicit choice of camera angle, the framing of scenes, the directness of the film apparatus, and the camera's superiority over the constraints of human perception. In Lissitzky's essay this change is clearly indicated in the phrase arguing that 'photomontage is in present stage of development uses finished entire photographs as elements from which it constructs a totality.'¹ From this we see that transparency in the single point is favored over fragmentation, iconic representation of an abstract reference is favored over the technical materiality of the trace of a volatile process, usability of the construction of incoherent surfaces and spatial references is exchanged for the immutability of the camera-angle's objective nature and the technological media equipment that it conveys. Yet while it is evident that at this moment the premises of the modernist paradigm were vacated, and that a programmatically commitment to new solutions radically changed the nature of artistic production, it seems no more appropriate to neglect or minimize, as happened in Lissitzky's or Rodchenko's

work from this period (not their subsequent involvement with Stalin's State Publishing House in the 1930s) than it would be to condemn certain successful artists (those in particular who developed what Max Ernst was to call the technique of the "painted collage") as being responsible for providing advertising's visual and textual strategies, operative in this very day.

Stalin's Photomontage and Propaganda: The Process

Partially as a response to his first successful exhibition design in Moscow in 1927, a committee chaired by Dmitry Lunacharsky decided to ask Lissitzky (together with Kabanovskii, who later withdrew from participation) to design the Soviet Pavilion at the forthcoming International Exhibition of Newspaper and Book Publishing in Cologne, the first exhibition of its kind. Since the decision of the committee was made on December 22, 1927, and the exhibition was to begin in the first week of May 1928, Lissitzky and his collaborators had four months to plan and produce the design of the exhibition. Apparently just two days after the committee had appointed him, Lissitzky submitted a first general outline that functioned for him as that of a "collective of creation" with himself as the general coordinator of the design. Among the approximately thirty-eight members of the collective, only a few, among them the stage designer Naumova, had previously participated in exhibition design and the discussion of revolutionary programs.²⁶ The larger group within the collective consisted of agitating graphic designers, chiefly themselves or because some of the most important graphic designers of the Soviet avant-garde. The majority of the 127 exhibits were produced and assembled in the workshops for stage design in the Lenin Hills in Moscow. The other elements were designed in Moscow as well, but produced and assembled in Cologne under the supervision of Lissitzky and Sergei Brailin, who had traveled to the site of the exhibition to supervise and install the Soviet Pavilion.

The conception of the exhibition was in fact the large-scale photomontage that Lissitzky had designed with Brailin's assistance. This photomontage, as Brailin called it, integrated approximately seven meters by eleven feet and depicted, in constant alternation of camera angles, of close-ups and long shots, the history and importance of the publishing industry in the Soviet Union since the Revolution and its role in the education of the Russian masses of the newly industrialized state. Thus the photomontage, *The Task of the Press in the Education of the Masses* (its official title), functioned as the centerpiece of an exhibition that was devoted to documenting the achievements of the Revolution in the educational field for a skeptical, if not hostile, western European public.

26. For a detailed description of the layout and the procedures of the work for the Press exhibition design, see Igor N. Kuznetsov, "D. Lunacharsky and the Press in Berlin 1928," in M. Lissitzky, *Exhibition Catalogue*, State (1988), translated by Peter Wodchitzky, 1987, pp. 71-81.



*El Lissitzky (in collaboration with Sergei Anisimov),
Phosphoric in Pervaya Ekspozitsiya - 1926*



The actual structure of the photomontage followed the strategies that Lissitzky had laid out in the essay that accompanied the catalogue of his first exhibition design in 1921. Large-scale photographic prints were assembled in an irregular grid formation and the visual dynamics of the montage resulted from the juxtaposition of the various camera angles and positions that culled from a jagged linear network of seams and edges of heterogeneous photographic fragments.

