MoMA Audio
Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented
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330. Introduction

Hear how artists become agents of change in moments of political, social, and technological upheaval. Enter 330 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a330 your phone.

Curator, Jodi Hauptman: I like to think of it that the earth is literally shaking below our feet because of wars and revolution and these enormous changes in industry and technology.

Professor, Stephen Kotkin: And so should workers make art? Should workers be the subject of the art? Should the medium be different?

Curator, Ellen Lupton: Art could now be out on the street; in magazines; art was on posters; on the walls of a factory.

Curator, Juliet Kinchin: Being an active agent in the creation of new ways of living and working and being

Jodi Hauptman: I'm Jodi Hauptman, Senior Curator in the Department of Drawings and Prints at the Museum of Modern Art. And I'm happy to welcome you to this exhibition.

There are two things that you should remember as you wander through the exhibition. The first is that this is a moment of enormous political, social, and economic change—World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In addition, there's expansion of the press and expansion of printed photographic images. So in the wake of all of that, artists began to ask this very simple question: what does it mean to be an artist? How do you make work that's relevant?

And what I think you'll notice right from the beginning is that the way these artists answer that question—what does it mean to be an artist—is that they leave their studio, the privacy of that space, and move out into the street to address a mass audience, to reach as many people as possible, to make work that has a more public dimension.

331. Lyubov Popova, *Production Clothing for Actor No. 7*, 1922

Hear how this costume design participates in building a new society. Enter 331 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a331 on your phone.

Curator, Jodi Hauptman: We're looking at a work by the Russian artist Popova, a costume design for a play called the *Magnanimous Cuckold*.

She was trained originally as an easel painter in the 1910s. And then the Russian Revolution happens in 1917. In the wake of that, she actually abandoned painting to produce forms of art that she feels will more directly engage a mass society.

She creates these costume designs that are based on worker's clothing. So, the blue in this costume would allude to the basic blue worker smock. So she's thinking about the role of industry and the way serial production is so much a part of people's lives. You can take one costume and repeat it and repeat it again and just change it in slight ways.

The red square is a form that's very much associated with the young Soviet Union. It's really a stand-in for the boldness and aspiration of this new society that artists, architects, workers, leaders are all building together. And it's a sign of this new visual language for a new world. And it's the language of abstraction, but what Popova and some of her fellow artists that you see in this room did, was they took that visual language, that abstraction, and retooled it for radical political ends.

332. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Maquette for poster for Tea Directorate (Chaeupravlenie) Cocoa* c. 1924

Hear why an artist and poet collaborated to become advertisers. Enter 332 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a332 on your phone.

Curator, Jodi Hauptman: We're looking now at some of my favorite works in the exhibition. They're a collaboration between the artist Aleksandr Rodchenko and the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

In the 1920s, in the early Soviet Union, capitalism was allowed for a brief moment, and they formed this advertising agency. Rodchenko would make these very dynamic graphics and Mayakovsky would make up these jingles, and then they would put them together. I'll just read the slogan for the chocolate because I just love it: "Comrades, there's no debate. Soviet citizens will get in great shape. What is ours is in our power. Where's our power? In this cocoa powder."

After 1917, those living in what would become the Soviet Union, were creating a society wholly from scratch. And what became part of these artists' mission, is to train a citizenry. How do you agitate a populace? How do you get them excited and involved? And these advertisements are just very much part of that—that every aspect of life, from your work to what you buy—all of that is collective activity that will further the ethos of this new society.

333. John Heartfield, The Hand has Five Fingers, 1928

Hear artist Martha Rosler on the potency of photomontage, then and now. Enter 333 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a333 on your phone.

Artist, Martha Rosler: My name is Martha Rosler and I'm an artist.

I went to photomontage myself because I felt the potency of actually referring to the real, even if it was to do so in a surreal manner, that is to rupture the agreed-upon surface of the everyday.

This poster of Heartfield's—it is both attractive and repellent at the same time, it's a hand that is distinctly unbeautiful, the workman's shirt. It appealed directly to a working-class identity. It's very potent visually because the fingers span that empty space. it certainly makes me want to stagger back a little bit. The hand bespeaks power, but the power is not turning a lathe or a machine, it's reaching for something. And what it's reaching for is to grab the enemy.

