

How I remember Tatlin

ANNA BEGICHEVA

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Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.

—Albert Einstein

Vladimir Efgrafovich Tatlin (1885–1953) became known internationally as far back as 1922, after the publication of the model for *The Monument to the Third International*—often referred to as “Tatlin’s Tower”—in the journal *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand* in Berlin.¹ The article written by Nikolai Punin extolled the project as that of a soaring tower rising up to the sky to celebrate a global Communist government centered in Russia. The accompanying photograph illustrated Tatlin’s achievement (fig. 1). The article did not mention the artist’s counter-reliefs, the three-dimensional constructions he began making in 1914 that led to the building of the model. Despite his prolific work in painting and stage design, and the numerous exhibitions and monographs that emerged after Khrushchev’s thaw in the 1960s, Tatlin’s international claim to fame remained tied to the Tower. In no small measure, this limited knowledge of Tatlin is due to the virtual absence of his original works in Western collections. In a greater measure, it is owed to our penchant to canonize narratives, preventing us from venturing beyond their bounds. In this respect, Christina Lodder’s skillful and persuasive history of Russian Constructivism is a case in point.

Within this established narrative, Tatlin’s journey to enlightenment began with his visit to Picasso’s studio in the spring of 1914, during which the Russian artist caught a glimpse of the master’s collages and sculptures made of heterogeneous materials, such as cardboard, paper, and wire. At the end of January 1914, Tatlin had gone abroad as a bandura player, visiting Berlin and Paris.² The main goal of this adventure was to meet

Picasso and to visit his studio.³ Toward the end of his trip, Tatlin succeeded in doing so. There are many variations in accounts of Tatlin’s encounter with Picasso, but everyone agrees on the outcome: Tatlin came back from Paris “with counter-reliefs in his head.”⁴ These counter-reliefs or, as Tatlin called them, “synthetic-static compositions,” were three-dimensional constructions compiled from materials more “industrial” than Picasso’s—various types of wood, metal, and glass (fig. 2). These works evolved from paintings and initially were called “painterly reliefs.” Over time, they became more and more independent from the flat support of the wall—a tendency that ultimately led to their complete autonomy, as evidenced by the model for the *Monument of the Third International*. Tatlin’s designs for coats, stoves, pans, and other objects for everyday life were logical extensions of this tendency to “expand” art into three dimensions and the space of the everyday. His ideas on the fusion of art and life were picked up by Aleksandr Rodchenko, who organized the First Working Group of Constructivists with the intention of redirecting artists away from the traditional conception of art toward the creation of objects for everyday life. Formalist theoreticians and ideologues gathered around the journal *LEF* promoted this tendency as Productivism, calling on artists to go to factories and begin working in industry with the goal of transforming the methods of industrial production to make them more aesthetically appealing. This account has been accepted worldwide, even in Russia, with the backing of such experts on the artist as Anatolii Strigalev.

The memoirs of Anna Begicheva, published here, do not fit snugly into this seamless narrative. In them, Tatlin the avant-garde icon seems biased, nationalistic, and even anti-modernist, while being talented, intelligent, charming, and popular. He rants against abstraction in art, complains about the Constructivists’ misinterpretation of his work, dwells on the importance of national roots, and attends long services in an

1. N. Punin, “Tatlinova bashnia (Tour de Tatline),” *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand* 1–2 (1922), p. 22.

2. A. Strigalev, “O poezdke Tatlina v Berlin i Parizh” *Iskusstvo* 2 (1989): 39–44, continued in *Iskusstvo* 3 (1989): 26–31; and A. Krusanov, *Russkii avangard* (Moscow, 2010), vol. 1, bk. 2, p. 222. In the old-style Julian calendar, which runs about two weeks later than Gregorian calendar, the dates would be February 14 to March 19.

3. Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaya’s reminiscences. Manuscript in the Archive of the Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. F. 100, no. 249, pp. 28–29, cited by Strigalev in *Iskusstvo* 2 (ibid.), p. 42.

4. Vera Pestel’s reminiscences; cited by Strigalev in *Iskusstvo* 2 (ibid.).

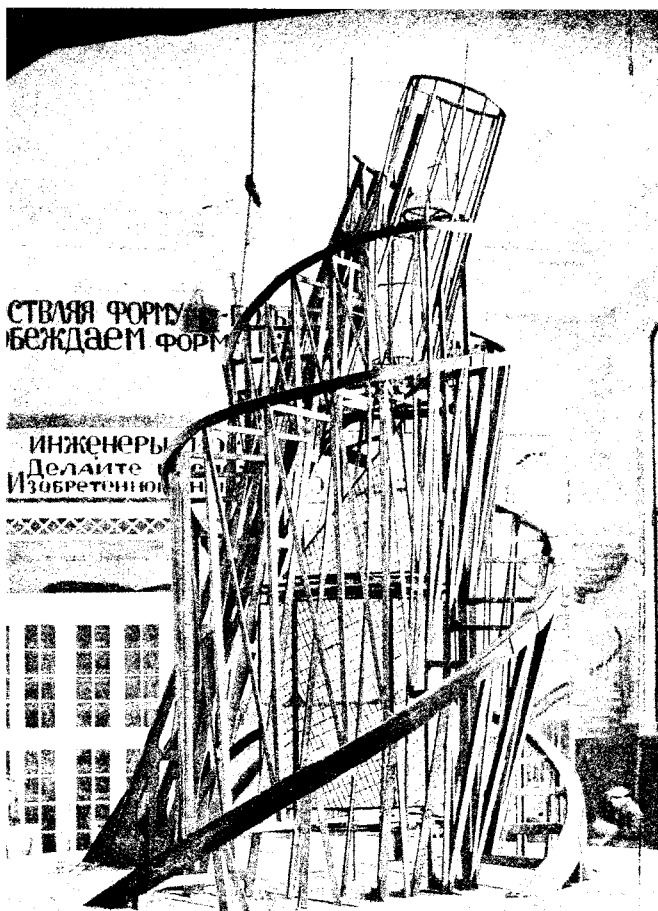


Figure 1. Vladimir Tatlin, *Model of the Monument to the Third International*, 1920. Published in *Veshch', Objekt, Gegenstand* 1–2 (1922): 22.

Orthodox cathedral. He appears both familiar, as when he describes his work on the Tower or discusses the building of his flying apparatus, and strange, as when he insists on a special “Russian way” for his art or refuses to cooperate with the directors Vsevolod Meyerhold and Les’ Kurbas because of their purported decadence. Tatlin’s behavior highlights his foreignness to Western sensibilities and may explain the reason for the unpopularity of these memoirs. Although long known to a host of researchers who worked with the artist’s archive, no attempt has yet been made to comment on them. Except for an obscure publication in a Ukrainian periodical in 1968, Begicheva’s memoirs have not seen the light of day.⁵ It did not help that their author, a run-

of-the-mill theater producer, also wrote an infamous letter to Stalin in 1948, accusing a number of Soviet intellectuals of introducing the decadent influence of the West into the Soviet theater.⁶ For those readers who are interested in the Russian avant-garde, but tend to idealize it and sanctify its members, a host of legitimate questions immediately arise. How could Tatlin befriend such a flawed individual? Moreover, if Begicheva’s moral judgment is compromised, can we trust the veracity of her memoirs?

Putting aside a knee-jerk reaction provoked by the indignation of associating Tatlin’s name—however indirectly—with that of Stalin, we should take these memoirs seriously. If we read them attentively, it all makes sense: the artist’s bravado, his theatricality, his apparent mistrust of the West, his search for the “Russian way.” All of these factors are part of a package. As the journalist Vadim Nikitin wrote when warning the Western public about its enthusiasm and support of the feminist punk collective Pussy Riot, three members of which were imprisoned in 2012: “You can’t have the fun, pro-democracy, anti-Putin feminism without the incendiary anarchism, extreme sexual provocations, deliberate obscenity and hard-left politics.”⁷ Similarly, with Tatlin and other members of the post-revolutionary avant-garde, one cannot have altruism, intelligence, uncompromising humanism, and relentless creative drive without suspiciousness, insecurity, anarchism, and a refusal to engage in active political life. Artistic achievement is rarely bound by universal moral criteria. Why then should we judge these artists according to the morality of their political or personal choices? Begicheva’s memoirs are valuable not because they reveal Tatlin from a conservative perspective, but because they shed light on the artist’s thought and his working process. In this age of artistic appropriation, it may be refreshing to investigate neglected historical sources in order to obtain new perspectives on the artists that have become part of the canon.

