

Nikolai Punin, “The Monument to the Third International” (1920)

In 1919 the Department of Fine Arts within the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment commissioned the artist V. E. Tatlin to develop a design for a monument to the Third International. The artist Tatlin immediately set to work and produced a design. The artists V. E. Tatlin, I.A. Meerzon, M. P. Vinogradov and T. M. Shapiro formed a “Creative Collective,” then developed the design in detail and constructed a model.

The main idea of the monument is based on an organic synthesis of the principles of architecture, sculpture and painting and was intended to produce a new type of monumental structure, uniting in itself a purely creative form with a utilitarian form. In accordance with this idea, the design of the monument consists of three large glass structures, erected by means of a complex system of vertical struts and spirals. These structures are arranged one above the other and are contained within different, harmoniously related forms. A special type of mechanism would enable them to move at different speeds. The lower structure (A), in the form of a cube, moves on its axis at the speed of one revolution a year and is intended for legislative purposes. Here may be held conferences of the International, meetings of international congresses and other broadly legislative meetings.... The next structure (B), in the form of a pyramid, rotates on its axis at the speed of one full revolution a month and is intended for executive functions (the Executive Committee of the International, the secretariat and other administrative and executive bodies). Finally, the upper cylinder (C), rotating at a speed of one revolution a day, is intended to be a resource centre for the following facilities: an information office; a newspaper; the publication of proclamations, brochures and manifestoes - in a word, all the various means of broadly informing the international proletariat, and in particular a telegraph, projectors for a large screen located on the axes of a spherical segment (a_1 - b_3), and a radio station, the masts of which rise above the monument. There is no need to point out the enormous possibilities for equipping and organizing these structures. The details of the design have not yet been specified, they can be discussed and worked out (during subsequent elaboration of the monument’s interior). It is necessary to explain that according to the artist Tatlin’s conception, the glass structures should have vacuum walls (a thermos) which will make it easy to maintain a constant temperature within the edifice. The separate parts of the monument will be connected to one another and to the ground by means exclusively of complexly structured electrical elevators, adjusted to the differing rotation speeds of the structures. Such are the technical bases of the project.

The artistic significance of the project

A social revolution by itself does not change artistic forms, but it does provide a basis for their gradual transformation. The idea of monumental propaganda has not changed sculpture or sculptors, but it has struck at the very principle of plastic appearance which prevails in the bourgeois world. Renaissance traditions in the plastic arts appear modern only while the feudal and bourgeois roots of capitalist states remain undestroyed. The Renaissance burned out, but only now is the charred ruin of Europe being purged.

It is true that Communist governments for a certain time will use, as a means of monumental propaganda, figurative monuments in the style of Greek and Italian classicism, but this is only because these governments are forced to use them in the same way as they are

compelled to use specialists of the pre-revolutionary school. Figurative monuments (Greek and Italian) are at variance with contemporary reality in two respects. They cultivate individual heroism and conflict with history: torsos and heads of heroes (and gods) do not correspond to the modern interpretation of history. Their forms are too private for places where there are ten versts of proletarians in rows. At best they express the character, feelings and thoughts of the hero, but who expresses the tension of the emotions and the thoughts of the collective thousand? A type? But a type concretizes, limits and levels the mass. The mass is richer, more alive, more complicated and more organic.

But even if a type is portrayed, figurative monuments contradict actuality even more through the limitation of their expressive means, their static quality. The agitational action of such monuments is extraordinarily weak amidst the noise, movement and dimensions of the streets. Thinkers on granite plinths perhaps see many, but few see them. They are constrained by the form which evolved when sailing ships, transport by mule and stone cannon balls flourished. A wartime telephone wire hits the hero's nose, a tram stop is more of an obelisk, townspeople recall Lassalle more times each day through book covers and newspaper headlines in libraries, than through passing by, beneath his proud head. Lassalle stands unseen and unneeded ever since the end of the unveiling ceremony....

A monument must live the social and political life of the city and the city must live in it. It must be necessary and dynamic, then it will be modern. The forms of contemporary, agitational plastic arts lie beyond the depiction of man as an individual. They are found by the artist who is not crippled by the feudal and bourgeois traditions of the Renaissance, but who has labored like a worker on the three unities of contemporary Plastic consciousness: material, construction, volume. Working on material, construction and volume, Tatlin has produced a form which is new in the world of monumental creation. Such a form is the monument to the Third International.

