

Asher Tures

Katherine Smith

ART 208

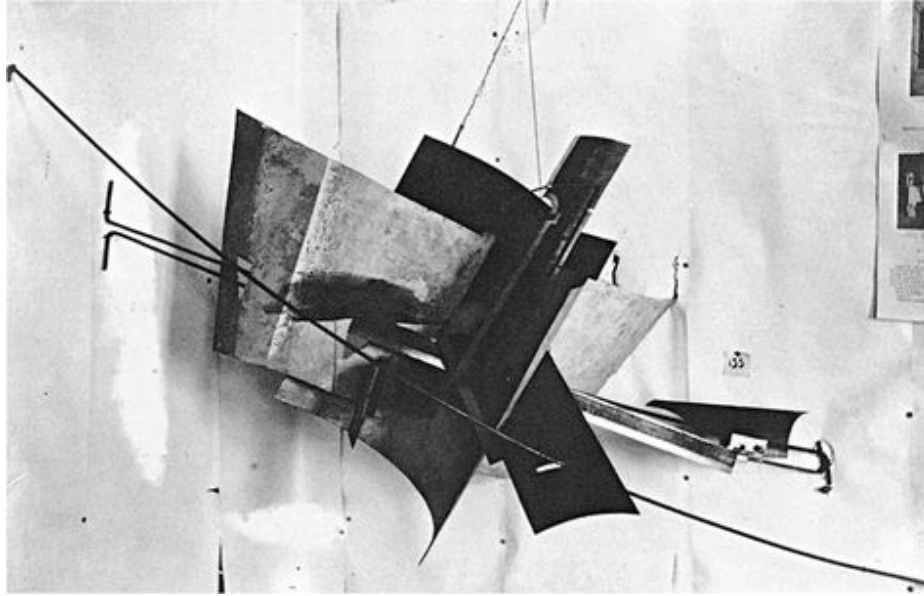
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A Critical Reflection on James Nisbet's "Material Propositions on the Individual/Collective: The
Work of Vladimir Tatlin"

The Russian Abstraction movement took place in a period of high political and social tension in Russia. Between the Bolshevik uprisings, the October Revolution, the fall of the Tsarist regime, and the rise of Lenin's socialism, many societal norms and standards were shifting. One of the primary topics of interest in the field of art concerned the placement of the individual in a society concerned with the collective benefit. Artists and writers came together in thinking of ways to address these new dynamics, creating a new perspective of society and style of abstract art, which frequently represented an idea rather than representing the world around the artist. James Nisbet addresses Vladimir Tatlin's interpretations of these shifts in societal understanding by examining three main phases of his career in the avant-garde. Nisbet approaches a reading of the individual and their role in collective society through Tatlin's various reliefs, his time at the Moscow Department of Fine Arts (IZO), and his time spent at schools and creating manufactured objects in service of the individual. He does this through a cross-referencing of historical records and one of Tatlin's contemporaries, Velimir Khlebnikov. Although Nisbet's structure and thesis are strong, he is limited by his choice in resource as it limits the material available for his final of three connections.

Some of the evidence Nisbet presents in favor of a reading of Tatlin's work in tandem with political movements of the time exist within Tatlin's modes of thought and common

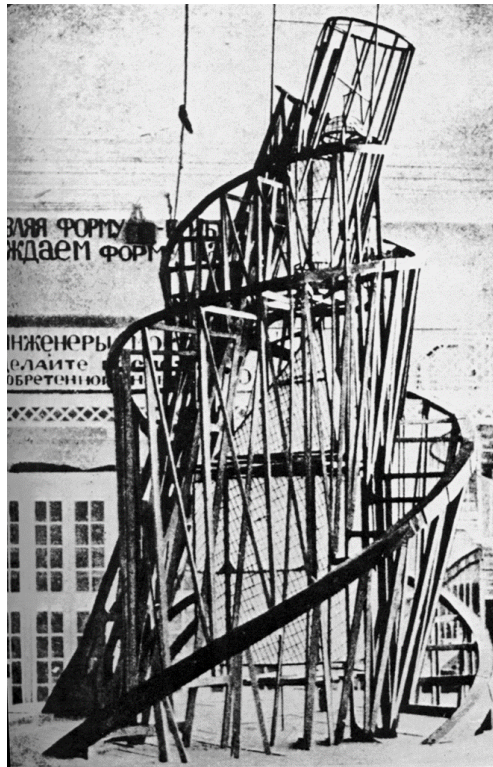
perceptions of the proletariat. Nisbet does this, with the first example being a view of *Corner Counter-Relief No. 133*. He compares the notion of each individual piece, with the way that they all come together to create a piece that is better than the sum of their parts, spatially interconnected and related. All of the various stages of Tatlin's relief-making are connected, as Nisbet states that "It is characteristic of Tatlin's entire run of constructed sculptures that the individual materials in each work connect to one another either through overlap or intersection" (Nisbet 116), further introducing and expanding on the idea of collectivity in sculpture. In the second section, Nisbet approaches the politically charged work performed by Tatlin in the Moscow Department of Fine Arts (IZO). This work still involved the space, as monuments were overtaken, rewritten, and created anew. The second section of this article deals heavily in the ways the public was perceived as a whole, and the political dynamics in the art world between Lenin, Lunacharsky, and Tatlin as the head of the IZO. Lastly, Nisbet touches on the narratives present in the items that Tatlin designed for the individual. These items were meant to be widely distributed and mass produced. However, this section notably touches less on the political, and transitions into a conclusion. Nisbet works to structure his evidence in each of his sections into a brief visual description, followed by Tatlin's thought process and the context that affected audience perception of the art.



Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief*, no. 133, 1915. Aluminum and tin sheeting, oil pigment, priming paint, wire, fastening components.

Exploring Nisbet's article layout in more detail, each section is structured with a broad overview of the chapter material in the introduction of the piece, and expanded upon in their respective sections. Nisbet pulls in elements of the political landscape, and cross references the claims he makes with recorded fact. One example of this technique is within the scope of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, and the historical narratives surrounding it. Nisbet begins with some details of the original sculptural plans, such as the tower being "large enough to dwarf the Eiffel Tower in height" and that it would be "four glass structures housed within the *Tower's* lattice frame" (Nisbet 121). He elaborates on the context of the making of the model, as Tatlin "was charged by Lunacharsky with carrying out Lenin's plan to replace Russia's old monumental sculpture with works appropriate to the new state's socialist aims" (Nisbet 121). He finally connects the two with a firm analysis, stating: "He proclaimed the Tower's revolutionary importance on three counts: first, it would be a functional structure as the center of operations for the Comintern; second, it would maintain a truth to modern materials by using only metal for its structure and glass to demarcate interior spaces; and third, its dynamic spiraling lines and tilted

orientation would provide a vital symbol of the Revolution” (Nisbet 122). The structure of this piece and the intended purposes as an international communications center, a rotating monument, and an inversion of the heroic individualism centric to the practice of monument creation are all important aspects that Nisbet brings into play with the discussion of this piece. This form of writing and explanation allows a logical link between the visual and the presented sociopolitical context.



Vladimir Tatlin, *model of Monument to the Third International*, 1920. Wood, cardboard, wire, metal, oil, paper

When analyzing Nisbet’s approach in studying each piece and its context, he makes a unique choice to involve the work of the poet Velimir Khlebnikov. The choice to involve the use of Khlebnikov was one that primarily affects how the article lays out the ideas it drives home, and one that I believe limits the research and strength of Nisbet’s article. Khlebnikov was a writer and poet who associated with Tatlin at times throughout the time period Nisbet explores. Nisbet argues for the importance of this connection as he “places particular emphasis on the poet

Velimir Khlebnikov, who shared a personal working relationship with the artist and, more importantly, whose shifting social theories resonate strongly with the turns in Tatlin's own modes of production." (Nisbet 111). In the first section, Nisbet studies Khlebnikov's linguistic analysis of words, and then of letters, and Nisbet connects the use of individual letters to create a legible whole to the idea of *faktura* and of the interconnected pieces of Tatlin's Reliefs *Faktura* is defined as a "term, typically rendered in English as either 'facture' or 'texture, but generally denoting the material quality of the work, encompassing the final state and the process of making the work" (Nisbet 113). This plays into the idea of the artist, the individual pieces and texture, and the idea of coming together, which Nisbet highlights. In the second section, Nisbet further studies Tatlin's work surrounding the political, and the ideals it shares with some of Khlebnikov's writings. Specifically, Nisbet spends time on Khlebnikov's theories about mathematical units and applications as a way of understanding the spread of information and ideas, as well as the use of technology to literally achieve this spread. The first of the two concepts is addressed in Tatlin's seventh thesis, surrounding the roles of individuals in the collective, which connects back to many of the core ideals of his work. The second of the two is in the structure of the proposed *Monument to the Third International*, which was supposed to have telephones, radios, and other technology, all of which would enhance the spread of ideas, propaganda, and knowledge. Overall, the use of Khlebnikov in the first two sections greatly enhances the narratives of thought that Nisbet is presenting as a part of Tatlin's work. However, this choice comes with some drawbacks in the legibility and structuring of Nisbet's article.

