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The Avant-Gardes, Utopias and Clothes

The avant-gardes are an essential constitutive part of modernism, they are “the spearhead of modernity at large.”¹ For many artists their modernist status and that of their art is being perpetually questioned, this questioning itself being a characteristic of modernism. For all practical (if not always also theoretical) reasons they nonetheless are considered to be modernist.

Modernism reached into realms that used to be off limits both to art and its theoretical reflection. In fact, one of the characteristics of modernism was its constant transgression of the confines set up by previous works and thus a continuous broadening of the frontiers of what is art. The mentioned perpetual questioning of the status of modernist works of art complements the broadening of art’s frontiers. The final consequence of such situation is that anything can become art: either by spatial and institutional contextualization or by conceptual argumentation. The avant-gardes are a paramount example of this—whether they exist as (a) nineteenth-century “proto-avant-gardes”² that are bound up with the birth of the socialist movement; as (b) the early or classical avant-gardes of the first three decades of the twentieth century; as (c) the post-World War II neo-avant-gardes; as (d) movements simultaneous with, but otherwise very different from, the neo-avant-gardes, such as Situationism; or as (e) what I have designated as “the third generation avant-gardes” or the “postmodern postsocialist avant-gardes.”³

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In 1845 when Gabriel Désiré Laverdant wrote the passage about the avant-garde which we often quote today, he linked the identity of the avant-gardes to human

¹ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1987, p. 119.

² See Stefan Morawski, “The Artistic Avant-Garde. On the 20th Century Formations,” *Polish Art Studies* 10, 1989, pp. 79–107.

³ Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003.

totality, to humans (i.e. “artists”) as members of a particular species who are “of the avant-garde” for they know where “Humanity is going, and what the destiny of our species is.”⁴ This destiny and the direction in which Humanity is going became standardized, a change that we owe partly to Marx and partly to Lenin. In spite of its enormous impact and the opening of a window of opportunity to emancipate the whole world, the aftermath of the October Revolution resembled the reign of Terror during the French Revolution. The only way to salvage utopia as a relevant concept implied by Laverdant’s “destiny of our species” was with the idea of progress, i.e. the idea of a desired future. A related concept was the enlightenment project of emancipation and thus the connectedness of aesthetics and ethics. This bond was what in 1970s allowed Miklós Szabolcsi to claim that a political and social “revolution without an avant-garde [in art] is really a pseudo-revolution.”⁵ He furthermore argued that “we can speak of a true avant-garde only if it overlaps with a political revolution, realizes it or prepares it.”⁶ It is such revolution that opens the doors to a possible utopia in a positive sense. There exist of course other views about this relation, according to which “the assumption of a necessary relation between cultural avant-garde and left politics is misleading as well as incomplete, because the political activities of avant-garde artists (of all kinds) have included other politics than those of the left.”⁷

It is for such reasons that it remains highly questionable whether the project of utopia remains relevant today. Instead we could side with Thierry de Duve, for example, who argues that the “emancipation project has to be replaced by the ‘emancipation maxim’”⁸ because “humanity will never reach adulthood—understood as the entirely rational and autonomous state of enlightened subject.”⁹

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The early or classical avant-gardes employed various new realms of human practice to create unprecedented works and to express new ideas and positions, thereby broadening the sphere of what was hitherto considered art. The new

⁴ Quoted in Calinescu, p. 107.

⁵ Miklós Szabolcsi, “Ka nekim pitanjima revolucionarne avangarde,” *Književna reč* 3, no. 101, 1978, p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ David Cottington, *The Avant-Gardes. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 100.

⁸ Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1998, p. 443.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 437-38.

avant-garde spirit reached into all crevices of life. This was especially true of expressionism, Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism and French Surrealism. Some avant-gardes—such as Russian Constructivism—reached also into arts and crafts. In this respect, Russian Productivism to some extent resembled Art Deco practices, the Arts & Crafts movement, the Deutscher Werkbund, Bauhaus, etc., thus creating works that were also meant to resemble art of the post-October Russia.

