Staging Revolution: The Constructivist Debate about Composition

Introduction
Among the relatively few areas of agreement after the 1917 Russian Revolution, two are particularly noteworthy. The first is the widespread perception that the urban environment was chaotic. Whereas few people agreed as to the source of this chaos (choosing to blame it on the capitalists, the architects, or the intelligentsia), almost everyone believed that urban life after the revolution did not justify the sacrifices and traumas imposed by three years of civil war. The second area of agreement concerned the role of the theater: despite continued and almost irreconcilable differences about what the future should look like, there was almost complete agreement that art and theater could be “weapons” or tools in the revolution. Theater, in particular, would lead the way: from Lenin’s project for monumental propaganda (1918) to the Russian futurists’ declaration that the “streets should be a holiday of art for the people,” there was widespread agreement that art should be taken to the streets, that it was capable of communicating messages in a voice which would be understood, and that theatricality was the key to the unification of the arts.

Ironically, one of the reasons why constructivism has been so difficult to study is the fact that it was long understood as a form of art which was against the creation of art. But one of the core values of constructivism was not the rejection of art but the belief that the only type of art which has meaning is one which challenges boundaries and definitions, and that part of this challenge concerns the relationship between the audience and the art work, whether we talk about theater, cinema, photography, or objects. This may not sound that radical to us today but in Russia in the 1920s, it was tantamount to revolution. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the same revolution that the government was seeking because it put entirely too much power in the work of art and in the audience. An engaged or activated spectator may be someone who challenges the status quo.

Constructivism was therefore an avant-garde movement of the 1920s in the truest meaning of avant-garde. Although we can identify relevant developments in the 1910s, the movement did not officially exist until 1921 when it defined itself at a series of debates. These debates attempted to determine the difference between a composition and a construction. Because the constructivists left extensive minutes of these meetings, we can reconstruct the course of their thinking, recognizing that to the extent that a constructivist ideology and movement exists, it exists because of these debates.¹
Composition versus Construction
To preview what happens, the members of the Working Group of Constructivists ultimately rejected the composition because of its finite quality and its harmony. The construction, in contrast, was defined as activity directed toward the creation of something new. In this sense of choosing the activity over the finite product, we might say that the constructivists replaced the image with the “scaffolding” of an image or the delineation of parameters and the creation of a condition (or conditions) of uncertainty and possibility. Certainly this was what the filmmaker Dziga Vertov meant by his belief that the camera-eye and the human eye were not identical and that the camera-eye, without filming fantasy or fiction, could nonetheless cause the viewer to see things in a new way. And when it came to the role of theater, this meant not only the rejection of a finite image; it was also the rejection of the dominant role of the text (the play, in other words). But the debate is worth examining in more detail.

The standard definition to emerge from an examination of this debate is that a construction is the goal-oriented organization of materials and elements, containing nothing that is superfluous or accidental. This definition stresses the importance of two concepts, organization and goal, although their relative weight varied from one member’s definition to another, with Aleksandr Rodchenko, for example, basically equating the construction with the organization of materials to achieve a goal. In contrast, the sculptor Aleksei Babichev focused on the efficacious and organic unity of materials and forms, saying more about the materials than a final goal. Despite some lack of consensus, the members of the Working Group of Constructivists coalesced around a rejection of self-sufficient form: form, they agreed, was to be the means and not the goal. Indeed, as the critic and theater historian Aleksandr Fevral’skii noted two years later, this was the differentiating criterion for distinguishing a true constructivist from someone who used constructivism as “just another style.”

The rejection of self-sufficient form is nonetheless not a rejection of the object. It is here that the art historian and constructivist specialist Maria Gough offers another interpretation of the debate, finding evidence for a different trajectory which further de-emphasizes the role of form and eliminates the object. She does this through a detailed examination of the members’ drawings, one which yields some additional insights into the definition as it exists at this point. For her purposes, Karl Ioganson is the member who best arrives at a solution to the problem of distinguishing between the composition and the construction. He does this by comparing two drawings (Figs. 1 - 2), one which he considers a
representation of the principle of making a still-life, and the other, a diagram in which he presents the basic components necessary to a construction: three orthogonal lines. Whereas the first can be seen as a representational abstraction of something concrete, the second cannot be called an abstraction since it is not possible to associate it with anything real. What it can be associated with are the essential or irreducible elements of something that might be built. Yet these elements are not the materials for constructing a building – his diagram contains conceptual and directional elements which could be used for any three-dimensional spatial construction, such as the ones he made for the 1921 OBMOKhu (the Society of Young Artists) exhibition in Moscow.

