Site Specifics:

Modernist Mediums in Modern Places

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that the modernist doctrine of medium specificity, the idea that the autonomy of the arts arises from artworks' investigation of the properties and limits of their materials, grounds artistic production in the place where it was produced. The identity of artistic mediums (writing, painting, sculpture, and land art) depends on their literal placement in physical, geographic environments. Medium specificity requires site specificity. In the aesthetic, art-historical discourses I consider — Gertrude Stein's account of Cubism, Soviet avant-garde writings on Constructivism, Robert Smithson's texts on landscape, earth art, and Minimalism — the mediums of art-making are located in places that serve simultaneously as construction sites, sources of raw materials, and models of aesthetic form. They are both the subject of representation and the representational means, the work's content, form, and substance. Art derives its physical properties, its subject matter, and its formal laws from the geography, topography, and geology of the sites at which it is made. Stein retroactively models Picasso's Cubism (and her own plays) on the spatial juxtaposition of houses and mountains in the Spanish landscape. Shklovsky discovers Constructivist principles (and those of his own formalist aesthetics) in the daily life of post-revolutionary St. Petersburg. Smithson finds a model for earth art and for the recovery of history from universal entropy in the "dialectical landscape" of Central Park.

For all three of these aesthetic theorists and practitioners, natural processes are entangled with social history, reciprocally modifying each other at the intersections of the built and the found. The specific site is constituted by such intersections and models site-specific art as a legible composition of modern life. By literally taking place, the site-specific artworks these writers describe, theorize, and propose acquire historical specificity, an identity that both indexes the social order that gave rise to them and resists or revises it. This autonomy of the artwork is the stake of site-specificity. An artwork's capacity to resist its present, to be autonomous from or non-identical with the dominant mode of production of its time, is a function of its localization in a socially determined site. A site-specific work is made from materials that are arranged in real space and organized by the laws governing this space. By turning social materials and social laws into its own constructive principle, such a work makes them perceivable and reveals the historical processes at work in them. Manifesting history in its material composition and formal arrangement, the site-specific artwork both remembers and remakes it.

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Acknowledgments

Film credits and casts of characters in certain novels (I have only ever found this in mysteries) list characters *in order of appearance*. An alternative to both the motivated hierarchy of social standing and to the arbitrary hierarchy of the alphabet, the order of appearance arranges the cast along a diachronic axis. The list is placed in time, acquires a historical dimension. The order of appearance is contingent on the circumstances of characters' arrivals on the scene, circumstances extrinsic to each of them. It is determined not by a system of relative values established by one or another cultural code, but by the meandering progress of the narrative (and its author) from one character to another. The order of the characters' appearance is the order of the plot itself.

I could never arrange the people I am about to thank into any relative order. They are, each of them, incomparable, and each has helped me, taught me, rescued me in ways that are absolutely particular, unrepeatable, and unrepayable. And each of them arrived on the scene just in time. So, in order of their appearance in my life, my infinite thanks to those who are behind every word of this dissertation:

Yuliya Bir and Mikhail Vydrin, my parents, have supplied the infinite conversation and the bottomless teapot.

Yelena Buroshko, my grandmother, has for decades created original works of painting by repeating preexisting ones, mediated by her own mimetic sense of color.

modernism, Bloomian Freud, and the chiasmic crossovers of self and world, priority and belatedness, the cowboy and the dandy. His classes were the reason I went to graduate school. More than a decade later, his words continue to return to me in sudden flashes of belated understanding, translated into the language of my subsequent reading.

The professors and fellow graduate students I met at Columbia have not only given me the subjects and objects about which I never stop thinking and talking but the very words to speak of them, the language I use every day. I have been with them for more than a decade and could not imagine thinking without them. To describe my gratitude and debt to them would require at least one more chapter (if not an entire dissertation) on influence, imitation, and giftgiving. For now, I will confine myself to some metonymic placeholders for the years of gifts that each of them has given me.

David Damrosch's generosity toward my half-formed ideas about modernism and sympathy for my commitment to aestheticism guided my first steps to a proper understanding of both and helped me figure out why I cared about them in the first place. His own critical practice taught me that historical specificity, worldly breadth, and intertextual close reading are inseparable from each other.

My graduate education is unimaginable without Ross Hamilton. In the seminar on Romanticism he taught in my first semester, he built a conceptual edifice that I continue to inhabit. He taught me not only a particular history of ideas but also the idea of intellectual history itself. He was there at every crucial moment, from my first seminar paper to my defense. When, facing a fast-approaching final deadline for completing and defending my dissertation, I asked him to be on my committee, he immediately agreed,

The only way to express my debt to Michael Golston is to say simply this: he taught me how to read poetry. His approach to modernist poetics at the intersection of verbal and plastic form is what made me think I could write this dissertation. His patience, encouragement, and faith in my work even as it seemed to stall at some indefinite stage of incompletion were what made its completion possible. His and Cherrymae Golston's hospitality and friendship gave me some of my happiest moments over the last ten years.

And it is thanks to Michael that I met Bruce Andrews, whose poetry and theoretical texts had overwhelmed and exhilarated me years before I met him. I am profoundly grateful for his incredibly generous response to my writing, for his genuine concern for my intellectual future, and, above all, for the chance I have had (and hope to continue to have) to discuss avant-garde poetics with one of its greatest practitioners.

Michael Taussig's welcoming warmth and interest have been a precious, unforeseen gift, as was his invitation to participate in the "ficto-critical" reading groups he held at his apartment. These meetings introduced me to an idea and a practice of critical writing that could be continuous with its subject matter, entangled in the narrative and tropic terrains it traverses, a scholarship sympathetic with the practices it studies and mimetic of their procedures. They also introduced me to a group of scholars (both graduate students and professors) whose heterodox and polyglot critical discourses convinced me to trust the impurity of my own. Taussig's own writing, in its infinite sympathy with the texts of Walter Benjamin, is what I think of every time I sit down to write.

As my conversations with Rishi Goyal extended ever further into the night and morning, it dawned on me that he was the first uncompromising utopian I had ever met. It has long ago come to the point that no text feels understood or idea formulated until I have discussed it with him.

Whether our shared Eastern bloc beginnings have anything to do with it or not, Andras Kisery and I have always shared a language. In our ten-year friendship, there has been nothing that this language could not accommodate.

If I were to try to list everything I learned from Matt Sandler I would produce something like a dissertation prospectus for a dissertation not unlike this one. Whether we were talking about Stein's *Tender Buttons* or Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, Benjamin's Arcades or Warhol's Factory, "Paris in the '20s or New York in the '70s," Matt somehow always gave me what I most needed to understand and would often not fully grasp until months or even years later.

Like Matt, Stefanie Sobelle introduced me to many of the objects, textual and visual, that I now cannot believe I ever lived without. I could not imagine having gotten through graduate school without her encouragement and example, from the first days of classes to the last weeks of writing.

Agnes Berecz is the kind of art thinker I would most want to be (however far I may actually be from being one). Hearing her explain an artwork to a group of museum visitors or construct a complex and capacious reading in a matter of minutes has not only been a thrilling intellectual experience but has also repeatedly transformed how I think about the art history I discuss in this dissertation.

Bina Gogineni was there from the earliest days of teaching and writing, a friend whose generosity of spirit I have always tried to live up to. Her insistence on expressing herself in every piece of writing and act of speaking she performs has always reminded me that the labor we do is (or ought to be) of the singularly unalienated kind.

Andrea Andersson's "native" knowledge of American experimental poetry and avant-garde visual art has been a constant source of help and inspiration as well as an ongoing reminder that, whatever else it might be, a canon can be a dwelling.

Casey Shoop was eternally willing to "stay up past his bedtime" to talk about everything, to argue on street corners and spend the night in diners. There was no idea of mine that was too half-baked or malformed for him to give it his committed attention and, in the process, make it worthwhile.

Karen Emmerich has shown me just how much close reading can do with and for an avant-garde poem. Her relation to the texts she writes about, mediated by her own work of translation, is that of a co-writer. Imagining her writing process has sustained mine, and her thoughts on the causes of my occasional writing paralysis immeasurably helped to lift it.

There hardly exists a topic that I did not at one or another time discuss with Jesse Rosenthal, usually more than once and almost always for hours. Every idea I have about aesthetics or politics, poetry or prose, culture on either side of its many divides has been contested, reconsidered, and relearned in conversation with him.

From the day I met Courtney Thorsson, she has helped me answer every question, scholarly, professional, or personal, that I ever put to her. It is an indescribable privilege to have a friend whose answers you know are always true.

Suzanne Li Puma helped me understand Hegel's dialectic while always telling me that I already understood it. Though all the misuses of the term in this dissertation are my own, her patient explanations have given me a critical method, a logic without which I can no longer remember thinking.

Some of my happiest memories of graduate school are the meetings of the Modernism/Postmodernism dissertation group (a.k.a. MoPoMo) that Ondrea Ackerman and I organized and held in her apartment. Our shared commitment to the "experimental cultures" in which we were both immersed turned what could have been years of solitary research into an irradiated and hilarious joint venture.

Andy Lynn and Sarah Kerman have both closely read and attentively commented on my chapter on Gertrude Stein. Their questions and thoughts helped me enormously in identifying the key terms of Stein's Cubist discourse. My conversations with them usually feel like they are being conducted in short hand, as a series of instantaneous and mutual recognitions.

Every conversation I have with Hannah Gurman reminds me that literary and cultural criticism is a public enterprise. Discussing and reading her work has not only given me a magnetic image of the writerly work of diplomacy but also immensely expanded my sense of my own field. Joe Alban's presence and participation in many of these conversations has been a true joy.

Much of this dissertation about site-specificity was planned and written in the libraries, cafés, and apartments of New York City. While New York does not appear by name until the epilogue, it is legible to me in everything I have to say about modern

places and modernist mediums, about sites that furnish artistic production with materials,

forms, and subjects, with matter in every sense. New York was where I discovered that

places are mediums of memory: spaces in which what is no longer there appears in the

constructions that have displaced it, estranged from themselves by the history they

recapitulate. To move through a city, this city, is to see the historical movement internal

to its every site, the making that arises from what it unmakes and thus prefigures its own

unmaking. Rising and falling in the same petrified gesture, every building is a ruin "even

before [it] has crumbled," a monument to itself.[1] This immanence of negation in every

work of construction turns each site into a threshold, a passage between the present

haunted by the past it could never completely erase (by virtue of being made from it) and

the future heralded by this past's ghostly return. To walk through the city is to see the

dialectic of history "at a standstill." If Walter Benjamin's work on the Paris Arcades has

given me the language to describe this frozen movement of historical time, New York has

given me my own dialectical images and "a slender but sturdy scaffolding" for

remembering them.[2]

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986) 162.
[2] *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999) 459.

Introduction

In his 1877 essay on "The School of Giorgione," the seventh chapter of *The Renaissance,* Walter Pater makes his famous claim that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music."[1] The statement comes several pages into the essay, which opens with what would seem to be the very different assertion of the autonomy of each of the arts as distinct mediums, their untranslatability into one another. The passage, a conceptual cornerstone of this dissertation, is worth quoting in full.

> It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting—all the various products of art—as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of colour, in painting; of sound, in music; of rhythmical words, in poetry. In this way, the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic, is made a matter of indifference; and a clear apprehension of the opposite principle—that the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other, an order of impressions distinct in kind—is the beginning of all true aesthetic criticism.[2]

Each art says what it says in its own terms, determined by the properties, capacities, and limits of its proper medium — what an art historian would call the artwork's material support. And it is the task of the "aesthetic critic," a critic sensitive to the autonomy of the individual arts, to "estimate the degree in which a given work of art fulfills its responsibility to its special material."[3]

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[1] Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, ed, William E. Buckler (New York: NYU P, 1986) 156.
[2] Pater 153.
[3] Pater 153.

Yet even as he insists on the inexchangeability of one work's embodied statement for that of another, Pater identifies a tendency in every artistic medium to borrow from or imitate the language and capacities of another. Pater calls this tendency art's *Anders-streben* ("other-striving"): "a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces."[4] It is this tendency, present in the relations between all the arts, that expresses itself most strongly in the generalized desire of all the arts to achieve the organic unity of form and content which for Pater, the Romantic aesthetician, defines the specificity of music: "Music being the typical, or ideally consummate art, the object of the great *Anders-streben* of all art, of all that is artistic, or partakes of artistic qualities."[5] Music is both the "typical and the "ideal" art because it perfectly attains "what all art constantly strives after"[6]: the absolute integration of the referent or occasion of the work (what Viktor Shklovsky will call "the motivation of the device") with the physical work itself. It is this impossibility of disentangling "the matter from the form," of extracting "a fixed quantity" of content from the concrete work's self-immanence, which makes it impossible to translate one art into another. Because there is no difference between content and expression, no content apart from expression, there is nothing to translate, nothing that can survive the passage from one expressive medium to another. The condition of music, then, is the condition that permits every artistic medium to be itself.

My interest here is not in the choice of music as the medium towards which all the others tend, the asymptote of medium convergence, the magnet or North Star of *Anders-streben*. My concern here is with the paradox that Pater's aesthetic theory so elegantly

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[4] Pater 155.
[5] Pater 156.
[6] Pater 157.

puts into place: a medium is unique and untranslatable to the degree that it aspires to be another medium. Its originality is borrowed, its uniqueness, a repetition, its autonomy, a dependence on another. All mediums are themselves because they aspire to be other than what they are.

This dissertation was originally to have been a kind of late history of cross-medium translation, or what I would call trans-medium modeling, a medium fashioning itself after another (late, because the possibility of comparing and equating mediums is at least as old as Horace's *ut pictura poesis*). I wanted to juxtapose Pater's paradoxical formulation of *Anders-streben* as the principle of a medium's self-identity with Michael Fried's proclamation, made nearly a century later, that "it is above all to the condition of painting and sculpture … that the other contemporary modernist arts, most notably poetry and music, aspire."[7] Fried made this statement in his polemical "Art and Objecthood," the 1967 essay-manifesto that defends the modernist autonomy of specific mediums against the trans-medium mixing of "theatrical" (because spectator-centered) minimalism.[8] How did painting come to replace music as the meta-medium of aesthetic autonomy? And how did the emblematic statement of Pater's comparative, inter-medium

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[7] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 167.

[8] The catastrophe that the modernist arts must avert at all costs (including, as Fried has repeatedly made clear, the cost of submerging their particular identities in that of painting) is becoming theatrical.: "Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater" (164). Theater, in turn, is defined as "what lies between the arts" (164), whereas art can have "quality and value," be meaningful at all, "only within the individual arts" (164). Clement Greenberg, Fried's mentor, makes the same claim, but welds painting's ontological instantaneousness, its all-at-onceness, with its epistemological will to self-knowledge: "The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of the discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." "Modernist Painting" (1960), John O'Brian, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 85 (hereafter cited as CEC). Fried and Greenberg reach the same conclusion about the task of modernism with respect to defining medium: "It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art." CEC 86.

aesthetics get conscripted into a late-modernist polemic against the very condition of self-difference, the dialectics of *Anders-streben*, that defines Pater's *Renaissance*?

I did not want to stop with a deconstruction of Fried's essay, or of the discourse of medium specificity in whose embattled name it was written. Fried's insight is explicit in his blindness. By mounting his defense of medium with the elevation of one medium as the model for all the others, by basing the very idea of medium identity on the identity of all mediums to painting, Fried's argument repeats Pater's paradox without assimilating its irony. Unlike Pater, the dialectician, who proposes otherness as the very basis of identity, Fried, the phenomenologist, insists on the *immediacy* or instantaneousness of the authentic work of art, the "presentness" that exists "only within the individual arts."[9] Yet what Fried's rhetoric of authenticity, calling on the other arts to imitate painting's "continuous and perpetual present,"[10] reveals in spite of itself is that the very concept of autonomy by which modernist aesthetics lives arises from heteronomy: the dependence of one medium on another for the very concept that would establish its proper domain.

But I did not want to simply catch modernist rhetoric contradicting itself — a contradiction that a Marxist would read symptomatically as the false claim of uniqueness under the regime of universal equivalence. Medium specificity is more than a rhetorical double bind. It is the principle by which modernist aesthetics defines art's non-identity with either the natural or the social realm, its capacity, in spite of everything, to resist the status of both inert matter and commodity fetish. But if this non-identity is founded on the identity of a medium with itself, can medium specificity survive its entanglement with other mediums? Can a medium survive its own implacable *Anders-streben*?

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[9] Fried 164.
[10] Fried 167.

I. Modernist Mediums and Modern Memory

In *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition,"* Rosalind Krauss tells the story of post-war American art as a gradual and paradoxical inversion of the logic of medium specificity.[11] The notion, formulated by Clement Greenberg in the 1960 "Modern Painting," that art's "self-critical" task is the study of the limits of its own physical materials[12] leads, according to this story, from an insistence on the irreducible difference of one medium from another (of painting from sculpture on the basis of their respective material natures) to a collapsing of all such difference into a general condition of objecthood (a painting is a thing like any other, just the same as sculpture). Fried has most famously written about this condition and those he holds responsible for it, and Krauss frequently refers to him (along with Thierry de Duve[13]) as one of its original diagnosticians. But of particular interest to Krauss, following de Duve, is that we have arrived at the generality of post-medium art – the replacement of the individual arts by art in general – through the very logic of specificity meant to shore up each medium's autonomy.

Here, briefly, is how the logic works. If painting is charged with the investigation of its own medium, and this medium is conceived as painting's material essence, or what Clement Greenberg calls "flatness and the delimitation of flatness,"[14] then the horizon of this investigation is a stretched blank canvas: an object co-existing on an equal basis with

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[11] Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*" (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999) (hereafter abbreviated as Voyage).
[12] CEC 86.
[13] See Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT, 1999).
[14] "After Abstract Expressionism" (1962), CEC 131.

other objects in three-dimensional space. Painting loses its claim to specificity as a direct result of making that very claim, this specificity being based on painting's fundamental commonality with every other object. This is the paradox behind Donald Judd's term for his art — "specific object" — that, despite its three-dimensionality, is not sculpture, but painting that has realized its essential three-dimensionality and ceased to be painting as a result. Specificity leads to generality via the material reduction originally undertaken to safeguard it.

Minimalism works with the products of this reduction, art objects now defined as shaped material. Judd, Robert Morris, Carl André extend modernism's investigation of the properties of materials, prolonging modernism past the point of its collapse, a collapse tantamount to that of art-historical tradition itself. What tradition still offered modernism was precisely the division of art into mediums (painting, sculpture, architecture) – an ontological guarantee of an artwork's historical meaningfulness and present legibility. The "specific object," on the other hand, has nothing outside it, no history or memory, to vouchsafe it its significance or establish its form other than its own physical properties. Hence the elemental gestures of minimalism, its rhetoric of beginning anew — ABC art, some called it. Minimalism is modernism working without a net.

The Conceptualism that followed gave art a new net, formed out of the very condition of generality that so radically severed it from its historical roots in the individual arts. With no more differentially defined mediums to give it its identity, an artwork, according to Joseph Kosuth, must define itself. The work of art is the work of definition, and the definition — a fundamentally verbal or linguistic construct —

constitutes the entirety of the artwork. Having shed its material body, art becomes pure

concept (a concept of art itself). And where formerly art circulated in the form of things,

Conceptual art, unencumbered by any material but the verbal, circulates freely along the

same channels of mass communication as any other information. This generalized

discourse on art furnishes art with an exchange value that transfers it perfectly, "without a

remainder," into the capitalist system of universal equivalence[15]. Conceptual art

forecloses in advance on the autonomy that medium-specific modernism always claimed

for itself. For Kosuth, however, this foreclosure actually immunizes it against the

commodification to which all putatively autonomous modernist art inevitably succumbs.

As Krauss puts it,

> By abandoning this pretense to artistic autonomy, and by willingly
> assuming various forms and sites – the mass-distributed printed book, for
> example, or the public billboard – Conceptual art saw itself securing a
> higher priority for Art, so that in flowing through the channels of
> commodity distribution it would not only adopt any form it needed but
> would, by a kind of homeopathic defense, escape the effects of the market
> itself.[16]

Art would become isomorphic with the flows of capital in order to perpetually avoid

becoming their product. To elude the status of an object with an exchange value, it

would embody exchange value itself.

Her work on medium specificity is Krauss's counter-offer to this post-medium

solution of Conceptual art.[17] It constitutes a proposal for rescuing the modernist project

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[15] *Voyage* 15.

[16] *Voyage* 11.

[17] In addition to *"A Voyage on the North Sea,"* this work consists of a series of articles on individual artists who reinvent the medium as a system of rules constituting a technical support — artists (James Coleman, William Kentridge, Sophie Calle, Harun Farocki, Ed Ruscha, and Christian Marclay) whom Krauss, in reference to Viktor Shklovsky's *Knight's Move*, calls the "knights of the medium." See especially "'…And Then Turn Away?' An Essay on James Coleman," *October* 81 (1997) 5-33, and "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999) 289-305. The most recent formulation of her thought on medium specificity is *Under Blue Cup*, whose last chapter, titled "Knight's Move," explicitly links the (re)invention

of specificity both from its essentialist misreading (the material reduction with which it
became identified and that lead to its demise) and from its dissolution into conceptualism.
She derives this proposal from the work of "a few contemporary artists … who have
decided … not to engage in the international fashion of installation and intermedia work,
in which art essentially finds itself complicit with a globalization of the image in the
service of capital."[18] What they did instead was reformulate the notion of medium. In
place of the "monomaniacal" idea of medium as pure material support whose unity is the
eternal content of every work, they offer a "hybrid" or "compound apparatus."[19] The
individual artist invents his or her own medium by taking a technology and "overlaying"
it with conventions that determine its use. The technology is often borrowed from an
outmoded popular form like the photo-novel or the silent film, which, following Walter
Benjamin's theory of the essential "ambivalence" of every commodity, reveals its utopian
possibility "at the moment of [its] obsolescence … like the last gleam of a dying star."[20]
The conventions governing the use of the technology inhere in its multiple, often
conflicting histories, all of which the invented medium holds in suspension. Each new
work is generated from this specific constellation of technology and conventions; it is
always both an allegory of that constellation and an exploration of its meanings and
possibilities.

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of medium to Viktor Shklovsky's formalist search for systems of rules and conventions which underlie and
generate individual artworks while concealing themselves under fictional "motivations." *Under Blue Cup*
(Cambridge: MIT, 2011) 101-102. *Knight's Move* is the central focus of my own last chapter, in which I
argue that Shklovsky's formalism offers a dialectical model of an art's relation to social life, in which art
negates social reality in order to reinvent it.
[18] Voyage 56.
[19] Voyage 25.
[20] Voyage 41.

If modernist aesthetics was predicated on the specificity of the artwork's physical materials, its material support, then "the dematerialization of the art object"[21] in the post-medium condition necessitates a reinvention of the very idea of medium if art is to retain its autonomy, its resistance to commodification. As Krauss writes in *Under Blue Cup*, "the medium is the memory,"[22] the means by which art remembers its own autonomy in the specificity of its support. Understood now not as the traditional materials of the arts (canvas, wood, bronze, plaster, etc.) but as "the technical supports" that the artist invents herself by discovering a set of rules in a preexisting technology, these invented (or reinvented) mediums redeem art from its status of recently outmoded commodity. An invented medium is the generative matrix, at once rulebook, springboard, and frame, that produces artworks which "image forth" their own medium.[23] What both types of support — traditional and invented, naturally found and artificially or socially made — share is this "recursive" form: the artwork produced within a specific medium represents itself, the way a monument figures its own grounding in a specific site by its analogous relation to its pedestal.[24] "This pointing to itself," Krauss writes, "came to be called specificity and entered the discourse of modernist criticism as medium specificity."[25]

This recursive form or self-representation on the part of the artwork establishes its identity with itself, mediated either by the properties of a given material or by the conventions governing its production, and its non-identity with everything else, with the interchangeable objects of commodity culture. The return of medium specificity, then, is

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[21] The phrase is Lucy Lippard's. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (U of California P, 1973).

[22] Under Blue Cup 3 and passim.

[23] Under Blue Cup 18-19.

[24] Under Blue Cup 17-18. For the full version of this argument, see Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT, 1986) 276-291.

[25] Under Blue Cup 4.

also the return of autonomy — the modernist promise of self-remembering made in the face of postmodern amnesia, the indifference of what Krauss calls, in reference to her own experience of the loss of memory, the aneurystic "stain."[26] If medium is the site of (modernist) memory, then we must remember medium in order to still be able to remember at all. In the age of the post-medium condition (which Krauss if not quite equates then certainly aligns with postmodernity itself),[27] artistic memory persists as the memory of modernism — the memory of autonomy. The autonomous artwork, the artwork that remembers itself, is possible today as the persistence of memory in the form of medium specificity.

But if, as we have seen, the rhetoric of medium specificity is doomed to dissolve into generality, if the very terms for defining the identity of a medium are borrowed from other mediums, how is autonomy to be theoretically established? How is medium to be rhetorically specified? Perhaps the question we should be asking is not *how* it is to be specified, but *where*?

II. Site-Specific Mediums

This dissertation is about the relation between medium and place in modernist aesthetics. Its starting point is that the central principle of this aesthetics is medium specificity, the idea that the materials used by each particular art not only define that art and determine its forms and expressions but also offer that art its proper subject matter, the content of its forms. An art's medium is its identity, the source and sole guarantee of its autonomy. In the modernist moment, medium specificity comes to be articulated as an

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[26] Under Blue Cup 2-3.
[27] Voyage 56; Under Blue Cup 119.

imperative — an art must investigate its medium "in order to entrench it more firmly in its zone of competence."[28] We see this not only in such canonical (and notorious) partisans of high modernism as Greenberg and Fried, but also in the founding documents — manifestos, prefaces, prologues, and programs — of the modernist artists themselves. A very partial list would include Pound's pronouncements on the "primary pigment" of poetry; Maurice Denis's statement that "a picture before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or whatnot, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order"; Gertrude Stein's placement of grammar at the center of literary composition; and Dziga Vertov's declaration in the opening titles of *Man With the Movie Camera* that his film was "an experimental work aimed at the creation of a genuinely international absolute language of cinema on the basis of its total separation from the language of theater and literature."[29]

At the same time that the specificity of particular mediums was both assumed and inaugurated, the very idea of this specificity was derived comparatively, through the analogies made between mediums. One medium was as specific as another; specificity itself became a general condition. This fact of a shared specificity itself is not the only paradoxical ground of comparison between mediums whose very claim to be mediums in the modernist sense rested on their incomparability or absolute difference. The very

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[28] "Modernist Painting," CEC 85.

[29] Ezra Pound, "Vortex," *Blast 1* (1914), ed. Wyndham Lewis (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 2002) 153-154. Just before declaring that "the primary pigment of poetry is the IMAGE," Pound, in a section of his manifesto on "Ancestry," quotes Pater's trans-medium principle of medium identity: "All arts approach the conditions of music" (154). In *Blast*, the "vortex" is itself a trans-medium term, at once the image of a formal principle embodied by artworks in different medums and of a historical moment in which the arts simultaneously express a collective aesthetic consciousness. For Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the vortex is the world-historical spirit of plastic form that manifests itself across history and geography in a succession of basic three-dimensionsal shapes — pyramid, sphere, cone, cube — that determine the art production of an epoch. Russell T. Clement, *Four French Symbolists: A Sourcebook on Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon and Maurice Denis* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996) 443; Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," *Lectures in America* (1935) (London: Virago, 1988) 209-246; *Man with the Movie Camera*, dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929.

terms used to refer to and theorize this specificity — writing and calligraphy (in the case of Gertrude Stein's discourse on Cubism), *faktura* and construction (in the case of the Russian avant-garde), language (in the much later, meta-modernist case of Robert Smithson) — not only refer to multiple mediums but also themselves contain inter-medium comparisons. They are mixed-media metaphors. (Another example would be the word "image," used by both the Imagists and, later, the Surrealists to designate the proper domain of poetry.) These common, trans-medium terms allow each of these aesthetic discourses to translate between mediums in the very process of establishing their specificity. We might think of these terms as an artwork's coefficient of autonomy. The greater the coefficient — the more "calligraphic" or "factured" or "linguistic" the work is — the truer the work is to the specificity of its medium and, consequently, the more self-identical and self-standing it is.

The discourse of medium specificity is an inter-medium meta-language. The specificity of medium is a general claim made across the arts; medium specificity is a trans-medium assertion. This generalized assertion of self-identity reveals itself to be the desire for an identity belonging to another. This constitutive desire of one medium for another, Pater's *Anders-streben*, resembles nothing so much as René Girard's mimetic (or mediated) desire, whose choice of object (here a material self-presence) is modeled on that of the mediator (another artistic medium), on which one bases one's own claim to self-presence.[30] Medium specificity, it would seem, is mediated desire for the (presumed) self-identity of another medium.

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[30] René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965).

My first concern was with this contradiction, the paradox that, as I have discussed, seems to define (or plague) the modernist doctrine of medium specificity. How did the separation between the arts on the basis of the physical materials proper to each and the autonomy guaranteed by this material propriety produce an aesthetics that mediated between the arts and compared them? How did we go from specific mediums to "art in general" (to borrow Thierry de Duve's formulation)? How does the very concept of medium that defines the irreducible particularity of each art (painting on the one hand, poetry on the other) come to be derived from a comparison between them? In the rhetoric of modernist aesthetic theory, medium specificity is general across the mediums. As I tracked this paradox, I discovered endless differences and varieties in the meanings of medium in modernism, to the point where I began to doubt whether the central term of my dissertation had any stable content at all.

What finally permitted me to retain medium as the central term without endlessly retracing the same aporia of its general specificity was that the three case studies in medium specificity I had chosen — Gertrude Stein and Cubism, Viktor Shklovsky and Constructivism, and Robert Smithson and land art — shared an insistence on the geographic grounding of aesthetic form. Medium specificity had to be *placed*. For all three, place or site is at once the source of artistic production (Cubism, for Stein, arose from "the mountains of Spain"), a model for new formal paradigms (landscape, again for Stein, suggests a solution to the problem of time in theater), and a register of historical change. For Stein, Cubism is the aerial view of the composition of modern life. For Shklovsky, Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to Third International*, like the city life of St.

Petersburg, is constructed from the daily experience of revolution. For Smithson, New York's Central Park is a historicization of nature that saves history itself from erasure.

Suddenly, the general terms for specificity that I had been encountering — calligraphy, *faktura*, construction, language — acquired a new content, one that was specific to the aesthetic discourses I was considering.[31] What was specific about these terms, what they had in common, particularly those used by the three authors I principally consider in this dissertation, was their association with specific sites or places, with landscapes or cityscapes whose geographical, topographical, and historical particularities lend these terms their meaning. Medium specificity, in short, is modeled on site-specificity.

In these discourse, sites or places serve both as analogies for particular concepts of medium specificity and as their origins. They offer their identities to particular mediums (and to their practitioners) and serve as illustrations of the particularities that were intrinsic to these mediums from the start. They also supply something else, one more form of specificity: history. What might otherwise be (and often is) an essentialist discourse about the identity of matter, of physical materials, becomes in reference to place a reflection on and index of the social and political present, of the configurations of contemporary life as it emerges from the vanishing past and disappears into the emergent future. The site-specific medium, its identity modeled on and visible in the modern landscape, is a physiognomy of the historical present.

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[31] Needless to say, each of these terms has a complex and highly specific constellation of meanings that have developed over the history of their use. My concern was with their portability as terms for a specificity of materials that this very portability put into question by making it transferable across heterogeneous materials. Rather than identify a quality, these terms seemed to permit a free exchange of one quality for another.

In the three constellations of aesthetic theory I consider —Gertrude Stein's contributions to theory of Cubism, the discourse on *faktura* in the texts of Aleksei Kruchenykh, Nikolai Punin, and Viktor Shklovsky, and the writings of Robert Smithson — medium specificity comes about through the coordination of specific materials, the principle or logic of their arrangement, and the site at which they are assembled and displayed. Place, then, is only one of the three determinants of medium-specific form. At the same time, place also determines each of the other two, as the source of materials to which it lends geographic and historical specificity and as the spatial model that form must follow in order to guarantee its own modernity and, in the case of Constructivism, its social utility. In these "critically regionalist" texts (to use Kenneth Frampton's term[32]), the dialectical sites of modernity reconcile the modernist doctrine of medium specificity with the trans-medium modeling that makes this doctrine possible.

The doctrine that the autonomy of the arts (and of art generally) arises from artworks' investigation of the properties and limits of their materials[33] is recast by these modernists as a doctrine of site-specificity. Artistic autonomy depends on art's literal placement in physical, geographic environments. Stein, Shklovsky, and Smithson (and the aesthetic discourses they formulate) derive the autonomy of their mediums from the particularity of the places in which these mediums (painting, writing, sculpture, language, and land art) are put to use. In the aesthetic theories I examine, art derives its physical properties, its subject matter, and its formal laws from the geography, geology, and history of the sites at which it is produced.

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[32] Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1983) 16-30.
[33] Again, this definition of the modernist artwork is preeminently Greenberg's in "Modernist Painting," CEC 85-93.

Place provides artistic production with formal models (the structure of an artwork replicates the spatial relationships of a place), with figurative matter (the subject of an artwork is the image of a place), and with physical materials (an artwork is made of the same matter as a place). Stein retroactively models Picasso's Cubism (and her own plays) on the spatial juxtaposition of houses and mountains in the Spanish landscape. Shklovsky discovers Constructivist principles (and those of his own formalist aesthetics) in the daily life of post-revolutionary Petersburg. Smithson finds a model for earth art and for the recovery of history from universal entropy (which, I argue, is his natural allegory for global commodification) in the "dialectical landscape" of Central Park. For all three, natural processes are entangled with social history, reciprocally modifying each other at the intersections of the built and the found. The specific site is constituted by such intersections and models site-specific art as a legible composition of modern life.