In the early twentieth century a fairly new expressive terrain was clothing, but one could also mention cuisine, smell, touch, furniture, and all sorts of novel expressive devices, ranging from Futurist photo-dynamism, the cinema, Russolo's 1910 noise intoners (*intonarumori*), and Giacomo Balla's clothes as presented in "The Male Futurist Clothing Manifesto" (1914), to the Russian fusion of avant-garde experimentalism in stage design and theater staging as such with cinematic montage, scenography and costumes: "Applied arts were [...] the instrument to materialize the Soviet utopian ideals in post-revolutionary Russia."¹⁰

Such thinking was by 1920 preceded by a long history, reaching all the way to Henri de Saint-Simon. The latter planned a new society built by artists, engineers, and scientists. In this way, the Saint-Simonian utopian vision was much later linked to Constructivism, with Saint-Simon's concept of the avant-garde of artist-producers strongly resembling that of the Russian Constructivists. The Utopia that the Constructivists envisioned was to be constructed by a union of technology, art, and industry. Margaret A. Rose claims that the Saint-Simonian concept of the artist as an avant-garde leader of men was what Russian Constructivism appropriated into its own conceptual and ideological framework.¹¹

Until the nineteenth century clothes remained on the fringes of theoretical and reflexive attention. Since our conference is devoted to utopia, let me begin by pointing to the zero point of utopia, namely to Thomas More's *Utopia*: "In the ideal society outlined in *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516), people wear practical clothes that are 'quite pleasant,' 'allow free movement of the limbs' and are suit-

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¹⁰ Flavia Loscialpo, "Utopian Clothing: The Futurist and Constructivist Proposals in the early 1920s," *Clothing Cultures* 1, no. 3, October 2014, p. 17.

¹¹ See Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic. Karl Marx & the Visual Arts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, p. 11.

able for any season. In Utopia people are ‘happy with a single piece of clothing every two years.’¹²

In the second half of the nineteenth century clothes became important expressions and manifestations of people’s utopian expectations: “[T]hey seem to break the continuum of history, articulating another vision of the world—the utopian idea of a total reorganization of life.”¹³

Even before Romanticism artists expressed their life philosophy with their lifestyles, their clothes, hair, general behavior and even with the choice of food and drink. Thus, in the seventeenth century drinking hot chocolate was fashionable among the European nobility (and denoted aristocracy), while in coffee shops where patrons supported the enlightenment, coffee was the required beverage accompanying liberal discussions. The semantic individuation offered by the dress codes of the middle ages was gone, but the more easy-going and eclectic Bohemian style became typical of the nineteenth-century artists and poets and has remained in this respect unchanged until today, only that since the 1960s it has been typical mostly of pop musicians and less frequently—if at all—of poets, painters or installation artists. There were exceptions, such as American conceptual artists of the 1970s whose conservative dress code—black suit and white shirt—has from the outset been their trademark. Similarly, members of the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) organization in Slovenia dressed from their beginning in the early 1980s in black, the more general style of their dress being made specific in the case of one of its central groups—the group of visual artists, the IRWIN group—in black suits, white shirts, and black ties. A specific case was and remains Dragan Živadinov, the leader of the theater chapter of the NSK who was under the strong influence of Malevich, his Suprematism, and to some extent also Russian Constructivism. In the 1980s and 1990s Živadinov wore a special suit: overalls. For him, too, this dress signified more than mere clothes possessing a simple practical value: “Overalls were introduced about 1750 as a protective article of clothing intended to prevent work related wear and tear

¹² Loscialpo, “Utopian Clothing,” p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

to breeches and stockings, which were the standard clothing items required by fashion at the time.”¹⁴

The first use of overalls as part of military uniform was by the Americans, while the earliest written mention of the “overalls” in English language was from 1776. The term was retained by the U. S. army until the 1850s. “By the 1859s, the overalls became a single piece and worn over the trousers. The standard colors slowly became standardized with white being for painters, pin striped for rail road workers, and finally the blue shades for the rest of the working class.”¹⁵ In the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries overalls were used by mechanics and later by aircrews.

In the early twentieth century overalls (coveralls) acquired additional aesthetic and ideological functions. Their political ideological function related mostly to the fashionable “artist-Constructor”—the Russian (pro-Bolshevik) constructor from the early 1920s. The image of the “artist-Constructor” was also promoted in the early 1920s by Aleksandr Rodchenko and László Moholy-Nagy, two well-known personalities who shared many political and ideological views. In this they were both preceded by John Heartfield as witnesses the painting *Monteur John Heartfield* by Georg Grosz from 1920.

