Constructivism (art)

Constructivism was an artistic and architectural philosophy that originated in Russia beginning 1919, which was a rejection of the idea of autonomous art in favour of art as a practice for social purposes. Constructivism as an active philosophy lasted until about 1934, greatly effecting the art of the Weimar Republic and elsewhere, before being replaced by Socialist Realism. Some of its motifs have been reused sporadically since.

Beginnings

The term Construction Art was first used as a derisive term by Kazimir Malevich to describe the work of Alexander Rodchenko during 1917. Constructivism first appears as a positive term in Naum Gabo's Realistic Manifesto of 1920. Alexei Gan used the word as the title of his book Constructivism, which was printed during 1922. Constructivism was a post-World War I development of Russian Futurism, and particularly of the 'corner-counter reliefs' of Vladimir Tatlin, which had been exhibited during 1915. The term itself would be invented by the sculptors Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo, who developed an industrial, angular style of work, while its geometric abstraction owed something to the Suprematism of Kasimir Malevich. The teaching basis for the new philosophy was established by The Commissariat of Enlightenment (or Narkompros) the Bolshevik government's cultural and educational ministry directed by Anatoliy Vasilievich Lunacharsky who suppressed the old Petrograd Academy of Fine Arts and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture during 1918. IZO, the Commissariat's artistic bureau, was managed during the Russian Civil War mainly by Futurists, who published the journal Art of the Commune. Constructivism in Moscow was represented by VKhUTEMAS, the school for art and design established during 1919. Gabo later stated that teaching at the school emphasized political and ideological discussion rather than art-making. Despite this, Gabo himself designed a radio transmitter during 1920 (and would submit a design to the Palace of the Soviets competition during 1930).

Constructivism as theory and practice was derived largely from a series of debates at INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) in Moscow, from 1920–22. After deposing its first chairman, Wassily Kandinsky, for his 'mysticism', The First Working Group of Constructivists (including Liubov Popova, Alexander Vesnin, Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and the theorists Alexei Gan, Boris Arvatov and Osip Brik) would develop a definition of Constructivism as the combination of faktura: the particular material properties of an object, and tektonika, its spatial presence. Initially the Constructivists worked on three-dimensional constructions as a means of participating with industry; the OBMOKhU (Society of Young Artists) exhibition showed these three dimensional compositions, by Rodchenko, Stepanova, Karl Loganson and the Stenberg Brothers. Later the definition would be extended to designs for two-dimensional works such as books or posters, with montage and factography becoming important concepts.
Art in the service of the Revolution

As much as involving itself in designs for industry, the Constructivists worked on public festivals and street designs for the post-October revolution Bolshevik government. Perhaps the most famous of these was in Vitebsk, where Malevich's UNOVIS Group painted propaganda plaques and buildings (the best known being El Lissitzky's poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919)). Inspired by Vladimir Mayakovsky's declaration 'the streets our brushes, the squares our palettes', artists and designers participated with public life during the Civil War. A striking instance was the proposed festival for the Comintern congress during 1921 by Alexander Vesnin and Liubov Popova, which resembled the constructions of the OBMOKhU exhibition as well as their work for the theatre. There was a great deal of overlap during this period between Constructivism and Proletkult, the ideas of which concerning the need to create an entirely new culture struck a chord with the Constructivists. In addition some Constructivists were heavily involved in the 'ROSTA Windows', a Bolshevik public information campaign of around 1920. Some of the most famous of these were by the poet-painter Vladimir Mayakovsky and Vladimir Lebedev.