A new interpretation of Tatlin is suggested by the artist’s distinct phenomenological stance, which emerges from these memoirs. The core of his artistic philosophy is characterized by an emphasis on perceptual consciousness as a self-affirming act of

6. Anna Begicheva’s letter to Stalin can be found at <http://www.ihtst.ru/projects/sohist/books/cosmopolit/85.htm>.

7. V. Nikitin, “The Wrong Reasons to Back Pussy Riot,” *The Opinion Pages*, *New York Times*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/opinion/the-wrong-reasons-to-back-pussy-riot.html>.

5. Anna Begicheva, “Komisar Narkomosu,” *Vitchizna* 2 (1968): 159–170.

existence. Tatlin conceived of that consciousness as an active shaping of the world rather than detached, disinterested, “scientific” observation. Several passages in Begicheva’s memoirs lead us to this conclusion: the artist’s insistence on palpable, object-based reality as the purpose of art-making; the necessity of being grounded in a certain environment in order to develop a basic sense of belonging and orientation in the world; and the importance of embodied as opposed to optical vision, in the artist’s production and viewer’s reception of the work. Our dependence on our physical and intellectual environment—our connection to the world through the physiognomy of things, their style—formed the basis of this thinking. At one point, Tatlin states so explicitly: By considering color as just another material—like cardboard, for example—and by treating the surface with paint, he continued the tradition of Russian art when he taught his students to grasp “the meaning of the phenomena, their quality.”⁸

Begicheva’s memoirs provide a valuable resource for art historians, helping them understand and interpret Tatlin’s work. The form of the manuscript makes it clear that the memoirs became an important life project for their author. Comprising more than sixty pages of tightly typewritten text, they encompass roughly thirty years of Tatlin’s acquaintance with Begicheva, from their meeting to his death. The memoirs are written like a film script, with a strong authorial voice and many short chapters describing various episodes from Tatlin’s life. For the purposes of this publication, the actual text was reduced roughly by half. The eliminated parts include Begicheva’s personal extrapolations on the meaning of Tatlin’s art, and those reminiscences which concern the artist’s life exclusively and have only a tenuous relationship to his art.

N. K.

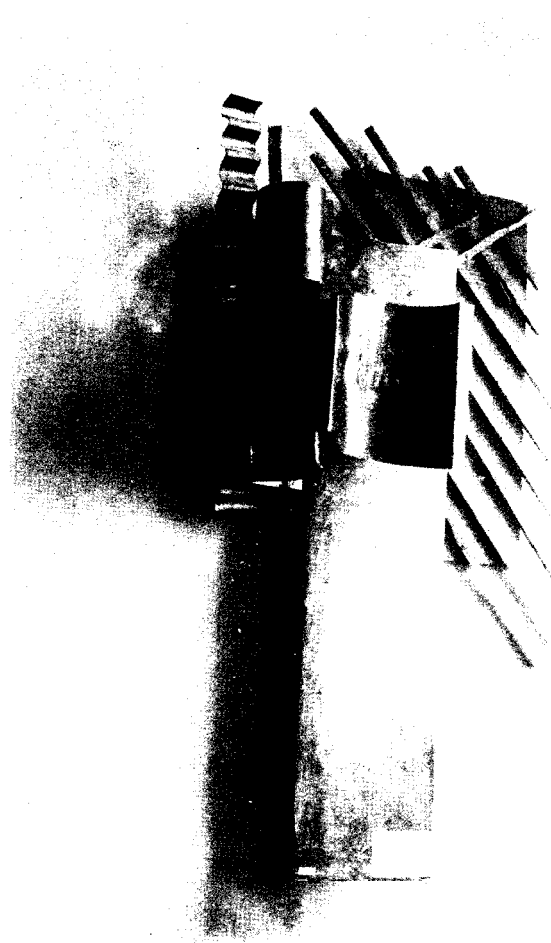


Figure 2. Vladimir Tatlin, *Counter-Relief*, 1916. Wood and metal. From *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (Galerie Van Diemen, Berlin, 1922).

How I remember Tatlin⁹

The first meeting

One never forgets an autumn in Kiev. Anyone who has seen it at least once during this season finds it impossible to erase from memory the city on seven hills framed by the blue Dnieper and its parks colored in flaming red. Tatlin came to Kiev during one such blessed autumn in 1925.

8. “Я стремился вернуть живопись к традиции русского искусства, когда художники разрабатывали цвет как живописный материал и живописно обрабатывали поверхность с помощью краски, учил постигать смысл явлений, их качество.” Begicheva’s memoirs, RGALI (The Russian Archive of Literature and Art) inv. 2089-2-40, p. 49. “I wanted to turn painting toward the tradition of Russian art, when artists considered color to be the material of their trade and treated the surface artistically with the help of paint. I taught students to understand the meaning of phenomena, their quality.” By “phenomena” Tatlin means the perceptual experience of color, form, and shape in their various combinations.

9. RGALI (The Russian Archive of Literature and Art) fund 2089, list 2, file 40. The author of these memoirs, Anna Alekseevna Begicheva, worked in theater and film as a director. She met Tatlin in Kiev in 1926 and stayed friends with him throughout her life. On the inside cover of the manuscript there is a commemorative inscription in red pen from the author to Iulia Solntseva: “Dear Iulia Ippolitovna! Some time ago,

Following a suggestion of I. I. Vrona,¹⁰ director of the art institute, Tatlin was invited to head the division of theater, film, and photography in the department of painting.¹¹ [. . .] Tatlin came to Kiev when he was forty years old, at the height of his creative powers, surrounded by legends. By that time, his “lopsided fame” [*krivobokaia slava moia*] as he called it, made a tour of Europe. He was famous for The Tower of the Third International [*The Monument to the Third International*]¹²—a project that was awarded a gold medal in Paris—and honored as an innovator who laid the foundation for the study of material culture. [. . .]

While everyone was enthusiastic about Tatlin, the artist himself had an ironic attitude toward his popularity. When in 1917 the Bauhaus students demonstrated in Weimar with slogans of “Tatlinismus [und] Maschinenkunst,” Tatlin was not happy.¹² They misrepresented his art. [. . .] “I want to make a machine by means of art and not to mechanize art—there is a difference in understanding,” he used to say.

Even then he categorically repudiated non-objective art, which was carried in the stream of “left” art. “Half-wits,” he used to say. “Everything in this world is object-oriented, figured, and perfect. An imperfect form in nature indicates sickness, ugliness. Nature strives for combination, unity, harmony. There is no abstraction in nature. In easel art, abstraction was created by a sick mind, bad taste, failure to understand the laws of art.” [. . .]

Tatlin’s pupils are partly responsible for misinterpreting his art: “I liked Rodchenko very much, but he did not understand me; he took up the cause of geometric art. Partly, it is his fault that I was labeled a formalist and the Berlin journal *Object* called me the father of Russian Constructivism. I’ve never been such.” [. . .]

One evening, warmed by a golden autumnal light, Vrona gathered his friends to meet Tatlin. The guests were excited—everyone was thrilled to meet a star. He came with no delay, at 7 PM sharp. He entered—or, rather, suddenly appeared—with his long arms, a ready smile, in a perfectly ironed suit of his own design, a blue shirt (blue and light blue were his favorite colors), no tie. [. . .] He brought with him calmness, a friendly disposition, and a certain sense of action. He tilted his head back slightly; his hair, eyelashes, and brows were the color of ash with a silvery tint, like those of a dark-blond person who turned gray early. His eyes changed, depending on his mood, from gray to blue to whitish. While not handsome in a traditional sense, he sparkled with inner light, which makes a person beautiful. He had a perfect build. Immediately he charmed everyone: He seemed close and familiar, although his thoughts were new and surprising.

“Do you belong to the left?”

“Not the left, nor to the right. I grow from the root [*ia korennoi*]. I know no theories, accept no declarations; I make things needed for the state. There are no movements in art—only artists. . . .”

