Art as construction

The specific character of the Russian context can be at least partly gauged by the ambiguous status of the objects shown at the third ỌBỌMKHЪ exhibition. Another photograph of the installation (Plate 87) shows a little more clearly how the objects were exhibited. There were works hung on the walls, free-standing constructions, and constructions suspended on wires from the ceiling. One of the free-standing constructions was Georgii Stenberg’s Construction for a Spatial Structure No.11 (Plate 88) made of iron, glass and wood; the metal elements were assembled with bolts and welded: it was a construction made in modern industrial materials using industrial processes of assembly. Like the works by Medunetsky we have already looked at, it was not conceived of as a piece of sculpture; yet neither was it an industrial product. It had been exhibited a few months before at a show called The Constructivists in January 1921, also in Moscow. This seems to have been the first appearance of the term ‘constructivist’, and the artists involved, Medunetsky and the two Stenberg brothers, declared ‘art and its priests outlawed’ (quoted in A. Nakov, 2 Stenberg 2, p.66). Constructivists did not see themselves as artists in the conventional sense, and the objects they produced were not to be construed as art. In March they signed The Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists, joining with the Constructivist group focused around Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova.

Although Rodchenko had not previously been part of the ỌBỌMKHЪ group, he participated in their third exhibition, where he showed a series of hanging constructions including Oval Hanging Construction No.12 (Plate 89). Rodchenko had begun this series well before the decisive commitment to utilitarian work was declared in the programme.
but it was included in the exhibition as ‘laboratory work’. That is, after it had been made it came to be thought of as ‘research’. These shifts are never cut and dried, but it is significant that Rodchenko produced this construction as an art work, and exhibited it as a piece of research. The practice of art came to be characterized by, and even became, a continual process of re-definition. This re-definition of even recently produced work according to shifting categories of art, research and production shows the insecure and transitional character of these works and of the world in which they were made. They were open to reinterpretation even by those who had made them: something that may have been made as an art object could cease to be seen as one. (And they were open to further reinterpretation: later on, under a different set of pressures, Rodchenko looked back critically and saw all these ‘experiments’ as, once again, art.)

These shifts indicated how ambivalent the work was – an ambivalence that can apply, I think, to the exhibition as a whole, in which, as we’ve seen, works were shown like art objects but not strictly speaking as art objects. It was not a matter of artists simply changing their minds, but of genuine contradictions in the transition of one form of practice to another. In the circumstances, contradictions were inevitable and even necessary. Constructivists refused the category ‘art’, yet used an art exhibition as a forum; they rejected art as a viable practice, yet set themselves up as artistic specialists, working in the laboratory. Any set of refusals and negations only makes sense through what is refused and negated. Although ‘laboratory work’ was not produced as art, it still worked with and against the available conventions, just as Medunetsky used a fairly conventional plinth for his construction (Plate 77), but pierced it with the metal rod, invading the secure, separate status of the base of a sculpture. This ambivalence demonstrates the problematic status of the work at this period (both as art and as ‘not art’).
Plate 89  Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Oval Hanging Construction No.12*, c.1920, plywood, open construction partially painted with aluminium paint, and wire, 61 x 84 x 47 cm. OBMOKHGU 3 Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; acquisition made possible through the efforts of George and Zinaida Costakis, and through the Nate B. and Frances Spingold, Matthew H. and Erna Futter and Enid A. Haupt Funds.

The constructions exhibited at the OBMOKHGU show related back to work done before the Revolution – for instance, to Vladimir Tatlin’s use of industrial materials such as zinc and lead in his reliefs and counter-reliefs (Plate 90). But the conditions underpinning exhibitions had changed, with the loss of a private market for art after 1917. Artists who had previously sold to private collectors now relied on other means of economic support, working in arts administration in the new ministry of culture, NARKOMPROS, and in the new art schools set up in the reorganization after the Revolution. Avant-garde artists moved from the margins of Bohemia to play central roles in the reorganization of culture. Their previous work on abstract form and materials was taken as the basis for a new kind of practice that would be relevant to a new society. After the Revolution, artists also became involved in all sorts of agitational and propaganda work – for example, designing posters, street decorations for revolutionary festivals, and street kiosks. This work was produced during the period of civil war that followed the Revolution and lasted until 1921 when the White Russian Forces were finally quashed. ‘Laboratory work’ was harnessed to production from 1921, when Constructivists directed their work on the material and formal elements of construction into utilitarian projects. This shift was not simply the inevitable outcome of the crisis of art and the insecure status of painting. For, however much the move to produce useful goods appears a logical conclusion to the problem of
the artist's role after the Revolution, it was only after 1921, when there was some recovery in industrial output to feel part of, that an involvement with production became feasible. It coincided with what many saw as the betrayal of the aims of the revolution: with the New Economic Policy of 1921, Lenin introduced some private enterprise into the devastated economy, producing a renewed demand for consumer goods.

