

# Concerning the Material and the Spiritual in Russian Modernism : Notes on the Icon, *Faktura*, and Self-Sufficiency

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The dichotomy of the spiritual and material pervades much of the discourse of the Russian avant-garde, whether in the polemics between Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich or Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vassilii Kandinskii's debates at the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK). I will address this apparent antimony through the juxtaposition of the icon, *faktura* and the "self-sufficient" work of art as significant nexuses of the material and spiritual in avant-garde practice. A corollary theme of this essay will be the relationship of these concerns to the Russian avant-garde's discovery and appropriation of Cubism. Reference will also be made to related developments in Russian Futurist literature and Formalist textual criticism. Through this analysis a new model of the spiritual and material should emerge; one that will illustrate the dialogical and mutually inferential nature of these properties. I hope thereby to undermine the oppositional binarism of these concepts, while also suggesting alternative approaches to this quintessential theme of avant-garde practice.

The icon has been cited as the inspiration for works as divergent as Aleksandr Gerasimov's portraits of Stalin and Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*. It haunted the officially atheist culture of the Soviet Union and has cast long shadows over much of twentieth century art. In Soviet scholarship the status of the icon was never firmly established; at times it was considered an expression of genuine popular art, and at others as a token of obscurantist mysticism.<sup>1</sup> In the West and in recent post-Soviet criticism the icon has been described most often as the preeminent manifestation of "the sacral" and a bridge from the realm of medieval ritual objects to the contemporary status of fine art as, in the words of Rosalind Krauss, a kind of "secular form of belief"<sup>2</sup>. Yet, the icon's direct influence on artists such as Malevich and Kandinskii has been a source of discomfort in some critical circles. A discomfort that Krauss ascribes to a contemporary intellectual environment in which "...it is indescribably embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence."<sup>3</sup> As the exhibition

"The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting: 1890-1985" has demonstrated, despite certain formal continuities, the messianic spiritual quests of Modernist seers like Kandinsky and Mondrian seem remote from the ethos of Post-Modernism.

Even in thoughtful accounts of the Russian avant-garde the icon seems to have suffered a measure of critical silence due to its denomination as a precursor of the spiritualized art of High Modernism. A number of significant studies of surface (*faktura*) and self-sufficiency in the art of Malevich and his contemporaries, such as Donald Judd's "Malevich: Independent Form, Color, Surface," "Yve-Alain Bois' "Malevich, le carre, le degre zero," Rainer Crone and David Moos' *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure* and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's "From *Faktura* to Factography," are indicative of this tendency.<sup>4</sup> Each of these accounts presents valuable insights, yet the authors avoid substantive discussion of the icon. It is ignored by Judd. Bois mentions it only in passing and Crone rarely discusses the icon throughout a large monograph. To his credit Buchloh briefly discusses the implications of the icon for the avant-garde, but he then asserts, "any references to specifically Russian or religious functions are too rapidly jettisoned to maintain [their] credibility."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the omissions in the texts of Judd, Bois and Crone, as well as this dismissal in Buchloh's narrative seem to exhibit an "anxiety of influence" regarding the icon. Perhaps these commentators, like the audience posited by Krauss, found the icon's "religious functions" and the concomitant discussion of art and spirit which they would entail, to be incompatible with their own critical discourses.

A number of appraisals of the Russian avant-garde have addressed icon painting<sup>6</sup>. Margaret Betz' programmatic article "The Icon and Russian Modernism" illustrates the understanding of the icon as the spiritualized art of which Krauss spoke<sup>7</sup>. Betz shares none of Buchloh's reticence to ponder the "religio-transcendental functions" underlying the relationship of icons and the Modernist project. Instead, she concludes: "Here, rising from the grave — as the Last Judgment — was the beacon of a new, transfigured life. There can be no doubt that Russian artists of the avant-garde looked to it [the icon] for inspiration, as the true sign that a new life was about to begin."<sup>8</sup> Betz exhibits little embarrassment in linking spirit or religious functions to art in her narrative. Unlike Bois, Crone and Buchloh, she pursues the import of the icon in Russian Modernist culture, yet she simultaneously becomes enmeshed in a reductive discursive trap which the others eschew. Betz construes the icon as a mere cipher for an overtly spiritual and eminently religious weltanschauung, thereby implicating the avant-garde in an unambiguously spiritual and quasi-religious undertaking.

