



For immediate release

Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography Exhibition showcases innovative images of 1920s Soviet artists

February 2—May 18, 2008 / North Balcony

MEDIA CONTACT

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PROMOTIONAL IMAGES AVAILABLE

Lawrence, KS— Alexander Rodchenko called the lens of the camera “the pupil of the eye of the cultured man in socialist society.” Beginning this weekend in the North Balcony, visitors to the Spencer may see for themselves what Rodchenko meant, as the museum presents ***Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography***—a selection of 40 photographs that serves to represent this brief but important time in recent world history.

The exhibition, organized by Spencer Museum of Art Photography Intern Ellen Raimond, is drawn exclusively from the Spencer’s collection and is offered as a complement to the national traveling exhibition ***EI Lissitzky: Futurist Portfolios***. Both exhibitions will be on view at the Spencer February 2 through May 18.

In the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917, avant-garde artists embodying the ideals of the Socialist Revolution shifted their focus from nonobjective formalist experimentation to more “practical” pursuits. These *Konstruktivitsky* (“Constructivists”) assumed a new “socially conscious” role: as “operators” armed with the mission of reinventing Russian society. During this period of marked political turmoil, the fledgling republic was defending itself against counterrevolutionary attacks and foreign intervention, while simultaneously instituting measures directed towards revitalizing its shattered economy.

During the 1920s, artists such as Rodchenko, who viewed the more documentary approach of “traditionalist” photographers as being ineffective, began exploiting the “viewpoint” of the camera and its lens in a more extreme and abstract way, to better transform and revolutionize the “ordinary.” His use of extreme close-ups, dynamic viewpoints exploiting unusual angles, and selective cropping influenced Boris Ignatovich, Georgy Zelma, and others. Beyond these stylistic traits, the formally complex imagery that was incorporated into photomontage and collage effectively combined the seeming objectivity of the camera’s lens with the subjective intellect of the photographer. This unification held the viewer ultimately responsible for determining the “true” subject of the Constructivist portrayal, not the “immediate” subject—still recognizable in its fragmented and distorted form—but the “new Soviet reality.”

In 1934, the Communist Party issued a decree disbanding all independent artistic groups and promoting the rise of Social Realism in literature and the visual arts. This exhibition of photographs seeks to explore how the Constructivist movement—armed with the mission of reinventing Russian society—successfully created images strongly rooted in design while capturing the distinctive characteristics of Soviet life. Today, the Constructivists run the risk of being dismissed as naïve and optimistic, when instead they should be applauded for using imagery to advocate their utopian ideals, with the hope of inspiring their fellow countrymen to commit themselves to a shared vision of Soviet Russia’s glorious future.

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Glossary:

Constructivism – Broad term applied to the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and early 1930s encompassing every feature and innovative trend in the arts of the period—influenced photography, painting, sculpture, theater and stage design, architecture, applied arts and commercial design, typography and poster design, literature, cinema, and music.

Formalism – An artistic theory or approach that emphasizes a work’s form (composition, line, etc.) over its content or subject matter.

photomontage – A work created from many smaller photographs arranged and often overlapping in a composition.

photojournalism - Journalism in which news is presented primarily through photographs, with supplementary text.

Productivism – An artistic movement invented by Constructivist artists, who believed that art should have a practical, socially useful role as a facet of industrial production.

Social Realism/ Socio-Realism – As practiced in Russia, an art movement that represented Socialist ideologies by depicting subjects of social concern (i.e., the struggle of the worker); specifically, the hardships of every day life as faced by the working class, with an emphasis on extolling the virtues of the loyal Communist laborer.

straight photography – Photography that attempts to depict a scene as realistically and objectively as is permitted by the medium, forsaking the use of manipulation, both pre-exposure and post-exposure.

Key figures:

Boris Ignatovich (1899-1976) was born in Lutsk, Ukraine. Ignatovich began his career in journalism, as an editor of newspapers and magazines. In 1923, experimenting with a borrowed camera, he became interested in photography and from 1926 onwards also worked as a photographer. Although strongly influenced by Rodchenko, Ignatovich soon found his own style and, when Rodchenko was expelled from the avant-garde art group, *October (Oktiabr)* in 1931, he took over as head of the group. While working for the Soviet picture agency *Soyuzfoto*, Ignatovich pioneered collectivism in photojournalism with a select group of talented photographers.

Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) was born in St. Petersburg. More than any other Russian photographer, Rodchenko influenced photography in the West. As a pivotal figure within the avant-garde, he was also influential as a painter, graphic artist and designer, theatrical producer, and professor at the Higher State Art Technical School (VKhUTEMAS). Prior to fully exploiting photography as an artistic outlet, he first made imagery for incorporation into photomontages. In his photographs and photojournalism, Rodchenko fought for a new vision of reality; he became known for his unconventional compositions, shots taken from above, below, or on the diagonal.

Georgy Zelma (1906-1984) was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. When his family moved to Moscow, his explorations with an old Kodak camera started him on the path towards a lifelong photography career. Formal training at a film studio led to an apprenticeship with the *Russfoto* agency, which supplied pictures to the foreign press. Later, the agency hired Zelma as its Central Asian correspondent and assigned him to his native city, Tashkent. With his intimate understanding of the area, he established his reputation by documenting how the city's inhabitants faced Soviet modernity. And, with the advent of World War II, Zelma gained international acclaim for his coverage of the Battle of Stalingrad.

ASSOCIATED PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Thursday, February 7

Art Talk: SMA intern Ellen Raimond on ***Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography*** / 6:30 PM / North Balcony

Thursday, February 7

Films: *Victory Over the Sun* and *Man with a Movie Camera* / 7 PM / Auditorium / Introduction by William Comer, director of Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies / Shown in conjunction with ***El Lissitzky: Futurist Portfolios*** and ***Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography*** / Robert Benedetti's 1980's recreation of *Victory Over the Sun* the Avant-Garde event of 1913 Russia, one of the first performance art pieces ever. Music by Mikhail Mitushiun. Text by Aleksei Kruchenykh. Art design and painting done by Malevich. Includes documentary commentary about the staging to the performance as well as scenes from the play (2001, 39 minutes) / Dziga Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* is considered one of the most innovative and influential films of the silent era. Startlingly modern, this film utilizes a groundbreaking style of rapid editing and incorporates innumerable other cinematic effects to create a work of amazing power and energy (1929, 68 minutes)

Thursday, February 14

Film: *Aelita, Queen of Mars* / 7 PM / Auditorium / Introduction by William Comer, director of Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies / Shown in conjunction with ***El Lissitzky: Futurist Portfolios*** and ***Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography*** / A Moscow engineer designs a space ship and travels to Mars. One of the most remarkable discoveries of Soviet silent cinema. A big-budget sci-fi spectacle with enormous futuristic sets and radical costumes said to have influenced Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. (1924, 113 minutes)

Thursday, February 21

Film: *Ballets Russes* / 6:30 PM / Auditorium / Introduction by Joan Stone, KU Lecturer in Dance History and Jerel Hilding, KU Associate Professor and Director of Dance / Shown in conjunction with ***El Lissitzky: Futurist Portfolios*** and ***Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography*** / For many, modern ballet began with the Ballets Russes of Monte Carlo, originally made up of Russian exiles from the Russian Revolution. This film tells the story of this landmark company with its stars and production as well as its power games, rivalries and tribulations that marked its turbulent history. (2005, 118 minutes)

Saturday, February 23

Children's Art Appreciation Class: —Machine Man” / Learn about the Russian artist El Lissitzky and create a metal sculpture / Instructor: Erin Hollis / 10:30 AM & 1:30 PM / Central Court & Galleries / \$ / Space is

limited; pre-enrollment is required. To enroll, contact the SMA Education Department, 785.864.0137 or smakids@ku.edu

Thursday, April 3

Gallery Conversation: Ellen Raimond, Photography Intern, on ***Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography*** / 12:15 PM / North Balcony

Saturday, April 12

Teacher Workshop: "Art, Politics, and Revolution: The Russian Avant-Garde and the Struggle for Ideas" / 10 AM – 1 PM / Auditorium & Galleries / Sponsored by KU's Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies (CREES) / In conjunction with ***Reframing Society: Russian Constructivist Photography*** and ***El Lissitzky: Futurist Portfolios*** / For more information contact Tatyana V. Wilds, International Outreach Coordinator, at (785) 864-4237 or twv@ku.edu

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Also find the Spencer...

- On the Web: www.spencerart.ku.edu
- E-mail: spencerart@ku.edu

Gallery hours

Tues., Wed., Fri., & Saturday 10 AM—5 PM

Thurs. 10 AM—9 PM

Sun. Noon—5 PM

Closed Monday

Museum Shop closes 30 minutes before the galleries close.

- Free parking in Lot 91 after 5 PM on weekdays and all day weekends, excepting home football games.
- Parking garage adjacent to Kansas Union is \$1 per hour weekdays, free on Saturdays and Sundays (but unavailable on home football games).