The text at the bottom is very careful and very clear, but it is at an angle so this violates notions of classical stability. And it's got exclamation points telling you that there's a very important thing you can do, which is vote. So it is an agitational poster with one message: go-get-'em!

Art alone is puny because it's only one utterance and it does not have the backing of power, but art is powerful when it is part of a human movement for change.

334. Valentina Kulagina, Maquette for *We Are Building*, 1929

Hear how an image of a Detroit skyscraper became a model for the construction of new Soviet cities. Enter 334 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a334 on your phone.

Curator, Ellen Lupton: I'm Ellen Lupton. I'm a curator at Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum and I study the history and practice of graphic design.

Valentina Kulagina was a Russian artist and designer working in the 1920s in the new Soviet Union. She cut and pasted and painted and drew the elements of this original photomontage. Artists and designers in the '20s often clipped photos out of books and magazines to create new work. It was also common for them to paint or draw images by hand on top of these photographs. They would also add lettering and typography to their montages.

The image of the worker, who she has welding on top of a building, becomes a heroic symbol of the growing Soviet Union. Behind the worker, you see a photograph of a skyscraper, actually a photograph of Detroit, but she's overlapped that with her own more abstract gridded drawings of new buildings rising up. So, it's as if this worker is making possible this growing Soviet modernity.

335. Nikolai Dolgorukov, Under the Banner of Lenin toward Building a Classless Society! (Pod znamenem Lenina k postroeniiu besklassovogo obshchestva!), 1932

Hear how artists agitated for Lenin's new regime. Enter 335 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a335 on your phone.

Archival audio of Vladimir Lenin (in Russian): What is Soviet power? What is the essence of this new power, which people in most countries still will not, or cannot, understand? The nature of this power, which is attracting larger and larger numbers of workers in every country, is the following: in the past the country was, in one way or another, governed by the rich, or by the capitalists, but now, for the first time, the country is being governed by the classes, and moreover, by the masses of those classes, which capitalism formerly oppressed.

Professor Stephen Kotkin: The fall of the czarist regime and Vladimir Lenin's coup d'état in 1917 didn't bring about the revolution in art. What it did bring about was a difficult question for the artists: should they serve the new regime for its revolutionary ends?

I'm Steven Kotkin. I'm a Professor of History and International Affairs at Princeton University and a Senior Fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

Propaganda for Lenin came very easily. Let's remember that World War I was pretty horrible. All of those families who had lost a loved one in the war. People who came home were maimed. Societies were just dumbstruck. And, so, there was a sense that things had to change. Something had to get better.

The promises of the revolutionary regime in the Soviet Union were extraordinary. The slogans from 1917—peace, land, bread, national self-determination—all of these sounded wonderful. Of course, in hindsight, we know that it was a big lie and a failure because you cannot produce peace and social harmony through mass violence, deportations, famine, terror, and everything else.

The essence of totalitarianism is how you act in support of a system that destroys your independent agency. This happened to many artists who were trying to propagandize, to mobilize the masses for the building of a new world.

336. Gustav Klutsis, Maquette for the poster *The Reality of Our Program Is Real People—That Is You and Me*, c. 1931
Hear about the failure of utopian aspirations. Enter 336 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a336 on your phone.

Professor Stephen Kotkin: The Stalin cult is about his megalomania, but it's also about empowering the millions of people who identified with him, wanted to be like him, wanted to sacrifice for him, and here, he simultaneously blends in with the masses, but he also stands out.

Stalin spoke and wrote very accessibly in a kind of catechism style, rhetorical question and answer. The particular speech that's depicted here was about allowing for higher wages to workers, if they worked better. And this was highly controversial because many people thought the revolution should bring about equality. But Stalin argued in this speech that if you worked harder, you should get paid more, because we need to build our factories, raise our technological level, and compete in the international system.