Betz' emphasis upon the role of the icon in the development of the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde is well placed. However, I would propose that the icon also functioned outside the circumscribed realm of the spiritual

and religious evoked in Betz's article. In this respect a discursive approach more consonant with that of Buchloh would better elucidate the icon's role in the artistic practice of the Russian avant-garde. Buchloh quite rightly rejects an interpretation of the icon which posits "religio-transcendental function" as the crux of the avant-garde's interest in *faktura*. The difficulty with Buchloh's admonition lies in his acceptance (like Betz) of the premise that the icon was an object inextricably bound to spirit and religion. Instead, an alternative model of the icon would take into account the image's material existence and its eminently earthly embodiment as an amalgam of wood, oil, gold leaf and metal. Through this examination it becomes clear that the icon serves not only as a paradigm for the great spiritual art of the Russian and European avant-garde (e.g., Kandinskii and Malevich) but also as a model for the materialist interests of Tatlin and the Constructivists.

Interest in the icon began to increase at the close of the previous century. However, only with Serge Diaghiev's exhibition at the *Salon d'Automne* of 1906 was the icon definitively thrust into the realm of art. In the following years interest in the icon grew as artists such as Malevich, Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov began to adopt compositional devices derived from its colorful, rhythmic design. Finally, with the celebration of the Romanov tercentenary in 1913 a large number of icons were cleaned and restored. With this rediscovery came a flood of publications devoted to the icon, including numerous articles in the art journal *Apollon*, the writings of the philosopher Pavel Florenskii and the lectures of the scholar V.F. Grineizin.<sup>9</sup> However, Evgenii Trubetskoi's "Icons: Theology in Colors" (1915) and the Futurist artist-theorist Waldemars Matvejs's (known under the pseudonym Vladimir Markov) "Principles of Creation in the Plastic Arts" (1914) will serve as my paradigms of two divergent approaches to the legacy of the icon in Russian culture.<sup>10</sup> For Trubetskoi, the icon is a specifically spiritual creation, while Markov emphasizes the "material" of the icon and its resemblance to contemporaneous art.

At the turn of the century the icon occupied a highly ambiguous cultural space. Certainly the most readily apparent feature of the icon was its function as a cult object. The icon continued to serve throughout the Orthodox world as an object of ritualized veneration and as a "portal between the heavenly and the worldly" in the words of Trubetskoi.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps most important the icon also provided viewers with a material manifestation of the contemplation of the divine and all that was incorporeal, holy and cosmic. These are the connotations that Kazimir Malevich clearly had in mind when he declared the *Black Square* to be "the icon of our time."<sup>12</sup> For Malevich the icon presented the ultimate expression of the contemplation of the spiritual and an invaluable source for the awakening of a new cosmic consciousness. A similar interest in the innate spirituality, imagery, colors and morphology of the icon appear in Kandinskii's art. Likewise,

in Kandinskii's seminal treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) the artist sets forth a model for a "spiritual" artistic practice that repeatedly harkens back to the geometric stylization, surface rhythm and sensual primary colors of the icon.<sup>13</sup>

Though the icon's role as a cult object endowed it with a certain auratic, ritual value, there are other aspects of the icon which must be called into question. For almost all Russians at the turn of the century the icon was not considered to be a work of art at all.<sup>14</sup> This is usually understood to mean that the icon was an object of veneration and thus elevated above the status of the mere work of art. Part of the "non-art" status of the icon surely resulted from its abjuration of resemblance and illusionism. As early as the seventeenth century this issue came to a head in the Orthodox Church when the conservative clergyman Protopop Avvakum declared, "one must never paint icons to resemble real humans."<sup>15</sup> In fact, resistance to naturalism in the icon was one of the underlying reasons for the schism in the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>16</sup> For the believer the icon was intended principally as the material embodiment of contemplation, not as a representation of the world. Through its inverse perspective, rigid geometric design and bright non-local colors the icon strove to create a surface that was valuable on its own terms, not as a mechanism for mimetic reproduction. Iconologist Leonid Ouspenskii has remarked that the icon was the product of a highly developed ordering of materials.<sup>17</sup> It was encased in metal coverings (*rizas*) and generally obscured by many layers of dirt and grime. In this context one may refer to Walter Benjamin's observation that cult objects, unlike objects d'art, do not derive their value from exhibition. "...what mattered was their existence, not their being on view."<sup>18</sup> And, in fact, icons were not displayed so as to be seen but to impress through their mere presence. Such details further underscore the icon's special status outside the loci of modern art.