While the scale and size of the photomontage – it was installed on the wall at a considerable height – signified the work with a tradition of architectural decoration and mural painting, the sequencing of the images and their emphatic dependence on camera technology and movement related the work to the experience of cinematic viewing, such as that of the audience. In their mostly enthusiastic reviews, many visitors to the Pevs exhibition actually discussed the theoretical and cinematic aspects of the photomontage. One critic mentioned that one went through "a drama that unfolded in time and space. One went through exposures, dissolves, intermissions, and finales."¹⁷ Reviewing both the David Hayslip Exhibition design by Lissitzky and the Caligaris Pevs design, a less well-depended critic still had to admit the designer's affiliation with the most advanced forms of cinematic production:

The first impression is brilliant. Excellent the technique, the arrangement, the organization, the manner way it has been constructed. . . . Propaganda, propaganda, that is the keyword of Soviet Russian exhibitions, whether they be in Caligaris or in David Hayslip. And how well the Russians know how to achieve the visual effects their films have been showing us for years!¹⁸

Even though Lissitzky did not meet Diego Rivera until 1929 (inaugurating a friendship that lasted until Lissitzky's death in 1973), it is very likely that in 1927–28 he was drawing not only upon the collage and montage sources of cubism, dadaism, and constructivism, but equally upon the cinematic montage techniques that Rivera had used in the film *El sin Piedad* (1926), and used still more daringly and experimentally in his work after 1928.

In his manifesto "Mo," published in *Iskra* in 1919 and illustrated by a diagram and rules drawing by Rodchenko from 1923, Rivera had called for "an art of movement, its central aim being the organization of the movements of objects in space." Holger Matthiesen speculates that this manifesto had considerable influence on Rodchenko, as well as the constructivists, and led him away from drawing and painting into the photographic montage production that Rodchenko published two years later in the same journal.¹⁹ It seems, however, that Rivera only visited a museum that, as we saw above in several

17. *Iskra*, p. 78.

18. *Clart in Iskra*, p. 78.

19. Holger Matthiesen, *Rodchenko: Propaganda, Moscow, November/December 1921*, p. 12.

however, was very much at the centre of the constructivist debate itself, to make 'construction' and 'montage' the procedures that would transform the passive, contemplative modes of seeing. Sophie Klippers argues that it was Vostok who learned the montage techniques from Lissitzky's earliest experiments with the photomontage and the photomontage, and that it was precisely Lissitzky's inexperience technique and the double exposure as photographic montage technique that left a particularly strong impression on Vostok's own work in the mid-1930s. Only in the late work produced by Lissitzky for the magazine *ISSU* in Constructivism can we imagine, according to Klippers, the influence of Vostok's *Line Poems*.

In spite of the obvious parallels between the cinematographic montage and the photomontage, and leaving aside the question of historical priority and influence, it is important to clarify in this context the specific differences that existed between the mural-based photomontage and exhibition designs of Lissitzky and the montage of Vostok's *Line Poems*. Clearly the still photograph and the new photomontage, as Lissitzky defined it, offered features that the moving imagery of the film lacked: aspects of the same subject could be compared and contrasted and could be offered for extensive reading and viewing; complicated processes of construction and social construction could be analysed in detailed accounts that ran parallel with statistics and other written information; and the same subject could, as Rodchenko argued, be represented 'in different times and in different circumstances.' This practice of 'visual construction' as the rich (as called Lissitzky's exhibition designs, had in fact enough a substantial change within collage and photomontage aesthetics. What is collage had been the strategy of collage, by which material had been juxtaposed, emphasising the divergence of the fragments, had now become the strategy of a conscious construction of documentary iconographic information.

In an excellent recent study of Russian constructivism, Christina Liddle has argued that it was the failure of the constructivists actually to implement their production program (due to shortage of materials, lack of access to industrial facilities, disinterest on the part of the engineers and administrators of the State manufacturing companies) that drove their efforts into the field of typography, publication and poster design, agitprop propaganda and exhibition design.⁴⁰ The emergence of a strong constructivism, backed by the Party at a level of Lenin's New Economic Policy in 1913, required the means to re-affirm values in an anti-bourgeois fashion for the rise of socialist realism. Liddle argues that it was as a result of these changes and as an attempt at competition with these reactionaries forces that Lissitzky's and Rodchenko's work at that time employed icons, photographic representation and abandoned

40. Christina Liddle, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1982.

the radical syntax of the montage aesthetic. The problem with this criticism, however—as with all previous rejections of the later work of Rodchenko and Lissitzky—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 needs of a newly industrialized collective society. Because, as we have seen, these conditions required radically different production procedures and modes of presentation and distribution, any historical critique or evaluation will have to develop its criteria from within the actual intentions and conditions at the origin of these practices.

