About ARTM Online ▼

ARTM Online Content -

Support

Submissions

News

ARTMARGINS ONLINE: EXHIBITION REVIEWS

About ARTM Print ▼

Q

Revolution Redo

BY SUSAN SNODGRASS · PUBLISHED 04/07/2018

REVOLUTION EVERY DAY, AT THE SMART MUSEUM OF ART, CHICAGO, SEPTEMBER 14, 2017-JANUARY 28, 2018 At a time when our own political moment has given rise to dangerous neoliberalism and right-wing nationalism across Europe and the United States, Revolutionary Russia of a century ago with its promise of social equality

REVOLIUTSIIA! DEMONSTRATSIIA! SOVIET ART PUT TO THE TEST, ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, OCTOBER 29, 2017-JANUARY 14, 2018

and transformation continues to seduce our imagination (at least in the former West), despite the ultimate failure of the Soviet project. This seduction fueled two recent shows in Chicago that marked the centennial of the October Revolution through the art, design and material culture of its artists and social architects, part of a wave of international exhibitions each devoted to some facet of the subject. Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test, at the Art Institute of Chicago, gathered some 550 objects that included the innovative artistic forms of the Russian avant-garde alongside the state mechanisms and propaganda machine all deployed to construct the new Soviet state. Revolution Every Day, at the Smart Museum of Art, was smaller and more tightly thematic, assembling documentary films, historical posters and other archival materials, alongside works by contemporary artists, to explore the role of women and women artists in "build[ing] a new everyday life under socialism." Together both shows offered a fascinating archeology of the period, even if at the expense of a distanced, critical view of the dissonance between socialist reality and political rhetoric. The ambitious Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! KAHHOM organized by the Art Institute's Curator of

El Lissitzky, "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge," 1920. Offset lithograph. 48.4 x 69.4 cm. Ne boltai! Collection. Photo courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago.

Revolution's core aims, all notably absent from the exhibition. Witkovksy explains such omissions in the introduction to the catalog:

across various themes. Each of these - Battleground, School, Press, Theater, Home, Storefront, Factory, Festival, Cinema, Exhibition – served as "models" of production and occupied its own spatial environment within the exhibition's circuitous installation, offering viewers different points of entry and navigation. However, the show's fluid layout and lack of strict adherence to a political genealogy begged the need for a timeline to further contextualize the artworks and objects on view, essential being the rise of Stalinism, the Reign of Terror, and the eventual demise of the "Rather than binding our chosen objects firmly to the fate of a miscarried revolution Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! allows for more skid and slippage between art and history. . . . In place of an evolutionist framework, a host of lateral relations and resemblances comes into view, likenesses that cannot be explained in terms of simple

Photography Matthew S. Witkovsky intentionally

accuracy – to create a discursive narrative that

eschewed linear chronology - and at times historical

charted the art and culture of Revolutionary Russia

genealogical influence. Permitted to inhabit its own artifactual temporality, the artwork drifts out of phase with the historical parameter of political exigency and enables alternative accounts of Soviet culture on this centenary occasion and into the future."(1)

This "skid and slippage" misrepresents, for instance, the foundational struggles directly following the events of 1917, as witnessed in Battleground, the opening section that framed the exhibition. Here, lithographic posters

from the Russian Civil War (1917-21) were exhibited opposite a wall of objects and images devoted to the Cult of Lenin, although Lenin's "deification" was not a concurrent phenomenon but rather orchestrated by Stalin after Lenin's death in 1924. Missing was any mention of Trotsky, head of the Red Army and fundamental leader within the ranks of the early Communist Party, whose "wedge of revolution" El Lissitzky symbolizes in his iconic work Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge (1920). (2) Created in support of the Red Army, Lissitzky's propaganda poster hung at the gallery's center, positioning the artist as a crucial figure in support of the Bolshevik's cause and within the exhibition.

