ABSTRACTION FOR RADICAL ENDS

Already committed to Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism—an approach he first presented in 1915 that rejected the deliberate illusions of representational painting—Liubov Popova, El Lissitzky, Władysław Strzemiński, and many of their peers responded to the imperatives of the 1917 Russian Revolution by deploying abstraction for radical ends. Basic shapes were utilized, as Gustav Klutsis put it, to construct "a new reality not yet in existence," to call, in effect, for world revolution.

In the early years of Soviet Russia, the red square exemplified this utopian stance, as seen in this gallery in Popova's costume design, the hero battling the old guard in Lissitzky's children's book, and the ground on which Vladimir Lenin strides in Klutsis's photomontage. In the following years, the red square would proliferate across Europe. While at times less explicitly agitational, it continued to represent the revolutionary impulses of this period in Russia and to embody aspirations for the new—an ongoing reminder of abstraction's experimental leap.

ARTIST CONSTRUCTOR

"The artist is a constructor," wrote Osip Brik in praise of Liubov Popova after her untimely death in 1924. "She was the most radical, the most principled of us all." To be a "constructor" in 1920s Russia was to create by embracing modern industry, technology, and utility in the service of postrevolutionary society.

Popova had studied art of the past, from the Italian Renaissance to French Post-Impressionism, and trained as an easel painter. Inspired by Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism, she turned away from representation in favor of abstraction as a visual language with which to reenvision the world. After the Russian Revolution, Popova abandoned painting altogether to more directly engage a mass audience, creating theater sets and costumes, illustrated books, and displays for festivals. For undertaking this shift, she was held up as a model by her peers. "My desire," Popova wrote, "is to translate the problem from the aesthetic to the production plane."

ADVERTISING-CONSTRUCTORS

"We understand perfectly well the power of agitation. . . . The bourgeoisie understands the power of advertising. Advertising is industrial, commercial agitation," wrote the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in the period of the Soviet Union's New Economic Policy (1921–28), when capitalist-style commerce was temporarily endorsed. Determining that new conditions in the years following the Russian Revolution demanded a new civically engaged role for artists and poets, Mayakovsky and the artist Aleksandr Rodchenko formed the advertising agency Reklam-Konstruktor (Advertising-Constructor).

Rodchenko designed the bold graphics while Mayakovsky contributed the pithy slogans. Their clients included the state-run department store GUM, the grocery enterprise Mossel'prom, and the Tea Directorate. As advertisers, their goal was not simply to sell such products as light bulbs and cigarettes, but to compel consumers to support the new state: to spark their desire for socialist objects and to transform that consumerist longing into a civic one, to shop as responsible Soviet citizens.

PHOTOMONTAGE

Artists in the early twentieth century took advantage of the expansion of print media—newspapers and magazines in particular—to create what became known as photomontage. These artists often called themselves "photomonteurs"—*monteur* meaning someone who puts together or assembles—to signal their mechanical labor and their self-identification as "engineers" for social change. While this medium was utilized for artistic and commercial purposes, in the wake of war and revolution it became a crucial tool for political persuasion.

Photomonteurs cut and pasted bits of printed photographic images to create new and often deliberately jarring compositions intended to shock viewers out of complacency and reflect the raucous conditions of modern life. Those photomontages meant for reproduction were then photographed and sometimes reworked; the final negative was transferred onto a printing plate for reproduction as a poster, postcard, book cover, or illustration, some in editions up to 50,000. In this gallery, original maquettes are exhibited alongside the final, mechanically realized products, revealing how artists developed their ideas.

DADA ENGINEERS

The artist Johannes Baader described Dada as "a bomb which explodes every nationality and every domain of power, above all the German." This art movement began in Zurich in 1916 and spread to Berlin, Paris, and beyond. For Dadaists, the unprecedented destruction of World War I, a result of trench warfare and advances in weaponry, revealed vast political corruption and called into question notions of progress. In Berlin, Baader, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, and Hannah Höch formed a Dada group and dedicated themselves to destroying tradition, undermining convention and creating a new, distinctly anti-authoritarian art for the twentieth century.

Central to this mission was photomontage, in which images from newspapers and magazines were cut, remixed, and pasted together. Responding to the expansion of mass media made possible by innovations in printing technologies, the Berlin Dadaists renounced subjectivity and expression, seeing themselves instead as engineers.

