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TATLIN, KHLEBNIKOV, AND THE ICONS

While much of the scholarship on Tatlin focuses on the way he developed the paradigms of modern European painting— those of Cézanne, Matisse, or Picasso among others—I would like to investigate the Russian roots of his art. The challenge in categorizing Tatlin's work in formal terms as a transition from representational to Constructivist art stems from its extreme heterogeneity, manifested not so much in its style, but in its highly diverse media. This exhibition presents the full range of the artist's oeuvre from early experiments with modernist painting to icon-inspired two-dimensional works, three-dimensional counter-reliefs, the sculptural-architectural model of the Tower, designs for coats and pans, and attempts to build a flying apparatus that would mimic a bird's flight. Apart from this array of media, Tatlin also dedicated much of his life to theater design. This extreme polymorphism distinguishes Tatlin's work from the modernist ideal of medium-specificity and from post-modernism as defined in Marshall McLuhan's formula, "the medium is the message." Approached from these two perspectives, Tatlin's work is confusing indeed. The memoirs of the artist's friend Anna Begicheva provide us with a possible clue to the riddle. They reveal that at the height of his fame in the mid-nineteen-twenties, the artist declared that all his life he had "thought like a painter."[1] And indeed, in later life, while working as a stage designer, Tatlin returned to painting "on the side," creating many remarkable works never exhibited in his lifetime.

To make sense of Tatlin's art, we must move away from obvious medium-specific influences and follow his thoughts. The poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov, a pillar of Russian Futurism, may help in this quest. Khlebnikov and Tatlin met in 1910 or 1911 around the time of the artist's relocation from Moscow to St. Petersburg.[2] In an article about Khlebnikov, Anatolii Strigalev quoted a statement he made in 1912: "We want the word to follow boldly after painting,"[3] noting the poet's affinity for visual art. Although Khlebnikov cared for Tatlin, it appears that their relationship did not have any deep significance for the poet.[4] For Tatlin, as virtually everyone who knew the artist recalled, Khlebnikov was a supreme authority.[5] Strigalev believes that Tatlin began idolizing Khlebnikov only after the poet's untimely death. Testimonies of their contemporaries and the artist's works, however, suggest the contrary.[6] It was precisely around the time that Tatlin and Khlebnikov met that Tatlin began to move away from concentrating exclusively on painting and began to engage with theater design.

Khlebnikov's call for the word to follow painting moved his poetry away from representation to extreme experimentation. His verse is characterized by language stripped to the core of its basic semantic units—sounds, syllables, words, and sometimes even syntax—and reinvented by assigning to these units a meaning different from their customary associations. According to Rudolf Duganov, Khlebnikov's word was neither representational nor abstract, but "transversal." By this he meant that "it did not name, but begat an object in one's imagination."[7] This view parallels the opinion of the poet's contemporaries, Roman Jakobson and Osip Brik, who called Khlebnikov's newly created semantic units "sound-images," suggesting the non-representational and non-nominalistic combination of acoustic and visual elements.[8]

Another contemporary, Victor Shklovsky, provided a helpful explanation in his essay "Art as Device." He characterized a work of art as an invention possessing a specific device whose aim was to address the senses directly, without the mediation of the mind, and thus stand out from the maze of other objects by its palpability and unfamiliarity. Specifically, Shklovsky declared that "the aim of art is to render a thing perceptible as a vision, rather than through recognition; the device in art is to make things strange by formal means, to augment the length of the work's perception, because the perceiving process in art is an end in itself. ..."[9] Shklovsky called this process "making strange." This approach may be explained in terms of the phenomenology of perception.

Phenomenology is the branch of philosophy that studies not objects or things, artistic or otherwise, but essences thereof. It looks not at subjects and objects, but at the pre-objective realm of subject-formation through perception. Because it rejects "third-person" scientific observation, the method of phenomenological investigation is descriptive, not analytical. The premise of phenomenology is that perception is the process of making sense of the world not conceptually by thinking about it, but experientially by living and exploring it with one's entire body on a level where the senses have not yet been separated into vision, hearing, and touch. Shklovsky meant this kind of perceptual shift when he talked about art as a stage of experience where the subject forms new meanings. Phenomenological perception addresses consciousness not as an analytic entity, but rather as the process of constituting itself and the world. It is actually not about representation, but about the situating of a body in time and space by a directed, pre-verbal consciousness that becomes a meaning-producing operation.