1931 was a time of unbelievable upheaval, mass violence. About 5 to 7 million people died of starvation. At least 50 million starved but survived. But alongside the mass starvation, there were soaring hopes for a new world of peace, prosperity, social harmony. A world that would not be capitalist but would be socialist. The thrill was that all of this was right around the corner and that you could bring about this new world and you could live in this new world. A revolution is kind of like a social earthquake. The earth opens up, it cracks, and out come all of these people to rise to dizzying heights who, before the revolution, had very limited life chances.

Klutsis served the revolutionary cause. Not everyone understood that in serving this regime, they were effectively giving up their independent agency. Many of

them thought that they were making it better. It's the great paradox of the age--an age, which could have so much bloodshed horror and terror, could produce such uplifting iconography and such fantastic works of art.

337. *MA* Magazine, Lajos Kassák, Ma: Aktivista-Folyóirat, Volume IX, no. 1, 1923

Hear about the vibrant community around the journal *Ma.* Enter 337 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a337 your phone.

Curator, Juliet Kinchin: My name is Juliet Kinchin. I'm a former Curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA.

MA magazine was a Hungarian magazine initially published out of Budapest in Hungary. The title MA means “today” but also can be taken to stand for “Magyar Aktivizmus,” Hungarian activism.

It was started during World War I. And Hungary, at that moment, was really at the very epicenter of the turbulence, as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was crashing apart around this group of artists, architects, and designers in the MA group. Many of this group were involved in the short-lived Bolshevik revolution of 1919, which was quickly followed by vicious reprisals. Many of them had to flee Budapest, and the publication of the magazine moved to Vienna.

You can see the shifting graphic identity of the *MA* magazine covers. When you look at the cover designed by MA's founder, Lajos Kassák, he's changed the format of the magazine to a square and has introduced these very architectonic letterforms, the M and the A have an architectural presence, like building blocks.

Curator, Jodi Hauptman: Farkas Monar's 1924 cover design for ma also features architectural letter forms.

Juliet Kinchin: 1924 was the year that Lenin died and hundreds of thousands of people filed past his body in the Red Square. So, in a sense, this red square almost becomes like a muster ground for this new collectivist society to which the MA group were looking forward.

338. Journals Introduction

Hear why artists turned to journal-making during this period. Enter 338 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a338 on your phone.

Curator, Jodi Hauptman: Throughout this period, we see this just incredible proliferation of artists' journals. And they're very important communication tools.

Editor, Alexander Provan: My name is Alexander Provan and I'm the editor of Triple Canopy, which is a digital magazine based in New York.

I think the perennial reason for starting a magazine is the ability to speak to a vast number of people, to bypass gatekeepers, to get around the institutions that you might not have access to. theoretically you could reach as many people as possible without having to get anyone's approval or have much money or recognition or status.

I think what's most exciting about magazines from this period, especially, given the new nation-states that were coming into being and the degree to which nationalism was fueling war, you can use a magazine to create relationships that transcend national identity, to create an international network that generates new ideas about how we can be in the world, what kind of political models we want, and what kinds of demands we can place on governments.

I think, generally, the level of precariousness in the world that these people inhabited was really extreme. And these magazines were pretty short-lived, but I can't imagine the people who started them would have expected anything else. And, so, I think that's one reason the magazines are so intense. You feel like everything these people have is being put into the magazine. And every issue has everything at once.

339. Kurt Schwitters, Poster for Opel Day: Great car and flower parade (Opel-Tag: Grosser Auto Blumen Korso), 1927

Hear about Kurt Schwitters's efforts to create a modern typeface. Enter 339 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a339 on your phone.

Curator, Ellen Lupton: Kurt Schwitters was a German artist, poet, publisher and graphic designer. He really wanted to disrupt familiar art practices. However, he had a family to support, so he was also seeking ways to use his skills as an artist to create work for commercial clients.

In this poster for a car show, Schwitters was experimenting with creating a new alphabet. It really annoyed him that the letters of the alphabet are so arbitrary. He wanted to reform the writing system so that the shapes of the alphabet would have more of a connection to the sounds of speech. So, if you look closely at the letterforms in this poster, you'll see that all the vowels are drawn with curves and the consonants are drawn with straight lines.