“What is important in art?”

“The sense of the new above all. Artistic tact and, of course, taste. Taste is the categorical imperative in art. My principles are concentrated in *The Tower of the Third International*. Not everyone understands this. The People’s Commissar¹³ called it ‘a lopsided freak’ [*krivobokii urod*]¹³—he was then hypnotized by Paris. Of course, this project was canned. But not everything that we do not understand is unnecessary, no? It does not matter, though. They will understand [me] later, when my thoughts are exported back from the West. People will demand new things and then they will need my discoveries.” [. . .]

After persistent requests, Tatlin explained the “secret” of his Tower: “My monument is the symbol of the era. In it, I created a certain synthesis of art and life by combining artistic and utilitarian elements. I based the design of the building on a screw [*vin*] as the most dynamic of forms. The screw is the sign of our time, indicating energy, dynamism, aspiration. The entire construction consisted of metal forms and looked like a spiral, inclined to coincide with the movement of the earth. Objects tilted to the earth’s axis are the most stable and soft of forms. This construction served

you expressed a kind desire to leave my ‘notes’ in your archive. I will be happy [to do that]. I consider myself a pupil of A. P. Dovzhenko. Of all my teachers, he alone entered my heart. He had a kind type of talent [*ego talant dobryi*] and it was infectious: It always evoked kindness in others.” At the top of the first page, there is an inscription with the same red pen: “Tatlin and I were friends united by art from 1926 until his death.” Lulia Solntseva (1901–1989) was a popular Soviet actress and film director, the wife of the film director Aleksandr Dovzhenko.

10. Ivan Ivanovich Vrona (1887–1970), a Soviet art historian. From 1924 until 1930 he was rector of the Kiev Art Institute. Vrona published his own memoirs about Tatlin in *Vitchizna* 10 (1986): 201–202.

11. Tatlin was invited to teach “formal-technological disciplines” at the Kiev Art Institute.

12. Begicheva’s knowledge of the German reception of Tatlin’s work was sketchy at best. She must refer to the 1920 slogan of German Dada launched by George Grosz and John Heartfield: “Die Kunst ist tot. Es lebe die neue Maschinenkunst Tatlins.”

13. Anatolii Vasil’evich Lunacharsky (1875–1933), The People’s Commissar of Education from 1917 until 1929.

as the foundation for three working spaces inside it: [. . .] a cube, a pyramid, a cylinder. All were turning around their axes, making one turn in a year, a month, a day. The walls, made out of double panes of glass, preserved heat. This was economical. I [also] based the entire construction on a tree. The stories of the tower were fixed to the central axis like branches to a tree, which assured stability and mobility. The radio-masts, crowning the tower, would quickly connect the thoughts of people around the world. [. . .] The monument would have been the symbol of friendship of all the people—a future worldwide family—united in time and space. An artist [always] looks at nature. It builds better than us. Nature creates a wise construction, which has its own system of control and assures structural soundness. People understand this very well. With what wisdom, for example, a wheel is made! However, in order to create the perfection of its form, hundreds of years and efforts of many masters and scientists were required. Then they all came to the conclusion: ‘Dear fellow artists, it looks like we have to leave Parnassus and become artisans [masterovymy].’”

“To make a bucket, no artist is needed,” objected Pal’mov.¹⁴

“Perhaps not one like yourself. However, a good master is necessary to create an intelligent form for a bucket. And we artists are masters of form first of all. We create new objects for daily life [byt]. As a matter of fact, paintings are also new modes of existence [bytie], which we create. Are they not? So, why then can’t we create an excellent, beautiful bucket? I do not consider it a lowering of my ‘high’ rank [as an artist] to make myself comfortable pants, while it may appear that this is a tailor’s job. Then even a tailor would become an artist and we would be creating something new, which is needed at the moment. Our eye is sharper, we see further. I suspect that [this discussion of] the bucket’s form makes me seem like a harmful formalist,” he laughed. [. . .]

Very soon, however, he became bored with “casting pearls [before swine],” and stopped the discussion. He went to the piano and arranged himself comfortably, placing his feet apart somewhat. [. . .] He placed his large hands onto the piano keys, touched them gently, and began to sing “Let us pray to the Lord God, telling a true old story. Twelve robbers lived, with them holy Pitirim.”¹⁵ The soft timbre of his voice enveloped his

listeners in something kind and hidden. He sang, contradicting all classic canons, breaking up the sounds with his breath and introducing special variations. Before our eyes appeared Kudeiar the robber, also known as the monk Pitirim. Tatlin sang with inspiration. He sang with his every cell. His entire being sang. His voice reached sonorous heights, dropped to a bare whisper, ascended to tragic tones. Not long ago I listened to a recording of Shaliapin performing this song. It was artistic. Tatlin’s rendition, however, was more touching. He sang it with humility, as if he were Kudeiar himself repenting for his great sins. Like a confession. This astounded us, and entered our memories for the rest of our lives. [. . .] Finally, his voice quieted down. A long silence entered the room. The magic of this silence was suddenly interrupted by Vrona’s daughter, who was seven at the time. She now tells me that she could never forget Tatlin’s singing [that night].

Tatlin straightened out, glanced at us with his merry blue eyes, and, nearly out of breath with passion, cried out: “The Andalusian night is hot, very hot!”¹⁶ Suddenly before us stood a love-stricken hidalgo. Then, he transformed into a young Russian fellow who complained about the failure of his “first number”: “I died on the spot.”¹⁷ Tatlin always said “fir’st” [per’vyi]: he had a soft, melodious Moscow accent. He sang a lot that night—love songs, folk songs, his favorite aria from *Boris Godunov*. . . .¹⁸ For a chaser, we witnessed a blind bandura player who grieved over the perished glory of the Cossacks. [. . .] [After finishing singing] Tatlin sat still, like a Buddha statue, with his hands on his knees, until the excitement around him subsided. Where did the gift of singing come from? Which depths? He answered: “I learned how to make words heard from shamans [veduny]. Prayers and spells have the greatest power of expression. I learned singing from kobza players, folk singers. Unsurpassed masters! Shevchenko, Khlebnikov, Shaliapin learned from them, as well as Viardot, who plunged great composers into ecstasy.”¹⁹

16. The beginning of a poem by Vsevolod Krestovskii, *From Andalusia (Andalusianka, 1862)*, which was turned into a popular Gypsy romance.

17. A line from an old soldier song: “If a hundred is your number, then you will be back, no problem. I, young fellow, go first and will die on the spot.” See V. Rakitin, “Tatlin i revoliutsiia,” in *Vladimir Tatlin: Leben, Werk, Wirkung: ein internationales symposium*, ed. J. Harten (Cologne, 1993), p. 464; see also Vrona’s memoirs (note 10), p. 201.

18. *Boris Godunov* is an opera by Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881), composed between 1868 and 1873.

19. Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861), a Ukrainian-Russian poet; Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922), a Russian poet; Fedor Shaliapin

14. Viktor Pal’mov (1888–1929), a Futurist artist, member of LEF in 1923 and 1924.

15. The beginning of a folk song from the Solovetsky Monastery.

A Ukrainian night

Charmed by his singing, I asked him: "Do you paint as well as you sing?" Tatlin smiled shyly (he always had a shy smile) and . . . did not answer. We left together. [. . .] On the way to Pechersk, where I lived, he read me his mother's poems. "She was a Ukrainian, a poetess, a member of the People's Will, and a very kind human being. Khlebnikov's mother was also from Ukraine. He and I are half from here." [. . .]

Then he read Khlebnikov's verses, recounting how he directed his play *Zangezi* in Leningrad. What unusual design he invented . . . Khlebnikov dreamed about his poems being published in handwritten books. In *Zangezi* [Tatlin] drew his words graphically. He invited me to direct *Zangezi*. Then I worked for the theater Berezil', assisting Kurbas in the production of *Haydamaky* by Shevchenko. I knew Khlebnikov only by reputation and did not read *Zangezi*, but Tatlin insisted: "If you have oxygen and hydrogen, you can create a sea. You only need to have a burning desire." [. . .] Tatlin could talk about art so well that his friends began calling him "*Zangezi*," which in Persian means "teacher."