What followed then was a sweeping survey that transported viewers from the utopic optimism that fueled the

art and image production of the early post-Revolutionary period to roughly 1935, although again the exhibition

Socialist Realism as official style in 1932. The section School does well, however, in establishing the artistic and

Aleksandr Rodchenko, Liubov' Popova, Varvara Stepanova, Alexandra Exter, Karl Ioganson, Gustav Klutsis, and

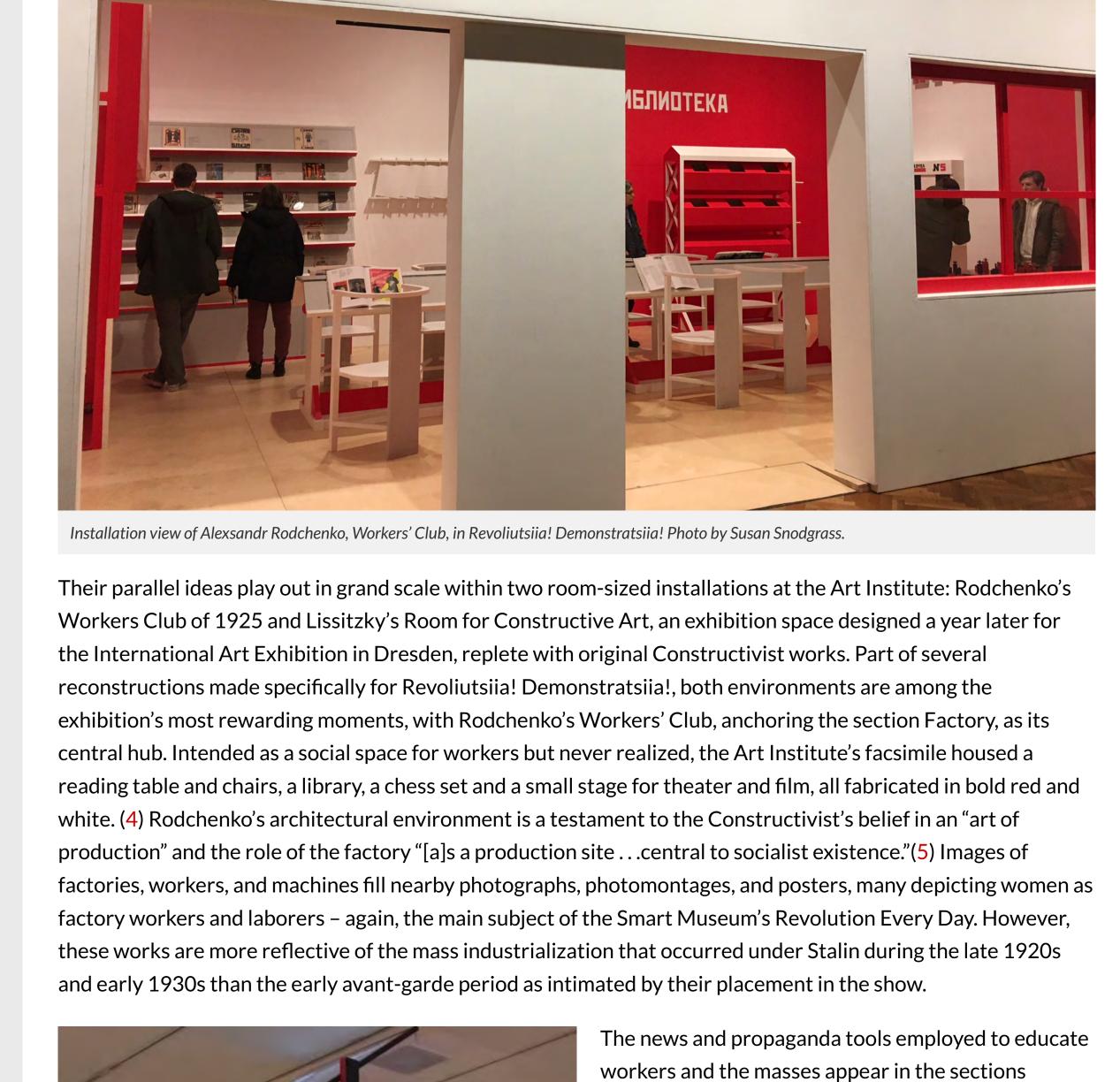
educational foundations that led to the rise of the exhibition's key protagonists, including, in addition to Lissitzky,

does not account for the impact of Stalinism on the art and artists on view or the imposed introduction of