The link between poetry and painting implied by Brik's composite term "sound-image" suggests the existence in Khlebnikov's verse of an active mimetic entity that erases the difference between the spoken and the imagined elements of a locution. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty reiterated after André Malraux, painting and language approach each other to the point of becoming indistinguishable only when they cease "representing" and instead endeavor to "express."[10] In Khlebnikov's word meaning was not an inherent property of the sign but, like in Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, arose in the gaps between the signs. His neologisms were expressive acts that seemed nonsensical at first, but they actually indicated new directions for familiar phonemes. What is the connection of this kind of poetry to painting? On the level of perception, language and vision act in tandem to create a totality: The visual experience attains significance from being learned simultaneously with language, while language "is concerned with becoming visible."[11] In his verse, Khlebnikov strove to reach a universe of primary meaning paralleling the totality of the

visual experience in a person's pre-objective and pre-imaginary stage. He attempted to resituate his listeners in time and space, while retaining the basic structure of the Russian language and its phonemes. Despite his poetic brilliance, Khlebnikov could not make sound fuse with vision completely because while acting synaesthetically, hearing and vision address different dimensions of perceptual experience: hearing directs the body in time, while vision fixes it in space.[12] A visual artist, such as Tatlin, was able to do a better job of that. Meeting the poet marked a turning point, before which Tatlin had put together work non-illusionistically, emphasizing the artificial nature of painting. After meeting Khlebnikov, Tatlin began addressing the "invisible" undertones of the Russian national imaginary. He developed an interest in icons and theater and created such signature works as *Sailor, Fish Seller,* and designs for the patriotic opera *A Life for the Tsar*. Tatlin was not the only member of the Russian avant-garde to turn to the Byzantine tradition as a source of inspiration, but his approach was radically different. Unlike Goncharova, who represented sacred figures by applying the conventions of icon painting to modernism, and Kandinsky, who was interested in its abstraction toward an "inner sound," Tatlin explored the formal and structural devices of the icon tradition in the modern idiom in two and three dimensions.

In their studies of Tatlin, Christina Lodder and Anatolii Strigalev came to the conclusion that the artist used the devices of icon painting and Byzantine art to define the volume of his figures, their movements, and "broad curved lines."[13] Strigalev based his conclusion on a relatively recent discovery of tracings of reproductions of old frescoes found in the Tatlin archive. Although authorship of these is disputed—Strigalev concedes that they may have been done by the Vesnin brothers, while the Tatlin expert Irina Duksina believes they may have originated in the circle around Alexander Afanasiev[14]—what matters is that Tatlin carefully preserved them to the end of his life, through the war years and all his relocations and calamities. Duksina also identified one tracing—of a famous sixteenth-century Novgorod icon of St. George—as the work of Tatlin by comparing it with the artist's sketches for the Captain in his designs for Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman*.[15]

By applying the formal devices of icon painting in three dimensions, Tatlin began to integrate modernism and tradition along the lines of phenomenological perceptual knowledge gleaned from Khlebnikov. He knew that modern masters, such as Matisse and Cézanne, while not explicitly concerned with icons, used the reverse perspective for recalibrating vision from its representational, Cartesian mode into an imaginary event in an attempt to retain the perceptual and expressive immediacy of the visible.[16] In addition, Tatlin was familiar with the techniques of icon painting and the paramount role that icons played in the life of an ordinary Russian. Khlebnikov helped redirect his thought from French Modernism to the importance of cultural context, emphasizing the complex nature of vision, which contains elements that are not visible, but implied or retained in one's history. Tatlin's familiarity with icons and Byzantine ritual made it possible for him to articulate the connection between perception and imagination.

Byzantine ritual's impact on the believer's experience is not strictly visual, but integral, enveloping the worshiper's body—not the objective body, but the phenomenal body that exists as the field of presence. This body serves as the means of communication with its environment, offering a "horizon" of sensory experience. To accommodate this phenomenal body, iconic space in Byzantium was constructed to elicit such experience. According to Alexei Lidov, icons in

Byzantinum were "spatial visions emanating from their depiction in the environment in front of them."[17] They occupied entire churches and cathedrals, could be created anywhere by the faithful, and filled the space with internal dynamism and the energy of divine presence.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty described the perceptual process as follows: "If I offer my ear or my gaze with the anticipation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible catches my ear or my gaze . . . I deliver over a part of my body, or even my entire body, to this manner of vibrating and of filling space named 'blue' or 'red' . . . . This is just as sacrament does not merely symbolize, in a sensible way, the operation of grace, but is the real presence of God and makes this presence occupy a fragment of space . . . that our body takes up and adopts if it can. Sensation is literally a communion."[18] At the beginning of this quote, Merleau-Ponty was talking about perception of color, while toward the end, he used the example of holy communion to illustrate his point about perception that draws parallels between secular and religious experience. In the same treatise, Merleau-Ponty talked about illusions, which often accompany perception and arise when ". . . the sense fits the sensible perfectly, is visibly articulated or enunciated in it"[19]—that is, when people anticipate what they believe they will see.