To create this poster, he had to actually draw all those letters by hand and it was his dream to have an actual typeface made from these letters that could be used in print shops. But he learned that this was an industrial process that was beyond his means.

Schwitters was really into graphic design. He thought it was an important part of culture and business. So even though Schwitters was an incredible artist with this really original practice as a collagist and a Dada performer, he was also really involved in building up graphic design as a new profession.

340. Kurt Schwitters, Poster for Dammerstock Housing Estate

Hear about the work of Kurt Schwitters's advertising agency. Enter 340 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a340 your phone.

Curator, Juliet Kinchin: One of the projects that Schwitters' Merz publicity agency undertook was the design identity for a housing estate exhibition, the Dammerstock Housing Estate. Schwitters actually takes the outline plan of the Dammerstock housing estate and attaches it to the letter "D" of Dammerstock. So, it's this idea of the synergy between topography and architecture at that time. And it's also about creating a graphic identity that wasn't just about the poster for the exhibition, it was the labels, the tags, the envelopes, the letterheads, the entrance tickets. And giving the whole event this very unique and clear identity.

But I think for Schwitters, graphic design became one of the frontiers through which modernism, he felt, could enter society at large. He very much wanted to take his ideas into the public realm. He saw text and topography as one of the great ways of confronting bourgeois life.

341. Natalia Pinus, We Will Build Daycares, Playgrounds, and Factory Kitchens. Enlist Working Women into the Ranks of Active Participants in the Industrial and Social Life of the Country! 1933

How did posters promote women entering the workforce? Enter 341 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a341 on your phone.

Curator, Ellen Lupton: We're looking at a poster by Natalia Pinus, featuring a woman worker in the foreground and behind her are spools of thread in a factory. And we see through the windows children are being supervised in what looks like a wonderful sunny playground.

The poster is made with a combination of photographic and hand-drawn imagery. So, you might think of a factory as a harsh and cold and noisy place, but by mixing

that color yellow with the black and white photographs, the artist is really able to create this feeling of warmth and happiness, and the sense of pride that this woman has in working in the factory and, and being surrounded by well-cared-for children.

Many of these posters reflected the rise of social realism as an official style in Soviet design. It became an official policy in the thirties to create highly legible posters with very clear idealized images of Soviet workers.

Professor Stephen Kotkin: An artist can't be separated from the masses in a socialist revolution. The artist is producing, not works of art per se, but is producing techniques to mobilize the masses on behalf of the revolutionary aims. So the artist is like a worker in a workshop, churning out images to be put up on the wall in factories, public places, in order for people to be enthused and themselves want to participate in creating this new world.

350. Maria Bri-Bein, Woman Worker, Fight for A Clean Canteen, for Healthy Food

Hear about efforts to increase industrial productivity in the Soviet Union. Enter 341 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a341 on your phone.

Curator, Ellen Lupton: We're looking at a poster by Maria Bri-Bein, an image of an industrial kitchen and one of the cooks is a woman and she's testing the quality of the soup. Women in the Soviet Union increasingly entered the workforce with the advent of Stalin's five-year plan, which was 1928 to 1932.

Historian, Stephen Kotkin: The five-year plan was an enormously successful piece of propaganda. It was supposed to be about planning the economy and having a massive growth spurt in GDP. There was no planning. It was very chaotic, but the idea was extremely catchy. You could, for example, put up output quotas and say how much steel should be produced, how much coal should be mined. And you could then print the statistics showing that you exceeded your quotas. With these quantitative statistical presentations, which were on all of the posters, they created the sense that the country was moving forward, building this new world of heavy industrial factories and could compete better than the capitalists at the new technology, but also were supposedly more just because there was supposedly no exploiting class. It didn't happen. But for a time, the dreams were very powerful.

342. Piet Zwart, Poster for the rubber flooring manufacturer LAGA, 1922

Learn about a socialist architect's approach to designing advertisements. Enter 342 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a342 on your phone.

