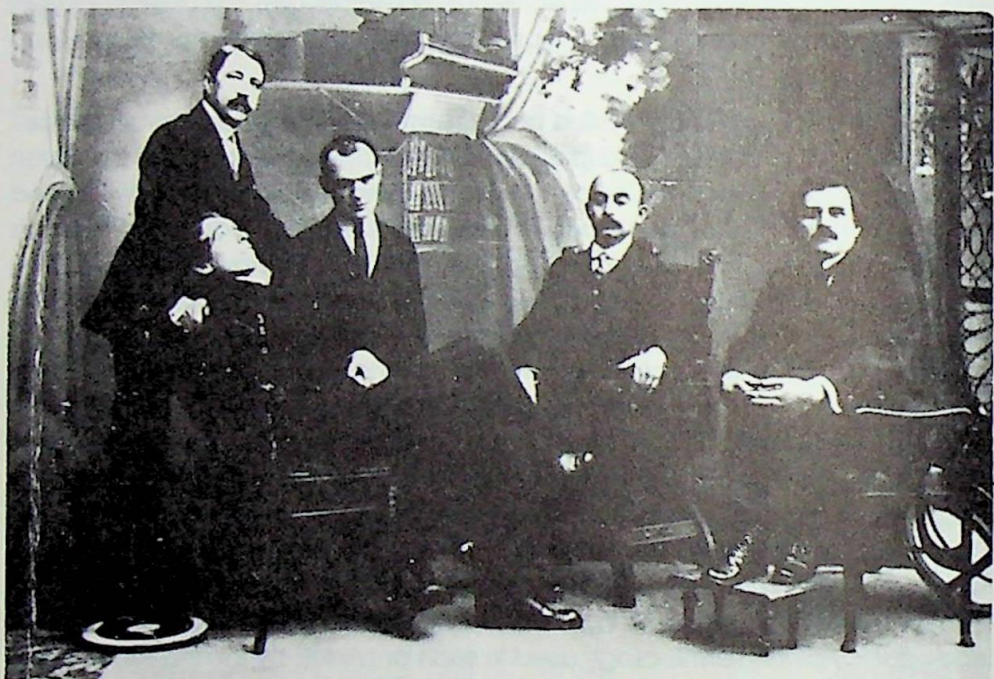


A SLAP IN THE FACE OF PUBLIC TASTE: THE ART OF THE BOOK AND THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

John E. Bowlf

To write about the books compiled and illustrated by the Russian avant-garde—that constellation of artists and ideas that transformed the evolution of Russian art in the 1910s and 1920s—is not an easy task. Practically all the primary and secondary members of that group of movements such as David and Vladimir Burluk, Natalia Goncharova, Vasili Kandinsky, Mikhail Larionov, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin—were involved in book design and/or illustration and, thereby, moved in close contact with the radical poets of that time such as Elena Guro, Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Although some scholarly research has been undertaken in the documentation and assessment of this discipline,¹ many avenues of enquiry have yet to be pursued: for example, a comprehensive directory to the Cubo-Futurist, Suprematist and Constructivist booklets is still lacking, and information on the materials published outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg/Leningrad, e.g. in the Ukraine and Georgia, is still hard to come by.² Appreciation is hampered still further by the inadequacy of the terminology used in such analyses, by the indistinct notion of what exactly constituted a book during the avant-garde period and by the relative scarcity of works owing to their limited editions (e.g. 300 copies) and also to the frequent differences and discrepancies between one copy and the next.³

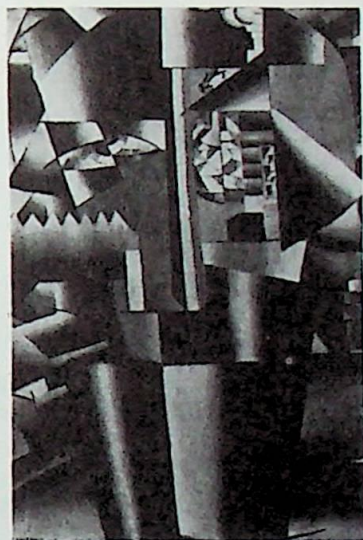
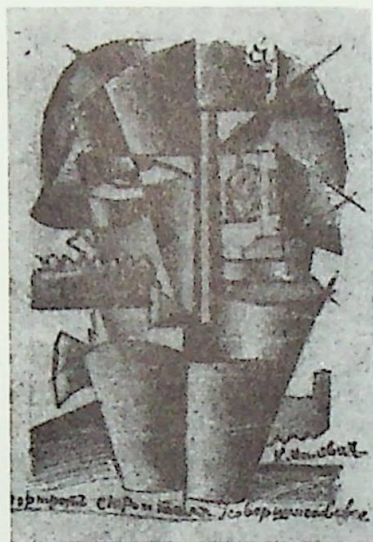
In spite of these difficulties, the illustrated booklets of the Cubo-Futurists are alluring, not just because they entertain through shock and jocularly in their words and images, but also because they can be viewed as an intimate gallery of modern Russian art—containing all the isms (and more) that Hans Arp and El Lissitzky described in 1924. Not only do the same stylistic principles appear concurrently in the paintings and book illustrations of, for example, D. Burliuk, Larionov and Malevich, but also the book illustrations themselves are sometimes paraphrases or "miniaturizations" of major paintings (as in the case of some of Malevich's graphic contributions of 1913-14). In the latter case, these representations often have no direct reference to the text and are to be viewed as visual accompaniments rather than as illustrations in the conventional sense (cf. Malevich's lithograph of a woman, reaping inside the first edition of *Troe/The Three*/by Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh and Guro/St. Petersburg, 1913). Such prints may be "irrelevant", but, then, alogicality was an active ingredient of avant-garde literature and art, and the deliberate insertion of the non-sequitur constituted a direct affront to the reading public—nurtured on the Victorian cultural and



Group photograph of (left to right) Mikhail Matiushin, Alexei Kruchenykh, Pavel Filonov, Iosif Shkolnik, and Kazimir Malevich.

social tradition of order, sequence and explicability.

Even a cursory glance at the key publications of the Russian Cubo-Futurists (eg. *Vzorval/Explodity*/by Kruchenykh with illustrations by Goncharova, Nikolai Kulbin, Malevich and Rozanova/St. P., 1913/*Slovo kak takovoe/The Word as Such*/by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov with illustrations by Malevich and Rozanova/M., 1913/, and *Porosiata/Piglets*/by Zina V. and Kruchenykh with cover by Malevich/St. P., 1913) demonstrates immediately sharp contrasts with preceding artistic and typographical methods.⁵ Generally speaking, it might be asserted that, in the 19th century, the prose and poetry illustration had been little more than that, i.e. a handmaiden to the text, desirable, but not indispensable. The avant-garde book, however, used the "illustration" as a component part of the text and often the work could not function without the image and vice versa. Of course, this proximity and frequent interpenetration of the two media was not altogether new in the tradition of book design, for we can trace similar harmonies and disharmonies in medieval illuminated manuscripts and in the 18th and 19th century broadsheet (American and Russian). Indeed, the



Kazimir Malevich: *Portrait of a Builder Completed*, 1913. Lithograph inserted between pp. 2 and 3 of the first edition of *Porosiata* [Piglets] by Alexei Kruchenykh and Zina V., St. Petersburg: EUY, 1913.

