

**Plate 98** Lyubov Popova, *Spatial Force Construction*, 1920–21, oil with marble dust on wood, 113 x 113 cm. Costakis Collection.

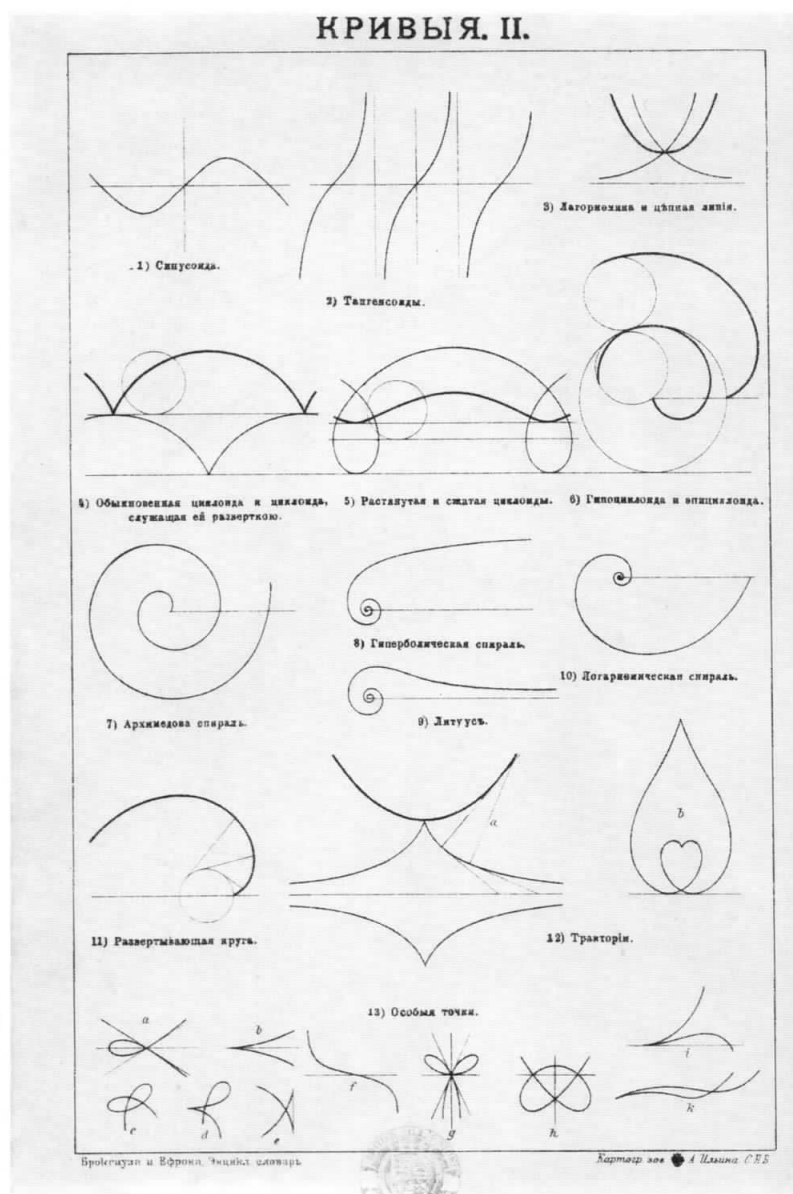
### The drawn line

In order to say something more about the force of the idea of 'construction', I shall focus on just one of its elements – the drawn line. We should not be surprised, perhaps, that drawing was such a central concern, given its associations with the elementary composition of painting in the fine-art tradition *and* with the kind of technical drawing used in industry.<sup>2</sup>

Lyubov Popova's *Spatial Force Construction* (Plate 98) is an example of how certain techniques were used to signify the working of a rational system of construction. The