Zangezi

It's getting dark. Tatlin stands on a mountain near the Dnieper River, by habit keeping his feet somewhat apart, as if growing into the ground. The Dnieper flows below him. The setting sun lights church domes, caresses mountains, stamps Tatlin's face with a fiery seal. . . . Across from him, on Trukhanov Island, storks are pacing grandly in the midst of willow bushes. The one with particularly long legs enters the water, stops for a moment, and deftly snatches a frog out of the water. He flies up with ease and sails in the direction of an old pine tree. Then he returns and again walks along the riverbank as grandly as a dandy on a boulevard.

"What are you thinking about?" Tatlin asked me.

"Me? About the Pechenegs."

"Everything has been thought about them already. Look instead at this bird. It is big and heavy but flies easily and gently. Would you like to fly?"

"Yes, very much."

"I will teach you how. If man learned how to swim when he needed it, then he will learn how to fly when the earth becomes too crowded. I built a bird already."

"Where is it?"

"Right here," he touched his forehead, "for now, it is here. Very soon I will fly. Note that the bird flies up against the wind. Up and forward right away. The wind would have driven her down, messing up her feathers. It was not by chance that the ancients predicted weather according to the flight of birds. The great Leonardo uncovered the secret of bird flight. Oh, he knew so much and he could do so much! Lilienthal nearly flew, but crashed.²⁰ People have always believed in being able to fly. It was not for nothing that legends about angels were born. The Russians created a magic carpet and a magic humpback horse. Gogol made the devil fly along with other evil spirits. Lermontov's demon hovered in the sky. Legends about Icarus and Dedalus were not invented. The names of the brave lurk behind them. There were plenty of daredevils who jumped off heights on kites. They crashed. Their names were not recorded. They were considered eccentric. You see before you such an oddity. I want to make a bird. I want to fly."

We sat on the top of a mountain. We could see the sky, the birds in it, and the clouds. Tatlin kept talking. . . . He told us how Mozhaisky built a kite and flew on it twice.²¹ The kite was tied to a cart whirled along a gentle slope by three horses. Mozhaisky held on strong. . . . The kite filled up [with the wind] like a sail. In a moment the kite and the rider would be in the air. [. . .] The horses gallop and he, already soaring in the air, shouts: "Drive on, drive on!" Then, the horses slow down to a trot, the kite descends. . . . This means that man can create! Then Mozhaisky switched to a screw propeller. The inventors have chosen this path. A man does not fly, but sits in a machine with its motionless, dead, outspread wings. This is how the dream of an individual flight died.

"I must realize this dream. This is not an idle fantasy. This air-bicycle would relieve the city from traffic, noise, and crowding, and would clean the air of gasoline. One could take off from one's window, balcony, rooftop—from anywhere. It would be fast, convenient, and cheap.

"Not very convenient," I objected. "What if the citizens fly away from the militia in different directions?"

Oh, how Tatlin laughed! Never again did I hear such laughter from him. "Well, something will be invented to restrain such citizens. The militia will fly first. Tsiolkovsky also believed in my bird.²² I visited him in Kaluga and

(1873–1938), a Russian-American opera singer; Pauline Viardot (1821–1910), a French opera singer, companion of Ivan Turgenev.

20. Otto Lilienthal (1848–1896), a German pioneer of manned flight. He died after an unsuccessful glider landing.

21. Aleksandr Fedorovich Mozhaisky (1825–1890), a Russian naval officer, aviation pioneer, engineer of early flying machines.

22. Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935), a Russian rocket scientist, founder of astronautic theory.

we talked. [He is] an interesting old man: It looks like he is falling asleep and does not hear [you], but if he needs to, he hears everything. From time to time he held up to his ear a big cone made out of tin plate, which he made himself. He was supportive of me: 'Dare!' he said, 'Man must fly!' I drew him. And he said, with a shy smile: 'Keep drawing, keep drawing an old idiot—that's what people here call me. The time will come when your drawings will be sought out.' This man believed in himself strongly. He advised: 'Take curved [lines] from organic forms, stimulate the engineering thought. The cards are in your hands: You are an artist, I only make calculations. All I do is calculate, calculate. . .' And he wanted to send man to the stars! He was always open to surprise: The ability to be surprised is a pathway to science, no?"

Tatlin continued: "It would be great to become a swallow, for example; the little bird flies without much effort at the speed of 375 kilometers an hour. [It could have] breakfast in Leningrad, lunch in Moscow, and dinner in Kiev. Isn't that what you call freedom? Man will have enough strength for flying—the wings will help. Even savages understood the advantages of wings. [. . .] Birds have hard-edged wings, so that they do not get crushed—we should make this our point of departure. Engineers made rigid forms—angry, with corners. They break easily. They crack. The world, however, is round and soft; it does not have corners. In my report for the Ministry of Aviation I indicated that man can fly with great maneuverability, landing where he wishes. Like a crow. Scientists were indignant: They said it was insane to assert that a crow flew well. I answered: 'Do not tell this to me, tell this to the crow. Perhaps he will listen to you and quit flying.' According to the laws of aerodynamics, a may bug cannot fly. Thank goodness the bug does not know this law and keeps flying regardless. Engineers do not understand what makes the may bug lift itself up in the air instantly. This is a weak spot of many theories."

"What made you think about flying?" I asked.

"Perhaps," he said after a moment's thought, "being an orphan. I thought about my mother a lot: She died early. I imagined her face, but could not fix it [in my memory]. I could feel the warmth of her breast and hands, keeping it with me, but could not recall her face. . . . When I looked into the sky, I saw clouds sailing up above me, changing their shapes. So many forms! Suddenly, among them, I saw my mother's face, disappearing instantly. I wanted to be there, next to the clouds. I was jealous of the birds, and observed them with attention. It's complicated, how people think. Perhaps Sofia

Kovalevskaya became a mathematician because she was intrigued by mysterious signs on wallpaper (her uncle wrote down algebraic formulas all over the place)? The girl must have wanted to decipher the mysterious drawings. . . . In the same way I also wanted to join the clouds then."²³ [. . .]

Fishermen

In the summer of 1926, Begichev,²⁴ I, and Tatlin lived among the woods on the Desna River not far away from Kiev, in a nature preserve called Pirnovo. The forest was being tapped for sap [*v lesu delali podsechku*]. We were the only people around. It was an old forest, filled with a thick aroma of tar. Not far from us, herons were nesting. It looked as if they came there from the entire Ukraine. Tatlin disappeared into the woods. He was drawing feathers, bones, levers, observing [the birds'] takeoffs. My husband made calculations for him. Both kept silent most of the time. Around five in the morning, the men would go fishing. They bought themselves a "bark," a dug-out Ukrainian canoe, and moved to the other bank of the Desna, which was covered with meadows. There, they hunted and fished.

We were surprised that Tatlin always returned with an empty bucket. The soup had to always be made from fish caught by Begichev. My daughter and I considered Tatlin a failure as a fisherman: "How could you be a sailor if you cannot catch enough for some fish soup!" Begichev assured us that Tatlin knew how to fish. Once, I went along with them and became convinced that Tatlin knew what he was doing. Sitting somewhat apart from each other, the "old chaps" began fishing. Tatlin's fish were biting well. However, after gently lifting the fishing line, Tatlin would take the fish off the hook carefully. Then he would examine it closely for a long time, turning it in his hands. Afterwards, he would come closer to the water and, making sure not to get his feet wet because they were permanently damaged by cold during his maritime voyages, he would let it go, watching it disappear. He hunted in a similar manner: without killing one duck (though there were so many in the bushes that they could be caught with bare hands). "I cannot kill a bird," he used to say. "She is my teacher. I would not have the heart."

In our yard, next to a gatehouse, there stood a bare pine tree. At its very top there was a stork nest. Tatlin

23. Sofia Kovalevskaya (1850–1891) was the first female mathematician to become internationally known.

24. Anna Begicheva's husband.

used to observe them for a long time: how the dad and the mom flew out to seek prey, how they fed their offspring. Then they taught them to fly. They would put the fledgling on the edge of the nest and would circle around him flapping their wings. They would flap until the little stork starts flapping his own wings. Finally, one parent would carefully pick the chick up from the nest. The little one would awkwardly wave his wings, fly up a few times, and fall back into the nest. Tatlin relished watching this. He stood under the tree for the longest time, observing the science of flight through the binoculars. At night, he would put mustard plasters around his neck, because it hurt.