In these three modernist discourses on medium, what maintains the identities of specific mediums, what preserves their non-identity from each other even as they are continually compared and reciprocally defined, what grounds mediums is ground itself — the geographic and geological but also historical and constructed environments which they reflect, reveal, and displace. The correspondence or homology between form, figure, and material, their reciprocal reflection, is what constitutes the identity of a medium and the recursiveness of an artwork made in that medium. The principle guaranteeing this correspondence, literally underlying it, is provided by the geography and history of the place that supplies the artwork with all three. Not just land art, but any work true to its medium is an "earthwork."

III. Thick Pictures

Before describing the individual chapters, I would like to briefly address a phenomenon of trans-medium modeling or *Ander-streben* that is both far older and much better known than the site-specific solutions of my authors. A canonical strategy of European literary production and the classic (and classical) example of medium translation is the rhetoric of *ekphrasis*, the verbal rendering of a work of visual art. The ekphrastic representation is a secondary, borrowed one — a mimesis twice removed. What is being imitated is not only the object of description — in our case (as in so many examples of ekphrasis across literary history), the landscape or site itself — but the visual or plastic means for representing it.

Even in the absence of an actual plastic image, the verbal description conjures it retroactively, by its attempt to make one see with words. The text cannot do so directly, without invoking (and evoking) a pictorial medium of representation — painting, sculpture, etc. — that is foreign to it. The absent, often non-existent image appears in the gap between mediums that the ekphrastic text opens in the act of translating one medium into the other. The heterogeneity of mediums — the material (ontological) difference between language and painting or sculpture — is established by the ekphrastic discourse that mediates between them. The very act of rendering the two equivalent by extracting a content (dramatic or static, a story or a portrait) from one and placing it in the other reveals the impossibility of the exchange. The untranslatable remainder is the specificity of medium — the representational means language calls upon in verbalizing the non-verbal that catalyzes the exchange but can never be assimilated or consumed by it.[34]

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[34] In a late (1966) essay "On Landscape," Shklovsky explicitly links the possibility of representing landscape or place in literature to ekphrastic figuration: "It is as though the artist were translating the

In the texts I am discussing, translation between mediums reverses the logic of ekphrasis. In ekphrasis, the goal is equivalence or exchange between mediums, and the consequence (intended or not) is the production or conjuration of radical heterogeneity, of the particularity of the source medium. In what I am calling trans-medium modeling, the goal is autonomy or absolute particularity, that medium specificity which underwrites the modernist artwork's claim to self-identity. The paradoxical consequence, as we have seen, is that a medium's specificity or autonomy is always borrowed from or modeled on the autonomy of another medium, and thus itself becomes a kind of universal equivalent or means for exchanging one medium for another.

For an emblematically modernist example of ekphrasis, we might consider Proust's description of the photographs of places that the narrator's grandmother gives as gifts. The grandmother attempts to stave off the commodification to which mechanical reproduction subjects both the world and the artwork by interposing layers of artistic representation, or "thicknesses," between the referent and the final photographic image. Instead of photographing Venice directly, the images she prefers photograph a painting, or, better yet, an engraving of a painting of Venice.[35]

> [S]he would find that vulgarity and utility had too prominent a part in them, through the mechanical nature of their reproduction by photography. She attempted by a subterfuge, if not to eliminate altogether this commercial banality, at least to minimise it, to supplant it to a certain extent with what was art still, to introduce, as it were, several 'thicknesses' of art: instead of photographs of Chartres Cathedral, of the Fountains of Saint-Cloud, or of Vesuvius, she would inquire of Swann whether some great painter had not depicted them, and preferred to give me photographs of "Chartres Cathedral" after Corot, of the "Fountains of Saint-Cloud" after Hubert Robert, and of "Vesuvius" after Turner … [M]y grandmother

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description from the language of painting into the language of words. This is the means by which landscape is realized." *Povesti o* Proze ("Tales of Prose") (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1966) 26.
[35] Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1992) 53-55.

> would endeavor to postpone the moment of contact still further. She
> would ask Swann if the picture had not been engraved, preferring, when
> possible, old engravings….[36]

Each new medium delays the moment of photographic reproduction, the closure of the

process of material inscription. While it is Proust's own description of the images that is

classically ekphrastic, we might consider the grandmother's images themselves as

performing acts of ekphrasis in the more general sense — translation between mediums

(not necessarily from plastic to verbal). What the grandmother's gifts do plastically,

ekphrasis does verbally — mediates the signified content by the plastic image it puts into

words (or, in the grandmother's case, into the language of another medium).

The Benjaminian reading of the grandmother's strategy immediately suggests

itself: the interposed thicknesses preserve or reinstate the aura of both place and picture

by postponing their mechanical reproduction as multiple and interchangeable copies. If

photography breaks the spell of aura, the dialectic of distance and proximity, by casting

the commodity's counter-spell of universal equivalence,[37] the grandmother negates the

negation with a tactile reenchantment of photography. But how does the layering of

mediation accomplish this task? One answer is that the depictions the grandmother's

pictures place between themselves and the depicted site are manual; their presence

preserves the trace of the hand erased from the image by the automatism of the camera.[38]

But along with the trace of the hand, what we perceive in these layered mediations is the

irreducible difference between and of the mediums, the autonomy of each declared by the

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[36] Proust 54.

[37] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 217-252.

[38] The removal of the human agent from the production of the image is how André Bazin defines "the ontology of the photographic image": "a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part. … For the first time, an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man." André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Film Quarterly* 13 (1960) 7.

very process that translates one into another. The layered thickness of the grandmother's pictures preserves the memory of specific mediums within the photographic condition of representation. Proust's grandmother is undoubtedly a knight of the medium, heroically defending medium specificity at the dawn of the post-medium condition by inventing (or discovering) "a technical support" — the mediated or "thick" photograph — whose rules she devotedly follows.

IV. Mediated Places

The primary texts I discuss in this dissertation are generically hybrid, art-critical reflections on artistic objects and aesthetic doctrines. Suspended between narration and analysis, memoir and manifesto, art-historical practice and aesthetic theory, they may constitute a genre of their own.

My first chapter discusses Stein's art-historical "biography" of *Picasso*, which I place in the context of theories of Cubism contemporary to her own: with Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger's *Du Cubisme*, a treatise which I compare with essays on Cubism by Roman Jakobson, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Robert Motherwell, and Clement Greenberg. Through my close readings of these art-critical writings, I attempt to demonstrate a shared modernist anxiety about the potentially "decorative" status of modern painting. The fear registered in these writings is that by losing contact with objective reality and succumbing to the literal flatness of the pictorial surface, painting could become "mere" design. The opposite danger, the result of mimetically reconstructing the object's appearance, is that of regressing to the illusionism of perspective. In the critical discourses to which it gave rise, Cubism plots a precarious

course between the Scylla of decoration and the Charybdis of illusion. In the section that follows, I argue that Stein offers her own navigation map for this modernist voyage – one modeled on the Spanish landscape in which she literally grounds the language of Cubism.

Stein fuses subjective vision with objective reality by identifying seeing with "the thing seen." What is seen is the composition of a given historical moment, the world of a given generation, which is seen by that generation either with its own eyes or the eyes of its predecessor. To see with one's own eyes is to see the composition of the present as it really is, not to distort it by subjective perception. What one sees is not the psychological truth of consciousness but the physical truth of matter, not a subjective interpretation of the world but its objective structure. This structure is not buried in the depths of the world but spread out on its surface, its skin. The composition of this surface is the spatial arrangement of the elements of landscape, elements both natural and artificial but whose particular organization is always historical. The historical present is visible in the landscape (particularly if you are seeing it from a plane), legible in the relationships between hills, trees, and houses. To see landscape is to read the composition of modernity written in the language of place. To record this composition, to represent modernity, whether one's medium is painting or writing, requires a language modeled on landscape, a site-specific writing that Stein calls calligraphy.

The second chapter, the first of two on the Soviet avant-garde, continues the discussion of site-specific seeing by examining the role of medium and site in Russian Constructivism, specifically in the work of Vladimir Tatlin and its reception by his Futurist and Formalist contemporaries. Tatlin's "counter-reliefs," three-dimensional constructions assembled from heterogeneous materials in the form of intersecting planes,

extend Cubist painting's dialectic of surface and depth into actual space. In the words of

Tatlin scholar John Milner,

> Tatlin has [in the corner counter-reliefs] an equivalent of picture space,
> where the painter's illusionistic intersection of planes, as in cubism for
> example, gives way to a construction in which diverse elements are
> actually slotted together in a real but bounded space. Tatlin's corner relief
> is an equivalent to painting and is not free-standing sculpture.[39]

Tatlin went to Paris in 1913 and made repeated and extended visits to Picasso's studio,

where he encountered Picasso's own painterly experiments with assemblage in relief, like

the 1912 *Guitar*.[40]

Tatlin's Constructivism, the assemblage of "real materials in real space," is

founded on the idea of *faktura*, a central term of modern Russian aesthetics. *Faktura*,

whose definitions and implications are the conceptual focus of my second chapter,

designates precisely that set of properties uniquely defining an artwork's material support

that we have been calling medium specificity. I argue for a distinction between two kinds

of *faktura*, Futurist and Constructivist. In Futurist aesthetics, *faktura* refers to the

physical properties or resources of the artistic material, be it the plastic possibilities of

metal, glass, or wood, or the phonic and graphic possibilities of language. Constructivist

faktura, particularly as it figures in, proceeds from this study of the physical nature of

materials to their placement in shared, social space. To risk a reductive formulation,

Futurist *faktura* is literal and essential, while Constructivist *faktura* is conventional (or

rule-bound) and site-specific, contingent on history and place.[41]

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[39] John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 108.

[40] Milner 70-76.

[41] In his book on Tatlin, Milner makes the fascinating and compelling argument that the orientation to *faktura*, whether in Futurist poetry or Constructivist art, always involved a historical understanding of material: "Khlebnikov explored language as material; Tatlin worked with more tangible materials, yet both explored *faktura*, which at its broadest implied the history of the handling of the material world, a study of man's activity as material within a material world. That *faktura* had a historical dimension was as clear to

This distinction could correspond (with some adjustment) to Krauss's distinction between the traditional, artisanal concept of medium as natural material and the invented or second-order supports she calls "technical," comprised of preexisting technologies and the rules regulating their use. For Krauss, the invention of new mediums is the avant-garde's response to the irreversible forgetting of old ones, to which there is no going back, as well as to the postmodern attack on the very idea of a specific medium. In an analogous way, Constructivist *faktura* is a response to the competing demands of social and artistic production immediately following the revolution and to the contradiction (at this point still resolvable) between formal experimentation and social utility.

Futurism, medium-specific in the literal sense, discovers *faktura* in the sound and shape of words, in the tactility of natural materials. Constructivism (literally) places this *faktura* of materials in the context of the object's site of display, its relation to the viewer, and its social utility — all contingent circumstances of construction rather than inherent properties of matter. Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, particularly as understood by his devoted champion, the art critic and theorist Nikolai Punin, exhibits this latter form of *faktura*. Tatlin's *Monument* is a site-specific construction that contextualizes its materials in the social environment for which they are destined, modeling their arrangement on that environment's political and ideological organization. The logic of Tatlin's tower (as the *Monument* was commonly known) follows the rules governing social space. Its technical support is an assemblage of materials set into (literal) motion by a code of social laws. The tower is an invented medium, a modernist equivalent of technical support in the age of the post-medium condition.

Tatlin as it was to Khlebnikov" (112). I would argue, however, that in Tatlin's work (and in its contemporary reception), *faktura* acquires a social and ideological specificity, a location in time and place, which may elude the world-historical "study of man's activity as material."

The Monument to the Third International, a colossal public work that was never built (except as a large-scale model), was commissioned by the newly founded state agency Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Education). Its hollow, inclined spiral column was to contain three geometrically shaped chambers, rotating at different speeds and housing legislative, executive, and media agencies. The monument is a piece of technology organized by rules (for example, the rotation speeds of the chambers: once a day, once a month, and once a year) derived from its physical materials (iron spiral, glass chambers), its site (the modern, post-revolutionary metropolis), and its use (state propaganda). In both Punin's and Shklovsky's reading, the monument's specificity as a work of art lies in its integration of non-artistic elements (the state agencies themselves, the function of agitprop) with its emphatically modern artistic mediums (iron and glass) into a formal unity. Tatlin's tower at once commemorates the revolution and reenacts it. "The monument," Shklovsky writes in *Knight's Move*, "is made of iron, glass, and revolution."[42] For Shklovsky, Tatlin's counter-reliefs as well as his tower are models of a world in which the sense of things, the continuous perceptibility of the physical world, has been restored to a humanity freed from the automatism of recognition, from the partiality and fragmentariness of sensation.[43] Tatlin's work, autonomous and complete in itself, points outside itself by prefiguring a renewed world to come, a world Shklovsky calls "some special paradise."[44]

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[42] Viktor Shklovsky, *Khod Konia* ("Knight's Move") (Moscow/Berlin: Gelikon, 1923) 111. All subsequent quotations are from this edition, hereafter cited as Khod, in my translation. In rendering Shklovsky's text into English, I have frequently consulted Richard Sheldon's translation, *Knight's Move* (Normal: Dalkey, 2005).

[43] Khod 105-107.

[44] Khod 106.

This renewal of sensation is precisely the aim of defamiliarization or estrangement (*ostranenie*), the idea that constitutes Shklovsky's most famous contributions to aesthetics: the operation by which art impedes the easy recognition of whatever it represents (by removing it from its context, describing it from an unusual point of view, distorting its appearance) in order to bring the reader or viewer to actually see it (as though) for the first time. To do this, an artwork must make itself unfamiliar, laborious, to rearrange its inherited repertoire of formal devices in a way that interrupts the expected process of representation and brings its formal machinery into view — that "lays bare the device." Laid bare, the device regains, along with its own perceptibility, the capacity to restore perceptibility to its object of representation, its fictional or illusory "motivation." Defamiliarization, the crux of Shklovsky's formalism, is then simultaneously form for its own sake and form for the sake of reality — a renovation of artistic means that renews one's relation to the world. This seeming contradiction between the idea of autonomous or autotelic form (the foregrounded device) and utilitarian form (the device that restores the sensation of things) has been cited as evidence of the incoherence of Shklovsky's formalism (as compared with the consistent formalism of a Roman Jakobson for whom art is always "a self-concerning message"). For me, it is precisely this entanglement between form and content, device and object, the form's self-negation in the represented object that turn the object itself into an element of form that constitutes the dialectical logic of Shklovsky's formalism. In Tatlin's ideologically motivated, medium-specific constructions, Shklovsky finds a perfect analog for the intertwined imperatives of his own aesthetics: to negate social reality by means of the autonomous artwork in order to remake reality on the artwork's terms.

Shklovsky is the principal subject of the third chapter, which deals extensively with *Knight's Move* and its figuration of the city of Petersburg. Beginning with Shklovsky's strident, polemical declarations of the autonomy of art and its independence from politics, the chapter examines the historical context of these declarations. The manifesto-style essay "Ullia, Ullia, Marsiane," its title evoking the Futurist emblem of the Martian trumpet that has been silenced by the alliance with state propaganda, along with many of the texts included in *Knight's Move,* is an anxious response to the adoption of the leading Futurist and Constructivist artists by Narkompros, lead by its (truly) enlightened Commissar of "Enlightenment" (the literal translation of *Prosveshchenie*) Anatoly Lunacharsky, and to the founding of the Izo-Narkompros (the agency's fine arts division). (The very newspaper, *Isskustvo Kommuny* (Art of the Commune), in which Shklovsky published his uncompromising critique of art's placement in the service of agitprop was the official organ of the agency he was taking on.) I argue that, in spite of this seeming rejection of political art, Shklovsky is far from advocating art's retreat from public life. To the Narkompros model of art's participation in society, Shklovsky counterposes art's intervention on its own terms, determined by the possibilities and constraints of its specific mediums (the wordplay of folk poetry, the footlights of the theater stage), its inherited conventional devices and its methods for revising them.

Most of the essays comprising *Knight's Move* were first published in a small theater newspaper called *Zhizn' Iskusstva* (The Life of Art — one half of Shklovsky's formalist chiasmus), and theatrical productions are frequently the occasion for Shklovsky's art- and literary-theoretical reflections. Through his dissatisfaction with what was passing for political theater in post-revolutionary Russia, not only with the

amateur productions of the Proletkult but also with the experiments of Nikolai Evreinov and Vsevolod Meyerhold, Shklovsky arrives at his own program for a modern theater founded on contrast, on the interruption of traditional narrative with contemporary motifs and vice versa. In his most far-reaching proposal, derived from a real production, Shklovsky imagines a theater set entirely on the city streets, its illusion inscribed in urban reality, its stage, director, actors, and audience, the streets and buildings of Petersburg itself. The streets of Petersburg become both the site and the model of modern theater — precisely the dual role that place plays in relation to artistic mediums.

But if the reality of Petersburg can defamiliarize and renew theatrical illusion, it is itself defamiliarized by the tragedy in which history compels it to play a part. *Knight's Move* is framed or bookended by Shklovsky's account of his city during and immediately after the blockade, presented in brief, paratactic scenes captioned with aphoristic commentary. My reading of these remarkable texts, at once documentary and allegorical, draws on Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image (developed in *The Arcades Project*) as historical process "at a standstill," frozen in ambiguous images that combine recently outmoded commodity forms with archaic myth to produce wish images in which the present dreams of the future. In Shklovsky's allegorical montage, the starving, freezing Petersburg, "melting in the [surrounding] country like soap in water," is at the same time burning with the red flame of the revolution. The revolution is "the great sickness" whose fever is the heat keeping the city alive, that kept it from "becoming provincial."[45] The city is literally consuming itself, disassembling its buildings, taking down scaffolding, stripping itself of every combustible material and burning it all to survive. During the blockade, the city lives on its own regression from urban second

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[45] Khod 34.

nature to rural first nature, from *techne* to *physis*, to a pre-built, even pre-animate state. In the process, the city performs on itself a collective act of defamiliarization, deforming every familiar object, every implement of everyday life, by taking it apart, severing it from its original function and context, and subjecting it to the single universal function of burning, to "the festival of universal conflagration"[46] that is simultaneously a ritual of survival with steadily diminishing returns and a revolutionary metaphor.

Knights' Move returns to Petersburg in its closing texts, with a new montage of images, this time of a city restored, a "free port." The self-consumption that during the blockade brought about the city's regression to a pre-built state, engineered entropy or artificial melting away, has now become the process of reconciliation with nature that, rather than invading the city from the outside, has come to constitute it from within. Petersburg becomes an ecosystem of oases, of gardens, parks, canals, in which its citizens are restored to urban life. The labor of disassembling buildings for firewood, which has covered the city in its own ruins, has reversed into the work reassembling new structures from old materials, "new fences from old iron." Iron, the emblematic material of modernity, is now found in the aging leftovers of modern constructions. The mediums of recent history live on as the reinvented supports of a society after the revolution.

My epilogue discusses the writings of Robert Smithson, which, together with his earthworks that figure entropy and decay as the shared conditions of history and nature, constitute a kind of late- or meta-modernist discourse on medium specificity from the vantage point of its near disappearance. In his essay on Central Park, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," Smithson performs an archaeology of the aesthetics of the picturesque, whose formulation by William Gilpin and Uvedale Price

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[46] Khod 24.

Smithson reads as a response to Edmund Burke's *Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*. The picturesque, for Smithson, is a dialectical middle term between the sublime and the beautiful that integrates the two in the production of landscapes with a legible history. Olmsted and Vaux's Central Park owes its intertwining of natural and cultural change to the picturesque method. Built on the site of a moving ice sheet, the park transposes geological time into human history, including the contemporary political history that punctuated its construction. A dialectical landscape, the park is a site-specific, regional critique of both modern nostalgia and postmodern amnesia, of the counterpart myths of unspoiled nature and the end of history.

A final word on the politics of the picturesque landscape. Olmsted's own aesthetics of the picturesque have been accused of naturalizing an exclusionary, classist reading of nature.[47] The naturalization of exclusion is inextricable from the history of Central Park, a history that begins with the displacement of the community of Seneca Village. This founding act of injustice remains legible in the park's constructions of view and of the viewer placed at its vantage points. But it is precisely this history that Smithson's essay contests. Through its archaeological, revisionist account (or counter-reading) of Olmsted's aesthetic ideology, the text redeems the earthwork, Central Park, from the political ideology that produced it. By tracing the park's constructive principle to the picturesque, and by reading the picturesque as the historicization of nature, Smithson breaks the spell of oblivion that the park casts over its own history. With the picturesque, the essay recovers the dialectical possibilities inherent in the idea of constructed nature, the entanglement of nature and culture at the sites of artificial

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[47] I am very grateful to Ross Hamilton for raising this problem with Smithson's (and my) valorization of the picturesque.

landscapes or "natural" scenes. In my reading, the picturesque is also Smithson's solution to his own problem of "entropy," the universal leveling of both cultural objects and human affect which, I argue, is Smithson's natural allegory of global commodification. Composites of culture and nature, artificial ruins subjected to organic processes, picturesque landscapes aggregate natural entropy with cultural decay. The picturesque thus serves as a kind of historiography of entropy, inscribing history at the site of its disappearance.

Chapter One

"The Trouble with Including Looking":

Gertrude Stein and the Cubist Landscape

This chapter has a dual and chiastic purpose: to restore Stein to art criticism and

to restore art criticism to Stein. To achieve the first is to situate her study of Picasso in

the context of both contemporary and later definitions of Cubism. I will discuss two texts

which offer explanations of the new pictorial language almost at the moment of its

emergence: Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's *The Rise of Cubism*, published in 1920 but

written as early as 1915, and *Cubism* by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, published in

1912. Between them, these two books present the major *topoi* of Cubist theory that

persist through the century both as touchstones for understanding Cubism and as

obfuscations of any such understanding. In the process of drawing these out, I will

attempt to chart a field of definition constituted by the tension between objectivity and

subjectivity – a system of related oppositions within which theories of Cubism invariably

find themselves.

In addition to being an extremely astute beholder of Picasso's work, Stein was

one of the few who had access to it in the period Max Jacob called "the heroic age of

Cubism."[1] Jacob's phrase is only one of several names for this period, only one of the

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[1] *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 6, hereafter cited as SW; Stein, *Picasso*, 1938 (Boston: Beacon, 1969) 9. In the second decade of the twentieth century, Picasso's work was not

many chronological schemes proposed for "the rise of Cubism." Later in the chapter, I

will address this will to periodization in the reception history of Cubism and argue for its

centrality to Stein's own art-historical "explanation." For now, I want to establish Stein

not merely as a collector who provided the occasion for a conversation about Cubism, but

also as a significant voice in that conversation, regardless of who was listening. In her

1938 *Picass*o, while decidedly taking the objectivist position, she develops a conception

of Picasso's work that circumvents the entire question of subjectivity. Her term for

Picasso's enterprise is "writing," and it is writing that furnishes the model for the most

influential current accounts of Cubism. One of these, Yve-Alain Bois's semiological

reading which he elaborates in two major essays and which he credits Kahnweiler for

first proposing,[2] differs crucially from Stein's notion of Cubist writing. Yet, just as

Kahnweiler does, she reads Cubism as Picasso's "script,"[3] and it is her particular

definition of the "scriptural" that I hope to restore to Cubist theory.

At the same time, by defining Cubism as a mode of writing, she conceives it as a

solution to the problems which her own writing had been posing since *Three Lives*,

namely those of time and interiority, of memory and repetition. In *Lectures in America*,

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publicly exhibited, and the monopoly on Cubism was safely in the hands of Gertrude and Leo Stein and on the walls of their studio at 27, rue de Fleurus. For the genesis of their collection, see especially James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Holt, 2003), 3-17, as well as Stein's own *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, SW 1-237. This monopoly is noted by Yve-Alain Bois in a footnote to "Kahnweiler's Lesson" as one of, in fact, two monopolies on Cubism at the time. The only other place in which works by Picasso and Braque were on display was Russia: "while their Parisian counterparts had only on view works of epigones of the movement … Russian artists and critics had on view the masterpieces of the Shchukin and Morozov collections. In Paris, except for Kahnweiler, a few intimate friends of Braque and Picasso, and the *habitués* of the Steins' salon, nobody could have had such a great firsthand knowledge of the art and issues at stake." Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT, 1993) 283n.22. The Russian connection is the subject of the next chapter.

[2] "The Semiology of Cubism," *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992) 169-208 (hereafter cited as Semiology) and "Kahnweiler's Lesson," *Painting as Model* 65-97 (hereafter cited as Lesson).

[3] "These painters turned away from imitation because they had discovered that the true character of painting and sculpture is that of a *script*." Quoted in Lesson 74.

her most comprehensive attempt at self-explanation delivered in 1934 and published a

year later, she expresses her solutions to these problems, to which she adds the problem

of seeing, in the art-critical vocabulary of her engagement with Cubism. Apart from any

analogy that can (or cannot) be made between, for example, her verbal portraits and

Picasso's visual ones,[4] what is significant is that she uses the same language to speak of

both. Her account of Cubist painting resolves some of the paradoxes that defined its

reception from the beginning. In turn – in return, I would like to say – Cubist painting

provides a new scene for her central preoccupations, a new motivation for non-narrative

representation, and a model of an art form that has done away with repetition as she

conceives it. Such are the stakes of her art-critical reflections, written in a visual

metalanguage and organized by a genre expressly designed to be a vehicle for

metalanguage – the "explanation" itself.

I. Theorizing Cubism

In his 1949 "Preliminary Notice" to the English translation (the first into any

language) of Kahnweiler's *The Rise of Cubism*, Robert Motherwell recapitulates half a

century of tropes about Picasso and Braque's revolution in painting. Discussions of

Cubism invariably begin with its ambiguous relation to mimesis, with the problem of

placing it in the Western tradition of representing three-dimensional reality on a two-

dimensional surface. On the one hand, it must always be seen as "the struggle to be free

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[4] For two particularly suggestive treatments of such analogy, see Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978) and Marjorie Perloff, "Of Objects and Readymades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 32 (1996) 137-54. In her reading of *Tender Buttons*, Perloff argues that Stein's punning statements on her own poetics belong with Duchamp's readymades rather than with Cubist compositions. While the affinity with Duchamp is unquestionable, my argument is that Stein writes *about* Cubist painting (and not, for example, about Duchamp's readymades) and thus belongs in the tradition of Cubist theory regardless of what we think of her claims to Cubist practice.

from nature," a "solution" that "broke the back … of centuries of naturalistic

representation."[5] On the other hand, the Cubist solution consists not in abandoning

nature but in dispensing with illusionism while continuing to deal with it. The belief that

such a solution was found persists from modernism's most strident declarations of

rupture to Clement Greenberg's late assurances of the continuity of easel painting. And

rightfully so. The disagreement is over the specific nature of this solution, over the

method chosen for breaking with "centuries of naturalistic representation." Motherwell

initially formulates it as the triumph of the objective over the subjective, as the

"indifference of the 'I' before an objective problem."[6] He thus echoes the earliest claims

for Cubism as the investigation of the "essential form" of the object, freed from the

habitual impositions of our vision. There remains, then, a fidelity to nature, to a nature

"more real than reality"[7] as we believe it to be, but still a nature outside of painting whose

rules painting observes. Yet in Motherwell's account, this faithfulness to nature

transforms seamlessly into faithfulness to the self. Following Kahnweiler's chronology,

he equates Picasso's "great step" of "pierc[ing] the 'skin' of objects" with "reducing

them and the world in which they existed to what we would now call subjective

process."[8] Over the course of a single sentence, the world turns into the self, the outside

into the inside. More precisely, the objective artist directs her gaze onto the world only to

find the world reflecting back her own gaze. "All thought and feeling is relative to man,

he does not reflect the world but invents it," he writes, and it is through this, "the leading

insight of the 20th century," that "cubism snapped traditional naturalism."

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[5] Robert Motherwell, "Preliminary Notice," *The Rise of Cubism*, by Henry-Daniel Kahnweiler, trans. Henry Aronson (New York: Wittenborn, 1949) vi.
[6] Motherwell vi.
[7] Picasso's phrase, quoted in Semiology 172.
[8] Motherwell vii. Unless otherwise noted, all further Motherwell citations are from this page.

But Motherwell's theorizing does not end with subjectivity. If Cubism began when artists refused the data of inherited vision, having "already rid their minds of history, middle-class society, religion," it ended when "they returned to Western construction," to conventional vision. Before this happened, "in cubism's highest flights," Picasso and the others produced "a sensitive calligraphy that sweeps up internal and external worlds into a oneness in which reality consists not of opposing essences of matter and spirit, representation and structure, but of relations, process." "Calligraphy" is exactly Stein's word for Picasso's most characteristic achievement, for whatever in his work is mostly completely his.[9] And it is his periodic succumbing to convention, his seduction by the vision of others, that, for Stein, leads to his frequent falls from calligraphic grace.[10]

Motherwell's invocation of calligraphy occurs just before the final turn of his heterodox and highly symptomatic meditations. The liberation from "natural appearances" which the Cubists had won "for everyone after them" could never be complete because "they refused to give up their studio subjects." What they did instead was "invent a new sign language with which to refer to their familiar objects in the studio, signs whose meaning was arbitrary, invented and by definition, like other symbolic structures: words or relational logic or the language of deaf-mutes."[11] Having voiced every traditional theory of Cubism, Motherwell ends on a Saussurian note that would not dominate Cubist scholarship until decades later.[12] Whether it can or cannot be

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[9] Picasso 33-35, 37-39.

[10] For example, Picasso 32, 34, 43, 45, 47.

[11] Motherwell vii-viii.

[12] The most compelling contemporary readings of Cubism have been in the structuralist tradition, particularly those of Bois and Rosalind Krauss. Krauss has written extensively on Picasso, but see especially "In the Name of Picasso," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*

made to square with the rest of his essay, this semiological conclusion emerges less out of

Motherwell's own theoretical commitments than out of the array of ideas that had formed

around Cubism over the years of its reception. By entertaining each of these ideas with

equal enthusiasm and rejecting none, Motherwell's "notice," and this is why I have given

it so much attention, allows us to reconstruct the entire array, with all its paradoxes.

Cubism is pure objective analysis that discovers the subjective point of view. It severs

conventional associations in order to set up a signifying system of its own. Cubist

painters "stumbled over the leading insight of the 20th century" and became

"unintelligible to others" as a result. These are the three primary motifs of Cubist

reception and of the reception of visual modernism generally in the writings of its

contemporaries. All three are present in Stein's *Picasso*, which, after decades of her own

engagement with these paradoxes, attempts to resolve all three. And all three are already

operative in that would-be founding document of Cubism, Gleizes and Metzinger's *Du

Cubisme*.

It is, from a certain point of view,[13] a document of an already academicized

Cubism in which objects are mechanically "represented from the front, in profile and

from above."[14] It is a Cubism that, in Stein's words, "is already a classic."[15] Published

in October of 1912, it appears at the end of the series of breakthroughs that lead to the

development of Cubism: Picasso's 1907 *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Braque's 1908

landscapes at L'Estaque, Picasso's work at Cadaqués in 1910 and his purchase of a

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(Cambridge: MIT, 1997) 23-40; "The Motivation of the Sign," *Picasso and Braque* 261-86; and *The Picasso Papers* (Cambridge: MIT, 1999).

[13] For example, from Picasso's own: "'I well remember what I told them in the Cubist room at the Indépendants, where there were some Gleizes and Metzingers: 'I thought we'd enjoy ourselves a bit, but it's getting bloody boring again.''" Quoted in Semiology 170.

[14] Semiology 170.

[15] "Composition as Explanation," SW 514.

Grebo mask in the summer of 1912.[16] Yet, belated as it is, *Cubism* is the only piece of writing produced by self-proclaimed Cubists that could be considered a manifesto of the movement.[17] One sign that the author-painters indeed had the ambition of writing one is their use of the first-person plural. The "we" in "we flatly refuse to perpetrate a division contrary to the vital forces of the painter's art"[18] refers to the two authors, both of whom are refusing to separate form from color. Yet the refusal is not made only in their names. A page earlier, they formulate it as a law: "Every inflection of form is accompanied by a modification of color, and every modification of color gives birth to a form."[19] The chiastic construction as well as the language of origin, of "giving birth," call attention to this law as a piece of rhetoric, as something more than an observation about the practice of painting by two professionals. "A law here asserts itself,"[20] and it is "we" who assert it.

The relation between form and color, one of the most traditional concerns of Western painting, receives much attention in early thought on Cubism. The idea that the two categories are inseparable is, first of all, directly contradicted by Braque himself, for whom the chief advance of the *papier collé* is precisely "the dissociation between color

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[16] Semiology 173. This purchase leads to what Bois calls "the semiological epiphany" (Semiology 175) – the discovery of the arbitrary nature of the sign which initiates the next major stage of Cubism: the *papiers collés*. For Bois, the *papiers collés* are Cubism proper – the investigation of how the same visual elements (sheet music, wood-grain paper, head of a guitar, drawing of a glass, etc.) can acquire multiple and contradictory meanings both from their contiguous elements and from their uses in prior *papiers collés*, significations they import into the current one (Semiology 173-174, 187-191). Picasso begins this semiological investigation "in the summer and fall of 1912" (Semiology 187) – exactly when Gleizes and Metzinger are writing their treatise.

[17] For the generic requirements of the avant-garde manifesto, see Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986). For a comprehensive theory of the manifesto as modernism's emblematic genre, see Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006).

[18] Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *Cubism, Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (New York: Prentice, 1986) 13. Hereafter cited as Cubism.

[19] Cubism 12.

[20] Cubism 12.

and contour."[21] Kahnweiler agrees, narrating the rise of cubism as the progressive

discovery of a means for representing volume that would dispense with the illusionism of

chiaroscuro, which subordinates color to the production of three-dimensional form.

