

Bolshevism and the avant-garde artists (1993)—Part 2

By David Walsh
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Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3

The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (September 25, 1992–January 3, 1993) in New York City, was a major artistic and political event. In response, the Bulletin newspaper, a predecessor of the World Socialist Web Site, published a seven-part article by arts editor David Walsh, devoted to the issues raised by the exhibition, in February–March 1993. The piece was later republished in the Fourth International magazine, Volume 20 Number 1, Winter–Spring 1994.

As the article indicates, the show was originally planned in 1988 when Mikhail Gorbachev was still in power in the USSR. By the time the massive exhibition went on display in New York and other cities, the Soviet Union had collapsed and the organizers made a concerted effort to use the occasion as a means of discrediting or marginalizing the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The 800 items on show, however, told a very different story, of the vibrancy of post-Revolutionary intellectual and artistic life, and the great impetus to creative activity provided by the first seizure of power by the working class in history. The show created considerable interest in the general public, attracting more than a quarter of a million visitors. We are posting the original series in three parts. Part 1 was posted February 13. This is Part 2.

Russian Futurism

When critics or admirers, such as Nikolai Gorlov (*Futurism and Revolution*, 1924), attributed so much significance to Futurism’s violent protests against bourgeois life and morals, Trotsky pointed out they were simply revealing their ignorance about the evolution of literary tendencies. “The French romanticists, as well as the German, always spoke scathingly of bourgeois morality and philistine life. More than that, they wore long hair, flirted with a green complexion, and for the ultimate shaming of the bourgeoisie, Theophile Gautier put on a sensational red vest” (*Literature and Revolution* [New York: Russell and Russell], p. 128).

He did suggest that the interrevolutionary period (1905 to 1917) which had given birth to Russian Futurism had provided it with certain advantages: “It caught rhythms of movement, of action, of attack, and of destruction which were as yet vague” (ibid., p. 129).

But the decisive event in Futurism’s evolution was not a literary or artistic one, but the “workers’ Revolution in Russia” which “broke loose before Futurism had time to free itself from its childish habits, from its yellow blouses, and from its excessive excitement, and before it could be officially recognized, that is, made into a politically harmless artistic school whose style is acceptable” (ibid.).

The fact that the revolution caught the Futurists while they were still a persecuted, youthful group pushed them in the direction of the working

class and socialism. But, Trotsky hastened to add, “Futurism carried the features of its social origin, bourgeois Bohemia, into the new stage of development. In the advance guard of literature, Futurism is no less a product of the poetic past than any other literary school of the present day” (ibid., p. 130).

It is this, of course, that Paul Wood (“The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” in the exhibition catalog, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* [New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992]) does not want to hear. His entire effort is aimed at smoothing out, eliminating the distinction between petty-bourgeois bohemia and Bolshevism.

In a profound passage, Trotsky criticizes the Futurists for their purely negative attitude toward the artistic past. “The call of the Futurists to break with the past, to do away with Pushkin, to liquidate tradition, etc., has a meaning in so far as it is addressed to the old literary caste.... But the meaninglessness of this call becomes evident as soon as it is addressed to the proletariat. The working class does not have to, and cannot break with literary tradition, because it is not in the grip of such a tradition. The working class does not know the old literature, it still has to master Pushkin, to absorb him, and so overcome him” (ibid.).

(It is well to review these words in the light of efforts by the most extreme of the so-called multiculturalists, who have all the weaknesses of the Futurists and show no sign of their strengths, to write off in an antihistorical fashion much of bourgeois culture as “white,” “male,” “European,” etc.)

Trotsky explains the usefulness of the Futurists’ breaking with the closed-in circles of the intelligentsia, who have nothing left to say, but adds that “it is not necessary to make a universal law of development out of the act of pushing away” (ibid., p. 131).

Trotsky points out that Marxists live in traditions, “and we have not stopped being revolutionists on account of it. We elaborated and lived through the traditions of the Paris Commune, even before our first revolution. Then the traditions of 1905 were added to them, by which we nourished ourselves and by which we prepared the second revolution” (ibid.).

So while the “October Revolution appeared to the intelligentsia, including its literary left wing, as a complete destruction of its known world ... To us, on the contrary, the Revolution appeared as the embodiment of a familiar tradition, internally digested.... We stepped into the Revolution while Futurism fell into it” (ibid., pp. 131-32).