The icon also complicates Benjamin's description of the cult object. The critic emphasizes the modern era of "exhibition" as a locus for reproduction, seriality and growing alienation from the aura of the producer. Strangely, the icon embodies several of these quintessentially modern characteristics. A given icon was intended to be reproduced (manually, not mechanically) with a minimal degree of variation from one artist to the next. In fact, detailed handbooks for icon painters (*podlinniki*) were created so as to prescribe not only what could be depicted, but also how an icon could be created.<sup>19</sup> The individuality of the icon painter was to be utterly removed from the process of production, so that the final image would embody a collective idea (*sobornost*) rather than that of an individual. In this respect the authenticity and auratic component of the icon has always been problematic.

The quotidian usage of the icon also differs from that of the cult object. The icon did not merely hang on the wall to be venerated and contemplated. On

the contrary, it would frequently be used to aid the sick, to bless homes and to greet visitors. Then, when an icon would become too decrepit it was "...sometimes discarded as trash. The usual place for discarded icons was the belfry, where they were exposed to the weather and often to *pigeons*." <sup>20</sup> For the Russian peasant (as well as the monk and priest) the icon was almost a kind of utilitarian object that, after losing its presumed hieratic powers, could simply be discarded. It is also interesting to note that the icon in the peasant's hut most often did not hang on the wall — only proper pictures would hang there. More often the icon would rest on a ledge in the corner, propped against the wall. This detail of placement indicates quite concretely that the icon occupied a position differentiated both psychologically and physically from "real art." <sup>21</sup>

The spirituality of the icon and its concomitant echoes of the cult object were crucial for the Russian avant-garde, but no less significant is the "non-art" status of the icon, as well as the icon's attention to design, materials and use-value. The icon may be viewed as a vehicle for spiritual transport and religio-transcendental functions but it was also a source for the investigation of materials and construction taken up in earnest by artists such as Tatlin and Rodchenko. In his essay "The Principles of Creation in the Plastic Arts" Vladimir Markov downplays the icon's spiritual connotations, underscoring instead its material existence: "let us remember icons: they are embellished with metal casings and haloes, fringes and incrustations... the material world is introduced into [their] creation only by means of the assemblage and application of real, tangible objects." <sup>22</sup> Markov further claims that the icon leads a dual existence "between two worlds" as both a spiritual art form and a particular organization of earthly materials. The critic emphasizes the icon's use not only as a portal for communion between God and the believer but also as an autonomous assemblage of presumably theurgic elements. This material, whether pigments, wood or gold leaf, derives its power not from the emulation reality but from the accentuation of its own autonomous existence. Moreover, the display and use of the icon demonstrated its distinct lineage from theretofore accepted works of art. With this in mind, I propose a genealogy of the icon that would take into account the symbiotic relationship of Trubetskoi's evocative description of the otherworldly spirituality of icon's and Markov's celebration of the icon's preeminent concern for materials and *faktura*.

At this point it may be appropriate to define the term *faktura* more concretely. The art historian Charlotte Douglas suggests that *faktura* be viewed as "the feel of a material." <sup>23</sup> The arresting facet of her description is its reliance upon another sense to explain a visual phenomenon. We find similar locutions in Markov's discussion of *faktura* as "the sound of paint" and in Nikolai Tarabukin's equation of "color, sounds and words." <sup>24</sup> But, as Buchloh notes, these references to a plurality of senses do not betoken a return to Romantic aesthetics and the synaesthesia of Kupka and Kandinskii. <sup>25</sup> Instead, it suggests

the Russian avant-garde's interest in the importance of the material aspects of objects and their sensory reception by the viewer or hearer. This interest will be manifest in the concern for *faktura* and a broader interest in the individual properties of each art. This presents one of the chief anomalies of the avant-garde in that its synthetic aspirations are frequently cited, though critics less frequently mention the artists' equally intense search for the essence of each individual art.<sup>26</sup> In Malevich's Suprematist canvases or Khlebnikov's *zaum* poetry the artist and poet sought to disentangle each medium from contamination with the other. These efforts are denominated by the Russian neologisms *zhivopisnost'* (painterliness) and *literaturnost'* (literariness). The goal was to free the painter from literary devices and the poet from descriptive conventions so that a "pure" work of art would emerge.<sup>27</sup> In this context the concept of *faktura* served as a kind of "empty signifier" describing whatever might be unique to a given material, be it the constituent elements of painting, poetry or sculpture.