Ioganson’s concept of “cold structures,” as elucidated by Gough and used with reference to these objects, bears on the anti-image definition of theatrical constructivism which I am developing. Fully non-representational in nature, Ioganson’s spatial constructions (Fig. 3) were non-kinetic structures which look as though they will move, either in response to patterns of air circulation or to human touch. Rigid structures, their immobility does not come from the presence of joints but from the use of a minimal number of pieces existing in contiguous and tensile relationships, the choice of materials, the placement of the pieces, their length and their size. In other words, these structures are concrete manifestations of principles, and as such, they are neither representational nor functional. The individual components therefore performed in a manner similar to that implied by Babichev’s definition of a construction, but not in a typically utilitarian manner since their use is predicated on their role in a structure that does not have any use. As a result, Ioganson’s spatial constructions create a paradox: they existed as real objects in their own realm of existence, having no relationship to the human world in which objects are created to be used. But if they are principles, then they are inherently functional, although not in a recognizably utilitarian sense. These were non-representational objects which existed in a state of dynamic equilibrium, always suggesting the possibility of an impossible change, but never suggesting an instrumental relationship to the world. In this, Ioganson’s structures are unlike Rodchenko’s contemporaneous spatial constructions (Fig. 4) which, despite their abstraction and non-functional appearance, exist to demonstrate the principle of the efficacious use of materials and space. Rodchenko’s was not an abstract principle; it was the basis for the eventual design of furniture, among other things. In contrast, Ioganson’s essentialist vision of a “non-instrumental mode of invention” does not lead to the production of objects. Instead, it was a
necessary step toward the beginning of a constructivist trajectory which does not produce utilitarian objects. We could, at this point, accept Gough’s premise that this is where the two trajectories of constructivism begin to take shape and to part ways. Or we can consider the possibility of another type of function, and interrogate the meaning of this non-instrumentality as a condition which, without explicitly negating the object, clarifies the role of the theater in the constructivists’ endeavors, noting that not only do constructivists work on theatrical productions but that there is an inherent theatricality in much of their work which is not made for the theater. In particular, we can ask whether the instrumentality of loganson’s work should be seen as lying in a mode of conceptual invention. Is there, in fact, a new utilitarian function to consider – that of demonstrating a principle?

To return to the implication made at the beginning of this discussion – that as far as theater is concerned, it will no longer be a theater of image or text – we certainly need to ask what remains of the theater. Constructivist theater would be a theater of the spectator and the formation of space. Together, four categories of interchange and transformation were central to the new system: the changing scenic background, which included the interchangeable spaces of the performance and the real world; a changing text, in which not only was the text subject to rearrangement but the actors were as well; changing vision – although enacted most readily in cinema, the theater incorporated this sense of cinematic montage and unstable vision as a natural outcome of the changing background; and the changing audience – the interchangeable artist, actor, object and spectator. With respect to the role of the audience, struggling to make sense of a production in which actors and stage machinery often exchanged roles, spectators were compelled to become active creators of meaning. And given the ironic coincidence that most of the constructivist productions in the 1920s contained masquerades, disguises and trickery, the viewer received little help from the costumes and scenery when it came to this task of deciphering the text. Just as the character of a Bolshevik revolutionary might turn out to be a bourgeois opera singer before the play ended, neither the viewer nor the objects were exempt from this scenario of transformation. If certainty had to be sacrificed, there was something to be gained: the spectator and stage objects exchanged their object-hood and self-hood for conceptual autonomy.

In class, we will use the examples of the Magnanimous Cuckold and I Want a Child to examine these developments.


5. In Gough, *Artist as Producer*, see plates 7 and 8, along with her discussion, pp 53-56.