Curator, Ellen Lupton: Piet Zwart was a Dutch architect and he designed interiors, and products, and furniture throughout his whole life. But in the early 20's, he discovered graphic design and we're looking at a poster of his for rubber flooring, in which he used the tools of the architect to draw all of his letters—so, he used a triangle, a T-square, a compass.

In the upper left-hand corner, you see this big logo that spells out the word Laga, which is one of the companies being advertised. He was inspired to try to create letterforms that conform to that pure geometry of right angles. Some of the other letters conform to the perfect circle. So, he was trying to find a kind of ideal geometry that was related to contemporary architecture.

Throughout his life, Piet Zwart was a very committed socialist. He was very concerned with the rights of workers. But he was also a commercial designer. He did posters for bread, and butter, and ham, you know, things that we would find in the supermarket. He brought his avant-garde design mentality to promote this material of everyday life.

343. Piet Zwart, Advertisement for Vickers House, The Hague, 1923

Hear how one designer brought letterforms to life. Enter 343 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a343 your phone.

Curator, Ellen Lupton: One of Zwart's most spectacular letterpress pieces is this 1923 advertisement for Vickers House. And the products being advertised are really ordinary. In the middle of the postcard, you see the words *zagen*, *boren*, and *vijlen*—saws, drills, and files. And all of those words end with the letter N and so you see the letter N, in green and in black, transitioning from a very narrow shape to getting wider and smaller and eventually becoming an H. So, in a way this little postcard is presenting a movie, like a moving image of letterforms changing and transforming as they move from top to bottom.

On the left side of the postcard, you see these little triangular, jaggy lines represent saw blades. And the sequence of circles going from small to large represents drill bits. And at the bottom, you see a pattern of diamonds that represents the texture of a metal file. Letterpress is a technology that is based on working with preexisting letterforms, rather than drawing letterforms by hand. So, he's using these wonderful abstract elements from the typesetting case to create these beautiful illustrations of simple industrial products. And this really became a hallmark of his work.

344. Fré Cohen, *Wat is Dat? De Encyclopedie Voor Jongeren*, (What is that? The encyclopedia for young people), vol. 13, 1930s Booklet

Hear about a designer who created designs for children. Enter 344 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a344 on your phone.

Curator, Juliet Kinchin: Fré Cohen was an extremely prolific designer in interwar Amsterdam. We're looking at a cover for a serial encyclopedia for young people called *What is that*? And I think of the girl who's lying sprawled across a carpet of flowers as like Fre Cohen with this endless curiosity about the world and this commitment to self-improvement and the value of education, particularly for girls. You can see her imaginative life as she's engaged in this encyclopedia.

There's an airplane in the top left corner. And below it, a gymnast bolting off an electricity pylon, very much engaged in the modern world and the future, and with such energy. And you can see the splashes of red and the red lettering, very much indicative of her socialist politics and affiliation.

345. Fré Cohen, *Goud Vreugdes Ontwaken* (Goudvreugde's Awakening), by Marie W. Vos, c. 1930 Book
273 words / 01:37

Hear about Cohen's designs for a socialist youth organization. Enter 345 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a345 on your phone.

Juliet Kinchin: Fré Cohen was from a Jewish working-class family and like many in her community, her family was a backbone of the Social Democratic Workers Party in the Netherlands. And these organizations had an affiliated youth group, like many political parties in the 1920 and 1930s, the AJC. They were her first main client.

The activities of this youth organization were hiking, camping, singing and dancing, and performing these plays. The idea was that this would be a genuine working class, socialist culture. We know of the Hitler youth organizations, but there were also their left-wing or socialist counterparts. The Nazis did try to shut down these rival organizations because they were aware of how powerful they were in really forming an ideologically, politically engaged and informed new generation.

So these intersecting socialist and Jewish circles in which she moved throughout her life, allowed her to develop this flourishing practice as a graphic designer but ultimately they also made her doubly vulnerable during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. And, sadly, she chose to take her own life in 1943, when she was captured by the Germanische SS.

346. Elena Semenova, Drawings for Workers Club Lounge, Cafeteria, Reading Room, 1930

Learn about how workers' clubs shaped collective experience. Enter 346 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a346 on your phone.