several others. Many were followers of Kazimir Malevich, who became director of the State Free Art Workshops (SVOMAS) in Vitebsk in 1919, where he enlisted Lissitsky to teach. Various artistic collectives soon formed around Malevich and Lissitsky, important being UNOVIS (Affirmers of the New Art) that rallied behind Suprematism and upheld the transcendental value of art, as evinced in Lissitzky's abstract Proun paintings (Proun being an acronym for "Project for UNOVIS"), an example of which is included here. As presented in the exhibition, it is at the Institute for Artistic Culture (INKhUK), under the direction of Rodchenko, and its VKhUTEMAS workshops, where the tenets of Constructivism, which more fully embraced art and design in direct service of the communist state, were established and debated in 1920-21. In his The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946, Victor Margolin identifies these two positions via the work of Lissitzky and Rodchenko: "Rodchenko maintained a materialist faith that new forms could be created through the analysis and combination of visual elements such as colors, lines, and planes. While these forms could become arguments for the character traits he espoused, they were nonetheless material objects that did not evoke transcendent values. Lissitzky, on the other hand, held the idealist conviction that forms could embody a new consciousness by pointing to a state or

ABUHUNKIS

condition outside the limitations of contemporary lived experience." (3)



Cinema and Press, the former a documentary film program housed within an enclosed viewing space,

white photomural of an agit-train. The section Press featured two reconstructions of Gustav Klutsis' propaganda structures: an impressive fourteen-foot multimedia information kiosk that also screened documentary images, and a reconstruction of one of the artist's Radio-Orators transmitting a speech by Lenin. Both structures, conceived in 1922 but never built, were accompanied by the original designs and related drawings, as well as by the artist's designs for various publications, alongside graphic works by Rodchenko and others. It is here in Press that the avant-garde's idea of a shared vision between the artists and the Soviet state seemed most fully realized, from early photomontages used as agit-prop in support of the Bolshevik campaign to later design work by Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Vavara Stepanova

Visible throughout Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! is the central role of women artists, whose contributions reflect

collage, graphics, and textiles, and, in the case of Popova, to designs for theater. Popova's work infuses the section

Theater – which also included costume and furniture designs by Stepanova and marionettes by Alexandra Exter –

with a dynamism that skillfully merges political content with Constructivist architectural forms, as seen in several

both the progressive social platforms of the revolutionary period and Constructivism's rejection of the

hierarchies between the fine and applied arts, the latter often associated with women. Several standout

examples by Liubov' Popova and Kseniia Ender reveal how fluidly female artists worked across mediums and

disciplines, adapting their abstract imagery based on Suprematist ideas of pure color and form to painting,

drawings, photographs, collages and design models for the experimental theater productions of Fernand

the exterior of which was covered with a black-and-

for USSR in Construction, a propaganda magazine

published from 1930 to 1941 during Stalin's rule,

although at this time that "vision" had changed

Crommelynck and Vsevolod Meyerhold. According to Christina Kiaer in her catalog essay "Home. Storefront" (titled for the corresponding sections in the exhibition), fabrics designed by Popova and Stepanova were "[t]he only Constructivist utilitarian objects to pass from prototype to mass production in a Soviet factory." (6) Here Kiaer (also a co-curator of the Smart Museum show) contextualizes the artists' textile works within a larger discussion of Soviet commercial design and industrial production, which sought to create a new type of everyday life (in Russian, "byt") through new prototypes for the home. Among the many wonderful examples on view were Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovsky's designs for cigarette, cookie and caramel boxes, and Natal'ia Dan'ko's small porcelain figures each representing a different social type – a sailor, a policewoman, a peasant woman, a bureaucrat. Kiaer argues that home as "the site where everyday life unfolds," and where Soviet women were traditionally defined by their relationship to the domestic, led the Bolsheviks's call for women's emancipation and the building of a new everyday life

under socialism. (7) For Trotsky, women's equality and

"the radical restructuring of everyday life" could only

be realized through "socialist forms of economy," i.e.

the factory. (8) Both statements inform the curatorial

thesis of the Smart Museum's Revolution Every Day,

co-curated by Kiaer, who teaches at Northwestern

University, Robert Bird (The University of Chicago),

and Zachary Cahill (Curator for the Richard and Mary

L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, The University of

modern art and design curator at the Smart Museum.