In Russia overalls became one of the symbols of the new Soviet society. In many respects, Russian Constructivism coincided with Italian Futurism. As early as 1911 and 1912, Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero developed theoretical positions on clothing according to which clothing should follow principles of Futurist painting. As he did on many similar occasions, Marinetti modified the text of the relevant manifesto so that it expressed the militant opposition of Futurists to “neutralists,” i.e. those who wanted Italy to stay out of the Great War (socialists for example). On September 11, 1914, Giacomo Balla published the manifesto “Anti-Neutral Clothes.” It was meant not as an attack on neutralists so much as an opposition to conformist dress and the promotion of clothes that were asymmetrical, colorful and daring. Shoes, for example, were intend-

¹⁴ Walton & Taylor Mercantile, “A Brief History of Overalls and the Origins of Blue Jeans,” <http://www.waltonandtaylor.com/overalls/html>.

¹⁵ Blair Mountain Reenactment Society, “The History of Overalls,” <http://blairmountain-reenactment.wordpress.com/2011/05/10/the-history-of-overalls/>.



Fig. 1:
Ernesto Michahelles (Thayaht), "Tuta" (1919)

ed to “deliver merry kicks to all neutralists.”¹⁶ For a short while after the war communists and Futurists cooperated. For instance, they jointly formed local Proletkult organizations. During this brief period of time “it was conceivable to have a Communist Party official wearing a suit from Depero’s workshop.”¹⁷

The early Futurist clothes were primarily a theoretical concept not meant for mass consumption. A completely different story was that of *tuta*, an invention of Ernesto Michahelles (aka Thayat) and his brother Ruggero Michahelles (RAM). Thayat (1893 – 1959) created the *tuta* (also written as TuTa) in 1919 with the purpose of offering Italians a dress that was practical, functional, simple, and inexpensive at the same time that it overcame class divisions. The two brothers received support from the Florentine newspaper *La Nazione*, made a film about the *tuta*, and printed postcards with the slogan “Everybody in *tuta*” (*Tutti in tuta*): “[M]ore than 1000 people in Florence had adopted the *tuta*, which was considered the most provocative garment of the summer of 1920.”¹⁸ When Thayat created his *tuta*, he did not yet fully embrace Futurism, as he did later. In spite of such “ideological” ambiguity, his works and ideas already at an early time exhibited affinity to ideas held by Futurists, making the question whether the Tuta can be considered a Futurist invention somewhat irrelevant. Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism thus held views that perhaps possessed no causal relation but shared features on the level of global society and its *Weltanschauung*.

What was a *tuta*? It was an overall, a simple dress in the shape of a letter T. From its inception, the *tuta* was an anti-bourgeois project, born as a protest against the high prices of the post-war period and the obsolete stylistic conventions. Thayaht’s aim was to “initiate a transformation similar to an ‘industrial revolution’ of fashion, making the masses feel well dressed and cultured.”¹⁹

The Russian overalls—the *prozodezhda*, the production clothes—had much in common with the Italian invention, the *tuta*—not to mention their historical simultaneity: the *tuta* was created in 1919 and the Russian overalls in 1918/19. Both underlined the social function of art and the importance of industrial pro-

¹⁶ Caroline Tisdall & Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism*, Thames & Hudson, London 1977, p. 194.

¹⁷ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics. Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, Berghahn Books, London 1996, p. 198.

¹⁸ Loscialpo, “Utopian Clothing,” p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

duction. Both suits represented “a crucial moment in the utopian vision of a total reorganization of life.”²⁰

In the nineteenth century avant-garde art emerges that is consciously partisan and whose creators consciously support social and political ideals. The founder of such notion of the avant-garde (and the first to use this term) was Henri de Saint-Simon whose character in his *Opinions* from 1825 exclaims: “It is we, artists, who will serve you as avant-garde: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas.”²¹ In Saint-Simon’s schema of society, artists were supposed to be its leaders, with art “exercising over society a positive power, a truly priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties, in the epoch of their greatest development!”²² In such a society the role of the government would be reduced to that of police, “an idea,” remarks Donald D. Egbert, that “like Marx’s classless society, was ultimately anarchistic.”²³ An echo of Saint-Simon’s ideas is later to be found in Marinetti and Futurism in general, as well as in Russian Constructivism.