Kazimir Malevich: *Portrait of Ivan Kliun*, 1911. Oil. Russian Museum, Leningrad.

convention of the Russian *lubok* (the cheap, handcolored broadsheet) is of particular importance to the context of the Cubo-Futurist book and, for example, both editions of the Kruchenykh/Khlebnikov *Igra v adu* (A Game in Hell, M., 1912, 1913)⁶ owe much to the devices of the *lubok*.

Furthermore, and paradoxically, even though the Cubo-Futurists wished to desanctify art (hence the pigs and bad words in some of Larionov's paintings or the Jewish in-jokes in Chagall's),⁷ they were no less elitist, no less sophisticated, no less esoteric than their immediate literary and artistic forebears, the Symbolists: their books, too, were published in miniscule editions, they were often incomprehensible, and decipherment of their messages relied on a keen understanding of contemporary cultural developments in Russia and the West. The Cubo-Futurists may have condemned the Decadent poets Konstantin Balmont and Valerii Briusov for their "perfumed lechery" and "paper armor" (although Briusov was an avid collector of their books)⁸ and have derided Mikhail Vrubel's "vain attempts at genius,"⁹ but, in actual fact, they were much obliged to the heritage of the *fin de siècle*. As the critic Genrikh Tasteven once wrote, the Futurists were simply the "maximalists" of the Symbolists.¹⁰



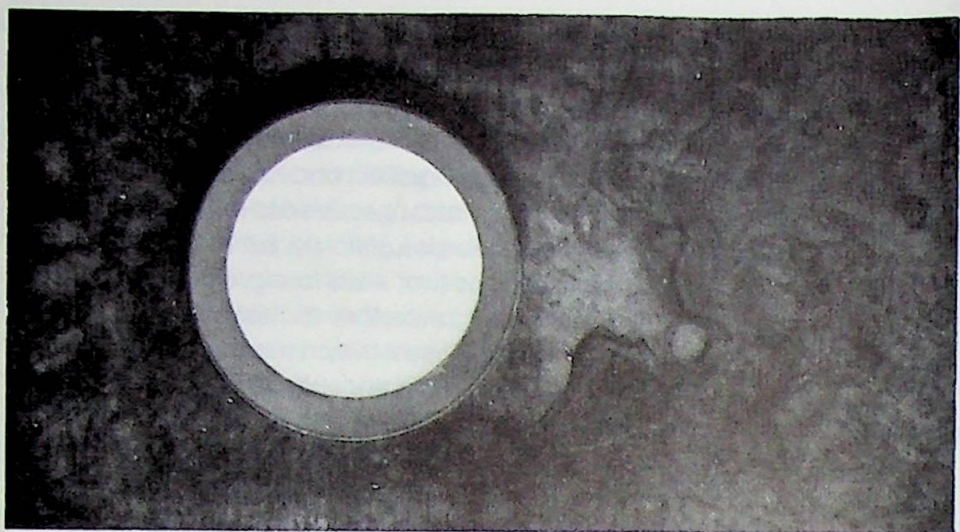
Kazimir Malevich: Illustration for the second edition of *Igra v adu* [A Game in Hell] by Alexei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, Moscow: Kuzmin and Dolinsky, 1914.

There were many philosophical and esthetic ideas that linked the avant-garde with the Symbolists—interest in artistic synthesis (the illustrated book is a clear example of this), the awareness of abstract art as a potential, subsequent development, the realization that Russian culture was undergoing a renaissance and that this, in turn, perhaps signified and anticipated a transformation of a broader, social kind. Both camps subscribed to these positions and in this sense Tasteven's rhetorical assertion is justifiable. But the Cubo-Futurists also entertained ideas and experiences that were foreign to the Symbolists: they did not support moderation and elegance, they did not, by and large, sympathize with the Symbolists' mystical impulses, they no longer respected the reader, and they certainly did not possess the encyclopedic knowledge and worldly wisdom of writers such as Andrei Bely and Briusov.

As far as the look of the book is concerned, the Cubo-Futurists can rarely be confused with the Symbolists. Their raucous titles (e.g. *Moloko kobylets* /Milk of Mares/ by Khlebnikov with illustrations by the Burliuks and Alexandra Exter /M., 1914/, *Tango s korovami* /Tango with Cows/ by Vasilii Kamensky with illustrations by the Burliuks /M., 1914/, *Futuristy. Rykaiushchii parnas* /The Futurists. Roaring Parnas/ by D. Burliuk and others with illustrations by D. Burliuk, Pavel Filonov and



Lubok [cheap, handcolored print] of ca. 1850 entitled *Punishments Inflicted on a Wicked Rich Man*. Lithograph.



Ivan Puni: *Relief with a Plate*, 1919. Oil, plate, board. Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.

Ivan Puni (St. P., 1914/), their reliance on accident and the spontaneous gesture (e.g. the "nonsensical" mutation of the word *kniga* /book/ into *gniga* /gook/ in Kruchenykh's *Zaumnaia gniga* [Transrational Gook, M., 1916, with illustrations by Rozanova/ which, with its absurd button sewn on to the cover reminds us of Puni's Dada painting with a plate of 1919),¹¹ the eccentric distribution of characters on the page as in Kruchenykh's *Vzorval*, and the deliberate interchanges of roles (for example, D. Burljuk signed his two articles on Cubism and texture in *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* /A Slap in the Face of Public Taste /M., 1913/N./Ikolai/Burliuk)—such activities differ immediately from the staid sobriety of the *fin de siecle* stylists such as Alexandre Benois and Konstantin Somov. But let us digress for a moment and dwell on this particular tradition which, while alien to the experimentation of the avant-garde, actually provided it with much vitality and continued to develop with it right until the 1930s. We have to be familiar with this tradition in order to better understand the Cubo-Futurist book.

The "un-Futurist" book, i.e. the fine edition, reached its apogee in Russia just before and after 1917, when designers such as Benois, Sergei Chekhonin,

Olga Rozanova: cover for the book *Zaumnaia gniga* [Transrational Gook] by Alexei ▶ Kruchenykh and Aliagrov, Moscow, 1915 (1916 on cover). Collage.

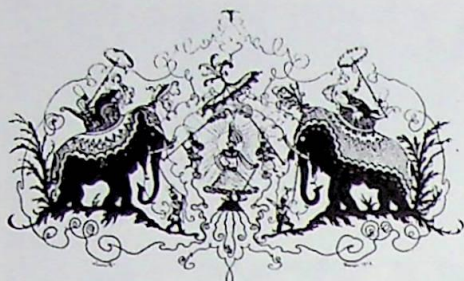
Крученых.
Алягров

Заумная ГНИГА

цветные гравюры
о. Розановой



1916 г.