Its historical chronology spans the late 1920s to the

industrialization and the collectivism of agriculture

told mainly through the art and images of women.

Excerpts from a trilogy of documentary films [Three

Songs about Lenin (1934/38), Lullaby (1937), and The

Three Heroines (1938)], by the pioneering Soviet film

that occurred under Stalin and his first Five Year Plan.

mid-1930s reflecting the years of rapid

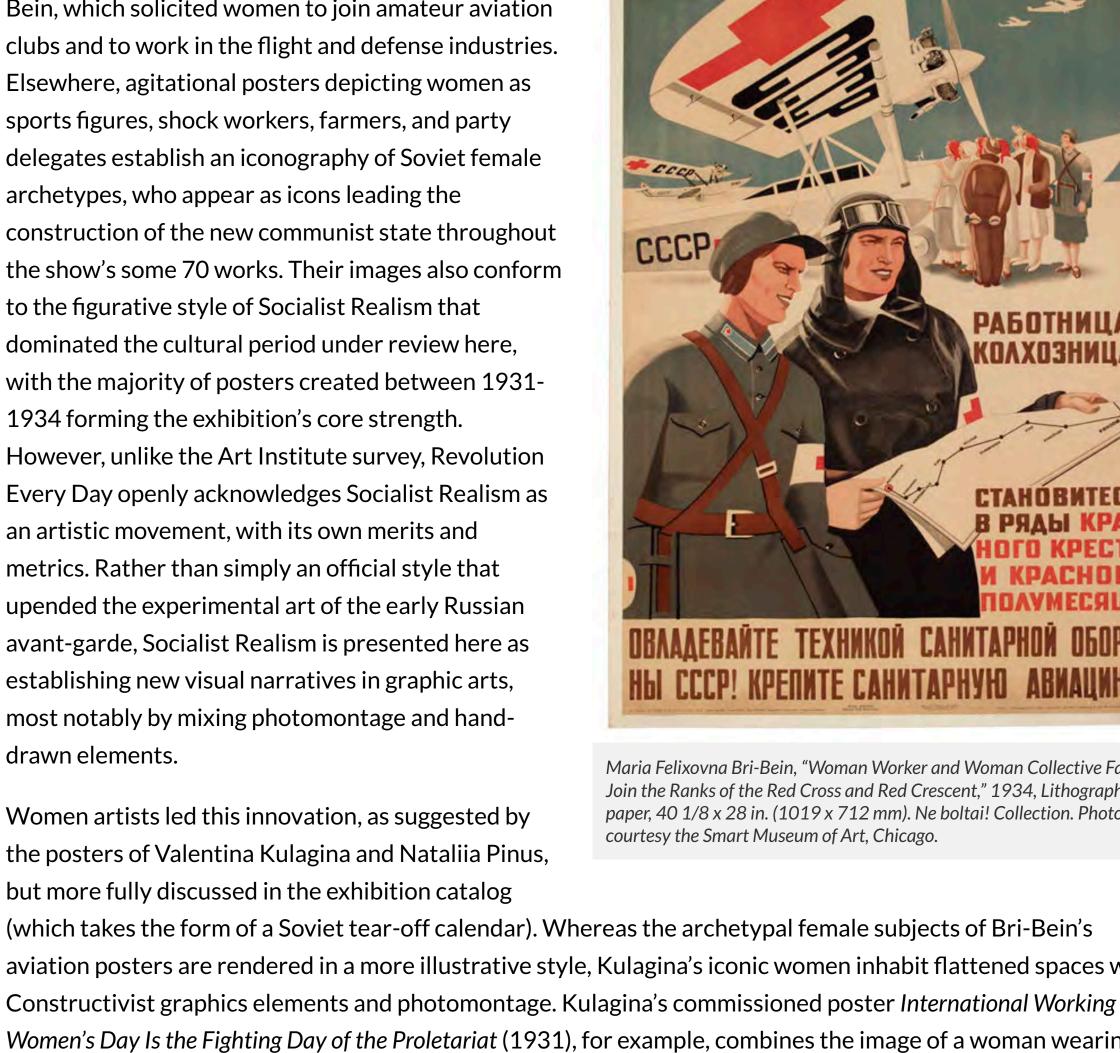
Chicago), in collaboration with Diane Miliotes, then-

Installation view of Gustav Klutsis, Information Kiosk, in Revoliutsiia!