Just as the question of *faktura* and its relationship to the icon occupied avant-garde painters, the relationship of the *faktura* of the word and ecclesiastical or glossolalic speech repeatedly appears in the programmatic pamphlets of the Russian Futurist poets, Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. In these tracts the poets attempt to analyze the significance of speech which defies the descriptive conventions of language, as in the ecstatic exclamations of the religious sectarians or *Khlysty* and Orthodox prayers spoken in Old Church Slavonic. In both cases the authors attempt to find a systematic means of understanding the signifying process of apparently unintelligible languages. From these discussions emerged the formulation of the tenets of "zaum language" (or transrational language—literally *zaum* means "beyond the mind"). Some have taken *zaum* to mean "irrational" but more accurately it expresses a new kind of rationalism; only a kind not accessible at the moment but one that will be in the future.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's conceptions of *zaum* are often treated as synonymous entities when they are quite distinct. In Kruchenykh's *zaum* the sounds should be entirely free from any referent. In other words, the sounds are intended as empty signifiers without any currently known signified. A famous example is the poem "Dyr. bul shs Cheryl" in which there are no readily available semantic clues. Thus, Kruchenykh accepted Ferdinand Saussure's distinction between the conventional relationship between signifier and signified. However, he believed that the signified was simply inaccessible at the moment of speech not merely the token of a conventional relationship.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Kruchenykh rejected the use of onomatopoeia as in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Futurist poems and in Dada works such as Hugo Ball's "Karawane."

Unlike these approaches to poetic language, Khlebnikov never abandoned his conviction in the intimate connection between sound and preternatural meaning. His experiments were emphatically dissimilar from those of Kruchenykh in this sphere. He insisted that the sounds forming a word were

not conventional but integral. Khlebnikov spent many years studying the roots of Russian and Slavic words and concluded that there were rational explanations for the bonds between sound and meaning.<sup>30</sup> He wrote in "On the Simple Names of Language" that words follow patterns of formation according to their material qualities (i.e., the constituent sounds in individual words),<sup>31</sup> while in "Analyzing the Word" he underscores the *faktura* of different sounds and their diachronic development in the Russian language.<sup>32</sup> For Khlebnikov the entire face of language was not arbitrary and no sound could really be devoid of meaning because all sounds contain at least a shade of preexisting signification. These conclusions were of great significance for Khlebnikov and his circle because they pointed towards a model of language (or artistic practice) which could be meaningful but not denotative or descriptive. Khlebnikov concluded that the most instructive examples of a language which was simultaneously meaningful and non-representational were the utterances found in prayers, glossolalia and spells.

In a particularly instructive passage Khlebnikov declares: "The prayers of many peoples are written in a language incomprehensible to those who pray. Does the Hindu really understand the Vedas? Old Church Slavonic is incomprehensible to the Russian. Latin—to the Pole and Czech."<sup>33</sup> Here semiotic systems linked to religion (e.g., ecclesiastical speech and shamanist chants) seem to naturally lend themselves to an emphasis upon the *faktura* of language. This accentuation of *faktura* takes place because the language of prayers or spells is not to be understood by the rational processes of the mind. In prayers the hearer perceives the material of language not as the intermediary for description but as an expression of the otherwise obscured inherent relationship between sounds and their subtle connotations. Khlebnikov praised such speech as the epitome of "language as such" and the model for his own *zaum* experiments. If we return to Markov's description of the icon we find a number of similarities between his description of the *faktura* of the icon and Khlebnikov's interest in the *faktura* of the prayer. Both critic and poet invoke an ecclesiastical lexicon not for its semantic import (i.e., Markov does not discuss what is depicted in icons) but rather for its direct appeal to the senses and its keen handling of "materials." In both cases *faktura* emerges from objects which foreground their existence as material entities of visual or verbal language. The icon, as Ouspenskii writes, does not effect the viewer through an appeal to rational analysis but through the devices employed by the icon painter: the symmetry of design, the juxtaposition of color, and the texture of the gold leaf.<sup>34</sup> In their analyses of these forms both Khlebnikov and Markov underscore the sensual-spiritual vocabulary of the icon and prayers not for their allusiveness and mystical qualities, but for their specific handling of verbal and visual language in its immediate, material form.