Lissitzky's exhibition design does overcome the traditional limitations of the avant-garde practice of photography and reconstructs it within the necessary conditions of simultaneous collective reception that were given in the cinema and in architecture. Further, in his new practice of montage, Lissitzky incorporated the method of "systematic analytical sequence," as Tretyakov was to define it shortly afterwards. Tretyakov wrote in 1931 that the photographic artist should move from the single-image aesthetic to the systematic photographic sequence and the long-term observation:

If a more or less random snapshot is like an infinitely thin slice that has been scratched from the surface of reality with the tip of the finger, then in comparison the photographs or the photomontage lets us experience the scratched continuum of reality, its authentic meaning. We build systematically. We move the photograph systematically. Sequence and long-term photographic observation—that is the method.¹⁴

Medvedev's Affirmation

In spite of the fact that even the most conservative international newspapers reported enthusiastically on Lissitzky's *Proun* design, and that he received a medal from the Soviet government in recognition of the success of this project as well as having been named an honorary member of the Moscow State Soviet, he seems to have been personally dissatisfied with the results. This is evident in a letter that he wrote on December 26, 1928, to his Dutch friend, the de Stijl architect J. J. P. Oud. "It was a big success for us," he stated, "but aesthetically there is something of a poignant satisfaction. The extreme busy

14. Sergei Tretyakov, "From the Photographers to Long-Term Photography Observation," in *Petersburg Art, IV* (1972), 35, reprinted in German translation in *Julius H. Rothemann and International Relations*, ed. Friedrich Lohmeier and Robert Göbel, Cologne, DuMont Verlag, 1979, pp. 123B.

and the shortage of time violated my intentions and the necessary completion of the letter—as it ended up being basically a theory discussion.”³²

We will, however, find in neither Lissitzky's letters nor his diary entries any private or public discussion of or signs of regret about having abandoned the role of the modernist artist for that of the producer of political propaganda in the service of the new Communist state. Quite the opposite: the letters we know Lissitzky to have written during the years of his subsequent involvement with both the design of exhibitions for the government and his employment by Stalin's State Publishing House on the magazine *VOEN i Konstruktsiia* clearly indicate that he was as enthusiastically at work in furthering the propaganda for Stalin's regime as were Rodchenko and Stepanova, who were at that time involved in similar tasks. Clearly Lissitzky shared the naive utopianism that also characterized Walter Benjamin's later essay, an optimism that Adorno criticized in his response to the text, saying:

Both the dialectic of the highest and the lowest [modernism and mass-culture] bear the stigma of nihilism, both contain elements of change. . . . Both are now halves of an integral fraction, in which however they do not add up. It would be romantic to swallow one or the other, either as the hegemonic consciousness of the conservation of personality and all that stuff, or as the anarchistic consciousness of total nihilism in the spontaneous power of the proletarian in the historical process—a proletarian which is itself a product of hegemonic society.³³

But it is also clear by now that both Lissitzky's and Benjamin's media optimism prevented them from recognizing that the attempt to create conditions of a simultaneous collective reception for the new audiences of the industrialized state would very soon issue into the preparation of an arsenal of totalitarian, Stalinist propaganda in the Soviet Union. What is more, it would deliver the aesthetics and technology of propaganda to the Italian Fascist and German Nazi regimes. And only a little later we see the immediate consequences of Lissitzky's new montage techniques and photomontages in their successful adaptation for the ideological needs of American politics and the campaigns for the acceleration of capitalist development through consumption. Thus, what in Lissitzky's hands had been a tool of instruction, political education, and the raising of consciousness was rapidly transformed into an instrument for generating the silence of conformity and obedience. The "consequence [result of technique] of which Adorno speaks in the letter to Benjamin is one possible result of the un-

32. Lissitzky, *Notes*, p. 103.

33. Walter B. Adorno, Letter to Walter Benjamin, *Cambridge, Mass.* 18, 1936, reprinted in *Adorno and Pöhl*, London, New Left Books, 1977, pp. 128ff.