Demonstratsiia! Photo by Susan Snodgrass.

considerably.

director Dziga Vertov - presented here in digital form decoration. Collection of Vladimir Tsarenkov. Photo courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago. and in their original 35 mm in an accompanying film program - set the exhibition's themes of female liberation and labor in motion. The Three Heroines (1938), made in collaboration with Elizaveta Svilova, showcases the attempted trans-Siberian flight of three female pilots and introduced the show's opening gallery devoted to women in aviation. Although their flight failed, these women were celebrated as national symbols of both Soviet matriarchy and motherland, ideals they also upheld, as seen in one excerpt where aviator Marina Raskova speaks to a group of young school children, "Everyone is loved under socialism." Also on view were several posters portraying women as pilots, such as those created by artist Mariia Bri-Bein, which solicited women to join amateur aviation clubs and to work in the flight and defense industries. Elsewhere, agitational posters depicting women as sports figures, shock workers, farmers, and party delegates establish an iconography of Soviet female



regressive social policies with the exception of a small section that positions Vertov's Lullaby, the director's ode to women and motherhood, as the lens for a handful of works that address the rise of "a new model of Soviet femininity" circa 1934, prompting a return to women in more traditional roles. But Revolution Every Day is as much a conceptual project as it is an historical one. Interweaved throughout were video works by contemporary artists Lene Berg, Olga Chernysheva, Anri Sala, and Cauleen Smith that functioned as counterparts to Vertov's films, while exploring the lingering vestiges of the October Revolution on the present day. Like Vertov's "poetic" documentaries, which interspliced

live footage, newsreels, and reenactment via montage

similarly blend past and present, truth and fiction. For

techniques, these artists employ filmic devices that

Pinus also employed photomontage in her

propaganda posters and graphic designs for

publications, many aimed at gathering support for

images of smiling peasant women replace those of the

campaign that forced individual landowners to give

up their land and join collective farms. Revolution

Every Day takes a fairly objective view of Stalin's

Stalin's collectivization of agriculture. But here

female proletariat and mask Stalin's unpopular

Intervista becomes a larger meditation on revolution and individual responsibility. Olga Chernysheva, still from "March," 2005, Video, 7:30 minutes. Photo courtesy of Diehl, Berlin; Pace, London; Foxy Production, New York, and the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.

real memory of the past go, one that is used up through being relived?"

CCCP! KPENNTE CAHNTAPHYHO Maria Felixovna Bri-Bein, "Woman Worker and Woman Collective Farmer, Join the Ranks of the Red Cross and Red Crescent," 1934, Lithograph on paper, 40 1/8 x 28 in. (1019 x 712 mm). Ne boltai! Collection. Photo courtesy the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago. aviation posters are rendered in a more illustrative style, Kulagina's iconic women inhabit flattened spaces with Women's Day Is the Fighting Day of the Proletariat (1931), for example, combines the image of a woman wearing a red kerchief, drawn in a "monumentalizing primitivism," on the left, and small black-and-white photographs of women working and socializing on the right. (9) A bold diagonal divides the composition into two fields, presenting two visions of Soviet women — one idealized, the other more grounded in the reality of the everyday.

Natal'ia Dan'ko, "Policewoman," 1920s. Porcelain with enamel

interview of his mother when she was a leader of the Communist Youth Alliance in Albania, however the audio is missing. Her words are recovered when Sala takes the film to a school for the deaf to be translated, after which he confronts his mother's political allegiances. The only film to offer a critical view of communism and its failure, Chernysheva's videos document the street life of the artist's native Moscow, transforming the seemingly mundane into larger moments that resonant with the specter of the Soviet past. In Marmot (1999), an elderly woman rummages through her purse oblivious to the street demonstration that takes place around her, while in March (2005), male youth in military uniforms appear bored and distracted during an unidentified street parade. For the more recent Project Screens: Dances, Layer, Meeting and Park (2017),

part of a larger ongoing series, the artist's mixes

black-and-white scenes and fragments of text that

unfold at different intervals across four small wall-

questions the everyday rituals of the present in

mounted screens. As in her other works, Chernysheva

relation to the historical past, asking: "Where does a

Valentina Kulagina, "International Working Women's Day Is the Fighting Day of the Proletariat," 1931, Lithograph on paper, 39 5/8 x 27 5/8 in.

