

News From Nowhere on “The Great Utopia” Exhibit at The Guggenheim Museum

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Objects, as works of art, can disappear from human experience, that is, from history. Archives are full of the names and works of artists upon which dust settles ceaselessly. Such names, which once commanded a certain attention for the objects their bearers produced, have been buried by, and in, time. One does not have to work as an art historian to know this. One need only think of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century genre paintings which depicted, for example, a rifle hanging from pegs near a rough-hewn door or a flaxen-haired child stroking the woolly head a lamb laid lovingly in its lap to know this is true. Certain artifacts to which the word ‘Art’ once clung can, in the course of time, lose this designation, a loss which, paradoxically, is most often effected by the addition of a second term: ‘popular.’ ‘Popular art,’ according to the dialectic of art, is, simply put, not ‘Art’ at all. It is some other thing, closer to ‘decoration,’ perhaps...

Yet if it is true that the word ‘Art’ can be dislodged from artifacts, that works of art can disappear in, and into, time, is it not also the case that the very same artifacts can have this term and this status restored to them, as if awakened from a long sleep? And is it not also true that other objects, which were never conceived or intended to be ‘Art,’ can, in a similar fashion, have this term and this status conferred upon them, affixed to them, as if raised from the obscure invisibility of ‘thingness’ by the rays of a light the touch of which they have never known?

With this latter question one can perhaps begin to approach an understanding of the *experience* of “The Great Utopia” exhibit of the ‘revolutionary art’ of the Soviet Union in the years 1914-1932. The experience of this exhibit demands such a question, in fact, because it was the avowed intent of such artists as Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Eisenstein, Tretyakov, and many others to explode the category ‘Art’ altogether — and they claimed to have done so, thereby eliminating not only ‘Art’ but the ‘Artist,’ as well, whose place in the ‘new’ society was not to be that of the gallery or the salon, but, as a ‘producer,’ that of the street, the factory, the home, the meeting hall — everywhere in a society perceived as a ‘great experiment.’ Yet the thousands of artifacts — the paintings, posters, drawings, plans, clothing designs, book covers, ‘constructions,’ furniture designs, collages, photographs, photomontages, fabric designs, plates, cups, and ceramic baby nursers — produced for this experiment have been gathered and placed in the Guggenheim Museum where they have been situated in its galleries, hung on its walls, and arranged under its glass cases.

What does it mean to look at such a vast array of things in the Guggenheim Museum in 1993? Today, when money is not far from anyone’s considerations, it is difficult to avoid the thought that mounting such an exhibit as this must have been a very costly undertaking, indeed. That a large international corporation — Lufthansa — is named on every ticket as the “major sponsor” of this exhibit should come as no surprise, even if the association of one of the world’s biggest airlines and a revolutionary Utopia strikes a chord of irony. But there is more at stake here than the issue

of corporate sponsorship — after all, the ‘friendly’ relations enjoyed by capital and cultural institutions in Western Europe and in North America are long-standing. More importantly, the high cost of creating an exhibit such as this one requires that large numbers of people attend it. This requirement is not dictated by accounting print-outs alone, however, but stands as the basis of any museum’s self-justification, not only as a cultural institution but as an *educational* one. The numbers of people who attend a particular exhibition, because they are ‘enlightened’ by it in some way, are held to be a measure of the exhibition’s — and the institution’s — success.

On the face of it, the drawing of large numbers of people to an exhibit such as this one seems an unquestionably good thing insofar as it suggests a democratized audience and a completely democratized function of the museum. In fact, the issue of a democratized audience is germane, in every way, to the project of which the works on display were contributions. Nevertheless, a tension, unstated and unrecognized, exists between the museum’s educational mandate and its need for large numbers of people to pass through its doors on any given day. On the one hand, the large number of artifacts that have been assembled make it nearly impossible to ‘take them in,’ so to speak, in one day. At the same time, the ticket price of twelve dollars, while not prohibitive by today’s standards, is costly enough to eliminate virtually, for a good many people, the possibility of repeated visits, visits which an adequate understanding calls for. On the other hand, the exhibit is accompanied by a book, as most exhibits are. This book, a huge tome in which photographs of the displayed artifacts are presented along with essays by scholars and art historians whose expertise allows them to discuss the importance of the people and the works represented in the exhibition, comes with the large price-tag of approximately fifty dollars (U.S.). Obviously, only those who can afford such a book, or those who feel that it is necessary for purposes of scholarship, will purchase it. Thus, what first appeared as an exhibit with democratic dimensions as regards not only its subject matter but also its audience, reveals, on closer inspection, certain divisions in the constitution of the latter, namely those of time, of money, and of expert knowledge.

