The Life of the Constructivist Theatrical Object

Roann Barris

Although several productions associated with Russian constructivism have achieved renown and Vsevelod Meierkhold is hardly an unfamiliar name to theatre historians, the constructivist contribution to theatre has rarely been conceptualized in terms of the creation of a new relationship among the theatrical object, the actors, and the audience. Without this reconceptualization, it is as difficult to arrive at a convincing definition of constructivist theatre as it is to explain Meierkhold’s eventual persecution by the Soviet government. In this essay, I examine the role of the object and the spectator/actor/object relationship in Meierkhold’s constructivist period, emphasizing the object’s change from something relatively definable, with boundaries, to one that comprised the entire network of performance repetitions of a single production.1

The constructivist association with Russian theatre in the 1920s has always been as enigmatic as it is difficult to define. The constructivists, after all, famously rejected theatre (along with fine art in general), and they also rejected the idea of style. Whereas some historians have chosen to ignore this rejection and tried to identify a constructivist style, most definitions of theatrical constructivism have focused on understanding the theatre as an arena or micro-environment for trying out prototypes of architecture and...

Roann Barris is the chair of the art department at Radford University in Virginia and associate professor of art history. She has been studying Russian art and theatre since graduate school. Her particular area of research interest lies in the politics and reception of theatrical constructivism in the 1920s.

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Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Russian are my own. I use the acronym RGALI to refer to the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art. Generally, I adhere to the Library of Congress system of transliteration, unless it is a familiar name or that my source has already provided a transliterated translation.

1 Meierkhold did not reject the label of “constructivist” (unlike Tairov, who did). In his essay “O Nekotorykh voprosakh prostranstvennoi kompozitsii spektaklia” (1936), in Vsevelod E. Meierkhold, Stati, pisma, rechi, besedy, vol. 2: 1917–1939, ed. O. N. Rossikhina and E. G. Ivanova (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), 2:496–500, Meierkhold defined his constructivist period as lasting from 1922 to 1924 and consisting of productions of Magnanimous Cuckold, The Death of Tarelkin, and Earth in Turmoil (produced in that sequence). Nikolai M. Tarabukin, probably the most dedicated chronicler of Meierkhold’s work in the 1920s, also makes this assessment, but goes on to see influences of constructivism in his later productions. See Tarabukin’s 1931 essay “Zritelnoe oformleniu v GOSTIMe k deklatetemnuu jubileiu GOSTIMa,” in O. V. E. Meierkholde, ed. O. M. Feldman (Moscow: OGI, 1998), 63–75.
furniture for use in real life. Yet few of the artists themselves spoke of it in that way. Even if they had, it would have been untenable for someone like Meierkhold, who, from almost the beginning of his career, called for the destruction of the stage box and replacing it with a theatre of kinetic movement in both horizontal and vertical directions. Meierkhold never got his ideal theatre, but the architectural/micro-environmental definition does not make sense for the many productions that avoided the creation of a specific scenic locale for the setting of the play and are nonetheless called constructivist. Nor does it make sense in light of the fact that few of the constructivist objects made for the theatre were intended to be used in real life, and those that did get used were often not made for the theatre. There are exceptions, of course, such as Alexander Rodchenko’s compact, folding furniture for Maks Abramovich Tereshkovich’s 1929 production of Inga at the Theatre of the Revolution (the furniture was so popular that the stage hands took most of it home), but Liubov Popova’s costumes for Magnanimous Cuckold (1922) had as little value outside of the production as did Varvara Stepanova’s deliberately collapsing tables and chairs made for the 1923 production of The Death of Tarelkin. But here we have a conundrum: the chairs were useful, albeit not in familiar ways. Thus the fact that these chairs could serve the carnivalesque ambiance of the play and its plot of deception and masquerade, while nonetheless not serving as models for chairs to be used in real life, may call for either a new or expanded definition of function. Rather than describing the production as a naturalistic laboratory for experimenting with prototypes of functional objects (a goal that, yet again, would be difficult to attribute to a director who believed that theatre should emphasize theatricality), we might recognize that the double entendre, intended by this furniture, along with its portability and the demands it made on the actor, was itself a constructivist goal and a redefinition of function, if not of the object itself.

Further complicating an already complicated scenario is the fact that theatre and the concept of theatricality were as fundamental to Soviet life in the 1920s as they would be to the constructivists, who quickly abandoned their anti-theatre stance. Not only does this contribute to the difficulty of determining where the constructivist contribution to theatre begins and ends; it reinforces the necessity of finding this contribution in a manner that addresses more than the individual stage set, costume, and object. As I will show, the real contribution is not an influence on design, but an influence

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2 Christina Lodder was a key exponent of this theory. See her essay “Constructivist Theatre as a Laboratory for an Architectural Aesthetic,” originally published in 1979 and reprinted in her Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914–1937 (London: Pindar Press, 2005), 340–67; see also her important book Russian Constructivism (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 170–80. For a lucid synthesis of the architectural variants, see Catherine Cooke, Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City (London: Academy Editions, 1995), but her primary focus is architectural constructivism.

3 Vsevelod E. Meierkhold, Rekonstruktsiya teatra (Moscow: Teakinopechat, 1930).

4 For an in-depth examination of Rodchenko’s work on this play, including the change from his earlier, more futuristic and transformative design to the more practical solution he ended with, see Roann Barris, “Inga: A Constructivist Enigma,” Journal of Design History 6, no. 4 (1993): 263–81.

5 I would also note that stories abound about the actors’ refusal to work with the furniture in Tarelkin and the difficulty of performing in Popova’s costumes.
on use—one that impacts the entire production and the audience as the user of a new constructivist object. I therefore trace the transformation of the constructivist theatrical object from something that might be called a “stage construction” into something more ephemeral and elusive: the entire production in all its iterations. At the same time, I will show that this transformation, a deceptive and duplicitous performance of its own, contributes to what might be thought of as an identity problem for the theatre, as theatre begins to adapt and adopt strategies associated with the photomontage and cinema. Would this have happened anyway and without the contributions of constructivism? Perhaps—but in contrast to cinema, the transformation of the theatrical construction creates an empowered audience, precisely at that point in time when censors and government agencies were calling for the opposite.