Soon the chicks learned how to fly and disappeared somewhere. Tatlin explained: “they are building their own nests.” One inspector charged with overlooking the tree tapping process shot the female stork for fun. The bird fell to the ground. Tatlin was incensed by the superior’s vandalism. He picked up the dead bird. He spread its wings above his window. They slightly quivered in the wind. The [male] stork circled the gatehouse making sad sounds, as if calling his beloved. Then he stood up on the edge of the nest, lifted up one leg, and hid his head under his wing. He stood like this for about three days without moving, then fell to the ground dead. This event upset everyone, especially Tatlin, who asserted that the stork committed suicide. “I am as lonely as this stork is,” he used to say.

At this time, Tatlin was alone. His wife, a doctor Musia Geintse,²⁵ left him, taking their son Volodia [Vladimir]. Tatlin loved the mother of his son and it seemed that he secretly was waiting for her return.

Kiev

Kiev did not meet Tatlin’s expectations as a calm place to work. Ukraine, somewhat later than Moscow, was re-evaluating its cultural life, rethinking artistic values. Young creative energy was sweeping everything without distinction, madly, even more furiously than in Moscow. The cauldron boiled. Everything stood on its end, [as if] mixed up in a huge blender. In theater, fine arts, poetry there was an intense competition of groups, a dizzying alternation of flags. [. . .] Tatlin openly criticized blind imitations of the West and ultra-left trends. [He said that] art seeks an expression of our spiritual world, and Paris is useless to us. He also rejected endless declarations

25. Maria Aleksandrovna Geintse (d. 1931?), Tatlin’s first wife, a biologist and medical doctor.

and manifestos. “Here my Order Number One about the elimination of windbags from our midst would come in handy,” he used to say.

Nationalistic excesses disgusted Tatlin, who began to see clearly new forms of universal beauty. Students loved him, because he always had interesting thoughts. His colleagues, the artists, began to look with worry at this “troublemaker.” He taught theater design because he considered theater a means of putting his teaching into practice. Kurbas proposed to him [to design] *Yves le Trouhadec* by Jules Romains.²⁶ “He did not understand me,” said Tatlin with surprise. When he returned from meeting Kurbas, he was beside himself: “I gave him a headache: The ‘maître’ went to bed.” One can only imagine their conversation if Kurbas, who had European manners, went to bed in front of his guest!

Tatlin continued with an indignant tone of voice: “Kurbas thinks that I am an abstruse formalist, while he himself is blinded by the West. Whom else? By the Expressionists, those bourgeois aesthetes. . . . You see, he is producing [Georg] Kaiser’s *Gas*, whereas I would like to create a Soviet classic. I already had a similar collaboration. Vsevolod (Meyerhold) asked me to make a mysterious tree and a dark hallway for his production of *Spectral Charms*.²⁷ Instead, I made him a slender, straight mast and a light hallway. ‘Why do you need a dark one?’ I asked him. ‘It would scare the children!’ The next day, when I came to see Vsevolod, he wrapped his head with a sheet and refused to see me. He told me that he had a toothache. Vsevolod had a toothache and Kurbas a headache. I am very contagious!” Tatlin was not upset that the collaboration failed. Meyerhold attempted to work with him once more by inviting him to design a set for Mayakovsky’s *Bathroom*. Tatlin refused, declaring that he did not find in *Bathroom* a deep content.

When he was preparing to work on his flying apparatus *Letatlin*, the artist became more focused; he kept to himself. In his room on Dikaia Street, he kept a stork who lived there in the winter. Tatlin spent most

26. *Monsieur le Trouhadec saisi par la débauche* (1923), a novel and play by the French writer Jules Romains (1885–1972). Tatlin had a fertile career as a theater designer. Over the years, he designed sets and costumes for several productions in Russian and Soviet theater including those in Ukraine. About the Kievan period of Tatlin’s work in theater, see A. Parnis, “Kievskie epizody teatral’noi biografii Tatlina,” in *Vladimir Tatlin: Leben, Werk, Wirkung* (note 17), pp. 394–399.

27. *Spectral Charms* [*Nav’i chary*] was the first novel in a series by the Symbolist writer Fyodor Sologub (1863–1927), which included the novels *Drops of Blood*, *Queen Ortruda*, and *Smoke and Ash*. Later, Sologub changed the title of the series to *The Created Legend*.

of his time at home, in a narrow circle of people who loved him. . . .

He had a scar on his left eyelid. "This scar determined my fate," said Tatlin. "Rather, not the scar, but a fork. Yes, a simple fork turned my life around." His father, infuriated by the boy's disrespect toward his stepmother, threw a fork at him during dinner. The fork pierced his eyelid, reaching the eyeball. Luckily, the vision was not lost. The father did not take pity on his bloodied son, but threatened to throw him out of the house. Already then the boy understood that he was a stranger in his family and left the house—he ran away through the window. "Had it not been for that fork, I would have probably become a regular engineer, like my father. . . ." ²⁸

His youth was spent wandering around places. He worked in a painting workshop, then at a construction site. He was a sailor on a training frigate and afterwards on a trading ship belonging to the merchant Churin, where, according to him, he received his first important life lesson. "The wake-up alarm went off, but I did not get up, because I did not hear it. The boatswain took off the chain that held his whistle and smacked my back with it with all his might. In pain, I fell to the floor. When I opened my eyes, I could not understand anything. The boatswain bent over me and said very sweetly: 'Tatlin, you need to get up on time!' Since then, I do everything on time: I was taught order. The boatswain was a wise man." Tatlin traveled throughout the Middle East; he was in India, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia (on Java). . . . He made a pilgrimage to Palestine. [. . .]

In Kiev Tatlin drew a lot, studying human musculature: "I will give similarly rounded, beautiful levers to the machine with which nature endowed man."

Often, Tatlin went to St. Cyril's Church, decorated by Vrubel'. ²⁹ He studied Byzantine frescoes in the Cathedral of St. Sophia. ³⁰ He admired the architectural

ensemble of the eleventh-century monastery of St. Michael, the Church of the Tithes [*Desiatinnaia tserkov'*] of the tenth century. He studied icons, asserting that the direction of man's thoughts induces changes not only in the expression of his face, but also, with time, in his features—like in the ascetics, for example. Russian icons influenced Tatlin more than Cézanne did.

Very soon we parted ways. In 1926, I went to Kharkov—the new capital—together with the theater. Tatlin came to Kharkov to listen to Szigeti, who was performing there. ³¹ [. . .] Another reason for Tatlin's trip to Kharkov was that he wanted to deliver a lecture on Khlebnikov's poetry. Of course, Tatlin never received permission for such a lecture. [. . .]

Moscow

Tatlin returned to Moscow in 1928. I went there in 1927 to organize a theater studio named after Kurbas. My friendship with Tatlin grew. He had a knightly attitude toward friendship. He knew how to make it safe and nurture it. [. . .]

And how devoted Tatlin was to Khlebnikov! Friends? No, it went beyond this "I can't get enough of him," said Tatlin. "If he walks barefoot on sand, I will kiss his steps. What a man he was! He did not have any proprietary attachments to life. He was not burdened by anything earth-bound. His entire being was filled with thought, with poetry, with the future of mankind!" Tatlin loved Larionov as well: "He is a Russian artist to his bone. He does not reflect the West in any way, even though he left his motherland out of false fear." ³²

When he parted with his wives (life can be complicated), he stayed friends with them. By 1928, Tatlin had a new family: Maria Petrovna Kholodnaia and her son Petrus'. ³³ Tatlin's son Volodia also joined them. Volodia's mother [Maria Geintse] died from typhus, which she caught during an epidemic in the Gorky region [now known as Nizhny Novgorod].