It is important to note, however, that this fascination with the senses was not a concern for the mystical realms of Symbolism or the acute apperception of

the Romantic. Khlebnikov and Markov were not mystics. Khlebnikov, in particular, considered himself to be a rationalist, and this may provide the key to *zaum* and the investigations of icons and prayers. If we return to the previous discussion of art and spirit it becomes clear that Khlebnikov, Markov and many of their contemporaries felt no embarrassment over the apparent linking of art and spirit because they did not accept the icon or the prayer as mystical or eminently spiritual creations. Rather, these endeavors illustrate the critic Grigorii Revzin's description of the avant-garde's enduring desire to create "a rational language for the transmission of the irrational."<sup>35</sup> Revzin sees this tension as one of the essential contradictions of the Russian vanguard and a paradox for all who study it. One sees echoes of this philosophy throughout the 1910s and 20s as various theorists sought to find immutable laws for the random proclivities of the senses, especially in the aesthetic experiments carried out at INKhUK and the "composition/construction" debate carried out by the Working Group of Objective Analysis.

Another salient concept of the Russian avant-garde was the theory of "self-sufficiency."<sup>36</sup> This idea appears in numerous manifestoes and theoretical statements of the period. It may have first appeared in its fully articulated form in Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's treatise "The Word as Such", published in 1913. In this essay they claim the *samovitoe slovo* (a neologistic expression usually translated as the "self-sufficient word") and the *slovo kak takovoe* ("the word as such") as the true goals of poetic art<sup>37</sup>. These slogans may have first appeared in the writings of these poets but similar statements were made by a number of contemporary artists and critics. In "The Foundations of the New Creation and the Reasons for its Misunderstanding" Olga Rozanova declared that the "new basis for art" will be its "self-sufficient significance."<sup>38</sup> The contemporaneous writings of David Burliuk, Aleksandr Shevchenko and Ivan Puni also contain discussions revolving around the autonomy of the work of art and its utter self-referentiality.<sup>39</sup> However, this concept was taken up with particular vigor by the Formalist literary critics Viktor Shklovskii and Roman Jakobson. In Shklovskii's provocatively titled essay "The Resurrection of the Word" the critic lauds the self-sufficiency of the most recent Futurist poetry because it allows "...artistic perception, that is perception in which form is sensed."<sup>40</sup> In a discussion of "painterly" art Jakobson states, "the realized texture (*faktura*) no longer seeks any sort of justification for itself, it becomes autonomous, demands for itself new methods of formulation, new material."<sup>41</sup> In these various texts the authors hold up "self-sufficiency" as the goal of all that is vital in art.

Jakobson, Shklovskii and their fellow Formalists would tirelessly popularize and elaborate upon this concept in the work of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and OPOIAZ (The Society for the Study of Poetic Language). The importance of "self-sufficiency" is closely related to *faktura* while it also suggests



similarities with the foregoing discussions of the icon. Self-sufficiency for the Formalists meant that language, whether visual or verbal, should exist first and foremost as a manifestation of material. Jakobson saw this kind of self-sufficient poetry, especially in Khlebnikov's works, as the ultimate expression of poetic language or "poeticity." Jakobson would later elaborate upon this idea: "Poeticity is present when the word is felt first as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion: when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and internal form acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."<sup>42</sup> Jakobson sees self-sufficiency and the accentuation of *faktura* as being opposed to the description of reality or the mere transcription of emotion. Returning to my earlier remarks about the icon, one sees that for Trubetskoi and Markov the icon was valued as a similarly self-sufficient, autonomous creation. The principal characteristics of the icon for them were its inverse perspective, heterogeneous composition and its opposition to descriptive illusionism. Indicative of this interest in the icon's unique space is Ouspenskii's statement: "In the icon space and volume are limited to the surface of the panel...it excludes all attempts to create an illusion of real space." Ouspenskii continues, noting "inverse perspective concentrates attention on the image itself."<sup>43</sup> Clearly, the icon existed as a supremely self-referential entity; one freed from the conventions of illusionism and representation of the outside world.

