The Politics of Pairing Gender Identity and Artistic Profession in Moscow's Constructivist Circle

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ABSTRACT

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Gabriella Penev

Through a comparative analysis of two artists working in Moscow's Constructivist movement in the early 1920's this paper assesses how the framework of gender shapes the ways in which they have been portrayed by scholars. By utilizing primary art works, personal writings, and scholarly materials this work considers how gender identity is woven in and out of Liubov Popova and Aleksandr Rodchenko's professional lives to construct current historical narratives about them. In tandem, by breaking down the decades-long cultivation and reification of the term 'woman artist' into three historical moments, this research seeks to determine whether it is a fitting primary descriptor of an artist working at the fore of one of the most experimental, and multi-disciplinary artistic movements in the early 20th century. My research suggests a redistributive lens is needed to include other aspects of identity in the categorical linguistic framing of Popova, so as to allow for alternative, yet equally relevant pairings, such as between her profession and her shifting class status. In conclusion this work hopes to reveal how both Popova and Rodchenko adhered to, and occasionally circumvented traditional class and gender specific forms of art practice through their Constructivist projects. Their navigations can be read as a subtle effort to destabilize definitions of high and low art, as well as the dichotomous relationship between feminine and masculine domains of art practice.

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Chapter I: Introduction

"Women have resisted the term 'woman artist' not as a denial or misrecognition of the self, but as a refusal to submit to the terms of a professional identity forever qualified by the condition of femininity"[1]

Richard Meyer

On April 24th 2013, *The New York Times* published an Op-Ed article entitled "Wikipedia's Sexism Toward Female Novelists" by Amanda Filipacchi. The article noted that in preceding months Wikipedia editors had been gradually moving female authors out of the 'American Novelists' category to an 'American Women Novelists' subcategory. Last names began to disappear in alphabetical order as one by one, female authors were relegated to this new category.

According to Wikipedia, the reason for this mass relocation was due to the overwhelming number of authors listed under the main heading. Filipacchi pointed out this did not result in the creation of a similar subcategory 'American Male Novelists';[2] instead the 'American Novelists' section became a de facto list of male authors without a gender descriptor in the title. Three days after Filipacchi's article received widespread media attention and international public interest, Wikipedia editors reinserted 'women novelists' back under the main heading.[3] The 'American Women Novelists' subcategory remained, and its 'male' equivalent quickly appeared to compensate for the earlier imbalance. Wikipedia contributors decided that 'women novelists' were in fact just novelists once more.

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[1] Richard Meyer. "Identity," *Critical Terms for Art History,* ed. Richard Shiff and Robert S. Nelson. 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2003), 355-356.

[2] Amanda Filipacchi, "Wikipedia's Sexism Toward Female Novelists," *The New York Times*, 27 April 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/opinion/sunday/wikipedias-sexism-toward-female-novelists.html?ref=opinion&_r=2& [Accessed 12 March 2015]

[3] Amanda Filipacchi, "Wikipedia's Sexism," *The New York Times*, 27 April 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/opinion/sunday/wikipedias-sexism.html?ref=sunday [Accessed 12 March 2015]

The controversy surrounding categorical configurations on the world's largest online open source (and publicly edited) encyclopedia closely mirrors the particular historical and theoretical problem I would like to analyze. The sheer prevalence of the terms 'woman artist' or 'female artist' to frame and describe individuals or groups across art movements or historical periods is striking; yet existing literature does not often address why or how these labels are essential when analyzing artists and their work. I believe that a critical assessment of the term 'woman artist' and its relevance as a category of historical analysis should be a requirement.

It is only in the last few decades that art historians have begun to question the term's use and analytical relevance, yet there is still a lack of research on the normalized categorization of female artists in terms of their gender identification. The absence of the term 'male artist' in describing, framing, and analyzing artists who happen to also be men demonstrates a one-sided application of gender classification in framing artists, which prevails in publications to this day.

This research primarily seeks to understand why the term 'woman artist' is so common in art historians' vocabulary and, to a lesser degree, concurrent curatorial practices where the term 'man artist' or 'male artist' is nonexistent. My thesis uses a comparative case study of two artists active in the Constructivist movement during the interwar period in Russia: Liubov Popova and Aleksandr Rodchenko. In doing so, I attempt to locate how these terms are alternately applied or avoided when framing the historical representation of both Popova's and Rodchenko's personal and professional activities. Literature on Popova often incorporates the term 'woman artist', yet the descriptors employed to categorize Rodchenko's person and production consistently

frame the artist as anything but 'male'. This comparative approach will assist me in understanding how social, economic, and ideological dynamics influence the historical treatment of two artists with different gender identities.