The constructivists tried to create works that would make the viewer an active viewer of the artwork. In this it had similarities with the Russian Formalists' theory of 'making strange', and accordingly their main theorist Viktor Shklovsky worked closely with the Constructivists, as did other formalists like Osip Brik. These theories were tested in theatre, particularly with the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who had established what he called 'October in the theatre'. Meyerhold developed a 'biomechanical' acting style, which was influenced both by the circus and by the 'scientific management' theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor. Meanwhile the stage sets by the likes of Vesnin, Popova and Stepanova tested Constructivist spatial ideas in a public form. A more populist version of this was developed by Alexander Tairov, with stage sets by Aleksandra Ekster and the Stenberg Brothers. These ideas would influence German directors like Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, as well as the early Soviet cinema.

Tatlin, 'Construction Art' and Productivism

The canonical work of Constructivism was Vladimir Tatlin's proposal for the Monument to the Third International (1919) which combined a machine aesthetic with dynamic components celebrating technology such as searchlights and projection screens. Gabo publicly criticized Tatlin's design saying *Either create functional houses and bridges or create pure art, not both.* This had already caused a major controversy in the Moscow group during 1920 when Gabo and Pevsner's *Realistic Manifesto* was published. This was opposed to the utilitarian and adaptable version of Constructivism used by Tatlin and Rodchenko. Tatlin's work was immediately termed by artists in Germany as a revolution of art: a 1920 photograph shows George Grosz and John Heartfield holding a placard saying 'Art is Dead – Long Live Tatlin's Machine Art', while the designs for the tower were published in Bruno Taut's magazine *Frühlicht.*

Tatlin's tower started a period of exchange of ideas between Moscow and Berlin, something reinforced by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg's Soviet-German magazine *Veshch-Gegenstand-Objet* which spread the idea of 'Construction art', as did the Constructivist exhibits at the 1922 *Russische Ausstellung* in Berlin, organised by Lissitzky. A 'Constructivist international' was formed, which met with Dadaists and De Stijl artists in Germany during 1922. Participants with this short-lived international included Lissitzky, Hans Richter, and Laszlo
Moholy-Nagy. However the idea of 'art' was becoming anathema to the Russian Constructivists: the INKhUK debates of 1920–22 had culminated in the theory of Productivism propounded by Osip Brik and others, which demanded direct participation with industry and the end of easel painting. Tatlin was one of the first to attempt to transfer his talents to industrial production, with his designs for an economical stove, for workers' overalls and for furniture. The Utopian element in Constructivism was maintained by his 'letatlin', a flying machine which he worked on until the 1930s.

**Constructivism and Consumerism**

During 1921, the New Economic Policy was established in the Soviet Union, which reintroduced a limited state capitalism in the Soviet economy. Rodchenko, Stepanova, and others made advertising for the co-operatives that were now in competition with commercial businesses. The poet-artist Vladimir Mayakovsky and Rodchenko worked together and called themselves "advertising constructors". Together they designed eye-catching images featuring bright colours, geometric shapes, and bold lettering. The lettering of most of these designs was intended to create a reaction, and function emotionally – most were designed for the state-owned department store Mosselprom in Moscow, for pacifiers, cooking oil, beer and other quotidian products, with Mayakovsky claiming that his 'nowhere else but Mosselprom' verse was one of the best he ever wrote.

Additionally, several artists tried to work with clothes design with varying success: Varvara Stepanova designed dresses with bright, geometric patterns that were mass-produced, although workers' overalls by Tatlin and Rodchenko never achieved this and remained prototypes. The painter and designer Lyubov Popova designed a kind of Constructivist flapper dress before her early death during 1924, the plans for which were published in the journal LEF. In these works Constructivists showed a willingness to involve themselves in fashion and the mass market, which they tried to balance with their Communist beliefs.