Trotsky described Futurism in this objective fashion not to condemn it on the basis of its adherents’ social origins, much less to dismiss it as a literary current. Far from it. He is not exercising “toleration,” to use Wood’s word (a very revealing word), but considering how Futurism can enter “into the new art, not as an all-determining current, but as an important component part” (ibid., p. 132).

Of course, Trotsky, to the great unhappiness of the competing avant-garde tendencies, refused to confer on Futurism or any other “little artistic factory” the title of Communist Art, Proletarian Poetry, or Official

Representative of the Artistic Interests of the Working Class. Such categories did not and could not exist. He conceived of the various vital and “genuinely revolutionary” groupings as contributors to the creation of socialist culture, which could only be created on an international scale through patient struggle, including the mundane task of raising the cultural level of the oppressed masses.

In essence, Wood, along with all petty-bourgeois commentators on Soviet art, of both right-wing and left-wing varieties, can only conceive of the revolutionary party in one of two ways: as an instrument of repression or the passive and uncritical (“tolerant”) ally of the bohemia. He cannot grasp the notion that Trotsky was attempting to utilize Marxism creatively as a weapon with which the world and ideas are changed, that he was entering into a historic dialogue with Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vladimir Tatlin and the Constructivists in order to contribute to their artistic work.

The objections Wood raises to Trotsky’s critique of Mayakovsky are as misleading, or simply ignorant, as they are condescending. Wood describes the Bolshevik leader’s reaction to Mayakovsky as the “*cri de coeur* of one whose categories are being brought into question without his having the resources adequately to reply” (Wood, p. 18). In the process, Wood glosses over, for his own political reasons, one of the most significant points Trotsky made in *Literature and Revolution*.

Wood’s “*cri de coeur*” remark is simply absurd and malicious, as are all his condescending comments; Trotsky was perhaps the greatest representative in history of the Marxist school of literary criticism, which itself incorporated what was most farsighted in the aesthetic criticism produced by the bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Following the path marked out by world historic figures such as Hegel, the great Russian critic and revolutionary democrat Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848), Marx and Plekhanov, Trotsky brought to his examination of literary trends the most profound understanding of the relationship between art and social life. His analysis of the significance of the different artistic trends in the wake of the October Revolution is historical materialism at its richest and most flexible.

One is not obliged to agree with every one of Trotsky’s individual comments. That is hardly the point. But Wood, a petty-bourgeois critic or academic, is attempting to ward off intruders. He rejects the very right of Marxists to offer their critical evaluations. He writes: “Trotsky’s somewhat rotund categories failed to mesh fully with the avant-garde work which came under his review” (ibid.). This might be translated as follows: “Marxism is too vulgar and crude a tool to utilize in such a delicate operation as the consideration of avant-garde art. Leave that to the specialists—people like me!”

(It is certainly telling in this connection that Wood fails to make a single reference to the professional literary critic who was closest intellectually and politically to Trotsky, Aleksandr Voronsky, the editor of the literary magazine, *Red Virgin Soil*.)

Wood suggests that Trotsky had “critical difficulties” with Futurism. Based on a reading of his essay, one must conclude that Wood had even greater difficulties with *Literature and Revolution*. He arrogantly ignores Trotsky’s detailed analysis of Futurism’s origins and evolution, and harps on quite secondary matters in relation to Mayakovsky’s work.

Whatever his attitude to Trotsky’s work as a whole, one would think that a “leftist” might demonstrate a measure of humility, at least pause and consider with some degree of seriousness the conceptions being advanced.

In his comments on Mayakovsky, Trotsky makes an extremely important observation on the relation between the artist’s conscious and unconscious. The socialist revolution seized Futurism and the avant-garde, Trotsky explained, and pushed it forward. “Futurists became Communists. By this very act they entered the sphere of more profound questions and relationships, which far transcended the limits of their own

little world, and which were not quite worked out organically in their soul. That is why Futurists, even including Mayakovsky, are weakest artistically at those points where they finish as Communists” (*Literature and Revolution*, p. 146).

With considerable insight, Trotsky pointed to this fact—that the problems of the revolution were not “organically worked out in [his] soul” (ibid.)—as the root of the weakness of Mayakovsky’s “political” poems.