After Saint-Simon’s death in 1825, his ideas spread across Europe and America. His followers, such as Emile Barrault, published works on his views on art aimed at attracting artists and writers to the cause of social progress through social art and away from the Romantic mentality. Saint-Simonians had a special affinity toward engineering. Thus, his disciples Père Enfantin and Michel Chevalier, were projecting new technical possibilities, taking the construction of buildings as their favorite technical, even utopian activity. This ranged from a temple (Chevalier) to support for the Suez canal (Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin) and the Grandes Halles in Paris (Eugène Flachet).

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As John Bowlt observes, “Constructivism produced very little of permanence. It was a movement of built-in obsolescence, of ready-to-wear and throw-away, of designs often intended for multiple and mass consumption, of theories, statements, and projects that left behind a precious, but very scant, legacy of

²⁰ Loscialpo, “Utopian Clothing,” p. 3.

²¹ Quoted in Donald Drew Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts. Western Europe*, Gerald Duckworth & Co., London 1970, p. 121.

²² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 122.

²³ *Ibid.*

material objects.”²⁴ On September 21, 1921, five avant-garde artists opened an exhibition of their works titled $5 \times 5 = 25$. This was a path-breaking exhibition. Rodchenko, who was one of the exhibiting artists, claimed that five of the monochrome paintings he contributed represented the final stage of the decomposition of traditional or past art. After them art could only be functional and integrated into the new historical and social reality of the post-October Russia. Soon after theorist Osip Brik invited 25 artists to leave the realm of pure art and begin working in industry. Except for Liubov’ Popova, Alexandra Exter, Varvara Stepanova, Tatlin and a few others, Brik’s revolutionary idea was not accepted by the revolutionary artists: instead of focusing their activity upon the production of practical and useful objects, they preferred to work in theater, commercials, posters, etc. That is to say, they preferred to continue their previous artistic creativity. They became artists-Constructors and strove to practice production art: The Revolution had created a new proletarian class who badly needed functional objects: “[The artist-Constructor was] someone who would combine the tough formal values of Constructivism with an understanding of technology to produce a new kind of industrial product.”²⁵

In Rodchenko’s opinion design was not concerned with aesthetics but was a synthesis of ideological, theoretical and practical elements, all of which were related to the broader historical setting represented by the new political system with unprecedented expectations of a classless society and one as it never existed before. Osip Brik shared this opinion: “Only those artists who once and for all have broken with easel craft, who have recognized productional work in practice, not only as an equal form of artistic labor, but also as the only one possible—only such artists can grapple successfully and productively with the solution to the problems of contemporary artistic culture.”²⁶

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Can it be claimed that Constructivists responded to the demands set up by Saint-Simon? The answer to this question remains uncertain. In 1984 Margaret Rose

²⁴ John E. Bowlt, “ $5 \times 5 = 25$? The Science of Constructivism,” in Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, Duke University Press, Durham 2015, p. 42.

²⁵ Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia. Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1997, pp. 83-84.

²⁶ Osip Brik, “From Pictures to Textile Prints” (1924), in John Bowlt (ed.), *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, Thames and Hudson, London 1976, p. 248.

wrote: “In the very first years of the revolution, the Constructivists El Lissitzky and Rodchenko were also to echo Saint-Simon’s encouragement of artists and engineers to co-operate in bringing to birth the new ‘golden age’ in their slogans, and to attempt to put the latter into practice in their monuments, engineering ventures, and new experimental designs for Soviet goods and propaganda.”²⁷

What is certain is that the aesthetic avant-garde—what Victor Margolin calls “the artistic-social avant-garde”—wanted the innovative forms that began to emerge with the Bolshevik Russia “to become signifiers of a new spirit. Their ambition was to create a new social role for art, one that made the artist a significant participant in the organization and building of social life.”²⁸ Again this brings us into proximity with Productivism.