Having examined the broad implications of the icon, *faktura* and self-sufficiency as theoretical principles, let us now turn to the specific oeuvre of Vladimir Tatlin. Perhaps more than any other member of the Russian avant-garde, Tatlin was closely associated with the tradition of the icon, the utilization of *faktura* and the search for a purely self-sufficient work of art. He was also deeply enamored of the poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov (practically to the exclusion of all other literature).<sup>44</sup> Tatlin's early canvases and reliefs also demonstrate an ongoing dialogue with Cubism. Tatlin, like most of the Russian vanguard, followed artistic developments in France closely, though he, unlike many others, did not actually study in Paris. Preceding his brief but fateful voyage to Paris in 1913 the artist had become familiar with Cubism through the Russian artistic community in France (particularly Aleksandra Exter, Liubov Popova and Nadezhda Udaltsova) and the extensive holdings of Cubist art maintained in the collection of the industrialist Sergei Shchukin. At last, the ever impecunious Tatlin managed to travel to Paris in the winter of 1913 where he met Picasso and observed the artist's most recent sculptures. Soon after his return to Russia in May, 1914 Tatlin exhibited his remarkable reliefs and embarked upon the artistic enterprises that would establish his reputation as the first constructivist and one of the chief innovators of Russian art.

The importance of Cubism in Tatlin's oeuvre is undeniable. The artist adopted its flattened composition, textured canvas, collage aesthetic, and distorted perspective, yet these cubistic elements are not necessarily derived from Cubism. As Natalia Goncharova, a friend of the artist and co-exhibitor at the seminal *Donkey's Tail* exhibition of 1912, declared: "Cubism is a positive phenomenon, but it is not altogether a new one. Scythian stone images, the painted wooden dolls sold at fairs are those same cubist works." Goncharova was not alone in the conviction that Cubism had existed in Russia since ancient times, as one of the principal motivations for the *Donkey's Tail* exhibition was to assert the Eastern roots of the Russian avant-garde. In this atmosphere the vanguard actively pursued the conflation of Cubist innovations and the elaboration of indigenous traditions and innovations. Many examples of such combinations could be cited: Mikhail Matiushin's publication of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger's *Du Cubisme* with parallel texts drawn from the Russian mystic P.D. Uspenskii, Goncharova's melange of forms derived from Scythian stone sculpture and the proto-Cubist canvases in the Shchukin collection or Malevich's combination of the theory of *zaum* with the pictorial conventions of Cubist collage. However, foremost among examples of native Cubism was the enduring tradition of the Russian icon. The artist-theorist Aleksandr Shevchenko wrote in comparing the *faktura* of Cubism and the icon, "Everywhere we see the same mixing of materials, the same principle of the variety of textures (*faktury*)."<sup>45</sup> The icon's peculiar morphological complexity, *faktura*, and self-contained existence all suggested comparisons with Cubism. For Tatlin such analogies would have been particularly apparent given that he began his career as a copyist of icons.<sup>46</sup> In his early canvases the artist utilized the devices of icon painting and Cubism as can be seen in works such as *Seated Nude* (1913, Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow). Though the icon provided a direct impetus to the composition of many of this early paintings and drawings, Tatlin also created a growing body of works that emphasized the specific *faktura* of different media.

Following his sojourn to Paris, and still under the influence of Picasso, Tatlin created the pivotal transitional relief *Bottle* (1913, Whereabouts unknown). In it the encrusted metallic coverings and grooved haloes of icons are reflected, as well as Picasso's studies in the sculptural rendering of common objects. Again this presents the melange of cubistic devices and those of the icon. It also returns to the theme of the utter interpenetration of the supposedly ethereal realm of icons and the banality of everyday existence. In this relief the spiritual and the material meet once again in fluid dialogue rather than in opposition. The piece also emphasizes the study of *faktura* in a manner that Tatlin's earlier work had not. In *Bottle* Tatlin investigates the properties of surfaces and textures through the juxtaposition of a thoroughly heterogeneous variety of materials: metal, glass, string, wallpaper. Though even in this work the artist continued Picasso's

practice of subordinating the materials of the relief to the representation of an object.