"Several times during the spring of 1910," Kahnweiler writes, "Picasso attempted to

endow the forms of his pictures with color."[22] Already, the two categories are distinct,

and are about to get only more so. "That is," he explains, "he tried to use color not only

as an expression of light, or chiaroscuro, for the creation of form, but rather as an equally

important end in itself."[23] The solution Kahnweiler attributes to Cubism is the

associationist one of "combining the 'real' stimulus" – a *trompe-l'oeil* representation of

an immediately recognizable object – "and the scheme of forms" – the grid on which so-

called "Hermetic Cubism" locates these emblems.[24] What this solution allows is the final

liberation of color from the demands of volume, its disentanglement from alterations in

form, a liberation that, according to Kahnweiler, had been Picasso's intention all along.

When the object is represented by its recognizable attributes rather than imitated by

modeling, by the configuration of light and shadow on its surface or "skin," its actual – or

"local" – color can be given without distortion.[25] "Since it was the mission of color to

create the form as chiaroscuro, or light that had become perceivable, there was no

possibility of rendering local color or color itself."[26] Local color, rather than color as

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[21] Semiology 187.
[22] Kahnweiler 10.
[23] Kahnweiler 10.
[24] Kahnweiler 12, Semiology 184. I am greatly indebted to Bois's article for this formulation of the "'informational,' 'hieroglyphic stage of Cubism" and for generally clarifying this middle passage between the "Analytic" grid and the system of the *papiers collés*.
[25] Kahnweiler 10-11.
[26] Kahnweiler 11.

"objectivated light,"[27] is equated to the very possibility of "color itself," achieved only once "chiaroscuro had been abolished."[28]

Gleizes and Metzinger's law, then, is far from incontrovertible and hardly empirical. Rather than a law in the scientific sense, a law one discovers, it is one in the juridical sense – a law one declares. In the sentence "Every inflection of form is accompanied by a modification of color," "is" has the connotation of "shall be." The present tense of the third-person indicative masks the future tense of the second-person imperative: "*You shall* accompany every inflection of form by a modification of color." It is one of the two places in which the text comes closest to the rhetoric of the manifesto (I will discuss the other at the end of this section). The manifesto at once announces what the future will be and declares it to have begun. Its call to action presupposes the conditions for this action, but it is the call itself that produces these conditions by presupposing them. This performative logic depends on the rhetoric hovering, temporally, between the present and the future and, modally, between the indicative and the imperative.[29] Gleizes and Metzinger declare "the kinship of color and form"[30] to be the inalienable condition of painting in order to make it so. And, as we have seen, they make this declaration in the context of an ongoing art-critical debate in which Braque has already taken and Kahnweiler will soon take the opposite position.

That "Kahnweiler never ceased to maintain his scorn for Albert Gleizes and Metzinger's book … and to insist on Picasso's small esteem for it"[31] is, therefore,

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[27] Kahnweiler 4, 11.
[28] Kahnweiler 12.
[29] I have come to this idea of the manifesto's temporal ambiguity from Puchner's speech-act theory of the genre (see Puchner 23-32).
[30] Cubism 12.
[31] Painting as Model 281n.13.

unsurprising. It shows that the positions taken on Cubism by its contemporaries were no less oppositional than those being taken today.[32] Although Kahnweiler's book would not be written until three years after Gleizes and Metzinger's, and not published until five years after that, it is precisely the position he takes in *The Rise of Cubism* that *Cubism* rejects. To the idea that "the object possesses an absolute form, an essential form, and [that], in order to uncover it, we should suppress chiaroscuro and traditional perspective," Gleizes and Metzinger reply, "What naïveté!"[33] This view of the "well-meaning critics" substitutes "geometry" for "painting" and thus "science" for "art."[34] To this fantasy of pure objectivity, they oppose the fantasy of pure subjectivity: "There is nothing real outside ourselves, there is nothing real except the coincidence of a sensation and an individual mental direction."[35]

Their treatise remained in sufficient circulation for their law of mutual dependence between form and color to be quoted almost verbatim seven years later by Roman Jakobson in his article on "Futurism."[36] In this early essay, as a variant of "deformation," derived from Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, by which art makes visible the object which everyday recognition has rendered invisible, Jakobson offers the classic Cubist notion of the "multiple points of view."[37] Gleizes and Metzinger make use of this trope when, in a rare prosaic moment, they list the actual techniques of the Cubist painter:

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[32] For example, the heated debate between Rosalind Krauss and Patricia Leighten over the interpretation of the newspaper fragments in Picasso's *papiers collés*. Krauss's "The Motivation of the Sign" is, in part, a response to Patricia Leighten's *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989). Leighten reaffirmed her commitment to reading the *papiers collés* through the content of the newspaper articles in "Cubist Anachronisms: Ahistoricity, Cryptoformalism, and Business-as-Usual in New York," *Oxford Art Journal* 17 (1994) 91-102, and Krauss developed her Bakhtinian alternative to this reflectionist reading in *The Picasso Papers* 25-85.
[33] Cubism 13.
[34] Cubism 13.
[35] Cubism 13.
[36] "Futurism," 1919, trans. Stephen Rudy, *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Belknap, 1987) 29.
[37] Futurism 28.

"configurating the weight of bodies … enumerating their different points of view …

moving around an object to seize from it several successive appearances, which, fused

into a single image, reconstitute it in time."[38] But this empiricist, quasi-scientific

endeavor is always, for them, subordinate to the production of symbols which fuse

objects in the world with ideas in the artist's consciousness.[39] Cubism consists in

fashioning such symbols, not in observing objects dutifully from all angles. The tension

between the objective and the subjective imperatives, manifested so clearly by

Motherwell's essay, is present here too, and, again like in Motherwell, the subjective pull

is stronger.

Not so in Jakobson, who, while quoting Gleizes and Metzinger on color and form

and on "impeded recognition,"[40] substitutes a distinctly conceptual vision for their

individualistic one. Cubism dispenses with "the tendencies of naive realism" by

presenting not what it sees of the object but what it knows of it. "As if what we know

about an object were one thing," he writes of realist painting,

> and the direct content of a presentation of objects were an entirely
> different thing…. As if we knew an object only from one side, from one
> point of view, as if, upon seeing a forehead, we forget that the nape of the
> neck exists, as if the neck were the dark side of the moon, unknown and
> unseen.[41]

Cubism, for Jakobson, consists in not forgetting that the nape exists, or rather, in refusing

to paint as though one has. A Cubist painter paints not what he sees but what he knows.

This opposition between seeing and knowing, more proper to painting perhaps than the

philosophical opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, organizes much of the

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[38] Cubism 15.
[39] Cubism 6.
[40] Jakobson 33.
[41] Jakobson 28.

thinking about Cubism by its contemporaries. It is precisely in these terms that Stein

explains Picasso's project. And when she observes that "it was also during the

calligraphic period, 1923, and later that this opposition of drawing and of color was the

most interesting,"[42] she inserts the standard art-critical topos of the separation of contour

and color into a discourse in which she has already translated all the standard Cubist

oppositions into ones of her own – oppositions dating back to *Three Lives*.

We began with Cubism's ambivalent relation to mimesis. Decidedly not

"abstract," the Cubist composition draws on data outside its frame. Its task is not to

replace the world with another, one generated entirely from the elements of painting,

from color and contour. It does not manifest a world of pure painting in a language that,

like Kandinsky's *malerei*, is pictorial from the ground up.[43] For a Cubist, such pure

painting risks a far greater failure than falling back into perspectival illusionism – it risks

becoming "mere decoration." This is not the place (though, where better?) to go into the

history of this emblematic bogey of modernist art criticism. I will discuss it here only as

it relates to the two texts we have been considering, as well as to Clement Greenberg's

canonical definition of Cubism. The concept of decoration appears both in *Cubism* and

in *The Rise of Cubism*, and both devote considerable space to rejecting it. For Gleizes

and Metzinger, decoration is what misguided critics see in the new painting, "a

widespread misapprehension" the authors immediately set out "to destroy."[44] To do so,

they present a highly suggestive, and refreshingly untautological, definition of

decoration:

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[42] Picasso 45.

[43] For a brilliant discussion of this particular ambition of modernist painting, see Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT, 1997) 147-96.

[44] Cubism 5.

> The decorative work of art exists only by virtue of its *destination*; it is animated only by the relations established between it and the given objects. Essentially dependent, necessarily incomplete, it must in the first place satisfy the mind so as not to distract it from the display which justifies and completes it. It is an organ.[45]

The syntax is ambiguous here, and the meaning of "destination" is not immediately clear. On the one hand, the destination of a painting, a visual message, is the viewer. By declaring "the antithesis of the picture" to be that work which is aimed at the viewer, Gleizes and Metzinger anticipate by fifty-five years Michael Fried's polemic against the "theatricality" of minimalist art.[46] Like minimalism according to Fried, decoration is "essentially dependent" on the viewer being there to perceive it. It actively addresses the beholder without whom the work's meaning is "necessarily incomplete."

On the other hand, such work might have another destination as well. The "relations" by virtue of which "the decorative work of art exists" are not, in fact, between the work and the viewer but between the work "and the given objects." These objects, presumably, are the content of the representation, the elements of reality which the work depicts. A work aimed at reality, then, not a work aimed at the viewer, is what decoration produces. The viewer, however, returns to the scene of decoration as the easily distracted "mind" for whose satisfaction the work exists. Dependence here is surely dependence on the spectator, the work now having a double destination: the objects it represents and the viewer to whom it delivers the representation. Facing both the object behind the picture plane and the beholder in front of it, this Janus-faced "antithesis of the picture" attains to the reality of neither. Unlike the "specific objects"

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[45] Cubism 5.
[46] "Art and Objecthood," 1967, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 148-72.

Fried accuses precisely of being merely objects, the decoration is not even a thing – it's a function, "an organ."

Decoration, then, betrays fidelity to the subjective, Gleizes and Metzinger's primary commitment. Actualized by the beholder's recognition, it sacrifices painting to the painted object. In Kahnweiler, decoration requires the opposite sacrifice. It is "by completely dissolving the form of the object" that "painting threaten[s] to debase itself to the level of ornamentation … to be 'decorative,' to 'adorn' the wall."[47] If *Cubism* champions the dissociation of the object from its familiar symbol, *The Rise of Cubism* advocates the use of precisely such symbols to represent the object. Gleizes and Metzinger's painter "rejects the natural symbol as soon as he has made use of it."[48] Their Cubist struggle is with ossified representation, with iconic convention which every painting is expected to repeat. Having come to associate an object with its "painted image," the viewer "persists in seeing the world only through the adopted sign."[49] The success of Kahnweiler's Cubism depends on exactly such association. What allows Cubism to dispense with illusionism while continuing to represent reality is the inclusion of emblems that call this reality to mind, attributes that instantly evoke the object to which they belong. This, for Kahnweiler, makes iconography central to the Cubist project. A painting, if it is to remain painting and not succumb to decoration, must provide clues by which the viewer can reconstruct its subject. In a Cubist painting, this reconstruction will take place not on the canvas itself but in the mind of its beholder.

> When "real details" are thus introduced the result is a stimulus which carries with it memory images. Combining the "real" stimulus and the scheme of forms, these images construct the finished object in the mind.

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[47] Kahnweiler 6.
[48] Cubism 6.
[49] Cubism 6.

> Thus the desired physical representation comes into being in the spectator's mind.[50]

Painting conceived in this way is aimed directly at the viewer, destined for the mind's associative act and dependent on the association being made correctly.

A source of doubt about its entire enterprise that never quite leaves the modernist imagination, decoration reappears in Clement Greenberg's 1958 "The Pasted-Paper Revolution."[51] In Greenberg's classic definition, Cubism at once questions and reaffirms the integrity of the picture plane by placing volumetric elements within a clearly two-dimensional pattern. Referring to the same painting as Kahnweiler, Braque's 1909-10 *Still Life with Violin and Palette*, Greenberg argues that the "very graphic nail with a cast shadow" establishes by its fictive three-dimensionality the flatness of the rest of the picture from which such fictiveness is otherwise absent. The significance of the *trompe-l'oeil* is that it disallows the illusion of the real object, and not, as for Kahnweiler, that it induces it. The nail "interpose[s] a kind of photographic space between the surface and the dimmer, fragile illusoriness of the Cubist space which the still-life itself – shown as a picture within a picture – inhabited."[52] For exactly opposite reasons, then, Greenberg and Kahnweiler identify the same iconographic elements[53] as key to the Cubist treatment of real objects in three-dimensional space. Both again credit Braque with the next phase of these elements, the "capital letters and numbers stencilled in *trompe-l'oeil* in paintings whose motifs offered no realistic excuse for their presence."[54] Imported from the world

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[50] Kahnweiler 11-12.

[51] John O'Brian, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 61-66. Hereafter cited as CEC.

[52] CEC 62.

[53] As Bois would point out, these elements are icons also by C. S. Peirce's definition (Semiology 177).

[54] CEC 62; Kahnweiler 10.

of "posters, display windows and commercial signs,"[55] these conventional symbols are both the most overt importation of non-pictorial reality and its surest conversion into pictorial terms. In them, writing, or signifying, has crystallized into pure matter, into printed – or painted – material.[56]

Such material, because it is "inconceivable on anything but a flat plane," returns the beholder's gaze to the flatness that has underwritten every volumetric intrusion from the world of objects.[57] The result is "the shuffling and shuttling between surface and depth"[58] which for Greenberg is Cubism's primary operation and the essence of its eventual "pasted-paper revolution." From this operation, Greenberg derives a brilliantly precise definition of Cubism[59] that uses the very term which its early theorists banished and yet constantly invoked: "Cubism, in the hands of its inventors – and in those of Léger too – achieved a new, exalted and transfigured kind of decoration by reconstructing the flat picture surface with the very means of its denial."[60] The increasingly literal elements of reality – from painted emblems to stenciled letters to fragments of actual paper and cloth – inoculate the painting against its own illusionism. Either by outdoing it (the *trompe-l'oeil*) or by undoing it (the letters and pasted papers), these elements are at once foreign to the painting and responsible for its remaining a painting: a two-dimensional

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[55] Kahnweiler 10.

[56] Bois discusses this materialization of writing in the context of Picasso's larger project, beginning with the 1912 *Still Life with Chair Caning*, of organizing the composition simultaneously along the vertical and the horizontal axes. "In the collapse of the vertical and the horizontal," Bois writes, "what Picasso is inscribing is the very possibility of the transformation of painting into writing – of the empirical and vertical space of vision, controlled by our own erect position on the ground, into the semiological and possibly horizontal space of reading" (Semiology 187). In *Picasso*, Stein proposes the opposite transformation – of writing into painting. Bois also contextualizes this "horizontalization of a vertical field" (along with its chiastic counterpart) in the early twentieth-century "interest in the Chinese character," an interest that produced "the ideogrammatic method" of Ezra Pound (Semiology 204-05n.65).

[57] CEC 63.

[58] CEC 63.

[59] The definition, in fact, is classically dialectical.

[60] CEC 65.

surface supporting symbols of three-dimensionality. By using reality in this way, the Cubists, according to Greenberg, achieve "a new kind of decoration."

We might well ask how the very concept by which Kahnweiler distinguished Picasso and Braque both from their Fauvist precursors (in Braque's case, from his prior Fauvist self) and their abstract epigones[61] could now be used to describe their achievement. One possibility is that Greenberg, the great champion of pictorial abstraction, is precisely interested in restoring to Cubism the category it purged, first, in order to break with Fauvism and, later, to maintain its difference from the movements it produced. Defining Picasso and Braque's invention by the "decorative urge"[62] so long denied to it, he retroactively enlists it in the campaign for abstraction, his own longstanding commitment. At the same time, Greenberg is no more comfortable with the idea of painting as decoration than Kahnweiler, and "the pasted-paper revolution" cannot simply be a matter of a change in scenery. Decoration it may be, but "a new, exalted and transfigured kind." Gris, on the other hand, fails to achieve any such exaltation or transfiguration and remains "conventionally decorative."[63]

Decoration, then, is the primary source of ambivalence and anxiety in definitions of Cubism. It is the second thought troubling and raising the stakes of what I take to be a key concession by Gleizes and Metzinger. Champions, as we have seen, of the unfamiliar sign, of the symbol not yet adopted by the crowd and born of the artist's own analogical faculty, they admit, nonetheless, the necessity of being understood. Their declaration, "Let the picture imitate nothing and let it present nakedly its *raison d'etre*!" appears in the same paragraph in which they "admit that the reminiscence of natural

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[61] Kahnweiler 6, 22.
[62] Kahnweiler 22.
[63] CEC 66.

forms cannot be absolutely banished."[64] The qualification, "as yet," only underscores the reluctance with which they make this admission. We can now attribute this reluctance to the specter of decoration that, by their definition, haunts any representation of objects, any painting that presents the world in a form already recognizable to the spectator. But could we not also say that this very definition of decoration as objective representation,[65] counterintuitive if not outright perverse, is itself a response to the fear of decoration? For it is not objectivity that threatens to become pure ornament but that very subjectivity on which Gleizes and Metzinger absolutely insist. The product of a gaze turned entirely inward, the artist's "integrated plastic consciousness" always runs the risk of expressing itself as "pure effusion,"[66] in which the viewer, having no access to the subjectivity motivating it, sees "only pleasant arabesques."[67]

The problem of readability becomes at the end explicitly a problem of reading – and writing. One of the most theoretically prescient, suggestive, and eloquent passages in their treatise, it is worth quoting at length.

> Not to discern at first contact the individuality of the objects which motivate a painting has its great charm, true, but it is also dangerous. We reject not only synchronistic and primary images, but also fanciful occultism, an easy way out; if we condemn the exclusive use of common signs it is not at all because we think of replacing them by cabalistic ones. We will even willingly confess that it is impossible to write without using clichés, and to paint while disregarding familiar signs completely. It is up to each one to decide whether he should disseminate them throughout his work, mix them intimately with personal signs, or boldly plaster them, magical dissonances, tatters of the great collective lie, on a single point of the plane of higher reality which he sets aside for his art.[68]

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[64] Cubism 7.
[65] I am tempted to say "illustration," but that would introduce another heavily loaded concept with a different, while perhaps parallel, history in modernist art criticism.
[66] Cubism 6-7.
[67] Kahnweiler 6.
[68] Cubism 15.

A fusion of manifesto and self-analysis, the passage is both a semiological meditation and one of the finest contemporary descriptions of the range of Cubist possibility. If "synchronistic and primary images" are clearly those of conventional illusionism, "fanciful occultism," while it could describe many pictorial practices, refers to possible misapplications of Cubism itself. If earlier, in the defensive definition of decoration, "the given objects" of a work "animated" it at the expense of its autonomy, here, objects must not only "motivate" the painting but also remain "discern[able]." To not associate the image with anything in the outside world has become "dangerous." It is at this point that Gleizes and Metzinger offer a principle that translates the Cubist composition into explicitly verbal terms. Painting uses "signs" and is, therefore, subject to preexisting systems of signification in which these signs have meanings. To invent an entirely new system would be "cabalistic." To use no system at all would be to give up signifying altogether.[69] Because meaning has been distributed prior to one's arrival at the scene, one can neither "paint while disregarding familiar signs completely" nor "write without use clichés." Painting is analogous to writing because subject to the same pre-existing condition, and decoration becomes the void beyond meaning promising the dangerous escape from "the great collective lie."

In the midst of a document that elevates subjective perception to the highest principle, objectivity, a dependence on the actual form of the object, reemerges as an imperative. Under pressure of remaining intelligible, *Cubism* places the object onto the

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[69] "In the same way as in language one cannot invent a neologism at random but must do so according to certain associative rules if one wants it to be understood, so in a semiological system like figurative painting – and one should note that Cubist painters never manifested the desire to plunge into the field of total pictorial abstraction – one cannot go beyond a certain limit, if one wants the figure to be read at all" (Semiology 174). What, in reference to Picasso, Bois calls "measur[ing] what could be the smallest amount of iconicity in a figurative system" could perfectly describe Stein's verbal experimentation.

plane of pictorial subjectivity, "the plane of higher reality" which retains its autonomy

neither with nor without it. By admitting the object, this plane succumbs to the lower

reality of which it seeks to be free. By expelling the object, it floats away from reality

altogether. Kahnweiler, equally committed to individual perception, finds a way to

maintains it at the center of Cubism by transferring the perceptual act from the mind of

the artist to that of the spectator. The "undistorted real objects," we remember, call up

memories associated with them, and it is these memories that form "the finished object."

The problem of intelligibility is solved through associationism, the subjective path along

which the spectator comes to learn "the new language" of Cubism.[70] The fear, as always,

is of decoration, of failing "to be more than just a pleasure to the eye of the spectator."[71]

It is to the actively perceiving mind that the painting must appeal instead. Rather than

mixing clichés with personal signs – Gleizes and Metzinger's solution of juxtaposing the

absolutely objective with the absolutely subjective – Kahnweiler's Cubism gradually

initiates the spectator by means of the prior knowledge supplied by the spectator's own

"'preperception.'"[72] Kahnweiler resolves the contradiction between individual

expression and conventional communication through an associationist phenomenology of

vision.

　　　　The definitions of Cubism we have been discussing both arise from and produce a

system of oppositions that we can summarize in the following schema:

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[70] Kahnweiler 13.
[71] Kahnweiler 13.
[72] Kahnweiler 13.

Gleizes & Metzinger
Bergsonism?

subjective objective

Kahnweiler
associationism

Stein
calligraphy

non-
decoration

decoration

Greenberg
"new decoration"
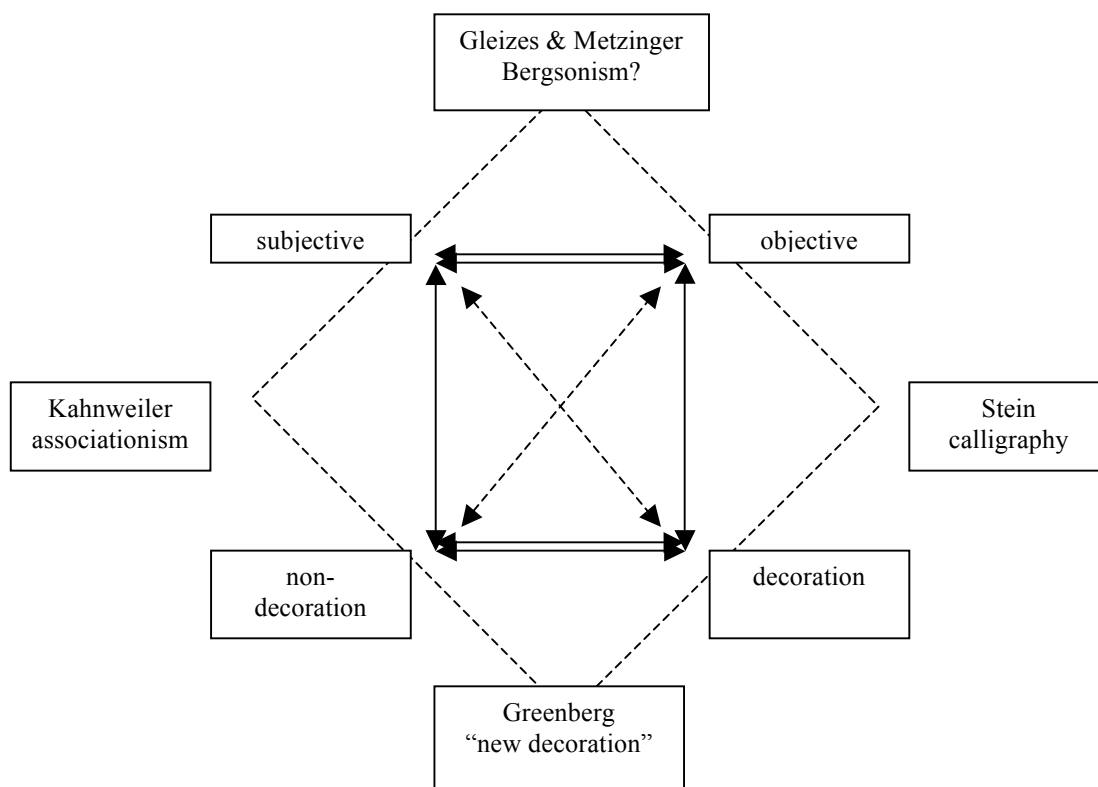
I have been reading each of these definitions of Cubism as proposing a different resolution to the contradiction between the subjective and the objective demand. With decoration being the implication of a purely subjective art, each theorist's task is to define a role for the self in which it would not usurp objective reality. What remains to be shown is how Stein's reading of Cubism completely reverses the values modernist art criticism places on both categories. By defining Picasso's painting as calligraphic writing, she at once rejects subjectivity and embraces decoration.

II. "The Existence of Spain": Periodizing Picasso[73]

I have been reading each of these theories of Cubism as proposing a different resolution to the contradiction between the subjective and the objective demand. With

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[73] Towards the end of *Picasso*, Stein writes, "the existence of Spain awakened Picasso" (48). The following section is, in large part, an explanation of this statement.

decoration being the implication of a purely subjective art, each theorist's task is to define a role for the self in which it would not usurp objective reality. As I am about to show, Stein's reading of Cubism completely reverses the values modernist art criticism places on both subjective expression and decorative representation. By defining Picasso's painting as calligraphic writing, she at once rejects subjectivity and embraces decoration.

Stein's *Picasso* is a dialectical interpretation of the painter's career. For Stein, Picasso's life, rather than an alternation of success and failure (as John Berger would have it), is a constant struggle between two competing forces. Most frequently, the two forces are identified with France and Spain. At stake in the struggle is the nature of Picasso's vision and the kind of painting in which it will manifest. Depending on which force has temporarily triumphed, one or another phase of his career will commence. These phases are familiar from standard art-historical accounts: the blue period, the rose period, Cubism. And Stein's account does not end with the Heroic Age; she takes Picasso all the way to the present of the book, 1937, and the dialectic produces some of its most complex negations and sublations after Cubism has ended. Periods and period names, their chronologies usually overlapping and often contradictory, proliferate in the book. One could call it a parody of art-historical periodization, but one would be wrong. If the book does not seem to insist on one periodizing schema or even present a single self-consistent one, it does, without a doubt, insist on periodization itself.

What the book has of the biographical appears mostly in the form of itineraries. Stein is very precise on the question of where Picasso was living, at what time, and where he moved afterward. Underlying all others is the itinerary of the central dialectic, a kind

of art-historical shuttle diplomacy between France and Spain. Wherever else Picasso might live – on the Rue Ravignan or the boulevard de Clichy in Montmartre, on the boulevard Raspail or the rue Schoelcher in Montparnasse – he invariably returns from the hills of Paris to the mountains of Spain, if only for a summer. For example, the crucial summer of 1909.

"Once again Picasso in 1909 was in Spain and he brought back with him some landscapes which were, certainly were, the beginning of cubism."[74] Stein is talking about the landscapes painted during the summer of Horta, during which according to Kahnweiler "the new language of form was … left essentially unchanged."[75] What about the Horta landscapes makes Stein identify them as the origin of Cubism in each of her three narratives of its genesis?[76] "These three landscapes," she writes, "express exactly what I wish to make clear, that is to say the opposition between nature and man in Spain."[77] And she wants to make this opposition clear because, being endemic to Spain, it is, *ipso facto*, endemic to Picasso. Before we write off this peculiar judgment as part of Stein's preoccupation with national characteristics (which it certainly is), let us consider the model of subjectivity that it, literally, puts into place.

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[74] Picasso 8.

[75] Kahnweiler 9. In "The Motivation of the Sign," Krauss notes that the current art-historical consensus is on Kahnweiler's side, that "now no one really takes Gertrude Stein seriously in this claim that Cubism began at Horta" (Motivation 266). She goes on, however, in her own reading of *Houses on the Hill, Horta de Ebro*, to do exactly that: to take seriously Stein's claim that in these paintings "the houses cut across the landscape" and that therein lies their foundational importance. Krauss finds in the lozenge shape, whose axes point up and outward at the same time, the exact analog to Stein's "opposition between nature and man in Spain" (Picasso 24). "If Gertrude Stein said that the houses cut across the landscape here, refusing to fuse with it, might she not have been describing just this effect of radical disjunction that takes place between, on the one hand, the experience of shape – frontal, rising, parallel to picture and to plane of vision, the very stuff of what Leo Steinberg has (with a wink at James Joyce) called the diaphane – and, on the other, the experience of something that imperiously, vertiginously beckons, something that excavates deep into both painting and landscape ground" (Motivation 267).

[76] Picasso 8, 13, 24.

[77] Picasso 24.

As a natural landscape, Horta precedes the painted landscape of which it is the

subject. But it also follows the painting, having retroactively become "cubist" in Stein's

reading: "certainly the Spanish villages were as cubistic as these paintings." In a perfect

example of deferred action, the primal scene of the literal landscape becomes recognized

for the first time after a vocabulary – the language of Cubism – has been acquired to

interpret it. Such a conception of place, suspended indefinitely between past and present,

its natural state a function of a representation which originally rewrites it in its own

(pictorial) terms, can hardly serve as an essentialist ground of identity. If Horta is the

origin of Cubism, then Cubism is the origin of Horta, the continually reaffirmed because

belatedly recognized guarantee of Cubism's national authenticity. As though to dispel

from the start any doubt of Horta's fundamentally figural status, Stein mediates her first

account of it by yet another rhetoric of the image, the photograph:

> These three landscapes were extraordinarily realistic and all the same the
> beginning of cubism. Picasso had by chance taken some photographs of
> the village that he had painted and it always amused me when every one
> protested against the fantasy of the pictures to make them look at the
> photographs which made them see that the pictures were almost exactly
> like the photographs. Oscar Wilde used to say that nature did nothing but
> copy art and really there is some truth in this and certainly the Spanish
> villages were as cubistic as these paintings.[78]

Even without Wilde to countersign it, this consummately Wildean scene of gratuitous

duplication in the name of art puts reality inside the brackets – or the frame – of

representation. Picasso repeats his own painting – the original act of repetition – by

taking a photograph (multiple ones, in fact), a second image intended to prove the

veracity of the first. Stein replicates his double replication of the landscape by showing

the photographs next to the paintings, which this act of comparison turns into paintings *of*

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[78] Picasso 8-9.

the photographs. With the paintings of the landscape having now become imperfect replicas of the more perfect replicas – they look "almost exactly like the photographs" – the landscape itself recedes at the vanishing point of a series of duplications that endlessly produces it as its own motivating fiction.

Such is the landscape in which Stein finds the true Picasso as well as the "triple foundation" of Cubism.[79] In the middle of presenting this triple foundation – the list of the three "historical" preconditions for Cubism – she inserts a discourse on the nature of historical change. In it, she largely restates her idea from "Composition as Explanation" that because people are conscious of the historical period immediately before the one in which they are living, they are always behind their own times.[80] To be behind the times means to see with the eyes of the previous generation, for "nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition."[81] In an almost identical sentence in *Picasso*, Stein puts "generation" in place of "composition." "Nothing changes from one generation to another," she writes, "except the things seen and the things seen make that generation."[82] "Composition" and "generation" are essentially synonymous, "the thing seen" always a product of the historical moment of seeing. *Picasso*, even more than "Composition as Explanation," is about generations – generations of painters, generations of Cubists, generations of compositions. To describe "the things seen" at Horta – the composition of her own generation – Stein must continually situate them in a historical, and art-historical, progression. And yet this progression is subject to precisely the kind of temporal displacement that locates Cubism

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[79] Picasso 10.
[80] Picasso 10-11.
[81] SW 513.
[82] Picasso 10.

in the mountains of Horta so that Cubism can be subsequently invented in their image.

The diachrony of generation is constantly reversed and interrupted by the synchrony of

composition. "Again and again he did not recommence but he continued after an

interruption."[83] Referring to Picasso, this statement also perfectly describes the structure

of the text, in which the struggle is always commencing, cubism is always beginning, and

Picasso himself is always being reborn.[84]

If Picasso's struggle is with the serial seductions of non-Spanish ways of seeing,

the text's struggle is with the seduction of art-historical narrative. Chronology is both

essential to Stein's view of composition and completely incompatible with it.

"Beginning again and again," she writes in "Composition as Explanation," "is a natural

thing even when there is a series. Beginning again and again and again explaining

composition and time is a natural thing."[85] Temporality, for Stein, is not a matter of

moving forward – nor of moving backward. As she insists throughout her explanations,

it is about an accretion of individual moments that together make "not many things but

one thing."[86] How, then, does one give an account of an artist's development over time,

of a succession of distinct periods?

As I have already suggested, Stein's solution comes from the very tradition of art-

historical periodization from which her program of "the continuous present" seems to so

radically exclude her. Art history periodizes Cubism not by time but by place.

L'Estaque, Cadaqués, Horta – the main chapters of Cubist history are named after places.

Two of these – L'Estaque and Horta – are not only the locations of the painters at pivotal

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[83] Picasso 22.
[84] At times literally, as when, a little less than half way into the book, Stein writes, "Picasso was born in Malaga, October 25th, 1881" (19).
[85] SW 516.
[86] *Lectures in America* (1935) (London: Virago, 1988) 177. Hereafter cited as LIA.

moments but also the subjects of the paintings themselves; to paraphrase Stein, they are

not only the place *of* the composition but also the place *in* the composition. This unique

ability of the landscape to be outside and inside the painting at the same time begins to

account for its prominence in Stein's criticism. Four years before *Picasso*, in her lecture

on "Plays," it already provided an important solution to the problem of time.[87] Faced

once more with being "always either behind or ahead," the temporal alternatives offered

by theater, Stein turns to landscape as a model for writing plays. Unlike the traditional

play with its machinery for introducing unknown characters, "the landscape does not

have to make acquaintance."[88] In no need of narrative, of a progressive unfolding, the

landscape exists all at once, "not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the

hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any

detail to any other detail."[89] The very emblem of modernist simultaneity, of the all-at-

onceness of vision,[90] the landscape is a real space, a pictorial genre, and a model for a

literary genre all at once. In *Picasso*, the landscape is also the seat of Cubism, the engine

of its evolution and allegory of its founding principle, and, finally, the surface on which

the twentieth-century composition becomes materially visible.[91]

We can now return to the problem with which we ended the last section: how to

perceive subjectively without rendering objective reality unrecognizable? If Picasso must

always see things not as others see them but as he does, with "Spanish" vision, and the

thing he is seeing is the Spanish landscape, then the thing he is seeing and the way he is

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[87] LIA 93-131.
[88] LIA 122.
[89] LIA 125.
[90] On simultaneity as the defining characteristic of modernist vision generally and of Greenberg's notion of opticality in particular, see Krauss's *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT, 1998) 1-30.
[91] Picasso 49-50.

seeing it are one. Just as when in *Three Lives*, Jefferson Campbell's subjectivity begins

speaking in Stein's voice, the outside has crossed into the inside to form its fundamental

identity. This vision may appear to distort reality, but it never actually does – it simply

cannot, being itself a reflection of it.