As he explained in his May 9, 1924, remarks, published as *Class and Art* (London: New Park Publications, 1974), “The heart of the matter is that artistic creativity, by its very nature, lags behind the other modes of expression of a man’s spirit, and still more of the spirit of the class. It is one thing to understand something and express it logically, and quite another thing to assimilate it organically, reconstructing the whole system of one’s feelings, and to find a new kind of artistic expression for this entity. The latter process is more organic, slower, more difficult to subject to conscious influence” (p. 7).

This was not an indictment. It was a blunt assessment of a historical problem and an artistic and personal dilemma for figures like Mayakovsky.

These were artists who, so to speak, embraced the revolution as an intellectual-political concept, but had not absorbed it into their bone and marrow and could not, therefore, dissolve it into their poetry.

This is not an insignificant matter. Of course it doesn’t disturb Wood because there is no conflict between his version of “Marxism” and a bohemian or academic existence. He cannot conceive of the necessity of the sort of critical and painful reworking of oneself and one’s work that Trotsky is referring to.

Wood intends to leave the reader with the impression that Trotsky was simply too imprisoned in “Enlightenment/classical culture” (in other words, insufficiently *au courant*) to do justice to Mayakovsky’s poetry or even, by implication, his sensibility.

Perhaps. But he should at least have the honesty to cite Trotsky’s comment on *A Cloud in Trousers*, Mayakovsky’s marvelous prerevolutionary paean to love, women, bohemia and, most of all, himself: “After all, ‘A Cloud in Trousers,’ a poem of unrequited love, is artistically his most significant and creatively his boldest and most promising work. It is even difficult to believe that a thing of such intense strength and independence of form was written by a youth of twenty-two or twenty-three years of age. His ‘War and Peace,’ ‘Mystery Bouffe,’ and ‘150 Million’ are much weaker, for the reason that here Mayakovsky leaves his individualist orbit and tries to enter the orbit of the Revolution” (*Literature and Revolution*, p. 157).

How could anyone consider this any less than the friendliest and most rewarding sort of criticism?

Trotsky’s comments on Mayakovsky are directly linked to a later passage in *Literature and Revolution*, in which he summarizes his conception of the role of the party in relation to art: “The Marxian method affords an opportunity to estimate the development of the new art, to trace all its sources, to help the most progressive tendencies by a critical illumination of the road” (ibid., p. 218).

The swift degeneration of the Bolshevik regime and the international workers movement from 1924 on prevented that “critical illumination” from bearing fruit. It was another fifteen years before Trotsky could address himself to these questions again, under immeasurably more difficult conditions.

By that time, the Russian avant-garde artists had long since succumbed to Stalinism, physically or morally. As for Mayakovsky, that “enormous talent,” he had taken his own life in 1930, a victim of the official struggle for “proletarian culture.” As Trotsky wrote in an obituary, Stalin’s officially sanctioned cultural regime had “become simply a system of bureaucratic command over art and a way of impoverishing it” (“The Suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky” in *Art and Revolution*, edited by Paul

N. Siegel [New York: Pathfinder, 1992], p. 176).

Simply on the basis of this brief examination of Trotsky's work, one can see that the identification of Futurism as "Bolshevism in art" is a fiction, and a pernicious one in two senses. First, it is an attempt to shove Bolshevism, retroactively, although for very contemporary reasons, into the swamp of radicalism. Second, it is an effort to divert or block any effort to challenge the conceptions of present-day artists and critics.

At a time when a section of the intelligentsia will inevitably react to the cultural stagnation and perhaps look to Marxism for a way out, Wood and his ilk are there to greet them and either turn them back, or introduce them to that variety of cynical radicalism that masquerades as "Marxism" in petty-bourgeois and academic circles.

Political evolution of the Russian avant-garde

Many of the artists whose work is included in the Guggenheim exhibit belonged to the Constructivist tendency. Before we turn to an analysis of Constructivism, including Trotsky's comments on the subject, it might be useful to consider concretely the political evolutions of the Russian avant-garde artists.

In another substantive essay published in the Guggenheim exhibit's catalog, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," Hubertus Gassner discusses, among other issues, the ideological stances of the avant-garde groups.