This orientation can be attributed to Picasso's allegiance to an underlying "realism" in his works. Tatlin would break with this practice. Instead, he began to execute the reliefs and counter-reliefs that would garner great attention throughout the avant-garde. In these works (executed more or less contemporaneously with *Bottle*), such as *Painting Relief: Collation of Materials* (1914, Whereabouts unknown), Tatlin further accentuated his study of *faktura* through the removal of any depicted object. In these works and those that follow, Tatlin would fully incorporate the theory of self-sufficiency into his works. In these reliefs the artist allows the materials to "speak" without subjecting them to the tyranny of description. Instead, in the words of David Burluk, "they live their own lives" as self-sufficient objects in space. Another aspect of Tatlin's reliefs and counter-reliefs is the artist's concern for the purity and inviolability of materials. Tatlin attempted to avoid all deformation of the substances incorporated into his reliefs. They were not to be bent to the artist's will but allowed to express their inherent forms, shapes, and unique properties of *faktura*.<sup>47</sup> In this concern Tatlin may have in mind the texts of the *podlinniki* and their advice for the icon painter to remain true to his materials. As Richard Temple writes in his article "The Painting of Icons," the process of icon production was intimately connected to the spiritualization of matter and the symbolic re-enactment of the Incarnation. According to Temple: "Techniques of painting were developed in the light of such ideas. This means that the great masters of icon painting had an understanding of the materials with which they worked that we can only approach today through microscopy, spectroscopy and molecular structure analysis."<sup>48</sup> With the reliefs of 1914 and the counter-reliefs of 1915 (saliently placed in the icon corner) Tatlin produced works that adroitly combined a continuation and elaboration upon the role of the icon in Russian culture while incorporating an acute sense of the *faktura* of surfaces and the self-sufficiency of materials.

The art of Vladimir Tatlin not only serves as a synthesis of the preceding discussions of the icon, *faktura* and self-sufficiency, it also recalls the dichotomy of the spiritual and the material in the Russian avant-garde. I submit that my original evocation of the opposed voices of spirituality and materialism in Malevich and Tatlin now presents a more complex situation. Upon closer examination it becomes clear that the icon was not connected exclusively to spirituality or mysticism, likewise *faktura* and self-sufficiency were not purely materialist concepts for the avant-garde. Instead, the apparently "material" finds its justification in the art of spirit, while reputedly mystical objects are transformed into the essence of material. I have endeavored to demonstrate that Tatlin and the Russian avant-garde frequently examined and appropriated the

putatively mystical and spiritual to fundamentally materialist and rationalist ends. Whether icons or prayers, these prototypically mystical cultural artifacts were addressed in a tone of scientific precision and logical deduction. Thus, when the critic finds references to the Orthodox liturgy in Khlebnikov's theoretical writings or the icon in Tatlin's reliefs this should not necessarily be accepted *ipso facto* as a token of spirituality and religio-transcendentalism. Indeed, it may be embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence, as Krauss would have it, yet in the context of the Russian avant-garde it is also difficult to know when to be embarrassed.

## Notes and References

1. I. E. Grabar's massive *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva* (12 vols. Moscow : Akademiia nauk, 1963-69) presents many examples of these ambiguities in Soviet iconology.
2. Rosalind Krauss, "Grids" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1985), 12.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Yve-Alain Bois, "Malevich, le carre, le degre zero," *Macula 1* ( 1976):28-49; Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 ); Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 ( Fall 1984), 82-119.
5. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," 52-53.
6. Notable studies of the icon and the avant-garde have been produced by Anthony Parton, Dmitrii Linnichev, W. Sherwin Simmons, Alison Hilton and Olga Tarasenko among others.
7. Margaret Betz, "The Icon and Russian Modernism," *Artforum* 15 (Summer, 1977): 38-45.
8. *Ibid.*, 44.
9. *Ibid.*, 45.
10. Kniaz Evgenii Trubetskoi, "Umozrenie v kraskakh" in *Tri ocherka o russkoi ikone* (Moscow : Infoart, 1991): 4-38 and Vladimir Markov, " Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh" ( St. Petersburg, 1914 ).
11. Trubetskoi, "Umozrenie," 9.
12. Kazimir Malevich, " Ot kubizma k suprematizmu: Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm" ( Moscow 1915), 14.
13. See the section devoted to the language of form and color in Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art.* trans. M.T.H. Sadler ( New York: Dover, 1977), 27-45.
14. There were no substantive studies of icons as " works of art" rather than religious or ethnographic objects until the close of the nineteenth century. see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art.* trans. Edmund Jephcott ( Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19-20.
15. Quoted in Trubetskoi, " Umozrenie," 14.
16. James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* ( New York : Vintage Books, 1970 ), 136-137.
17. Ouspenskii writes, " A significant feature of the technique of iconography is the selection of basic materials which enter into it. In their totality they represent the fullest participation of the