As previously indicated, I focus on a limited segment of Meierkhold’s career: the short period of 1922–24, which used either Popova or Stepanova as stage “constructors” (Stepanova’s preferred term). I will also refer to plans for a 1929 production (with El Lissitsky as constructor) that unfortunately complicates categorization as constructivist or otherwise because it never took place. Yet the arc of all four productions, whether realized or planned, adumbrates both the problem of definition and the transformation of the object from a unitary construction to a montage of objects, into something that appears to be more cinematic in its use of lighting and actualities, and finally to an unfixed montage of performance repetitions.

It is my purpose in this essay to amplify and complement the work of Alma Law and Nick Worrall, among others, by focusing not on the biomechanical movements in these productions, but on the nature of the theatrical constructivist object. Spencer Golub’s more recent work raises questions of a different sort. His intriguing analysis of Magnanimous Cuckold, with its emphasis on the wheels used in the construction and the “vowelless” presence of the playwright’s name on the largest wheel, does resonate with my analysis, although we differ in his use of structuralist and poststructuralist theories to read backwards to an intriguing though somewhat anachronistic understanding of the production from the perspective of what Popova, Meierkhold, and the other constructivists were saying and writing at that time. In contrast, because I focus on the elusive constructivist object, the question of greatest importance to my work is how Meierkhold used the spectator, the object, and the production, and for what

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6 Stepanova used the term “constructor” on the posters she created for Tarelkin. Meierkhold also used it in his written materials, although he changed the title at different points in his career, generally corresponding to changes in the role of the artist with whom he worked.

7 I refer to his plans for a production of Sergei Tretiakov’s play I Want a Child. The most complete discussion of this play is Robert Leach’s analysis of a production in the 1990s in his introduction to Sergei Mikhailovich Tretiakov: I Want a Baby, trans. Stephen Holland, ed. Robert Leach (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham Studies in Drama and Dance, 1995). The production plans have received scant attention in art historical and theatrical literature for the obvious reason of the impossibility of knowing how the plans would have been carried out. It nonetheless raises some compelling questions and hypotheses.


purpose. This, in turn, broaches a question of newer provenance: despite Meierkhold’s recent and Russian “rehabilitation,” art historical and other literature has posited the existence of a straight line from the avant-garde practices of the 1920s to the agitation trials of the 1930s, passing directly through his work. Although this essay alone will not suffice to disprove that hypothesis, it is an essential piece of my argument that the constructivist theatrical object mediates a new relationship between the audience and the performance, one that is directly antithetical to the controlled audience of the agitation trials.

**From Object to Construction: Magnanimous Cuckold**

Long identified as the iconic (and sometimes the first) example of constructivist theatre, the production of *Magnanimous Cuckold* ironically gave rise to the traditional equation of the role of constructivism with the design of the stage set, even as it demonstrated the shortcomings of this definition. The famous ramped wooden structure of steps, platforms, doors, and wheels accomplished both. To understand this requires a brief excursus into constructivist theory.

In 1921, the First Working Group of Constructivists met to debate and define the three terms that would eventually be seen as the constructivist triad: “*konstruktsiia*” (construction), “*faktura*” (the working and manipulation of materials), and “*tektonika*” (the ideological forces erupting in the product). Note that the constructivists’ definitions did not account for media differences; they do not directly speak of applications in their definitions. Following both the sequence of their debates and the relevance of these concepts to the productions I examine, I begin my exegesis with *konstruktsiia*, the concept that provides the scaffolding for the other terms. Despite the English cognate, its meaning is not obvious. The concept was difficult to define because the members of the Working Group did not use the term to denote a physical structure or construction. Indeed, a lengthy debate over the differences between a construction and a composition finally led to agreement that construction was a goal-oriented organization of materials and elements, containing nothing that is superfluous or accidental.

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10 Since the mid-1990s, a lot of previously suppressed material has become accessible to researchers and, in some cases, archival materials have been published. For a recent publication that includes archival materials, see the *Meierkholdovskii Sbornik*, vol. 1, ed. O. M. Feldman and Komissiia po tvorcheskomu naslediiu V. E. Meierkholda (Moscow: OGI, 2000). There are also academic departments (for example, at the Research Institute of Theory and History of the Fine Arts in Moscow) dedicated to the examination of Meierkhold’s work, along with a greater openness to dialogue and debate about his contributions.

11 Boris Groys is not alone in his belief that there is a direct connection between the avant-garde and Stalinist culture, although he does not connect the avant-garde to the agitation trials, as other writers do. See his *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). For a study that does propose connections between constructivist theatre and the agitation trials, see the work of Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

12 Most sources on constructivist theatre include reproductions and discussions of this play. For additional information, one might examine Law, “Meyerhold’s *The Magnanimous Cuckold*”; D. Sarabianov and N. Adaskina, *Popova*, trans. M. Schwartz (New York: Abrams, 1990); and Roann Barris, “Russian Constructivist Architecture as an Urban Carnival: The Creation and Reception of a Utopian Narrative,” *Utopian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1999): 42-67. Briefly, the play concerns a miller who believes his wife is cheating on him and arranges to have all the men of the village pass through her bedroom, himself included though in disguise. When she kisses him, he doesn’t know if she recognized him or was cheating. She leaves him at the end.
Although the members of the Working Group disagreed on some of the finer points, they united around the belief that form was only the means and not the goal. This point was well-taken by the critic and theatre historian Aleksandr Fevralskii, who noted two years later that this was the mark of difference between a true constructivist and someone who used constructivism as “just another style.”