In the wake of the February 1917 revolution, which ousted Tsar Nicholas and turned the state over to the Russian bourgeoisie, a Union of Art Workers was established encompassing all fields of artistic activity. Its "left bloc," Gassner reports, was under the leadership of individuals such as Mayakovsky, painter Natan Al'tman, art critic Nikolai Punin and theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold.

The left bloc, calling itself the Freedom for Art Federation, published a declaration in March 1917—against the new government's planned Ministry of Fine Arts—in both the Menshevik and (pre-April) Bolshevik daily papers. The proclamation was signed by twenty-eight artists, including Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin and Nadezhda Udal'tsova.

The federation summed up its essential demands in a pamphlet distributed on Petrograd streets March 21: "Freedom for art—abolition of government tutelage. Complete decentralization of cultural life and autonomy for all institutions that will be funded by the municipal authorities. Establishment of an All-Russian Artists Congress. Abolition of all academies, which shall be replaced by art schools responsible for the training of art teachers. Replacement of patronage by public support through subsidies and grants" (quoted by Gassner, p. 300).

While he distorts the reality, in order to emphasize the supposed "anti-intellectual" propensities of the masses, Gassner correctly points to a growing crisis of the bourgeois intelligentsia in the period leading up to the October Revolution:

"With the radicalization of the masses in the summer of 1917, the crisis among artists and intellectuals intensified.... 'Intellectual' and 'bourgeois' became synonymous in the minds of the radicalized masses. Artists—and all the members of the intelligentsia—suddenly saw themselves denounced as enemies of the working class and ranked among the 'superfluous persons' of the detested past. The break between the insurgent masses and the intelligentsia culminated in the October Revolution. The ousting of the Provisional Government and the Bolshevik takeover gave most intellectuals outside the radical leftist parties such a shock that they remained silent for several months or passively boycotted the new rulers" (Gassner, p. 301).

In fact, when People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky extended a well-publicized invitation to Petrograd artists to come to the Smolnyi Institute to discuss prospective cooperation a few days after the revolutionary insurrection, only six persons showed up: the

poet Aleksandr Blok, the publicist Larisa Reisner, painter David Shterenberg, Al'tman, Meyerhold and Mayakovsky—and the last-named broke off relations with the Bolsheviks shortly afterward and took off for Moscow.

The more conservative, pro-Kerensky intellectuals stayed away because of their obvious hostility to the Bolsheviks. They hoped the revolutionary government would be overthrown in a matter of days or weeks. Many of the extreme left artists refused to cooperate with the new regime because of their anarchist inclinations and their reservations about collaborating with government institutions of any kind.

Six months later, after the official establishment of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts) in January 1918, Al'tman, Punin and composer Artur Lur'e were obliged to travel to Moscow in an effort to win the cooperation of artists there. In an appeal published in *Anarkhiia* (*Anarchy*), they specifically called on "comrades Mayakovsky and Tatlin" to cooperate with the new government.

Tatlin was elected by the Moscow Professional Union as its delegate to the Moscow Council of Workers and Soldiers Deputies on November 21. But, as Gassner points out, he, "like many other avant-garde artists, was politically closer to the anarchists than to the Communist Bolsheviks. On March 29, 1918, he published an appeal in *Anarchy* urging 'all my confederates... to enter the breach I made in obsolete values' so that their minds could 'embark on the path of anarchism'" (ibid., p. 302).

As mentioned, Mayakovsky (who was probably the closest of all to the Bolsheviks), after his initial meetings with Lunacharsky had grown impatient and left Petrograd. In Moscow, he and two old friends—painter David Burluk and poet Vasili Kamenskii—opened the Kafe poetov (Poets' Cafe). The three of them formed the Federation of Futurists and in the one and only issue of their *Futurists' Newspaper* declared that "Futurism" was the aesthetic counterpart of "socialism/anarchism" and that only a "revolution of the psyche" could liberate workers from the shackles of obsolete art.

The cafe was a hangout, according to Ilya Ehrenburg, for "a crowd that did not exactly deal in poetry—speculators, women of doubtful reputation, young people who called themselves 'Futurists'..." (quoted by Gassner, p. 303). The cafe was closed down by the revolutionary government on April 14, 1918.

Both Tatlin and Rodchenko had worked in the Activist Group of the Moscow Association of Anarchist Groups. On April 2, 1918, *Anarchy* published a salute to Rodchenko, Ol'ga Rozanova, Udal'tsova and others among the avant-garde: "With pride we look upon your creative rebellion.... We congratulate the creator Rodchenko on his spirited three-dimensional constructions of colored forms..." (ibid.).