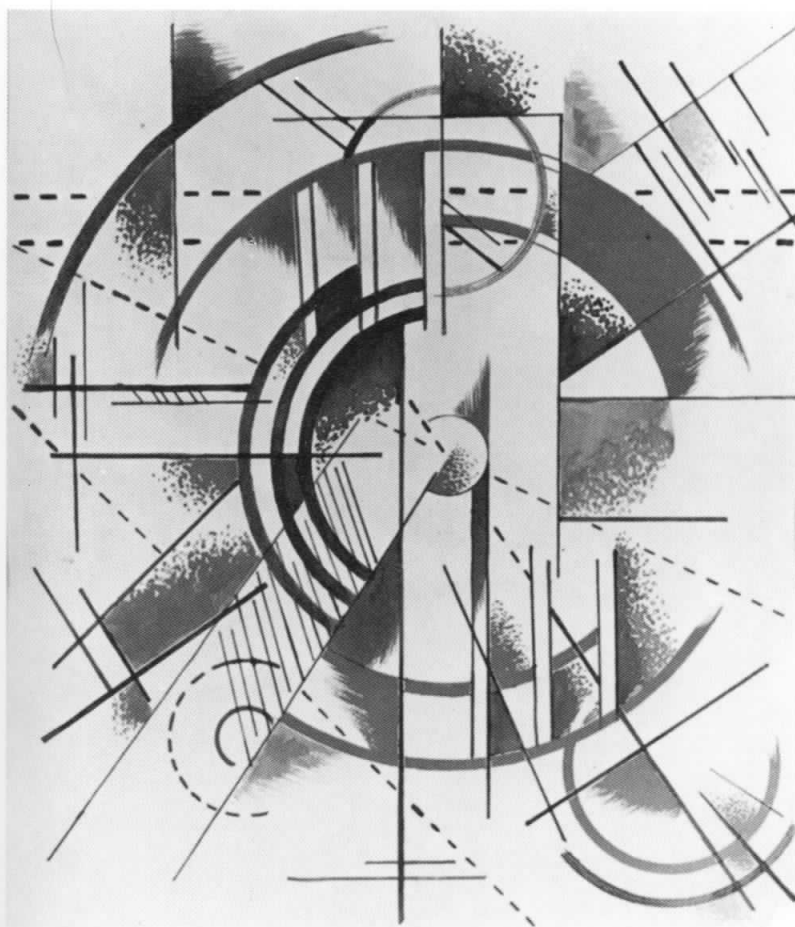
<sup>2</sup> M. Nesbit has done some extremely interesting work on the line and the geometric in France, discussed in her series of Durning-Lawrence lectures, *The Language of Industry*, given at University College London in 1991. See also her article on drawing, industry and mass production, 'Ready-made originals'.

**Plate 99** 'Curves' from *The Encyclopaedia Slovar* (generally known as *The Brockhaus Efron*), vol.67, opposite p.740, 1907. British Library 2108d. Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board.