The rejection of self-sufficient form, essential to the definition of the construction, does leave the status and function of the object in doubt. Indeed, debate about whether the object should actually be useful was pursued by both El Lissitsky in his editorials for the international magazine *Veshch Object Gegenstand* and Karl Ioganson, a sculptor who eventually applied his constructivist tenets to factory work. Unlike El Lissitsky, Ioganson participated in the original debates, taking the idea of the construction into an apparently nonfunctional realm. In her astute analysis of Ioganson’s contribution to these debates, art historian Maria Gough introduces the concept of “non-instrumentality.” Describing Ioganson’s early spatial constructions, she observes that although these nonrepresentational structures were nonkinetic, they look fragile and unstable. In reality, they are rigid (fig. 1). Because this rigidity derived from the quality, size, placement, and tension of the materials used, it can be asserted that these constructions existed to demonstrate a principle of dynamic balance. Yet, as Gough argues, the structures were useless in utilitarian terms—hence her term “non-instrumental.” But Ioganson’s spatial constructions create a paradox: not intended as abstract works of art, they existed as real objects in a private realm of existence, with no relationship to the human world in which objects are created to be used. The paradox, however, is that if they exist to demonstrate principles, then they are inherently functional. This vision of a “non-instrumental mode of invention” may not lead to the production of specific objects, but it does lead to principles of production.

Although Ioganson’s noninstrumental constructions were unusual, his emphasis on production principles was not. Historians have long recognized two directions in constructivism: an aesthetic or laboratory realm and a utilitarian or productivist realm, ostensibly dedicated to the creation of useful things. But if one thing can be said to unite the original theorists of constructivism and production art, it is the prioritization of process over product. This was both a rejection of the role of representation in art

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15 As Roland Nachtigaller and Hubertus Gassner observe in “3 x 1 = 1 Veshch Object Gegenstand” (trans. Michael Robinson and Catherine Schelbert), in *Veshch Object Gegenstand*, ed. Nachtigaller and Gassner (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 1994), 39, artists such as El Lissitsky could simply make useful objects, or they could “construct new forms without thinking about their immediate application.” Maria Gough analyzes Ioganson’s approach to function in *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
16 Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 75–92, 99. As Gough demonstrates, this principle became the basis for Ioganson’s belief that invention could precede knowledge of a goal or planned use.
and an assertion of a new relationship between the worker (the artist, inventor, or user) and the object. To take one example: the production theorist Boris Arvatov described production as an “enormous system of cooperation between the human and elemental forces of nature,” culminating in a new relationship between the producer and the object.\footnote{Arvatov, “Byt i kultura veshchi,” 81; and Kiaer, \textit{Imagine No Possessions}, chapter 1, “The Socialist Object.”} It is not only that process is more important, but that the key to this process is the organization of human and nonhuman materials into a “dialectical montage of actual facts.” For a proletarian audience, true art would be made by the “montagists of daily life”—namely, engineers.\footnote{Boris Arvatov, \textit{Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo. Sbornik statei.} (Moscow: Proletkul’t, 1926), quotes on page 126. On Arvatov’s theories of theatre as production, see Elena V. Sidorina, “Kontseptsiia proizvozstvennogo iskusstva i ‘Teatralnyi Oktiabr,’” \textit{Tekhnicheskaiia estetika} 21 (1979): 25; and Arvatov, “Teatr kak proizvodstvo,” in \textit{O Teatre}, ed. I. A. Aksenov (Tver: Tverskoe Izdatelstvo, 1922), 113–22 (also included in \textit{Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo}). See also Boris Arvatov, “Ot Rezhissury teatra k montazhu byta,” \textit{Ermitazh} 11 (1922): 3.} It is important to recognize that Arvatov’s notion of art is the transformation of daily life by this new system; it is also worth noting that in an article titled “Theatre as Production,” he called for the elimination of subject matter, decorations, and the stage, along with a complete transformation of theatrical devices. The director, in this case, would not merely be a montagist, but an active transformer of daily life.

Figure 1. Reconstruction in the Tretiakov Gallery of Contemporary Art of the 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition. Karl loganson’s spatial constructions can be seen on stands in the foreground. (Photo: Author, September 2010.)
Magnanimous Cuckold, as we will see, is in many respects a liminal work: abandoning representation, but not text, stage, or the use of an object made specifically for the production. The stage construction is also liminal in its refusal to commit to either instrumentality or noninstrumentality. A nineteenth-century Belgian play about a cuckolded miller by Fernand Crommelynck, this production of Magnanimous Cuckold achieved renown for two reasons: the biomechanical approach to acting, and the replacement of scenery with a single construction. Originating in Popova’s sketches of a barn-like setting, the final form, while containing elements of a house and mill, has little resemblance to either. Crommelynck’s text is very specific about the scenic locale—Meierkhold and Popova were not. They created something that might provide a sense of place, but was more useful in its role as something to be acted on and with (fig. 2). Indeed, the multitude of visual sources that have been identified for the stage set, from northern windmills and popular pantomime theatre productions to mass celebrations and fairground gulianie (ice-covered ramps for strolling and sledding), suggests that the set is deliberately multivalent in its references and has a goal other than that of representing a scenic locale. As one writer of the period observed, the design of this play not only avoided aesthetic illusion, but anything that might once have been included in a painted backdrop had here become part of an “object-montage,” with everything mounted on the stage floor for the use of the actor.

The break with a traditional stage becomes even clearer when we, as did Golub, observe that one of the wheels in the set spelled out the consonants of the playwright’s name—a peculiar gesture for two reasons. Not only is it unusual to see the playwright’s name included in the staging, but the letters were not Cyrillic. Oddly, with the exception of the letter “L,” the consonants all have recognizable Cyrillic counterparts (although they do not identify the same letter and the “R” would be backwards in Russian). It is also of interest to observe that the use of letters in a collage or montage typically calls attention to the flatness of the artwork’s surface. Here, the letters seem to assert the opposite: that this structure is neither flat nor immobile. The play is, after all, about a masquerade. Perhaps the letters were invited to join; or perhaps they exist to spell out the nature of a useless but functional object. Thus whereas we might accept that the wheels’ function in the production is to accentuate text and action (Meierkhold did prepare a “score of the wheels” with indications telling partially obscured stagehands

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21 On Popova’s role, although there have been suggestions that Popova reused a design by the Stenberg brothers (and the suggestion is made by the Stenbergs themselves), without existing sketches from the Stenbergs it is difficult to substantiate the degree to which their claim is supportable. See Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, Vladimir i Georgii Stenbergi (Moscow: Russkii Avangard, 2008), 135–36. In contrast, several sketches by Popova do exist documenting the transformations in her work. And it is also evident from the way Meierkhold worked that he himself would have had input into the design at some point, regardless of who the designer was. He increasingly listed himself as collaborator on all parts of the production, including the text.