Let me return to Rodchenko’s avant-garde gesture of wearing overalls. This is how Galina Chichagova, a young female art student at the VKhHUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios), remembered seeing her teacher Aleksandr Rodchenko for the first time, just as he was entering the room to instruct the school’s Basic Course: “A man walked into the studio, from his appearance he looked like a combination of pilot and motorist. He was wearing a beige jacket of military cut, Gallifet-breeches of a grey-green color, on his feet were black boots with grey leggings. On his head was a black cap with a huge shiny, leather peak. [...] I immediately saw that this was a new type of man, a special one.”²⁹

We know how Rodchenko’s overalls looked like (and how he looked in them) thanks to the photographer Mikhail Kaufmann, who took a picture of him in overalls in 1922. In the photograph we see Rodchenko smoking a pipe, his head shaven, looking sternly to the right, with two enormous pockets that are immediately noticeable on the front of his overalls and were designed (just like the overalls themselves) by his wife, Varvara Stepanova. As in medieval pictures, three-dimensional constructions behind the artist (most probably we see *Spatial Construction* from 1920/21) illustrate his craft: the production of Constructivist objects.

²⁷ Rose, *Marx’s Lost Aesthetic*, p. 127.

²⁸ Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy. Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2012, p. 283.

²⁹ Quoted in Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*, p. 87.

Rodchenko's overalls were not a product of the fashion industry; it is fairly obvious that what mattered about them was their message and not the fine details of the handiwork of a professional seamstress. In this respect, Rodchenko's clothes were different from the overalls of the other well-known Constructivist who also belonged to the avant-garde, namely those of László Moholy-Nagy, of whom we possess a photograph as well. We observe his photographic image taken by his wife Lucia Moholy in Dessau in 1925. In his case the fabric of the overalls falls over his body in soft folds, and his trousers are impeccably ironed. The Hungarian aristocrat—at that time already the director of Bauhaus—resembles a fashion model rather than a militant Constructivist. Although Rodchenko emanates the spirit of self-assurance and vivacity, he nonetheless looks very different from his aristocratic Hungarian friend: modest and provincial, in overalls made at home, in the kitchen perhaps. Moholy Nagy's piece of clothing, on the other hand, is easy to imagine being sewn in a high-end couture shop from which a special delivery boy brings it to Lucia Moholy.

The artist-Constructor was to announce a new time and new society, one in which Construction would replace all previous art, with this being so much easier and legitimate for it was created (or was to be created) in a Soviet Union that was on its path toward a classless society in which new art was to replace that of the old bourgeoisie.

Nonetheless, the story of the overalls doesn't end here. For a long time it seemed to me that Rodchenko was the source of the avant-garde overalls and that Moholy-Nagy simply appropriated them and wore them in Bauhaus in Weimar and in Dessau. Moholy-Nagy projected "the modern image of the artists as an engineer and technician, thereby replacing the expressionist image of the expressionist artist that had dominated the school before his arrival."³⁰ In this he differed from the previous leadership and its director, the spiritualist Johannes Itten, who dressed in unusual clothes, adhered to Zoroastrianism, and was easily recognizable by his image and behavior. Moholy-Nagy was offered the post of director in part because conceptually and philosophically he was a complete opposite of Itten: practical, technically oriented, a believer in the special aes-

³⁰ Louis Kaplan, "The New Vision of László Moholy-Nagy" (*From the Exhibition Catalogue 'LUMA – Modern Photography from First Half of the 20th Century'*). <http://thesip.org/language/en/lkaplanmoholynagy-en/>.

thetic and practical value of machinery and construction, he also highly appreciated the role of design.

In correspondence with the author of this essay, Prof. Dr. Alexander Lavrentiev from the Moscow State Academy “Sergei Stroganov,” (who is also the grandson of Aleksandr Rodchenko) explained that as far as he was familiar with the matter, the person who was the main promotor of overalls was “John Heartfield [Johann Hartfelde] who was known as ‘monteur’ and wore blue robes while doing his collages and photomontages in 1919 and 1920. Rodchenko designed his Productivist suit as a demonstration of the general principle of the specialized functional cloth which had its origin in the costumes of the aviators and drivers, in the principle of the uniform as well. A costume as part of the profession, as a professional instrument.”³¹

Stepanova and Popova added to overalls a geometric design that referred to the imagined order and efficiency of the Soviet state. Some of the clothes created by Constructivists also found their way into the theater.