(1100 x 725 mm), Ne boltai! Collection. Photo courtesy the Smart

Museum of Art, Chicago.

instance, Berg's Stalin by Picasso or Portrait of Woman with Moustache (2008) combines animated drawings,

commissioned by a French newspaper to explore the making of both these twentieth-century icons against issues

of individual and artistic freedom. Sala's well-known *Intervista* (1999) blends personal biography, archival images

and fragments of television news segments in this portrait about lost ideals. Here, the artist discovers a filmed

archival photographs and voice-over narration that uses Picasso's controversial 1953 drawing of Stalin

Vertov's film canonized Lenin by combining documentary footage and first-person testimonials, the latter a strategy adopted by Smith to narrate stories of American slavery and unfair labor practices. Told from the perspective of three African-American women – in the personas of historical figures Susie King Taylor and Jane Johnson, both slaves, and Luanna Cooper, a unionist – Smith recuperates the early tenets of the Soviet Revolution and its promise of women's emancipation for the continued struggle for Black freedom.

Three Songs About Liberation (2017) by Calueen Smith, the only work commissioned for the exhibition, is

structured after Vertov's Three Songs About Lenin. Released on the tenth-anniversary of the leader's death,

importantly commemorative, both exhibitions offered subjective interpretations of the progressive principles of their art historical subjects, what Russian curator Viktor Misiano and others have termed "progressive or radical nostalgia" to describe the positive effects of remembering in understanding the traumas of history and the challenges of the present. This strategy mitigated the critical position both exhibitions needed, yet allowed

Cauleen Smith, still from "Three Songs about Liberation," 2017, 16 mm film transfer, 9:27 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey.

With these contemporary works, Revolution Every Day directly engaged the complex legacies of the Soviet

period. This curatorial strategy could have been pushed further, however, with a few additional commissioned

works to extend the exhibition's rhetorical and geopolitical reach, particularly given the renewed challenges to

women that strongly plague our current political epoch and the global protest movements that we lead. While

Commissioned by the Smart Museum of Art. Photo courtesy the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago.

Susan Snodgrass Susan Snodgrass
☐ is a Chicago-based critic and editor of ARTMargins Online. Much of her writing is devoted to alternative models of critical practice and artmaking, whether exploring new genres of public art or contemporary art in former Eastern Europe. She is a 2018 recipient of a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her blog, *In/Site*: *Reflections on the Art of Place*, which explores art, architecture and urbanism, and a finalist for the 2019 Dorthea and Leo Rabkin Foundation Arts Journalist Award. She has written for both print and online publications for over 30 years, most notably for Art in America for which she was



[back]

[back]

5. Ibid., p. 219. [back]

- a Corresponding Editor, as well as Textile: Cloth and Culture and THE SEEN. Her book Inside the Matrix: The Radical Designs of Ken Isaacs was published by Half Letter Press in 2019.
- **FOOTNOTES** 1. Devin Fore and Matthew S. Witkovsky, "Introduction," Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test, Art Institute of Chicago (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 19. [back] 2. Kathleen Tahk does discuss Trotsky in relation to Lissitzky's work in her essay "Battleground," in Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! p. 24. [back] 3. Victor Margolin, The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 10.
 - 6. Christina Kiaer, "Home. Storefront," in Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! p. 144. [back] 7. Ibid., 140. [back] 8. Lev Trotsky, "Problems of Everyday Life," 1923, as quoted in Revolution Every Day: A Calendar, 1917-2017, exhibition catalog, ed. Robert Bird, Christina Kiaer, Zachary Cahill; executive editor Diane Miliotes, Smart Museum of Art (Milan: Mousse Publishing), entry for January 31, 1917. [back]

9. Christina Kiaer, "International Women's Day, 2017," as quoted in Revolution Every Day: A Calendar, 1917-2017, entry for March 9, 1917.

4. Rodchenko's original design for his Workers' Club was shown in the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels in

Paris. See Barbara Wurm, "Factory," in Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! [back]



viewers to make their own connections between the Soviet art and propaganda on view and the art and information systems of today.



Contact