Александр Бенуа
(А. Бенуа)

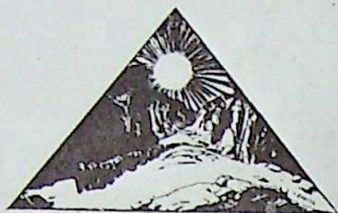
сашь, и эта книга одна из лучших соборь была арте осведомея сосредоточенный оть абакуре сабтовь по кейто и пфам патеры. И это иль равнодушие к тому, что вь дереве ижего иль вь промьей голось, какь-бы свиставый о ижеотестовь, какь-бы говораящ: „и ижего не надо, один проклясь“, почити ижего иль не смутьиль: „фу — какь жреца Бакал и также оруть“. Я достояль во коюда служба. Она такуащь злыя, безь красоте, монотонно вь смеяль ижеобразия Наконей вьсе окончалась. Что это за служба вь поряде римскаго богослужения (было часа 4, а можеть быти и по-полуночи) — я не знаю. Но они велики, ни мало не силаза, покуда плачю, какь солдаты, на дикозорю раней, и покуда, смею не устать, вьрнкой и покуда, грубо и терпя. И пережестяля по правде злыюу. Кто-кто ко-

смотрять на меня вь темноты. „Ты зачь вь тут? И теба не надо, ижего не надо. Мы один тут и совершенно статным. Богь и мы“.

Внезапно, какь и повсюду, постоанно вь Италия: „ну, сь ними довольно трудно договаривать о соединении деревей. Они спобуьт вась сь ногь, просто самь вь движенияхь, бытй вь своемь, равнее чь вь высьте доготорить первую фразу „середложия“: спобуьт — и перекуть, черезь вась, и пойдуть вь своимь дьявля, и зоруть, какь дь вь, что-нибудь грубое надь Мисахит, безь воспоминания о вась, безь сожаления вась, потому-что иль вь иже и доется иль по этой огромной вьрнкой коня, какь сьловно сьловую, который шеть и унывает и зора сь вь вь Миса, он — по сьловнкой. Это — вьра. Да, это тоже вьра,

Миръ искусства

У ГОДЪ ИЗДАНИЯ



САНКТПЕТЕРБУРГЪ,
1903.

Page from the magazine *Mir iskusstva* [The World of Art], St. Petersburg, 1902, Vol. 8. The text is part of Vasiliï Rozanov's article entitled "Florence"; the ornament is by Alexandre Benois.

Leon Bakst: cover for a brochure advertising the magazine *Mir iskusstva*, St. Petersburg, 1903.

Mstislav Dobujinsky, Dmitrii Mitrokhin, Georgii (Yurii) Narbut and Somov replaced the often excessive ornamentation of the Victorian book with restrained and elegant filigrees. This trend was encouraged by a number of collectors and patrons' societies in St. Petersburg, particularly by the St. Eugenia Society and Vasiliï A. Vereshchagin's Circle of Lovers of Russian Fine Editions. The latter was responsible, for example, for I. I. Leman's impressive *Graviura i litografiia. Ocherki istroii i tekhniki* (Engraving and Lithography. Outlines of their History and Technique, St. P., 1913). The increased interest in the limited, deluxe book paralleled the general refurbishment of the Russian decorative arts, and often the book designers of this period were also active as stage, fashion, and porcelain designers. For example, Benois, who was responsible for many illustrations and vignettes in the journals *Mir iskusstva* (The World of Art, St. P., 1898-1904), *Zolotoe*

runo (The Golden Fleece, M., 1906-09), *Starye gody* (Bygone Years, St. P., 1907-16) and *Apollon* (Apollo, St. P., 1909-17)¹², also created sets and costumes for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and Chekhonin, who produced many charming illustrations and covers for children's stories, became head of the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory in 1918.

The reassessment of the book as an artifact, and the rapid evolution of the art of fine design were occasioned in part by the rediscovery of 18th and 19th century Russian engravers, draftsmen, architects, and decorators. Even though the technical level was uneven, it did constitute a tradition that was developed and enriched by artists such as Benois, Ivan Bilbin and Dobujinsky during the early 20th century.¹³ They excelled in all print media—engraving, etching, xylography, zincography, linocut, they organized special exhibitions to propagate their achievements and published specialist journals on the graphic arts. During the 1900s through the 1920s, many collections of original engravings



Konstantin Somov: illustration for *Le Livre de la Marquise*, Petrograd: Golike and Vilborg, 1918, p. 157.

Konstantin Somov: illustration for *Le Livre de la Marquise*. Planned luxury edition, Moscow, 1916. Formerly in the collection of Vladimir Girshman, Moscow.

by "elegant" artists appeared in the two capitals. Published for the most part in very small, exquisite editions, these books and folios were collectors' items, intended for a limited clientele and covering themes that tended to elicit a nostalgia for the past, a curiosity about exotic countries or a strong erotic response. Typical of this vogue was Somov's cycle of illustrations for *Le Livre de la Marquise* (first published in 1908)¹⁴ and the album of linocuts by Sergei Kolesnikov called *Mongoliia* (Mongolia, M., 1922), and Ivan Pavlov's *Ugolki Moskvyy* (Corners of Moscow, M., n.d.). The culmination of this unprecedented interest in the fine edition was the exhibition "The Graphic Arts in the USSR 1917-1927" at the Academy of Arts, Leningrad in 1927 (catalog by Erik Gollerbach and Vsevolod Voinov) and Viacheslav Polonsky's solid monograph *Mastera sovremennoi graviury i grafiki* (Masters of Contemporary Engraving and Graphics, L., 1928). However, neither of these sources referred to avant-garde book design, i.e. to such extraordinary typographical constructions as *Pomada* (Pomade by Kruchenykh with illustrations by Larionov, M., 1913), *Dokhlaiia luna* (Croaked Moon by D. Burliuk et al. with illustrations by D. Burliuk et al., M., 1913), and Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Tragediia* (Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy with illustrations by D. and V. Burliuk, M., 1914). It was as if this alternative tradition had not existed, as if, by tacit agreement, the impropriety, disorderliness and vulgarity of the avant-garde book were considered unworthy of scholarly investigation. The conspiracy of silence that removed discussion of the avant-garde from Soviet culture was, therefore, inaugurated by intelligent, academic critics of the time and not necessarily by pen-pushers from Stalin's cultural bureaucracy.