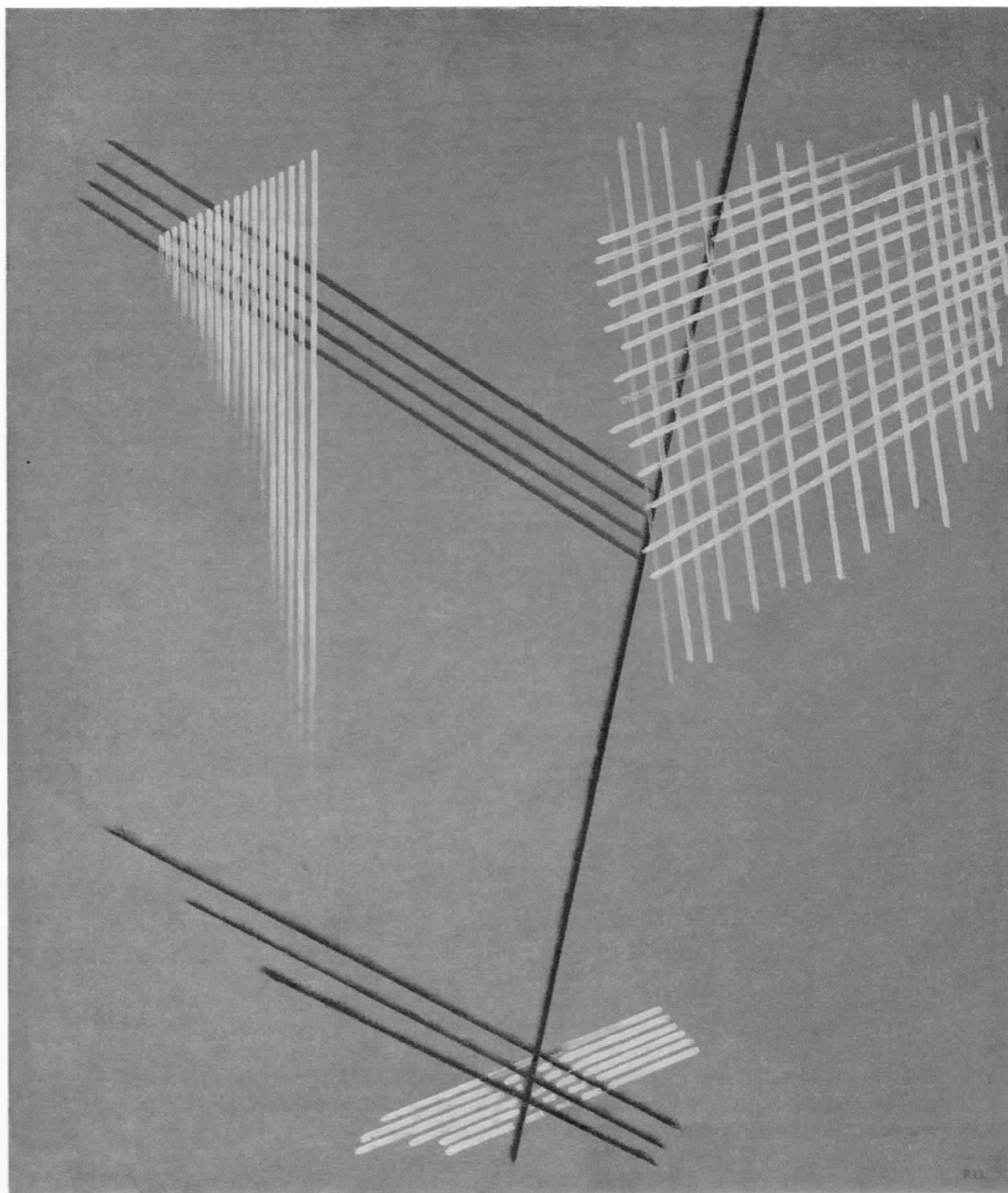
broken, ruler-drawn line of the diagram refers to diagrammatic drawing of the kind found in Plate 99. Like the materials and technical methods that were borrowed from the realm of industry in the three-dimensional constructions we looked at earlier, the diagrammatic line is derived from the realm of science and technical drawing. In one of the studies for this work (Plate 100) this diagrammatic layout is more obvious, but still the final work has elements of that notation. The works do not represent the world by 'conventional signification', if that is taken to be the model used in figurative art, but they contain allusions to the world in which they were produced through a currency of associations of materials and methods.

One of the most important features of artistic construction was that it was treated as a system that could be broken down into component parts. Its elements could be analysed, dissected and put back together again. The basic building bricks of construction were broadly formal in character and included *faktura* (surface texture), line, colour, plane,