23 Despite my familiarity with the model of the set, it was not until I read Robert Leach’s Vsevolod Meyerhold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) that I realized the letters should have been Cyrillic, although a Russian colleague of mine, Vadim Shcherbakov, told me that many Russians would have been familiar with the Latin letters. Leach’s point is that the movement of the wheel creates a color pattern that reinforces the theme that meaning comes through movement (106). What Leach does not point out is that Russian designers often used Latin letters as decorative elements, since they would discourage reading but generate visual patterns, and that literate Russians attending the theatre may have been able to read Latin letters.
behind the set when to set the wheels in motion) or else we might accept Golub’s densely argued thesis that the vowelless decoration on the wheel functioned as a subversive revolutionary message about self-determination, we might also or instead identify a noninstrumental goal in which the structure and wheels contribute to the demonization of function as it is traditionally understood.

In theatrical terms, the utilitarian goal of the set, in the eyes of both producer and designer, was the facilitation of the actors’ movements and the play’s actions. From the kaleidoscopic visual effect created by the movement of the wheels to the occasional replication of the set in the actors’ movements, the set played a role quite similar to that played by clowns in a circus performance. Everything emphasized motion, whether physical, textual, or comic, and everything participated. As one critic wrote: “Constructivism, the machine-like quality of the decorations, or more truly, the structure, in which there were absolutely no architectural hints at the stenciled pavilion, an almost complete absence of chairs, armchairs, and in general, places to sit on the stage, forced the actors to be in motion all the time, not giving them a chance to behave like dead statues.” He went on to note that the set bombarded the viewers’ eyes with the effects

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24 In addition to notations about the wheels in directing copies of the script, there was a special set of materials titled “Partitura koles” (a score of the wheels), preserved in Meierkhold’s fond in the Bakhruhin Theatre Museum (180171, delo 174).

25 Uriel, “Velikodushnyi Rogonosets’ v Masterskikh GVTMa,” Izvestia VTsIK 93 (28 April 1922); Meierkhold kept numerous reviews, both positive and negative, in his personal collection (fond 998, delo 1-3351 [RGALI]).
of scenic tricks and acrobatics. What he did not say was that none of this was either random or mechanized, nor was it magic. Dressed in black, the stagehands could be seen; unlike the cuckolded miller (the seeming mastermind of the plot’s masquerade), the viewer was in on the joke.

The critic Nikolai Tarabukin surprisingly lambasted the set for its painterly qualities and failure to reformulate the space of the theatre. Part of his criticism concerned the colors used in the wheels and repeated in the actors’ uniforms (prozodezhda), and part concerned the character of the set as a central structure, which was always located in the same place, was not moving (except for the wheels) and not changing the surrounding space. With the advantage of looking at other photographs, we might question his conclusion. Whereas some views of the performance are familiar, an album of more than twenty photographs taken by a little-known photographer, N. V. Iarovov, contains views that are less frequently seen. Theatre historian and archivist Natalia Zaitseva, one of the few people to have written about these photographs rather than the play, has suggested that some of Iarovov’s photos deliberately reinforced an emphasis on the two-dimensional composition that Meierkhold and Popova created. Because the lighting in the photos brings equal attention to the actors, the brick wall, and the wood construction, the actors do not dominate the photographs. In several cases, they have more in common with an architectonic painting, such as Popova herself made, than with a typical performance photo from a play. In figure 2, for example, not only do the bodies of the actors replicate the angled corner of the structure, but the three wheels and the windmill-like ladders are present only as shadows on the brick wall. The deepest recess of the stage provides a black background that does not create depth as much as a patterned contrast with the varying lighter shades of the actors’ clothing, their faces, the stage floor, and the lit part of the wall. With little effort, one focuses less on the bend in the U-shaped wall and more on the overall composition of lines, forms, and varying tonalities similar to Popova’s painting, a spatial-force construction from 1921 (fig. 3). Indeed, the flatness conveyed by Popova’s costume designs, which show little of the complexity of her textile designs for other clothing and that are not drawn with an eye to conveying movement or volume (as though we are looking at a pattern rather than a figure), suggests a resemblance between the costumes themselves and her architectonic paintings.

Popova, in fact, criticized herself for being unable to escape her painterly background when she began working on this production. Unfortunately, her self-criticism is more familiar than a second comment. When she said that she conceptualized her structure in two dimensions (like a painted backdrop?), Boris Kushner, her questioner, responded by saying that like a painting on glass, one can see through this structure, creating a type of double vision. The comment is particularly meaningful in light

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27 Natalia Zaitseva, “Fotosiemka spektaklei B. E. Meierkholde v nachale 1920-x godov,” in Meierkholdovskii Sbornik, 1:483–516. Zaitseva also showed me the digital copies of these images in the Bakhrushin Theatre Museum archives and confirmed that the original album is located in RGALI. A microfilm of the album is in the Meierkhold fond (998-1-144 38), and the originals can be seen if requested.

28 In a passage preserved in the archives of INKhUK and quoted in S. O. Khan-Magomedov’s Konstruktizm—konsepteziia formobrazovanniia (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 2003), 300, Popova admits to conceptualizing her design, including the actors, in two dimensions. See also delos 56 and 57 in Popova fond 148 in the Tretiakov Gallery archival collection.
Figure 3. Liubov Popova, *Spatial force construction*, oil on plywood, 1921. (Courtesy of the Tretiakov Gallery, inventory J-1314. Copyright and artwork owned by gallery.)