The graphic attainments of Benois, Chekhonin, Somov may delight the eye and titillate the senses, but their moderation and good taste were foreign to the avant-garde. True, artists such as the Burliuks, Goncharova, Larionov and Malevich used and abused the preceding conventions, but they did not espouse a Realist, illusionistic style and reacted immediately to the standard kind of book illustration whether satirical (as, for example, Alexander Agin's 1846 caricatures for Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*) or documentary (as, for example, Iliia Repin's pieces for *Scribner's Magazine* in 1892). On the other hand, these angry young men took full advantage of the Tsar's proclamation of civil liberties, including freedom of the press, issued in 1905. Before that time, jurisprudentially, the book designs and other antics of the Cubo-Futurists would have been unthinkable in a society that, in 1890, proscribed a picture of Cupid "because the genitals can be seen" and in 1902 forbade newspapers to reproduce portraits of Tolstoi "forever."¹⁵ The Cubo-Futurists also exploited the Russian book market and publishing world which, from the late 19th century onwards, had expanded and advanced by leaps and bounds: with the advent of Symbolism came the little magazine, the professional reviewer, the intimate edition and the vanity press. In other words, by ca. 1900 Russia already possess-

Ведь я горящий булыжник дум ем
Сегодня в вашем кричащем
тосте

Я овенчаюсь моим безумием

Сигна постепенно
наполняется
Человек без ушей
Человек без то-
потов в др. Тулови
Смелый без ко-
рычки едят
дальше

В Маяковский

Граненых строчек босой
алмазник

Взметя перины в чужих жи-
лицах

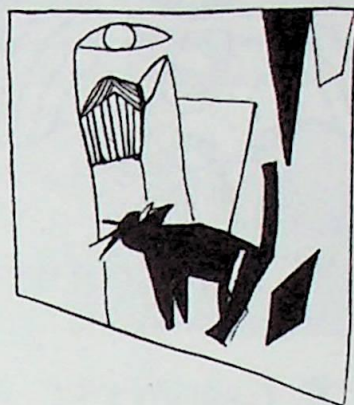
Зажгу сегодня всемирный празд-
ник

Таких богатых и пестрых нищих

Старик с козы
кажи

Оставь

Зачём мудрецам погремушек потеха



David Burliuk: "The Old Man with Cats". Page for Vladimir Mayakovsky: Vladimir Mayakovsky. Tragediia, Moscow: Gileia, 1914.

ed the literary apparatus that, whether amicable or hostile, played a key role in the Cubo-Futurist endeavor. After all, it was precisely this community that D. Burliuk and his colleagues had in mind when they issued their Slap in the Face of Public Taste in December, 1912, declaring that "The Academy and Pushkin are more incomprehensible than hieroglyphics."¹⁶

Within the rhetoric and sensationalism of the Russian avant-garde there were many serious artistic ideas that were to have particular importance for the development of 20th century art in general, but there were also vulgar gestures, shock tactics and much foul language that were used to shake the foundations of the Russian establishment. For example, Malevich and his friends once posed for a group photograph beneath a grand piano suspended from the ceiling upside down; Kamensky showed a mousetrap at an art exhibition in Moscow in 1915; Goncharova, Larionov and others walked about Moscow with their faces decorated with Rayonist designs; Mayakovsky donned his famous yellow vest and paraded through downtown Moscow; Kruchenykh threw hot tea into the laps of his audience. Such highjinks formed the charged, emotional at-



Zinovii Grzhebin: *Eagle-Werewolf or Domestic and Foreign Policy*. This satirical drawing (the meaning becomes clear when the "eagle" is turned upside down) was published in the journal *Zhupel* [Bugbear], St. Petersburg, 1905, No. 1.



Nikolai Kulbin: illustration for Nikolai Evreinov's study of the modern theater, *Teatr dlia sebja* (The Theater for Itself), Petrograd: Pervaya zhenskaia tipografiia, 1915, Vol. 1, p. 65

mosphere in which the Cubo-Futurist booklets were published.

But once again we may question the apparent iconoclastic novelty of these publications. Hadn't the radical, revolutionary magazines of 1905-06, illustrated by artists such as Bilibin, Dobujinsky and Zinovii Grzhebin been just as scandalous? What could have been a sharper rebuttal of public taste than Grzhebin's depiction of the Tsar's hind quarters called *Eagle-Werewolf* in 1905? Such illustrations and the titles of the journals themselves (e.g. *Zhupel* /Bugbear/, St.P., 1905-06 or *Adskaia Bomba* /Hellish Bomb, Stavropol, 1907) served as important precedents to the often shocking pieces by the Burliuks and their colleagues, even though their emphasis was on esthetic innovation and not on political commitment. During the period of social reaction (1908-14) caricature and parody of this kind did not disappear, although the focus of attention changed from the government structure to the bourgeois household or to the world of artists and literati. Among the journals that favored this inclination were *Satirikon* (Satyricon, St.P., 1908-13) and its successor *Novyi Satirikon* (New Satyricon, St.P., 1914-18), and some of the artists who worked for them such as Vladimir Lebedev, Re-mi (pseudonym of Nikolai Remizov) and Mayakovsky



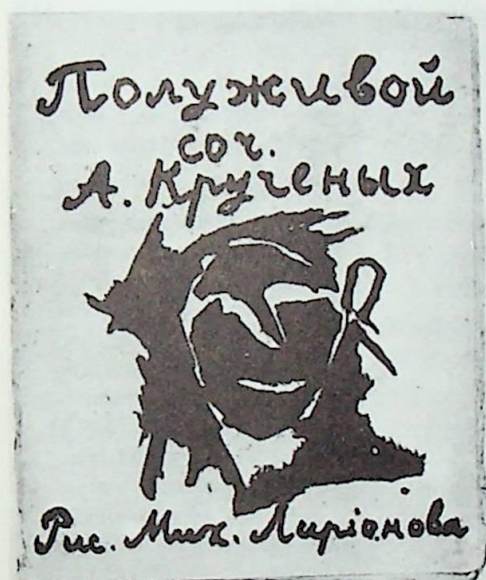
Re-mi (Nikolai Remizov): *Mona Lisa*. This caricature was published in Alexei Radakov et al.: *Sokrovishcha iskusstv*, St. Petersburg: Kornfeld, 1912, unpaginated.

Kazimir Malevich: *Composition with Mona Lisa*, 1914. Oil. Private collection, Leningrad.

