

Pamela Kachurin. *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013. 170 pp. \$45 (paper over board). ISBN-13: 978-0-81012-928-3.

In the opening paragraph of this slim, important book, Pamela Kachurin notes that “many members of Russia’s historic avant-garde . . . went to work for the Bolsheviks, finding gainful employment as museum directors, art school teachers, and arts administrators.” (p. xvii) In focusing on this integral, yet neglected aspect of the Russian avant-garde’s post 1917 existence, *Making Modernism Soviet* seeks to reframe the longstanding debate regarding the nature of the relationship between the avant-garde and the nascent Soviet state. This debate, outlined in works such as *The Total Art of Stalinism* by Boris Groys and “The Politics of the Avant-Garde” by Paul Wood, has largely revolved around questions of agency: whether and to what degree the avant-garde, in its enthusiastic support for the Soviet project, was opportunistic, merely naïve, or indeed complicit in its own eventual destruction. As a substantial account of this relationship has the potential to profoundly disrupt and reshape our understanding, not only of Russian Modernism, but of twentieth-century avant-gardism itself, it is understandable that this issue remains charged and contentious. Here is a fulcrum upon which rests not only current accounts of artists and individual works, but whole-cloth histories of the avant-garde, not least, as Kachurin notes, Peter Bürger’s influential and widely read *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.<sup>1</sup>

Given this, it is pleasing to note that *Making Modernism Soviet* offers a thoroughly-researched, tightly-structured account of the tense, uncomfortable entente between Modernist artists and the emerging administrative apparatuses of the Soviet state. In detailing the requirements and pressures that marked the shift from cultural agitation and opposition to loyal employee of the state, Kachurin adds significantly to our understanding of early Soviet avant-gardism. For what emerges in *Making Modernism Soviet* is an avant-garde far less strident and messianic, and far more cautious, reactive, and accommodating than detailed in previous studies. Indeed, the crucible and primary achievement of this book is its well-supported, vivid demonstration of how profoundly the process of

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1. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992); Paul Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum *et al.*, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), pp. 1-24; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

“Bolshevik self-fashioning” (Kachurin attributes the term to Stephen Kotkin) shapes the artistic, theoretical and pedagogical output of the post-revolution avant-garde.<sup>2</sup>

To make her case, Kachurin selects as the basis for her study three important early Soviet artistic institutions, each largely run by Modernists (The Moscow Museum of Painterly Culture; The People’s Art School in Vitebsk, home of Affirmers of New Art (UNOVIS); and The Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture, later reorganized as The State Institute of Artistic Culture, or GINKhUK). Kazimir Malevich, in his underappreciated role as a teacher and administrator, features prominently in the chapters on UNOVIS and GINKhUK. Kachurin’s analysis, richly supported by archival sources, focuses on the efforts of each to create, sustain and defend an avant-garde agenda, as well as the frequently creative ways these practices were framed and justified to relevant Soviet authorities. These chapters are especially strong in their detailed account of the complexity of these situations, the ways in which the competing pressures of creative freedom, ideological conformity, financial resources, and administrative duty formed horizons of possibility for avant-garde practice. Thus at Vitebsk in 1920-22, when Malevich’s protégé Vera Ermolaeva served as director of the People’s School of Art, giving UNOVIS “carte blanche to carry out their ambitious professional and pedagogical agenda,” (p. 41) Suprematism was re-theorized and valorized as the collective, ideological language of a ‘party in art.’ In contrast, during Malevich’s subsequent tenure at GINKhUK, in “an increasingly hostile political environment,” (p. 86) Suprematism was quietly folded into a broader theory of artistic and social evolution, whose scientific disinterest was emphasized. As Kachurin notes, in his 1929 solo exhibition at the State Tretyakov Gallery, Malevich included only five Suprematist works, all painted after 1917, and a far larger number of peasant portraits, falsely antedated to 1909-15 and doubtlessly intended to buttress his ideological credentials. Demonstrably here, the pressures of Bolshevik self-fashioning have radically shaped the self-presentation of a major artistic figure.