Figure 4. Photograph from the 1923 performance of *Magnanimous Cuckold* (also in N. V. Iarovov’s album of photographs). (Reproduction courtesy of RGALI, fond 998-1-144 38, no. 30.)
of the fact that in other photos, especially those with only a few actors, who in some cases appear to be either erupting through the construction or entwined with it, the effect has less in common with a painting than an abstract photomontage. Compare, for example, figure 4 with Gustav Klutsis’s 1924 illustration for an unpublished version of a book by Yuri Libedinsky called The Week (Nedelia) (fig. 5). Here, we see that some of the photographic elements are almost indistinguishable from the ladder’s steps; some visibly emerge from the structure while maintaining a connection to it; and still others exist in another spatial realm that has no apparent connection to the ladder. It is often said that a photo freezes a moment in time; in reality, the stage image would have dissipated as soon as the actors moved. Obviously, more is at stake here than the creation of a painterly composition, and just as obvious, the structure does not function as a building.

Although we can only guess at Iarovov’s artistic intentions, we can use his photos to surmise Popova’s and Meierkhold’s. The album as a whole challenges a tendency to discuss the biomechanical movements of the actors and the wooden construction as separate, albeit complementary and equal, components of the production. The reality may well be otherwise: that Meierkhold and Popova shared a vision of the unity of figure and structure in which both functioned as dynamic, changing elements of the production and neither could exist without the other. If the entire structure itself did not replace the stage, conceptually and visually its role and relationship to the actors did change during the performance. Without looking anthropomorphic, the structure became an actor. And if we then recognize that the corpus of interactions between the structure and actors, and not the structure itself, was the true construction, we might also recognize that Popova changed both the object and the space of the theatre. Meierkhold knew this; most of the critics and viewers did not.

It is fair to say that this was a production of unexpected contradictions: contradictions between the old space of the theatre and the new space created by the stationary structure; the openness of the structure, which could be penetrated by the human actors even as it suggested closed space; and the chain of action from “hidden” stagehands to a presumably inert machine, which then provoked movements in actors, who struck some viewers as mechanical puppets. These contradictions were integral to the performance and their presence superseded any familiar use for a stage set, suggesting that this was the beginning of a noninstrumental mode of performance, one where truth to the text may indeed be less significant than the creation of a conceptual framework. This is hardly surprising, in light of two statements made by Meierkhold that with this production, he sought to lay the foundations for a new theatrical worldview. In retrospect, the production was not perfect, and its biggest liability—the single stage set—would soon be abandoned. Nonetheless, as a moving yet immobile structure, one that did transform the acting space and create a type of double vision as it changed its relationship to the actors (and vice versa), it introduced a new way of thinking about the stage—the concept of konstruktsiia—and the relationship of the viewer to the production. Although still limited to a visual response, we might describe this as one of perceptual perpetual motion.

29 “Pismo v redaktsiiu” (1922) in the Fevralskii collection of reviews (fond 2437-2-125 [RGALI]); “Kak byl postavlenny Velikodushnyi Rogonosets?” (1926), in Meierkhold, Stati, pisma, rechi, besedy, 2:47.
Thus although theatrical constructivism embraced the elimination of naturalism and the decorative set, in itself this change would not have been novel or significant. However, combined with a new understanding of the object/worker relationship and influenced by theories of production and the montage technique, it was. *Magnanimous Cuckold* was an early step in the constructivist reconceptualization of the theatrical object and its function. The next, more definitive step came with both Meierkhold’s second and third constructivist productions, *The Death of Tarelkin* (1923) and *Earth in Turmoil* (1923–24). *Tarelkin* was a well-known nineteenth-century Russian classic, while *Earth* was a revision by Sergei Tretiakov of a French play (*Night*, by Marcel Martinet), updated to relate to the conditions of the recent Civil War.30 *Tarelkin’s* importance relates to Stepanova’s decision to break with the single set and replace it with numerous movable constructions, while *Earth* famously used real military equipment as part of the production. Both productions contributed to the move from *Cuckold’s* initial and somewhat tentative use of montage principles toward the association of the concept of “faktura” with a more cinematic understanding of the photomontage. The next section

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lays out the increasing influence of the montage, while noting that Meierkhold’s use of this technique takes it in a direction that is nearly diametric to the reasons for its growing popularity. *Faktura* in particular underlies this contradiction.

**Faktura and the Dismantling of the Construction**

Like *konstruktsiia*, *faktura* was not easily defined by the constructivists. The primary arguments concerning *faktura* centered on the degree to which it was seen as a property of the materials themselves (a relatively traditional understanding), or as a function of how the materials were used. The key difference between these positions lay in the degree of importance given to the efficacious use of the materials, or to the user of those materials. This latter emphasis returns us to the production belief that the worker/object relationship is more important than the form of the object, and it should also remind us that the worker in this equation can either be the person who makes the object or the person who eventually uses it. In this respect, *faktura* is a more political concept than *konstruktsiia*. In either case, however, *faktura* in a theatrical production is complicated by the recognition that not only does theatre include living and nonliving materials, but it is also a collection of different art forms, each of which may have its own *faktura*.

As I have already indicated, *The Death of Tarelkin* contained competing ideas of function. It also had competing ideas of *faktura*: on one hand, we find that the materials were used truthfully and efficaciously, if unexpectedly; and on the other, spectators were deprived of visual clues for interpretation. In this case, *faktura* was either an impediment to the play’s reception or the facilitator of a new role for the viewer.