Popova, for instance, in planning the costume and set design for the Meierkhol’d production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), declared her intention “to find a general principle of *prozodezhda* for the professional work of the actor in connection with the essentials of his present professional role.”³²

According to Christina Lodder, “Among the first practical realisations of [production] clothing was the work-suit which Stepanova made for Rodchenko. [...] Rodchenko’s work-suit, resembling a jump-suit aggressively demonstrating its fastenings and its storage pockets, transformed these essential components into significant formal elements. Otherwise it was extremely simple, and economic in cut, sewing and material. It was a very specialized and individual garment.”³³

Another photograph exhibiting the overalls is that of El Lissitzky: *Vladimir Tatlin at Work on the Monument to the III International* from around 1922. Yet another,

³¹ Alexander Lavrentiev, Correspondence with the Author, April 17, 2015.

³² Loscialpo, “Utopian Clothing,” p. 19.

³³ Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1983, p. 149.

titled *The Constructor* from 1924, employs photographic montage and is in fact El Lissitzky's self-portrait.

One of Gropius's students at Bauhaus was the Slovenian artist Avgust Černigoj who in 1925 held a Constructivist exhibition in Ljubljana. To the consternation of the local population, he walked around the city, which then had no more than 50,000 inhabitants, dressed in overalls, like a mechanic—an obvious reference to the figure of the artist-Constructor and particularly to Moholy-Nagy whom he met at Bauhaus. Picasso and Braque also wore overalls because they were practical for work in the studio, were anti-conventional and distinguished them as artists.

In 1984 in Ljubljana there took place a colloquium organized by the Slovenian Society for Aesthetics. Among the participants were artists and academics who had first-hand knowledge of the classical avant-gardes from the 1910-1930 period; likewise, there were those of us who were born after World War II. Articles and essays from the colloquium were then published in three issues of the magazine *Sodobnost*. One of the contributions in the colloquium was by France Klopčič, who was one of the founding members of the Slovenian Communist Party (founded in 1923). In his paper Klopčič drew a vivid image of that time, among the most memorable ones being his recollections of a visit to the Constructivist exhibition organized by Avgust Černigoj in Ljubljana in 1925. Klopčič, who was no art *connoisseur*, nonetheless sensed the revolutionary nature of this new art that Černigoj took as his own and which he presented at the 1925 exhibition from a fairly militant standpoint. This is how France Klopčič recalled his visit: "The exhibition of Constructivism was organized by Avgust Černigoj, who in Germany learned much new from the architect-artist Gropius [sic] and his school Bauhaus. [...] In the hall were hanging big posters, standing upright, diagonally or upside down: "Capital is theft," "the Artist must become an engineer," etc. In the exhibition there were objects and pictures. Among the objects one could see individual bicycles, scooters and a typing machine, for the organizer of the exhibition started from the principle: *Construction is the first expression of art of that time*. It is here that originated the name of the current—Constructivism. Between the pictures were circles, squares and similar combinations in white, black and red color.

"I visited the exhibition in the company of Ludvik Mrzel, Stane Melihar, Ivo Grohar and some other male and female comrades. [...] We were greeted by Avgust Černigoj. What I saw overturned all my previous conceptions of artistic exhibitions. I liked the slogan 'Capital is theft,' for until then something like that did not exist. With great curiosity I gazed at canvases with black squares and red semi-circles or triangles. And why is here a motor bicycle, where did the wooden bicycle come from? It was unclear to me. But of one thing I was certain; the exhibition marked in essence a protest against the culture and the aesthetic of the bourgeois class, for it destroyed what until then was not allowed to be upturned."³⁴

Černigoj was especially attracted to Moholy-Nagy: "He made us create from different materials something completely new; it was at the same time temporal and abstract."³⁵

Soon after Černigoj left for Trieste. He intended to start publishing together with the poet and friend Srečko Kosovel a journal titled *Constructor*, but the periodical never materialized. Thereafter Černigoj lived and worked for most of his life in Trieste, to be discovered and recognized as a unique Slovenian artist only in the 1980s. In the early 1980s not only were numerous academic gatherings devoted to the avant-gardes, but also an extensive revived interest in the classical avant-gardes sprung up across the globe—from Ljubljana to Belgrade and from Ukraine to Armenia. In this respect, our activities in Slovenia strongly resembled those all over Europe and beyond. It was during that time that Dragan Živadinov started to dress in overalls.