diological abandonment of modernism was easy to harness a bilingual styling. As early as 1932 we see the immediate impact of the Pirelli project in its adoption for the propaganda needs of the Fascist government in Italy. Inspired by the members of the Italian League of Rational Architects, in particular Bardi and Paladini (who was an expert on the art of the Soviet avant-garde), the architect Giuseppe Terragni constructed an enormous mural-sized photomontage for the *Exposition of the Pirelli Building*.²⁴ It would require a detailed formal and structural analysis to identify the transformations that took place within photomontage evolution once they were put in the service of Fascist politics. It may suffice here to bring only one detail to the attention of the reader, a detail in which that invasion of meaning under an apparent continuity of a formal principle becomes apparent, proving that it is by no means enough the case of an evolution formal strategy being reified with a new political and ideological content.

24. These works were in 1932 in the library of the Villa del F. M. Bardi's work *Tracce dell'arte* had been included upon Terragni's montage work published in *Forma* journals. For Paladini, Terragni reports, the relationship was even more direct since he had been there in Munich of Italian patterns and had developed a strong interest in the Soviet avant-garde. Terragni, in the exhibition of the Soviet Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1934, he published a study for it in the *Arte* from 1935. See Terragni, *Collegio, Colaggio, Chiamato Vetro*, 1988, pp. 58.

John W. Burt Foster, Jr. All four have been checked as one.
 JOURNALISM: THE SPECIAL ISSUE: THE JOURNAL OF
 THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF JOURNALISTS, vol. 42, no. 42,
 1998.



The ideal in question is the representation of the masses in Terragni's plasmoidal, where a crowd of people is contained in the outline of a relief shaped like the propeller of a turbine or a ship. Clearly it was one of the most difficult tasks, in constructing representations for new mass audiences, not only to establish conditions of simultaneous collective viewing, but further, actually to construct representations of the masses themselves, to depict the collectivity. One of the most prominent examples of this anomaly is an early photomontage poster by Klee, which in fact seems to have been so successful that Klee is said to have used the same visual configuration for two different purposes.³² The subject of

32. Klaus Klee's first version of the photomontage poster is 1935 work, "Let us build the great people," and it was an encouragement to participate in the first year plan of 1935. The second version of the poster is dated in its image of an assembled crowd which is itself composed of a large number of assembled faces and an even larger number of photographic portraits. In this case the composition reflects the vision of the Soviet Union to participate in the German and German-making process of this total action. This poster version later also had an influence on John W. Burt Foster, Jr., who mentioned Klee's assembled faces in an assembled work with a face, giving the vision of the Communist International under the slogan, "All has been built up for us," on the cover of the 42nd no. 42 (1998). Thus, as well as in Klee's and Terragni's work, the image of the masses is contained in the remarkable representation. In Klee's and Terragni's photomontage is, however, the assembly of the masses itself as a sign of active participation, whereas in the Terragni's photomontage it is the assembly of the masses that suggests the idea of individualism. The photomontage Terragni's photomontage must create

the power in both versions is the representation of political participation in the decision-making processes of the new Soviet Union. In Klee's poster participation is encouraged by an institutional hand within which hundreds of lines are contained, thus the individualization resulting from the participation in political decisions and subordination under the political needs of the collectivity seems to be successfully integrated into one image. In Tzeng's photomontage the same structure has been deployed; this time, however, the overall lines of the institutional hand of the ruling individual is replaced by the outlines of the machine (the poppet, the turbine) which contains the image of the masses of people. And it is clear that the Fascist image meant what it unknowingly conveys: that the subordination of the masses under the state apparatus in the service of the continued dominance of the political and economic interests of the industrial ruling class has to be marked behind the image of technological progress and masses. Abstracted as it is, however, from the interests of those who are being massed, it appears as an image of universality and subjugation rather than one of individual participation in the construction of a new collective.