Curator, Jodi Hauptman: We're looking at three drawings for a worker's club by Elena Semenova.

In those early years of the Soviet Union, there's this idea of building something new and bringing everyone in. And the worker's club was part of that. They were often attached to factories and they were meant to kind of extend the collective experience of work into the realm of leisure. And, so, they were spaces to read, to rest, to eat, and to teach.

I love in those little boxes, where you can imagine the workers coming in and changing their clothes and putting their dirty work clothes in those little cubbies. And then they can go sit down and relax. It's a very light-filled space. There's no clutter. There's no ornament. That attentiveness to how details can transform your lived experience is so important here. And I think it's shared by many of the artists in this room, who were really thinking about different models of living.

I think sometimes we think of citizenry as the act of voting or working for a political cause. But a worker's club shows us being an active citizen extends to every part of what you do.

347. Max Bill, Poster for an exhibition on the Neubühl housing project, Zurich, 1931

Hear about how rethinking housing encouraged new ways of living. Enter 347 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a347 on your phone.

Curator, Juliet Kinchin: There were many exhibitions of the period devoted to housing. And often these exhibitions took the form of an actual housing project, like that at Neubühl in Switzerland. And you can see in this poster, which was designed by Max Bill, a Swiss architect, designer, artist, he's given a diagrammatic representation of the site, you can see the underlying, rational layout of the housing, and overlaid that with this dynamic, very modern use of color and sans serif type.

These communities were like laboratories for this new way of living—prefabricated architectural styles, incorporating modern utilities, clean fuels like electricity, and new kinds of kitchens and layouts.

And the Neubühl community was also where many furnishings by the firm of Wohnbedarf were actually displayed. Light, economic, mass-produced furniture with which people could furnish this new style of small, modern houses.

348. Erich Mrozek, Poster design for *International Hygiene Exhibition*, Dresden, 1930

Hear how typography amplifies this poster design's message. Enter 348 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a348 on your phone.

Curator, Juliet Kinchin: In the 1920s and 1930s, many designers were actively aspiring to make a more equitable open kind of society. And in Germany, were the proliferation of civic exhibitions on a whole range of themes: education, sport, the new architecture, the new kitchen, the new housework.

One such exhibition in 1930 was, specifically on the subject of hygiene, and the poster was designed by Erich Mrozek. You can see the design is purely typographic. It's about this idea of purifying and purging the language of art and design, just as people needed to purify and create healthy bodies and lifestyles for this new world. The vivid yellow ground communicates this sense of sunshine and health.

At this time, there were real health issues with tuberculosis outbreaks. And this theme of health and hygiene was intimately connected with the development of modernism—the idea that the new architecture, the new world should be full of air and light and sunshine. But of course, with hindsight, the idea of hygiene and Germany at this time has uneasy overtones of racial and ethnic cleansing.

349. Ella Bergmann-Michel, Wahlkampf (Letzte Wahl), 1932

Explore artists' activism and resistance. Enter 349 on MoMA Audio or moma.org/a349 your phone.

Curator, Jodi Hauptman: In this is a film by the artist Ella Bergmann-Michel, we see the way the streets of Frankfurt are transformed by political posters. This footage was shot in 1932, so right before Hitler became chancellor of Germany. And so we see a dark end to this very dynamic period. We're heading into world war, into fascism across Europe.

What I would say is that so much was seeded in the late teens, twenties, and into the thirties by these artists. What we see in this exhibition is the expansion of the role of the artist, the idea of participating, of resisting, of responding to their own time. And we continue to see that resistance all the way up until the present day.

We're also living in a time of enormous political, social, economic change. We're also living in a time, where image-making has exploded in new forms—online platforms and new ways of using digital tools. So, when we see artists trying to make art that lives on Twitter or on Facebook, those artists are also thinking about: how can they respond to the most urgent political, social, and economic issues of their day?

And so this exhibition is, in a way, a reminder that as artists and as people who look at art, we have to continually ask ourselves those questions about the meaning of art, what it can do, and what it can say about our time.