AN ALLIANCE WITH INDUSTRY

Henryk Berlewi first exhibited the series Mechano-Facture in 1924 in Warsaw's Austro-Daimler showroom, where his drawings were surrounded by mechanical parts and luxury automobiles. He chose this unorthodox venue to emphasize that his approach was, in his words, "derived from industrial technology, independent of individual whim, and supported by the precise functioning of the machine." The lines and shapes of his drawings evoke the steady rhythm of an assembly line, while the hard edges and stark black-and-white palette suggest industrial exactitude.

Leaning casually against a car, with his works arrayed behind him, Berlewi, in this photograph, takes on the role of a salesman. Indeed, understanding the importance of publicity, Berlewi created his own poster to promote this show, and soon after formed the advertising agency Reklama-mechano with avant-garde writers Stanisław Brucz and Aleksander Wat in an effort to bring the ideas of Mechano-Facture in line with commercial interests.

ARTIST AS AGITATOR

"Photomontage is an agitation-propaganda form of art," Gustav Klutsis declared. This poster depicts Joseph Stalin as a man of the people, striding alongside workers representing a variety of occupations. The title is from a 1931 speech in which he promoted higher wages for technical specialists as a way to improve industrial productivity; the imagery reiterates the slogan's anti-elitism.

Preparatory designs reveal how Klutsis experimented to create a poster with maximum visual power, cutting and rephotographing his source material and pasting elements in different configurations to determine his finished composition. In 1931, the year this work was published, Stalin's regime centralized poster production, which enabled the state to censor artists and control their output, including dictating that the leader personify socialism. Artists once drawn to the utopianism of the revolution found themselves enlisted to mobilize the masses in support of a dictatorship. Despite his years of service, Klutsis was executed in 1938 for being an "enemy of the state."

ACTIVATING DATA

In this poster series, schematic and technical diagrams—from organizational charts to bar graphs—become tools for structuring a nonlinear history of trade unions. Lydia Naumova understood that data could tell complex stories of transformation, in this case how unions, in parallel with the 1917 Russian Revolution, redefined human capital. Utilizing the bold geometries and striking colors of Russian abstract painting of the 1910s as switchback layouts and giant dials linking one poster to another, she created visualizations of information both eye-catching in form and didactic in substance. This poster series exemplifies a popular genre of portable exhibition, intended for installation in public spaces, such as museums and workers' clubs, to educate and enlighten citizens in the Soviet Union.

A VAST NETWORK OF MAGAZINES

The Polish artist Henryk Berlewi described "a vast network of magazines scattered around the globe, which justify and propagate new ideas and forms." In the 1920s, journals emerged as a key mechanism for communication among internationally dispersed artists. As publishers, theorists, editors, and designers of magazines, artists embraced the expansion of printing technologies and sought to circulate artworks and ideas in their home cities and across the world. Groups and collectives formed around these journals, and they staged events, exhibitions, and performances.

Whether between Zagreb and Paris, Budapest and Berlin, the dominant discourse concerned a rational, functional, socially engaged and technologically driven mode of production, inspired by developments in Russia and adapted elsewhere, loosely identified as "Constructivism." These publications were driven by debate, but also by generosity and a desire for connectivity. Many featured advertisements for their counterparts in other cities (often with contact information) in a gridded format exemplifying their puzzle-piece interconnectedness.

MA

The magazine *Ma*, founded by writer, artist, and activist Lajos Kassák in Budapest in 1916, began as a platform for leftist artists to promote agitational art in Hungary and to connect with cultural producers across continental Europe. Following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and the rise and fall of Hungary's communist government in 1919, a new right-wing government waged a campaign of violence against leftists, trade unionists, and Jews, compelling Budapest's avant-garde to flee.

Kassák escaped to Vienna, where he continued to edit *Ma*, renamed *Ma: Aktivista folyóirat* in 1919. Artists such as Farkas Molnár and László Moholy-Nagy sought refuge at the German Bauhaus school of art and design, where they contributed to the journal. Written in Hungarian, the journal emphasized nationality, while its focus on Constructivism across Europe reflected an aspiration toward a universal artistic language, as seen in the adjacent display, which evokes objects and practices represented in its pages.