It is significant that the principles of photomontage are completely abandoned once the technique of the photomontage is employed for the propaganda purposes of the German fascists. In the same manner that they had discovered Eisenstein's *Monte* as a model to be copied for their purposes (Lutz Rohlfenwald mailed his work thoroughly for the preparation of her own propaganda number), they had also recognized that the achievements of the Russian artists in the field of exhibition design could be employed to serve their needs to manipulate the urban and rural masses of Germany during the crisis of the post-Weimar period. When the German Wehrmacht, which had just been named into a fascist organization, put together a popular photography show in 1933 called *Die Camera*, the organizers explicitly compared their exhibition design with that of the Russians (without, of course, mentioning Lissitzky's name):

If you compare this exhibition with the propaganda rooms of the Russians that received so much attention during the last years, you will instantly become aware of the direct, unprejudiced, and unproblematic nature of the representation of reality in this room. These pictures address the spectator in a much more direct manner than the evolution of typography, photomontage, and drawings. . . . This hall of honor is so calm and grand that one is almost embarrassed to talk any longer about propaganda in this context.¹⁰

To trace even the last remnants of aesthetic practice in photomontage, the frame and the margins where the constructed nature of reality could become

acknowledged. "We knew the inflammatory words of Stendhal across the people of Italy with the subtle power of violence and courage that is Fascism."

10. Kemp, *Post-Exem*, p. 34.



George Toppel: Plasmungen: mural for the
Exposition of the Fascist Revolution, 1932

Reproduced at the German Weiskopf Exhibition Die
Kunst, Berlin, 1933.



appeared – and therefore its potential for change – did soon become a standard practice in construction propaganda, and construction was replaced by the awe-inspiring monumentality of the gigantic, single-image panorama. What had once been the visual and formal incorporation of dialectics in the structure of the message – in its simultaneity of opposing views, its rapidly changing angles, its unmediated transition from part to whole – and had as such embodied the relationship between individual and collectivity as one that is constantly to be realized, was now first displaced by the unified spatial perspective (here the birds-eye view) that reveals our unimpaired expansion (land, fields, water, nature) and then substitutes the perspective of government and control, of the surveillance of the ruler's omnipotent eye in the metaphor of nature as an image of a purified social collective without history or conflict.

It remains to be determined at what point, historically as well as structurally, this reversal takes place within the practice of photomontage during the 1920s. Utilization of the image and its consequent monumentalization were – as we saw – already operative in Lissitzky's work for the *Beat* exhibition. These tendencies were of considerable importance for the success of his enterprise. And according to Supanov's own text, Rodchenko abandoned photomontage principles as early as 1924, replacing them by single-frame images and/or series of single-frame images with highly informative documentary qualities. At what point these iconographic dimensions turned into the direct abolition of totalization power, however, is a question that requires further investigation. That this point occurs within Rodchenko's work, I am also in Lissitzky's, for the journal *USSR in Construction* is a problem that modernist art historians have tried to avoid by styling these artists as avant-garde and marginal who had to sacrifice their commitment to the spiritual realm of abstract art to their ordered involvement with the state. A revision of this conflicting dimension of history is long overdue. It is a dimension that deprives these artists – if nothing else – of their actual political identity (their commitment to the cause of Russian politics was enthusiastic and sincere and quite unforced, as is evident from the fact that an artist such as Tulin, who did not work for the state agencies, continued to live his private, if economically miserable existence without harassment), as it deprives us of the understanding of one of the most profound conflicts inherent in modernism itself: that of the universal dialectic between individual autonomy and the representation of a collectivity through visual constructs. Clearly the history of photomontage is one of the arenas in which this dialectic was raised to the highest degree of its contradictory forces. Thus it is not surprising that we find the first signs of a new authoritarian monumental aesthetic defined through the very rejection of the legacy of photomontage in favor of a new unified imagery. In 1928 Supanov could still treat this reversal's development through an apparently neutral political terminology in characterizing the climax of the post-revolutionary iconographic position:

Within its short life, photomontage has passed through many phases

of development. Its first stage was characterized by the integration of large numbers of photographs into a single composition, which helped bring into relief individual photo images. Contrasts in photographs of various sizes and, to a lesser extent, the graphic surface itself formed the connective medium. One might say that this kind of montage had the character of a *glacial* montage superimposed on white paper ground. The subsequent development of photomontage has confirmed the possibility of using photographs as such . . . for individual ensembles are no fragmented and have all the characteristics of a real document. The artist himself must take up photography . . . The value of the photograph itself seems to assume primary importance; the photograph is no longer raw material for montage or for some kind of illustrated composition but has an independent and complete reality.²⁷