Initiating a greater departure from conventional theatre than did *Magnanimous Cuckold*, Stepanova dismantled the set and created object-furniture (fig. 6). At the time, Stepanova explained her decision by noting that a unified framework was an inefficient solution to the varied needs of the play. In a conversation with the theorist Aleksei Gan, she described her task as one of creating the individual and necessary elements of the set, uniting them through color (white for the furniture; gray with dark blue for the costumes) and material (wood planks), eliminating all distracting, formal variations, and forging a connection between the human and nonhuman materials of the stage. The connection was made through the rudimentary actors’ uniforms, which themselves were dominated by angular areas of dark color that matched the predominant direction of movement of each character type, while simultaneously appearing to be shadows cast by the furniture. Stepanova went on to note that she had wanted to create objects that would be multifunctional—serving as genuine tables and chairs, but capable of interacting with the performers. In her design of these objects, the skeletal structure, rather than ornament or decoration, defined their look.

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31 Maria Gough provides one of the rare analyses of this term as used by the constructivists in her article “*Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde*,” *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 36 (1999): 32–59, esp. 53–57. The first definition was associated with Rodchenko’s position; the second with Gan’s (see his *Konstruktivizm*, 62).

32 It was certainly recognized by critics and historians of the theatre at that time as having done so. Tarabukin, again, is one of those who identified it as a “decisive break” in his article written for the ten-year anniversary of Meierkhold’s theatre in 1931 (“*Zritel’noe oformleniye v GOSTIME k dekadiotletnemu jubileyu GOSTIMA*,” in *O. V. E. Meierkholde*, 67–68).


34 At much the same time, Stepanova wrote about her belief that constructivist creations should be multifunctional; see Stepanova [Varst], “*O Rabotakh konstruktivistskoi molodezhi*,” *LEF* 3 (1923): 53–56. See also Aleksandr Lavrentiev, *Varya Stepanova*, ed. John E. Bowlt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 63.
We learn several things from photos and commentaries about this production. The objects, as others have observed, did indeed look like furniture and crates made of strips of wood. Each of these deceptively ordinary, bare-bone objects concealed a trick: seats that collapsed, legs that splayed outwards from pressure, backs that fell down, and a stool that fired a shot. The tricks were such that some of the actors eventually refused to perform with the set. Sergei Eisenstein, working as Meierkhold’s assistant on this production, called the staging an unbelievable “clownade”—a positive assessment on his part, as he went on to note that the trickery asserted the priority of the actors’ skills.35

Despite deliberate references to the circus and carnival, along with the use of collapsible and portable props, these qualities belie the true accomplishment of this set. When Stepanova said that the function of each piece determined its form, she did not have in mind ordinary function. Did she consider function to be the degree to which each piece served the plot? Alexander Lavrentiev has proposed a psychological function, and for a play in which identity (dead or alive) is unstable, unpredictable func-

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tion may be a true psychological commentary. The problem with this interpretation is that, first, it attributes an expressionist quality to a movement that is not about the expression of feelings; and, second, it fails to acknowledge that the tricks were funny and chaotic, and that the production’s unpredictability was greater than the tricks themselves. This montage, in which the furniture was as dynamic as the actors, could never be frozen. Although it would be several years before Meierkhold explicitly centralized the impossibility of replication from one performance to the next, and with it, the true creation of a mobile or unfixed viewpoint, here, more than in *Magnanimous Cuckold*, he anticipates that outcome. Nonetheless, it still occurs primarily in the visual realm. Also in the realm of the visual, Meierkhold here begins to develop a cinematic approach to lighting; he introduced the use of projectors to illuminate the stage. At first, light came from the wings, then from the depths of the auditorium, and then from the center of the first upper tier. In his first use of this technique, the lights restricted acting to certain parts of the stage, leaving other parts in darkness. With the prevailing darkness of the theatre, without a set that indicated a specific place, and with the actors wearing striped, loose-fitting costumes, viewers were deprived of any familiar schema for responding to a play that was, in fact, very familiar. Ultimately, as one reviewer noted, the production conveyed all the dissonances of a carnival and of life in the 1920s. In true grotesque fashion, the viewer was left on an unfamiliar plane without guidelines for evaluating right and wrong. Meierkhold had begun to move the viewer’s uncertainty from the realm of the visual to the conceptual.

Unfortunately, what might be described as an unfixed reception or viewing point coincided with the growth of interest in factography. Benjamin Buchloh’s seminal article on the transition from faktura to factography focuses on the montage as the essential step in changing from a paradigm that tolerates variability in audience responses to one that depends on “simultaneous collective reception.” In his formulation, the photomontage initiates the transition to factography by replacing the image as a representational sign of something else with the image as icon—an act of self-presentation. What Buchloh does not say is that the photomontage, predicated on juxtapositions of images that may not typically coexist in real life, may not be entirely believable and as a

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36 Lavrentiev’s satisfying discussion of the play in his *Varvara Stepanova* indicates an interest in endowing the furniture with psychological qualities, such that a collapsing table might indicate Tarelkin’s loss of control over his life. Briefly, the 1869 play by Sukhovo-Kobylin concerned an official who fakes his own death in order to avoid prosecution for larceny, assumes the identity of a neighbor who has died and who turns out to have been as dishonest as Tarelkin himself. The ambiguous ending suggests that one masquerade has been solved, but that Tarelkin never actually existed. See Thomas Seifrid, “‘Illusion’ and Its Workings in Modern Russian Culture,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (2001): 209, for a discussion of the role of deception in this play.


38 Samuel Margolin compared the performance to a balagan (carnival) and said it conveyed “all the dissonances of our time” in his review in *Teatr i Muzykai*, which I read in the Fevralskii fond collection of reviews of Meierkhold’s performances (fond 2437-2-127 [RGALI]).

39 One of the first articles to address the factographic impulse is the one by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* 30 (1984): 82–119. Elizabeth A. Papazian, in *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), describes something she calls the “documentary moment,” which is not identical to Buchloh’s discussion (he gives greater emphasis to the “fact,” or content), but in many respects they are discussing a similar development.