BLOK

Teresa Żarnower and Mieczysław Szczuka founded the journal *Blok* in Warsaw in 1924 to "present new forms of graphic design" and "mark out new pathways for printing." Intended to facilitate an international conversation about the role of technology in transforming art, each spread of the issue projected on this wall offers multilingual reports on developments in Berlin, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, the Netherlands, Paris, and Romania. The cover, constructed entirely with elements found in a printshop, exemplifies Żarnower and Szczuka's focus on the means of production as the vocabulary of the new artist.

The publication, which showcased vibrant avant-garde activities in Poland, was the heart of the eponymous collective. Three of its members—Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, and Henryk Stażewski—went on to found the "a.r." group. Dedicated to "revolutionary artists" and the "real avant-garde," the collective organized exhibitions and launched a publishing enterprise that highlighted typographic innovations in books and journals.

AN EXPERT IN PUBLICITY

Max Burchartz argued that an advertisement should be clear in its message, modern in its means, and economical in its form. Exemplifying this approach, the photomontage on the adjacent wall combines three distinct elements: photographic reproductions of industrial parts; a red square, indicating his Constructivist leanings; and Burchartz's own logo, a lowercase, bold, sans-serif *b* with an inset square. The upper three tubes are cannons; the bottommost is a pipe of the kind made by one of Burchartz's major clients, the manufacturer Bochumer Verein (later one of the largest arms producers for the Third Reich).

Neither an advertisement nor a study for publication, this photomontage is instead a personal work, like a calling card. A member of an international group of graphic designers and typographers founded by Kurt Schwitters known as the Ring of New Advertising/Publicity Designers, Burchartz was committed to advancing modern, functionalist advertising and typography. In the late 1930s, Burchartz, like many of his clients, turned toward fascism.

ARTIST AS ADMAN

"The word MERZ is nothing more than the second syllable of *Commerz*," Kurt Schwitters explained of his branding of his one-man art movement. The catalogue for his *Great Merz* exhibition of 1927 featured a photograph of him fashioned as an American-style adman, with slicked-back hair and a sly smile. While in fine art such gestures may have appeared ironic, Schwitters used the exhibition and its publicity to promote himself in his new role as an advertiser.

As a fine artist, Schwitters gathered urban detritus into collages. In 1924, he established the advertising agency Merz Werbezentral to address a broader public, shape its appreciation for functional design, and harness a stable income. Based in Hannover, the agency, later renamed Werbe-Gestaltung, served a range of clients, from a furniture maker to the city's streetcar company. Combining bold, often asymmetrical layouts, typographic elements reflecting information hierarchies, and photography, his designs emphasized split-second legibility for busy viewers.

PUBLIC ADDRESS

Doing double duty as message and form, a poster's text is as vital to its brash communication as its vibrant images. As slogans, texts argue forcefully on behalf of products or trumpet the virtues of emerging states, criss-crossing sheets to persuade consumers or agitate citizens. Language is delivered in a hierarchy, from short-hand headlines in oversize type, better to capture mobile viewers' split-second gaze, to precisely organized layers of information that demand sustained attention.

Sentences, words, and letters act as forms: abstracted into geometric shapes, blown up to fill a page, playfully jostled, treated like architecture in the sheet's open space, or repeated like items in an assembly line. These texts, whether alone or juxtaposed with, slashing through, or overlapping images, were designed to speak to and shape a wide audience. Calling out the aspirational spirit of the era in which they were made, graphic designer Karel Teige asserted, "Be a poster! Advertise and project a new world!"

A POSTER FOR DELFT SALAD OIL

"A poster . . . the kind of work that I've wanted for myself so often," wrote Bart van der Leck. "Now I'm being commissioned to make it!" The ten iterations of a poster design for the oil manufacturer Netherlands Oliefabriek (NOF) Calvé-Delft provide a step-by-step view of his process: starting with a mustachioed man behind a counter surrounded by bottles of salad oil, he made a set of initial designs and, tracing from those, progressively reduced elements to geometric shapes and lines rendered in a limited palette of primary colors (red, yellow, blue), black, and white.

A founding member of the artist group De Stijl, van der Leck honed his approach, including the use of black outlines, while apprenticing in a stained-glass workshop. Van der Leck's proposal was ultimately deemed unsuitable by NOF. The decomposition of the figure and his surroundings makes deciphering the product almost impossible—counterproductive for commercial purposes.