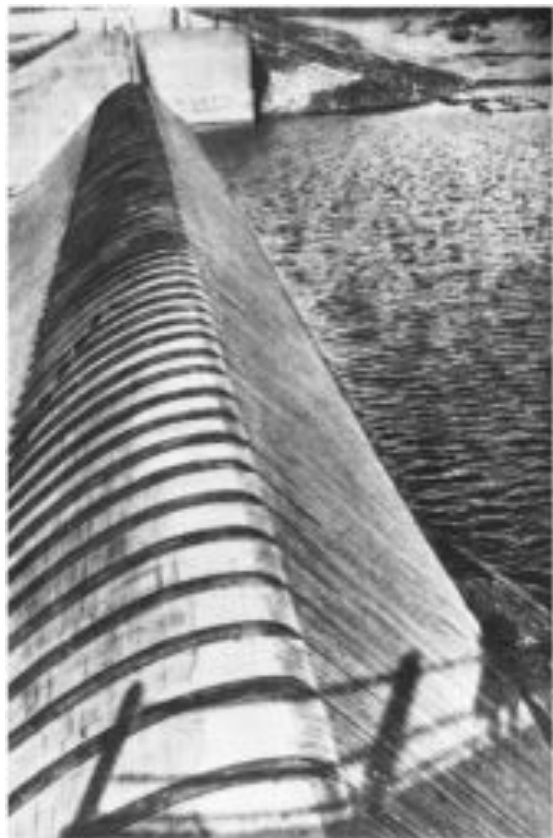
But two years later, even within the Soviet Russian reflection upon the purposes and functions of the technique of photomontage itself we witness the rise of that concern for the new monumentality and heroic pathos that was the prime feature of the German fascist attack on the legacy of photomontage opened above. In 1938, in his own "The Social Meaning of Photomontage," the critic O. L. Kuznetsov writes:

. . . the solution to the problem of the proletarian, dynamic photo montage is inherently connected to the simultaneous solution of the question for a monumental style, since the monumentality of the tasks of the construction of socialism requires a heroic pathos for the organization of the consciousness of the operators. Only in a successful synthesis of dynamics and monumentality—in comparison with the construction of a dialectical relationship between the levels of life—can photography fulfill the function of an art that organizes and leads life.²⁸

Thus it seems that Balaban's original, utopian quest and program for the future functions of experimentalist photography are to become "an informed analysis of the creative tasks which social life poses," one that will "organize the consciousness and psyche of the masses by organizing objects and ideas," had become true within ten years' time, although it is a manner that was perhaps quite different from what he had actually hoped for. Or we could say that the latest

27. Benjamin, "Photomontage" (1938), English translation in *Thomas Schatzberg, ed., Essays*, pp. 302.

28. O. L. Kuznetsov, "The social meaning for Photomontage," *Iskusstvo* (Art), Moscow, 1938, pp. 1-3; also *Questions on the German resistance to Socialist Realism and Socialist Realism*, pp. 150.



Concrete Backbone. This page from the magazine (1938 in Construction, no. 12, November 1933, Special issue on the construction of the Suez Canal.)

Discarded cages in photograph made: In the course of 17 months almost 25,000 skilled workmen were trained in 40 trades. They were all engineers, fitters, turners, welders, machinists. For the first time they became witnesses of the glory of labor, the romance of construction work. They mediated the norms of their own civilization.



element of social engineering, inherent in the notion of social progress as a result of technological development which art could mediate, had finally caught up with modernism's orientation toward science and technology as its underlying paradigm for a cognitively and perceptually contemporary position.