Dragan Živadinov started his career as the leader of various theater groups and has as such become involved in the activities of the Neue Slowenische Kunst organization, in which he has been most intensively active and interested in theater, ritual, space and space travel (supported by similar ideas emanating in the first half of the twentieth century in Russia). Živadinov soon developed his theater pieces and events in the direction of Russian mysticism, especial-

³⁴ France Klopčič, "Slovenska zgodovinska avantgarda 1910-1930," *Sodobnost*, XXXIII, no. 3, 1985, p. 293.

³⁵ Avgust Černigoj, "Slovenska zgodovinska avantgarda 1910-1930," *Sodobnost*, XXXIII, no. 3, 1985, p. 297.

ly that which had its sources in Kazimir Malevich and his personal and artistic mythology. In the 1980s and the 1990s, the figure of the artist-Constructor was very much a part of Živadinov's *Weltanschauung*—and to some extent still is, except that in his recent works and discourse abound phrases such as “an engineer is constructing a new theatre.” This shows that the figure of the artist-Constructor is still present, but its previous plethora of significations is now drastically reduced. While such traces of the Constructivist past remain noticeable in Živadinov's works, lately he has focused on space travel and refers in passing to Constructivism. Thus, in 2009 he held a lecture devoted to the “Trieste Constructivist Ambiance as an Announcement of Post-Gravitational Art.” (This original “ambiance” was a spatial construction devised by Avgust Černigoj, Edvard Stepančič, Georgio Carmelich and Josip Vlah in 1927 in Trieste.) Especially in the 1990s, Živadinov made use of the term “artist-Constructor” and proclaimed himself the “attractor,” a “Constructor”³⁶ and “an engineer who is constructing a new theater, in which spectators will look around their own axis and learn a new circumvision.”³⁷

The image of the engineer has today lost its attraction. It no longer relates to the works and ideas of artists and thinkers who attempt to fuse and upgrade art and Construction—two elements at the same time connecting and separating the old bourgeois and class society with the new communist society that was in the making but in fact never quite made it.

Let me conclude by summarizing the main points of this article: at approximately the same time Italian Futurists and Russian Constructivists started to develop specific clothes (overalls) so that they would serve practical function and would at the same time represent a step toward the imagined utopia of the future. Balla and Depero in Italy had some modest success with their clothes already at the time of the First World War, while the real success in Italy was that of *tuta*, developed by Thayaht. The *tuta* and the productivist *prozodezhda* had much in common for both were based on the same modernist ideology, namely to create objects that fulfill the functions and needs of the human being as a social being

³⁶ See Tomaž Toporišič, “Spatial Machines in Slovene (No Longer-)Experimental Theatre in the Second Half of the 20th Century,” in Ivo Svetina (ed.), *Occupying Spaces. Experimental Theatre in Central Europe 1950-2010*, Slovenski gledališki muzej, Ljubljana 2010, pp. 456-57.

³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 457.



Fig. 2:
Dragan Živadinov, Bajkonur, 2015

and that at the same time denigrate stratified society, turning the nation into one big political party. In this and in many other respects, these new overalls represent a successful instance of modernist utopianism.

The other (but also related) topic of my paper has been the history of the development and ramifications of the concept of overalls. They were first used by the American army before becoming diversified in the early twentieth century and developed both in Italy and in Russia, with both cases being also excellent examples of modernist utopianism. In Bauhaus the Slovenian artist Avgust Černigoj admired Moholy Nagy in his red overalls and decided to emulate him. In 1925, he thus publicly wore such working clothes in Ljubljana. Six decades later—for the first time in 1981—the overalls were once more publicly worn by an artist—Dragan Živadinov—who was emulating both Russian Constructivists and Avgust Černigoj, thereby prolonging not only the practical but also the symbolic life of this piece of clothing.

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