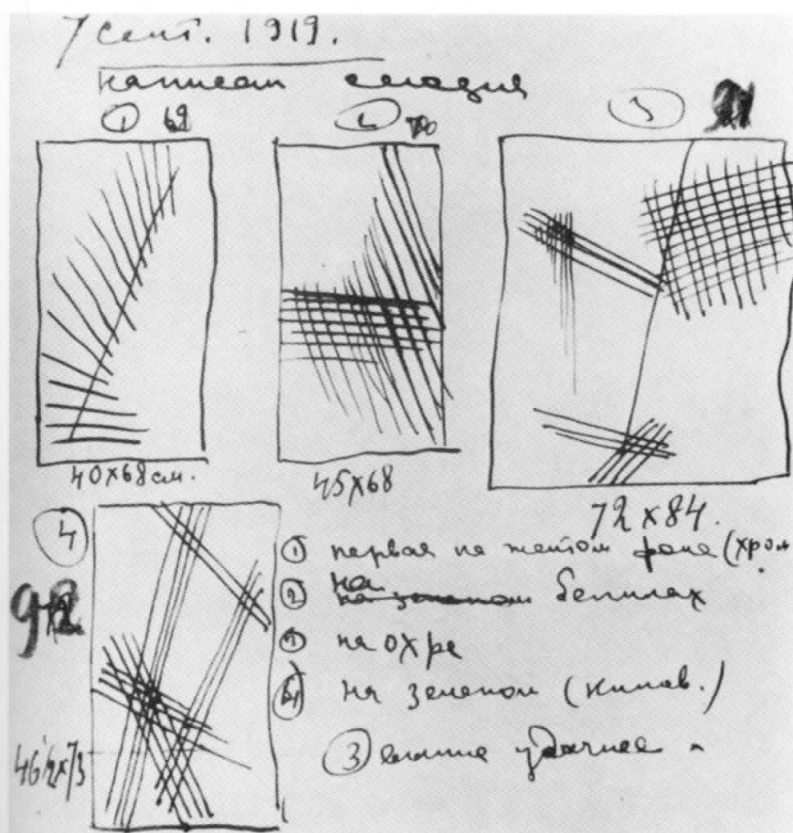


**Plate 100** Lyubov Popova, *Spatial Force Construction*, 1920–21, watercolour on paper, 46 x 40 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, TR74. Gift of George Costakis.

space and material. Each element in the system could be worked on and analysed separately from the others. So Rodchenko, for example, could concentrate in one series of works on the line – the line as far as was possible exclusive of all other concerns, minimizing evidence of surface texture or colour. His *Non-Objective Painting* (Plate 101) of 1919 was made up of lines on an unobtrusive brown surface – lines of different lengths, in different combinations. In a notebook drawing of the same year, this work is shown as one of several possibilities, each using lines in different permutations (Plate 102). Works such as Plate 101 were produced *as* paintings, to reiterate a point I have already made, but were later redefined as research – as the idea of painting became increasingly hard to defend. In 1921, Rodchenko identified the line as a basic element in the system of construction: it was 'the carcass, the skeleton, the relationship between different planes; it could also show movement, collision, conjunction, break and continuation' ('The line', p.293). The line could be isolated (Plate 103) and then deployed in various combinations. As an element in the system of construction, it was treated as 'raw material', a basic component; but it was also seen as a 'device', as a forming element that could implement a variety of effects, for example where the line demarcated areas of pictorial space or suggested recession. In *Linear Construction* (Plate 104), the line as a perspectival device for showing recession in space is at the same time hinted at and denied by concentrating attention on the line as an element in the construction of the surface. Like the carcass or the skeleton, where only a structure is left, the line is one of the basic elements of construction to remain when all the superficial elements of composition have been removed.



**Plate 101** Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Non-Objective Painting*, 1919, oil on canvas, 85 x 71 cm. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of the artist, through Jay Leyda.