**LEF and Constructivist Cinema**

The Soviet Constructivists organised themselves in the 1920s into the 'Left Front of the Arts', who produced the influential journal LEF, (which had two series, from 1923–5 and from 1927–9 as New LEF). LEF was dedicated to maintaining protest against the critiques of the incipient Socialist Realism, and the possibility of a capitalist restoration, with the journal being particularly scathing about the 'NEPmen', the capitalists of the period. For LEF the new medium of cinema was more important than the easel painting and traditional narratives that elements of the Communist Party were trying to revive then. Important Constructivists were very involved with cinema, with Mayakovsky acting in the movie *The Young Lady and the Hooligan* (1919), Rodchenko's designs for the intertitles and animated sequences of Dziga Vertov's movie *Kino Eye* (1924), and Aleksandra Ekster designed the sets and costumes for the science fiction movie *Aelita* (1924).

The Productivist theorists Osip Brik and Sergei Tretyakov also wrote screenplays and intertitles, for movies such as Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia* (1928) or Victor Turin's *Turksib* (1929). The moviemakers and LEF contributors Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein as well as the documentarist Esfir Shub also regarded their fast-cut, montage style of moviemaking as Constructivist. The early Eccentrist movies of Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg (*The New Babylon*, *Alone*) had similarly avant-garde intentions, as well as a fixation on America which was characteristic of the philosophy, with its praise of slapstick-comedy actors like Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, as well as of Fordist mass production. Like the photomontages and designs of Constructivism, early Soviet cinema concentrated on creating an agitational effect by montage and 'making strange'.

![An advertising construction](image-url)
Photography and Photomontage

The Constructivists were early developers of the techniques of photomontage. Gustav Klutsis' 'Dynamic City' and 'Lenin and Electrification' (1919–20) are the first examples of this method of montage, which had in common with Dadaism the collaging together of news photographs and painted sections. However Constructivist montages would be less 'destructive' than those of Dadaism. Perhaps the most famous of these montages was Rodchenko's illustrations of the Mayakovsky poem *About This*.

LEF also helped popularise a distinctive style of photography, involving jagged angles and contrasts and an abstract use of light, which paralleled the work of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in Germany: the major practitioners of this included, along with Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich and Max Penson, among others. This also shared many characteristics with the early documentary philosophy. Meanwhile LEF produced an architectural version, the OSA group directed by Alexander Vesnin and Moisei Ginzburg – for more information see Constructivist architecture.

Constructivist Graphic Design

The book designs of Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and others such as Solomon Telingater and Anton Lavinsky were a major inspiration for the work of radical designers in the West, particularly Jan Tschichold. Many Constructivists worked on the design of posters for everything from cinema to political propaganda: the former represented best by the brightly coloured, geometric posters of the Stenberg brothers (Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg), and the latter by the agitational photomontage work of Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina.

The Constructivists' main early political patron was Leon Trotsky, and it began to be regarded with suspicion after the expulsion of Trotsky and the Left Opposition during 1927-8. The Communist Party would gradually favour realist art during the course of the 1920s (as early as 1918 *Pravda* had complained that government funds were being used to buy works by untried artists). However it wasn't until about 1934 that the counter-doctrine of Socialist Realism was instituted in Constructivism's place. Many Constructivists continued to produce avantgarde work in the service of the state, such as Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Stepanova's designs for the magazine *USSR In Construction*.

Legacy

A number of Constructivists would teach or lecture at the Bauhaus schools in Germany, and some of the VKhUTEMAS teaching methods were adopted and developed there. Gabo established a version of Constructivism in England during the 1930s and 1940s that was adopted by architects, designers and artists after World War II (see Victor Pasmore), and John McHale. Joaquin Torres Garcia and Manuel Rendón were instrumental in spreading Constructivism throughout Europe and Latin America. Constructivism had an affect on the modern masters of Latin America such as: Carlos Merida, Enrique Tábara, Aníbal Villacís, Theo Constanté, Oswaldo Viteri, Estuardo Maldonado, Luis Molinari, Carlos Catasse, João Batista Vilanova Artigas and Oscar Niemeyer, to name just a few. There have also been disciples in Australia, the painter George Johnson being the best known.

During the 1980s graphic designer Neville Brody used styles based on Constructivist posters that initiated a revival of popular interest. Also during the 1980s designer Ian Anderson initiated The Designers Republic, a successful and influential design company which uses constructivist principles.