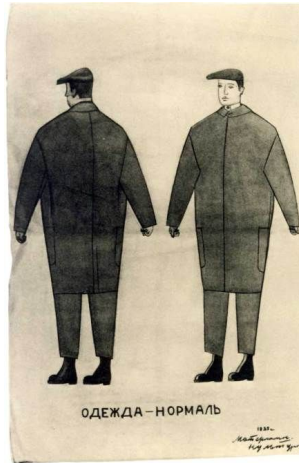
The last section of Nisbet's argument seems like an abrupt shift from the presented scholarship of previous sections. It is short, it contains less detail and historical knowledge, and rapidly transitions into a conclusion. Further elaborating, this last section is stated in the

introduction to comprehend Tatlin's role in the art schools of Russia in this period of transition, as well as to contextualize his manufactured objects within the individual and collective.

However, Nisbet's section covers little of Tatlin's time at art schools, and the connections made between the manufactured objects and the narratives throughout the rest of the article are shakier.

This is possibly due to Khlebnikov's untimely death in 1922, and Nisbet's reliance on Khlebnikov as a source. No matter what reason, the section is an abrupt change from the historical depth and narrative significance of Tatlin as an artist, and distances him from political narratives of change and power.

To show the lessened impact of this final section, the reader can examine the ways that Nisbet presents Tatlin's design for a coat in comparison with any of the other pieces he examines. While he provides an extensive visual analysis, he does significantly less to elaborate on the political implications of the piece. The most he does to elaborate on the connection between the coat design and the political is to describe the coats as "objects made for the individual worker and conceived from the literal contours of the human body" ending his thought there (Nisbet 130). This directly transitions into a conclusion, as Nisbet considers all of his presented material. This last section feels like a dramatic and rapid shift into a conclusion. This shift weakens the strength of Nisbet's research overall, as it cuts short an otherwise well-explored set of connections to Tatlin and Khlebnikov's thought processes. Considering why this shift might have occurred may allow the reader to better understand this shift, but does nothing to dull the shock of the abrupt ending. When contextualizing this choice to study Khlebnikov, the audience may look to the past research in the field.



Vladimir Tatlin, *design for man's overcoat*, 1923. Charcoal on tracing paper.

Some of the most formative research about the Russian avant-garde is performed by Christine Lodder and Christina Kiaer, as they dedicated their primary dissertation studies to the research and contextualization of this art. Both had extensive funding, and did intense research of surviving artists and families, and delved into Russian archives. In structuring his article, there is more of a sense that Khlebnikov is the primary source that Nisbet cites and uses to contextualize his claims. While this is an interesting approach, it may not be as entirely effective as the in-depth research done by Kiaer and Lodder. Part of understanding Nisbet and his perspective and experience in this field is understanding his background. He is a scholar that primarily researches American art in the 1960s and 1970s, and is therefore outside of his primary field of research. In addition, another important piece of context is the theory that this was written concurrently with his dissertation, which was published in the following year. These two concepts play into the understanding of Nisbet's use of Khlebnikov. While this use of Khlebnikov is inventive and adds to his argument in the first few sections of analysis, it ends up halting the progress of his last section of thought, which has less solid conclusions to draw upon.

Taking all of this into account, "Material Propositions on the Individual/Collective: The Work of Vladimir Tatlin" has a successful core argument, but lacks the same conviction as seen

in Lodder and Kiaer's scholarship. Nisbet's argument is strong, and allows the readers to understand the complex modes of thought in the Russian avant-garde, and to focus on Vladimir Tatlin's contributions to the field. The thesis is clearly stated and accessible, and Nisbet provides an easy logical path for readers to follow. His first two sections are fairly well structured, and further elucidate the connections between the political and Tatlin's art. In this sense, Nisbet has succeeded in breaking ground in the field, and introducing a new perspective. However, Nisbet's final section ends up falling short of the precedent set by the first sections. Nisbet seems to have less conviction and evidence for his claims, and the section ends with an abrupt transition into Nisbet's conclusion. There was an expectation of Nisbet delving further into the conceptual ideas he introduces, but never follows through with. Despite the weakness of the third section, the argument Nisbet makes still holds merit, and warrants further research and investigation. If the intent was to bring a new perspective to be further explored, Nisbet fully succeeded at his stated task. As new waves of scholarship come to pass, the further elaboration and positioning of the Russian avant-garde in their political landscape will hopefully become a priority.

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