The interval characterized as 'laboratory work', though fairly short-lived, draws attention to some of the problematic and shifting aspects of art as construction that I want to pursue, and to 'construction' as a multi-faceted term. So far, I have looked at 'construction' in three-dimensional works. 'To construct' means to put together, to build, to assemble; and work in three dimensions might seem most obviously to use a process of construction. As we've seen, in Stenberg's Construction for a Spatial Structure No.11 (Plate 88), iron components are literally bolted and welded together using industrial processes. Yet these techniques were displaced from their normal usage and assimilated into the idea of artistic construction. The work was listed in the Constructivists' catalogue as Konstruktisiya prostranstvenovo sooruzheniya 4. Stenberg used the term konstruktsiya, a
technical term derived from building; *prostranstvennoe* means 'spatial'; *sooruzheniya*, translated as 'apparatus', was a technical term for a system or structure. The term 'artistic construction' (*khudozhestvennoe konstruirovanie*) was also used to apply the technical aspects of construction to art. 'Construction' was applicable to two-dimensional surfaces, to paintings, or to reliefs such as Tatlin's. Both terms, *konstruksiya* and *konstruirovanie*, originated in architecture and the building industry, but had come to describe the art object. Discussing the way in which construction could be understood in painting, the critic Nikolai Tarabukin wrote:

The painter could only adopt the general structure of the concept from technology, and not by any means all its elements. The concept of construction in painting is composed of entirely different elements from the same concept in technology. By the general concept of construction ... we mean the whole complex of elements which are united into one whole by a certain kind of principle and which, in its unity, represents a system. Applying this general definition to painting, we should consider the elements of the painterly construction to be the material and real elements of the canvas ...

(N. Tarabukin, 'From the easel to the machine', p.140)

Tarabukin traced this use of 'painterly construction' back to Cézanne, but the art-critical use of the term in Russia seems to have derived largely from its currency in French Cubist theory, with which the Russian avant-garde was familiar.

Tatlin had called his works 'reliefs' and 'counter-reliefs', and 'selections of materials' – although they were no less 'constructed' than later Constructivist works. The sympathetic critic Sergei Isakov, writing in 1915 ('On Tatlin's counter-reliefs', p.335), stressed the 'principle of constructiveness' so manifest in Tatlin's counter-reliefs (for example, Plate 90). And for the Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, the single most important quality of an art object, as a constructed object, was its *fakтура*, its surface texture, the evidence of its having been made: as he put it, again in an article on Tatlin, 'Fakтура is the main distinguishing feature of that specific world of specially constructed objects the totality of which we are used to call art' (Shklovsky, 'On fakтура and counter-reliefs', p.341). As a literary critic, Shklovsky could talk about poetry in the same terms, and we shall return a little later to the question of how a verbal text could be classified as a particular kind of 'constructed object'. *Fakтура*, or the material aspect of the surface, was seen as the peculiar property of the art work, while the external world 'is perceived as a series of hints, a series of algebraic signs, as a collection of objects possessing volume, but not a material aspect, a *fakтура*' (Shklovsky, p.341). The work, for Shklovsky, referred to the world (by hints and signs), but its distinctive character was as an artistic construction.

Although the term 'construction' had appeared in art criticism in the prerevolutionary period, it took on additional meanings after 1917. It came to be associated with the idea of the artist as constructor, which had connotations of the engineer and of useful work. Mikhail Kaufman's photograph of Rodchenko, with his hanging constructions folded on the wall behind, represents him in this guise – as a constructor, wearing a constructor's suit designed by himself and made by Stepanova (Plate 91). In 1918 in the journal *Art of the Commune*, the critic Osip Brik wrote that the artist was 'now only a constructor and technician, only a supervisor and a foreman...'. The important point here is that art was seen, not as 'creation' but as a particular kind of work, which was analogous to other kinds of work in industry and production. The term 'construction' was powerful because of its multiple associations, as we shall see – with language, with industry and with the construction of socialism. 'Foremanism', to pick out one of Brik's other analogies, hardly had the same ring.

1 quoted by C. Lodder (*Russian Constructivism*, p.77), who identifies this as almost certainly the first use in print of the term 'constructor' in connection with art. In my treatment of the Russian material in this chapter, I am indebted to her wide-ranging, detailed and impressive research.
Construction versus composition

One way in which ‘construction’ came to be defined was in opposition to ‘composition’, and in the spring of 1921 INKhUK held a series of debates to look at this distinction. INKhUK was the acronym for the Institute of Artistic Culture, set up in 1920 as a centre for theoretical research. In practice, it provided a fairly informal forum where artists, critics, theorists and other interested parties could meet to discuss pressing issues and argue out priorities. Drawings were produced for discussion, such as the two pairs by Medunetsky and Vladimir Stenberg (Plates 92–95). As Christina Lodder has discussed (Russian Constructivism, p.83), conflicts emerged between those who thought that construction must be related to utilitarian work and ultimately industrial production, and those who thought of it as an artistic category. The examples shown here are by two artists committed to utilitarian work, who believed that certain principles and methods could be established in ‘laboratory work’. For them, the aesthetic was irrevocably linked with the idea of composition, and was therefore retrogressive. Medunetsky’s Composition (Plate 92) is framed by ruler-drawn lines; within that frame, geometric elements such as the circle are supposedly composed rather than constructed on the surface. His Construction (Plate 93), on the
Plate 92 Konstantin Medunetsky, Composition, 1920, pencil and orange crayon on paper, 27 x 24 cm; on reverse, INKHUK stamp no.26. Costakis Collection.