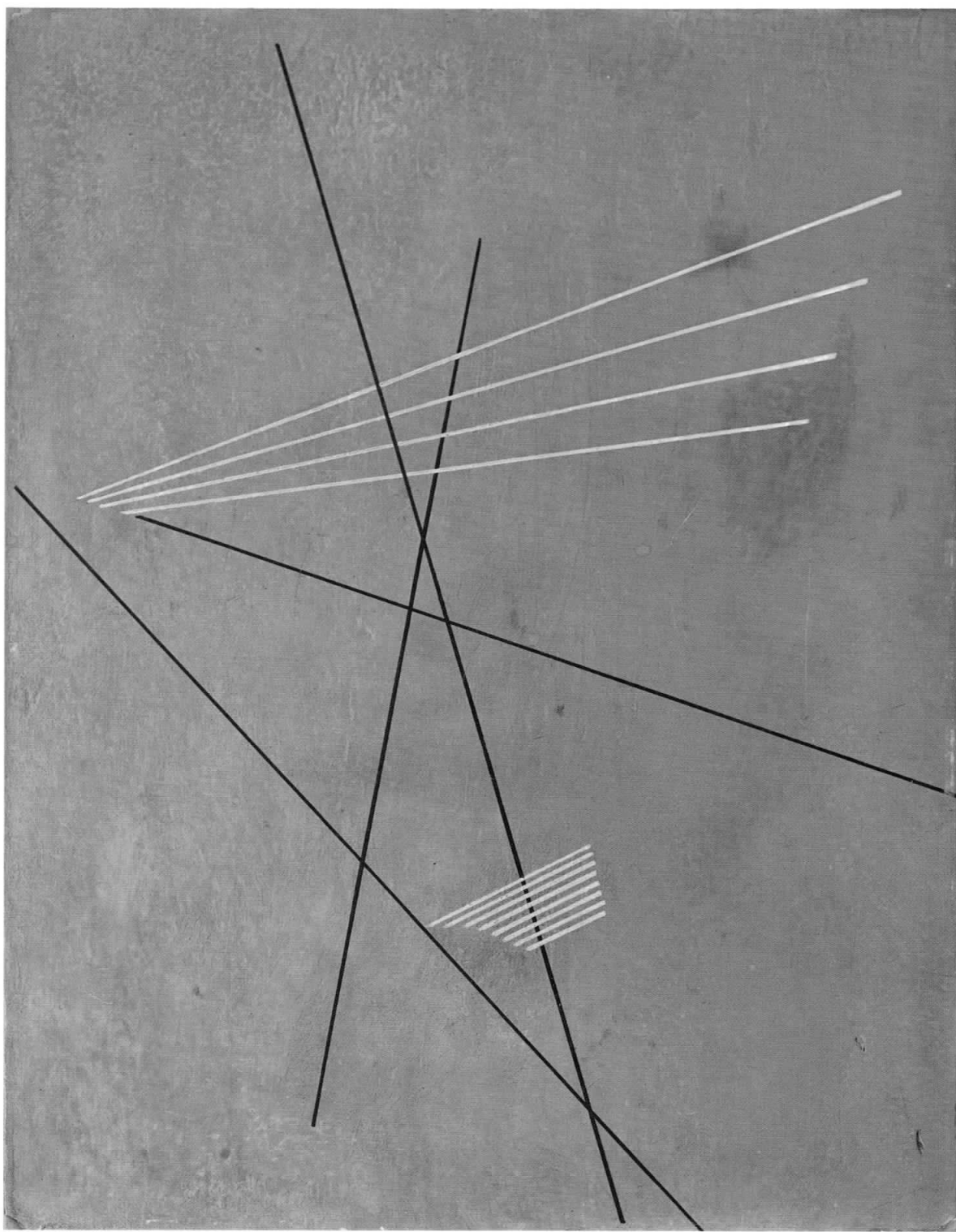


**Plate 102** Aleksandr Rodchenko, a page from a notebook, 1919. Rodchenko Family Archive, reproduced from G. Karginov, *Rodchenko*, 1979, Budapest, Corvina Kiado.

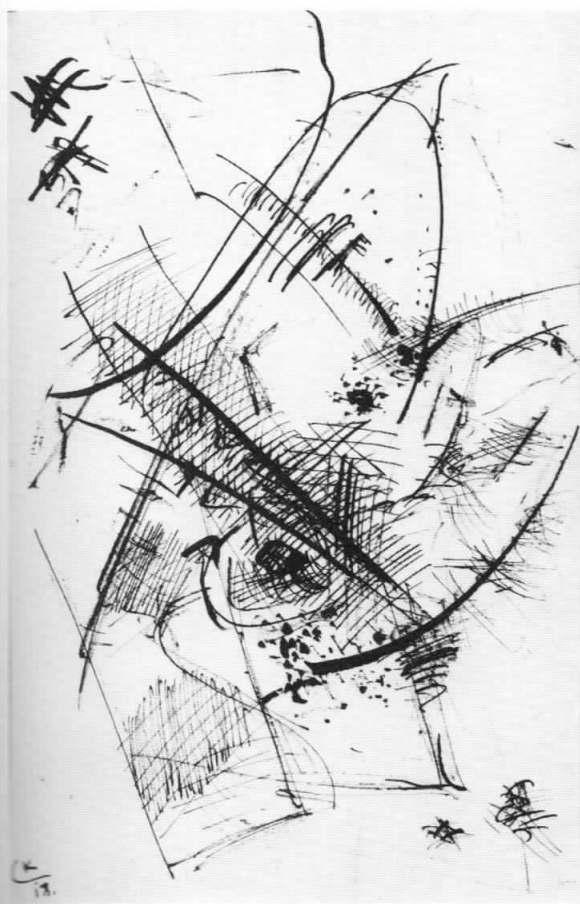


**Plate 103** Aleksandr Rodchenko, sketch for the cover of the booklet *The Line*, 1921. Rodchenko Family Archive, Moscow.





**Plate 104** Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Linear Construction*, 1919, oil on panel, 47 x 36 cm. Private collection. Photograph by courtesy of Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva.



**Plate 105** Vasily Kandinsky,  
*Abstraction*, 1918, indian ink on paper,  
24 x 16 cm. Tretyakov Gallery,  
Moscow, TR5. Costakis Collection.