At a time when these individuals were occupying a liminal space between artist, comrade, and constructor, it is remarkable that scholarly analysis of the artist who happens to be female so readily associates gender and profession without sufficiently exploring if it provides a fair assessment of her identity as a person of historical and artistic interest. On a broader note, I hope that this case study can help explore how the use of identity labels in historical analysis can affect our shared understanding of a historical moment, experience, and individual.

Profession and gender are hardly the sole facets that are repeatedly and deliberately linked together in publications from scholarly works to contemporary news. In today's cultural climate it is more common than ever to rely on identity-based categorical analysis as an effective narrative lens. One of the underlying purposes of this method of filtering information is to highlight recognizable aspects of a person's identity so it can be easily consumed by the reader. The human brain can only focus on or digest so much information, and often when complexities are introduced the information can get lost, which is why categorization in general, and in particular identity-based categorization can be a powerful tool of communication. This is immensely important for minorities whose experiences are often overlooked by mainstream narratives or media. Through categorization, specific perspectives are called to attention and considered, thus reshaping the historical moments that define our shared reality.

Categorization based on identity can help to define and communicate shared successes and failures of a group to their community and beyond its real and imagined borders. A contingent factor of this categorization as communication is the emergence of patterns as the easiest way to recognize a concept, develop a narrative, and understand a specific group of people. Tropes and stereotypes form, and the pairing of certain aspects of one's identity are reinforced as acceptable filters through which meaning is made. Herein lies the query of this paper as it seeks to take just one pairing of identity, gender and profession, and explores how it has influenced years' worth of scholarly debate and discussion surrounding two individuals.

This project engages with disparate literatures to consider the use of the term 'woman artist,' and explore the absence of its so-called male counterpart in historical literature in order to determine the value of framing certain individuals throughout the narratives of art history in such a repeatedly imbalanced fashion. I have divided a sample of historiography pertaining to the conception of the 'woman artist' into three historical moments, each denoting the chronological evolution of the term's use. These occurrences illustrate the changing priorities in Western art historiography – from an enthusiastic effort to include 'women artists', to questioning the validity of the category, and finally to an unsuccessful attempt to move beyond the term. An argument that explains the necessity of this linguistic association is lacking from the available scholarship. This discrepancy is inadequately explored, which in turn sustains the expression's continued recurrence. What is available is a brief suggestion of decoupling identity from profession, an all-too-common form of classifying solely women, into recognizable groupings.

Ultimately, this investigation seeks to bring these theoretical and historical literatures together for the first time to determine how and why the term 'woman artist' remains prevalent while 'man artist' escapes regular use. As a result, the secondary sources analyzed in this paper must frequently be treated, in fact, as primary sources, since the ways in which these two artists have been categorized by the Western art historical scholarship is at the very heart of my argument. In the pages that follow, I explore the normalization and frequency of gender descriptors in much of the scholarly work on Popova, and in contrast examine the lack of analysis regarding how perhaps the maleness of Rodchenko reorganizes our reading of the artist. This project seeks to fill a gap in current literature regarding the concept of the 'woman artist' and 'man artist' as categorical frameworks, highlighting the particular historical narratives of prominent Russian Constructivists Popova and Rodchenko, in order to cast light on the pattern of how identity is reinforced, circumnavigated, or passed over in the telling of their histories.

Chapter II: First Moment: The Absence of 'Women Artists' in Art History (1971)

My study begins with a seminal text about the lack of scholarly work on women artists, which took its inspiration from the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, the movement focused on dismantling gender discrimination across a wide range of social areas. From campaigns to legalize abortion, to protests against workplace inequality, the movement actively focused on a number of social issues to call out and reorganize the weighted scales of gender difference. By 1969 the motions put in place by this movement reverberated in the halls of Vassar College's

Art History department in New York State. Dr. Linda Nochlin, a faculty member in that department, began to apply these ideas to what is arguably the first feminist intervention in Western art history. Her now famous essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (published in 1971) reoriented the field toward an exploration of the socio-economic and patriarchal barriers constructed to stifle women's involvement in and exposure to the arts, as well as art literatures.

