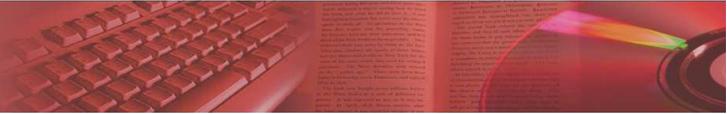


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Margarita Tupitsyn. *Moscow Vanguard Art: 1922-1992.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. viii + 278 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-17975-0.

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Published on H-SHERA (July, 2019)

Commissioned by Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

Anglophone scholars have expressed a deep interest in the Russian avant-garde since the 1962 publication of Camilla Gray's *The Russian Experiment in Art*. The canonical narrative, which stresses the creativity and radicality of the Russian and early Soviet avant-gardes' abstract canvases and constructivist objects and denounces Soviet "totalitarian" realism, began to develop shortly after Gray's introduction to the topic, at the height of the Cold War. While recently a younger generation of scholars has begun to reconsider the formal and political functions of modern realism, including its Russian and Soviet iterations, the narrative of the creative avant-garde versus an oppressive state-sanctioned socialist realist style continues to maintain a prominent position within the history of modern Russian art. In her latest book, *Moscow Vanguard Art, 1922-1992*, Margarita Tupitsyn works within this narrative. She emphasizes in particular how the Moscow Artists' Union (MOSKh)—the state institution that determined the "official" style of Soviet visual art—controlled what artists could and could not produce from 1932 onward (p. 28). Tupitsyn seeks to provide the first comprehensive text that details how a small group of Soviet artists, whose art she calls "vanguard," managed to produce innovative, creative works that remained connected to modernism's experimental principles despite a lack of state financial and institutional support (p. 1). She demonstrates how artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Lidia Masterkova, Erik Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, the members of Collective Actions, Nikita Alekseev, Ilya Kabakov, and Vagrich Bakhchalian managed to produce vanguard works despite the fact that most encountered difficulties with the Soviet state. These artists, Tupitsyn argues, turned Moscow into the site of

an alternative history of socialist art, continuing modernism's experiments while also questioning and reinventing its forms.

The first two chapters of Tupitsyn's book, "In Defense of Nonobjective Art" and "The Specters of Formalism," are devoted to the postrevolutionary avant-garde. In these chapters, the author offers a detailed discussion of the debates between those early Soviet artists, such as Evgenii Katsman, who supported figurative realism as the most appropriate form of socialist art and the avant-garde artists who preferred suprematist abstractions and utilitarian objects. Although Brandon Taylor and Matthew Bown brought the significance of these debates to light in the 1990s, they remain under-recognized. Tupitsyn's discussion, together with other recent scholarship on the topic, pushes them to the fore once again.[1] The author's description of the Moscow art scene's contentious atmosphere during the period between 1917 and 1932 is unique, however, in that it emphasizes the significance of Evgenii Katsman's role in the advancement of figurative realist painting as the most appropriate form of Soviet art. Katsman was one of the founding members of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR). He was also an eloquent and vocal advocate of the group's platform. Tupitsyn devotes large sections of her first and second chapters to an analysis of Katsman's role in the art debates, focusing on the artist's rivalry with Kazimir Malevich. Katsman and Malevich were married to the Rafalovich sisters—Katsman to Natal'ia and Malevich to Sofia. For a time during the Civil War, the artists and their families lived together at their mother-in-law's home on the outskirts

of Moscow. They argued bitterly about the most appropriate art forms for socialism, with Katsman advocating realism and Malevich, suprematism. Based almost exclusively on her reading of the artists' respective memoirs, Tupitsyn argues that Katsman's public denunciations of both suprematism and Malevich himself led the early Soviet art establishment to turn against the abstract painter, ultimately pushing him to the margins. Apart from the painters' memoirs, the Russian archives contain many largely unexamined documents relating to both Katsman's and Malevich's interactions with the organs of early Soviet power. In her article "Staging Soviet Art: 15 Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic, 1932-33," Masha Chlenova, for example, has already demonstrated through a careful analysis of archival documents relating to exhibitions and curatorial practice in the early 1930s, that multiple factors contributed to the eventual marginalization of avant-garde artists, including art debate discourse, sharp changes in the political sphere, and the increasing influence of public opinion on the meaning of socialist art.[2] It will be interesting to see what kind of nuanced dialogue about the complex history of early Soviet art will continue to emerge from the interplay of examinations like Chlenova's and argument's like Tupitsyn's about the influence of artists' personal relationships on the fate of the avant-garde.