Just as the new artists parodied the hallowed image of the Mona Lisa and, thereby, the entire esthetic of high art, so they desecrated the book. Their publications were intended not only to shock the bourgeoisie by their scandalous and often erotic allusions, but also to undermine the conventional notion of the book as a fine edition, expensive, scholarly, prestigious. The Burliuks, Goncharova, Larionov, Malevich, Rozanova and their fellow illustrators rejected the esthetic of the *fin de siècle* book with its leather Art Nouveau covers, its serpentine illustrations and parchment paper, and returned the book to the status of the *lubok*. Instead of being an object of discernment and esteem, the book now became a joke, instead of being a symbol of truth and permanence, it was now a throwaway item, a piece of ephemera. Instead of being a logical, readable experience, "its words," as Kruchenykh wrote in *Te li ie* (illustrated by Rozanova and Kulbin, St.P., 1914), "have no definite meaning";²⁰ instead of being a source of solace, it now attacked the reader's peace of mind and demanded an active, creative involvement. Just as the old *lubki* parodied im-

portant personages and social foibles of the time, interpreting them for an illiterate or semi-literate consumer, so the Cubo-Futurist booklets followed similar aims, relying on handwritten script and rude illustrations, incorporating mistakes in spelling and grammar and other typographical "mistakes," and using cheap paper (the first issue of *Sadok sudei* /A Trap for Judges, St.P., 1910/ was actually printed on wallpaper). As a matter of fact, Malevich's theoretical tract on Suprematism, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve* (On New Systems in Art), published in Vitebsk in 1919, relates directly to this Cubo-Futurist esthetic of book production: its lithographed clumsy script, its crossings-out and slips of the pen, its incongruous "illustrations" of geometric shapes recall the graphic devices of *Poluzhivoi* (Half-Alive by Kruchenykh with illustrations by Larionov, M., 1913) and *Vozroptshchem* (Let's Grumble by Kruchenykh with illustrations by Malevich and Rozanova, St.P., 1913).

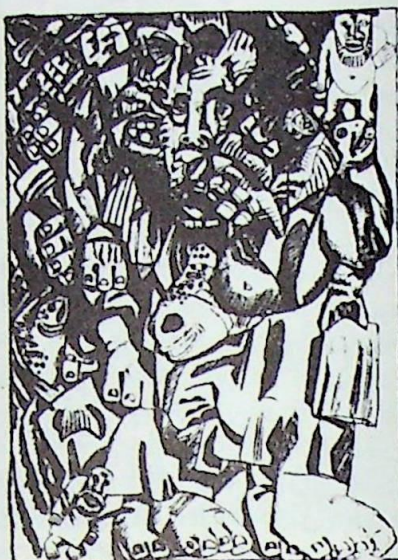
The methods mentioned above were employed by the avant-garde not only to ruffle the complacency of Russian society. They also reflected a sincere wish on the part of the Cubo-Futurists to combine the literary and the visual arts. If the French Cubists attempted this in their incorporation of letter and word col-



Michael Larionov: cover and illustration for *Poluzhivoi* (Half-Alive) by Alexei Kruchenykh, Moscow: Kuzmin and Dolinsky, 1913. Lithograph.



ОПОЩАМО МИНОГАМО ПИНДО ПИНДО
 БЫДНЫ ВЫТАГВЯЮТСЯ ВЪ КЪЯК КЛЕБЪ ВЪ
 — РАВЛИ УЛЕДАНТ ШИЩОДАМ МАГАДАМ ВЪ
 КАДАМ.
 УХ, ЧУХ, ЧУХ
 ЧУХЪ
 РАДОВАРЪ ВЪ ЮЖИЯ ГЛАВЧАНИКИ:
 ВОИ СУЩА СЮДА ИДЕТ
 ВЪ СВОЕЙ ВЕРНОЙ БЕЗРУКАВЪ
 ОН ЖИВЕТ



ОХОРОНДИ ОПРИШКАМИ ЮВАРМОН
 ТОКЪ НОЖЪ ТО КИМЪ ВЪ ДОН
 ТЕПЕРЬ МЫ НЕ ЖИВЕМ
 С УРАВДЫ АЕГНИИ
 А МАЩА МХ ВЪ ТЪНИ.
 УСАККИ: КОГО НЕСЕТЪ МХЪ ШАМКА
 СОСЪДАКА ОТДАДИ КА
 Р УСАККИ: О! О! ЦОК
 О! О! ДОК
 ПИЦ, ПАЦ, ПАЦУ
 ПИЦ, ПАЦ, ПАЦУ
 О! О! ЦОК
 О! О! ДОК
 ПИЦ, ПАЦ, ПАЦУ
 ПИЦ, ПАЦ, ПАЦУ
 ШОМО, ШОМО, ШОМО
 УАХИДО, РЫНОДО, РЫНОДО

СЪ МОБОИ НАДЕЖДА ВЪ РЫНКИ ОНЫМ
 МЕРЯ ПРОВОЖАША ЗОВОМ ДОЖЕ
 И КАКЪ ДОБЫЧУ МЕРЯ ПОДЪИМЛИ БЫЛИ
 КОГДА ВОШЕЛЪ МЫ НА ПЕСЧАНОЙ РЪИ ПОЖЕ.
 КАКЪ ИВЕРЪ ВЪ АЧУТЪ СЪ ПРЪТЪ СЪИДИ
 МЕКШИИ КРОВЬЮ ЖАРКАИ КУСЪ
 ВЪ АДИМИРЪ НЕ ПОДАРИТЬ — ЛИ ТАКЪ ГОЛЪДИТЪ
 ТВОИ ЗОЛОТЕННИЙ РАЙНИИ УС
 МЫ ЗНАЕШ ПУТЬ ПЪТЪНИИ ПРЪ
 И СЪМЕНИ ВЪ РЫНЪ О ТЕРУНЪ
 КОГДА ЖЕ АТОИ И БЕЛОИ СЪМЪ ПРЪ
 ПЕРЪ МОБОИ ВЪ НОВЪ ОБЪЕДИНИИ НАС ВЪ УНЪ.
 И АБЕМ ВОЗМОЖЕННИИ НА САНИ,
 КАКЪ ВЪ КОГДА МЫ ПРОВОЖАША
 ТАКЪ ТМ ОКОНИИ ВЪ ПЕРЕНЕРЪ
 УМАВА ВЪ НОВЪ СЪАГОТЪ ВСЮ КИРАНИИ.

Natalia Goncharova: illustration for *Vertogradari nad lozami* [Gardeners over the Vines] by Sergei Bobrov, Moscow: Lirika, 1913. Lithographs in color.

lages into their paintings or if Apollinaire achieved a successful marriage of poetry and visual design in his *Calligrammes* of 1914-17, the Russians resolved the issue in their own way. First of all, it is worth remembering that many of the Cubo-Futurist poets—Kamensky, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, D. Burluk—were also painters and, in some cases, attended art school. Conversely, a number of the artists, including Filonov, Malevich, Rozanova and Stepanova tried their hand at poetry. Not surprisingly, therefore, the creators of the Cubo-Futurist booklets gave simultaneous attention to the aural and the visual perceptions of the word. For example, Malevich designed his devils for *Igra v adu* as a vertical accompaniment to the downward reading of the poetry. Filonov also achieved a remarkable conjunction of artistic and literary devices in his designs for Khlebnikov's *Izbornik stikhov* (Selection of Poetry also illustrated by N. Burluk and Malevich, St.P., 1914). This includes not only two illustrations by Filonov, but also his own calligraphy whereby he tried to match Khlebnikov's often abstruse and archaic vocabulary by a more accessible visual entertainment in the form of ideograms; for example, he drew the first letter of the word *rusalka* as a barebreasted mermaid and suspended the middle letter of the verb "fly away" above the rest of the word. Consequently, Filonov (and Malevich) is playing a calculated game with the viewer, inviting us to participate dynamically in the perception of the artifact—something that Lissitzky developed with his "architecture of the book" in the 1920s.