From societal gender norms to institutional preconditions for achievement, Nochlin breaks down the common factors inhibiting women from receiving recognition within Western art history's canon.[4] Her article is pivotal to my analysis of the term 'woman artist' for she singlehandedly began to question the lack of attention to female artists in art history, which is why this query begins with Nochlin's work. Besides noting a few "outdated and patronizing 'histories' of women artists" from the 19th and early 20th centuries, the absence of literature on great artists who were also women was astounding to Nochlin.[5] Not arguing for a revisionist feminist art history that simply includes women in the existing canon of great artists, her work nevertheless resulted in a plethora of writings that sought to refocus attention on women artists.[6] Historian Joan Scott characterizes this feminist history as the 'her-story' approach, problematic for its tendency to "isolate women as a special and separate topic of history", easily dispatching them to a "'separate sphere' that has long been associated exclusively with the female

[4] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power And Other Essays,* ed. L. Nochlin (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 24.
[5] Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 19.
[6] Flavia Marcello aptly notes how "post-feminist histories tend to go trawling through the history of art in an attempt to exhume artists who had been passed over or ignored because they were women and to place them alongside the great masters as objects of equal worth." See her "Preface," in *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919-1939: Expanded Social Roles for the New Woman following the First World War*, eds. P. Birnbaum and Anna Novakov (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 1.

sex."[7] In some ways it is understandable that no sustained critical analysis of the term 'women artist' surfaced at the time as it was a relatively new concept – gaining ground in the early 1970s thanks in part to Nochlin's innovative critique. While eloquently explaining the barriers to women artists in the artistic world, Nochlin's contribution to the literature on women artists skipped a necessary explanation as to why the hybrid term combining one's gender and profession is a useful combination by which to categorize artists who happen to be women. I argue that this has the potential to systematically exclude 'women artists' from the main 'artist' category, in the same way that Wikipedia's 'American Women Novelists' subcategory excluded novelists based on gender.[8]

While Nochlin's work was necessary at a time when women were almost entirely left out of the canon of 'great artists', Western art historians soon began to publish works focused on groups of 'women artists' to the point where this new term became reified as an acceptable framing device in historical analysis. Publications on women artists, and other minority groups became the norm. They became a new and exciting way to write about historical experiences and situations. However, this often led to work that did exactly what Joan Scott had earlier warned against – that is categorically focus on women simply because they were women, instead of focusing on the nuanced overlaps of experience that may have stemmed from their gender identification, or even an exploration of how women and men working in the same profession worked alike or differently due to their gender, or owing to many other principal facets of identity and experience.

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[7] Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History,* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), 20.

[8] This can be seen in the publication of art history works solely focused on women artists, as well as in growing interest in museum exhibitions focused on groups of women artists over a period of time active within a regional area or artistic genre. Several of these works pertaining to Liubov Popova will be discussed below.

In 1976 Nochlin and fellow art historian Ann Sutherland-Harris curated an exhibition and publication titled *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, with the intention to once and for all highlight the artists who have been absent from critical discussions on historical art literature. The authors chalk this lacuna up to the lack of institutional access and opportunity stemming from being a woman, and a normalized cultural preference to discuss history through the lens of male artists. In the preface to the text there is a passage that reveals a self-perpetuating struggle with the very notion of focusing on artists who are also women:

> For too long they either have been omitted altogether, or isolated, as even in this exhibition, and discussed only as women artists and not simply as artists, as if in some strange way they were not part of their culture at all. This exhibition will be a success if it helps to remove once and for all the justification for any future exhibitions with this theme.[9]

Sutherland-Harris and Nochlin were acutely aware that discussing women artists in a monolithic and categorically unified manner was a temporary fix, and a necessary but ideally short-lived way of integrating artists into a field that refused to recognize their activities and existence for generations. Ironically, this was the first of hundreds of exhibitions and publications (some of which will be discussed in this paper) that have continued to apply the exact same frame over the next four decades.

Chapter III: Second Moment: Questioning 'Women Artists' (1980-Present)

Coinciding with the demise of second wave feminism and the rise of third wave feminism, art historians began to question the 'woman artist' frame, tentatively pointing

[9] Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland-Harris, *Women Artists 1550-1950*, Issue 35, (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, University of Minnesota), 44.

out the risk of manifesting a discourse of seclusion based on one gender. Indeed, the literature associated with this historical moment draws much inspiration from Nochlin's earlier work. Griselda Pollock, for instance, presents the most significant beginnings of questioning historical terminology in her 1999 text, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*.[10] Pollock points out a major flaw in using 'women' as a category of analysis:

> There remains a problem posed by the category 'women', created by the way societies treat those thus designated. Woman - capital W - is a fiction and a myth. But for the last decades of this century we have organised as women, imagining a political collectivity of women in their concrete, social relations. Even this has, however, been radically challenged. The term 'Women', tracked through diverse fields of history, sociology, philosophy, art history and literature no longer offers much security for the critical historian or cultural analyst.[11]

Here Pollock turns away from the historical trend of treating 'Women' as a stable category of analysis, refusing to accept the inherent validity of the constructed term. This uneasiness is followed by another acknowledgment pertinent to this discussion. She writes that "if we use the term women of artists, we differentiate the history of art by proposing artists and 'women artists'. We invite ourselves to assume a difference, which all too easily makes us presume that we know what it is."[12] Pollock brings a sharp awareness to the nebulous and occasionally overt gender distinctions in writing about artists. By identifying this linguistic distinction that haunts artists who are also women, Pollock touches upon the categorical predicament facing scholars that automatically weave identity-based nuances into their analyses of historical subjects without careful

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[10] Steven Z. Levine, "Representing Women by Linda Nochlin; Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories by Griselda Pollock," *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 22, No..1 (Spring – Summer 2001), 64.
[11] Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Art's Histories.* 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 99.
[12] Ibid, 33.

consideration of these very categories and the differences they create. While offering great insight into the difficulties of using the term 'Women' as a platform for critical analysis in art history, this work does not delve further into dissecting what the 'presumed difference' is between an artist and a woman artist.

Flavia Marcello does, however, offer a short explanation regarding the implications of the category of 'women artists', in her preface to *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919-1939*. After coming to no discernible conclusion as to why Western historians feel the need to make a distinction for 'women artists', Marcello provides a justification for the category, as it "implies a sense of these women's struggle and survival" to succeed in a male-dominated world.[13] This mirrors Nochlin's argument that patriarchal institutions and ideological forces are what kept women out of art history's canon. While it stands as a reminder about what the term 'woman artist' implies from a feminist perspective, her comment does not adequately sum up why it is effective as a category of analysis. Marcello's introduction does suggest that "by moving beyond the constraining 'isms' and traditional narratives of Western art history" we can begin to understand not only how women were active within cultural spheres but also how men have been constrained by these very same narratives surrounding their artistic expression.[14]

While it is important to highlight the term 'woman artist' for its implication of women's collective 'struggle and survival', this also presumes that the experiences of particular individuals are collective due to their gender identification, without taking into consideration other aspects that might show difference within this categorization, or

[13] Marcello, 2.
[14] Ibid, 18.

possible similarities to male artists as well. It is too simplistic to approach such diverse and multilayered individuals who have affected artistic and political currents over the years by just one label, and Pollock and Marcello are struggling to find a way to go beyond this frame while continuing to pay close attention to the gender identities of their historical subjects.

Scholars now questioning the term 'women artist' in Western art history parallel the historical movement in the early 1970s in that they lack analysis of the term but remain insistent that 'women artists' are a diverse group. The continuity of this message is important. Linda Nochlin stresses in her pivotal essay "women artists and writers would seem to be closer to other artists and writers of their own period and outlook than they are to each other."[15] As Nochlin suggests, comparisons based on gender identification bind 'women artists' under an analytical lens that does not rest on as stable foundations as a lens that considers artistic technique, motive, or historical predicament. Historian Kristen Frederickson similarly notes that artists who are also women "do not necessarily share a universal set of experiences based on sex and gender roles."[16]

If these authors consistently stress how different 'women artists' are in their approaches to making art, methods, framing, then is the term particularly useful in historical rhetoric as a category of analysis? What does the term usefully convey as meaning if all these texts stress that the perspectives and realities of women are increasingly varied and contingent? Joan Scott defends gender as a useful category of analysis; yet the pairing of gender and profession that is so popular in Western historical works is not always employed to unpack the lives of artists and their works. Instead they

[15] Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", 4.
[16] Kristen Frederickson, *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 8.

are often relying on gender as a way to connect historical subjects in a neatly packaged publication without reflecting on how this shared identity may have or may not have played a role in the formation of their professional works.