The period from 1928 to 1933—up until the exhibition of *Letatlin*—was full of life and intense work. Teaching at the institute, working on *Letatlin*, spending

28. It is difficult to ascertain the veracity of this tale. As Anatolii Strigalev notes, Tatlin liked embellishing his tales and often would not let the truth stand in the way of a good story. See Strigalev, "Real'naia i mistifitsirovannaia biografija Vladimira Tatlina," in *Vladimir Tatlin: Leben, Werk, Wirkung* (see note 17), pp. 273–277. See also his "O poezdke Tatlina v Berlin i Parizh," (note 2). Apparently, after Tatlin left home, he kept in touch with his relatives, his father in particular. See Strigalev's chronology in the catalogue *Vladimir Tatlin: Retrospektive* (Cologne, 1993), pp. 383–397; esp. 383–384.

29. The Church of St. Cyril was built in Kiev in the twelfth century; Mikhail Vrubel' painted frescoes and icons there in 1884.

30. The Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev was constructed in the eleventh century. Apart from its innovative architecture, it is famous for its frescoes and mosaics, which also date to that time.

31. Joseph Szigeti (1892–1973), a Hungarian-born American violinist.

32. Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), a Russian avant-garde artist, who exerted important influence on Tatlin by encouraging him to exhibit his works in Moscow in 1909–1912, the time of intense avant-garde activity.

33. Maria Petrovna Kholodnaia (1903–1989), a sculptor, Tatlin's second wife. They stayed together from 1926 until 1931.

time with his family and friends transformed the artist. He became more talkative and sociable. The work on the flying apparatus was art. Necessary parts of the machine became beautiful in his hands. Without any theory—through practice—Tatlin introduced into life the so-called “technical aesthetics.” He used to say: “This aesthetic has been present in people’s lives since time immemorial. It was not invented yesterday.” Tatlin built every detail of his machine like an artwork, similar to how skilled masters carved window frames or made Guzul belts out of silver, and made containers out of birch bark to hold honey, bows, spindles, spinning wheels. . . . Art is the deepest necessity of humankind.

Letatlin was a beauty. The artist was full of hope. He called the wooden 8-shaped support for the wing his “beloved Venus.” After his death, this “Venus” was thrown out of his apartment and was lying in the yard on Maslovka [Street].

“The Greeks turned everything into beauty,” said Tatlin. “Even suffering and death. Remember their funeral lamentations! And what about the funeral feasts of the Slavs, their weddings, the greatness of their burial mounds!”

During this calm period, an irreparable sorrow entered Tatlin’s life: Mayakovsky’s suicide.³⁴ Tatlin could not accept it. “Volodia, Volodia! Life must have been too gentle with you! You must have judged yourself too harshly if you took your own life. You often forgot that you are a poet, which is more terrifying than daily life,” lamented Tatlin. “A poster is not yet a poem; a signboard is not yet a painting.”

The exhibition of *Letatlin* at the Museum of Fine Arts was the high point of his life.³⁵ Tatlin was happy. Full of inspiration, he captivated people around him, like his *Letatlin*. [. . .] The exhibition was full. Friends rejoiced; enemies twisted their lips. Could it be otherwise? Tatlin broke the limits of the accepted norms of thinking. Many were angry about this and mocked him insanely. But the young and the honest believed in Tatlin. I remember how a Spanish artist, Helios Gómez (who lived in Moscow at the time), came up to him, bent his head and kissed his hand: “Moscow loves you, Teacher.”³⁶ Tatlin did not know what to say—he was taken aback,

which was uncharacteristic of him. He was touched and embarrassed. Was it the first time that he had been so sincerely honored by a genius? Just once. . . . This made him happy.

Tatlin’s triumph was short-lived. The exhibition closed. The bird evoked no further interest. Funds for his experiments were denied. Officials did not approve of this “venture.” [The artist] did not have friends who could demand action by banging their fist on the table. Larionov emigrated. Mayakovsky died. Much talk about Tatlin’s “magic” ended in silence. . . . He was asked to leave his studio on top of the bell tower of Novodevichii Convent. And so the inventor was left without shelter. The rejected bird was lifted upon the shoulders of Aleksei Sotnikov—Tatlin’s faithful disciple—and was dragged on a sled and on skis to the Osoaviakhim Museum on the other end of Moscow.³⁷ “A museum is like a cemetery, and I dreamed of raising her up into the sky!”

Because he was considered a formalist, Tatlin did not receive any painting commissions. But he had to live somehow. Tatlin turned again to light industry, but here he was already perceived as a schemer. The artist made sketches of typical decorations of shops and bakeries; he was thinking of building a modernized Russian izba with plank beds, suited for sports, hunting, and fishing. Long before America, he proposed plans for a studio-on-wheels for artists to the art fund. He came up with a plan for a new city with a calm, measured way of life—a satellite city. Everything there was thought through to the minutest detail: housing, offices, transport. Everything was so conveniently located that any trip would have been a leisurely, relaxing walk for the inhabitants of the city. It was intended to be a small, exemplary garden-city. The artist’s architectural projects, technical inventions, objects for everyday life, and drawings all added up to a unified oeuvre.

The Revolution stimulated latent life-building tendencies, but unfortunately, the weak state of technology made it impossible to realize his ideas. That was the artist’s tragic predicament: the impossibility of bringing his thought to completion. Now, when technical possibilities have grown immensely, Tatlin’s tower would have soared to the sky.

The artist exerted so much effort in order to make life easier, more pleasant, more comfortable, and more

34. Vladimir Mayakovsky killed himself on April 14, 1930.

35. Tatlin’s only solo exhibition took place in the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow (also known as the Pushkin Museum or GMI), May 15–30, 1932. It was dedicated almost exclusively to Letatlin.

36. Helios Gómez (1905–1956), Spanish graphic artist, painter, and muralist. As a politically active leftist artist, he came to Moscow in 1932, shortly before Tatlin’s exhibition, to escape political persecution

in Spain. He stayed there until 1934. In 1933 he had a solo exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts, where Tatlin had showed his *Letatlin* a year earlier.

37. “Osoaviakhim” stands for Society of Assistance to Defense, Aviation, and Chemistry (1927–1948).

beautiful for Soviet people, but his ideas were mocked. However, Tatlin did not despair, did not lose heart, firmly believing, like Tsiolkovsky, that his ideas were valuable. “One must become mad with art, be obsessed with it—then it is possible to create genuine things,” he used to say.

No one tried to understand Tatlin. His sketches sold once in a while, but his ideas were not realized. Everything was shelved. Even the project for the coat “for all four seasons” did not catch the interest of the industry. Officials considered it unprofitable. Tatlin demanded quality, perfection of form, and honesty in execution, which did not go along with mass production, planning, etc. The architect Ivan Leonidov attempted to “pull through” [his designs] to get them produced. But he alone could not resist an army of rote “thinkers”—hucksters. Tatlin proposed to construct a radio in such a way that this engineering project would look like an artwork, so that there would be no need to cover up the “essence” [*estestvo*] of the machine as something ugly. However, it is necessary to think through and to get to the core [of a technological construction] in order to simplify it and make its interior beautiful. “In a telega nothing is hidden, everything is beautiful. This means that all the details are thought through.”

Tatlin was filled with indignation at new buildings. He expressed his thoughts approximately like this: “A pile of bricks does not make a house. A stockpile of iron and concrete is not yet architecture. Buildings, like human faces, reflect the characters of their inhabitants, the soul of the century. . . . Our homegrown followers of Le Corbusier will make a real mess of things, will disfigure an ancient city. They already destroyed the Sukharev Tower—the standard of Russian architecture of an entire era, admired throughout the world.”

Such arbitrary judgment Tatlin considered a national disaster. “I hope they do not automatically drag Broadway over to Moscow. And we have so much space, such expanses of land! If I had had money, I would have opened a cabinet of curiosities for talentless and tasteless things. There would be no fee to enter, so that the public can learn to hate ugliness. It is not for nothing that [Oscar] Wilde wrote a tale about a boy who hated his mother because she was ugly. Beauty has great power!”

Tatlin’s work in theater was fraught with difficulty. Here he brought his fresh ideas. He said that a theatrical construction, which is the basis of all stage decor, should help artists. However, in *Princess Turandot*³⁸ for example,

and in Tairov’s theater, uncomfortably inclined platforms were heaped up [on top of each other], forcing actors to learn how to walk anew. The platform became an alien body in the play in the name of meaningless effects. [. . .] Tatlin did not tire of repeating that the task of theater was not only to build character, but also to cultivate good taste. The artist must use theater in order to nurture the taste for beauty and encourage good habits in everyday behavior: in gestures, words, and especially in the attitude toward beautiful things. [. . .]

