

Matthew S. Witkovsky and Devin Fore, editors. *Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test*. Contributors, Yve-Alain Bois et al., foreword by James Rondeau, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2017. Distributed by Yale UP. 324 pp. Illustrations. Checklist. Bibliography. Index. \$65.00, cloth.

The book *Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test* was published as a catalogue for an eponymous exhibit that took place at the Art Institute of Chicago from 29 October 2017 to 14 January 2018 and that coincided with the forty-ninth ASEEES Annual Convention, which was held in Chicago in 2017. The exhibit was organized as a centennial show, to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution, an event that changed the course of world history. Both the exhibit and the book are divided into specific sections and systematized to demonstrate the chief innovative discourses that were developed by early Soviet art and design. These groundbreaking directions disrupted the outdated principles of pre-Revolutionary daily life, material culture, and entertainment in order to create a new reality for a new Soviet people. This new Soviet world meant to propagate the radical ideas of revolution and to follow the Proletkult paradigm, in which proletarian culture was showcased as dominant and progressive. According to these new concepts, both public and private spheres were to be formed only through the use of avant-garde artistic forms—spatial and temporal, visual and textual, theatrical and cinematic, and motorial and static. Everything was put to the test. As the editors of the volume, Devin Fore and Matthew S. Witkovsky, convey in their introduction (see 17-19), “From paintings to dinner plates, every class of object needed restructuring; activities as disparate as brushing one’s teeth or building monumental public works were freighted with symbolic as well as practical significance” (17). The editors also explain that “[r]ather than binding our chosen objects firmly to the fate of a miscarried revolution, *Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!* allows for more skid and slippage between art and history” (19).

The book includes nine essays/chapters, which are arranged thematically and are all richly illustrated. To a certain extent, the volume follows the exhibition structure and explains the reconstructed and original objects presented at the exhibit and in the illustrations. Thus, Kathleen Tahk’s “Battleground” (20-43) examines the emergence of Soviet propaganda and the innovative methods of delivery of visual/textual messages explaining the Revolution to the masses. The chapter “School” (44-77), by Yve-Alain Bois, addresses issues of art education under the new conditions. Kazimir Malevich and his involvement in SVOMAS (Free State Art Studios) and later in VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios) and the

Vitebsk-based UNOVIS (Affirmers of New Art)—the experimental laboratories of new art and design—played a fundamental role in creating new and deliberately radical (in contrast to the vision of previous generations) theoretical principles dictating the execution of Revolutionary art and design and their message. Maria Gough, in her two essays, “Press” (78-113) and “Exhibition” (280-87), focuses, respectively, on visual-verbal means of propaganda—traditional print-press and innovative radio-orator devices that were designed by Aleksandr Rodchenko and Gustav Klutsis—and El Lissitzky’s design of the exhibition space for the Constructivist art show in Dresden in 1926. The chapter “Theater” (114-39), by Masha Chlenova, elucidates the essence of new theatrical production, which challenged traditional theatre and embraced a pre-Revolutionary Futurist conception of theatrical performance (at that point infused with new political meaning and messages). The scholar examines Vsevolod Meierkhol’d’s theatre, which meant to dissolve the boundary between art and life (121). She also focuses on Liubov Popova’s, Varvara Stepanova’s, and Vladimir Tatlin’s set designs, paying special attention to Tatlin’s role as director, stage designer, and lead actor in the production of Velimir Khlebnikov’s play *Zangezi* (1922). Christina Kiaer’s essay, “Home: Storefront” (140-217), explores the new interior of the proletarian home, including its functions. Constructivist artists combatted the old forms of everyday life, restructuring “the space of the home as a laboratory for producing an expedient and efficient *novyi byt*” (142). The chapter “Factory” (218-49), by Barbara Wurm, explains “factory” as a social metaspace for a proletariat that struggles for socialism and as a place for which “topos” becomes central in the visual arts (219). Kristin Romberg’s chapter, “Festival” (250-79), is devoted to mass participation in the holidays as documented in film and photographs. The last essay in the book is “Demonstration” (288-96). Here, Fore analyzes the strategy of communication, which he presents as an “ostension” (this term was invented by the Czech semiotician Ivo Osolsobě). The primary function of the strategy of “ostension” is the “act of showing and manifesting” (290). Fore explains that early Soviet culture, in order to show a righteous way of living and thinking, developed a communicative approach that helped to vocally demonstrate “how to” through explicitly affectionate examples. The scholar clarifies his thought: “If, in the West, to be on display is to be an object, both grammatically and existentially, to be on display in Russia is to be a subject” (292).

The book follows the main themes of the exhibit, but unfortunately, it omits the section that was presented as “Cinema”; this deserves a separate chapter and would be highly desired. The collection would also benefit from adding a chapter on the Soviet body and dressing the Soviet body. This topic is discussed in the scholarly literature (see, for example, Levent; Starks), and

it is sporadically mentioned in several chapters of the book. The subject deserves to be revisited, especially considering the fact that the exhibit and the book showcase a number of photographs of the Soviet body. The issue of Soviet leisure (see, for example, Siegelbaum) also deserves additional attention; it is mentioned throughout the chapters and is present in a number of the images, but it is not addressed in depth.

Notwithstanding these points, the book *Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!* is an excellent contribution to the scholarly field. It could be used in courses of Slavic studies, communication studies, art history, history of material culture, and more. Its scope presents an explicit and multifaceted explanation of how the visual and material cultures became a battlefield for artistic experiments that were aimed at restructuring an outdated world view and well-being and building a new world based completely on new principles of Soviet communal welfare. And the study is free from bias and utopian assertions. Such a book has been long awaited by scholars interested in different aspects of modernism. It presents pure, analytic food for thought and offers a detailed exploration of multimedia artistic experiments.

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Works Cited

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