Moving beyond the complex factors that led to Malevich's eventual marginalization and a decreased overall interest in the early abstract works of the avant-garde, in her second chapter, Tupitsyn draws our attention to the founder of suprematism's late figurative works. Recently, Malevich's oeuvre has become a topic of both public and scholarly interest on an almost global scale. Despite this, however, the impressionistic portraits he produced after 1933, such as his muted 1934 *Self-Portrait* and his *Portrait of Una*, from the same year, have not yet been subjected to a multivalent scholarly examination. In 1934, the MOSKh members were beginning to establish socialist realism as the official style of Soviet art, and Tupitsyn argues that Malevich turned to the expressive freedom of impressionism, the painterly phenomenon that many view as the beginning of European modernism, in order to continue his vanguard experiment with the forms of modernist art. In so doing, she suggests that these late pictures be read as painterly innovations that offer a new take on impressionistic form. They do not simply rehash what had already been achieved in the late nineteenth century. Tupitsyn also suggests that like Malevich, Aleksandr Rodchenko returned to abstract painting in the early 1940s in order to free him-

self from government-imposed constraints. In her view, Rodchenko's rarely discussed late works, such as the line paintings in the *Streamlined Ornament* series, constitute a return to origins of the modernist experiment—a move she argues that Rodchenko made in order to continue the project in creative innovation that he too had begun before the Revolution, and thereby contributed in his own way to the Moscow vanguard.

With the exception of Rodchenko's linear abstractions, Tupitsyn does not discuss works produced during the Second World War, so it is difficult to speculate as to how or even if, in her view, Soviet wartime art occupied a place within the state-mandated style/vanguard dichotomy that propels her argument. Chapter 3, "Reinventing Abstraction," begins instead with the Thaw (1953-67, approximately). Here the author offers a detailed description of the Soviet turn to abstract painting, which occurred during the years immediately following Stalin's death in 1953. She argues that artists such as Vladimir Slepain, Vladimir Nemukhin, and Lidia Masterkova took up the experiment with the elements of painterly form that Rodchenko had begun in the early 1940s. This younger generation of vanguard artists engaged in self-critical, modernist experiments with line, flatness, color, and *faktura*, the tactile component of painting that according to the Russian-language concept of the medium appeals directly to sensate experience. Through a careful examination of the artists' personal archives and a close reading of the Soviet and Western press, Tupitsyn also describes the abstract painters' reaction to American abstract expressionism, which they had the opportunity to see in person during *The American National Exhibition* in Sokolniki Park in 1959. She demonstrates that the Moscow abstractionists did not simply copy the Americans' modernist techniques. They engaged with them dialogically as they tried to develop a form of communicative expression that could transcend, through their own understanding of the means of pure painting, the Soviet state's oppressive bureaucracy, which relied not on the visual, but on the literary. In so doing, Tupitsyn argues, this new generation of vanguard artists continued the project that artists such as Malevich and Rodchenko had kept alive before Stalin's death.

The author devotes the final quarter of her third chapter to the postwar vanguard's gradual transition from abstract painting to conceptual art. Tupitsyn shows that, having been inspired by Estonian painter Ülo Sooster's strange, geometric works, Ilya Kabakov began to explore the painterly medium as a "picture-object" (p. 88). According to the author, Kabakov combined ready-made

objects from Soviet everyday life with painterly surfaces to demonstrate that in the USSR “an aesthetic object had no function outside of its ideological exploitation” (p. 88). Tupitsyn argues that the “picture-objects” that Kabakov produced throughout the second half of the 1960s, together with Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid’s humorous performance-installation *Circle, Square, Triangle* (1974-75 and 1978), which mocked suprematist painting’s totalizing, utopian imperatives, marked the beginning of the vanguard’s turn away from “the genealogy of non-representation” toward new experiments in site-specificity and the linguistic experience of the Soviet everyday (p. 97).