The "fiercest of all the anarchist fervor" came from the pen of painter Kazimir Malevich in a series of articles he wrote for *Anarchy* between March and July 1918. In Gassner's words, "The artistic principle of non-objectivity served him as a starting-point for a nihilistic ontology which negated material reality as well as any form of state" (ibid.).

Malevich blasted those who collaborated with the new regime and declared "our ego" to be "supreme." In a typically florid passage he wrote: "The banner of anarchism is the banner of our ego and like a free wind our spirit will billow our creative work through the vast spaces of our soul" (quoted by Gassner, p. 304).

In light of their political histories and sometimes strident comments, it is remarkable that over the course of the following year virtually all of the significant "left" artists, including Malevich, Tatlin and Rodchenko, agreed to cooperate or work directly for one or more of the new revolutionary state's institutions.

This transformation is all the more striking when one considers the political and economic conjuncture at which it took place. Nineteen-eighteen was unquestionably the most difficult year for the revolution. Trotsky wrote the following about the summer and spring of

1918: "At times, it seemed as if everything were slipping and crumbling, as if there were nothing to hold to, nothing to lean upon. One wondered if a country so despairing, so economically exhausted, so devastated, had enough sap left in it to support a new regime and preserve its independence. There was no food. There was no army. The railways were completely disorganized. The machinery of state was just beginning to take shape. Conspiracies were being hatched everywhere" (*My Life* [New York: Pathfinder, 1970], p. 395).

In January 1918 the Bolshevik regime was in the midst of peace talks with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk. In February, with no agreement signed, the Germans began an offensive. In March a humiliating treaty was signed by the representatives of the Soviet government. The Left Communists, led by Nikolai Bukharin, objected strenuously to the peace and demanded a "revolutionary war."

In April 1918 the anarchist clubs were raided and some six hundred people, including both ideological anarchists and criminal elements, were forced to hand over their arms. The Left Social Revolutionaries openly agitated against the Bolsheviks and one of their members assassinated the German ambassador Mirbach in July in order to prompt war between the two countries. In August Left SR Fanya Kaplan fired two bullets at Lenin in Moscow, nearly killing him. Bolshevik Central Committee member M.S. Uritsky, one of those responsible for leading the struggle against counterrevolution, was assassinated in Petrograd on August 20, 1918.

Thus the best elements among the petty-bourgeois bohemia were won to the side of the new state precisely at the point that the latter was in combat with, among other forces, various forms of anarchism and pseudo-revolutionary "leftism." It would be misleading to think this was simply a matter of the artists' discretion being the better part of their valor.

Bolshevism demarcated itself once and for all during this period as a tendency representing the international interests of the working class in opposition to phrasemongering, petty-bourgeois radicalism. It was this unequivocal political demarcation and the seriousness and flexibility with which Lenin and the Bolsheviks went about their efforts to construct a new life which won the artists' allegiance.

What Trotsky wrote in 1923 in relation to the Left Social Revolutionaries could be applied to the avant-garde bohemia as well: "The revolution is highly skilled both in separating men from one another and also, if need be, in bringing them together. All the most courageous and consistent elements in the Left SR party are now with us" (*The Military Writings and Speeches of Leon Trotsky, How the Revolution Armed, Vol. I: 1918* [London: New Park Publications, 1979], p. xxvii).

Having been won, with whatever hesitations and vacillations, to the side of the Bolsheviks, the most far-seeing artists threw themselves into a variety of activities, under conditions of extreme privation. Rodchenko, in April 1918, wrote an appeal "To the Artist-Proletarians," which gives some flavor of the period.

He wrote: "We, who are in a worse situation than the oppressed workers, are workers for our livelihood as well as creators of art. We, who live in holes, have neither paint nor light nor time for creating. Proletarians of the paintbrush, we must unite, must establish a Free Association of Oppressed Artists, must demand bread and studios and our existential rights" (quoted by Gassner, p. 307).

Mayakovsky painted and supplied verse for more than 2,000 posters put out by ROSTA (the Russian Telegraph Agency). The posters were designed to raise the political consciousness of the workers and peasants during the Civil War. His subjects ranged from the simplest—how to clean one's rifle, how to sew on buttons—to the most complex—how to destroy the forces of the White generals, how to build socialism.