Each production cost Tatlin a lot of nerves. I remember his despair when he requested linden and oak for the design of the play *The Case*, but was given veneer instead.³⁹ He was asking for brocade and velvet to make costumes, but was given dyed fustian. There were innumerable conflicts with directors and scandals over financing with the management. Tatlin suffered. He [always] made the model [for the set] himself, carefully shaping every detail, but the execution of his designs infuriated him. “They keep slipping in a substitute! They feed [the public] junk!” he protested. “The spectator must fall in love with the thing [he sees] on stage and bring it into his daily life.” This attitude toward the stage Tatlin passed on to Meyerhold. Already in *The Inspector-General* and *The Lady of the Camellias*, the stage was filled with furniture made from Karelian birch, crystal, and bronze—things that enchanted the spectator.⁴⁰ Unoriginal, badly made, and touched-up props always disgust, breaking the unity of the image.

In theater, like everywhere else, Tatlin was cast aside. His personality irritated his superiors, you see. [. . .] Tatlin endured this as well. “One must live without getting tired,” he used to say. According to him, an artist could not live behind the times: He must lead the pack, foreseeing what’s to come. And so, casting aside bad feelings, Tatlin kept marching ahead. But people were forgetting him, pushing him to the background. The years 1936–1938 were financially difficult. The artist often needed money. He did not have commissions. It is also possible that his last family, with the sculptress M[aria] Pleskovskaia, was falling apart.⁴¹

(MKhAT), it was the last play to be directed by Evgenii Vakhtangov before his death.

39. The play *The Case* [*Delo*] was produced in 1940 by the director Popov in the Theater of the Red Army in Moscow.

40. Nikolai Gogol’s play *The Inspector-General* [*Revizor*] (1925–1926) was one of Meyerhold’s most famous productions; Alexandre Dumas’s *The Lady of the Camellias* [*Dama s kameliiami*] was produced in 1934.

41. Maria Ivanovna Pleskovskaia, an artist. In his chronology, Strigalev wrote that Tatlin became close with her in 1940 (see *Vladimir*

38. *Turandot* is a play by the Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806). Produced in 1922 in the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theater

[At this time,] Mikhail Chigirev, the main artist of the agricultural exhibition, invited Tatlin to work on it. He entrusted him with the cattle-breeding pavilion.⁴² "This is good," Tatlin said. "The four-legged creatures will understand me. I will make a comfortable, beautiful dwelling for them. Men are blinded by false pride [*spesivtsy*]. They think that animals do not care where they live. But I saw with my own eyes how a horse laughed when he was happy. I saw how dolphins played and had fun. When I was a sailor, I observed them frequently. They are intelligent. They understand people's intonations and intentions. They hate drunks, and expect mean tricks from them. I saw how cranes dance with pure joy."

Tatlin saw many things in his life. With enthusiasm and full commitment Tatlin started working on this task, which may seem too lowly [*malopochtennoe delo*] for his extraordinary talent. He consoled himself with the thought that even the great Leonardo often interrupted his work on paintings in order to make a lampshade or a mill wheel, if life so demanded. [. . .]

The war

The war crushed Tatlin. His son Volodia died at the front. He was a nineteen-year-old volunteer. This happened in 1942.⁴³ Soon after the start of the war, Tatlin invited [his friends] to a festive dinner. We found him, as usual, working. He was sitting on a stool in his apron, peeling potatoes. Volodia entered. Slightly embarrassed, he said, "I am leaving, papa." Tatlin looked into his son's face—still very young, almost childlike. I knew that his son was a sniper and that he was getting ready to go to the front. But . . . so soon?

"When?" he asked, looking somewhere far away, over the head of his son.

"I have to be at the station in two hours."

All of a sudden, Tatlin stooped, which was not his habit. The knife fell from his hands. He froze. He became

immobile. The boy did not notice any of this: He was packing. He put bread, toothbrush, and soap into his backpack. The father told him to take wool socks and a warm scarf. He beckoned his son with a finger and put money into the pocket of his student jacket. Humbly looking at his son, he stroked his chest several times, as if he wanted to touch the beating heart of his boy. "You are leaving, son, but your bicycle just arrived. . . . Perhaps you could wait a bit?"

"Father, I am not a little boy and not a coward. My friends are waiting for me." Volodia hurried away and did not even have time for dinner. He pressed his cheek against the cheek of his father and quickly left the room. I went to see him off for a bit. I looked into his clear face. . . . If even for a second I could imagine this face covered in blood I would have never let him go. . . . The sun shone through his childlike ears and made his freckles golden. The boy smiled (he smiled readily, like his father). In parting, he shyly hugged me. His hands were thin like a girl's.

When I returned, Tatlin was still sitting. Potatoes were half-peeled. The knife was on the floor. He could not get up. He told me that he had tremendous pain in his feet, which he froze long ago, when he was sailing on a frigate and had to scrub the deck on cold mornings. "You and I are both orphans," he said quietly. My daughter, who would have been nineteen, had died by that time. Soon, Volodia died in a hospital from his wounds. Petrus', Tatlin's stepson and Volodia's friend, lost his life as well.

Tatlin retracted into himself somehow, as if shrunk in size. He usually did not talk about his misfortune with other people. Only when he offered someone something sweet, he would say: "Volodichka loved this." [. . .]

Tears

The war ended. The arrival of the Soviet soldiers on Red Square was an event for poems, songs, and epos. Tatlin came to me and asked timidly: "Shall we go?" We stood on the street in silence looking at the passing tanks and soldiers. All of a sudden, not far from us a shortish man in a cap waved his hands somewhat awkwardly and started shouting. One soldier left the column: "Father!" He embraced the old man. This happened suddenly and impressively, like a cut in a film frame.

Tatlin shuddered. "Let's go, let's go." He pulled me by the hand. At home, he opened a bottle of wine. "Let's remember the little one." He took from the plank bed a canvas and showed me a portrait of his son, which was almost finished. He looked at it for a long time. "No,

Tatlin: Retrospektive [note 28], p. 395); these memoirs move the date to the mid-1930s. In a private conversation, Strigalev told me that Pleskovskaia's marriage with Tatlin was never registered. Apparently, after Pleskovskaia and Tatlin parted ways, he became close with another artist and former ballerina Aleksandra Nikolaevna Korsakova, who is considered his other (and last) common-law wife. The reasons for Begicheva's omission of Korsakova's name from the list of Tatlin's official and unofficial wives may be personal.

42. Begicheva must be referring to the First All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, which opened in Moscow in August 1939.

43. According to Strigalev, Tatlin's son died in a military hospital after January 1943. See *Vladimir Tatlin: Retrospektive* (note 28), pp. 395–396.

this is not it," he said, and calmly began to scrape off the image. The artist and the father placed very high demands on himself: The brush could not keep apace and satisfy them. That's how the portrait of the boy bathed in sunlight, all painted in golden and blue tones, perished. Volodia when he was little and Volodia grown up. A child and a soldier. Lively and stern. The eyes, open for life and looking into death. A collective portrait of all the Volodias in this world. Its inner expression reminded me somewhat of the earlier portrait of Khlebnikov. It was composed of flowing, almost ethereal lines, permeated by streaming rays of light. The portrait touched [*volnova!*].

"Don't touch it, don't you dare," I shouted. But Tatlin became as if deaf and blind, committing the monstrous crime. Volodia was looking at us from the portrait, smiling. After he completely removed the portrait, Tatlin touched his heart and said: "This cannot be expressed by hand. Only the great can recreate someone who is already gone. . . ."

"Where lies the power of the great?" I inquired.

"They made life and not art so much. Giotto, Dionisius [the Wise], Rublev expressed the religious ideals of the people—painting for prayers; this made their art internally strong, capable of conquering people's hearts. For them painting was a religious rite. Before picking up his brushes, Rublev prayed. Before he painted the image of Christ, he fasted for forty days. When he painted the cathedral in Vladimir, he made a vow of silence. Rembrandt loved life and people. He created not for glory, but because he was overcome with emotion . . . Lermontov extended his grief to his poetry."

