Constructivism: An Outline of the Basic Ideas

Tatlin, in his bottle relief of 1913, already laid some of the groundwork for the later constructivist movement.

- explores the physical nature of a bottle: the materials and form that make a bottle
- left side--a tin plate with wire mesh--meant to convey the ambiguity of volume in glass--it contains space, occupies space, and is invisible
- center--rolled sheet of polished metal, the form chosen emphasizes the reflective properties of the material
- right: a piece of wallpaper, seems to be the most explicit reference to the influence of Picasso's collages
- Tatlin's interest in exploiting the textural qualities of materials is the basis for the constructivist concept of faktura (in conversational terms, the idea of letting the materials “speak”)

Tatlin's next step is to engage real space. Although Boccioni had said “let us break open the sculpture and enclose the environment in it,” he had still created an ideal space, a conceptual space, in his Development of a Bottle in Space. Tatlin does precisely the opposite His corner reliefs are organized explicitly in relationship to the two wall places that support the work. They therefore insist on their continuity with the real world.

1918: Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda:
~ commemorate outstanding revolutionaries, Russian and foreign, in different fields of endeavor, by erecting statues and associating festivals with the unveilings
~ most were conservative artistically
~ Tatlin's is the first to defy this with his Monument to the Third International
He wants to express "the dynamism of a socialist and revolutionary society." He wrote that all the elements of this monument should be "modern technical apparatuses promoting agitation and propaganda."
His sources: Eiffel tower? Boccioni's development of a bottle in space? Or something closer to home?

Rodchenko’s spatial constructions: demonstrate an early interest in the economy of materials and function; also demonstrate the evolution of his painted, two-dimensional “constructions” into three-dimensional space
**Popova**: conceives of the painting as the organization of the elements of a painting (color and form); in her “architectonic” paintings she tends to use forms which are not complete or finite, so that they suggest the possibility of movement toward completion; this tendency implies an early interest in movement in space, an interest which can be seen in almost all the pre-constructivist work— that of Tatlin, Rodchenko, Popova and El Lissistskii.

Movement into space suggests that the real concern is not with the creation of an artistic object for contemplation but with engagement in real life. Movement also functions as a metaphor for change; when the Russian constructivists call for “art into life,” they are calling for a utopian world in which art creates the new utopia.

Thus, by 1917, when the Russian revolution took place, the basic ideas for a revolution in art were already in place. The key ideas of constructivism:

1) an interest in the use of real materials. This had characterized Tatlin’s reliefs in a concrete sense. In the work of Popova, Rodchenko, and El Lissitskii, this interest was present in a more abstract or conceptual sense.

2) an approach to design which lets the material determine the final form of the work;

3) an interest in the production of work, in the process of making it, of bringing together raw materials in order to create something real which exists on its own terms (rather than as a representation of some reality which exists outside of the art work). This interest in process is always more important than the end product, and is another relationship to the role of movement in constructivism.

4) a new understanding of the logic of space (not unique to the Russians, an interest in 4th dimensional geometry is very characteristic at this time)

5) a new understanding of the role of the spectator of the art work as someone who engages with it mentally, physically, and ideologically: the “engaged spectator” is one of the key and unique contributions of constructivism. Again, this is not unique to Russian art but the Russian notion of the object as a “comrade” to the person who uses it is very unique.

Why this emphasis on movement?

The constructivist view of art considerably exceeded a goal of planning and creating utilitarian artistic products. This may have been an outcome, but more important was the way in which the artwork would function as an incentive or stimulus
to change: constructivism thought of the artwork as a dynamo. As such, art would energize the person, intensify the individual's experience of reality and emotions, and ultimately induce a desire for change. This is the basis for the idea of the spectator as an engaged spectator.

Constructivism intended to produce the “new daily life” before the new life had come into existence. As one constructivist said at that time: "Constructivism is not, as one might believe, an artistic trend but an ideology born in proletarian Russia during the existence of the Revolution....The aim of constructivism is to organize communist existence by shaping constructive Man." This new human was to be achieved through the use of new methods of thinking, new inventions, and new technology.
Study Questions

Try to summarize the excerpts from Gan’s manifesto on Constructivism in a short sentence.

Explain the meaning of konstruktsia, faktura, and tektonika.

What does the concept of “tensegrity” mean? How does it apply to constructivist work?

In addition to the constructivist triad (in question 2), other principles characterize constructivism. They are not clearly aesthetic principles since they don’t have to do with establishing standards of beauty. What are some of these principles and how do they apply?

See the images in the Artstor image group, The Russian Avant-garde, for some ideas.