> [T]he character, the vision of Picasso is like himself, it is Spanish and he
> does not see reality as all the world sees it, so that he alone amongst the
> painters did not have the problem of expressing the truths that all the
> world can see but the truths that he alone can see and that is not the world
> the world recognizes as the world.[92]

And yet the world it is, the very "composition of the present" which no academic painter

sees and which Picasso knows by looking at it. "The problem of expressing truths that all

the world can see" is also the problem of not expressing them adequately, of failing to

express them. It is this problem that Stein's model of a vision founded on landscape

eliminates. Recognizable or not, this vision *is* the world.

What Stein says of the role of realism in Cubist painting is remarkably close to

Greenberg's notion of "reconstructing the flat picture surface with the very means of its

denial."[93] "After these cubist painters had used real objects, they wanted to see if by the

force of the intensity with which they painted some of these objects … they could not

replace the real by the painted objects which would by their realism require the rest of the

picture to oppose itself to them." [94] To "oppose" the picture to the real object is exactly

to "declare" the surface "by force of contrast."[95] Even Greenberg's language of force, the

vocabulary of "vehemence" and "power,"[96] finds a counterpart in Stein's "force of

intensity." The point is certainly not to establish Stein's influence on Greenberg but to

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[92] Picasso 41-42.
[93] CEC 65.
[94] Picasso 23.
[95] CEC 63.
[96] CEC 63.

show a striking consonance in their sense of how Cubism works. For Stein, however, the

opposition between surface and depth that is Greenberg's primary interest is only a

particular manifestation of the larger oppositional logic by which she defines Cubism.

Because "nature and man are opposed in Spain," "the work of man is not in harmony

with the landscape" but in opposition to it – the very discovery that the landscapes

painted at Horta placed at "the basis of cubism."[97] Because Cubism is oppositional, it is

Spanish, and because it is Spanish, it is "a necessity, of course it is."[98]

The nature of this necessity is in its mode of confronting the material world.

Stein's Cubism encounters the surfaces of things in the present of vision. It refuses to

reconstruct those aspects of the object that are supplied by prior knowledge but invisible

to the eye. Picasso struggles "not to express the things he did not see, that is to say the

things everybody is certain of seeing but which they do not really see."[99] The example

Stein gives of seeing what one really sees could be a direct counterstatement to

Jakobson's argument for not dissociating vision from knowledge.

> A child sees the face of its mother, it sees it in a completely different way
> than other people see it, I am not speaking of the spirit of the mother but
> of the features and the whole face … it is certain the child for a little while
> only sees a part of the face of its mother, it knows one feature and not
> another, one side and not the other, and in his way Picasso knows faces as
> a child knows them and the head and the body.[100]

Cubist painting, contrary to the critical notion of its (and our) time, is not about showing

an object from different points of view. If Jakobson's Cubism completes the seen with

the known, the forehead with the nape, Stein's brackets the known to register only the

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[97] Picasso 23.
[98] Picasso 24.
[99] Picasso 19.
[100] Picasso 14-15.

seen. Picasso, who "when he saw an eye, the other did not exist for him,"[101] is exactly

Jakobson's amnesiac spectator. Insisting on "frontality," to use Rosalind Krauss's term,

Stein wants us precisely to "forget that the nape of the neck exists." To see without

remembering – this is Stein's Cubist solution.

Such amnesiac vision rejects the associationism that Kahnweiler offers as

Cubism's principal invention, a representational strategy that works because "everybody

is accustomed to complete the whole entirely from their knowledge."[102] The objects in

the painting, realistically drawn metonymies from which the viewer's mind will

reconstitute the whole, are "memory images." Knowing means remembering, and

remembering for Stein always means repeating. And repetition is the problem that had

occupied Stein since the lethal repetitions of *Three Lives*. No less a condition of

illusionist painting than of narrative writing, repetition will end with Picasso's – and

Stein's – Cubism. Coming in her lecture on "Portraits and Repetition" to the period of

her portraiture when she began to perceive her subjects by "looking" as well as by

simultaneously "talking and listening," Stein writes of the problem that this created, "the

trouble with including looking":

> The trouble with including looking … was that in regard to human beings
> looking inevitably carried in its train realizing movements and expression
> and as such forced me into recognizing resemblances, and so forced
> remembering and in forcing remembering caused confusion of present
> with past and future time.[103]

Painting that reconstructs the object must always to do it in reference to both "past and

future time," comparing its current aspect to its former one, anticipating from one angle

what will later be visible from another. The anamnestic painter is always, mentally if not

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[101] Picasso 15.
[102] Picasso 15.
[103] LIA 188.

physically, taking that pseudo-Cubistic walk around the object to apprehend it from

multiple points of view – "recognizing resemblances." "The painters naturally were

looking," Stein says in the same lecture, immediately after explaining the trouble, "that

was their occupation and they had too to be certain that looking was not confusing itself

with remembering."[104] And to make quite certain that it would not, painting had to

become writing.

  If Picasso's seduction by the vision of others – of France, of Italy, of Russia[105] –

causes him to compromise his Spanish vision, it also leads him away from the

fundamental truth about his painting: that it had always been a kind of writing. Though

from the beginning, "his drawings … were words for him,"[106] it is specifically when

"cubism changed to rather flat surfaces" that it became "writing."[107] A kind of writing,

moreover, that never broke with the visual, with "things seen without association."[108]

Stein's word for this kind of writing, as I have mentioned already, is calligraphy.

> It is necessary to think about this question of calligraphy, it must never be forgotten that the only way Picasso has of speaking, the only way Picasso has of writing is with drawings and paintings. In 1914 and from then on it never stopped, he had a certain way of writing his thoughts, that is to say of seeing things in a way that he knew he was seeing them. And it was in this way that he commenced to write these thoughts with drawings and with painting. Oriental people, the people of America and the people of Spain have never, really never forgotten that it is not necessary to use letters in order to be able to write.[109]

Calligraphy, the "painting which was writing,"[110] not only contains every aspect of

Cubism, but also embodies Stein's entire model of seeing. Seen in the context of the

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[104] LIA 189.
[105] Picasso 7, 34, 40-41.
[106] Picasso 2.
[107] Picasso 39.
[108] Picasso 35.
[109] Picasso 38-39.
[110] Picasso 33.

critical debate over Cubism, a context I have tried to reconstruct in the previous section, calligraphy also becomes Stein's intervention into this debate and a reevaluation of the established art-critical hierarchies of her time. Produced on a flat surface, calligraphy is opposed to the sculptural "because it was not possible … to really write with sculpture."[111] With this idea, Stein joins the tradition, which includes Kahnweiler and reaches its apogee with Greenberg, that sees the task of modernist painting to be a continual investigation into the flatness of its support, the surface it declares with increasing forcefulness. But Stein also faces head on the possible outcome of this investigation – that painting is (or has become) decoration – and turns it into the very victory originally intended: a victory over the associative limits of memory and the interpretive distortions of subjectivity.

She speaks directly of the European marginalization of the decorative. Unlike China, for example, in which "the letters were something in themselves," "in Europe the art of calligraphy was always a minor art, decorated by painting, decorated by lines, but the art of writing and the decoration by writing and the decoration around writing are always a minor art."[112] This minor art of writing is the decorative opposite of painting, the supplement drawn dangerously in its margins – the literal margins of frames and borders – that always threatens to take painting's place.[113] In the works of "pure calligraphy," such as the *Lines and Stars* of 1923 or the *Deux Femmes Calligraphiées* of

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[111] Picasso 39.

[112] Picasso 34.

[113] Stein describes Picasso's design for the settings of the ballet *Mercure* as "written, so simply written, no painting, pure calligraphy" (38). The most far-reaching discussion of the frame or the border as the ontological precondition of painting that threatens the very integrity it institutes is Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 1-147.

the same year,[114] this marginal decoration enters the pictorial field to constitute it from the inside.

Turning writing into painting at the same time as it turns painting into writing, calligraphy is also, for Stein, the key to the survival of modernist painting in particular. Calligraphy begins as a marginal activity but soon becomes the only outlet for Picasso's proper vision and a Noah's arc of pre-war modernism. During what Stein considers "the last period of pure cubism,"[115] that is from 1913 to 1917, Picasso "took great pleasure in decorating his pictures, always with a rather calligraphic tendency than a sculptural one."[116] But during the period that immediately followed, "a realistic period" after the war when "he was satisfied to see things as everybody saw them,"[117] it was the only vision left to him that was entirely his – "the consolation offered to the side of him that was Spanish."[118] At a time, after the end of Cubism, when European modernism was everywhere succumbing to classicist reaction,[119] calligraphy, according to Stein, remained the only idiom in which the ideas of Cubism, "everything that he could not put into his realistic pictures," could still be expressed.[120] It had come to replace painting, but only after painting had betrayed its own anti-illusionist discoveries.

These are the stakes of Stein's reclaiming of decoration from its critical exile, an exile to the limit of pictorial abstraction and motivated by the fear of this very limit. An art-historical scandal for that reason, calligraphy is an art-theoretical scandal as well, for

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[114] Both of these works are discussed by Stein and reproduced in her book (37, 38).
[115] Picasso 35.
[116] Picasso 37.
[117] Picasso 32.
[118] Picasso 37.
[119] For a definitive reading of this period as a recurring art-historical phenomenon, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Repression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992) 107-34.
[120] Picasso 37.

it collapses the opposition between the spatial art of painting and the temporal art of writing that has divided the arts since Lessing's *Laocoon*. Painting and writing cross into each other at the calligraphic line. A feature of both, the line is the two-dimensional essence of the decorative script. "They were really cubism," Stein writes of these lines, "that is to say a thing that existed in itself without the aid of association or emotion."[121] And as such, they were also really "Spanish." The strict two-dimensionality of calligraphy, a two-dimensionality it shares with Cubism and with pictorial modernism generally, requires a reading of surface pattern – a reading originally induced by the encounter with the Spanish landscape. A frontal vision of present reality, it replaces interpretation by the registration of topography, of those oppositional arrangements of houses and landscape recorded in the Horta paintings. To achieve such "direct vision,"[122] the horizontal plane of the landscape must be transferred to the vertical plane of the canvas as though onto a map.[123]

The surface that can be read without such a transfer is that of the already vertical human form. It is here, at the literal skin, that Cubism finally defeats the depth imperative of subjectivity. Rather than piercing the exterior to discover the interior that motivates it, Stein's Picasso stays on the surface and declares it to be the only motivation there is. "Why interest one's self in the souls of people," she asks on his behalf, "when the face, the head, the body can tell everything."[124] "Why use words," she continues, "when one can express everything by drawings and colors."[125] What drawings and colors

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[121] Picasso 38.
[122] Picasso 47.
[123] Again, this is the argument both Bois and Krauss make about the Cubist collapse of the vertical and the horizontal axes.
[124] Picasso 47.
[125] Picasso 47.

express is that they have become words – two-dimensional ciphers of a site-specific

script.

Chapter Two

"Iron, Glass, and Revolution":

Constructivist Form and the Mediums of Modernity

Aleksei Kruchenykh, it would seem, heeded F. T. Marinetti's call to murder the

moonshine. "Her days are numbered," the Russian Futurist writes in "Biography of the

Moon," "and so, it is done / the futurians' book has come out: 'the dead moon.'"[1] The

biography which ends with this terminal act of publication is a section of "The Secret

Vices of the Academics," an essay that first came out in 1916, with illustrations by Ivan

Kliun and Kasimir Malevich. In 1923, Kruchenykh collected several of his previously

published pieces, including "Secret Vices," in a book called *The Apocalypse in Russian*

Literature. The book was his one hundred and twenty-second and was so labeled

(Kruchenykh was numbering his works half a century before Godard). He was published

for the last time in 1930, the year of Mayakovsky's suicide, though he lived until 1968,

subsisting on a miniscule government pension and on the occasional sales of his

"albums," collages of texts and images from his vast futurist archive.[2]

A Futurist in the immediate post-revolutionary years, when society seemed finally

to catch up with its aesthetic vanguard, he remained, improbably and uniquely, a Futurist

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[1] Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Kukish Proshliakam* ["A Fig to the Dated"] (Moscow: Gileia, 1992) 110. Hereafter cited as Kukish. All translations from the Russian of this and other texts are mine unless otherwise noted.
[2] For an honest, deeply sympathetic, and eloquently understated account of Kruchenykh's later years, see E. N. Berkovskaia, *Sud'by Skreshchen'ia: Vospominaniia* ["Crossings of Fate: Reminiscences"] (Moskva: Vozvrashchenie, 2008) 633-646.

throughout the Stalinist decades and for more than a decade after Stalin's death. In the teens and twenties, together with Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, with whom he collaborated on manifestos, poetry and various publication projects, Kruchenykh formulated the Russian version of the movement which had been founded in Italy by Marinetti and his circle. Unlike both his Russian and Italian contemporaries, however, he survived the *rappel à l'ordre* of the thirties, the initially self-imposed restraint on avant-garde experimentation and its increasing subordination to the aims of the state. In the thirties, Kruchenykh neither died nor converted. He became neither a Stalinist nor a fascist. The price of such resilience was a literary existence as marginal as his earlier one had been central.

Yet the particular mode of his near-underground activity – the archival collage-work already mentioned – was the logical continuation of what he had been doing all along. From the start, his books were assemblages of prose and verse, of the new and the recycled, of the self-authored and the quoted. Most important, however, was the autonomy these components maintained after entering the textual assemblage. In a Kruchenykh *trakhtat* (his inflection of the Russian word for treatise), all heterogeneous materials remain heterogeneous, each element retaining its generic, stylistic, and thematic specificity. Their subordination to each other and to the overall "message" of the book is so slight that one immediately loses sight of the occasion for their inclusion – as well as of the polemical or pedagogical message itself. And yet the books are decidedly both polemical and pedagogical, arguing against and arguing for. They are never more so, in fact, than in places of the most extreme heterogeneity, and it is in his explorations of the

heterogeneity of words and sounds that Kruchenykh's central contribution to Futurist theory lies.

Kruchenykh's name appears on two founding manifestos of Russian Futurism: *Slap in the Face of Public Taste* and *The Word as Such*. Published in 1912 and 1913 respectively, they are cosigned by David Burliuk, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Vladimir Mayakovsky.[3] In three books written by him alone (though with substantial quotation from a variety of contemporary and classical literary sources) and published in the early twenties —*Faktura Slova* ("The Faktura of the Word"), *Sdvigologiia Russkogo Stikha* ("The Shiftology of Russian Verse"), and *Apokalipsis v Russkoi Literature* ("The Apocalypse in Russian Literature") – Kruchenykh announced his unreconstructed allegiance to Futurism. Brought out in a series by the Moscow Association of Futurists (MAF) (*Faktura* and *Sdvigologiia* in 1923 and *Apokalipsis* in 1922), they belong historically to the period after Futurism. Proclaiming its uninterrupted life, they are the late documents of a movement that had already been replaced by something else.

Historically, what succeeded Futurism was LEF, or the Leftist Front, which involved many of Futurism's former adherents but drastically parted with it on the question of art's role in the revolutionary society. As the publication dates of the founding manifestos make clear, Futurism was a pre-revolutionary movement, welcoming of the Revolution once it arrived but itself owing little to it. What to make, then, of Kruchenykh's atavistic writings in the twenties, which neither herald the new, fact-based, society-building dispensation nor make any transitional attempt to reconcile

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[3] See David Burliuk, Alexey Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Velimir Khlebnikov, *Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (1912) and [Velimir] Khlebnikov and Alexey Kruchenykh, *The Word as Such* (1913), *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2001) 230, 237-238.

the Futurist position with the LEFtist one? In the twenties, Kruchenykh was still very

much in the business of defining Futurism, of announcing its arrival and articulating its

tenets.[4] Rather than proof of his increasing isolation from the vanguard of Russian

culture and his irrelevance to it, these announcements and articulations cannily

demonstrate his kinship with what was most radical in the LEFtist and Constructivist

vanguard. Instead of adjusting his Futurism to qualify for LEF (as many of his fellow

Futurists did, including Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, and Osip Brik), Kruchenykh

continued to advance Futurism in parallel with LEF by theorizing in his own way a

concept that was fundamental to both. The relation between the Futurism championed by

Kruchenykh and the Constructivism promoted by LEF hinged on their respective

definitions of the idea of *faktura*.

I. *Faktura* of the Future

Kruchenykh's treatises adapt to literary and linguistic theory the concept of

faktura, an idea central to the Russian visual avant-garde since the publication of David

Burliuk's essay on the subject in the 1913 *Slap in the Face of Public Taste*.[5] The analogy

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[4] His history of Futurism, which he updated and expanded for the movement's first, fifth, and fifteenth anniversaries, is each time titled *Our Arrival*. Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Nash Vykhod: K Istorii Russkogo Futurizma* ["Our Arrival: For a History of Russian Futurism"] (Moskva: RA, 1996).

[5] The critical literature on *faktura* has effectively oriented discussions of the Russian or Soviet avant-garde around this term. A comprehensive discussion of the history and theory of *faktura* is Maria Gough, "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 36 (1999) 32-59. Margit Rowell's essay "Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura," *October* 7 (1978) 83-108, gives an analysis of the role of *faktura* in the trajectory of Tatlin' work. In "From Faktura to Factography," October 30 (1984) 82-119, Benjamin Buchloh traces the evolution of Soviet avant-garde aesthetics from the formalist notion of *faktura* as a medium's tactility and self-referentiality, developed by the Futurists and the Rayonists, to the critique of bourgeois conventions of representation by the "Laboratory" Constructivists (Rodchenko, Tatlin, the Stenberg brothers) through the exploration of the object's technological manufacture and its reception, "a reference to the placement of the constructivist object and its interaction with the spectator" (90), to the attempt at creating a collective audience through the introduction of the iconic, seemingly unmediated representation of reality by means of photomontage. Buchloh describes this development as "the gradual transition from the modernist position in the Russian avant-garde to the factographic and

between verbal and visual *faktura* rests precisely on the modernist paradox of medium specificity at the center of this dissertation: what is unique about each medium are its material properties, and it is this very uniqueness that it has in common with other mediums. *Faktura* is, essentially the term for this trans-medium specificity, for that which is proper to every medium *qua* medium — every medium is specific due to its *faktura*. "Medium," writes Margit Rowell, "implies a specific substance or texture, specified by the Russian term *faktura*."[6] To clarify things at the outset, then, *faktura* is the Soviet avant-garde's term for medium specificity. And as the argument of this dissertation is that mediums acquire specificity in relation to specific sites, what the rest of this chapter will explore is the intersection between *faktura* and place.

Speaking art-historically, *faktura*, as it was theorized and practiced in the work of Vladimir Tatlin, opened for Russian avant-garde art the "exit out of cubism."[7] In the studio-laboratory described in the writings of his close friend and tireless champion, the critic and art historian Ivan Punin, Tatlin and his students researched the nature of specific mediums (sheet metal, glass, etc) in preparation for molding, arranging, and juxtaposing them. Summing up the achievements of Tatlin and his students in the years immediately prior to the revolution, Punin writes,

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utilitarian position" (95). "Thus *faktura*, an essential feature of the modernist paradigm that underlay the production of the Soviet avant-garde until 1923, was replaced by a new concern for the *factographic* capacity of the photograph, supposedly rendering aspects of reality visible without interference or mediation," and paving the way for the subordination of photography to "totalitarian propaganda" as well its "successful adaptation for the needs of the ideological apparatus of the culture industry of Western capitalism" (118). In addition to these art-historical accounts of the meaning of *faktura*, my own understanding and use of the term owes a great deal to Aage Hansen-Löve's conceptual overview of the term in "Faktura, Fakturnost" *Russian Literature* 27 (1985) 29-37.

[6] Rowell 91.

[7] "The Exit Out of Cubism" is the subject of a group of articles in Ivan Punin's collected writings on Tatlin, *O Tatline* ("On Tatlin") (Moscow: RA, 2001). This collection is an invaluable source of historical and theoretical information about Tatlin's work. Punin's criticism combines aesthetic commitment with both theoretical insight and a sense of historical context, all informed by a profound and first-hand engagement with Tatlin's art and knowledge of his process. Punin, I am tempted to say, may be the perfect art critic.

> The sense of spatial relations was calibrated, the ability to make complex compositional constructions was developed, receptiveness to distinct qualities of material was heightened. People stewed in the pot of the Tatlin method and came out of these years more stable, grown into painting, bound to quality by movement and apprehension, as to the foundation of the entire painterly element, as to the real foundation of all reality turned to the artist.[8]

Tatlin's counter-reliefs extended this investigation of specific mediums to equally specific, non-transferrable sites in which they would be constrained not only by their physical properties but also by their environment. For Tatlin, *faktura* is the aggregate or coordination of all three specificities: material, arrangement, and environment. If a material's properties determine the form this material can take and the uses to which it can be put, the object's environment (the corner of the room in which the counter-relief is placed) supplies another dimension of specification. Constructivist form is the intersection of medium and site. It emerges precisely at the intersection of medium specificity and site specificity.

At the same time, Tatlin's site-specificity not only reconciled the Cubist opposition between subjective and objective seeing but also reintroduced memory into an aesthetics of the continuous present. The counter-relief, placed in a corner of the room at the intersection of three architectonic planes (two walls and a ceiling), at once repeats and negates the analogously placed medieval icon within the futurist arrangement of its contemporary materials, offering an imaginary resolution of the contradiction between the dominant revolutionary present, the residual tsarist past and the emergent utopian future. Site-specific *faktura* dispenses with the need to forget the past in order to imagine the future and derives the medium's present specificity from the history of its prior use.

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[8] Punin 12.

Following the discussion of Cubism in the last chapter, we are now in a position to say that Tatlin's revision of Cubism is derived from a possibility already contained within it. This possibility is one of the solutions, offered by Cubism, to the problem of subjectively representing an objective reality. Indeed, Tatlin's constructivist breakthrough is often dated to his visit to Picasso's studio in 1913, where he saw the *Guitar* — an assemblage in relief that built up volumetric form frontally, rather than in the round (as would a sculpture).[9] Let us recall that a central point of contention in the discourse on Cubism was whether, as Jakobson claimed, the new pictorial language reconstructed the object from multiple points of view or whether, on the contrary, instead of a conceptual fiction of the object, it offered a limited view as it was really seen by an embodied, placed observer. Cubism, in other words, is constituted by the alternative between an amnesiac recording of the object as it appears in the present and an anamnestic reconstruction of the object as it really exists. As we have seen, the former was the position Stein took in her reading of Cubism as a pictorial form of writing that, analogously to her own, dispensed with memory and repetition — the functions required to reconstruct an ideal concept of the object independent from the specific circumstances of perception. As we saw in the previous chapter, Cubist practice and the various discourses on it found themselves in a series of contradictory articulations of the irreconcilable demands of subjectivity and objectivity, stuck between the particularity of the perceptual experience and the universality of the object's nature.

Tatlin's principle of "real materials in real space" resolved this contradiction by making the observer's point of view an objective property of the construction. The

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[9] John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983); Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT, 1981) 47-55 (hereafter abbreviated as Passages).

counter-relief was built to the specifications of the limited point of view of an observer

who shared its space. As Rosalind Krauss argues in her reading of modernist sculpture,

these site-specific counter-reliefs crystallized the difference between Tatlin's

Constructivism and that of Naum Gabo.[10] Gabo's work synthesizes the views of the

object available from particular points of view and reconstructs the object as a totality of

all possible viewing points, performing a kind of phenomenological abstraction from

concrete acts of perception to the implied but perceptually unavailable whole. A Gabo

sculpture could exist in any site because its principle of construction denies the

perceptual limitation that defines site-specificity.

It is precisely this conceptual totalization, the construction of an abstract or virtual

object as it would be seen from every viewing point if no actual viewing point existed,

that Tatlin's work refuses. Tatlin's Constructivism places sculptural form in a double

context: it contextualizes the primary forms of pictorial modernism (Cézanne's sphere,

cylinder, cone) in the physical properties of specific materials and contextualizes these

shaped materials in a specific environment of display. "The radical quality of Tatlin's

corner reliefs," argues Krauss,

> stems from their rejection of this transcendental space in two different
> ways, first in the anti-illusionism of their situation and second in the
> attitude they manifest toward the materials of which they are made. Each
> corner relief is demonstrably organized in relation to the conjunction of
> two wall planes that Tatlin uses to support the work physically. This
> architectural integer—the corner … is part of the real space of the room in
> which the counter-reliefs are to be seen. … [T]he function of Tatlin's
> corner is to insist that the relief it holds is continuous with the space of the
> world and dependent upon it for its meaning.[11]

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[10] Passages 55-62.
[11] Passages 55.

The most emblematic act of this double contextualization of form in materials and place, of the object's "continuous[ness] with the space of the world," is Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. A tower that was never built, the *Monument* was intended to house various organs of mass media in three containers, a cube, a pyramid, and a cylinder, each rotating at different speeds within a single spiraling column. As we will see later in this chapter, it was in Tatlin's *Monument* that Viktor Shklovsky found the intersection between physical medium, aesthetic form, and historical site that distinguished his formalism as much from the Futurist conception of medium specificity (or *faktura*) as from LEF's subordination of aesthetic means to social ends.

Kruchenykh's Futurist version of *faktura* diverges from Tatlin's (and Shklovsky's) Constructivist version precisely on this matter of site-specificity. Kruchenykh's investigations into the phonic and graphic properties of words locates verbal form in literal linguistic matter, in the shape of the signifier (in Walter Benn Michaels' phrase), rather than in the historical uses to which it has been put. In investigating the *faktura* of the self-sufficient word (*samovitoe slovo*), "the word as such," what remains unexamined are the rhetorical, stylistic, and generic registers that are literature's analogs to a sculpture's placement in space — the verbal object's orientation to its reader, the text's manner of addressing its audience. Kruchenykh's medium specificity, we might say, is a medium essentialism, a concept of medium ungrounded in the historical specificities of time and place. But to leave it at that would be to do Kruchenykh an injustice, to miss an important historical dimension of the theory and practice of this untimely Futurist.

In Kruchenykh's poetics, a word's *faktura* is not, in fact, confined to its intrinsic, self-contained properties. Context plays a part here too, and the word is placed simultaneously in the syntactic environment of the sentence and in the historical environment of prior literary use. The concept of *sdvig* ("shift")[12] registers the interactions between phonemes, the ways in which sounds placed next to each other enter into phonic combinations — the auditory equivalent of painting's law of simultaneous contrast.[13] The awareness of such purely physical possibilities of the verbal material is precisely the orientation (*ustanovka*) to *faktura*, analogous to the investigations performed in Tatlin's studio into the properties and interactions of specific materials. At the same time, each *sdvig* has a history of prior occurrences, a series of echoes of prior occasions in which homophonic *sdvigs* took place in earlier verse contexts. By forming sound patterns that recurred in the works of certain writers, literary schools, or periods, *sdvigs* marked the text's historical origin. A reader oriented to verbal *faktura* could identify a text's literary and social context by its characteristic *sdvigs*, its sound signature. Kruchenykh's shiftology is a kind of phonemic stylistics; in his hands, the *sdvig* becomes not only a compositional device but also a method of reading.

This double determination (the syntactic present, the literary past) at once links "the newest Russian poetry" to literary tradition and marks its most radical difference from it. To perceive *faktura* means to recognize the double context of every verbal juncture, and this recognition permits the Futurist poet to write the poetry of the future — not by forgetting the past but by remaking it at the atomic (i.e. phonemic) level. A way

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[12] Craig Dworkin, "To Destroy Language," *Textual Practice* 18 (2004) 191. Hansen-Löve makes the point that in Futurist and Russian formalist poetics, the concept of "faktura" is virtually identical with the concept of "sdvig" (5).
[13] Kukish 35-79.

of reading literary precursors that is also a way of rewriting them, the orientation toward *faktura* produces an engagement with the past far more extensive than any manifested by Italian Futurism.

While appearing to reject the past with no less finality, as in its analogous "murder" of lyrical tropology, the newer Futurism, in fact, emerged from a sustained dialogue with both its Symbolist contemporaries and their shared nineteenth-century ancestors from the "golden age" of Russian poetry. *Faktura*, then, was also a way out of the amnesia of Italian Futurism with its mythology of pure origination. *Faktura* is the capacity of the artistic medium for historical memory. Indeed, historical memory is Kruchenykh's particular province. Almost from the start of his avant-garde activity, he was a historian of the movement he had helped found and a curator of its publications. In his self-produced Futurist anthologies (the "albums" I described at the beginning of this chapter), pamphlets, drawings, and poems that announced the rupture of history, "threw Pushkin overboard from the Ship of Modernity,"[14] and inaugurated the future, became documents of an archaic utopia and acquired an eloquent historicity. In these fragile montages of the ephemera of a recent past, ruins of a betrayed future, Kruchenykh invented a specific medium of historiography. As their author, collector, and custodian, Kruchenykh became an archivist of the outmoded future.

Nevertheless, even as it acquires a historical dimension in his collage texts, verbal *faktura* remains for Kruchenykh a physical and essential property of the phoneme. At this point, we should formulate what, for our purposes, are two distinct notions or types of *faktura*, corresponding to the two models of avant-garde aesthetics that I have been

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[14] This is what *Slap in the Face of Public Taste* notoriously demanded that its readers do.

discussing: the Futurist and the Constructivist. According to the first, Futurist (or, art-

historically, Cubofuturist) notion, *faktura* is the phonic, graphic, or tactile quality of the

aesthetic medium (verbal or visual). This is the *faktura* of "the word [or "the letter"] as

such," the weave of the canvas, the layer of paint — all the sensory qualities of the

materials of verbal or plastic art perceived in and for themselves. In the words of

Hansen-Löve,

> In cubo-futurist manifestos and in formalist work on poetics of 'trans-
> rational language' the concept of faktura (or 'orientation to faktura') is
> transferred directly onto the self-expression of the sonic or prosodic
> quality of the 'self-sufficient' word or 'the word as such.' Connected with
> this is the radical identification of 'poetic' and 'factured word.[15]

We might characterize Futurist *faktura* as an orientation to the first-order properties of

the medium, to its literal or physical qualities.

In the second, Constructivist notion of *faktura*, the investigation into the physical

properties of the medium is put in the service of a specific arrangement of the materials,

an arrangement — or, properly speaking, construction — whose principles and shape is

determined by the physical possibilities of the medium. The form of the object is

determined by the properties specific to the materials from which it is made (glass is

capable of taking on certain shapes, sheet metal, others). Nikolai Tarabukin, in a text

written in 1916 and published in 1923 (the publication year of both Kruchenykh's treatise

on *Faktura* and of Shklovsky's *Knight's Move*), formulates this materialist derivation of

Constructivist form:

> The form of a work of art derives from two fundamental premises: the
> *material* or medium (colors, sounds, words) and the *construction* through
> which the material is organized in a coherent whole, acquiring its artistic
> logic and its profound meaning. Consequently, the notion of form should

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[15] Hansen-Löve 32

be understood as the real structure of the work, its structural or
compositional unity….[16]

At the same time, form is also determined by the place for which the object is made, by

the parameters of the site it is meant to occupy. Tatlin's formula, again, is "real materials

in real space." To sum up, Constructivist *faktura* coordinates three types of specificity:

material, construction, and site. In this triple orientation, medium comes to be defined as

material in use, an object of culture rather than a thing of nature.[17] The Constructivist

object owes its *faktura* to its social location — its everyday [*bytovoi*] placement and use

— as much as to the physical properties of its materials. The first-order properties of the

Futurist material are mediated in the Constructivist object by the second-order (or even

second-nature) properties of use. Constructivist *faktura* is the aggregate of the *material*

from which the object was made, the technological *process* by which it was made, and

the *purpose* for which it was made. It is this last idea of purpose or utility that

Shklovsky's formalism will dispense with while assimilating Constructivism's triple

orientation to physical material, formal construction, and historical site.

II. *Faktura* of Estrangement

At the same time that Kruchenykh was theorizing the *faktura* of the word,

Shklovsky was navigating his version of Russian formalism across the shifting terrain of

Soviet cultural norms. Attentive to both the Futurists and the Constructivists, he placed

at the core of his literary theory an inter-medium concept of materiality that owed the

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[16] Quoted in Rowell 91.

[17] While the difference between "object" and "thing" has a complex philosophical genealogy (particularly in Heideggerian phenomenology), Hansen-Löve provides a concise formulation of this difference: "'Thing' here is understood as the contrary of the concept of 'object': 'Thing' is the precultural work of nature, 'object' — a work of cultural communication, of realities with a pragmatic function." (7). The difference between the natural thing and the artifactual object corresponds to a difference between two types of *faktura*.

most to the concept of *faktura*. Russian formalism, as a method of literary scholarship, was to become the Soviet avant-garde's most influential export. Before it became that, before it *could* become that, it had to resolve an ambiguity built into it from the start by Shklovsky's idea of *ostranenie* ("estrangement" or "defamiliarization"[18]). Defamiliarization, the theory famously holds, is the primary function of art, the operation by which art impedes the automatic recognition of reality by deforming the familiar and thus restoring it to active perception. Art performs this task, Shklovsky writes, "in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony."[19] Aesthetic form can both fall victim to perceptual automatism and become an agent of its disruption. Once we cease to notice the way a work of art is made, *that* it is made, we begin to see it with no more clarity or specificity than the objects of our everyday life. Unlike these objects, however, art is a privileged instrument for examining reality, and when suddenly rendered visible, it does the same for all that is in its purview. What is ambiguous, even contradictory, about this version of formalism is that it claims to restore visibility to form by making it a more effective lens for seeing something else. Are we, then, supposed to be seeing the lens or the object? And which of the two should be deformed or defamiliarized?

