

## Politics in Reverse: The American Reception of American Constructivism

(preliminary proposal submitted for Radford summer research 2009)

As art historians have increasingly turned their attention to Russian constructivism, the one question that continues to elude researchers concerns the American reception of constructivism. Two factors make it worth asking: the focus of American interest in Russian constructivism changes considerably during the twentieth century; and in those cases where artists have identified a constructivist influence, it's not always clear as to whether this influence is one of aesthetics or one of ideology. Because constructivism was born in an intensely political moment (immediately after the Russian revolution of 1917), the possible divorce of this art from its politics raises questions about the manner in which art becomes political and differences in the ways both artists and historians use art and history.

Although no one, to my knowledge, has attempted to trace a history of the American response to constructivism, a number of key markers in this response can be identified.<sup>1</sup> My preliminary research suggests that there have been at least three phases in the American reception of Russian constructivism, with each phase linked to a specific interest group or question. The first period was largely motivated by the travels of American theater critics and directors who were both excited by the Soviet revolution and often had political motives for traveling. In addition to critics who came home and wrote reviews for American magazines and newspapers, one of the most notable theater enthusiasts was Hallie Flanagan, who later became the head of the Federal Theater Project.<sup>2</sup> Not entirely limited to people in the theater, other travelers at this time included the Russian-born graphic artist Louis Lozowick<sup>3</sup> (who shared his observations in writing and became a consultant to the artist, collector and curator Katherine Dreier, founder of the Société Anonyme) and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr, whose influence would potentially be felt in exhibitions, essays, and collegial interactions with American artists.<sup>4</sup> The first period, primarily the 1930s and 40s, is complicated by two factors: the increasingly negative American response to communism, and by extension, anything Russian,<sup>5</sup> and the tendency to confuse an international form of constructivism with the Russian version. The second phase, largely in response to Camilla Gray's 1962 book on the *Russian Experiment*,<sup>6</sup> had a more direct impact on artists looking for a way out of the dominant artistic mood of the previous decade – the emotionally driven and “heroic” abstract expressionism of artists like Jackson Pollock – and on architects searching for a response to the monumental glass and steel skyscrapers of the international modernism of the 1950s. The most recent interest, concerned more with theory and history, took shape in the 1990s with the opening of the Soviet archives to foreign scholars.<sup>7</sup> Although exhibitions of Russian art can be traced throughout the twentieth century, since the 1990s the scope and scholarly rigor of these exhibitions has changed dramatically. Rather than exhibitions dedicated to a loosely defined Russian avant-garde, recent exhibitions of Russian art began to focus on specific media (such as theater or books) and specific artists and styles.

This brief outline suggests the major areas for my study: the evolution and influence of exhibitions; the development of print resources in the form of books, reviews, and diaries; and the identification of artists and critics who served as direct contacts and intermediaries

(Lozowick, Dreier, Barr, and Frederick Kiesler are some examples). It also suggests that the American response has never been one of complete disinterest or rejection, but it is much more difficult to pin down than the influence of more widely known movements such as cubism or impressionism. Yet, whereas those movements can only be assumed to have influenced the “look” of American art, constructivism was a movement which was more concerned with process and ideology than form. If it did have an influence, this influence would have to be expressed in use and ideology, rather than image. But was it? When architects turned to constructivism, for example, were they just pursuing a visual affinity, without attempting to assert an ideological relationship, as suggested by Philip Johnson and Mark Wrigley in their catalogue for the MoMA exhibition on “deconstructivism” of 1988?<sup>8</sup> Likewise, when Daniel Flavin titled a sculpture made from florescent light bulbs, *Monument to Tatlin*, what connection, if any, was he trying to make to Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, a spiraling wood structure intended to serve as a model for a new meeting place for legislative bodies and the news media? Working only with these two examples, we might conclude that American artists saw constructivism as a source for a new aesthetic, devoid of social and political content. In contrast, if we turn to Hallie Flanagan, we find a theater director who saw in constructivism an effective and lively tool for communicating current issues to large audiences. She changed those issues to suit her American public, but the significance of this difference was apparently lost on the House Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities, and the Federal Theater Project lost its funding in 1939 (the same year in which Vsevelod Meierkhold, whom Flanagan admired, was assassinated by the Soviets).

The underlying questions for my study are therefore three-fold, beginning with the question of the nature of this fascination with the Russian avant-garde:

1) Is it predicated on a search for the political or the visual underpinnings of this art? To what extent has this interest been fueled by factors of accessibility as opposed to the art historical shift away from purely formal models of analysis to more determinedly social and political models? 2) Since constructivism in Russia affected theater, cinema, architecture, photography and graphic design, has its impact been experienced equally in those media in this country? And among those artists who were affected by constructivism, how did they read and revise this constructivist influence? 3) Finally, which artists have not only responded to constructivism but have made that response contingent to understanding their work – when must we understand the meanings and ideologies of constructivism in order to understand the work of these artists? And when has a mis-reading of Russian constructivism resulted in comparable mis-readings of American art? (A working list of questions is attached at the end.)

This project has its origins in my earliest work on Russian constructivism (which, by necessity, began by reading the previously mentioned articles by American theater critics) and Peter Eisenman,<sup>9</sup> an American architect included in the MoMA show on “deconstructivism.”