40 Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” 94–95.
result, interpretation may not be uniform. Meierkhold, as he moves toward an increasingly montage-like structure, would appear to be moving closer to an often-stated goal of his, especially in his discussions of the grotesque: namely, not telling the audience what to think. The problem, however, is that this is happening at the same time that theatrical producers are being asked to lead audiences in pre- and post-performance discussions to ensure that they understand the correct meaning and in order to avert the possibility of a "crisis of reception." One might assume that Meierkhold, in contrast, was trying to foment a crisis. Perhaps this is why his next constructivist production seems to move in the opposite direction: creating a production that is more cinematic, more contemporary, and less ambiguous in meaning and reception. Earth in Turmoil, the third production in Meierkhold's triumvirate of constructivist productions, most completely unites the principles of konstruktssiia, faktura, and tektonika. It also manifests a clear response to the increasing call for fact (factography) and the elimination of variability in audience responses.

**Tektonika and the Crisis of the Object**

Tektonika, in its connection to social conditions in the real world, was an essential part of the constructivist transition. This term has always been the most difficult to define, in large part because Gan’s definition relied on a geological explanation. If we examine his definition, however, we may find that the metaphor does make sense:

"Tektonika or a tektonic style is one which is organically extracted from and formed by communism, on the one hand, and the goal-oriented use of industrial materials, on the other. The word 'tektonik' is taken from geology where it refers to violent eruptions from the heart of the earth. ... Tektonika, as a constructivist discipline, must lead to the practice and synthesis of a new subject in a new form. The Constructivist must be educated as a Marxist, moving away from art to the real use of industrial materials. Tektonika is the guiding star, the bridge from the experimental to practical activity. Constructivism without tektonika is like painting without color."  

In the excerpted passage, the word "vyplavliaetsia," which I translated as "extracted from," can also be translated as "smelted." Gan used a word that generally refers to a process in which a purer metal is extracted from another substance through a process of melting. The emphasis on process, as we have already seen, was shared by the constructivists. Gan’s definition more specifically relates process, rather than overt content, to politics. Yet the play that most clearly manifested the way in which the inclusion of tektonic principles and a factographic context engaged the viewer was the only one in this group to have been written specifically for production at this time and to refer to recent conditions in Soviet life.

Earth in Turmoil, one of Meierkhold’s most successful productions, especially when performed outdoors on tour, was a stronger manifestation of his interest in thinking cinematically about theatre. Two elements in particular contributed to this: lighting and projected slogans. In Tarelkin, he had used the lights to focus on a specific person, leaving other parts of the stage in darkness. Here, however, he used the lights more actively to emphasize sequences of actions in a mise-en-scène, creating a stage that...

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41 M. Veprinskii, *Teatr v derevne* (Moscow: Iz-vo Krasnaia Nov', 1923). The phrase “crisis of reception” is a recurring theme in Buchloh’s argument.
42 Gan, *Konstruktivism*, 61 (emphasis added).
functioned as and resembled a movie. The other cinematic element of the production, specifically contributing to an agitation effect, was the projection of slogans on a screen. In contrast to the outdoor performances, the arrangement of the stage indoors placed the screen above the actors and in the center (fig. 7). Because the slogans were projected as if they were a filmed commentary, because they were not phrases from the play but referred to real life, and, last, because Popova used a graphic style that resembled that of her colleague Rodchenko in his film titles for Dziga Vertov’s documentary films, the slogans further enhanced the impression that Earth in Turmoil was, indeed, a documentary movie—an impression only strengthened by the objects used in the production.

Describing her role as that of “selecting and uniting the material elements of the production” in such a way as to achieve the greatest agitational effect possible, Popova explained that all the objects were “taken from [the conditions of] surrounding reality and introduced to the stage in their natural form, insofar as the arrangement of the theater permits.”

This was a play in which no objects were made specifically for the production, with one exception. Unable to bring a real crane onto the stage for indoor performances (because it would not have supported the weight), the only object built especially for the performance was a wooden crane-like construction. In other respects, all of the objects were genuine: real military equipment, a tractor, trucks, a field kitchen, and other things that would have been used during war. We can either call this a return to naturalism or, alternatively, recognize it as an exemplar of Arvatov’s theatre of production; if the latter, then faktura has truly become a “dialectical montage of actual facts.” Noted by reviewers at the time as marking a new development in theatre, the elimination of objects made specifically for the play and the incorporation of things that were not only real, but generally had no previous place in theatre (although they had been used in film), was widely regarded as a rupture with traditional theatre—in particular, the naturalism of the Moscow Art Theatre.

As one reviewer wrote, this was not an attempt to create a photographic representation of an era and its people, but a profound attempt to change the theatre from a place of

44 Numerous reviews published in 1923 in newspapers like Pravda and Zrelishcha attest to the success of this production. Most can be found in the Meierkhold Theatre fond (963-1-335). Those of particular relevance to my discussion include I. A. Aksenov, “K postanovke Nochi M. Martine” (Zrelishcha 21 [1923]: 8–9); Nikolai M. Tarabukin’s article on ten years at the theatre of Meierkhold, “Zritelnoe oformleniu v GOSTIme k deciatiletнемu jubileiu GOSTIma” (1931), in O. V. E. Meierkholde, 63–75; and A. V. Fevralskii’s own work commemorating the ten years, Desiat Let. Fevralskii also collected reviews of the performances at Meierkhold’s theatre; they are preserved in his personal fond (2437-2-125/130 [RGALI]).
45 The play’s subject, in both the French and Russian versions, is war, although Tretiakov’s version emphasized a celebration of the war against imperialism and praise for a new militaristic organization of humanity. Divided into eight episodes and written with a percussive rhythmic style, it begins with a group of people standing and questioning a sudden pause in the sounds of warfare. Soon a soldier arrives to tell them that the war has ended and a new life will now begin. The remainder of the play concerns the identification of leaders, enemies, and traitors, struggles between the people and the government, and calls to build a new world of labor and truth, ending with a paean to the world of the future as one that will belong to the youth. My summary is based on a typescript in the Meierkhold fond in the Bakhrushin Theatre Museum (180171/164).
entertainment into a social-political organ of agitation.⁴⁶ Along the same lines though speaking of an outdoor performance in Baku, another reviewer noted that in contrast to a naturalistic production that presents the appearance of truth, this production used actual objects and things from the real world as they were meant to be used. The actors were connected to the objects rather than to individualized, psychological problems, with the result being a play that responded to the spectators’ need for a reflection of the interests of their own era.⁴⁷ Slightly amplifying the comments of that reviewer, we might note that in this play, tektonika, the eruptive connection to a generative problem, was more than the contemporary subject matter of the play. The text did emphasize