This paradox is crucial not only for the subsequent history of Russian formalism but also for the intellectual trajectory of Shklovsky himself. In the subsequent development of Russian formalism, Shklovsky's definition of literature as restored materiality came to be replaced by literature as reflexive system or self-concerning

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[18] I will be using the two imperfect English equivalents interchangeably.

[19] Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal: Dalkey, 1998) 6.

message, by the Jakobsonian notion of *literariness*.[20] All that the structural approach to

literary texts has given to scholarship is the direct consequence of this reformulation, and

Jakobson himself always insisted that his structuralism was the legacy of Futurist ideas of

the self-sufficient word and self-aware construction. Nevertheless, before the

structuralist turn could be taken and the theory taken abroad, one aspect of early

formalism had to be dismissed as ambiguous and incoherent: the idea that one can talk of

words and stones in the same way because words have stoniness too. Unlike Jakobson's

structuralism, Shklovsky's formalism does not clearly distinguish between language and

reality, between form and content. Neither defamiliarized word nor defamiliarized thing,

but the process of defamiliarization itself — the impeding of recognition in the service of

a gradual unfolding of both form and of matter, the latter by means of the former.

Again and again in his writings (in the early, defiantly formalist *Theory of Prose*

and *Knight's Move* but also in the late, retrospective and revisionist *Tales of Prose*),

Shklovsky insists that the repertoire of forms available to an age ages, becomes automatic

and transparent, loses palpability. To reacquire significance as independent, self-standing

aesthetic entities, the devices making up this formal repertoire must be periodically

transvalued and rearranged in relation to each other as well as in relation to prior, now

antiquated devices and formal registers, to outmoded generic and rhetorical systems. The

current formal repertoire must be replenished from historical stock. (Later in the chapter,

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[20] For the idea of literature as a self-concerning message, see especially Jakobson's "Linguistics and Poetics," *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987) 62-94. Viktor Erlich's still definitive account of the history and theory of Russian Formalism, *Russian Formalism: History and Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton, 1980), decidedly stakes the fortunes of the movement on Jakobson's achievement. While acknowledging Shklvosky's role, Erlich presents Shklovsky's *ostranenie* as a stepping stone to Jakobson's language-centered theory of literary form. My argument is that rather than a primitive version of structuralism, Shklovsky's *ostranenie* offers a dialectical model of form which takes up constructivist *faktura* as the middle term between the social and the aesthetic realms.

I will say more about this historicity of Shklovsky's concept of form, the diachronic axis

of his synchronic orientation to construction.) Its perceptibility restored, the formal

dimension of an artwork reemerges at the foreground of the beholder's or reader's

consciousness and regains its place as the work's true subject and meaning, independent

of whatever extra-aesthetic (historical, psychological, anecdotal) material may have

furnished the fictional occasion for the work. Yet it is precisely when, through

defamiliarization, it has acquired (or reacquired) this autonomy, when it has become

seemingly autotelic, that form can exercise its proper function: the defamiliarization of

the world, of that extra-aesthetic reality, which is merely its occasion, or "motivation."

Having regained its presence to consciousness and independence from content,

form must return the favor and restore to its beholder's consciousness the beholder's own

lived reality, return to sensory experience the material that has motivated the device. The

artwork's autonomy is itself heteronomous, dependent on the matter from which it is

estranged and for the sake of which it performs its own work of estrangement. Better

(and fairer) yet, the work's autonomy depends on the autonomy it restores to what is

outside it. The measure of the self-sufficiency of form is its capacity to restore self-

sufficiency to its content, to the very material from which it declares its independence. In

Shklovsky's dialectical formalism, form is neither material nor construction, but their

reciprocal estrangement, performed, as I will argue later in the chapter, within the

predetermined constraints and possibilities of a specific site.

In this reciprocal relation between form and content, one becomes a moment of

the other, passing over and disappearing into its opposed term. The material disappears

in the device for whose use it provides the occasion (motivation), and the device,

rendered perceivable and self-standing, vanishes in the material that it restores to

perceptibility by formal means. Shklovsky's aesthetic theory offers a dialectical

integration of form and content, the constitutive antinomy of Western aesthetics that,

since Hegel, it has set itself the task of reconciling. No less than this, I would argue, are

the stakes and the promise of the apparent confusion underlying the idea of *ostranenie*, its

reference, by turn, to defamiliarization as an operation undergone by form itself for its

own sake and to the defamiliarization performed by form for the sake of disrupting the

automatism of perception and restoring the disappearing world, "in order to return

sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony."

The confusion or, as I am arguing, dialectic of form and content manifests itself

practically in Shklovsky's literary-critical writings in the fluidity with which they move

between story and plot, between considering what happens and how it is told, between

the represented details of everyday life, the material thickness of time and place, and the

structure of the literary "chronotope" (to use Bakhtin's term) by which this thickness is

rendered perceivable.[21] At the level of theory, this dialectic manifests itself in the

conceptual continuity between the two ostensibly opposed central terms of Shklovsky's

formalist discourse: motivation and device. The concept of motivation allows

Shklovsky's formalism to convert matters of form into matters of content and back.

Motivation is formalism's revolving door, a self-reversing passage through which the

formalist enters the work and reemerges in the world. We see a perfect example of this

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[21] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 84.

reversible relation between motivation and device in the essay "Parallels in Tolstoy," included in *Knight's Move*[22].

The essay begins with one of Shklovsky's clearest presentations of the logic of defamiliarization. As always, this logic is given alternately in formal and social terms. "In order to make an object a fact of art," the text begins, "it is necessary to remove it from the facts of life."[23] This classically formalist imperative calls not only for a strict separation between the artistic order and the social order, between the "poetic" and the "practical," but also for a flight from the latter to the former, for removing the object "from the facts of life." But in the very next sentence, the essay returns to the social realm that has just been abandoned, crash landing in political reality with a sudden, shocking analogy drawn from the nightmare of Russian history: This comparison between the aesthetic act of estrangement and the police act of interrogation (and worse) certainly reveals that estrangement may involve the very opposite of what, in his first published text, Shklovsky called "resurrection." This is terminal estrangement, the aesthetics of the death drive.[24]

The essay then cuts to an anecdote, taken from Chekhov's *Notebook*, of a man who misreads the word on a sign he walks by every day until, one day, when the sign is taken down and propped up on its side, he finally reads the word correctly. For Shklovsky, the episode is, of course, an allegory for the function of art. And his rhetoric in decoding this allegory is overtly political:

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[22] Viktor Shklovsky, *Khod Konia* (Moscow/Berlin: Gelikon, 1923) 115-125. All subsequent quotations are from this edition, hereafter cited as Khod, in my translation. In rendering Shklovsky's text into English, I have frequently consulted Richard Sheldon's translation, *Knight's Move* (Normal: Dalkey, 2005).
[23] Khod 115.
[24] It is precisely this sinister, even catastrophic dimension of Shklovsky's formalism that Cristina Vatulescu explores in "The Politics of Estrangement: Tracking Shklovsky's Device through Literary and Policing Practices," *Poetics Today* 27 (2006) 35-66.

> The poet takes down all the signs from their places, an artist is always an instigator of the revolt of things. Things revolt in the hands of poets, throwing off their old names and taking with the new name a new appearance.[25]

Estrangement here is, unmistakably, revolutionary action, "the revolt of things" engineered by artistic practice. The essay soon returns to the aesthetic territory of form and rhetoric. But following this passage, this territory cannot be seen but in the light of revolution, cannot but fly the flag of "the revolt of things":

> With this, the poet achieves a semantic shift [*sdvig*]. He wrests the concept from the order of meaning in which it stood and transfers it with the aid of the word (the trope) into a different order of meaning; moreover, we feel newness, the placement of the object in a new order. The new word fits the object like a new dress. The sign has been taken down.[26]

In Futurist poetics, the *sdvig* was a strategy of word creation, a method of neologism, enlisted in the construction of new graphic and phonic combinations toward the creation of *zaum*: a transrational language in which "words as such" would exist for their own sake as verbal matter, independent of reference. In Kruchenykh's treatises on *Faktura* and *Sdvigologiia* ("Shiftology"), as I mentioned earlier, *sdvigs* also historicized verbal matter. Shklovsky is both drawing on these Futurist meanings of *sdvig* and polemically aligning himself with the original Futurist program, declaring himself, as he does throughout *Knight's Move*, an unreconstructed Futurist. ("I am a person," he declares in a later chapter, "who wears under his coat the yellow flag of the Futurists."[27]) At the same time, he reframes this Futurist term with his own aesthetic theory. By redefining a central Futurist idea as a device of defamiliarization, one among many others and derivable from a long succession of strategies by which art made the familiar

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[25] Khod 115-116.
[26] Khod 116.
[27] Khod 144.

unrecognizable, Shklovsky reinserts Futurism in the very history of art from which it strove to radically break and which it commanded art to discard. This Futurist presentation of estrangement is, at the same time, an estrangement of Futurism.

Following this series of demonstrations of defamiliarization, a montage of allegories of art, the essay turns to its specific eponymous subject: parallels in Tolstoy. After discussing several other devices by which Tolstoy impedes the reader's recognition of everyday reality, Shklovsky considers parallelism proper: the juxtaposition and comparison of analogous or contrasting figures. Tolstoy introduces such comparisons into the narrative of *War and Peace* by means of some fictional relation between the figures compared. Kinship supplies the justification — "motivation," again, is the formalist term — for the device of parallelism. But in Shklovsky's reading, this thematic of kinship takes turns playing the role of motivation and the role of device. When groups of characters, "separately conceived," need to be compared, kinship motivates or naturalizes their parallelism, justifying their juxtapositions by the transparently artificial ploy of family connection.[28] But what is motivation in one context can become device in another, shifting from the background of reading into the foreground, turning from ploy to plot.

In the case of kinship, this happens when, rather than comparing multiple entities, the text needs to analyze a single figure or type. Here, where it is a matter not of drawing parallels among many but of parsing one, kinship becomes a version of another canonical device: the so-called "step-ladder construction," a means of decelerating perception by gradually unfolding the structure and meaning of its object — a kind of visual or semantic arpeggio.

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[28] Khod 123-124.

> Tolstoy very interestingly used 'kinship' not for motivating connections but for step-laddering construction. We see two brothers and one sister Rostovy. They represent as it were the unfolding of a single type. … Here the connection between personalities is not explained by kinship…. Here, kinship was needed for the construction of steps.[29]

In this capacity of the same theme or motif to serve either as motivation or as device, as contingent content or essential form, we see the dialectical logic of Shklovsky's own formal method. Formal devices can be motivated by thematic occasions — juxtapositions of characters by their kinship, however remote. But thematic elements can themselves be motivated, as when the inclusion of song and dance in a theatrical adaptation of another Tolstoy text, *The First Distiller*, is justified by the drunken revelry of the characters.[30] The convertibility of content into form and back, the materiality of the principles of composition and the composed, mediated nature of materials — these reversible passages between work and world, rather than damning Shklovsky's theoretical discourse to incoherence, save his formalism from abstraction and assure it a place in the social reality against which it defines itself. A universal theory of the aesthetic function, estrangement is also a particular operation performed on specific elements, taken as formal and thematic by turn. The techniques of this operation are determined each time by the nature of what is to be estranged and by the relative automation of the devices of estrangement, by the resistance they pose to recognition, assimilation, and consumption. This capacity for resistance, the relative opacity or unfamiliarity of the device is determined both by the object's location in the history of its medium and, as we will soon see, by its physical placement in space — by the intersection of medium specificity and site specificity.

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[29] Khod 124-125.
[30] Khod 126-127.

The term for the operation which defines art *qua* art, for the specificity of the aesthetic realm and for the action performed by every genuine artwork within it, estrangement is also that which promises to return art to the world from which it had to be alienated in order to become itself. Art can reenter life, but only on its own terms — the terms of estrangement. Form can disappear in its content, become content, but only as continuous deformation. And if estrangement is the aesthetic operation in general, it is also distinctly and differently practiced by specific mediums, making use of the devices proper to theater, to poetry, to sculpture to achieve the estrangement effect. It is another inter-medium term that, like *faktura*, describes a general specificity, a property of specific mediums held in common by the joint venture known as autonomous art. In his writings on Tatlin's counter-reliefs, we will see Shklovsky explicitly aligning estrangement with Constructivist *faktura*, modeling the two concepts on each other and illustrating both with a site-specific configuration of continuously perceivable materials.

But how might this contradictory, or dialectical logic of estrangement help us understand the development of Shklovsky's thought? Unlike Kruchenykh, Shklovsky is widely held to have capitulated to the Stalinist doctrine of socialist realism and severely compromised his theory to suit it. Whatever allowances for state ideology he made in the writings he published after the twenties, in the wake of his supposed surrender (whether "ostensible" or "hedged"[31]), these self-revisions constitute a genuine elaboration of the dialectical realism that was inherent in his thought from the start. To put it more directly, Shklovsky's version of formalism could accommodate Marxism without betraying itself. Dynamic and self-negating, aesthetic form acquires meaning by means of the content

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[31] See Richard Sheldon, "Viktor Shklovsky and the Device of Ostensible Surrender," *Slavic Review* 34 (1975) 86-108, and Viktor Erlich's response, "On Being Fair to Shklovsky or the Act of Hedged Surrender," *Slavic Review* 35 (1976) 111-118.

which it makes available to perception in the act of deforming it. An aesthetic theory that

holds art to be a continual self-estrangement in the service of estranging its other (i.e. the

world) is necessarily oriented to reality, a reality that, as we have seen, it conceptualizes

as, simultaneously, raw material, motivating fiction, and formal model.

What remains consistent throughout Shklovsky's writings, and a consistent proof

of their theoretical continuity, is the elevation of sensation over recognition. For

Shklovsky, as for Stein, sensory perception is perfectly capable of grasping the object as

it really exists, but only if it is freed from the perceiver's habitual relation to the object,

particularly from the practice of deriving the whole from a part. Perception of the object

as a sensible totality is interrupted by a recognition of one of its components, known from

everyday use and decodable as a figure, a synecdochal or metonymic stand-in for what is

never actually seen. "The outside world," Shklovsky writes in his essay on Tatlin's

counter-reliefs, "On Faktura and Counter-Reliefs" (later included in *Knight's Move*), "is

perceived as a series of hints, a series of algebraic signs, like a collection of things,

having volume but not having materiality — *faktura*."[32] We will return shortly to this

text, central to Shklovsky's engagement with plastic art in general and with Tatlin's

Constructivism in particular. Here I would like to point to what constitutes for Shklovsky

the problem of everyday perception and to the nature of his solution.

Art's role is to dislodge perception from its habit of dismembering reality into

algebraic signs, to interrupt the interruption, and to put continuous sensation in place of

discrete recognition. What makes art different from life, then, is not some specialized

canon of materials, images, or themes, not even a repertoire of genres or forms, but its

construction of objects that demand to be perceived continuously, that elude recognition

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[32] Khod 102.

and decoding, that refuse to be known in parts. The "word in art" is "spoken to the end and heard to the end."[33] We should not be surprised that Shklovsky gives this quality of manifested construction the name of *faktura*: "Faktura — the principal feature of that special world of specially constructed things, the aggregate of which we call art."[34] And "this special world of specially constructed things" (or objects, in Hansen-Löve's definition) has the capacity to render perceptible the construction of our own world, to restore its materiality to our senses.

We might see a contradiction between this notion of continuity and the idea of limited, placed perception that I have been tracing through Stein's discourse on Cubism and Tatlin's site-specific counter-reliefs. By seeing the object from one point of view only and representing that view without completing it with the rest of the object, Stein's Cubism and Tatlin's Constructivism seem to call for exactly the opposite of Shklovsky's "uninterrupted perception," to break up reality into contiguous but discontinuous parts. Yet, contrary to appearances, I would argue that Shklovsky's imperative "to create an uninterrupted thing, perceivable in every one of its parts" is not merely compatible with Stein's "not to express the things he did not see" and Tatlin's "real materials in real space" but that all three are dictated by the same aesthetic principle: the orientation to specific materials, consciously constructed and specifically placed.

Stein's and Tatlin's refusal of conceptual synthesis, of deriving the invisible sides from the visible ones and reconstituting the object on the basis of an implied but absent totality is precisely the refusal to decode the whole from its parts, the rejection of recognition in favor of sensation. As proof of the profound continuity between these

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[33] Khod 102.
[34] Khod 102.

aesthetic philosophies, let us recall Stein's metaphor for Picasso's pictorial vision: the

vision of a child:

> it is certain the child for a little while only sees a part of the face of its
> mother, it knows one feature and not another, one side and not the other,
> and in his way Picasso knows faces as a child knows them and the head
> and the body.[35]

For Shklovsky, as for Romantic aesthetics since Schiller, art holds the promise of

restoring us to ourselves, of reclaiming a way of seeing and living in the world that we

have lost. To compare Cubist vision with a child's is to insist on its organicity or

"sentimentality" (in Schiller's sense), its completeness, its opposition to our alienated

relation to the world. "In life," Shklovsky writes, "we fly through the world, like the

heroes of Jules Verne flew from the earth to the moon in a closed sphere. But in our

sphere there are no windows. The entire work of the artist-poet and the artist-painter is

above all to create an uninterrupted thing, perceivable in every one of its parts, a thing

factured [*fakturnaia*]."[36] "An uninterrupted thing" is not a conceptual totality, completed

from incomplete data, but a thing that is entirely present to the senses. And such a thing

would be as much a work of art as a model of a restored world to come: "The new world

must be an uninterrupted world."[37]

　　　　Art teaches us to see rather than to recognize, to perceive things as though we

were encountering them for the first time. The literary touchstone for the device of

describing a familiar social custom or institution, an everyday phenomenon as though it

were unknown and incomprehensible, everywhere in Shklovsky's writings, is the work of

Leo Tolstoy. In some of his texts, Tolstoy justifies or "motivates" this device by telling

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[35] Picasso 15.

[36] Khod 102-103.

[37] Khod 107.

the story from the point of view of an outsider or stranger (for example, a horse, in the short story "Kholstomer"). But defamiliarization is also a predominant operation of his heterodiegetic, third-person narration, undisguised by any fictional occasion. It was this narrative device, Shklovsky argues in a much later discussion of Tolstoy in *Povesti o Proze*, defamiliarization in its most canonical and specifically literary form, which allowed literature to represent the natural landscape for its own sake rather than as a set of comparisons to human action, a source of epic similes, or an inert, conventional background with no resistance or specificity of its own.[38] Landscape, Shklovsky argues, appears throughout the history of literature as a purely cultural figure, constructed from a preexisting repertoire of motifs that had been established by folklore, pastoral poetry, or, later, neoclassical painting and architecture. Landscape had to be estranged in order to become natural. We can learn to see the things of the world as they really are if we learn to see them as works of art. But what this means is not that we replace them with our own cultural constructs — exactly the opposite. To see the worldly thing — or place — as an aesthetic object means to see it as different (from itself and from other things) rather than exchangeable or equivalent, a form immanent to its material manifestation rather than a conceptual schema with an indifferent content, and a trace of historical processes rather than a token of a recurring cycle. Above all, Tolstoy's verbal art estranges us from itself and teaches us to see its objects as heterogeneous from itself — to see landscape as a site of difference.

But if we can discover the world in art, we can also discover art in the world. Shklovsky's accounts of events and places — the civil war in *Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* (1923), the life of the Russian emigré community in Berlin during

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[38] *Povesti o* Proze ("Tales of Prose") (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1966) 21-31.

his exile in *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* (1923), the civil war blockade of Petrograd

(Petersburg) and everyday life in the city under War Communism in *Knight's Move*

(1923) — continually trace in the world the very operation by which he defines art: the

restoration of continuous perceptibility through the deformation of the familiar. The

world can become estranged from itself and lay bare its own *faktura*: its own materials

and principle of construction. This is particularly likely to happen under conditions of

collective reconstruction, of radical social reformation and deformation, in a moment of

historical transition or rupture. We discover how the world is made at a moment of its

unmaking. We perceive *faktura* at the site of revolution.

III. *Faktura* of Revolution

Let us recall here the two types of *faktura* I outlined at the end of the first section.

The first, the Futurist version, locates the specificity or identity of the medium in the

physical properties of the materials of which the work is made. Futurist *faktura*

privileges tactility, and the tactile sense, as the experience closest to the material surface,

to the givens of matter. A plastic work of art has *faktura*, or "definite 'thingness,'"[39] to

the degree that the materials of which it is made (paint, canvas, stone, bronze, etc.) are

perceivable in themselves and for their own sake, within, beneath, and beyond whatever

illusionistic or fictive composition they mediate. *Faktura* is the apprehensibility of the

work's material support. The *fakturnost'* ("facturedness") of a work proceeds as much

from the beholder's orientation to its material properties as from the maker's

foregrounding of these in the construction of the work. As Hansen-Löve writes, "In

contrast to academic application of paint, and to the dematerialized 'smoothness' of the

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[39] Hansen-Löve 30.

surface of sculpture, faktura induces, first of all, a heightened 'sense of the material,' and, in connection with this, an intensified sensory perception generally."[40] By analogy, the *faktura* of a literary work, in this Futurist sense, is the audibility or visibility of the language matter in which it is written, the sound and appearance of letters and letter combinations perceived apart from their signified concepts or referents.

If in the idea of "an intensified sensory perception generally," we hear an echo of Shklovsky's doctrine of estrangement, with its aim of restoring our ability to perceive the world, this is no accident. In Hansen-Löve's synoptic and compressed overview, Futurist *faktura* is, indeed, continuous with formalist estrangement. [rest of the quoted passage from last par.] In the previous section, we saw Shklovsky himself establishing this continuity, flying his Futurist colors and defining estrangement as a generalized perceptual "sdvig." But we also saw him theorizing Tatlin's Constructivist *faktura* in similar terms. Shklovsky frames his discussion of Tatlin's counter-reliefs with the idea of "an uninterrupted thing, perceivable in every one of its parts"[41] and defines the aim of Constructivism as not only the creation of such things but also the recreation of the world in their image. "The ultimate aim of such a movement must be the construction of a new, tangible world."[42] My argument is that while Shklovsky never distinguishes his theory from either Futurism or Constructivism, glossing both movements as "laying bare the orientation to faktura," as allies in the radical "resurrection of the word," his own model of *faktura* as estrangement differs from both. Adapting *faktura* to his own formalist aesthetics, Shklovsky integrates the Futurist and Constructivist models into a third alternative.

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[40] Hansen-Löve 31.
[41] Khod 103.
[42] Khod 106.

To help clarify this third alternative, I will briefly restate what I earlier referred to as the Constructivist model. If Futurist *faktura* locates the meaning of the work in its treatment of materials, Constructivist *faktura*, as we saw in Tarabukin's statement, mediates the properties of matter with those of technological construction, raw material with industrial process. And, as we saw in the counter-reliefs' orientation to the limited vantage point of their beholder, both material and process are mediated by the physical site that the object was made to occupy and by the pragmatic function it was made to perform. Shklovsky's model of *faktura* preserves the Futurist notion of the reflexive, self-valuable material, while using the Constructivist emphasis on process and site to ground this material in social reality and political history, to place it in space and time. At the same time, in order to square Constructivism with his own formalist doctrine of artistic autonomy, he must put into question the movement's growing concern with utility, resist its placement of artistic practice in the service of political information and agitation propaganda.

While preserving the social determination of the Constructivist object, Shklovsky must divert this object from the status of instrument. The object must neither serve society as its tool (the program of the avant-garde under Narkompros) nor represent it as its image (the old realist aesthetics) — both regimes of instrumentalization. Instead, the object must be made of the same materials as the society in which it was made and perform the same operation on these materials as the society with which it shares them. What is needed, as always, is a middle term that would allow one to translate back and forth between artistic and social construction by describing the materiality common to both. Also needed is a shared principle of construction, a logic that organizes both the

social and the aesthetic realms and that would establish their continuity. As the reader

will no doubt guess, Shklovsky finds this shared principle in estrangement and this

mediating third term in *faktura*.

In Constructivism, Shklovsky finds a method of artistic production in which

everyday life plays the dual part of raw material and formal model. If, as we have seen,

art, far from effecting a flight from lived reality, is always charged with its restoration to

the senses, the everyday that provides the fictional or illusory occasion (motivation) for

the artistic performance is also its blueprint. The real structure of reality, hidden from

our senses by habit and the orientation to utility, is what is to be revealed by the

defamiliarizing operation of the artwork. This structure can be the real arrangement of

letters on an invisible sign, the actual physiognomy of a too-familiar face, the forgotten

meaning of an automatically performed social ritual. Shklovsky finds species of the

estranged everyday in every work of literature he considers, from Sterne's *Tristram

Shandy* to Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to Bely's *Petersburg*. What he finds in Tatlin's

counter-reliefs and particularly in *The Monument to the Third International* is the

everyday specific to a society living in the wake of revolution and a formal organization

specific to this life. (We will see him uncover this very organization through his

estranged reconstruction of his own wartime experience of Petersburg.)

To properly understand his two articles on Tatlin in *Knight's Move*, we need to

place them in dialogue with Nikolai Punin's writings on Tatlin's *Monument*, written at

exactly the same time and published in the same periodicals in which Shklovsky was

regularly appearing — a real dialogue, then, conducted in real time. Punin's texts,

informed by many conversations with Tatlin and a longstanding, intimate knowledge of

both his studio process and pedagogy, are history, theory, and journalism all at once. Offering an art-historical and philosophical account of Tatlin's work, as well as a partisan defense of his aesthetic position, Punin reflects on the very idea of monuments on the scene of revolution.

"On Monuments" was written in 1919 and published in the newspaper *Art of the Commune* [*Isskustvo Kommmuny*], the organ of the newly state-sponsored and socially-oriented avant-garde, in which, in the same year, Shklovsky published his "Ullia, Ullia, Marsiane," a polemic against this new orientation of Futurism and plea for the autonomy of art. Punin's text, too, is a polemic — against the official practice of building monuments to the heroes of the Revolution, mediocre statuary that was springing up everywhere in Petersburg and Moscow. Punin formulates his critique of this monumentalizing culture in simultaneously political and aesthetic terms.

Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, known as Tatlin's tower, is the alternative to the proto-socialist realist monuments commemorating the revolution. Politically false because firmly rooted in the regressive cult of individual heroism, these monuments are aesthetically bankrupt because their form is entirely automatic, altogether incapable of either self-estrangement or the estrangement of its environment. In a near echo of Shklovsky's retelling of Chekhov's story about not seeing the lettering of a sign until it was taken down, Punin tells the story of walking by one of the monuments for days without realizing it was gone.[43] Their timeliness as temporary constructions to commemorate a passing event is ironically negated by their inherent antiquation. The monuments are composed in the formal language of prerevolutionary art, at once automatically familiar to the senses and hopelessly irrelevant to contemporary reality.

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[43] Punin 15.

Speaking neither to the bourgeois past (whose destroyers they celbrate) nor to the collectivist present (which they betray by their bourgeois individualism), theses pseudo-revolutionary monuments are specific neither to their time nor to their place, neither medium nor site.

It is as an alternative to these fundamentally abstract, timeless and siteless (sightless) constructions that Punin offers Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. The monument is itself a specific site — composed of independently rotating sites of mass information and mediation, contained by the macrostructure of the monument. As sculpture, the monument fulfills its memorializing function, signifying a historical moment from within a space consecrated to it. At the same time, this autonomy of sculptural form is cancelled by its functionality as architecture. As a (potentially) occupied piece of architecture, the tower cohabits the social and material reality of its occupants, achieving its structural coherence not apart from but as a part of the world from which its materials originate. Finally, its compositional language of "simplest,"[44] most basic forms comes directly from modernist painting: Cézanne's volumetric language of "the cylinder, the sphere, the cone" translated into cylinder, pyramid, cube.

This integration of sculpture, architecture, and painting is enacted through the coordination of another triad, "the three units of modern plastic consciousness: material, construction, and volume."[45] What guarantees the invention and construction of unified form — "simultaneously architectural, plastic, and pictorial"[46] — is the principle that, for Punin, above all defines Tatlin's contribution to the development of modern art (and its plastic consciousness) and distinguishes his constructions from Cubism: the principle of

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[44] Punin 16.
[45] Punin 20.
[46] Punin 17.

utlity. Tatlin's work "restores" to art "its 'eternal' qualities: unity and being needed."[47]

(We will hardy be surprised to recognize in this statement the same Romantic logic of

revolution as paradise regained that we observed in Shklovsky's notion of

defamiliarization as the restoration of a lost world of continuous perceptibility.) Unity, in

this context, always means the unification of the arts, particularly of sculpture (or

"plastics"), architecture, and painting, into a single mode of utilitarian artistic production.

And just as the unity between the arts must be immanent to each construction, intrinsic to

the interrelation between material, tectonics, and volume rather than a supplementary

decoration of real space by sculptural and pictorial ornament, so utility, too, must not be a

subordination of art to use, work to world, after the fact, but itself a principle of formal

organization. In Punin's words,

> Any content of form can be taken up and compressed by utility, for utility
> of form is nothing else than the organization of its content. Forms lacking
> practical purpose, the majority of artistic forms that have existed until this
> time, are simply unorganized forms.[48]

As an internal quality of the construction, utility assures that the monument

achieves a synthesis of its materials that alone makes it perceivable as a work of art. This

perceptibility, in turn, makes the monument suitable for the extra-artistic purpose of

agitation propaganda — one of the tower's principal aesthetic and institutional tasks. The

topmost of the three rotating chambers, the cylinder, was to make one revolution a day

and house the organs of mass media: "bureau of information, newspaper, publishers of

proclamations, brochures and manifestos, in other words, all the diversity of means for

widely informing the international proletariat."[49] (The other two chambers — the cube at

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[47] Punin 52.
[48] Punin 21.
[49] Punin 18.

the bottom, making one revolution a year, and the pyramid in the middle, making one

revolution a month — were to be dedicated to legislative and executive functions

respectively.[50]) But while the agitprop functions were to be carried out by informational

apparatuses located inside the tower, the tower itself, as a formally unified whole,

fulfilled the purpose of agitation by means of its own principles of construction: its

specific synthesis of materials and technology, its integration of pictorial image, plastic

"rhythms,"[51] and architectural space.

  We will recall here that such integration is precisely what constitutes the

Constructivist model of *faktura*, or the reciprocal mediation of three determinants of

form: the materials of construction, the process and technology of construction, and the

physical site in which the construction is placed — "real materials in real space." Punin's

discussion of the tower motivates this integration with the idea of a synthesis of the arts

(sculpture, painting, architecture), retaining the triple derivation of plastic form that

defined the counter-reliefs. As we have seen, the counter-reliefs were inspired by

Tatlin's encounter with the Cubist form, a method of establishing the picture surface

through heterogeneous material signifiers of volume. Tatlin extended the fundamentally

pictorial Cubist composition further into three dimensions and oriented it to the

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[50] Punin 18. There is considerable divergence in both contemporary and art-historical descriptions of the *Monument*, specifically in the accounts of the three rotating geometric bodies occupying the core of Tatlin's tower. While Punin lists the three bodies as cube, pyramid, and cylinder, with the cube at the bottom, Shklovsky's description reverses the order, placing the cylinder at the bottom and replacing the cube with a sphere. In his translator's preface to *Knight's Move*, in which Shklovsky's included his essay on the tower, Richard Sheldon gives yet a third account of the tower (one that, intriguingly, he makes no attempt to reconcile with Shklovsky's, which provided the impetus for his own discussion in the first place): cylinder at the bottom, followed by a cone, and topped by a cube — the exact reversal of Punin's, with the pyramid replaced by a cone. Finally, in her definitive history of modern art in Russia, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), Camilla Gray gives the same description of the tower's three chambers as Sheldon's. Even as the accounts differ on the precise order and geometry of the bodies, all agree on the fundamental logic of their rotation: the speed increases from one revolution a year to one revolution a day as one gets closer to the tower's summit.
[51] Punin 21.

beholder's actual vantage point. Tatlin's tower, then, may certainly be understood as a counter-relief on a mass scale, a counter-monument.

But even as it exhibits the same orientation to *faktura* as Tatlin's earlier work, the *Monument* makes a crucial contribution to the coordination of material and place — to the intersection of medium-specificity and site-specificity. What Tatlin unveiled in 1920 along with the model of his projected tower was the historical nature, the historicity, of both the materials and the environments whose physical properties were to dictate aesthetic form. The tower, a monument to an event in the history of revolutionary struggle, refigures the intersection of medium and site as a historical crossroads. In the language of iron and glass, the tower spells out the chiasmic principle of its own construction, a principle we might call historical materialism in the Constructivist key: to build material history from historical materials.[52]

For Punin, Tatlin's *Monument* inscribes the revolutionary present and its recent history at all three levels of its form: materials, construction, and site. The materials from which Tatlin's tower is built are the emblematic mediums of modernity: iron and glass.

> Similarly to how the number of vibrations produced per wavelength is the spatial measure of sound, the relation of glass to iron is the measure of material rhythm. What a stern and red-hot simplicity is concealed in the juxtaposition of these two simplest materials, for which fire was in equal measure the giver of life. These materials are the elements of modern art. Form, determined by their juxtaposition, creates rhythms of such a wide and mighty vibration that it appears as the birth of the ocean.[53]

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[52] As Margit Rowell writes in "Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura," her illuminating account of the role of medium specificity in Tatlin's work and development, "Unquestionably, the *Monument to the IIIrd International* grew out of certain notions which existed in embryonic stage in the reliefs and counter-reliefs. Two notions in particular are peculiar to the time and place in which Tatlin worked: the importance of materials which generate specific forms, and the understanding that this new kind of construction embodies a new language which is ideologically significant" (101).