So-called Deconstructivist architecture was developed by architects Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and others during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Zaha Hadid by her sketches and drawings of abstract triangles and rectangles evokes the aesthetic of constructivism. Though similar formally, the socialist political connotations of Russian constructivism are deemphasized by Hadid's deconstructivism. Rem Koolhaas' projects revive another aspect of constructivism. The scaffold and crane-like structures represented by many constructivist architects are used for the finished forms of his designs and buildings.

Cinematic influences include Bulgarian born animator Theodore Ushev's 2006 brief movie *Tower Bawher*. Inspired by Russian constructivist art, the animated short features visual references to artists of the era including Vertov.
Stenberg, Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Popova.[2]

**Artists associated with Constructivism**

- Ella Bergmann-Michel – (1896–1971)
- Max Bill, painter, sculptor and designer (1908–1994)
- Ilya Bolotowsky, painter and sculptor (1907–1981)
- Norman Carlberg, sculptor (1928– )
- Carlos Catasse – (1944–2010)
- Šrečko Kosovel – (1904–1926), Slovenian poet
- Theo Constanté – (1934–Present)
- Avgust Černigoj – (1898–1985)
- Burgyoa A. Diller – (1906–1965)
- Sergei Eisenstein – moviemaker (1898–1948)
- Günter Fruhtrunk – (1923–1982)
- Naum Gabo – (1890–1977)
- Moisei Ginzburg, architect (1892–1946)
- Alexander Vesnin – architect, painter and designer (1883–1939)
- Theo Constanté, painter and sculptor (1898–1987)
- El Lissitzky – (1890–1941)
- Ivan Leonidov – architect (1902–1959)
- Verena Loewensberg – painter (1912–1986)
- Marcelle Cahn – painter (1895–1981)
- Peter Lowe – (1938– )
- Louis Lozowick – (1892–1973)
- Camille Graeser – (1882–1980)
- Berthold Lubetkin – architect (1901–1990)
- Thilo Maatsch – (1900–1983)
- Estuardo Maldonado – (1930–Present)
- Kenneth Martin – (1905–1984)
- Mary Martin – (1907–1969)
- Vsevolod Meyerhold – theatre director (1874–1940)
- Vladimir Mayakovsky – poet, painter, and playwright (1893–1930)
- Konstantin Melnikov – architect (1890–1974)
- Vadam Meller – (1884–1962)
- Josef Müller-Brockmann – graphic designer (1914–1996)
- Tomoyoshi Murayama – (1901–1977)
- Antoine Pevsner – (1886–1962)
- Lyubov Popova – (1889–1924)
- Aleksandr Rodchenko – (1891–1956)
- Oskar Schlemmer – (1888–1943)
- Kurt Schwitters – (1887–1948)
- Manuel Rendón Seminario – (1894–1982)
- Vladimir Shukhov – architect (1853–1939)
- Varvara Stepanova – (1894–1958)
- Enrique Tábara – (1930–Present)
- Vladimir Tatlin – (1885–1953)
- Joaquin Torres Garcia – (1874–1949)
- Vasily Yermilov – (1894–1967)
- Thomas Ring – (1892–1983)
- Alexander Vesenin – architect, painter and designer (1883–1957)
- Aníbal Villacís – (1927–Present)
- Oswaldo Viteri – (1931–Present)
- Hans Dieter Zingraff – (1947–Present)

**References**


**Resources**


**External links**

• Soviet Constructivist Architecture (http://www.housing.com/categories/homes/soviet-constructivist-architecture-1922-1936.html) - Video
• Constructivism art (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIxZjE_y_rok) – video
• Ukrainian Constructivism (http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/pages/C/O/Constructivism.htm)
• *Constructivist Book Covers* (http://www.sil.si.edu/ondisplay/czechbooks)
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