WOMEN AS PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS

Joseph Stalin's first Five-Year Plan (1928–32), which aimed to increase industrial productivity and the construction of public infrastructure, created an urgency for Soviet women to enter the workforce. A campaign for a "new everyday life" (*novyi byt*), in which the state would provide services such as childcare, cafeterias, and public laundries, sought to free women from domestic duties and enable them to work outside the home, in factories and communal farms, for example.

Central to this initiative was the creation of posters, often by women artists assigned to the theme, representing new ways female citizens could be producers and consumers in Soviet society. These artists sought to reach a wide public as they shaped the socialist ideal of gender equality. The posters on this wall showcase a range of approaches, from hand-drawing to photomontage, to present women at work—textile workers at industrial looms, machinists focused at their benches, tractor drivers in the fields—all in the service of encouraging civic duty.

LADISLAV SUTNAR: FROM PRAGUE TO NEW YORK

"The painter and draftsman have never had the opportunity to collaborate with print as today. Through print they work for life," wrote Ladislav Sutnar in 1932. A prominent artist, designer, art director, and educator in interwar Czechoslovakia, Sutnar likely assembled these five albums of his graphic design around the time he traveled to the United States to work on the Czechoslovak Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair. The onset of World War II left him exiled in the U.S., where he restarted a successful design career.

This compilation exemplifies Sutnar's range. In addition to books and magazines, he also created comprehensive identities for businesses and cultural institutions and advertisements for his own glass, porcelain, and metalware sets. The designs collected here demonstrate Sutnar's bold yet simple visual style, characterized by a limited palette of high-contrast colors; schematic layouts; and experiments with the concept of *typo-foto*, the combination of photography and letterforms for effective communication.

NEW WAYS OF LIVING

In Willi Baumeister's poster for the 1927 exhibition *The Dwelling*, a large red X strikes out an image of a traditional bourgeois drawing room, calling out the show's central, provocative question: "How should we live?" This challenge embodies the ambitions of architects and designers in the 1920s and 1930s to offer new ways of living—from furnishings to interior design to urban planning—that would modernize and improve the quality of daily life.

Experimenting with new materials, new technologies, and newly standardized forms made possible by industrial production, artists, architects, and designers reconceived traditional spaces, such as apartment blocks, schools, sanatoriums, and exhibition venues, while also innovating new ones. In the Soviet Union, for example, these included workers' clubs, intended to shape the new proletarian citizen through communal enlightenment and relaxation. In the excitement to share these new developments, exhibitions proliferated across Europe, with accompanying posters that advertised these efforts in bold shorthand.

ARCHITECTURE AS ADVERTISING/
ADVERTISING AS ARCHITECTURE

"Light-advertisements turn the street into an uncanny theater," wrote El Lissitzky of the transformation of the urban landscape in the 1920s. Electric signage converted building facades into publicity, while architectural forms—particularly exhibition designs and kiosks—became stages for persuasion. At the Bauhaus school, designers and architects such as Herbert Bayer, Walter Dexel, Heinz Loew, and Joost Schmidt reconceived the relationship between the built environment and mass media images. Bayer, for instance, capitalized on the visual effects of new technologies to build public desire for them, using transparency to advertise a glass company and electric lights to advertise an electric company. The surge of trade and industrial fairs, meanwhile, offered opportunities for artists and designers to expand the use of information and images—manipulated or scaled up to fill display spaces—whether for agitational or commercial purposes.

MODELS OF RESISTANCE

Ella Bergmann-Michel shot footage in the streets of Frankfurt during Germany's last free election, in 1932, weeks before Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor. In her unfinished film, we see city walls plastered with posters: those electioneering for the political parties—notice the three arrows of the Social Democrats, the hammer and sickle of the Communist Party, and the swastika of the Nazi Party—jostle with advertisements for stores and goods, all competing for urban dwellers' attention.

With fascism on the horizon, the utopian aspirations of artists collided with the dark realities of authoritarian power, in Hitler's Germany, in Joseph Stalin's USSR, in Benito Mussolini's Italy, and elsewhere. Even so, the daring experimentation and bold social agency of artists of the interwar period continued to seed opposition. There is no better case than that of John Heartfield, who used photomontage combined with acerbic texts to create biting critiques of National Socialism. Such resistance continues to be a powerful model and spark today.