⁴⁶ A. Verkhoturskii, clipped review from Proletarskaia Pravda, June 1923, kept in the Meierkhold fond (998-1-3355 [RGALI]).
⁴⁷ A. Gurvich, writing in the Bakunskii rabochii, 19 April 1927. Filed in the Glaviskusstvo fond, a folder of copies of articles about the Meierkhold Theatre from 1920 to 1928 (645-1-322 [RGALI]).
subject matter of direct relevance to the viewers’ lives, but more critical to the quality of eruption is the way in which this production abandoned representation, treating text, people, and objects as “facts” in the construction, and treating the construction as a dynamic, audiovisual montage—a new subject in a new form.

Just as Meierkhold used movement and emotion to create “masks” for individual roles, Tretiakov in this play used timbre, articulation, and lexicon to create “speech-masks,” as both he and Meierkhold called them. Based on Popova’s cited comments, she seems to have thought in terms of “object-masks.” Thus although everything seen and heard onstage originated in reality, nothing was real, not even the actors. They, in fact, were the most “unreal” element of this montage, figuratively turned upside down as they were more literally in Popova’s photomontaged maquette for the stage. Yet judging from audience responses and extrapolating from the similarity to cinema, it is quite likely that the actors were not perceived as actors, but as real soldiers. Taken together, and in contrast to more usual interpretations of this production, we might argue that because Popova and Meierkhold used real and not constructed objects, this was not an aestheticization of the real, but the concretization and even the reification of the aesthetic. But was it the end of theatrical constructivism? Only, I would argue, if we believe that constructivist theatre was a laboratory for the production of real objects. In contrast, if we recognize the new theatrical object as a montage of actualities, using everything within its means to arouse an action on the part of the spectator, then it takes its place in the realm of constructivist theatre. Nonetheless, as successful as it was with audiences, it did not fully succeed as constructivism. Although it did not clearly reject the mobile viewpoint, neither did it reject the factographic impulse. These were incompatible goals for Meierkhold, as well as for the constructivists. Forging a new constructivist theatrical object for the theatre, it also presaged the difficulty of trying to reconcile factography with an engaged spectator who could control her own response.

Conclusion: The Complete Reformation of the Object

The progression of the constructivist theatrical object thus far has been from a single construction that often subliminally, and occasionally actively, joined the actors in the performance; to a disarticulated set of constructions that assumed a more active and even disruptive or competitive role, often antagonizing the actors; to a role in which the objects, reduced to their true, factographic identities, seemingly returned to a supporting role in the production. That they did so, however, was the condition that enabled the actors, speech, and objects together to begin to be seen as a new unity—a montage of animate and inanimate objects. I Want a Child would have taken this montage to the next level, one that was simultaneously more cinematic and more unpredictable, had it been produced. Planned for an elliptical theatre (initially designed by El Lissitsky

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48 Tretiakov describes his use of “rules” and auditory masks in his work on Martinet’s play; see his essays “Zemlia dybom” and “Chevo ia trebuiu ot moei p’esy.”

49 Elena Rakitina takes issue with the belief that this production was actually the end or a rejection of constructivism, although she does believe that reality takes precedence over theatricality. See her “Novye printsipy stsenicheskogo oformleniia v sovetskoi teatralnoi dekoratsii 20-X Godov” (Ph.D. diss., Moscow State University, 1970), chap. 3.

50 In addition to Leach’s analysis of a production in the 1990s in his introduction to Sergei Mikhailovich Tretiakov, Kiaer has addressed the unrealized production plans in chapter 6 of Imagine No Possessions and in her essay “Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tret’jakov’s I Want a Child!” in Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia, ed. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman
though never built), with seating surrounding the acting area and multiple levels for acting, no inanimate objects would have been necessary. The confusion between actor and object would have been complete as the actors became “objectified orators”: invited nonactors set in the audience to incite debate among the real members of the audience (whoever they were). Meierkhold had never treated the text as inviolable; here, it would have been remade during each performance. In fact, the spectacle would have been impossible to grasp on the basis of a single performance, as the production was deliberately planned to differ in each repetition. Whereas the previously discussed productions generally succeeded in creating variable audience responses, this production, as far as can be imagined, would have created a truly divided audience. Indeed, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, the audience would have been the producer. The existence of a mobile viewpoint would have exceeded a single performance, as each repetition would have had its own divided and producing audience. This theatrical object would have encompassed the entire series of performances, unequivocally demanding a new role for the user. But here we have another paradox: this nonmaterial and indefinable object without boundaries had an instrumental function—that of provocation. We can only speculate as to the outcome.

Meierkhold’s plans never came to fruition. Lars Kleberg has suggested that the creation of a divided audience would have been a rejection of constructivism. In contrast, it is my position that replacing the unitary theatrical object with a provocative and “dialectical montage of actual facts,” some of which were produced by the audience, would have been the resurgence and apotheosis of theatrical constructivism.

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 183–216. Naiman also discusses it in his Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Soviet Ideology (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 109–15. I am at work on a manuscript that offers a different interpretation and explanation for the failure to produce it, tentatively titled “Apotheosis or Betrayal: The Crooked Mirror of Theatrical Constructivism.” This play is the focus of my argument against the theory that finds the direct line from the avant-garde to socialist realism in Meierkhold’s work.

51 Meierkhold had used “orators” (his term) in other productions, but they were more clearly identified as not being true audience members.