The best artist in the Russia of the Workers and Peasants (his life proving his knowledge of the working masses), was commissioned a year ago to develop a design for a monument to the Third International. The project which has been designed is not only completely remarkable as a manifestation of contemporary artistic life, but it can also be interpreted as a profound break in the deadening circle of the over-ripe and decadent art of our time. Art is embracing the twentieth century, delineating areas of development in all aspects of creative activity-. Regarding myself, to some extent, competent in artistic matters, I consider that this project is an international event in the art world.

One of the most complex cultural problems is solved before our very eyes: a utilitarian form appears as a purely creative form. Once again a new classicism becomes possible, not as a renaissance but as an invention. The theorists of the international workers' movement have long sought a classical content for socialist culture. Here it is. We maintain that the present project is the first revolutionary artistic work, and one which we can send to Europe.

Form in the project is placed along two axes aa_1 and bb_3), which are in a constant state of conflict. The line a to a_1 develops into a movement upwards which is broken at each point by the movement of the spirals from b , b_1 b_2 b_3 , to the line aa_1 . The collision of these two movements (by their very nature mutually contradictory) must produce a break—such as characterized “cubism” (long since left behind), and entail the destruction of the utilitarian idea. But the converging spirals, adopting the movement of aa_1 (and bb_3), carry these lines above and beyond the movement of the main support (girder aa_1) to the same point, producing a dynamic image, imbued with the powerful tension of endlessly disturbed and clashing axes. The whole form

oscillates like a steel snake, constrained and organized by the one general movement of all the parts, to raise itself above the earth. The form wants to overcome the material and the force of gravity, the strength of the resistance is enormous and massive: straining every muscle, the form finds an outlet through the most elastic and rapid lines which the world knows, through spirals. They are full of movement, aspiration, and speed: they are taut like the creative will and like a muscle tensed with a hammer.

The application of the spiral and its organization into a modern form is, by itself, an enrichment of the composition. In the same way as the equilibrium of the parts in a triangle makes it the best expression of the Renaissance, so the best expression of our spirit is the spiral. The interaction of weight and support is the most pure (classical) form of stasis; the classical form of dynamism is the spiral. Societies divided by class fought to own the earth, the line of their movement is horizontal. The spiral is the movement of liberated humanity. The spiral is the ideal expression of liberation: with its base set in the earth, it flees from the ground and becomes a symbol of the suspension of all animal, earthy and groveling interests.

Bourgeois societies love to develop the animal life on top of the earth, working its surface: they build shops, arcades, banks. Bourgeois life, based on the urban squares, was played out in full view and for show. Creative humanity disappears with its animal life into the earth, where the co-operatives' work is not visible. The square is a place for agitation, games and for festivals. Emancipated life rises above the earth, above grey and earthly materials. As living accommodation and social space carried to a level above the earth, the building is an expression of modernity and the content of contemporary life. At the same time, it comprises the content of a great artistic form.

The content of any form can be taken and condensed by utility, because the utility of a form is nothing other than the organization of its content. Forms devoid of practical significance (the majority of artistic forms which have existed up to now), are simply forms which are not organized. And perhaps the principle of organization has for the first time actually been realized in art. The monument is calculated on the concentration of legislative (Structure A), executive (Structure B) and informative (Structure C) initiatives; furthermore, in accordance with the stated principle of expressing modernity, these structures are raised into a higher level of space. In this way, and through the material (glass), the purity of the initiatives, their liberation from material constraints and their ideal qualities are stressed. An art devoid of creative idealism which is the content of intuition, is an art of impure rhythm. Up to now no one has succeeded in breaking rhythms down into the elements of material culture which define the growth and conditions of existence. But life itself consists of rhythms. Intuition flows in accordance with these rhythms. The purity and the intensity of the rhythms define the degree of talent, but I know of no more pure or intense rhythms than those in Tatlin's work. He possesses an eye of the greatest sensitivity with respect to material and it is precisely the juxtaposition of materials which defines the limits of the rhythmic waves. We accept, as a basis, that the unit of a rhythm is the section of a wave, enclosed between the qualities of the glass and the qualities of the iron. Just as the production of a number of oscillations along a wave is a spatial measure of sound, so the relationship of glass to iron is a measure of material rhythm. There is a stern and incandescent simplicity hidden in the juxtaposition of these two most elementary materials, both in a similar way brought into existence by fire. These materials are the elements of modern art. The form, defined by their juxtaposition, produces a rhythm of such broad and powerful oscillation that it seems like the birth of an ocean.

To translate this form into reality means to realize a dynamism of the same unsurpassed greatness as that embodied in the stasis of the pyramid. We maintain that only the full power of the multi-million strong proletarian consciousness could bring into the world the idea of this monument and its forms. The monument must be realized by the muscles of this power, because we have an ideal, living and classical expression the pure and creative form of the international union of the workers of the whole world.