At this juncture it might be appropriate to concentrate on key contributions by two or three of the leading book illustrators of the avant-garde in order to discover how they interpreted and applied particular principles of design: Goncharova, Larionov, Malevich, Rozanova and Lissitzky are of primary relevance to the issue at hand.

In no small degree, Goncharova and Larionov were responsible for the "coming of age" of Russian art in ca. 1910, and their blending of Western influences (especially from Gauguin and Matisse) with domestic stimuli (especially folk art) is one of the most remarkable attainments in early 20th century Russian culture. In challenging Parisian supremacy, they focused attention on what they argued were esthetic concepts and objects of no less a value than those of Post-Impressionism and Cubism. They maintained that their exuberance and vitality derived in part, at least, from indigenous and also from Eastern sources: "Primitive art forms—icons, *lubki*, trays, signboards, fabrics of the East, etc.," they asserted, "these are specimens of genuine value and painterly beauty."²¹ Goncharova and Larionov, in particular, began to give attention to such art forms as early as 1907-08 and injected new energy into Russian painting just as the previous dominant trend, Symbolism, was entering a state of decline. Perhaps their concentration on folk art was also, in part, a result of the democratic impulse of the 1905-06 revolution, although, by and large, the pioneers of the Russian avant-garde were apolitical, at least before the Oc-

tober Revolution, and they gave little thought to ideological social systems.

As the Neo-Primitivist movement developed after 1908, so its proponents looked ever more intently at their domestic roots, flaunted their derision of the West and issued xenophobic claims to the effect that "Neo-Primitivism is a profoundly national phenomenon" or "The *lubok* presents other constructions that are much more complicated than the visions of Picasso and Braque."²² This esthetic Slavophilism found dramatic visual extensions in the paintings, drawings and book illustrations of 1910-13 and in the propagation through societies and exhibitions organized by Larionov and his colleagues (such as the 1910-11 showings of the "Jack of Diamonds" in Moscow). Moreover, as this enthusiasm for "things Russian" increased, so the awareness of Russia's alleged derivation from Oriental culture also became attractive. That is why Goncharova, in the preface to the catalog of her one woman exhibition in Moscow in 1913 could affirm that:

The Impressionists are from the Japanese. The Synthetists, Gauguin, from India spoiled by its early renaissance. From the islands of Tahiti, he apprehended nothing, apart from a tangible type of woman. Matisse-Chinese painting. The Cubists-Blacks (Madagascar), Aztecs. As for the past—certain historians are sadly mistaken in deducing a Romanesque influence, even a German influence, on our icons.²³

Goncharova and Larionov tried to prove their assumption by categorizing certain Russian artifacts, especially *lubki*, along with Japanese, Chinese, Persian, Hindu and Tartar works, as they did, for example, at the "Exhibition of Icons and *Lubki*" in Moscow in 1913. We should not be surprised, therefore, to see direct paraphrases of Russian *lubki* and other pieces of folk art in Goncharova's and Larionov's book illustrations of 1912-13. Goncharova's pieces in *Igra v adu* (1912), for example, including the cover, derive immediately from 19th-century lithographic broadsides such as *Punishments Inflicted on a Wicked Rich Man* of the 1850s. At the same time, both artists were acutely aware of Western developments, especially Italian Futurism, and not only did Larionov repeat panegyric statements about the modern city, but he also expanded the Futurists' interests in energy, speed, and the cinema into his theory of Rayonism (1912-13) dependent on only the "laws germane to painting: colored line and texture."²⁴ Even though Goncharova and Larionov were skeptical of their Italian colleagues, they were surely paraphrasing Carra and Severini in their Rayonist illustrations to Sergei Bobrov's *Vertogradari nad lozami* (Gardeners over the Vines, M., 1913, illustrated by Goncharova) and Kruchenykh's *Starinnaiia liubov* (Old-time Love, M., 1912, illustrated by Larionov). Indeed, Larionov, at least, had no qualms about borrowing from the Italians—as he did in his designs for Sergei Diaghilev's projected production of *Histoires Naturelles* in 1916. Quite justifiably, Fortunato Depero accused Larionov of "arranging my designs in his own man-

ner . . . plagiarizing them completely."²⁵

Goncharova and Larionov were pioneers in the development of avant-garde design, although their concentration on the Cubo-Futurist book lasted



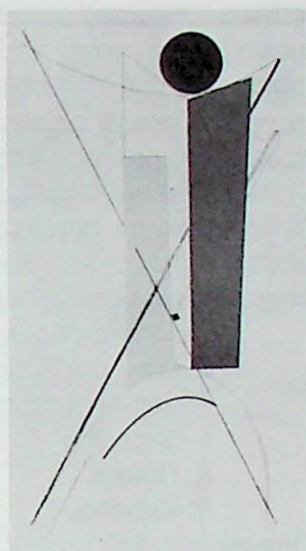
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Natalia Goncharova: collage cover for *Mirskontsa* [Worldbackwards] by Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh, Moscow: Kuzmin and Dolinsky, 1913.

only two years, since, beginning in 1914, they gave increasing attention to the stage. The books that they chose to illustrate later such as *Tsar Saltan* (Paris, 1922, illustrated by Goncharova), while vivid and charming, had none of the provocative elan identifiable with *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards, M., 1912 by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov with illustrations by Goncharova, Larionov, Tatlin and I. Rogovin), *Pustynniki* (Hermits, M., 1913, by Kruchenykh with illustrations by Goncharova), and, of course, *Igra v adu*. On the other hand, Goncharova and Larionov prepared the way for other talented designers, especially Malevich who, in his paintings and designs, owed an appreciable debt to Neo-Primitivism.

Through Goncharova, Malevich reached his sculptural sturdy rendering of the human body present in works such as the costumes for *Victory over the Sun* (1913) or the peasant woman on the cover of *Troe* (The Three, St. 1913, by Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh and Guro). Malevich even repeated certain subjects favored by Goncharova. His lithograph called *Death of a Man Simultaneously in an Airplane and at the Railroad* (1913), for example, which appeared in *Vzorval*, matches Goncharova's painting *Airplane above a Train* of the same year,²⁶ and his untitled lithograph of a carriage in motion in *Troe* brings to mind Goncharova's *Cyclist* of 1912-13 (Russian Museum, Leningrad). Both works, of course, find a common counterpart in Italian Futurism (cf. Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Cyclist* of 1913 in the Mattioli Collection, Milan).