There can be no doubt that the collapse of the Soviet Union has played a significant part in making possible such an exhibit as this — not the first of its kind but perhaps the largest. ‘The Great Utopia’ includes something of just about everything produced by the members of the Russian avant-garde, and with very few exceptions, such as a reconstruction of a painting by Malevich, it includes the original objects themselves. This stress on the originality of the artifacts that comprise the exhibit is worthy of note not only because the dissolution of the Soviet Union has made available to the nations of the West the very objects themselves, but also because the fetish quality of ‘authenticity’ and ‘originality,’ as it sticks to ‘Art,’ was both denied and negated by the people who produced the very objects on display. Beneath the glass of a display case, for example, one can see a design-drawing of a chess table; one can even see there a photograph of two people playing chess at such a table; but one cannot have the experience of seeing or touching, let alone of sitting at, such a table. For this experience to occur, the table would have to leave the design and the photograph — in short, to leave the realm of representation — and be *constructed* — or reconstructed. On paper and in a photograph, the work is incomplete. Insofar as the design-drawing and the photograph are understood as ends in themselves, the work is imprisoned, so to speak — but imprisoned precisely as Art. It is an ‘artwork’ and nothing else, despite the fact that the photograph may be intended to show that the

physical table did exist. To confer upon the drawing the self-sufficiency of *Art* is to eliminate from consideration altogether the importance of the practical, i.e., the non-aesthetic, side of the term ‘work.’ The issue here does not rest on the fact that very few of the Constructivists’s designs were ever actually realised. The issue is one of using such an historical fact to ascribe to such designs a value that derives from their being viewed as ‘purely’ imaginary. The emphasis placed on gathering ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ materials entails the laying of great stress on the visuality of those materials. Infused with a fetishistic value, they are, in their original purity, not to be touched or held, or in any other way brought near to hand; they are not, in other words, to be experienced in any other way but the visual.

At precisely this point of museological appropriation, certain limitations of museums, the manners in which they function, define themselves, and present themselves, begin to appear. The huge array and the large numbers of the original artifacts that have been collected may certainly be understood as attempts to achieve ‘representativeness’ and ‘comprehensiveness.’ But they can also be understood to reflect a sheer voracity and a spectacularization. If certain artifacts pose, by their very nature, an implicit criticism of museums, it nevertheless seems to be the case that these institutions, whether out of habit or out of self-certitude, or both, remain deaf to such criticism.

The question of museological understanding is not only a matter of giving primacy to the visual aspect of experience by stressing the image quality of the artifacts at the expense of their other qualities. Such an understanding shows itself as well in the manner in which material of the exhibition is arranged and ordered to produce an educational experience. The schema adhered to by the curators of “The Great Utopia” is chronological, beginning with the influences of Cezanne and Cubism in the formation of a Russian avant-garde of artists who enthusiastically throw themselves into activity in support of the Bolshevik revolution. Significantly, on this score nothing is said in the legends that accompany the artworks of the specifically Russian aspects of the development of the *intelligentsia* (a Russian word, after all) as the social group from which this avant-garde would be drawn. Be that as it may, from beginning to end, “The Great Utopia” is a narration of the downfall of the marriage of art and revolutionary politics: the presentation of a *Tragedy* in which Art failed to achieve the project, social and political, of its own overcoming. In the agonistic struggle between art and the Soviet State, it is the state that, incapable of understanding such art and therefore despising it, not only devours its own children (the artists) but actually murders the infant revolution itself. That the project of the Russian avant-garde not only failed, but failed nobly, allows it to be excavated and recovered as Art. Utopia, if it can be said to exist at all, exists only in and through Art. All attempts to bring Utopia down to earth as that which people can actually live are doomed. The subsequent failure of the revolution in the ascendancy and the passing away of the bureaucrats and “engineers of the soul,” represented by the the Party’s official sanction, under Stalin, of Socialist Realism, means that Art outlives revolutionary politics — even if the former is the precondition of the latter, even if such ‘art’ could not have existed without such politics. ‘Utopia’ is a museum.

The structure of the Guggenheim Museum is not unlike that of Dante’s Mount Purgatory. The spectator walks an incline that ascends in a spiral fashion ever upward. Of course, from this pinnacle one is supposed to be able to survey both the underbelly of Heaven and the Earth left far below. In the case of “The Great Utopia,” a reversal

has been effected. For, as the spectator reaches the top, she or he actually enters the Hell of Socialist Realism. Art, even Revolutionary Art, like Dante's Virgil cannot go this far. This is certainly one 'lesson' to be learned from the way in which the exhibit "The Great Utopia" has been organized and presented: the attempt on the part of art to place itself in the service of social and political change, even when it is undertaken for truly altruistic reasons, results not only in tragedy but also in travesty — for both. On the other hand, a different lesson, negative but perhaps more compelling, can also be drawn from "the Great Utopia" to see the artifacts produced by these people *only* as Art, even *only* as historical documents, is to see them as standing for something already impossible, something over and done with. We are asked to idealize these artifacts to the degree that we do not admit them as elements in a project, at once theoretical and practical, which is itself capable of critical — and useful — transformation.