[53] Punin 21.

This mediums combined in Tatlin's tower are elemental in their "simplest" qualities and modern in their undisguised, tactile juxtaposition. Analogizing their juxtaposition to the movement of sound, Punin defines form as a spatial rhythm, space constructed on the model of time. His discussion of medium specificity resonates with a canonical paradox of modernist and avant-garde rhetoric: the birth of the new as the return of the old, the birth of the modern as the return of the primordial.[54] Iron and glass are at once "the elements of modern art" and the children of fire, that revolutionary gift given to humanity by Prometheus, "the giver of life," at the birth of its civilization. The trope of birth itself is a dialectical image of the modern as the archaic, the new as it was at the absolute beginning of creation: "the birth of the ocean."

The revolutionary nature of iron and glass, then, is guaranteed by their physical modernity, their implementation in contemporary building as well their shared symbolic origin in inaugural, life-giving fire. The tower's other constructive mediums represent the revolution through their participation in, indeed their consubstantiality with the newest technology. The apparatuses of mass media to be located at the top of the tower are not simply functional appendages but building blocks in their own right. "Tatlin's project," Punin writes, "founded on the synthesis of the technological conquests of our time, gives the opportunity to richly implement the new artistic forms in the realm of

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[54] Two particularly illuminating accounts of this paradox and its various implications are, in the realm of the plastic arts, Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Camridge: MIT, 1986) and, in the territory of literary modernism, Perry Meisel, *The Myth of the Modern: A Study in British Literature and Criticism after 1850* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987). Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), a theory of modernity incarnated as a work of modernist art, is informed by a philosophy of history in which the revolutionary task of the present is to redeem the past in its moment of reappearance before it disappears forever. Released ("blasted") from its place in the historical continuum, the remembered past releases the (dialectical) image of the future that can only be recognized as such in the now of our anamnestic awakening. While representing an instance of the larger Romantic paradox of revolution as the restoration of lost paradise, *The Arcades Project* puts this paradox to the hermeneutic work of demystifying commodity culture and, more uniquely to Benjamin, redeeming the utopian imaginary this culture conceals.

technology. Radio, screen, wire, being elements of the monument, can also be elements

of form."[55] The functions of information and propaganda for the sake of which the tower

is to be constructed, its motivation and guarantee of revolutionary utility, are integrated

into its very design as building matter on par with the iron and glass encasing them. So,

too, is the design principle itself, the very logic by which these materials are integrated

into a unified, symbolic form. It is here, on the level of *tektonika*, or construction, that

the monument acquires its world-historical significance as a symbol, or perhaps more

appropriately to its temporal, kinetic logic, an allegory of the revolution it

commemorates.[56]

> The use and organization of the spiral in modern form is in itself an
> enrichment of composition. Similar to how the equilibrium of parts — the
> triangle — is the finest expression of the Renaissance, the finest
> expression of our spirit is the spiral. Reciprocity of weight and support is
> the purest (classical) form of stasis; the classical form of dynamism is the
> spiral. Societies with class contradictions fought for the ownership of
> land, their line of movement is the horizontal; the spiral is the line of
> movement of an emancipated humanity. The spiral is the ideal expression
> of emancipation.[57]

It is with its spiral construction that the tower attains full revolutionary legibility. The

spiral tower is a Communist gestalt.

Finally, the tower exhibits its revolutionary meaning through its placement — the

third determinant of Constructivist form. We have already discussed the tower's nature

as autonomous site, a vertical assemblage of rotating geometric chambers meant to house

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[55] Punin 17.

[56] Rowell is particularly explicit and clarifying on this point: in Tatlin's *Monument*, the Constructivist derivation of aesthetic form from the specific properties of materials (*faktura*) and their arrangement (*tektonika*) becomes a discovery of aesthetic form's ideological content: "These two notions [material and construction], of course, derive from the *concepts* of *faktura* and *tektonika*. But with the October Revolution, they take on new meaning. *Faktura* will henceforth denote the introduction of modern materials representing the new age; *tektonika* will encompass both industrial technology and the ideal of communism." (101). The Constructivist "culture of materials" becomes, in the light of revolutionary history, a Communist material culture.

[57] Punin 20-21.

legislative, executive, and informational apparatuses. But while the tower's form gives

rise to specific sites, this form is itself produced by the site in and for which it was built

(or meant to be built): the modern metropolis in the wake of revolution and on the verge

of industrial transformation. The *Monument* suits the site of the occasion it

commemorates. And this is precisely what the monument culture that Punin critiques

fails to do. The commemorative statuary that implemented Lenin's program of

monumental propaganda — in place of which Punin offers Tatlin's tower — populated

major urban centers with statues that did not fit the environment into which they were

placed. The problem with commemorating the revolution in the language of classical

sculpture is that the revolution did not take place in the world for which such sculpture

was meant — the southern Europe of Greek and Roman antiquity and of the Italian

Renaissance. Seated, nude human figures may have belonged in the southern cities of

Renaissance Italy but not in the northern cities of revolutionary Russia:

> In some archaic epoch of the Renaissance it was natural, especially in the
> south, to put up a seated human figure under an open, radiant sky.
> Plasticity acquired a measure of its expressiveness from this light; light
> justified the implausibility of a naked youth in the middle of a city square.
> But now in the 20th century, in our bleak cold north — how false, absurd,
> primitive all these figures and monuments are. On cold days, you really
> want to stick a hat on their heads, through a coat over their shoulders; and
> this is not a paradoxical wish, it is lawful, it comes from our natural
> tendency to the appropriate, to techtonics (*tektonika*) — the finest
> principle of art.[58]

The second implication of this correspondence between object and space is that

the work's utility — the quality that lends unity to form and distinguishes Tatlin's

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[58] Punin 15; Punin gives other, related reasons for the archaism of classical sculpture in the modern city on 19. And see Rosalind Krauss's influential, groundbreaking discussion of "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT, 1986) 276-291, for a discussion of how a monument's constitutive relationship to its site becomes the principle of its formal organization and the content of its recursive representation, which makes any monument into an image of itself.

constructions from their Cubist and Futurist precursors[59] — is determined by the degree

of its continuity with its environment.

> A monument must live the sociopolitical life of the city, and the city must live in [the monument]. It must be useful and dynamic, then it will be modern. On the other side of the representation of the person-unit lie the forms of modern agitplasticity.[60]

A construction is modern in so far as it is useful, and its usefulness is a measure of its

consubstantiality with its physical and social context, of its reciprocal relation with its site

of construction and display — the chiasmus of work and world. Utility is site-specificity.

And if utility, as we have seen, is an immanent principle of form that guarantees the

object's internal coherence, the tower's utility is expressed and proven by its modernity at

all three levels of production: material, construction, and site. Made of iron and glass, the

characteristic materials of its age, organized in the shape of a spiral, the symbolic form of

revolutionary kinesis, and located in contemporary urban space, the tower is an aesthetic

totality that serves the purposes of agitation propaganda by virtue of being made in its

image. It is this immanent integration of matter, form, and ideology that Punin calls

"agitplasticity."[61]

Punin's essay on Tatlin's tower was published in 1920 by the Fine Arts division

of the Narkompros, the newly formed government organization led by the Anatoly

Lunacharsky that put the Futurist and Constructivist avant-garde to work in forming the

culture of the new society. At nearly the same time, Shklovsky published his own essay

on the *Monument*, titled "Monument to the Third International (Tatlin's Latest Work)," a

follow-up to his earlier piece on Tatlin's counter-reliefs. We will recall that in that text,

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[59] Punin 43-45, 50-52.
[60] Punin 19-20.
[61] Punin 20.

the counter-reliefs were, for Shklovsky, models of that world of continuous perception that all art attempts to restore through its own palpability, its foregrounding of its own tactile made-ness, its *faktura*. It is precisely by being absorbed in itself, in its own materials and principles of construction, that art acquires a social function — the only properly aesthetic function of defamiliarizing known reality, of impeding our automatic perception of the recognizable in order to return it to visibility. "The ultimate aim of such a movement," Shklovsky writes of Tatlin's Constructivism, "must be the construction of a new tangible world."[62]

What the counter-reliefs represent is that world of "specially constructed things," which, later in the same text, Shklovsky calls "a special paradise."[63] Tatlin's constructions are a prophecy of perception regained. Shklovsky puts off judging the social consequences of the counter-reliefs until he can see firsthand Tatlin's newest project — *The Monument to the Third International*. And it is in his text on Tatlin's tower, an essay published in the same newspaper as the earlier one and republished as the next chapter in *Knight's Move*, that, I believe, he resolves his own doubt about the feasibility of "the special paradise" of Constructivism. For the paradise of specially constructed things to be realized on earth, for "the bent sheets of tin" to "unfold into a forged counter-relief of the new world," the counter-relief must be forged out of the materials of this world. Such a counter-relief must be made on a scale commensurable with that of the world it would at once emerge from and transform, a world whose historical reality it would express through its form even as it proposed to remake this reality in the counter-relief's own image. And what could be a truer representation of a

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[62] Khod 106.
[63] Khod 106.

revolutionary present, a society born of rupture and driven by transition and flux, than a construction that looked like it continued beyond itself, beyond the very matter out of which it was made?[64] What such a counter-relief on a mass scale would share with the environment from which it, literally, arose, would not only be physical matter but also principles of social organization and, of course, the very space in which the counter-relief coexists with the society which built it.

While Shklovsky's reading of the tower seems to diverge from Punin's on the question of utility,[65] his understanding of the tower's form as the integration of materials, constructive principle, and place is remarkably close to Punin's model of utility as agitplasticity. He begins by setting the scene, first with no reference to the tower, introducing the construction through a description of the construction site. The essay's opening, one of Shklovsky's most sonorous and evocative passages of urban description, recapitulates the central metaphor of the essay on counter-reliefs — the fantastic voyage through space in a windowless sphere — and refigures it as a train journey. Instead of a monad hurtling through an invisible atmosphere, daily existence has become a series of train cars overfilled with "strange and diverse carts, cannons, crowds of people making noise about something" — a thickly realist scene of everyday life in Russia in the years after the revolution, a life that is one continuing passage, a series of flights and evacuations in the company of things as crowded and noisy as the people they are meant to serve. If perception is deadened here, it is not due to an abstract condition of sensory

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[64] This is the visual effect of the tower's spiral form, its specific illusion: "The monument appeared to lean, dramatically emphasizing its energetic qualities: the spiral thread seemed to heave forward off its base upwards and forwards, the screw thread of a tunnelling device screwing into the air as it emerged from the earth" (Milner 151). In Camilla Gray's description, "[t]his body was to be suspended on a dynamic asymmetrical axis, like a leaning Eiffel Tower, which would thus continue its spiral rhythm into space beyond" (Gray 226).
[65] Khod 110.

deprivation (the windowless sphere) but to an overabundance of sensation, particularly

auditory, a wall of everyday sound, a deafening sonic *byt*. While likened by the text to

those who are desensitized to the sound of water by living near the sea, the people riding

these train cars are deafened by second nature, by the sea of their own praxis. "The

blows roar somewhere in the chest, below consciousness. We live in the silence of

clamor." And it is immediately following this paradox of the revolutionary everyday

(*byt*) that we first hear of Tatlin's tower: "In this paved air was born the iron spiral of the

project for a monument the height of two St. Isaac's Cathedrals."[66] A product of the

desensitized, self-forgetful present, the tower bears the weight of the "paved air" on its

ascending spiral, which at once recalls and surpasses the iconic monument of its specific

site: St. Isaac's Cathedral of St. Petersburg.

If the paved air has given rise to the spiral, it has also produced the iron from

which it was made. Just as it was for Punin, the tower is for Shklovsky a world-historical

event, an inaugural moment in the history of plastic form in which a revolutionary age

has expressed itself in a material that is unique to it. And this material has, in turn,

acquired its own expression by developing the formal possibilities inherent in its physical

properties. "Here for the first time iron has stood up on its hind legs and seeks its own

artistic formula."[67] What follows this statement is a Futurist epic simile, a metaphoric

flight into the empyrean future of technological progress that, following Shklovsky's

recursive model of history, was prophetically anticipated by the image repertoire of

classical antiquity.

> In the age of construction cranes, as beautiful as the wisest Martian, iron
> had the right to go mad [*vzbesit'sia*] and remind people that our "age" in

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[66] Khod 108.
[67] Khod 109.

vain calls itself, from the time of Ovid, the "iron" age, not having any iron art.[68]

In the image of the infuriated element "gone mad," we ought to see the same "revolt of things" that, in "Parallels in Tolstoy," Shklovsky credits the poet with instigating, a poetic revolution in which objects throw off their familiar names and acquire, along with a new language for denoting them, a new physical appearance. In Tatlin's tower, iron, having revolted, "stood up on its hind legs" and "gone mad," has assumed an appearance specific to its plastic qualities, a form that would not have been possible in any other medium. By achieving such medium-specific form, iron comes to consciousness of itself and assumes possession of the age whose emblem it has already become. The iron revolution finally inaugurates the age of iron.

But just as we saw in Punin, the tower's mediums are not limited to physical materials, either naturally found (iron) or industrially manufactured (glass). The *Monument*'s form is organized by a distribution of social functions, by a division of institutional labor: legislative, executive, informational. As much it is made of iron and glass, the tower is made of these social functions and of the institutions responsible for performing them: the Sovnarkom, or the Council of People's Commissars (*Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov*), the state's principal executive body, and Rosta, or the Russian Telegraph Agency (*Rossiiskoe Telegrafnoe Agentsvo*), the state news agency. On the one hand, these organs of the new revolutionary republic have formed the sociopolitical conditions for the tower's construction. On the other hand, the tower forms (or reforms) these organs by assembling them into its own kinetic, ascendant body. They are at once

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[68] Khod 109.

the tower's matrix, its medium, and its meaning. "The monument is made of iron, glass and revolution."[69]

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[69] Khod 111.

Chapter Three

"This Strange Place":

Petersburg as Medium in Viktor Shklovsky's *Knight's Move*

In 1919, in the March 30th issue of *Isskustvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune],

Shklovsky published an essay titled "Ullia, Ullia, Marsiane," a phrase that

onomatopoeically conjured the sound of the Martian Trumpet, Khlebnikov's emblem for

Futurist prophecy. A strident declaration of art's independence from politics, "Ullia,

Ullia" was a plea to the Futurists recently taken under the wing of Anatoly Lunacharsky,

the People's Commissar of Education, to refuse their conscription into the service of state

culture and propaganda. That this document was not only published at all but published

in *Isskustvo Kommuny*, the official newspaper of the Izo-Narkompros (the fine arts

division of Lunacharsky's Commissariat of Education), is a striking sign of the openness,

the dialogical and self-contesting nature of this early Soviet experiment in the alliance

between art and revolution.[1]

In the same issue of *Isskustvo Kommuny*, Punin published his essay "On Futurism

and Communism," critiquing Shklovsky's position on the autonomy of art and his failure

to understand art's materialist basis. In dismay with the Futurist's new utilitarian turn,

Shklovsky had written, "And to think that we, the Futurists, bind our art with the Third

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[1] For a detailed account of this experiment through the history of early Soviet journals, see Christina
Lodder, "Art of the Commune: Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917-1920," *Art Journal* 52 (1993) 24-
33.

International."[2] Answering what he takes to be Shklovsky's absolute separation between

the politics of the Third International and the aesthetics of Futurism, Punin writes, "What

difference is there between the Third International and Khlebnikov's Martian Trumpet or

Tatlin's relief? For me, none at all. The first, the second, the third — all are new forms

which gladden humanity, with which it plays and which it uses."[3] Shklovsky's essays on

Tatlin's counter-reliefs and on the *Monument to the Third International* should be read

side by side with Punin's statement. As we saw in the previous chapter, what this

juxtaposition shows is that Shklovsky's position, while expressed in the language of

formalist autonomy, is nearly identical with Punin's own. Shklovsky's writings on

Tatlin's Constructivism not only refute any notion that Shklovsky's aesthetics are

disengaged or apolitical but also propose an analogy, even equivalence between art and

revolution on the basis of their shared materiality and placement, the intersection of their

mediums and sites, their historical *faktura*. It is *faktura* — a property as much of the

revolutionary (Constructivist) work of art as of the Revolution itself — that lends the

formal method the capacity to integrate art and revolution.

In nearly each of the essays comprising the chapters of *Knight's Move*, his 1923

collection of essays written "for Russians abroad" and originally published in "a tiny

theater newspaper called *The Life of Art*,"[4] Shklovsky disavows art's social dimension —

its utility, referential content, or dependence on historical forces. Yet the book's

circuitous, "knightly" path from one formalist aphorism to another passes through a

series of detailed critical demonstrations of the very opposite: the entanglement of art

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[2] Shklovsky, "Ullia, Ullia, Marsiane," *Isskustvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune] 17 (March 30, 1919); reprinted in Shklovsky's *Khod Konia* [Knight's Move] (Moscow/Berlin: Gelikon, 1923) 40 (hereafter abbreviated as Khod).
[3] Nikolai Punin, *O Tatline* ("On Tatlin") (Moscow: RA, 2001) 112.
[4] Khod 10.

with life, aesthetics with politics, art history with social history. Social reality is constantly discovered in art, and art in social reality. Shklovsky links purely artificial conventions, like the knight's move itself, with the constraints of the historical moment that generates and motivates them. "There are many reasons for the strangeness of the knight's move," Shklovsky writes in the First Foreword (the first of the book's many frames), "and the main one — the conventionality of art… I am writing about the conventionality of art. The second reason is that the knight is not free — it moves sideways because the straight path is forbidden to it."[5] Writing these words in exile in Berlin, having narrowly, and for the second time, escaped arrest by the Cheka (the first Soviet state security organization), Shklovsky knew first-hand the lateral moves one makes under official constraint. Aesthetic form and political practice are both subject to historically motivated rules. Both are ideologically plotted and geographically placed.

As both Svetlana Boym and Cristina Vatulescu have argued, life in post-revolutionary Russia exhibited for Shklovsky the very operations of estrangement by which he defined the aesthetic function.[6] Under the conditions of revolutionary upheaval, social reality inherently serves as a model for an artistic practice that wants to be genuinely — that is, formally — revolutionary. Reciprocally, an art that estranges its medium in the process of revealing its inherent formal properties, offers a model for a new, post-revolutionary life. We have already seen in Shklovsky's reading of Tatlin's *Monument* how historically specific materials and social institutions can furnish an artwork with both its mediums and its constructive principles. The tower "made of iron,

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[5] Khod 9-10.

[6] Svetlana Boym, "Poetics and Politics of Estrangement: Victor Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt," *Poetics Today* 26 (2005) 581-611; Cristina Vatulescu, "The Politics of Estrangement: Tracking Shklovsky's Device through Literary and Policing Practices," *Poetics Today* 27 (2006) 35-66.

glass, and the revolution" is the emblem of the reciprocity between artistic and social organization.

Let us recall here, too, the utopian dimension of this chiasmic relation between art and life. Tatlin's "ultimate task," Shklovsky writes, "is, obviously, the creation of a new world of perception, the transference or dissemination of the methods of constructing artistic things to the construction of 'everyday things.' The ultimate goal of such a movement must be the construction of a new tangible world."[7] The heterogeneous materials, textures, elements from which Tatlin and his students assemble their counter-reliefs are "pieces of some special paradise, where there are no names and no voids" — elements of a fully perceptible, continuous existence to come.[8] For Shklovsky, Tatlin's work paradoxically demands and produces continuity of perception by means of discontinuous planes and surfaces. And in so doing, it provides an alternative to the Proletkult (Organization for Proletarian Culture) vision of a socially useful art production. Instead of serving life as it already exists, the counter-reliefs take apart the material composition of life in order to reassemble these pieces of untransformed existence into a model of an existence to come.

In the process, they foreground the contradictions and disjunctions in the current composition, even as they negate them. In a negative dialectic that anticipates Adorno's by several decades, Shklovsky's Tatlin traces the absent image of a reconciled, unalienated existence in the broken contours and clashing surfaces of what currently exists. Shklovsky's doubt about the realization of such an existence by means of this negation of negation — "whether the bent tin sheets of his students' compositions will be

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[7] Khod 106.
[8] Khod 106.

able to blossom into the forged counter-relief of a new world"[9] — registers the tragic irony of art's inherent refutation of the actual. Continuously perceivable and autonomous, an artwork stands as concrete evidence of the actuality of continuity and autonomy — of substantial, unsubordinated life. Yet it cannot evoke such a life without immediately expressing its absence from any currently being lived; its own fictive status of artwork, of a thing absolutely different from the things of the world, condemns to nonexistence the existence it represents. As evidence of the actuality of the non-actual, art always perjures itself. This, for Adorno (in *Aesthetic Theory* as in just about all his writings on aesthetics), is art's original sin. By making "some special paradise" appear to those who have banished themselves from it, art makes a promise it can only betray; art, for Shklovsky as it is for Adorno, is "the broken promise of happiness."[10] At the end of his reflections on Tatlin's Constructivism, Shklovsky makes it clear that if art is to remain art, it must continually renew this continually broken promise. "I don't believe in miracles," he writes, "so I am not an artist"[11] — a fittingly negative formulation of the imperative to keep faith with a miracle whose condition of realization is the negation of all that is presently real.

Shklovsky's dialectical formalism makes art's autonomy, its independence and difference from life, into the very guarantee of its social and political significance. To transform existence, art must be absolutely unlike it; it must be the principle of dissimilarity itself. On the other hand, and at the same time, its very unlikeness and heterogeneity likens art to the heterogeneous, self-differing life around it — particularly

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[9] Khod 107.

[10] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) passim.

[11] Khod 107.

to the life of a society being unmade and remade from the ground up. The flight from social existence into artistic autonomy followed by a return to the social on the ground of its identity to artistic non-identity — this is the dialectic of the knight's move. Its figure is retraced in the book's every encounter with specific plastic, literary, and theatrical artworks. It also gives formal coherence to the book as a whole, as it moves from its opening eye-witness account of the blockade of Petersburg to a gallery of aesthetic objects, returning at the end to Petersburg, "the free port" in the wake of the blockade, to find it at once transformed and preserved. Itself an exhibit of the dialectical formalism it champions, *Knight's Move* is a montage of discontinuous texts, suspended between two elaborately artificial framing devices and exhibiting indelible traces of the contingent, socio-historical circumstances of their composition. The book is a counter-relief in critical prose, a reflexive artifact assembled from preexisting materials, a moving monument to an incomplete revolution.

I. The Millipede and the Knight

In the last chapter, we saw Shklovsky define Tatlin's tower as a formal synthesis of art and revolution. We are now ready to consider Shklovsky's own narrative reconstruction of Petersburg in similar terms: as a site-specific constellation of historically determined mediums. This verbal construction is a hybrid of journalistic narrative, cultural theory, and memoir that forms the innermost "frame" of *Knight's Move* — the opening and closing accounts of Petersburg during and immediately after the civil war blockade of 1919. But before we turn to Shklovsky's own monument to the Revolution, let us first examine more closely the politics of his argument for aesthetic

autonomy. This argument is presented at the opening of *Knight's Move* by means of a

step-ladder, meta-fictional allegory of the work of art in the age of Agitprop.

In the second of two Forewords to *Knight's Move*, Shklovsky presents three

interlinked parables on the nature of art. The first parable tells of a peasant's encounter

with Nicholas the Wonderworker. The peasant, dismayed at the paucity of his harvest

due to unpropitious weather, curses Nicholas the Wonderworker for failing to provide the

proper conditions for crops to grow. In return for his curses, Nicholas grants the peasant

the power to regulate the weather. "Here is your self-determination [*samoopredelenie*],

here is your mandate [*mandat*]," says Nicholas, "make your own weather."[12] Nicholas's

diction is decidedly disenchanted, indexing the codes of revolutionary polemics and

political journalism. This, of course, is exactly the point – what is at stake here is not

agricultural folklore but the protocols of state regulation. The peasant proves hopeless at

regulating the weather, and at their next encounter, Nicholas, perhaps in consolation, tells

him a story, the second of the three parables, about "people who later became idiots."

This unfortunate fate befell the heroes of this next allegory, who "lived in Italy or Japan,"

because they had been eating husked rice. In their attempt to remake rice, to extract the

useful and discard the extraneous, they threw away what was most valuable, "the part

needed by the brain [contained] only in the chaff."[13] Having discovered the reason for

the onset of the people's stupidity and delivered the moral — "Do not invent food, you

will never anticipate everything"[14] — the doctors compare them to the peasant who

wanted to regulate the weather (and whose mentor, Nicholas the Wonderworker, narrates

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[12] Khod 13.
[13] Khod 15.
[14] Khod 15.

this second parable, which is nested in his own like rice in its chaff) and to "the Indian folk tale of the millipede," which one of the doctors then proceeds to tell.

This third and final parable at once adds one more allegory of state regulation and decodes the entire narrative chain. Linked formally by its relay of narrators, this chain is linked thematically by the opposition between nature and artifice. The climate, the soil, and their organic products (wheat, rice) are impervious to social engineering. They can be followed, learned, but not remade or reinvented. Until this point, the moral seems to be a vaguely Romantic injunction against regulating nature. But in the parable of the millipede, who takes over the narrative not to extend it but to close it with a final meaning, reveals that what cannot be regulated in nature is the very thing that cannot be regulated in art. The tortoise, jealous of the speedy millipede who "had exactly a thousand legs or less," compliments her ability to coordinate all her legs: "How wise you are! And how do you guess and where do you get the cleverness to know what position your 978th leg must take when you advance your fifth?"[15] The flattered millipede, reflecting on the matter, "began thinking about where each of her legs was, introduced centralization, red tape [*kantseliarshchinu*], bureaucracy, and could no longer move a single one."[16] In the face of this fiasco of bureaucratic organization, the learned millipede declares,

> 'Viktor Shklovsky was right when he said: the greatest misfortune of our time is that we regulate art without knowing what it is. The greatest misfortune of Russian art is that it is neglected like a husk of rice. And meanwhile, art is not at all one of the means of agitation propaganda, [but] is like vitalin, which must be contained in food besides proteins and fats, itself neither protein nor fat, but the life of the organism is impossible without it.

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[15] Khod 16.
[16] Khod 16.

> 'The greatest misfortune of Russian art is that it is not allowed to move organically, like the heart moves in the human chest: it is regulated like the movement of trains.[17]

Bringing the triple parable to a close, the millipede's statement renders explicit what has all along been its philosophical content: the nature of art and the possibility of aesthetic theory. In the first parable, art, likened to the totality of nature, is a profession and a *métier*, knowable only by those who explore its specific rules and exigencies. Art, like nature, is an organic medium. In the parable of the rice eaters, art is husk: that which appears useless and dispensable, an outer shell that contains the essential but is itself inessential. It fits into none of the categories by which productive society organizes the useful. It is "neither protein nor fat, but the life of the body is impossible without it."[18] The parable of the millipede introduces one more organic figure for the life of art: the human body. Art is the spontaneously organized movement of a living whole, "like the heart [that] moves in the human chest."[19] It is destroyed by self-consciousness and systematization, by the imposition of analysis from within and regulation from without — both extrinsic to art. The allegory equates internal analysis with external regulation: as the millipede begins to analyze its own movements, to bring its spontaneity to consciousness by accounting for all its legs, it "introduced centralization, red tape, bureaucracy and could no longer move a single one."

These three parables of art appear to caution against interpretation. Between them, Nicholas the Wonderworker, the idiots, and (most damningly and most polemically) the millipede seem to announce an urgent warning: to analyze art is to paralyze it. At the same time, what might seem like a modernist rehashing of the

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[17] Khod 16-17.
[18] Khod 17.
[19] Khod 17.

Romanticist recoil from rationalizing the imagination (Wordsworth's "we murder to dissect") becomes more complex and paradoxical when we consider that the warning, delivered by a succession of allegorical narrators, is issued by Viktor Shklovsky, Russian modernism's foremost champion of the formalist analysis of art. Does the formal method not require precisely the identification, classification, and reconstruction of the constituent elements of the work of art that the three fools of the parables attempt? Does not every formalist count the millipede's legs? And does not formalism, with its descriptive and systematic approach to the work, moreover, contest by its very nature what seems to be the radically skeptical implication of the last parable: that art is not only unknown but unknowable, like the life immanent to the human organism?

The answer is that it is not any interpretation or analysis of art that the allegorical misfortunes of the peasant, the rice eaters, and the millipede warn against, but specifically *political* interpretation. The political stakes of the polemic against "regulat[ing] art without knowing what it is" are raised in the second half of the millipede's warning, an explicit politicization of the Romantic aesthetics of the first half:

> 'Citizens and comrades,' said the millipede, 'look at me and you will see to what excessive regulation leads! Comrades in revolution, comrades in war, leave art its free will, not in its own name but in the name of the fact that there is no regulating the unknown!'[20]

Yet if the triple parable in the book's second preface is a warning against entangling art in politics, what do we make of the preface that precedes it, in which the book's very title is interpreted politically, as a figure or political allegory of digressive progress in the space of unfreedom — the strategy of politically constrained art? The book's most famous pronouncement, "Art has always been free from life, and its color has never

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[20] Khod 17.

reflected the color of the flag over the city fortress,"[21] is the declaration which Shklovsky

threw in the face of the Futurists' new social agenda, the reorientation of Futurism to

social utility which he saw as the betrayal of both art and politics. Yet here, in the book's

own opening move, the metaphor of the knight links aesthetic convention with political

circumstances, artistic form with social content. The knight's move at once reflects the

lack of the freedom to move forward directly and compensates for it through formal

means, through a strategy that allows it to move forward in spite of everything. As

allegorized by the knight's move, aesthetic form is both the expression of social problems

and a solution to them. Rather than existing apart from the social realm, art achieves its

freedom by negating social unfreedom; its aesthetic autonomy is the negative image of

social heteronomy.[22] In the figure of the knight, then, art *does* seem to reflect — if only

negatively — the colors of the flag flying over the city fortress.

In an early chapter, political propaganda is itself characterized in uncannily

formalist terms, granted the very capacity to render the familiar strange, to disrupt habit

and impede recognition of everyday objects through their deformation that, as I have

discussed in detail, constitutes Shklovsky's core aesthetic doctrine.[23] How can we tell art

from propaganda if both perform the central aesthetic operation, the function of art as

such? If art is to be kept away from political interpretation, liberated from social utility,

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[21] Khod 39.

[22] In a phrase, this is Theodor Adorno's position on aesthetic autonomy, which he formulates in many of his essays on literature and music, particularly those collected in *Notes to Literature I* and *II* (New York, Columbia UP, 1991 and 1992), and develops most fully in *Aesthetic Theory*. For Adorno, art's political role is to model a reconciled world, a world free of subordination, which exists only in the image of the autonomous work of art. Art's freedom from utility, its purposiveness without purpose (in Kant's definition), always puts it on the side of freedom in an unfree world. Art is the promise of an unsubordinated life, of an existence that does not yet exist. At the same time, by representing freedom in a world defined by its absence, art implies that such freedom could exist in the present, thereby betraying the very freedom whose possibility it represents. This, for Adorno, is art's bad conscience, to which any serious art is doomed and which modern art uncompromisingly exposes with its "broken promise of happiness."

[23] Khod 44-45.

ontologically distinguished from life itself, how are we to read this crossing between the two in the formalist formulation of the difference between them?

My aim here is not to deconstruct or expose as untenable the opposition between art and life or form and content that organizes Shklovsky's formalism. Rather, it is, as I have been doing, to show that the crossing of these canonically opposed terms is the inevitable and desirable outcome of aesthetic theory's engagement with history and place, the mark of a dialectical aesthetics. In Shklovsky's theory of art, art's difference from social reality, the principle that makes art unlike the world in and from which it is made, is to be found in reality itself as its own defining feature. If not, perhaps, stranger than fiction, life is exactly as strange. This condition reflects both the post-revolutionary, transitional moment in which the theory arose and the theory's adequacy to the historical and political meaning of that moment. Shklovsky's theory articulates its own historically symptomatic nature. The contradiction at the heart of estrangement, art's entanglement with the life from which it would keep separate, is proof of the theory's historical truth.

But let us attempt to reconstruct the program advanced by Shkovksy's text – and *Knight's Move* is certainly programmatic. Like so many aesthetic programs advanced in the age of the historical avant-garde, Shklovsky's begins with negation. What the narrative and critical texts gathered in *Knight's Move* polemically, uncompromisingly reject is exactly what I have just suggested is the book's central concern: the social nature of art. That the book is Shklovsky's unambiguous rejection of the historical-materialist theory of art (his last such rejection, before a sequence of compromises with state doctrine culminating in 1930 in "A Monument to Scientific Error") would appear as

much from Shklovsky's own proclamations in the book as from those of the book's

Marxist critics — most famously, Leon Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution*.[24]

The immediate historical context of Shklovsky's declaration of art's

independence from life is a series of clashes, immediately following the February

Revolution, between two leading cultural organizations, Maxim Gorky's Commission on

Art Affairs and the Union of Artists. The Union included the principal Futurists and

Constructivists, among them Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Brik, Tatlin, along with

Shklovsky himself as one of its leaders.[25] The struggle between the Commission and the

Union lead to the Futurists joining a new state institution, the State Council for Art

Affairs, founded by Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education and one of the most

influential figures in Soviet culture until Stalin's ascendance in the late 1920s. The

newly fortified Futurists, empowered by their involvement with Lunacharsky's

Narkompros, began in 1918 to publish the newspaper *Isskustvo Kommuny* (*Art of the

Commune*), which became the official organ of LEF and one of modern history's rare

collaborations between state power and the avant-garde. The Futurists' new program

called for art's participation in revolutionary social praxis and for the elimination of

outdated art (and, very nearly, of the outdated idea of art as such).[26]

Shklovsky's response to this program was, as we have seen, the article "Ullia,

Ullia, Marsiane" (a reference to Khlebnikov's earlier manifesto, "The Trumpet of the

Martians," whose Futurist position the new program had compromised), published in

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[24] Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005) 146-149.
[25] Here I am drawing entirely on Richard Sheldon's detailed and illuminating account of these crucial events in early Soviet cultural history in "Viktor Shklovsky and the Device of Ostensible Surrender," *Slavic Review* 34 (1975) 87.
[26] Sheldon 88.