This historical dialectic seems to have come full circle in Rodchenko's career. In 1931 he worked as an intern-architect on the site of the construction of the White Sea Canal in order to document the heroic technological achievements of the Stalin government and to produce a volume of photographic records, that apparently is the last year when of his army more than 100,000 workers lost their lives due to inhumane working conditions. While it is unimaginable that Rodchenko would not have been aware of the conditions that he photographed for almost two years, his subsequent publications on the subject only present a grandiose vision of nature harnessed by technology and the criminal and historicist impulses of the proto-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary personalities mastered through the process of modernization in the closed labor camps of the White Sea Canal.²⁰

While it is undoubtedly clear that at this time Rodchenko did not have any other choice than to comply with the interest of the State Publishing House if he wanted to maintain his role as an artist who participated actively in the construction of the new Soviet society (and we have no reason to doubt that to be his primary motive), we have every reason to think that by 1931 the goals of photography had clearly been abandoned.

However, the concepts raised in this *Whorehouse* perspective of the fate of modernist photomontage and photographic practice in the Soviet Union during the 1930s or as its transformation into totalitarian propaganda in fascist Italy and Germany seems historically appropriate. For the technique was adapted to the specifically American needs of ideological displacement at the very same moment. Once again, the tradition of photomontage itself had first to be attacked in order to clear the ground for the new needs of the monumental propaganda machines. Here is Edward Steichen's American variation on the theme of an ambivalentist backlash in favor of his version of a "productionist" integration of art and commerce in 1930:

The modern European photographer has not liberated himself as definitely [as the American commercial photographer]. He still irritated his friend, the painter, with the so-called photomontage. He

20. Current online photo archive in *antimontage.com* have with regard to Rodchenko's career at large in the Soviet Union, as the artist, *antimontage.org*, especially pp. 1048, and n. 175. The problem is, however, that he seems to have no information on the working conditions at the White Sea Canal and the number of victims in his "communist" or Alexander Rodchenko's writings, clearly a source that would have to be quoted with serious caution in a historical study. The same goes on Lissitzky's, Rodchenko's, and Bogomolov's collaboration with Stalin State Publishing House remains to be done.

has mostly shown the modern painter with a microscope. We have gone well past the patchy period of combining and mixing the hand commercial photograph. . . . It is logical therefore that we find many modern photographers lined up with architects and designers in stead of with painters in photographic art today."⁶⁰

Two years later Brecher staged his first project at the Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition *Real is Vain*. Once again its propagandistic nature depended almost entirely, as Christopher Phillips has shown, on a distorted and falsified version of Lissitzky's exhibition designs.⁶¹ In this case it was Richard Beyer who provided American industry and designers with what he thought Lissitzky's ideas and practice had attempted to achieve. Beyer was well suited to this task, having already prepared an extensive photo-montage brochure for the National Association's *Domestic Household* of 1938, staged in coincidence with the Berlin Olympics. When asked by Christopher Phillips about his contribution to this project for the Nazis, Beyer's only comment was, "This is an interesting brochure insofar as it was done exclusively with photography and photo-montage, and was printed in a chromatic technique."⁶² Thus, at the cross-section of politically manipulative production aesthetics and the transformation of modernist montage aesthetics into an instrument of mass education and enlightenment, we find not only its transverse transformation into totalitarian propaganda, but also its successful adaptation for the needs of the ideological apparatus of the culture industry of American capitalism.

60. Edward Brecher, "Comments on Photography," *Journal of American Design*, New York, 1939, p. 139.

61. Christopher Phillips, "The Industrial Use of Photography," *October*, no. 22 (Fall 1982), pp. 178, provides detailed information on Brecher's intent: *Designers of Exhibition Design at the Museum of Modern Art* (as a New York, Alan Sekula's essay, "The Truth in Photography" appeared in *Photography and Modernity*, Italian, The Press of the Nova Italia College of Art and Design, 1983), gives us the first discussion of the design of the exhibition by Brecher and also teaches upon the issues of exhibition design in general.

62. I am grateful to Christopher Phillips for providing me with this information and for his permission to quote from his private correspondence with Richard Beyer, as well as his lending me the brochure itself. *Domestic Household* (1938) was also published as an insert in the design magazine *Gebrauchskunst*, April 1938.

Robert Ryan. Photograph for Edward Steiner's exhibition "Road to Victory" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1942.



Robert Ryan. Photograph for Steiner accompanying the exhibition "Road to Victory" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1942.