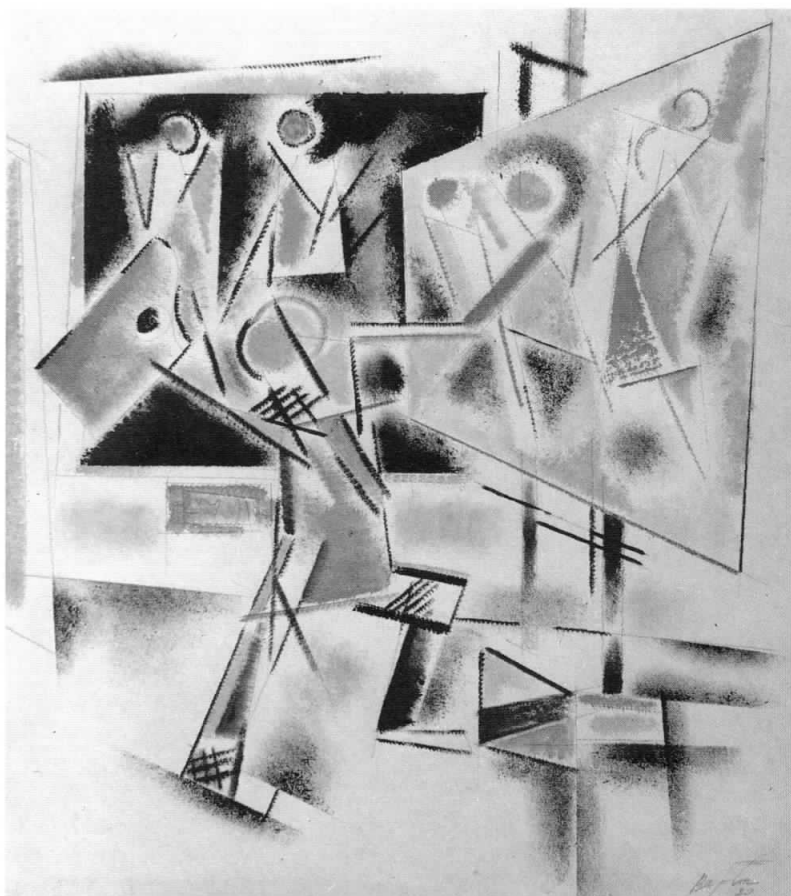
The line in both these works by Rodchenko has, of course, been drawn. And it has been drawn in a certain way, to take on a particular character. It has not been drawn free-hand as in Vasily Kandinsky's *Abstraction* (Plate 105), where cross-hatching, dots, curves and angles display purposefully the hasty marks of the artist's hand. The effect of these marks was interpreted by Kandinsky, and by his opponents, as both psychological and expressive. Kandinsky had returned to Russia from Germany in 1915 and was involved in the INKhUK debates in 1920–21, until he was ousted by the Constructivists – subsequently moving back to Germany, and to the Bauhaus. Kandinsky's commitment to the expression of emotion was taken by the Constructivists to be retrogressive. For Rodchenko,

the inaccurate, trembling line traced by the hand cannot compare with the straight and precise line drawn with the set square, reproducing the design exactly. Handcrafted work will have to try to be more industrial. Drawing as it was conceived in the past loses its value and is transformed into diagram or geometrical projection.

(Rodchenko, 'The line', p.294)

The old role of the line in composition is transformed in the language of construction. The laxity of a 'trembling line' drawn by the artist's hand is considered less precise and therefore of less value than a line drawn using a set-square, as if the hand plays no part. Industrial techniques could serve as correctives to the arbitrary character of the hand-made. The brush, for Rodchenko, had formerly had a use in conveying the illusion of an object; but its value was now exhausted, a sign only of servitude to an anachronistic model of illusionistic art. The Constructivists' attempt to 'depersonalize' practice, to take it out of the realm of individual artistic expression, made it necessary to mediate the hand of the

**Plate 106** Varvara Stepanova,  
*Painter at an Easel*, 1920,  
 tempera on paper, 40 x 35 cm.  
 Photograph by courtesy of  
 Aleksandr Lavrentiev and the  
 Rodchenko Family Archive,  
 Moscow.