1919 in *Isskustvo Kommuny*, whose pages were the very target of Shklovsky's urgent

critique, and then again in 1923 in *Knight's Move*. The essay's declaration that "Art has

always been free from life, and its color has never reflected the color of the flag over the

city fortress"[27] has been read ever since as Shklovsky's last stand, the final flare of

formalism fired across the Rubicon of Soviet cultural history.

Yet, writing from abroad, in exile for the second time since the Revolution,

having fled to Berlin after barely escaping arrest on charges of his involvement with the

Socialist Revolutionary Party (the SRs) plot to overthrow the Bolshevik government,

Shklovsky makes a strange candidate for a politically disengaged aesthete. As Cristina

Vatulescu writes of the self-portrait that emerges from *Sentimental Journey* (1923), "A

far cry from the hackneyed portrait of the apolitical Formalist critic, Shklovsky is an

armored car commander, then a wanted fugitive."[28] Clear as Shklovsky's polemic

against the subordination of art to politics may be in the pages of *Isskustvo Kommuny*,

this polemic acquires a different meaning in the context of *Knight's Move*. There, what

may appear in isolation to be an aestheticist declaration of the disinterested nature of art

becomes a dialectical model of aesthetic autonomy. This autonomy is defined as much

against the literalist model of artistic medium as material essence (which I have aligned

with Futurism, but which, for Shklovsky, was represented by Suprematist abstraction) as

against the instrumentalization of art (as represented by both Narkompros and Proletkult).

A rejection of both, Shklovsky's dialectical formalism instead derives aesthetic autonomy

from the historical homology between artistic and social forms, from the reciprocal

analogy between art and life. Read this way, *Knight's Move* anticipates Shklovsky's

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[27] Khod 39.
[28] Vatulescu 42.

adaptation of the formal method to historical materialism. Even more importantly, such a reading of this unrepentantly formalist text shows that, contrary to the standard critical account, Shklovsky's accommodation of historical materialism was not a surrender, either actual or "ostensible," to external state pressure state but a logical development of the historicity and site-specificity of his formalism.

This contradiction, the dependence of the aesthetic realm on the reality from which it must declare its autonomy if it is to be properly aesthetic, finds its own resolution in the specificity of place. It is the structure of the geographic and historical sites of aesthetic theory and artistic practice that reconciles form and content, art and life, aesthetics and politics. The city of Petrograd (which Shklovsky archaically calls Petersburg, at once indicating by negation the revolutionary rupture which renamed it and defamiliarizing the still unfamiliar post-revolutionary present) is at once a work of art and a work of history. The account of the blockade of Petersburg, the documentary "bundle"[29] which follows the allegorical preface, maps the modernist discourse of autonomous and autotelic form onto the modern landscape of the starving, literally self-consuming city. The dialectical cityscape resolves the central contradiction of Shklovsky's formalist theory by providing it with a third term: the city as both art and life. At the same time, it offers a method of integrating the aesthetic with the social without subordinating art to politics. Shklovsky's account of Petersburg during the civil war and in transition between the policies of War Communism and Lenin's New Economic Plan (NEP) frames the book's art- and literary-critical theorization of medium and *faktura* with a historical, first-person plural account of the deformation of persons

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[29] Sheldon's translation. I would prefer the Benjaminian word *convolute* or "sheaf"— an appropriate term both for Shklovsky's method of nesting texts within texts and for the practice of indirect forward movement practiced by the knight.

and things under the pressures of history — of revolution and war.[30] The flag flying over

the fortress of Shklovsky's city is the site-specific medium of history itself. In *Knight's*

Move, the cityscape performs the aesthetic function of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization or

estrangement) on non- or extra-aesthetic material — on the inhabited (and uninhabited)

buildings, objects, and mediums of daily experience.[31]

As we have seen in "Ullia, Ullia, Marsiane," Shklovsky presents his dialectical

formalism in explicit opposition to art's propagandistic misuse by stage agencies that

were fast conscripting and absorbing the avant-garde with promise of state supported

influence. In the text that follows "Ullia, Ullia, Marsiane," entitled "Pounding Nails with

a Samovar," Shklovsky's target is again the misplacement of art in the service of

agitprop.[32] Using music for propaganda is like pounding nails with a samovar: a

physically possible but profoundly inappropriate act of misuse.

Having defined didactic art as the diversion of an object from its established

function, Shklovsky immediately compares it with the effect that war has on the functions

of things.

> I have seen war, I have stoked stoves with a piano in Stanislavov and
> burned rugs in bonfires, pouring vegetable oil over them, in the mountains
> of Kurdistan. Now I'm stoking a stove with books. I know the laws of

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[30] This analysis, conducted through and by means of narrative representation, could be perfectly described, using Michael Taussig's term, as "fictocritical" anthropology. *Knight's Move* as a whole is, I believe, an exemplary work of fictocriticism.

[31] Vatulescu makes the argument, in "The Politics of Estrangement" that in Shklovsky's autobiographical writings, it is life itself, as it was lived in the decades following the revolution, that has become enstranged. To employ *ostranenie* as a representational strategy, then, is to accurately reflect or register what has already taken place in the social realm. In the context of the early Soviet republic, modernist deformation is mimesis. It is also a form of coping, a sublimation of the logic of social experience through its aesthetic reduplication. I am greatly indebted to Vatulescu's reading that historicizes Shklovsky not against the grain of his aesthetics but on its own terms, giving us a formalism that truly confirms Roland Barthes's statement in *Mythologies*: "To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it." Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 112.

[32] Khod 42-45.

> war and understand that it reforms things in its own way, turning a person
> into 180 pounds of human flesh or a rug into a surrogate for a fuse.[33]

Both war and agitprop, then, turn objects away from their intended functions, "reform" them by taking them out of their conventional context and reassigning or reshaping them to new uses. But wartime misuse, dictated by "privation," reforms things by treating them as material, which is "terrible and honest," while agitprop is dishonest because it pretends that no misuse has taken place. While in this text Shklovsky never refers to *ostranenie* by name, there is no mistaking it in this generalized displacement of objects from the uses by which they are known. Defamiliarization is misuse — the catachrestic treatment of things. And war is defamiliarization on a mass scale, the world made strange. The theater of war as the scene of defamiliarization — this is the condition of everyday life in Petersburg under the blockade.

Just as it was for Stein, place (here cityscape rather than landscape) for Shklovsky is at once origin and goal, a source of material, a formal model, and an artistic destiny. And as we will see again in Smithson's dialectical landscapes, place presents an image of an immanently historical nature, a physiognomy of social modernity. Finally, but also firstly, place is the means by which social reality enters the aesthetic construct.

II. Street Scenes

The subject of the majority of the critical essays in *Knight's Move* is theater. Plays, theatrical adaptations of prose works, and revivals of classic repertoire provide varied ground for practicing the formal method of analysis. The many reviews of specific theatrical productions are also always occasions for a more general theoretical

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[33] Khod 42.

engagement with the meaning of modern theater and its role in post-revolutionary art and culture. Shklovsky's principal target of critique is the immanence of theater in everyday life in the form of amateur theater troupes and drama circles, a development he associates with Evreinov's notion of the theatricalization of life. In an essay on "Drama and Mass Productions," Shklovsky writes, "Here we have Evreinov declaring: 'Every minute of our life is theater.' Now, what use is this to us, when we have theater every minute!"[34] An essay on the same topic, titled "A Flag Is Snapping," makes a more direct and dire diagnosis: "This hysterical acting syndrome, enveloping all of Soviet Russia, is like an adipose transformation of tissues."[35] But even as Shklovsky wants to deliver workers, sailors, soldiers from "vaudeville, dance, and lectures on cosmography,"[36] he is just as critical of professional productions that are equally oblivious to the historicity of their medium — to its conventions and constraints.

Amateur productions put on by Proletkult drama circles and professional ones staged by theatrical eminences like Evreinov and Meyerhold can fail in the same way: by unwittingly replicating the very bourgeois theater they intended to displace. The problem with Meyerhold's and Evreinov's productions is not their modernization of classical plays but their failure to modernize them. For Shklovsky, the principal cause of this failure is contemporary theater's neglect of the central principle of theatricality, which, in the essay "On Psychological Footlights," he defines as "flickering illusion."[37] Like any art, theater must foreground its own rules of construction in order to keep them from

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[34] Khod 51-55.
[35] Khod 53.
[36] Khod 53.
[37] Khod 78.

becoming automatic and invisible, to "underscore and refresh the conventions of form."[38]

The technical means that theater has at its disposal, its proper, medium-specific device

for laying bare its own artifice is the line of footlights demarcating the edge of the stage,

the illuminated border between art and life, the flickering limit of illusion. Theater takes

place at this limit, this physical line between illusion and reality that theatrical action

continually crosses in order to reestablish it — a limit that is preserved, reaffirmed in the

very act of being transgressed. "[T]heater needs a flickering, that is, by turns appearing

and disappearing, illusion. … here meaning lies in the fact that the action is perceived as

real and as illusory by turns."[39]

This eminently dialectical theory of theater as the making and unmaking of

illusion is a medium-specific application of Shklovsky's dialectical formalism.[40] Form is

always engaged in the process of deformation, a self-estrangement that restores it to

visibility and thereby restores its capacity to defamiliarize the very reality against which

it is defined. The medium of this process, the material subject to deformation and

renewal, is the stock of inherited forms and tropes (devices, plots, motifs) from which the

elements of a new composition are selected and combined, the canonical "warehouse of

spare parts" that constitutes the tradition.[41] The central thesis of Shklovsky's formalist

art historiography is that "Creativity, even the revolutionary-artistic kind, is traditional

creativity."[42]

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[38] Khod 77.
[39] Khod 78.
[40] It is also precisely analogous to Greenberg's reading of Cubist composition as "reconstructing the flat picture surface with the very means of its denial." "The Pasted Paper Revolution," CEC 65.
[41] Khod 71.
[42] Khod 73.

He makes this claim in an essay titled "Collective Creativity," which redefines collective production as the rearrangement of a shared, traditional repertoire. "Collective Creativity" is Shklovsky's version of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (and written at essentially the same time as Eliot's essay). It exhibits a consummately modernist awareness of the dependence of the present on the past, of the new on the antiquated, of originality on imitation. Collective production becomes a matter not only of collaboration with contemporaries in the present but with precursors in the past, of the simultaneity of all prior canons, formal and thematic, with the heretical work that revises them. In anticipation of Barthes' "Death of the Author," Shklovsky consigns the creator to the status of "the geometric point where lines of collective creativity intersect."[43] The modern collective creator, like the epic poet,[44] is the vehicle or vessel for collectively held ideas.

Post-revolutionary theatrical culture, and culture in general, is in danger of forgetting "the traditional collective" status of its materials of production.[45] By forgetting the historicity of forms and mediums, art risks losing the very history it attempts to represent. Instead of a historical theater, Evreinov's productions offer an escape from history into spectacle. The contemporary theater Shklovsky criticizes is an amnesiac theater that, like Suprematism's objectless abstraction,[46] fails to contextualize form in the history of its use. To historicize theatrical form itself and assimilate the historical present into the medium of theater, a production must include pieces of the present as contrasting

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[43] Khod 69.
[44] Khod 71.
[45] Khod 72.
[46] Khod 104.

elements.[47] Instead of a mechanical juxtaposition of fiction and life, Shklovsky proposes

a Brechtian solution to the problem of making theater political on its own terms[48]: the

disruption of the absorptive illusion of theatrical action by the intrusion of the viewer's

reality, a transformation of the technology of theater rather than a mere substitution of

content.

Instead of Evreinov's theatricalization of life, Shklovsky proposes to

detheatricalize theater by staging it in the space of the city, to subject its dramatic action

to interruptions from everyday life, just as everyday life is itself constantly subjected to

both internal interruptions and to the intrusions of mass spectacle. In the essay with the

Mayakovskian title "About a Loud Voice," Shklovsky reviews "a production of a

mystery play set up in the portal of the stock exchange."[49] The aspect of the production

that draws Shklovsky's highest admiration is its "use of non-aesthetic material in a work

of art."[50] Just as Tatlin's *Monument* included state institutions among its mediums,

retracing with the formal arrangement of its parts the political distribution of legislative,

executive, and informational functions, the mystery play repeats the utilitarian, or

"prosaic," structure of a military parade with its "artistic" organization of actors moving

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[47] Khod 57, 66.

[48] Besides Brecht's own writings on theater, perhaps the clearest statement of both the problem of political art and the Brechtian solution to it is Walter Benjamin's "The Artist as Producer," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986) 220-238. Benjamin's thesis — that an art form's political content cannot be transformed without first transforming its productive apparatus — emerges through a discussion of both verbal and plastic mediums, culminating with theater. While Brecht is a central influence, the essay is also the product of Benjamin's contact with Sergei Tretyakov, whose close involvement with LEF, theatrical work with Meyerhold (among others), and Constructivist theories of the object and "factographic" form exposed Benjamin to precisely the constellation of aesthetic theories and practices we have been charting.

[49] Khod 80.

[50] Khod 81.

across the stage.[51] A theatrical performance that follows "the laws of aesthetics"

replicates a political performance that follows the laws of the state.

Inspired by this integration of art and life, Shklovsky proposes a "bolder," more

radically factual strategy for artistic production: "to juxtapose, to find the aesthetic

relation not between an aesthetic and a non-aesthetic object but between two non-

aesthetic ones, directly between things of the real world."[52] As an example of a potential

artwork made from two objects taken directly from reality, Shklovsky offers the

juxtaposition of two districts of the city of Petersburg, "the Vyborg side and the

Petersburg side"[53] — a larger scale version of the site-specific theatrical production he is

reviewing, a work physically inserted into the Petersburg cityscape. The production is

mapped onto the city by a precise set of coordinates (the Fortress of Peter and Paul, St.

Isaac's Cathedral, Uritsky Square) — Petersburg landmarks that designate the boundaries

of the performance and together constitute the footlights of a stage coterminous with the

city itself. These reflections on theatrical site-specificity end with a vision of a city

brought to life by theater, a kind of techno-animist scene with the Martian, the mascot of

Russian Futurism, in the starring role:

> In such a performance, the actors should also be the construction cranes
> over the Neva, harbingers of my brothers, the Martians of H. G. Wells.
> And the projector [on the Fortress of Peter and Paul] would
> simultaneously conduct all the orchestras of the city and the cannon
> drums.[54]

The very same construction cranes, "beautiful as the wisest Martian," that augured the

new iron age of Tatlin's tower have now become the prophets of the theater of the future.

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[51] Khod 81.
[52] Khod 82.
[53] Khod 82.
[54] Khod 83.

The city would become at once the stage, the actor, the director, and the spectator of the performance.

This radical externalization of the stage, rather than diminishing its theatricality, would reorient theater to its own artifice as it discovered its proper language, specific to its medium, in the very composition of modern life. Far from abandoning its autonomy, such a theater would reclaim it by revealing the operation of its own rules in its contingent and prosaic raw material, laying bare the artistic device already at work in everyday reality, displaying the aesthetic organization of the non-aesthetic. Site-specific theater would not *imitate* reality but *include* it, locating its own formal parameters in the public, historical sites of the living, post-revolutionary city. This recasting of the theater as city is framed by the first chapter of *Knight's Move,* in which the city becomes the stage of history — a theater of war and of catastrophic daily life — in Shklovsky's scenographic account of Petersburg during the blockade.

III. "Of Space and Sea": The Self-Consuming City

In its opening and closing framing accounts of the blockade and its aftermath, *Knight's Move* insists on the legibility of revolutionary transformation in the buildings, bridges, canals, and streets of Petersburg. These texts express a simultaneous commitment to the fact of irreversible change and to the persistence of the place in which this change manifests. Shklovsky's commitment to place, reaffirmed in exile, as the identifiable medium of a history still incomplete at once registers the exile's longing to return and the dissident's refusal to recognize oneself in a place that has become other without ceasing to be one's own. This contradictory commitment finds rhetorical

expression in repeated negations — "Life is not being built by us," "I have lost myself,"
"No truth, no. Not the whole truth. Not even a fourth of the truth," "Not the whole truth,
not even a fourth of the truth. I do not wish to remember" [55]— of the very work of self-
placing, truth-telling, and remembering that the text performs.

The city of Petersburg, under the conditions imposed by the civil war and the
blockade, becomes raw material for continued existence, a quarry for the extraction of the
minimal survival (and less), the support of bare life. Its buildings are disassembled for
burning materials, to supply heat for basic daily necessities. The city lives by consuming
itself.[56] But, Shklovsky insists, it does live:

> And the city, the great city, lived on. It lived by its city soul, the soul of
> many, like a heap of coal smoldering under the rain. Out of our dark
> apartments (oh darkness, and soot of the little nightlight, and waiting for
> light!) we gathered in the theaters. We looked at the stage. The hungry
> actors played. The hungry writer wrote. The scholars worked.[57]

The minimal survival that the besieged city supplies to its citizen from within its walls,
the barely sustaining sustenance it provides with its own flesh, supports an intellectual
life far in excess of its physical resources. "It seemed that we were working not with the
brain but with the spinal cord" — a somatic stream of consciousness running parallel to
the flow of the ice-covered Neva ("The Neva flowed beneath the ice, it flowed, and we
worked").[58] Thought itself is site-specific.

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[55] Khod 193, 194, 196
[56] Khod 24.
[57] Khod 33.
[58] Khod 34.

The process of self-disassembly that gradually turns Petersburg into "an artificial ruin … an engraving by Piranesi"[59] also transforms it into the site of a new, post-revolutionary becoming.

> The city was ill with a great illness — revolution. This dying Petersburg did not become provincial, those who came from it were melting from its heat. … The old life has ended and we are in the desert. I don't know where I am going, but I don't want to go back.[60]

The fire in the desert of the new city, the city living in its own wake, is "the red flame of revolution"[61] that (literally) feeds on the decaying matter of the old city, the wood and the paper, the walls and the furniture of pre-revolutionary existence. But rather than being consumed and disappearing, this matter persists within the life processes and constructions of the city to come. As we will see, Shklovsky returns to the self-consuming city (if indeed he ever leaves it) at the end of the book and sees it physically rebuilt from its own repurposed ruins. Like Freud's allegorical Rome in which all the architectural phases of its history simultaneously occupy the same space, every building still standing in the place where it once stood and appearing in its original form on the same ground with the structures that replaced it, Shklovsky's revolutionary Petersburg lives its past in the present.[62] Unlike Freud's vision of pristine preservation, however, the city Shklovsky describes persists in the form of ruins. But rather than being the

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[59] Khod 24.

[60] Khod 34-5.

[61] Khod 35.

[62] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962) 17. As I have mentioned already, Shklovsky's very choice to (for the most part) refer to the former capital of Russia as "Petersburg" instead of "Petrograd" (its official name after 1914) is a form of deliberate anachronism. We might think of this anachronism not as reactionary nostalgia but as a survival strategy — a use of preexisting materials to construct new scaffolding for the present.

monumental ruins of official history, Petersburg's ruins are the traces of anonymous
everyday life, indexes of minor, "weak and unskilled"[63] practices of daily survival.

We might see in these practices which put available materials to uses for which
they were not made, which dismantle existing structures in order to construct new ones
from their constituent parts, a version of Claude Lévi-Strauss's "science of the concrete"
— the bricoleur's "devious" use of "pre-constrained" or pre-coded materials.[64] Indeed,
Shklovsky's Petersburg during the blockade appears to be a vast scene of bricolage, a
collective work of second-order creation that turns ends into means, completed,
engineered structures into raw materials for newly improvised ones.[65] But if bricolage
works with "the remains and debris of events," the "fossilized evidence of the history of
an individual or a society,"[66] Petersburg's self-consumption is bricolage in reverse.
Rather than performing a rescue operation on the leftovers of history by constructing a
present from fossils of the past, its citizens turn current constructions into leftovers by
fossilizing the present. To turn the city into "artificial ruins" is to engineer entropy, to
invent a *techne* that beats *physis* at its own game of decay.[67] Old buildings reemerge from
under their scaffolding, which has been removed and burned for fuel:

> It was then that the graves of old houses opened: on Nevsky people took
> down and burned the scaffolding on the buildings being rebuilt and they
> appeared anew, as old, dead walls.[68]

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[63] Khod 24.
[64] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1966) 16, 17, 19.
[65] Lévi-Strauss 21-22.
[66] Lévi-Strauss 21-22.
[67] In the epilogue, we will see the writings of Robert Smithson perform and theorize this fossilization of the present. Both in his earthwork and in his critical prose, Smithson is concerned with the artificial production of decay that transposes history onto natural processes and, conversely, historicizes nature as the work of social forces.
[68] Khod 25.

The besieged Petersburg is performing bricolage on itself. Its survival strategy is to divert the process of decay into the generation of usable energy. In this endgame economy, the city hastens its return to the inanimate state in order to live on its own death drive.[69]

Continuous with this process of artificial regression is the reversal of the relation between country and city. If before the blockade, "the city drew everything from [the country], grew and swelled," now the country turns the tables on the city and draws from it its material and human wealth: in exchange for "bread and potatoes … fat," it takes "drapes, dishes, gold, gramophones, icons, clothes."[70] "Now," Shklovsky wites, "the city is melting in the country like soap in water."[71] The only thing left behind, excluded from this transaction, is books — "everything except books."[72] Books are the inexchangeable, indissoluble remainder of the return to nature that is really the exchange of second nature for first.

But there is another figure for Petersburg's self-consumption, one that may describe better than the notion of engineered entropy or a diverted death drive its reconstructed life after the blockade. Shklovsky's affirmation of the city's continuity, particularly its uninterrupted practice of art and scholarship, is expressed, in the closing words of his account, through the Leninist trope of the revolutionary flame: "the red fire of revolution — the last that remains of the city in Russia."[73] The text's figuration of fire — "the festival of universal conflagration,"[74] "the smoldering heap of coal in the rain,"

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[69] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989).
[70] Khod 32.
[71] Khod 32.
[72] Khod 32.
[73] Khod 35.
[74] Khod 24.

— converges at the end with the earlier metaphor of the city as "a weak patient."[75] What

fire and illness have in common is heat, the heat of the flame and the heat of the feverish

body: "The city, exhausted to ash, was warm with the heat of a feverish patient."[76] It

is this metaphoric heat of revolutionary fever that keeps the city from dying. Heat,

given off by Petersburg's self-immolation and its revolutionary fever, is the city's

hope.

The mediums of this hope are the materials, once utilitarian and site-specific, that

people burn to survive: books together with bookshelves, furniture, doors, walls.[77]

Burning renders all objects equivalent, interchangeable as things that burn. Their specific

utility or qualitative use value is obliterated by their exchange value as quantities of fuel.

Under the blockade economy of self-consumption, things are exchanged at their burning

rate. Shklovsky represents this production of universal equivalence as the exertion of a

"pressure" so enormous that it denatures and deforms all things into uniformity.

> When the pressure does not exceed a certain amount, objects change their
> form in diverse ways, but when the pressure is enormous, the hardness of
> straw and the hardness of iron are equal before it. It all forms uniformly.[78]

Under the pressure of daily necessity, conditioned by the catastrophe of history as it

overtakes a specific place, objects lose their identity — a combination of their particular

purpose or utility, the specificity of their material, and their location in space. By losing

their medium-specific form, their *faktura*, specific things become reified as things in

general. What they acquire instead, generating life-sustaining heat as they are consumed

by the red flames of the revolution, is the identity of (and with) the revolution itself. Like

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[75] Khod 21.
[76] Khod 34,
[77] Khod 23-4.
[78] Khod 25.

Tatlin's tower, objects of everyday life become mobile monuments to the revolution,

made of the revolution itself.

In the texts that "complete the frame" of *Knight's Move*, Petersburg becomes a

site of post-revolutionary memory, a monument to recent history. Its places and place

names, its unstable buildings and repurposed building materials, are the indexes of social

transformation and contradiction, the language in which history is written in the spaces it

unmakes and remakes. Its every site an image of historical process rendered perceptible

in the shape of the constructions it affects, the city is a medium of historiography.[79] In

the eyes of the dialectical formalist, it also becomes the very tool for writing history, for

inscribing the past in the medium of place. The formalist optic also reveals that the very

operation by which art makes things perceptible and available to redefinition and

transformation ("the revolt of things") has already been performed by the city itself.

Petersburg makes itself available to historical knowledge and constructive practice by

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[79] My reading of Shklovsky's Petersburg as a site-specific medium of history and of his account of the aftermath of the blockade as a montage of still images of historical transformation owes everything to Benjamin's concept, elaborated in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), of the dialectical image as history "at a standstill," "a dream image" of an epoch to come that renders "perceptible" the epoch that dreams of it. (See especially the two "exposés" called "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" and "Convolute N"). Shklovsky's texts on Petersburg, in their topographical precision, their foregrounding of concrete spaces and objects as indexes of transitory and transitional social phenomena, their continual rhetorical crossings between natural processes and historical forces, in their paratactic structure and aphoristic style have a profound kinship to Benjamin's work on the images of nineteenth-century material and intellectual culture constellated around the Paris Arcades. In Benjamin's philosophy of history, founded upon a discontinuous conception of the historical continuum, an image of the past attains legibility in a "now" heterogeneous to its own, "as it flashes up in a moment of danger" in which it can be either recognized truly for the first time or lost forever to the triumphal "progress" of conquest and barbarism ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 253-264). Benjamin and Shklovsky share this orientation to the remainders and refugees of historical progression, a sense of proximity to catastrophe and a melancholy commitment to the possibility of rupture that may be the only hope of averting catastrophe but may also be the catastrophe itself. Both insist upon freezing historical phenomena at the thresholds of their disappearance and on remembering the recent past in order to awaken the present into a future of which this past dreamed. Unlike Benjamin, however, Shklovsky lived in a present that had already awoken into the post-revolutionary future that for Benjamin (even, or perhaps especially, in the wake of the Russian Revolution) remained an unfulfilled Messianic promise.

withdrawing from habitual use and automatic recognition — by defamiliarizing the tools and sites of everyday life.

One of the recurring place names (and places) in this historiographic topography is the Peter and Paul Fortress, one of Petersburg's earliest buildings and the symbol of its founding, the seat of the city's power and the target of revolt against it. Performing the role of prison for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the fortress was taken over during the February Revolution, its prisoners freed and replaced by those who were once their jailers, and then again by the Bolsheviks, who turned its guns against the Winter Palace and once more used it as a prison for the deposed officials of the Provisional Government. Its steeple, rising above Zaiachii Island, becomes for Shklovsky an axis on which to locate his own position in the city as well as an instrument of his own critical activity.

He begins his figuration of the fortress, characteristically, not with the building itself but with its site, placed it precisely on the Petersburg map: "At the corner of the Neva and the canal marking off the fortress from the Petrograd side."[80] But the very next clause puts this precision into question — "or at the corner of the canal by which the Neva fastens the fortress to itself…" — only to be followed in turn by the assurance that "this is one and the same corner."[81] The text makes a side-step movement from one site to another and then returns with the assertion that no movement has, in fact, taken place. Difference has, necessarily, been introduced into the identity of place, an interior gap or spacing produced by the act of mapping itself. The self-sameness of a site on a map has been defamiliarized by Shklovsky's rhetoric of site-specificity.

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[80] Khod 188.
[81] Khod 188.

The Peter and Paul Fortress itself, like the intersection of waterways that locates it in city space, is at once singular and multiple, an identity in process. A contested symbol of state power that was successively recoded at each phase of the revolution, the fortress is also an overdetermined site of subjective memory.

> Two words about the fortress: when you write about it, its spire etches itself so deeply in memory, and so many memories everywhere, on all sides, run around it like the road to Djulfa around Mt. Ararat that you want to write the words "Peter and Paul" [*Petropavlovskaia*] from the bottom up, by the spire [*shpilem*].[82]

Memories mimic the shape of the sites that produce and retain them, tracing their anamnestic orbits around centers of public life. Place grounds memory in a collectively shared reality, gives it a material constitution, an architectonic shape that memory, in turn, sets in subjective flight.

The medium of this reciprocal formation of memory and place is writing, which Shklovsky figures as the production of iconic signs, a writing that visually resembles its referent.[83] The word "PeterandPaul" [*Petropavlovskaia*] is to be written vertically, in imitation of the form of the Peter and Paul Cathedral spire [*shpilem*]. The fortress, then, is not only the occasion or motivation for writing but also its model. A medium of memory, individual and collective, the spire is also the medium of its representation. But the grammatical form of the word — the ablative declension of the word *shpil'* — suggests that the steeple has a third function: that of writing instrument. In this context, the primary meaning of the ablative form is the way in which the word *Petropavlovskaia* is written — up and down, rather than left to right; to write *spire-like*. But the ablative would also be used to refer to the implement by or with which the action is performed —

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[82] Khod 188-9.

[83] For the semiotic distinction between symbol, icon, and index, see C.S Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955) 98-119.

to write *with* the spire.[84] In a flash of formalist seeing, the site becomes both word and

tool, medium and means, a self-writing text built like the structure it names, from the

ground up.

      While this desire for mimetic writing is immediately renounced in the next

sentence — "But I will not write"[85] — it expresses itself again, in spite of the negation, in

another image of typographic iconicity: "I, for example, would like to print an article in a

newspaper diagonally, and it seems the reason here is not architecture alone."[86]

Simultaneously linking and denying the link between this formalist intervention and his

figuration of the spire of Peter and Paul, Shklovsky invites the reader to consider what the

reason for this act of avant-garde publishing or concrete poetry might be. That the reason

is social and political becomes apparent in the statement that ends the section: "I want to

break rank [*stroi*]."[87] The word *stroi* also means "order," as in a social order or in the

working order of a machine. The desire to break rank or order is attributed to a collective

voice, a proclamation of nonconformity shouted in unison by those who publish in

newspapers. Shklovsky's irony here is aimed at exposing the "terrifying business of

organizing souls"[88] — the same social phenomenon of "regulating the unknown" that he

satirized in the parable of the millipede. In this context, the formalist gesture of

publishing an article diagonally becomes a form of protest, an aesthetic act of

defamiliarization in the service of social difference.

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[84] Sheldon's translation emphatically chooses the second meaning over the first: "you want to write the word Peter and Paul from the bottom up, using the spire as a pen" (*Knight's Move* 120). I have chosen the rather unfelicitous "by" — a kind of pseudo-ablative — to connote the ambiguity of a declension that does not exist in English.
[85] Khod 189.
[86] Khod 189.
[87] Khod 190.
[88] Khod 190.

The spire of the Peter and Paul Cathedral returns as the title of a short text that begins with a memory of a train car carrying prisoners of war. Following his usual (knightly) method of montage, Shklovsky splices this image of wartime misery with an ambiguously relevant, ruefully sincere directive: "One must feel one's connection to the state."[89] This connection is figured through the same metaphor by which Shklovsky represented the swarm of memories around the cathedral spire: "Like the train on the Djulfa road always runs around Ararat."[90] Though the spire is not mentioned directly (outside the title), the image of the circular road around Ararat brings the text sequence full circle to its axial starting point. And this return to the spire is Shklovsky's return home from exile by way of a metonymic chain of place names: "like the Neva cannot leave Petersburg, I cannot leave Russia."[91]

The iconic figuration of the Peter and Paul Fortress announces the book's return to Petersburg. The penultimate text, "The Free Port," picks up where "Petersburg during the Blockade" leaves off — with Petersburg after the blockade has been lifted, the enemy repelled.[92] Shklovsky's description of the free port, delivered in a montage of brief scenes, at once recapitulates the decay and death of the earlier account and sublates them in an image of a city reborn.[93] The leitmotif of water replaces the leitmotif of fire in a symbolic irrigation of the desert left by the blockade, conjuring a mythical vision of regeneration, of an urban paradise regained. The return to nature, or regression from second nature to first, which under the blockade meant the decay of urban life, here suggests the reconciliation between city and country.

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[89] Khod 195.
[90] Khod 195.
[91] Khod 195.
[92] Khod 34.
[93] Khod 196-201.

In the "free port" of Petersburg, "smelling of space and sea," city culture has been engulfed by rural nature.[94] The newly vegetal city has become an urban garden in the wake of the revolution. The text registers this dialectic of the organic and the inorganic that entangles the city with the country, interweaves the built with the growing, by playing on the near identity of the Russian words "city" (*gorod*) and "garden" (*ogorod*). "Gardens around the city" (*Krugom goroda ogorody)*; "The city has gardened" (*Razogorodilsia gorod*).[95] And if water and earth are the mediums of culture's return to nature, the generalized defamiliarization of everyday life is the consequence and logic of this return. "What a strange country," Shklovsky muses in the closing pages of his book.[96]

In a few brief scenes, "The Free Port" recapitulates the conditions of decay and death that prevailed in "Petersburg During the Blockade." We see hungry people fishing for canals deserted by fish; we see the foundations of buildings washed away by water leaking from pipes; we see again the ruins of buildings that had been pulled apart for fuel.[97] We see nature — salt water, grass — assert its rights over a territory from which history[98] had displaced it, reclaim urban space for its own domain. During the blockade, the countryside was stripping bare the desperate, dying population too exhausted by its daily struggle for survival to resist its return to the preanimate state, "melting in the

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[94] Khod 199.

[95] Khod 199.

[96] Khod 201.

[97] Khod 198, 198-9, 200.