It is relevant to mention here that Rozanova, too, was deeply impressed by Goncharova, and her designs for the second edition of *Igra v adu* (1914) are clearly inspired by Goncharova's drawings for the first edition. Similarly, Rozanova experienced the effect of Italian Futurism, extending the cult of the machine to her industrial paintings and prints of 1913-14. Rozanova's cover for *Vzorval* of 1913 brings to mind her contemporary paintings such as *The Factory and the Bridge* (Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of the McCrory Corporation, New York). It was a short move from these works to Rozanova's own formulation of abstract art dependent upon the mechanical, functional components of the material itself. Rozanova was one of the first avant-garde artists to advocate an art form based only on the interplay of its intrinsic elements, and her illustrations (with Kruchenykh) of *Vselenskaia voina* (Universal War, Petrograd, 1916) mark the highpoint of this "era of purely artistic achievements."²⁷ Using a sequence of twelve non-figurative, colored collages, Rozanova and Kruchenykh "illustrated" a book that had no text. These floating cutouts appear as pictures in miniature, extensions of Rozanova's own experimental painting and drawing, especially her Suprematist work such as *Non-Objective Composition* (ca. 1916, Russian Museum, Leningrad). *Vselenskaia voina* was one of two portfolios that Rozanova and Kruchenykh worked on in 1916, the other being *War*. The latter, carrying concrete references to the military events, was in the same vein as Goncharova's *Voina: Misticheskie obrazy voiny* (War: Mystical Images of the War, M., 1914) and Filonov's *Propeven o prorosli mirovoi* (Chant of



Olga Rozanova: collage illustration for *Vselenskaia voina* [Universal War] by Alexei Kruchenykh and Olga Rozanova, Petrograd, 1916.

El Lissitzky: Proun from *1 Kestnermappe*, Hannover: Ludwig Ey, 1923. Lithograph with collage.

Universal Flowering, Petrograd, 1915), whereas *Vselenskaia voina* was an "abstract" interpretation. True, in their dadaistic shifts and asymmetries, these paper collages sometimes suggest particular objects, but they can hardly be construed as guns, soldiers or angels of war. By the time she had arrived at this remarkable resolution, Rozanova had had considerable experience of avant-garde book design, making her debut in the March, 1913 issue of *Soiuz molodezhi* (Union of Youth, St.P.) and in the second edition of *Igra v adu*—in which her dynamic compositions are remarkably close to those of the Ukrainian artist Alexander Bogomazov. In 1914 she also contributed to the Kruchenykh/Khlebnikov *Te li le* and then, in 1915, to the *Zaumnaia gniga*.

Perhaps the real fascination of the Rozanova/Kruchenykh *Vselenskaia voina* lies in the fact that it both drew upon Malevich's Suprematist system and also pointed forward to other developments in the concept of the book: for example, as a cycle of abstract compositions, *Vselenskaia voina* reminds us of other abstract sequences such as Malevich's *34 risunka* (34 Drawings, Vitebsk, 1921) and Lissitzky's Proun folio of 1920-22.²⁸ The exciting album *34 risunka* pro-

vides a survey and graphic paraphrase of Malevich's major Suprematist paintings of 1915 onwards. Each image in this collection relates, therefore, to a similar painting.²⁹ But these black and white images are more than just graphic reproductions of particular canvasses—they are experiments in the art of abstract lithography. If the Suprematist paintings use the intrinsic elements of painting, these lithographed forms also exploit the essential ingredients of the lithographic art—black and white contrast, tonal gradation, textures. Indeed, what D. Burluk once categorized as basic painterly textures can almost be applied to the diverse surfaces of *34 risunka*:

The Plane of a picture can be:

A. Even, and B. Uneven . . .

Structure of a picture's surface:

I. Granular.

II. Fibrous.

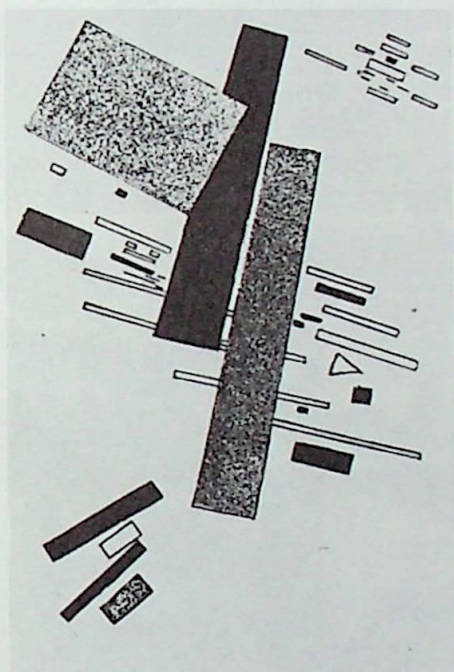
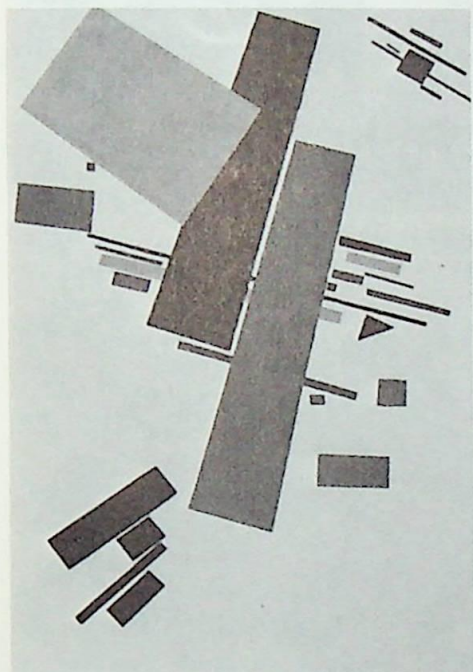
III. Lamellar.³⁰

One probable reason for the artistic success of *34 risunka* (and of Malevich's *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve*) is that Lissitzky, then a follower of Malevich, was in charge of the lithograph workshop at the Vitebsk Popular Art Institute where Malevich was director from 1919 to 1922; and it is rumored that Lissitzky himself lithographed these sheets. The Vitebsk lithography workshop was responsible for a number of interesting lithographic and hectographic publications, all inspired by Malevich and all now exceedingly rare. Mention should be made of the journals *AERO* and *Put Unovisa* (Path of Unovis), and Vera Ermolaeva's woodcut design for the February, 1920 production of *Victory over the Sun* in Vitebsk.³¹

That Lissitzky was deeply influenced by his proximity to Malevich in Vitebsk in 1919-20 can be seen when we compare his designs for Yiddish tales such as *The Bear* (Kiev, 1918) and his cover for *Jewish Folk Tales for Children* (Kiev, 1919)³² with his *Pro dva kvadrata* (About Two Squares), conceived in Vitebsk in 1920 and published in Berlin in 1922—a Constructivist masterpiece. This extraordinary "biblio-construction," which contains the blatant paradox "Don't read—Take bits of paper, matchsticks, bits of wood, compose, paint, build," must be experienced as a poster or billboard or even as a movie rather than as a book. Instead of laboriously assimilating lines of letters in sequence, the eye immediately grasps the semantic value of each frame through the simple contrasts of "black and white (with flashes of red)" within the space of the page. The principles of the Proun³³—the rejection of the axis, the convenience of entering the work at any junction—are equally active here. Each page can be accepted as a separate unit, independent of the story; typography is as much a complex of geometric forms as a sequence of linguistic signs; there is no ending—"further" is the last word.