artist as much as possible. Thus, '*Faktura* in painting (impasto, glaze, etc.) has been superseded by mechanical tools (roller, press, etc.) which make possible a scientific analysis of form and material' (Rodchenko, p.294). The way in which the lines were drawn was itself suggestive: straight, ruler-drawn lines signified in part the tools that had been used to draw them, tools that were associated with draughtsmanship and technical drawing. Stepanova talked of 'mechanized factures', where the spray-gun or the roller mediated the hand of the artist (Plate 106). The point here is that the spray-gun no more mediated – in any literal sense – the artist's hand than, say, the more conventional brush, but the use of 'mechanized' techniques signified difference from the conventional techniques of painting. Art becomes here, not a matter of *depicting* new symbols but of renegotiating itself as a symbolic practice, in a continual state of redefinition through the means that it uses.

In 1923, in an article published in *LEF* (the journal of the Left Front of the Arts), Brik wrote about Rodchenko's move into production:

Rodchenko was an abstract artist. He has become a Constructivist and a production artist. Not just in name, but in practice.

(O. Brik, 'Into production', p.130)

He compared Rodchenko with other artists who had merely adopted the fashionable jargon of Constructivism:

Instead of 'composition', they say 'construction', instead of 'to write' they say 'to shape', instead of 'to create' – 'to construct'. But they are all doing the same old thing ...

(Brik, p.130)



'The same old thing' was painting pictures, or applying ornament in applied art (whether it be flowers or Suprematist circles), or working on abstract aesthetic problems in a vacuum. 'Not just in name,' Brik stressed, 'but in practice'. As Brik says, this re-naming was not merely a matter of preferring one term over another, but part of a fundamental change in how art was perceived – and a redescription that involved a change in the terms of reference. Rodchenko's ruler-drawn lines were meaningful if they were seen as components in a system of construction: the lines were represented *as* part of that system; to talk about works such as these as 'non-representational' obscures this fundamental point.

Underlying Brik's comments was the idea that changes in the forms of linguistic description are bound to changes in the practice of art. There is a relationship between them, and yet one is neither superfluous to, nor simply synonymous with, the other. Next, I want to consider further how art, as an autonomous system of signs, was understood to be both analogous with, as well as distinct from, the formal character of language.

## *The language of construction and the construction of language*

### **Art and language**

When I compared Rodchenko's and Kandinsky's line drawings, I noted their differing character – one ruler-drawn, one traced unevenly by hand – and the connotations that each held in a given context. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the claim for the expressive value of a painting made up of abstract forms – over and above a 'pattern' and the merely 'decorative' or 'utilitarian' value attributed to design – had been fought for by Kandinsky and others in the early 1910s.<sup>3</sup> Now, in changed circumstances, the ruler- or compass-drawn line symbolically reinstated a utilitarian basis for art: precisely because of its utilitarian connotations, the line could trace an intersection between art and industry. It was still vital that work in construction be distinct from the ornamental patterns of applied or decorative art, but it was also set squarely against the spiritual significance with which earlier abstract artists had sought to imbue artistic form – which came to be linked by the Constructivists with retrogressive notions of individuality, psychology and subjectivity. The line, for Rodchenko, could serve as the sign of a 'red farewell' to all that,<sup>4</sup> and could usher in the new conditions of collective work. The gesture was made technically (just a line, or a series of lines on a surface of board) but the gesture was politically inflected – a symbolic point of intersection, too, with Bolshevism.

These were important ideological differences, yet we should not lose sight here of the common ground over which they were fought. Both Kandinsky and the Constructivists declared a commitment to the idea that art was part of a revolutionary programme. They described artistic form in similar terms – for instance, in their mutual insistence on a basic formal vocabulary of line, surface, plane, space, colour, texture. They shared the belief that art was a kind of language, made up of formal components, and not dependent on resemblance to objects in the world. Yet their respective approaches depended on different models of the kind of language that art might be. It is one thing to agree on a structure, another to agree on the value and significance of its component parts. The question I want to pursue here is how it was the Constructivist model that won out.

In 1920 the INKhUK programme was initially set up on the basis of a plan devised by Kandinsky, who at that time was centrally involved in its activities. The effects of the formal properties of art were to be examined as 'a bridge to the explanation of their

<sup>3</sup> See C. Harrison's discussion of the emergence of abstract art, in Chapter 3 of Harrison *et al.*, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction*.

<sup>4</sup> See Harrison *et al.*, Chapter 3.