[98] Petersburg's relation to its environment was precarious from the start, its history a series of devastating floods and a continuing engineering struggle to keep the overflowing delta of the Neva River from taking back the territory that had never been securely wrested from its grasp. The definitive Romantic treatment of the founding of Petersburg and the baleful legacy of its site is Aleksandr Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*. The poem's hero. having lost the woman he loved in a flood, curses the statue of Peter the Great (the Bronze Horseman) for having founded Petersburg, destined by its environment to destroy its inhabitants. An ambivalent ode to the city, *The Bronze Horseman* is also an image of Petersburg as a city that should have never been built.

country like soap in water." After the blockade, however, the return of (and to) nature

provides this population with sites of refuge, with oases in a postwar desert. The

regression from second to first nature now produces safe thresholds, liminal zones,

escape hatches for stubbornly surviving life. The process of self-consumption, of self-

immolation that turned Petersburg into a ruined monument at its own gravesite becomes

here the very process that restores it to life. The dying city has become "the free port."

This penultimate movement of *Knight's Move* begins with an emblem of the

dialectical process I have just described, with a dialectical image of death's reversal into

a refuge for life. This image is, like most of the images in the book, a specific site — a

point on a map that is not only an intersection of streets but also of opposing movements

in dynamic suspension, "at a standstill."[99]

> By the Nicholas Station, a gravestone… A clay horse stands, its legs
> apart, stands under the clay behind of a clay policeman. They are both
> bronze. Above them, a wooden booth, "Monument to Freedom" and four
> tall masts at the corners. […] when police come with their rifles to catch
> [street urchins peddling cigarettes] and take them to an orphanage and
> save their soul, the urchins shout "Scram!" and whistle professionally…
> run in every direction… run to the "Monument to Freedom."[100]

A bricoleur's version of the Constructivist engineer's *Monument to the Third*

International, the "Monument to Freedom" is a dialectical study in the politics of

medium and place. Instead of laying bare its materials, this monument conceals them

under the cover of another — an ordinary clay mounted policeman masquerading so

effectively as a bronze horseman that the text grants it its illusion ("[t]hey are both

bronze"). A symbol of discipline and incarceration, placed at the site of death, the statue

with its wooden booth is recoded as a symbol of their negation: freedom.

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[99] Again, both the idea and the phrase are Benjamin's.
[100] Khod 197.

This ironic reversal of the monument's signification is performed by the city's practice of everyday life, enacted by the resistant tactics of the street urchins who use it as a refuge from the police, the very agency it symbolizes. These Petersburg Gavroches (whom Shklovsky names after the heroic street urchin of Hugo's *Les Miserables*) "lie low in this strange place — in the void beneath the planks between the tsar and revolution."[101] This dialectical site of the city, an official monument to freedom in the medium of its limitation, is appropriated by the unofficial agents of freedom as a hiding place, a gap in power between one regime and another. For Shklovsky, this spatial gap is also a historical threshold, a space between the old and the new order, a site suspended in the revolution in which the past persists in the present in a form that belongs to neither. The "Monument to Freedom" is a site of historical non-synchronicity in which freedom persists as the very principle of the non-identical, the self-differing, the defamiliarized — a provisional, improvised utopia for those who know how to sneak in.

As discipline is diverted by freedom, so construction is remade by the exigencies of survival. The process by which the city literally unraveled itself, reversing its own history, to live during the blockade is reversed in turn when it becomes a free port. The sites of ruined, half-consumed buildings are taken over by new construction, made from old materials.

> The sites of houses disassembled for firewood resemble the fields of Finland, the same as stones there, here bricks and broken toilets are collected in heaps, and out of bricks fences are assembled like those around the fields of Finland. But more than anything there are new fences made of old iron.[102]

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[101] Khod 197.
[102] Khod 200.

Bricolage has finally become constructive, gathering and building up rather than plundering and tearing down. Iron, that emblematic medium of modernity that "has stood up on its hind legs and seeks its artistic formula," is still the medium of new construction, but it has become "old iron." Modernity has aged along with its buildings and places, its construction sites, and aging has become a property of its mediums, a feature of their *faktura*. The mediums of the modern age have become aging mediums. And modern life, the life of the revolutionary metropolis that Punin imagines as "the birth of the ocean," in whose "paved air" Shklovsky sees the origin of the iron spiral, has become a field strewn with "odds and ends," with the "remains and debris"[103] of recently dismantled constructions. "New fences made of old iron" — the new formula of a belated modernity, redeeming its prior life by remaking itself from its leftovers.

The countryside that reclaims this leftover city — the grass that grows in the streets, the gardens that move from the city's periphery into its center — is reclaimed by the survivors of the blockade as a source of life. "All who do not want to die, work the land," and they do so at decidedly urban sites: "[a]t the corner of Vvedensky and Kronverk, people are plowing."[104] (Shklovsky cannot stop himself here from making the ironic observation that "not everyone wants to die."[105]) As nature takes over the city and is taken over by the city in turn, the nature that always already constituted the city from within its limits — the parks, the canals — is restored to its former urban life.

> People are swimming in the Summer Garden (in the pond) and in the Moika (by the Field of Mars). Mostly children. The garden's linden trees are enormous. A paradise lost and regained.[106]

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[103] Lévi-Strauss 21-2
[104] Khod 199.
[105] Khod 199.
[106] Khod 200.

More than a record of survival, this is a utopian vision of restored prelapsarian being, of humanity's reconciliation with the nature from which it expelled itself in the attempt to dominate it.

Finally, this urban idyll of an unalienated humanity, of paradise regained, combines with an image, or montage, of restored economic prosperity: "On the streets, cafés have reopened. Visible in the store windows: rolls [*bulki*], sturgeon [*balyki*], sugar."[107] Reflected in these store windows is a "strange country" on the threshold of the New Economic Plan, Lenin's tactical compromise with capitalism designed to help the country recover from the privations of War Communism. A paradise of humanized nature is regained along with the material plenty of a post-revolutionary society finally realizing its promise. "What a strange country," writes Shklovsky,

> where everyone is their own transportation, their own gardener and makes their own boots. In Kazan, they harness camels to streetcars. A country of electrification and Robinson Crusoes.[108]

A strange, or self-estranging country, Russia after the revolution is defined by the contemporaneity of the non-contemporary. The allegorical montage of electrification and Robinson Crusoe suspends, if not resolves, the contradiction between individualist self-sufficiency and collective production — precisely the delicate equilibrium or suspension of conflict between capitalism and socialism achieved by the NEP. The burning city "sick with revolution" has been cured by a revolution that has achieved its aim by reversing itself along its course. Like the knight in the book's last sentence, the

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[107] Khod 200.
[108] Khod 201.

revolution arrives at its destination when it "turns its head and laughs."[109] This is an

exile's laughter on returning home to a strange place.

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[109] Khod 203.

Epilogue

"A Jumbled Museum":

The Mediums of History in the Writings of Robert Smithson

To begin (or end) with a geographical, or a geo-positional question: where do we find Robert Smithson's writing? This may be different from asking where we find his art — his earthworks, for example. Whatever the vicissitudes of their physical presence, however uncertain their fate, determined by the factors (natural and artificial) governing each structure's interaction with its geological and topographical environment (the temporariness of the Yucatan mirror displacements (1969), the implacably entropic deterioration of *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970); the eventual submersion and recent reemergence of *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in and out of the Great Salt Lake) — however unpredictable (or only partly predictable) the dialectic between the foreground of work and the background of place, it is precisely the work's localization, its proverbial site-specificity, that guarantees the possibility of such fluctuation in the first place. The work changes over time only because it remains some-place, some-where. Geographical grounding — if not stability— is the condition of temporal transformation. The continual metamorphoses that displace the work occur within a circumscribed location, inside a boundary; we might say, simply, displacement takes place. Can the same be said of the

written work? Where, if at all, do the Collected Writings of Robert Smithson take place? Where are they set?

Or, beginning differently, I would repeat a question posed inside one of these writings, one of the earliest texts in Smithson's "mature" canon, an aggregate composed between 1965 and 1973, quarried from modernist aesthetics, mid-century cultural theory, art historiography, geological science, and shaped into an image of the petrified terrain whose dialectic of *physis* and *techne* these writings chart. "Time breaks into many times," he writes in "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966) of the work of Dan Flavin.[1] And proposes a consequence: "Rather than saying, 'What time is it?' we should say 'Where is the time?' 'Where is Flavin's Monument'" — the monument in question being to Vladimir Tatlin, whose own *Monument to the Third International* (1920) remained a prototype of a foreclosed future, a model whose actualization would have required the simultaneous construction of the social order it modeled, a fossil in reverse of a surpassed possibility. "The objective present," the thought continues, "at times seems missing. A million years is contained in a second, yet we tend to forget the second as soon as it happens. Flavin's destruction of classical time and space is based on an entirely new notion of the structure of matter" (11). And going on to Judd — the essay mediates freely between contemporaneous Minimalist projects while adhering to the particular features of each — Smithson charges this newly restructured matter with a clandestine mission: "The concealed surfaces in Judd's work are hideouts for time. His art vanishes into a series of motionless intervals based on an order of solids" (11). We will return to this welding of surface with interior and to the disappearing act by which

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[1] Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California P, 1996) 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

the future is established at the site of its concealment, on the sheer surface, where nothing can any longer be hidden. And we shall ask if this new structure of matter, terminal in its immobile uniformity, is indeed Smithson's last word on history. But, first, there is the matter of the Smithsonian word itself.

I. Medium: Language Matter

Occasionally, the writings are set in "the crystal land" of New Jersey, "near Paterson, Great Notch, and Upper Montclair," among "the mineral-rich quarries of the First Watchung Mountain" (CW 9). These quarries, abandoned, or semi-abandoned (one does encounter the lone "rock hound" stalking the land for traces of its lunar destiny), are themselves set in, framed by a *paysage démoralisé* of suburban housing developments. Their appearance along the edge of his field of vision provide Smithson with rhetorical occasion and indexical motivation for a sprawling list of place and color names: "names like Royal Garden Estates, Rolling Knolls Farm, Valley View Acres, Split-level Manor, Babbling Brook Ranch-Estates, Colonial Vista Home—on and on they go…. Most of the houses are painted petal pink, frosted mint, buttercup, fudge, rose beige, antique green, Cape Cod brown [place inhering in color, or the reverse], lilac, and so on" (8). This bravura act of nomination, a roll call of labeled particulars, savors each one for its catachrestic quality, for the incommensurability, if not utter unlikeness, of the named objects (places or colors) to the things to which their names imply a comparison (natural phenomena like valleys and brooks, cultural achievements like fudge). The names are ossified figures, whose foregrounded appearance in this procession of American local

color, far from restoring their link to organic nature, underscores their severance from it, the intransitive metaphoricity of a vehicle without a tenor.[2]

This granting of sensory plenitude to rhetoric in the very act of voiding it of foundation enacts in the verbal medium the operation by which Smithson defines the Minimalist object, particularly Donald Judd's "specific objects."

> An uncanny materiality inherent in the surface engulfs the basic structure. Both surface and structure exist simultaneously in a suspended condition. What is outside vanishes to meet the inside, while what is inside vanishes to meet the outside. The concept of "antimatter" overruns, and fills everything, making these very definite works verge on the notion of disappearance. The important phenomenon is always the basic lack of substance at the core of the "facts." The more one tries to grasp the surface structure, the more baffling it becomes. The work seems to have no natural equivalent to anything physical, yet all it brings to mind is physicality. (6)

That last sentence encapsulates the phenomenology of catachresis. And if these "specific objects" (Judd's and others') perform the dialectical procedure of material self-voiding by means of particularly selected, industrially manufactured mediums, Smithson's writing replicates it by the act of naming these mediums and their sites of origin, by the critical act of inventory.

> Donald Judd has set up a "company," that extends the technique of abstract art into unheard-of places. He may go to Long Island City and have the Bernstein Brothers, Tinsmiths put "Pittsburgh" seams into some (Bethcon) iron boxes, or he might go to Allied Plastics in Lower Manhattan and have cut-to size some Rohm-Haas "glowing" pink plexiglas. Judd is always on the lookout for new finishes, like Lavax Wrinkle Finish, which a company pamphlet says, "combines beauty and general durability." Judd likes that combination, and so he might "self" spray one of his fabricated "boxes" with it. Or maybe he will travel to

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[2] These place and color names are subtly catachrestic in the conventional sense of mixed metaphors, if we extend this notion to the juxtaposition of heterogeneous descriptive registers ("antique green"). But I am using the term as Barthes does in *S/Z*, as a figure of pure likening, with nothing being likened. It is not incidental to the sensory pleasure of this carnival of names, the aestheticism of Smithson's rhetorical landscaping, that Barthes defines the catachresis as "the figure of beauty." Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 33-4.

> Hackensack, New Jersey to investigate a lead he got on a new kind of zinc based paint called Galvanox, which is comparable to "hot-dip" galvanizing. (4)

An inventory of finishes, colors, and techniques, this is also a map of their production and an itinerary (Judd's) of their acquisition. (In "Entropy and the New Monuments," Smithson tells us that "John Chamberlain, upon learning of Judd's interest in ["impenetrable"] color, suggested he go to the Harley Davidson Motorcycle Company and get some "Hi-Fi" lacquer (20). Which, of course, Judd promptly did.) Chemical properties of materials, brand names, and names of industrial processes — a rhetorical compound of industry jargon, scientific nomenclature, and commercial aesthetics — overdetermine the mediums of what is, after all, the last medium-specific avant-garde.[3] These proper (or property) names intertwine to form a wire mesh of manufacturing sites overlaying the geography of Minimalist production — here, New York and New Jersey; on other occasions, places in the American Southwest.

In his engagement with Minimalism, Smithson is no less site-specific about his own itinerary, the particular path of his own quest in search of medium. On the occasion of one such expedition, described by him in a two-page quest romance entitled "The Crystal Land" (1966), Judd was one of his companions. Having introduced their shared "interest in geology and mineralogy" and their decision to "go rock hunting in New Jersey," this extraordinary text erupts into a list of elements found in the "Triassic sedimentary rocks of the Newark series" (7). This list is itself found, extracted, Smithson tells us, from Brian H. Mason's *Trap Rock Minerals of New Jersey*. It is an alphabetical

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[3] An arguable claim, to say the least. But whether one takes Minimalism to be the limit case and testing ground of Greenberg's modernism, defined as art's "self-critical tendency" to lay bare the properties and constraints of its material means, as Thierry de Duve does, or the literalist profanation of modernist autonomy, as Michael Fried did and still does, its orientation to the fundamental qualities of shaped matter is indisputable.

succession of specifically made words standing for elementally found things, a *techne*

literally grounded in a *physis*. Each element name, though certainly distinct, shares the

first two or three letters with its immediate neighbors, and, in this string of related

morphemes, derived from proximal language regions as the elements themselves are

derived from neighboring mineral strata, they run into each other and can look nearly

identical ("albite, allanite;" "chalcocite, chalcopyrite"). Their serial arrangement as a

succession of ordered (here, alphabetized) variants converging into identity (or identities

diverging into variation) is the precise verbal equivalent not only of the seriality of

Minimalist objects, but indeed of the entire array of grids in which modernism endlessly

stages the dialectic of difference and repetition.

But something else happens along the way to the abandoned rock quarries,

something rather different from serial arrangements, word lattices, and gridded variation.

This happens during the same car ride that previews (in rear view) one of Smithson's

legendary later projects: "the rearview mirror dislocated the road behind us" (8-9). But I

am not talking about the Yucatan mirror displacements, and neither would Smithson for

another three years. I am talking about an incident of travel reading:

> While listening to the radio, some of us read the Sunday newspapers. The
> pages made slight noises as they turned; each sheet folded over their laps
> forming temporary geographies of paper. A valley of print or a ridge of
> photographs would come and go in an instant. (9)

Soon after, the travelers reach The Great Notch Quarry, "situated 'about three hundred

yards southwest of the Great Notch station of the Erie Railroad'":

> The walls of the quarry did look dangerous. Cracked, broken,
> shattered; the walls threatened to come crashing down. Fragmentation,
> corrosion, decomposition, disintegration, rock creep, debris slides, mud
> flow, avalanche were everywhere in evidence. The gray sky seemed to
> swallow up the heaps around us. Fractures and faults spilled forth

sediment, crushed conglomerates, eroded debris and sandstone. It was an arid region, bleached and dry. An infinity of surfaces spread in every direction. A chaos of cracks surrounded us. (9)

By 1968, this geographical vision of the page and "dangerous" experience of the land would merge, under the double banner of Poe and Borges, in the following sublimely allegorical passages on the geology of words. From "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art":

> In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge … but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures … at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations. (78)

From "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects":

> The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. (107)

I am suggesting that in these new kinds of inventories, not of interchangeable labels but of heterogeneous traces, a different model of language emerges, one that will be simultaneously available with and alternative to the notion of language as bald-faced banality, as "cool," "empty," "ultramoderne," "sub-monumental" (Smithson offers a multitude of related terms for this) as the "hermetic kingdom of surfaces" such language describes (20). This second idea of language replaces the phenomenological dialectic of surface — the crystallography in which planes at once construct and empty out their own interior — with the historiographic dialectic of the pulverized landscape.

II. Landscape: From Entropy to History

In Smithson's writings, the language of geology produces a geological theory of language.[4] To say that this reversible analogy between word and world yields a mimetic theory of language, an Adamic language in which words inhere in the things they signify, is both true and misleading. Smithson's language theory amounts less to modeling mimesis as such than to allegorizing the lived world by its chosen means of expression (language being one). The questions to ask, then, are: which means and what kind of world?

The world reflected in the hard surfaces of Minimalist objects is the world of administered banality. If, after all the dialectical formalism and allegorical speculation, this reading seems crudely reflectionist, vulgarly deterministic, or just vulgar, there may at least be some satisfaction in a vertically integrated cultural apparatus: a banal theory fit for a banal world. But this would be neither sufficient nor just. For even while Smithson is drawing an unapologetically iconistic parallel between Minimalist flatness and suburban platitude, between the architecture of office buildings and the empty monuments decorating their lobbies, between "the slurbs, urban sprawl, and the infinite number of housing developments" and the new art's "'facts' of the outer edge," he is also diagnosing the logic which has brought about such a world (13). A logic that sustains and proliferates this world by relentlessly expanding its own dominion over all things. There is only one economic order governed by such a logic, one mode of production

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[4] In "Earthwords," Craig Owens explores the deconstructive implications of this reciprocal allegory. Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition*, ed. Scott Bryson (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992) 40-51. More recently, in a magnificently Smithsonian text called "Shift," Craig Dworkin, by merging sampled geological and linguistic discourse, constructs not only a "Tectonic Grammar" but also a geo-stratified model of literary tradition. Craig Dworkin, "Shift," *Strand* (New York: Roof, 2005) 7-28.

destined by its own internal necessity to saturate every space available to it by translating all it encounters into its own language: capitalism, with its law of universal equivalence.

While describing the Minimalist uses of manufactured materials and industrial techniques, diverted by Judd and company from their original purposes, Smithson never fails to point to these intended commercial uses, to the mediums' destination among the habitats of the administered world of corporate urbanism and middle-income suburbia. And it is to this world of near-total uniformity that Smithson gives the name of entropy, or rather to the completed version of this world, a projected future of universal "consumer oblivion" (13). Entropy is a scientific trope for a cultural development that will terminate in the total reification of the lived world. Such is the future figured forth by the glacial immobility of Minimalist art, the social content of the scientific and science-fictional allegory of entropy: the irreversible triumph of the commodity, a future in which all singularity is converted to sameness, all movement frozen in a temporal vacuum, all times, places, and things rendered interchangeable. In this vision, Minimalism is art for the end of history.

"This sense of extreme past and extreme future," Smithson writes, "has its partial origin with the Museum of Natural History; there the 'cave-man' and the 'space-man' may be seen under one roof. In this museum, all 'nature' is stuffed and interchangeable" (15). Culture, particularly print culture, is subject to the same condition and contributes to the same end:

> Like the movies and the movie houses, 'printed-matter' plays an entropic role. Maps, charts, advertisements, art books, science books, money, architectural plans, math books, graphs, diagrams, newspapers, comics, booklets and pamphlets from industrial companies are all treated the same. (18)

The future of universal uniformity, present already in the logic of contemporary cultural institutions, is a post-history spelled out in pre-history, a notion that is itself symptomatic of the very erasure of temporal heterogeneity it announces. At the end, we shall return to this predictive archeology to see it recast as a model of historiography that would mine the past for traces of the future without reducing history itself to an indifferent nullity.

But this recasting must take place in a different sort of landscape, one less like the once-and-future realms of speculative fantasy and more like the abandoned quarries of New Jersey, surviving their own obsolescence in the postindustrial present. This is the landscape Smithson charts, theorizes, and reduplicates in a masterpiece of cultural reason called "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape" (1973).

The essay is set largely in New York's Central Park, a site that in the first sentence Smithson displaces from any recognizable present to "one million years ago" (157). But the text does not use this displacement to collapse time in a preemptive figuration of its own imminent exhaustion, anticipating a world that has come all the way around not to its beginning but to before it began, at the expense of a vanishing present. Instead, that proposed snapshot (or x-ray) of the pre-historic Park dissolves immediately in a shot of the essay's heroes, the landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, planning Central Park in the 1850s on the former site of an imperceptibly moving ice sheet.

Slow history, glacial in both matter and tempo, is instantly interrupted with the fast history of urban building — "The building of New York City had interrupted the ponderous results of those Pleistocene ice sheets" (158) — while even that glacial deep history is already a history of displacement and disruption. The interrupted movement of

the glacier was itself an interruption of the bedrock: a "slow crushing, scraping, ripping, movement [that left] great masses of rock debris in its wake" (157). Towards the end, the essay returns to Olmsted, now himself interrupted by City politics under Boss Tweed (167). Rather than entropy, what slows down development are local, site- and moment-specific circumstances. History rather than entropy. And rather than compressing all movement into an eternally self-cancelling surface, history clutters it with debris, with wrecks and relics (both organic and inorganic) of its immediate past: "in Olmsted's words, the Park Department had become 'an asylum for aggravated cases of hernia, varicose veins, rheumatism, partial blindness, and other infirmities compelling sedentary occupations'" (167).

The first half of the essay is an archeology of an aesthetic concept — the picturesque — that, for Smithson, yields a method not only of making earthworks but also of reading the postindustrial landscape as an always already existing earthwork. In typical Smithsonian fashion, the very word "picturesque" becomes mimetic of its meaning. If the word "Galvanox" is itself "hot-dipped" in its alloyed morphology (electrochemical root, commercial suffix), "picturesque" must, like the image it contains, itself be a historical ruin:

> A tree, for example, struck by lightning was something other than merely beautiful or sublime—it was "picturesque." This word in its own way has been struck by lightning over the centuries. Words, like trees, can be suddenly deformed or wrecked, but such deformation or wreckage cannot be dismissed by timid academics. Price seems to have accepted a side of nature that the "formalists" of his times would rather have excluded. (159)

Smithson traces picturesque theory to its prehistory in Edmund Burke's *Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), from which Uvedale Price and William Gilpin derived the picturesque as a dialectical middle term, neither sublime

nor beautiful, but a kind of temporal suspension of both in a landscape with a legible history.

This intellectual history turns into a polemical reading of aesthetic ideology as Smithson charts a map of modernist misreading of Romantic aesthetics. The "neoclassical formalism" of Eliot, Pound, and Lewis, with its orientation to abstraction and purity, directly influenced by the anti-Romantic philosophy of T. E. Hulme and Wilhelm Worringer's theory of abstraction as flight from nature, depends upon the rejection of the hybrid picturesque, produced by the interaction of antithetical impurities. Despite this rejection, Romantic nature, particularly in its picturesque register, persists in the emblematic *topoi* of Anglo-modernist poetry: in Eliot's empty chapels and ruined towers, Pound's windswept groves paved with dead leaves and broken stones, as well as in the famously fragmented nature of the texts themselves. In a brilliant insight into the politics of aesthetic discourse, Smithson observes that Eliot's reception of the picturesque retains its nostalgic content while jettisoning its dialectical form. "Eliot's picturesque," he writes, "was a nostalgia for church authority, it ceased to be the democratic dialectic between the sylvan and the industrial that Price and Olmsted worked toward" (162). But the formalist imperatives of purity and abstraction, even more importantly for Smithson than clashing with the very poetry meant to embody them, contradict the structure of nature itself, the inherent (again, literal) ground of this abstract geometry.

> What are the lattices and grids of pure abstraction, if not renderings and representations of a reduced order of nature? Abstraction is a representation of nature devoid of "realism" based on mental or conceptual reduction. There is no escaping nature through abstract representation; abstraction brings one closer to physical structures within nature itself. But this does not mean a renewed confidence in nature, it simply means that abstraction is no cause for faith. Abstraction can only be valid if it accepts nature's dialectic. (162)

Central Park, the earthwork of the essay, overlays the material history of "nature" with the discursive history of aesthetics; the landscape is the dialectical site at which aesthetic theory writes on the surface of nature to produce the text of the work, a legible trace of the interweaving evolutions of "nature" and "art." The essay offers a stratified historiography, in which "natural" history, the geological "deep" history of the earth, is a sediment layer below social history: the history of technology and its uses and of the politics organizing both, the deployment of humans and machines at the construction site. But rather than remaining parallel repetitions or reflections of each other (like the minimalist surfaces that reflect the uniform world), these layers ceaselessly erupt into each other, deform and are deformed in turn.

The local registers and reshapes the imported, heterogeneous to each other and, composites from the start, divided against themselves. Determined, to varying degrees and in varying proportions, by aesthetic theory, technological practice, and the flows of global capital, the dialectic of the regional and the trans-regional (whether international like architectural style or universal, like biochemical processes) opens onto a reciprocal critique. If the phenomenology of the reflecting and self-voiding surface enacts a mimesis, whether critical or not, of the reified world, the dialectical landscape yields the very "critical regionalism" that Kenneth Frampton called for in his "Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" (1983). An approach to production as well as to interpretation (or the performance of one in the other — a building that is also a thinking), critical regionalism would subject the uniformity of international architectural style to the heterogeneity of local topography. For Frampton, it is a resistant third term between an eager complicity with the leveling indifference of late-capitalist civilization

and the reactionary provincialism of autochthonous culture.[5] Smithson's own

topographical dialectics offer a parallel mediation between modernism's flight from

nature and the "wishy-washy transcendentalism" that "fails to recognize the possibility of

a direct organic manipulation of the land devoid of violence and 'macho' aggression"

(163). This mediation is history's best hope for survival, for resisting the forces of

cultural (rather than natural) entropy, for leaving legible marks on an ever more

impervious surface.

III. Museum: Without Circumference[6]

"The Dialectical Landscape" ends with Smithson wandering through Central Park

in the East 80s, finding himself near the Metropolitan Museum of Art amid a cacophony

of boulder graffiti, contesting the museum's role in the life of the Park and questioning its

right to exist precisely on the grounds of purity and the incommensurability of nature and

technology, the given and the made: "'Concrete and trees do not mix'" (169). This

rhetorical proximity of the purist argument to an anti-museum argument might alert us

against identifying Smithson too quickly with the anti-museum rhetoric he often seems to

employ. In his introduction to *The Collected Writings,* Jack Flam cites a part of the

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[5] Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1983) 16-30.
[6] In his now classic "On the Museum's Ruins," Douglas Crimp reads the museum as a discourse that projects coherence — trans-historical, trans-regional, trans-medium — onto what would otherwise be a random assemblage of heterogeneous artifacts. Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," *October* 13 (1980) 41-57. For Crimp, Robert Rauschenberg's combines, like the self-perpetuating, unmotivated collections amassed by Bouvard and Pécuchet, expose (by enacting) this irreducible heterogeneity and incoherence at the museum's foundation. The following section suggests that Smithson's writings contain an alternative archaeology of the museum. Rather than ordering the incommensurable and repressing its incommensurability, Smithson's site-specific museums preserve the obsolete and reveal the antithetical history written in its obsolescence.

following passage from a short text entitled "Some Void Thoughts on Museums" (1967)

as proof of the unambivalence of Smithson's position:

> Art history is less explosive than the rest of history, so it sinks faster into the pulverized regions of time. History is representational, while time is abstract; both of these artifices may be found in museums, where they span everybody's own vacancy. The museum undermines one's confidence in sense-data and erodes the impression of textures upon which our sensations exist.…Visiting a museum is a matter of going from void to void. Hallways lead the viewer to things once called "pictures" and "statues." Anachronisms hang and protrude from every angle. (41-2)

Flam glosses this attitude with the following statement: "Smithson in effect set aside

European culture by sweeping away history itself and by addressing instead the

metahistorical extremes of time — the remote past and the remote future" (xxi). We have

seen how, far from sweeping away history, these metahistorical categories can turn into

an opportunity for rescuing history from oblivion. "Some Void Thoughts on Museums"

ends with language that might have been lifted directly from Smithson's discussions of

Minimalist objects: "Art settles into a stupendous inertia.…Things flatten and fade. The

museum spreads its surfaces everywhere, and becomes an untitled collection of

generalizations that immobilize the eye" (42). We might wonder if the museum is not

another monument to entropy, and indeed the museum as tomb, as mausoleum, a trope

that Smithson uses though by no means invents, would point us in that direction, towards

a return to undifferentiated dust on a seamless surface.

But between the title and the text itself is an epigraph, an epitaph for the text

taken from another. The source text is George Kubler's *The Shape of Time: Remarks on

the History of Things*, published in 1962, in which Kubler proposed a theory of the

evolution of forms, as it finds its expression in the historically bounded world of objects.

The epigraph reads:

> Tomb furniture achieved apparently contradictory ends in discarding old
> things while retaining them, much as in our storage warehouses, and
> museum deposits, and antiquarian storerooms. (41)

If museums are like tombs, then, it is not (or not most importantly) because the objects in them are dead, but because they have been preserved — preserved by being removed from the continuum of productive existence that, frequently, has already passed them by. To discard museums might indeed mean to "sweep away history itself." "Our older museums are full off fragments," Smithson says to Alan Kaprow in their 1967 dialogue, entitled "What Is a Museum?", "bits and pieces of European art. They were ripped out of total artistic structures, given a whole new classification and then categorized" (48). And he concludes this line of reflection by saying, "I like the uselessness of the museum" (49). Museums are places where objects live a second life, having survived their first (and often second and third) death — a death, it is true, in which, as institutions wielding cultural power, museums have been all too often complicit. But it is precisely in its mausoleal nature, in its role as a gallery of anachronisms, in its fundamental kinship to flea markets and refuse heaps, that the museum's resistant significance lies. The dialectic of mausoleal burial — preserving by discarding — which Kubler discovers in the tomb marks the museum as another dialectical landscape, another pulverized, eroded site of historiography. "The strata of the Earth," Smithson says in "Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," "is a jumbled museum" (110).

For example, the museum Smithson visits on his 1967 "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey":

> The indifferent backs of the cars flashed and reflected the stale afternoon
> sun. I took a few listless, entropic snapshots of that lustrous monument.
> If the future is 'out of date' and 'old fashioned,' then I had been in the
> future. I had been on a planet that had a map of Passaic drawn over it, and

a rather imperfect map at that. A sidereal map marked up with 'lines' the size of streets, and 'squares' and 'blocks' the size of buildings. At any moment my feet were apt to fall through the cardboard ground. I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past; it is in yesterday's newspapers, in the *jejune* advertisements of science-fiction movies, in the false mirror of our rejected dreams. Time turns metaphors into things, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs. (73-74)

I would like to conclude by setting this passage next to another, by a practitioner of a dialectic no less unorthodox than Smithson's: Walter Benjamin. I do this not to suggest that Smithson was "influenced" by Benjamin (although he had a copy of *Illuminations* in his library), nor even to "apply" Benjamin's thought to an interpretation of Smithson's. Rather, I place these objects, discoveries of a polemical archaeology that disinters not tombs but museums, as cornerstones of a methodological edifice, of a tradition of historiographic practice, as well as collaborators in an emblematic chiasmus. From *The Arcades Project*, Convolute R (Mirrors):

> As rocks of the Miocene or Eocene in places bear the imprint of monstrous creatures from those ages, so today arcades dot the metropolitan landscape like caves containing the fossil remains of a vanished monster: the consumer of the pre-imperial era of capitalism, the last dinosaur of Europe. On the walls of these caverns their immemorial flora, the commodity, luxuriates and enters, like cancerous tissue, into the most irregular combinations. A world of secret affinities opens up within: palm tree and feather duster, hairdryer and Venus de Milo, prostheses and letter-writing manuals. The odalisque lies in wait next to the inkwell, and priestesses raise high the vessels into which we drop cigarette butts and incense offerings. These item on display are a rebus: how one ought to read here the birdseed in the fixative pan, the flower seeds beside the binoculars, the broken screw atop the musical score, and the revolver above the goldfish bowl—is right on the tip of one's tongue. After all, nothing of the lot appears to be new. The goldfish come perhaps from a pond that dried up long ago, the revolver was a corpus delicti, and these scores could hardly have preserved their previous owner from starvation when her last pupils stayed away. And since, to the dreaming collective itself, the decline of an economic era seems like the end of the world, the

> writer Karl Kraus has looked quite correctly on the arcades, which, from another angle, must have appeared to him as the casting of a dream....[7]

If Smithson's prehistoric landscapes turn into celestial playgrounds of the profane, precisely the places where one might have last heard "the street song last on everyone's lips,"[8] Benjamin's dreaming arcades dissolve, however briefly, in an image of fossilized prehistory. But prehistory and late history are linked not by the indifference of beginnings and endings, the amnesiac banality of the cycle, but by persisting traces of discarded passages. The repository for these specific traces, these "ruins in reverse," in Smithson's uncannily Benjaminian phrase, is a species of museum. Not a Malrauxian "museum without walls," in which style is the exchange value of every artifact, but a Smithsonian museum without circumference (78-94). Or Benjamin's museum of the discontinuous, self-disrupting historical archive, a catastrophic record of catastrophe always imminent and already surpassed, but also of all that such catastrophe consigns to obsolescence and by so consigning, preserves. A collection of former commodities living for the first time in their own afterlife. A partially buried woodshed for the storage of newly forgotten things.

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[7] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999) 540.
[8] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986) 182.

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