Malevich taught at the new State Free Art Workshops beginning in October 1918 until the autumn of 1919, when he joined the Popular Art School in Vitebsk and began to organize Unovis. He, Tatlin, Rodchenko

and Wassily Kandinsky were all involved in the work of the Museum Department of Izo Narkompros, which established thirty-six museums of contemporary art in the space of two years.

Tatlin became one of the leaders of the Moscow Board of Izo Narkompros. El Lissitzky wrote that in Vitebsk he and Malevich, among other activities, "painted a 16,000-square-foot canvas for a factory celebration, decorated three buildings, and created the stage decorations for the festive meeting of the factory committee in the city theater" (quoted by Gassner, p. 304).

Tatlin and Malevich both prepared texts for a multilingual journal entitled *Art International*, which unfortunately was never published.

The relations of the avant-garde artists and the revolutionary authorities were by no means without friction, as we will discuss in more detail somewhat further on. According to Gassner, "As early as 1919, the Moscow Soviet publicly objected to the participation of the 'Futurists' in the decoration of the revolutionary celebrations" (*ibid.*, p. 305).

Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova wrote their "Manifesto of the Suprematists and Non-Objectivists" at the beginning of the same year, in which they declared: "Emphatically we praise the revolution as the only motor of life.... We painted our furious canvases amid the jeers and laughter of the bureaucrats and petit bourgeois who have fled. Now we repeat to the so-called proletariat of former servants of the monarchy and intellectuals who have taken their place: We will not give in to you. In 20 years, the Soviet Republic will be proud of these paintings" (quoted by Gassner, p. 305).

It is not within the scope of this article to consider the different artistic schools in Russia which expressed sympathy with the aims of the revolution. In particular, it is necessary to exclude from consideration, for our immediate purposes, the tendency identified with Malevich, and turn our attention to those who became identified with Constructivism and the slogan of "bringing art into life."

It would be a vulgarization of Marxism, and simply wrong, to identify the Malevich group as an "idealist" tendency and its opponents as "materialists," although this is very much what the latter would have liked to believe. The reality is much more complicated than that. In fact, Malevich, from his standpoint of absolute idealism (the nonexistence of the object, the world as pure sensation), made some extremely valid points against the utilitarian excesses of Constructivism, as did Kandinsky.

It's equally true that the Unovis group members, despite the cult-like, Utopian commune atmosphere that apparently prevailed, did not simply have their heads in the clouds. The artistic followers of Malevich involved themselves in numerous practical undertakings, from the decoration of towns to the design of teapots.

There was also a considerable degree of overlapping, intellectually and even stylistically, between the various groups. In one fashion or another they all, or nearly all, went through the requisite stages of Cezannism, Cubism, Cubo-Futurism and "non-objective" work. Lissitzky, a future coworker of the most ardent Constructivists, was a devoted colleague of Malevich in Vitebsk. (In 1922, he even declared that Unovis was one of the two groups which "claimed Constructivism.") A non-specialist observer from our time might be forgiven if he or she considered Tatlin, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Liubov' Popova, Stepanova, Rozanova and Malevich all members of one multisided tendency.

Nor, frankly, was there any lack of individual ambition and "supreme ego" in the disputes. The famous fist fight between Tatlin and Malevich, if it in fact took place, was certainly grounded in different artistic perspectives, but it also no doubt involved the question of who was to rule the artistic roost. Tatlin's friends, according to Vasili Rakitin's "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers" paint a picture—full of sympathy—of a 'holy fool of Futurism,' a man suspicious to the point of absurdity, to the brink of phobia. He openly suspected

Malevich of artistic espionage.... Tatlin erected something like a tent, but one that could be locked, in the middle of his studio.... God forbid Malevich should see what he was up to and get ahead of him” (exhibition catalog, p. 29).

All this notwithstanding, there were very definitely differences of substance, which put this or that tendency or individual in a more advantageous social, psychological or even, so to speak, physical position to address some of the problems posed by the revolution and the revolutionary epoch. For our purposes we need to examine the origins and development of Constructivism, particularly as its proponents somewhat grandiloquently claimed to base themselves on the principles of Marxism.

To be continued

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