- visible world in the creation of an icon." in Leonid Ouspenskii, *The Meaning of Icons* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 55.
18. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*. trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 224.
  19. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 18.
  20. Trubetskoi, "Umozrenie," 104.
  21. Ironically Andy Warhol's comparably ambiguous 32 *Soup Cans* were originally displayed in a similar leaning manner.
  22. Markov, "Printsipy tvorchestva," 54.
  23. A statement taken from a lecture given at New York University in spring, 1995.
  24. Markov, "Printsipy tvorchestva," 53 and Nikolai Tarabukin, *Le Dernier tableau* (Paris: Le Champ Libre, 1972), 102.
  25. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," 53.
  26. One of the more familiar statements concerning this theme is the Symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok's appeal for a "synthesis of the arts." "in order to remedy the backward state of Russian culture, in *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Kniga, 1965), 8, 213-214.
  27. It is unfortunate that Mark Cheetham in his excellent study, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), does not consider the contributions of Malevich and the Russian avant-garde.
  28. This locution sheds light on Khlebnikov's usage of the term *budetelianin* ("the ones who will be") rather than the western cognate *futurist*.
  29. Lotman remarks that a *zaum* word is not just sound; rather it is a signifier whose signified remains temporarily obscured; in Iurii Lotman, *Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta* (Providence: Brown University Slavic Reprints, 1971.), 178
  30. On this point I would disagree with Margit Rowell's claim that the poet "used the phonetic sound, the syllable, divested of historical or contextual connotation." in Margit Rowell, "Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura" *October* 7 (Winter, 1978), 96. In fact, the poet was constantly studying the etymology of words and the effects of contiguity upon sounds and words.
  31. Velimir Khlebnikov, *Sobranie proizvedenii Velimira Khlebnikova*. ed. N. Stepanov and Iu. Tynianov (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisateli v Leningrade, 1928-1933), 5, 203.
  32. *Ibid.*, 198.
  33. Velimir Khlebnikov, *Tvoreniia*. ed. M. Ia. Poliakov (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 633.
  34. Ouspenskii mentions that the iconographic canon proscribes not only "What" ..... "but also how it should be depicted, by what means it is possible to indicate the presence of the grace of the Holy Spirit..." in *The Meaning of Icons*, 38.
  35. Grigorii Revzin, "Novyi intellektualizm 1910 godov," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo 7-8* (1992): 17-18.
  36. In a recent article the Russian critic Natalia Adaskina has proposed that the question of "the autonomy of the work of art" coupled with "the investigation of artistic languages and the rejection of Aristotelian mimesis" form the crux of the "artistic theory" of the Russian avant-garde, see Natalia Adaskina, "Khudozhestvennaia teoriia russkogo avangarda I problema iazyka iskusstva" *Tvorchestvo* 1-4 (1994): 11-13.
  37. This interest in poetic self-sufficiency shares certain affinities with the poetic theory of the Italian Futurists (of which the Russians were undoubtedly aware).
  38. Olga Rozanova, "Osnovy novogo tvorchestva I prichiny ego neponimaniia" *Soiz molod-ezhi* 3 (1913), 20.

39. See Ivan Puni, *Manifest suprematizma* (Petrograd, 1915), David Burluk, "Faktura" *Poshchechina obshchestvennoumum vkusu* (St. Petersburg, 1912) and Shevshenko, "Neoprimitivizm. ego teoria. ego vozmozhnosti. ego dostizheniia" (Moscow, 1923).
40. Viktor Shklovskii. *Voskre-shenie slova* (St. Petersburg, 1914), 28.
41. Roman Jakobson, "Futurizm" in *Raboty po poetike* (Moscow: Progress, 1987), 415.
42. Roman Jakobson, "What is Poetry?" trans from Czech. M. Helm in *Semiotics of Arts*, ed. L. Matejka and I. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1976), 174.
43. Ouspenskii, *The Meaning of Icons*, 41.
44. John Milner discusses this relationship in *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde*, as does Camilla Gray in *The Russian Experiment in Art*, 174.
45. Aleksandr Shevchenko, "Printsiipy kubizma I drugikh sovremennykh techenii v zhivopisi vseh vremen I narodov," in *Mastera iskusstva ob iskusstve*, ed. A. A. Fedorov-Davydov (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1970), 500-501.
46. John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 24-26.
47. *Ibid.*, 91-92.
48. Richard Temple, "The Painting of Icons" in John Baggley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance* (London: Mowbray, 1987), 99-100.

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