

## Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented

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Originally scheduled for May 2020, the exhibition under review opened seven months later in a world very different to the one in which it was supposed to make its debut.<sup>1</sup> In the pandemic era of cancellations and postponements, *Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented* brings new meaning to the idea of the plan as an art form, one powered by the synergy that can arise when strategy and idealism collide. Accompanied by an ambitious catalogue, the show examines a radical new approach to artmaking in the early twentieth century: the reconceptualisation by the artist as architect of their physical and ideological world, whose designs for fonts, typographies, textiles, informational posters and other minutiae were intended to usher in different variants of utopia.

The exhibition centres on the recent acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), of over three hundred works from the Merrill C. Berman Collection. Amassed over nearly fifty years, the collection comprises posters, advertisements and other works on paper that were not considered appropriate for display in a museum at the time of their creation. Berman has long been concerned with breaking down institutional barriers and questioning organisational systems, such as the division of museums into departments – laudatory goals that align well with the aims of the ‘new’ MoMA after its \$450 million expansion in 2019. There is of course an irony in such a trove of socialist and communist prints being stewarded by a wealthy American benefactor, as well as the collection being held in a former Twinkie warehouse, but this only adds texture to the history of a collection that is as comprehensive as it is uncommon.

Featuring prominently in the first room of the exhibition, Gustav Klutsis’s mixed media work



## Exhibitions

*Electrification of the entire country* (cat. no.12; Fig.18) visualises the ideological early days of the Bolshevik Revolution. As Maria Gough notes in the catalogue, this mysteriously anachronistic collage predates the Soviet hero worship photomontages for which Klutis is known (pp.60–63). Composed from two separate black-and-white photographs, a ‘colossal’ Vladimir Lenin strides into a series of layered geometric forms and a modernist building. A number of diminutive workers also figure in this arrangement, including one with a hammer aimed at a spare grid below. The unbuilt character of the image perfectly encapsulates the idea of the leader-constructor as a material and ideological fabricator, showing him standing before the blank slate on which he was to project his perfect society. In the succeeding galleries, this idealism is surpassed by the profound and abiding fiction that characterised Klutis’s work under Stalin, as his heavily retouched photomontages became a grotesque simulacrum of reality.

One of the most interesting questions that this exhibition raises – but does not explicitly pose – is what role capitalist marketing methods were supposed to play in the new social order(s). The Soviet product advertisements on display walk a definitional tightrope between propaganda and commercialism. A slogan for a poster (cat. no.19) by Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovsky, for example, equates the power of comrades with the cocoa powder of the Tea Directorate, framing the consumption of this state-sponsored beverage as a test of Soviet citizenship. In terms of the selected artists, there are few attempts in the exhibition to explicate the subtle distinctions between their political ideologies. There is, however, a successful example in the pairing of John Heartfield’s iconic 1928 campaign poster *The hand has five fingers* (no.154; Fig.19) with Nikolai Sedelnikov’s *Advertising technique 1* from 1930 (no.1; Fig.20). In the former, a worker’s calloused hand reaches out in a menacing grip, whereas in the

latter a stiff salute is surrounded by machinery. As a motif, the hand acts as a barometer of the relationships between labour, its symbolism and the aesthetic policies of different Communist parties: openly resistant in Germany and rigidly subordinate in the USSR.

A number of widely circulated posters and book covers are

19. *The hand has five fingers*, by John Heartfield. 1928. Lithograph, 97.8 by 74.3 cm. (Merrill C. Berman Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York).

instructively exhibited alongside their maquettes in a nearby display. The trajectory between models and their final products present the very process of propaganda, revealing what has been redacted or changed in order to emphasise certain elements of the truth. Colour selection, compelling graphics and editorial cropping contribute to this



moulding of reality. However, there is an additional paradoxical level on which the inclusion of the maquettes and their status as unique objects can be seen to operate, particularly when considering the exhibition's stated aim of valorising the applied arts. The aura of the original image still holds power over a viewing public that is not necessarily accustomed to seeing mass-produced media in a museum space.

One of the pitfalls of curating an exhibition based on an acquisition such as this is that the works selected can sometimes adhere unevenly to the theme. Although the show fleshes out the strengths of the collection – more specifically its holdings of Constructivist posters and other ephemera – it can only briefly reference the important role played by De Stijl artists, who are not as substantially represented. Furthermore the addition of Dadaist collage inserts chaos into what would otherwise be a predominantly well-ordered narrative. Although the inclusion of Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann might seem fitting for a movement as nonsensical as Dada, their appearance causes the overall theme to meander slightly. Even the catalogue, which has otherwise judiciously clarified seemingly non-sequitur inclusions, does not adequately explain the place of these collages within the whole.

In contrast, the small gallery space dedicated to Kurt Schwitters includes the real bread-and-butter type of work that allowed such artists to survive, while also explaining his aim of reinventing the tools of everyday communication. A prominent example is Schwitters's universal typeface design *Systemschrift*, which he included in his *Poster for Opel Day: Great Car and Flower Parade* (1927; no.141). As one part of the artist's commitment to a methodical overhaul of written language, *Systemschrift* was a phonetic typeface with the potential to express symbolically all sounds utterable from the human mouth – from words to guttural noises. If Schwitters's Esperanto-esque type had only been more legible, perhaps it could have



20. *Advertising technique 1*, design for a journal cover, by Nikolai Sedelnikov. 1930. Letterpress, 29.8 by 23 cm. (Merrill C. Berman Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York).

transcended post-war fractures by easing written communication and cultivating a symbiotic and international print culture.

At its best, this exhibition renders visible the various design schemes, mass media devices and communication systems that have come to seamlessly penetrate everyday life over the past century, and which originated from a desire for social transformation. Now, one hundred years later, the agitational tools embodied in these works of art

have a new resonance – one reflected in the recent calls for racial justice and income equality. Indeed, in the current deteriorating economic and labour environment, exacerbated by the recent pandemic, the idea of redesigning an ideal society – as these artists attempted to do – is an appealing one.

1 Catalogue: *Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented, 1918–1939*, The Merrill C. Berman Collection at MoMA. Edited by Jodi Hauptman and Adrian Sudhalter. 288 pp. incl. 344 col. ills. (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2020), \$75. 978–1–63345–108–7.