Although my current writing deals with the Russian response to constructivism, the question of the American response is one to which I have always intended to return and which takes on greater meaning in light of the continually evolving relationship between the U.S. and Russia in political, cultural and social matters. As a slight change in direction, this research allows me to synthesize my extensive studies of Russian constructivism with my teaching focus on twentieth century modernism through research on a topic of long importance to me – the ideological reception of art. My research plans include the use of archival materials in the

Archives of American Art collection of the Smithsonian,<sup>10</sup> theater materials in the NYPL Theater and Performing Arts archives, and the Library of Congress Federal Theater Project collection (much of it is available online), the MoMA archives in NYC for two exhibitions held at the Museum of Modern Art prior to 1980 and the Alfred Barr archive, and the Katherine S. Dreier archive at Yale University. Although much of this research is bibliographic and archival, there are three contemporary women artists whose work does make identifiable references to Russian constructivism: Alice Aycock, Miriam Schapiro, and Suzanne Lacey. I hope to be able to contact these artists to pursue the question of the Russian influence on their work.<sup>11</sup>

Because my dominant focus falls in the area of historiography as opposed to formal analysis of unique art works, and because the artistic media in my study are varied, my intended journals for submission include: *Critical Inquiry* (for its interest in cross-disciplinary questions), the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (some of the most visible responses to constructivism are in the domain of architecture and design), and the *Art Bulletin* (questions about twentieth century art history have been receiving attention recently).

#### Notes

1. The New York Public Library is conducting an NEH summer institute this summer on the American response to Russian art between approximately 1880 and 1930. I was not eligible to participate this summer since I participated in an NEH institute last summer, but I would note that my question actually concerns the period from about 1920 to the present, since constructivism did not come into existence until 1920.
2. For one example, see Lee Strasberg, "The Magic of Meyerhold," *New Theatre*, Sept. 1934, 14-15; 30. Others exist: they formed my earliest research on Russian constructivism, before I was able to read Russian. For Flanagan, secondary sources include Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in American Theatre* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988) and Ray Allen Billington, "Government and the Arts: The W. P. A. Experience," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4. (Winter, 1961).
3. The "art deco" aesthetic and the work of artists such as Lozowick and John Storrs, also influenced by constructivism, are discussed in Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian, *The Machine Age in America 1918-1941* (NY: Brooklyn Museum and Harry Abrams, 1986). For Lozowick, it is also possible to locate documents written by him: "Soviet Painting and Architecture," in Joseph Freeman, Joshua Kunitz and Louis Lozowick, *Voices of October* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1930) as well as several articles which explore his "machine aesthetic" in light of a possible constructivist influence. These articles are informative, but unlike their authors, my understanding of constructivism is based on extensive, archival research.
4. Barr's "Russian Diary" has been reproduced in *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* (New York: Abrams, Inc., 1986), 103-137.
5. See, for example, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 85 -112.
6. Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922*, revised and enlarged edition (NY: Thames and Hudson, 1986), was first published in London in 1962.

7. I fall into this third category but it is also reflected in the growth of exhibitions on Russian constructivism, beginning with the Guggenheim Museum's show, the *Great Utopia*, in 1992.

8. Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1988).

9. My first published article in the field of art history challenged the assumption that Eisenman was influenced by constructivism. "Peter Eisenman and the Erosion of Truth," *Twenty/One* 1, No. 2, 1990, 20 - 37.

10. The Hallie Flanagan papers from the Federal Theater Project are located there in microfilm, with originals in the New York Public Library. Additional Federal Theater Project papers are in the Library of Congress.

11. Monographs exist on the first two of these artists; Lacey is the subject of a forthcoming book by a colleague of mine in Illinois who has shared her manuscript with me. I have arranged an upcoming interview with Alice Aycock.

### Working Questions:

- in the context of examining the “American reception,” is it meaningful to differentiate between Russian constructivism and “international constructivism”?
- Is it possible that some people called all abstract art which vaguely or explicitly suggested a machine aesthetic constructivism?
- Is it the case that anything which looks like it has some relationship to Tatlin’s tower (and perhaps his contra-reliefs) is called constructivism (or Tatlinism)?
- When people describe something as looking constructivist, is that as important or even more important than documentation of a real or legitimate influence?
- If Kiesler is possibly a more likely influence on Aycock than Popova, and people in the 1920s thought of his work as constructivist, can one say that Aycock was influenced by constructivism? Is it more important to know what the artist wants us to think (as it often is in her case) than to know what the actual influences were?
- Even from reading a little about Kiesler it seems clear that the constructivist influence may have been greater in the “applied arts” than in the fine arts, which would more or less make sense since the constructivists themselves rejected the fine arts, but they also rejected the applied arts
- Is the American tendency to read constructivism as an art of the machine related to an American desire to centralize the machine age as an important part of American modernism? Or more realistically an overlapping of influences, in which Russia is influenced by American industrial and machine-age developments, and then Americans see these manifested in Russian art and buttress their own desires to develop an art of the machine age by “borrowing” from Russian art (generally called constructivism)?
- It’s still impossible to ignore the fact that various artists in different places were talking about similar things at almost the same time, essentially ruling out a question of influence. Kiesler’s writings sound remarkably similar to constructivist passages in places, but he would not have read the constructivist writings (nor would they have read his writings), which must lead to the conclusion that these individuals are responding to like circumstances in similar manners; what makes this more perplexing is that Kiesler does refer to a Russian influence (he generally treats Malevich and Lissitzky and Tatlin as examples of that influence which he ultimately calls constructivist) although ironically he’s not referring to the correct sources of that influence
- what is the exhibition history of Russian art in the US?
- El Lissitzky and Victor Shklovsky both seem to define Russian art for American audiences although in different ways – EL as the icon of international constructivism and VS as a more conceptual influence (which isn’t really constructivist). What leads some artists to the first influence and others (Lacey, Dan Graham) to the second?