"Nothing is more difficult than knowing precisely what we see," said Merleau-Ponty, because ". . . the essence of consciousness is to forget phenomena and to make possible the constitution of 'things.'"[20] By turning his attention to icons, Tatlin was not interested in the Orthodox doctrine or its symbolism, but rather, guided by Khlebnikov's example, in knowing precisely what we see when we look at the world, how this primary meaning is formed, mimetically, through an affinitive relation to this world. The development from two to three dimensions in his work and its heterogeneity reflects a quest to bypass art's symbolic and imaginary characteristics as the media-specific means of communication and to concentrate on discovering its mimetic relationship with the real as the fundamental step in man's self-realization.

1 Anna Begicheva, "Таким помню Татлина" [How I Remember Tatlin], RGALI, f. 2089, inv. 2, file 40, p. 46.
2 Anatolii Strigalev, "Татлин и Хлебников" [Tatlin and Khlebnikov], in *Искусствознание* [Art History], nos. 3–4, 2007, pp. 385–424, here 391.
3 Velimir Khlebnikov, *Неизданные произведения* [Unpublished Works] (Moscow, 1940), p. 334.
4 Dmitrii Petrovsky, "Воспоминания о Велимире Хлебникове" [Memories of Velimir Khlebnikov], *ЛЕФ* (LEF), no. 1, 1923, pp. 143–71, here p. 145. Khlebnikov's 1916 poem "Tatlin, tainovidets lopastei ..." is an example of the poet's affinity for Tatlin: John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven, 1983), pp. 119–20 and Robin Milner-Gulland, "Khlebnikov, Tatlin and Khlebnikov's Poem to Tatlin," *Essays in Poetics 2*, 1987, pp. 82–102. However, Khlebnikov also wrote laudatory poems for other artists: Velimir Khlebinikov, *Полное собрание сочинений в шести томах* [Complete Works in Six Volumes], ed. R. Duganov (Moscow, 2001–2006), vol. 2, pp. 330–32, 333, 403.
5 Begicheva (see note 1), pp. 33-34; Daniil Danin, "Улетавль"[Uletavl], in *Дружба народов* [Friendship of the Peoples] 2 (1979), pp. 220–36, here p. 225; "Квартира No. 5" [Apartment No. 5] in Nikolai Punin, *О Татлине* [On Tatlin], ed. Irina Punina and Vasilii Rakitin (Moscow, 1994), pp. 9–12, here p. 9.
6 Strigalev 2007 (see note 2), p. 386; no 3, p. 415.
7 Rudolf Duganov, *Велимир Хлебников: природа творчества* [Velimir Khlebnikov: the Nature of Creativity] (Moscow, 1990), p. 21.
8 Roman Jakobson, *Новейшая русская поэзия* [Recent Russian Poetry] (Petrograd, 1921), p. 48.
9 Victor Shklovsky, "Искусство как прием" [Art as a Process], in *Поэтика: сборники по теории поэтического языка* [Poetry: Anthologies on the Theory of Poetic Language], (Petrograd, 1919), pp. 101–114, here p. 105.
10 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, 1993), pp. 75–120, here p. 84.
11 Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy* (Stanford, 2005), p. 66.
12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, 2012), p. 116.
13 Anatolii Strigalev, "Wladimir Tatlin. Eine Retrospektive," in Düsseldorf 1993, pp. 8–52, here p. 21. See also his "Die Bedeutung der altrussischen und volkstümlichen Kunst in Tatlins Werk," in Harten 1993, pp. 128–35.
14 Anatolii Strigalev, "Университеты художника Татлина" [The Universities of the Artist Tatlin] in *Вопросы искусствознания* [Questions of Art History] 9, no. 2, 1996, pp. 405-38, here p. 415, nos. 42 and 43, p. 434.
15 Irina Duksina, "Гончарова и Татлин" [Goncharova and Tatlin] in *Амазонки авангарда* [Amazons of the Avant-garde] ed. Georgii Kovalenko (Moscow, 2001), pp. 111–333, n. 1, p. 124.
16 Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (see note 9), pp. 59–75.
17 Alexei Lidov, Пространственные иконы и образы-парадигмы в византийской культуре [Spatial Icons and Paradigmatic Forms in Byzanzine Culture] (Moscow, 2009). The summary in English is on pp. 307–37.
18 Merleau-Ponty 2012 (see note 11), p. 220.
19 Ibid., p. 22
20 Ibid., p. 59.