In chapter 4, “Dangerous Luncheon on the Grass,” the author shows how in 1974 *The Bulldozer Exhibition* sounded the death knell for the vanguard’s pursuit of the abstract. Relying not only on artists’ recollections but also on her own documentary photographs and personal experience of the moment when the Soviet police forces quashed the large, open-air exhibition of mostly abstract painting that Oskar Rabin and other artists whose work was not supported by the state organized in Moscow’s Beliaev neighborhood, Tupitsyn explains that the results of the exhibition were positive. Artists publicly protested the vulgar actions of the Soviet authorities, and several unofficial artists were permitted to exhibit their works in small and unusual state-funded spaces. However, the author explains that given the interest in conceptualism that emerged in the wake of Kabakov’s “picture-objects” and Komar and Melamid’s installation-performances, the vanguard’s younger, more radical artists were not satisfied with the confinement of their experiments to public exhibition spaces. Mikhail Chernyshov, Boris Bich, and the other members of the Red Star group, for example, elected to move the forms of painting into outdoor public space. This prompted artists such as Kabakov and Andrei Monastyrsky and the members of the Collective Actions group (CAG) to explore the spatial sensations of painting. This, Tupitsyn argues, further convinced Monastyrsky that painting could translate into action. The younger vanguard’s new site-specific, conceptualist understanding of painting prompted them to begin to examine both the aesthetics of the interaction between form and environment and the aesthetics of human action and interaction. The author’s analysis of these conceptual works, particularly those of CAG, sets the stage for the book’s innovative argument about the meaning of Soviet installation art, which Tupitsyn elucidates fully in her fifth chapter “The Reason d’Etre of Installation Art.”

According to Tupitsyn, the turn to installation occurred when Nikita Alekseev, who was once a member of CAG, criticized Monastyrsky and CAG for turning away from aesthetic analysis toward theatricality. Alekseev then converted his apartment into an unofficial gallery space and began to accept works from individual unofficial artists. Tupitsyn describes Alekseev’s home as a place for “collective installation that blurred individual authorship” (p. 126), which, by making art semi-autonomous, encouraged spectators not to interact theatrically but to feel the aesthetic aspects of the objects on display. The author shows how Alekseev’s “Apt Art” practice prompted other vanguard artists to explore the relationship between an object’s aesthetics and its specific role in late-Soviet everyday life. She convincingly argues that Kabakov developed his “communal dwellers” based on this idea; the aesthetics of his characters’ *faktura*, rather than a narrative, allowed the work to raise critical questions about the realities of late-Soviet life (p. 135). Tupitsyn also demonstrates how Kabakov’s emphasis on the *faktura* of installed objects formed the basis of one of his most famous works, *The Man Who Flew into the Cosmos from His Room* (1985), and argues that with this total installation the artist began to reveal the ways in which theatricality can in fact complement “modernist consciousness” (p. 161). The author’s argument that Kabakov’s late-Soviet works evolved from the vanguard’s aesthetic installations constitutes a major intervention into the history of postwar Soviet art, which to date has tended to focus on the narrative aspects of Kabakov’s totalizing exhibits rather than the aesthetics of their *faktura*.

Tupitsyn devotes chapters 6 and 7 of her book to émigré vanguard artists in New York and the art of Perestroika. In “Moscow—New York,” she explains that émigré artists quickly discovered that New York galleries, despite key differences in economic organization and ideology, were just as inaccessible as those in the USSR. She also describes artist Vagrigh Bakhchianian’s smart, performative critiques of New York art institutions. In so doing, Tupitsyn raises important questions about how Western Cold War ideology prohibited Bakhchianian from gaining exposure at the same time that it made the West German artist Hans Haacke, who produced similar works of institutional critique, into a superstar. Lastly, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Perestroika,” the author describes this final Soviet period of a time of both unprecedented artistic freedom and open contact with the West. This open contact, Tupitsyn explains, set the stage for the development of post-Soviet vanguard art, which

continues to evolve today.

On the whole, *Moscow Vanguard Art, 1922-1992* provides a provocative new narrative of the evolution of Soviet unofficial art, which suggests a clear link between the pre- and postwar Soviet modernism. The book also offers the first in-depth, rigorous discussion of the relationship between the postwar American art and the So-

viet postwar vanguard. It will be interesting to observe how scholars engage with Tupitsyn's argument as they begin to devote more attention to the post-Soviet vanguard that she alludes to in her conclusion.

Notes

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Citation: Angelina Lucento. Review of Tupitsyn, Margarita, *Moscow Vanguard Art: 1922-1992*. H-SHERA, H-Net Reviews. July, 2019.

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