Tatlin suffered as well. He was pale. He grew stubble, which never happened before. This man had always been neat, clean-shaven, in a pressed suit. (Following the sailor's habit, he always folded his pants and put them under the mattress.) "They forgot me as if I were dead," he exclaimed bitterly. "If they do not remember me as an artist, perhaps they will as a bandura player. Here, I made a new one." And Tatlin demonstrated the sound quality of his new bandura. But I paid little heed to the bandura. Before my eyes still stood Volodia's portrait, which struck me. [. . .] I do not know—perhaps this portrait had some faults from a professional's point of view, but it overwhelmed one with the force of love and grief embedded in it. The portrait seemed to cry out the father's pain: "I do not have my son!"

I could not bear seeing Tatlin's silent pain anymore. I tried comforting him, finding words of consolation. . . . He listened. Suddenly, he dropped his head into his arms and started weeping. No. Wailing. Moaning. Shouting. It

was terrifying. I saw him crying for the first and last time in my life. Only someone who lost everything—love, faith in people, hope for recognition—could grieve like this. [. . .]

The artist

It seemed that everything was in order. He had the title of the Honored Art Worker, a professional studio, and a personal pension. However, Tatlin still did not have any painting commissions. The sign of a formalist still was hanging over him. Someone called him that little word at some point and it did the job. It crippled his life. . . . Many leftist artists repented at that time. Tatlin refused to defer to the Academy [*ne poshel na poklon*].

"I have nothing to confess," he said. "I wanted to prove that materials have certain forms. I wanted to assert that forms are not produced by an individual; they are not invented by us. They belong to eternity, which is discovered by philosophers, scientists, artists, each in their own language. I wanted to turn painting toward the tradition of Russian art, when artists considered color to be the material of their trade and treated the surface artistically with the help of paint. I taught students to understand the meaning of phenomena, their quality. Where was my fault then? Perhaps in my search for new forms that corresponded to their time? But art is determined by its openness to new forms. My task was to find those forms, which would express their materials most fully and could [also ensure] strong connections. I studied volume in its spatial relations—this is why I made counter-reliefs. I spoke about this back in 1916 at my personal exhibition of counter-reliefs." [. . .]

Tatlin really did not have anything to confess. He was still considered "from the left." Other artists living next door, his colleagues, painted and exhibited their work. Tatlin designed stage sets, worked on the camouflage of the city [during the war], and executed small jobs for the industry, but a "conspiracy of silence" grew around him. People either said that as an artist he was finished or that someone "broke his backbone." Who?

After the death of his son and the tragic death of his sister, the artist's life changed drastically.⁴⁴ Having reduced his personal expenses to a minimum, he locked himself in his studio like a monk in his cell and began painting anew—"for himself." Hiding from mockery, he created a fusion-like, almost ethereal style. Tatlin

44. Tatlin's older sister Sylvia died sometime between 1942 and 1945, apparently in a railroad accident.

took down the old icons—the object of his constant admiration—from the scaffold-like plank bed [*polati*] that he made for his room on Maslovka [Street]. And again, like in his youth, the artist would prime planks of oak and linden with a mixture of alabaster and chalk, and prepare the canvas according to old recipes (he knew a lot of methods for priming). On his windowsill appeared pots of paint made with a mixture of honey and egg, jars with [prepared] gold. In the Old Believer Church on Preobrazhenka, where Tatlin became a frequent visitor, he was taken for a Nikonian monk. He remained standing throughout long services, fixing his gaze upon ancient Russian icons.

Energetically Tatlin ran through museums. He looked intently at works by El Greco and Zurbarán, finding in them new depths. To uncover the secrets of Velázquez's color, he went to Kiev twice to visit the museum with the famous *Infanta*.⁴⁵ He admired Borovikovsky's portraits; studied the methods of Raibushkin, who, according to him, knew how to "apply paint"; tried to understand Serov's devices; admired Korovin's coloring; and spent hours in front of the canvases of his beloved Rembrandt.⁴⁶ "There is no one better than him in painting," he exclaimed. "Mankind expended a lot of energy in order to create the likes of Rembrandt, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rublev. . . . Many generations will study their art, will read them and will not be able to finish reading—will not understand whence comes the nearly magic power of these geniuses."

That is how seriously an elderly Tatlin again immersed himself into painting. He took chances. Remembered. Thought a lot. Considered it insufficient for an artist to have only eyes and hands. [. . .] He demanded the participation of the mind. "An artist must not only reflect—most importantly, he must experience the world." . . . He drew a lot during this period. His sharp, mathematically precise drawings, resembling those of the Dutch masters, were astonishing. He knew how to make the line now subtle and barely perceptible, now firm and energetic, now serpentine, as if swirling. It was not for nothing that in Penza he learned painting from Afanasiev, a wonderful draftsman.⁴⁷ The time for painting finally came . . .

45. Diego Velázquez's painting *Infanta Margarita* (1658–1660) is in the Kiev Museum of Western and Oriental Art.

46. The Russian painters Vladimir Borovikovsky (1757–1825); Andrei Riabushkin (1861–1904); Valentin Serov (1865–1911); Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939).

47. Aleksei Fedorovich Afanasiev (1850–1920?), director and art teacher at the Penza Art School, whom Tatlin credited with influencing him most.

He asserted that our spiritual foundation was laid down in childhood and developed until the end of our lives, maturing and strengthening only in a native land—this is the strength of a tradition. As far as mastery was concerned, it came with experience. Once again Tatlin diligently studied the plasticity of the human body, but instead of professional models he drew friends, for free. For models, he sought out Russian bogatyrs with a classical body type and lyrical Russian women. [. . .]

Tatlin totally immersed himself in painting, hoping to uncover his true self by expressing the depth of his relationship to everything that is new in life with his own language of painting. He was among the first pioneers of a new era of visual arts firmly rooted in the native land.

"I think as a painter," the artist did not tire of repeating. "This is why I chose painting, in order to communicate with mankind. I have liked this language since childhood." [. . .] Tatlin began with flowers. [. . .] His bouquets were full of breath. They lived on the canvas with a new life created by the artist. They appeared from some imperceptible airy depth as if not made by human hands. . . . Their color seemed to belong organically to the petals and leaves, rather than be painted. The silhouette attracted with its subtlety and expressiveness.

To the question of how he managed to achieve the depth and the precious iridescence of colors, he used to say: "Beauty is hiding, one needs to uncover it. [This is achieved,] first of all, by thinking hard about the material with the help of a sharp eye. We belong to the breed of prophetic eyes! Our language is also visual. The most important aspect of painting is that paint does not lie on the surface, does not look decorative, flat, as if applied by a housepainter. It should become one with the material [of the support]. It takes a lot of effort and understanding to apply color this way."

Of his last works, Tatlin considered completed, or "perfected," three bouquets. . . . One depicted garden flowers and was painted in silver tones. White-and-blue, they trembled in the air. They charmed and bewitched. "Aren't they fragrant?" he asked. The other bouquet was of field flowers in a glass jar. This work he dedicated to his late son. "They are merry like children," he used to say. Finally, [he painted] a tiny little bouquet of small flowers on a linden board. There, he achieved Rembrandt's perfection of chiaroscuro. [It reflected] light, a flickering vision of the real world of beauty. . . . The painting shimmered. . . . In it, two half-opened buds were lighting up with red light, just a tiny little bit, slightly. [. . .]

Experiments, experiments, experiments.

In the intervals between commissions and painting, Tatlin made banduras, “for a change,” as he said. He prepared the wood by taking care of it and drying it at a specific temperature for twenty to thirty years. How he loved them! He stroked the surfaces glittering with varnish. “What wealth! I managed to get a musical tree, sycamore. It is good for making harps. And here is the one made of maple. It’s my favorite. Here I cut the sounding board deeply, inserting a support, so that it could hold the weight of the strings. The bridge is made out of bone, so that the sound does not deaden. I made the ridge higher than usual and lengthened the secondary strings. The sound will come out cleanly and beautifully. I will perfect the instrument!”

Efgrafych⁴⁸ touched the bandura’s smooth, silky-sounding board made of straight-grained strips of spruce. “I am the master—I can make what I want.” [. . .]

48. Efgrafych was Tatlin’s middle name. This is a familiar way to address people in Russia.