The focus on Malevich in the final two chapters of *Making Modernism Soviet* is additionally fruitful in that it provides a context against which to read the often baffling shifts in the artist’s (voluminous) theoretical writings of the 1920s. From the teleological triumphalism of “On New Systems in Art,” to the cosmic mysticism of “God is Not Cast Down,” and on to the quasi-scientific neutrality of his writings on the Additional Element

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2. Book Review Editor’s note: Stephen Kotkin employed the term “speaking Bolshevik” in *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1995), but “Bolshevik self-fashioning” is more closely associated with Igal Halfin’s work. Jochen Hellbeck’s variation is “fashioning the Stalinist soul.”

and for the Ukrainian journal *Nova Generatsiia* (Kharkiv, 1927-1930), Malevich's abrupt and frequently contradictory recalibrations of Suprematism have never been satisfactorily explained. In providing the fullest picture we have of Malevich's Soviet career and its attendant pressures, necessary compromises and strategies for survival, *Making Modernism Soviet* offers a critical framework that may produce new insights into these dense, recalcitrant texts. Here, one is again reminded of how much work on Malevich remains to be done.

Given the focus of *Making Modernism Soviet* on the shifting political and cultural terrain of the NEP era, it is unsurprising that the book draws upon its material to contest a number of key tenets regarding the period. Central to these is the association of the NEP with "a liberal cultural policy and corresponding artistic freedom," (p. xviii) a judgment often emphasized via juxtaposition with the 'repressive' codifications of cultural policy under Stalin. In the course of her three chapters, Kachurin constructs a darkly persuasive picture of the NEP as, essentially, a proving ground for methods of control and conformity in the sphere of visual arts. Yet her apparent ambition to challenge "the validity of the very conception that the Leninist 1920s and Stalinist 1930s were fundamentally distinct periods of Soviet cultural policy" (p. xix) seems overblown, a point pushed too far. Indeed, this contention is offered little serious support in the text, which is at its strongest when detailing the myriad inconsistencies, uncertainties, and tensions that distinguish NEP-era cultural policy. Here, the serious, well-supported thesis that the "open" 1920s, like the Stalinist 1930s, is distinguished by an administrative goal of establishing State control over cultural production, is diminished by what seems to be a discounting or elision of the stark differences between the two periods. Yet these differences are substantive and integral to any articulation of cultural policy – the degree of artistic pluralism permitted, for example, the kinds of radicalism proscribed, or indeed the relation of form and content – and such questions find very different answers in, say, 1927 than they do in 1935. To offer a convenient example, Malevich's 1929 exhibition, facilitated, as Kachurin notes, through the "support of allies and personal friends within the Tretyakov," (p. 101) would have been an unthinkable proposition five years later.

In addition to its challenge to accounts of NEP-era "openness" in cultural policy, *Making Modernism Soviet* seeks also to complicate the prevalent view of the avant-garde and the Soviet State as mutually opposed antagonists. Here again, the book provides excellent evidence of how the duties of state employment resulted in avant-garde figures contributing "to the centralization and standardization of the Soviet art world." (p. xvii) Yet, in contending that "'the avant-garde' and 'the state' should not

be viewed as distinct entities struggling against each other,” (p. xxii) *Making Modernism Soviet* again risks overstating the case it so carefully presents. For the book details precisely how, in the face of increasingly conformist pressures, artists at state-funded institutions rewrote and “Sovietized” avant-garde practices to preserve and sustain them. This tension, between a bureaucracy increasingly focused on cultural control and uniformity, and an avant-garde resistant to both pressures (at least where its own production was concerned), complicates any attempt to fold the two together. Indeed, Malevich’s writings of the period are peppered with acerbic comments about state coercion, including this passage from his essay “Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting” (published in Petrograd in 1923 and in Germany in 1927):

Those who succumb to the regimenting power [of the state] are advanced as loyal supporters of the state while those who preserve their subjective consciousness and individual point of view are looked upon and treated as dangerous and unreliable.<sup>3</sup>

Here the resilient tensions between state and non-conforming subject are underscored. Certainly, even while working for the state and learning its privileged languages and modes of self-presentation, Malevich in his writings defines himself, and avant-gardism in general, firmly in opposition to the state’s “regimenting power”. The mutual tension and suspicion that permeates this relationship, amply illustrated in the body of the text, is undersold in the book’s introduction and conclusion.

These, however, are minor objections. The achievement of *Making Modernism Soviet* lies in its carefully researched, complex and fascinating account of how, for over a decade, state patronage both sustained and transformed avant-garde practice. In this, the book breaks new scholarly ground. For producing a work that will be indispensable to those working on the period, as well as fascinating to other scholars, Kachurin is to be congratulated.

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3. Translation taken from Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism* (Mineolam, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), p. 21.