On the other hand, is a drawing of a three-dimensional object, a construction in space. Stenberg's drawings (Plates 94 and 95) show the same distinction between two and three dimensions. Both received some criticism for their constructions, which were thought to be drawings of technical constructions, a consequence of their view that construction was most effective in three dimensions.
Plate 93  Konstantin Medunetsky, *Construction*, 1920, brown ink on paper, 27 x 19 cm; on reverse, INKhUK stamp no.27. Costakis Collection.
In an INKUK paper setting out the position of the Constructivists, the real crux of the distinction between composition and construction was not just a matter of whether a work was made in two or in three dimensions, but of a far broader contrast of approach:

*Construction is the effective organization of material elements.*

The indications of construction:

i. the best use of materials

ii. the absence of any superfluous elements.

The scheme of a construction is the combination of lines, and the planes and forms which they define; it is a system of forces. Composition is an arrangement according to a defined and conventional signification.

(quoted in C. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.84)

Here the virtues of construction are set against the negative terms of composition: construction uses materials economically whereas composition uses superfluous and merely decorative forms; construction is a ‘system’ that is, by implication, *not* subject to the ‘defined and conventional signification’ characteristic of composition. We could interpret this to mean that construction is not subject to any kind of signification or meaning, but that is not exactly what is said; the text refers specifically to *conventional* signification, such as might be found in figurative painting. Other modes of signification, other ways of meaning, may be at work, but they are neither clearly defined nor fixed. So, despite the contrast set up, we should not necessarily see ‘system’ and ‘signification’ as mutually exclusive.
After all, it is hard to argue that these constructions are inherently any more systematic than other possible configurations: they are constructions only by association. They drew on a currency of contemporary references – to three-dimensional constructions, to the methods of technical drawing, and to the work of the scientist or engineer. We could say, therefore, that for a work to signify as a construction depended on the ‘hints’ and ‘algebraic signs’ (to which Shklovsky had referred) being set in train in the first place. Shklovsky’s emphasis had been on the art work’s resistance to these references and signs, a resistance that ensured art’s specially ‘constructed’ character: only hints, only signs, they did not betray the full effectiveness of a work as art. Yet the point of our discussion here is to try to retrieve some of that suggestiveness in terms of then current beliefs about the world, to see those hints and signs as playing a positive rather than negative role in the production of meaning, while we retain a sense of the effectiveness of artistic construction.

‘Construction’ seems to have been such a powerful frame of reference because it interlocked with other areas of social experience. For example, in political discourse the ‘building’ of socialism was a recurrent term. The Constructivist programme of 1921 referred to the part to be played in the ‘building up’ of communist culture, echoing the constant use made by Lenin of the metaphor of ‘communist construction’. Lenin believed that communism had to exploit for its own ends the science, technology and culture left behind by capitalism: ‘We must build socialism out of this culture, we have no other material – we have bourgeois specialists and nothing else. We have no other bricks with which to build’ (V.I. Lenin, ‘The achievements and difficulties of the Soviet government’, p.70). This metaphor was current at this period. For instance, Plate 96 shows the ‘building

Plate 96  Anon., The Building of Socialism, 1919, black and white lithograph, 71 x 104 cm. Uppsala University Library BS207.
of socialism' (zdanie sotsializma) as a classical building; it depicts the various stages of economic development, from the Middle Ages to the Revolution, as layers built one upon the other, moving through Marx and Engels to Lenin. However, despite the similarities of language, the Constructivists were not concerned with providing a picture of the building of socialism in this way, or indeed with building upon the cultural traditions indicated by Lenin. For instance, when Tatlin in the Monument to the Third International (Plate 97) symbolized the development of Socialism, he used the forms of an abstract construction, envisaged on a huge scale where, according to Nikolai Punin, 'the spiral represents the movement of liberated humanity' (Punin, 'The monument to the Third International', p.346). The monument was built only in model form, but it was designed to be made in modern technological materials using advanced engineering techniques – the supporting structure in iron, the suspended 'rooms' in glass. As a symbolic structure it combined an avant-garde vocabulary of artistic form with technology and utility. (See Chapter 4 for further discussion of Tatlin's monument.)
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.¹

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

¹ 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 1931. See also her article on drawing, industry and mass production, 'Ready-made originals'.