The notion of the book as an artistic totality, catering equally to the senses

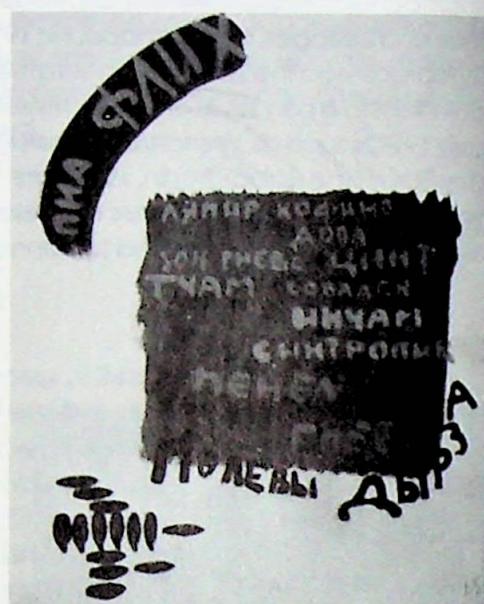
of sight and hearing was, of course, not altogether new. Sonia Delaunay and Blaise Cendrars had experimented with it in their collective publication *La Prose du trans-siberien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (Paris, 1913) which, as a matter of fact, was well known in St. Petersburg; Filonov, Rozanova and Stepanova approached the concept in their works (cf. Stepanova's transrational book of verse and collages, *Gaust chaba*, M., 1919). But as in the case of his Prouns, Lissitzky reprocessed the sometimes tentative, imprecise ideas of his colleagues and took them to a new level of artistry. His several book and magazine covers of the early 1920s such as *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* (Berlin, 1922) and Olga Forsh's play *Ravvi* (The Rabbi, Berlin, 1922) are constructed on the same principles as *Pro dva kvadrata*, although less exuberantly. As in the title-page to the children's tale, a strong diagonal is used to connect statements on the cover of *Veshch*;



Kazimir Malevich: *Dynamic Suprematism*, 1915. Oil. Ludwig Museum, Cologne.

Kazimir Malevich: image from *Suprematism. 34 risunka* [*Suprematism. 34 Drawings*] by Kazimir Malevich, Vitebsk, 1921 (1920 on cover). Lithograph.

the P (surely, Lissitzky's favorite letter) and the exaggerated A of Ravvi are borrowings from the captions to *Pro dva kvadrata*.



Varvara Stepanova: four examples of graphic poetry, 1918-19. Watercolor and ink. Collection of Varvara Rodchenko, Moscow.

Such resolutions anticipated Lissitzky's most impressive book design, i.e. Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Dlia golosa* (For the Voice, Berlin, 1923). As an aural-visual construction, this book of poetry is a unique assemblage built on definite, "scientific" principles. For Lissitzky, the visual element here was not meant simply to illustrate—to accompany or even describe the text—but to serve as a directory to the poems. Furthermore, Lissitzky, paying homage to the ethos of efficiency and speed, introduced the thumb index as a quick reference tool just as in an office ledger or catalog. Finally, Lissitzky wished to correlate the emotional charge of the poems with that of the images: just as he modulated the interior space of his exhibition rooms from Dresden and Hanover in 1926 and 1927-28 by applying reliefs to the walls and just as he then led the visitor through this space by the "geographical" layout of the reliefs, so he incorporated the visual signs in the Mayakovsky book as guides to the reader's psychological response. *Dlia golosa* was Lissitzky's most extraordinary attainment in book design, although he continued to experiment in this field. For example, he made extensive use of photomontage in several catalogs and pamphlets of ca. 1930, and, like Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, he hoped that the next stage would be "photo-writing." Together with Gustav Klutis, Rodchenko, Sergei Senkin, Stepanova, and Solomon Telingater, Lissitzky tried to use photography as a dynamic, creative discipline as a member of the group October in 1928-32—one of the last manifestations of experimental design in the Soviet Union. Even in the 1930s, in spite of weak health and increasing political pressures, Lissitzky continued to apply photomontage in new and refreshing ways, and with Rodchenko, Stepanova, Nikolai Suetin and others, he made a vital contribution to the issues of the propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction* (Moscow, 1932-38). In many cases, the subtle integration of image and word, the sophisticated treatment of the documentary photograph, and the often unexpected resolutions of composition remind us of Lissitzky's audacious book designs of the earlier period.

The "visualization" of the Russian book in the 1910s and 1920s produced many exciting results, only a few of which can be mentioned here. A longer assessment would take into account Kamensky's so-called "ferro-concrete" poems of 1914-16 with their mixed typographies and universal accessibility, Stepanova's graphic poetry of 1919-20,³⁴ and Telingater's "voicegrams" for Semen Kirsanov's poetry of the mid-1920s.³⁵ But one conclusion that should be made is that the Constructivist achievements of the 1920s, especially in book design, were essentially the culmination of the pre-Revolutionary experiments and did not necessarily derive from the socio-political commitments of the Revolution. For example, Rodchenko's famous cycle of photo-collages for Mayakovsky's *Pro eto* (About It, M. 1923) can be viewed as extensions of Malevich's photo-collages in his transrational paintings (e.g. *Woman at an Advertisement Kiosk*, 1914, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam). True, in the post-Revolutionary avant-garde book, the medium may no longer be the on-



El Lissitzky (?): cover for the magazine *USSR in Construction*, Moscow, 1937, No. 3.



**ОСНОВОПОЛОЖНИКИ
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КРАСНОЙ АРМИИ**

book in Stalin's Russia reflects this renewed power of the word as social communication. As in the 19th century, the image, once again, became a mere accompaniment to the text, an illustration of the fantastic messages delivered by an enormous propaganda machine. Book illustration thrived—and many



Vasilii Kamensky: *Ferro-Concrete Poem*, 1914. Reproduced in *Tango s korovami* [A Tango with Cows], by Vasilii Kamensky, Moscow: *Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov*, 1914.

◀ Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova: frontispiece for the album *Krasnaia armia* [The Red Army] edited by V.G. Sokolov, Moscow: *Ogiz-Izogiz*, 1938.

unorthodox artists worked as designers and illustrators at that time—but it was, precisely, illustration, a handmaiden to the story, demoted once again to an auxiliary position.³⁷ Moreover, the Soviet book itself, commissioned, printed and published exclusively by the state, could no longer accommodate individual deviance and eccentric interpretation. But perhaps there is another, more universal reason for the rapid decline of book design after ca. 1930—and not just in the Soviet Union. By then other communication systems presented themselves to the human imagination—the radio, the long-distance telephone, and the talkies. The fact that the Cubo-Futurists had given such careful attention to the book, that they had used it consciously as a primary means of communication indicates that, for all their “vulgarity,” they respected the book as a special, inimitable artifact.³⁸