Chapter IV: Third Moment: A New Framing of 'Women' and 'Artist'? (2003 – Present)

Similar to the earlier works of Nochlin, Pollock, Frederickson, and Marcello, Marsha Meskimmon's *Women Making Art* (2003) questions the coupling of 'woman' and 'artist'. She states, "writing about women's art practices is a dangerous task, as it can lead to ineffective approaches to changing power dynamics in the art world, such as counting the number of works by women in a show, or adding women to current canon's of 'masters', or producing an alternative canon of the 'great' women artists".[17] Meskimmon's writing exhibits a guarded critical stance in comparison to previous sources. She points directly to the potential problems created by focusing on the preponderance of 'women artists' within various fields. In seeking to redress histories without devolving to a "reductive definition of 'women artists' and 'women's art' as homogeneous categories", Meskimmon seeks to understand the subtle differences between the individuals in her scholarly work.[18]

Though not overtly done, she re-conceptualizes what she sees as a blatantly reductive focus on 'women artists' into women making art. This approach allows Meskimmon to embark on a careful negotiation of subjective female identities, material specificity and historical locality to emphasize the contingency of the artistic process at

[17] Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics,* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.
[18] Ibid, 2.

hand, while continuing to apply gender as a category of analysis.[19] Focusing on how women make art illustrates the relational position between gender and artistic creation. Nevertheless, her work continues to use the label of 'women artists', which is interspersed throughout the text with the 'women making art' descriptor. Meskimmon's writing helps to highlight the dangers of homogeneous characterization in writing histories on individuals who share a profession and gender identity.

None of the aforementioned scholars stray far from coupling profession and gender when it comes to writing histories of artists who happen to also be women. Perhaps there is a source of normality in attaching the two sides, which creates a socially shared meaning. It is just one strong pairing of many identity-based linguistic patterns that has become a practice in writing histories, stories, talking about and distinguishing people. This practice is called into question by Richard Meyer's chapter on identity-based historical analysis in the 2003 compendium *Critical Terms for Art History*. Meyer probes the focus on a person's or group's distinctive or representational traits – a pattern that burst forth from the politically charged identity-based social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. While not directly focusing his case study on how scholarly works categorically employ the frame 'women artists' it provides insight into the ostensible blueprint of identity-labeling in modern culture and historical scholarship.

Meyer's research on artist Paul Cadmus (a painter based out of the United States) explores how scholarly works have oft pigeon-holed Cadmus as a gay artist, going so far as to note the writer's own prejudice in wanting to form an image of the artist in such a way that misrepresents Cadmus' perception of his work. The article calls for "more attention to those moments when identity and its visual representation are misaligned,

[19] Ibid, 3.

disconnected, or otherwise uncoupled".[20] This suggests that identity-based historical analysis in the last four decades may have unwittingly perpetuated a cycle of hyper-exclusivity that depends on, and celebrates categories of difference.

Furthermore, this does not always accurately represent the subject of historical interest, as in the case of artist Paul Cadmus. Meyer discovers that "it was not homosexuality Cadmus was averse to discussing but rather the connection between his homosexuality and his artistic output" which decouples the presumed and largely celebrated association between Cadmus as a gay individual and his professional work as an artist.[21] This turns into a query of how meaning is made out of a person's supposed identity(/ies) in relation to their profession(s), and how historians and scholars subsequently choose to honour these subjects of history by exhuming certain facts while leaving others undisturbed. For some artists surely, certain aspects of their identity take on a central role for the development of their work, and how they are seen by peers, media, and scholars. Yet for others, as Meyer points out, identity is not always an attributable factor to the self-concept of someone's work, and the seemingly celebratory and innocuous rhetoric can contradict or confine the authenticity of historical treatment.

To tie this back to the framing of artists who are women as 'women artists' Meyer's work also surveys research regarding artists' conscious resistance to a "professional identity forever qualified by the condition of femininity".[22] He considers the magnificent steps forward in highlighting and celebrating individual identity-based differences that have a part in influencing artistic output and tries to make sense of how

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[20] Richard Meyer, "Identity," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed., eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 355.
[21] Ibid, 354.
[22] Ibid, 356.

these differences affect scholarly analysis. By asking, "what precisely does it mean to focus art-historical attention on identity?" and "how are particular forms of identity rendered visible in and through the history of art?" he probes at a growing trend that pairs identity and artistic expression as de facto partners in the writing of history.[23]

With the fields of post-modernity and intersectional theory Meyer enters the scene attempting to distinguish aspects of identity from aspects of profession in his analysis of Cadmus and urges other scholars to take steps in doing the same. This moment qualifies identity grouping as a temporary and modern theme in Western academic research. It is this moment from which my own research derives inspiration in tackling the patterns of gender categorization in the scholarly work on artists Popova and Rodchenko. I hope to distil how the pairing of profession and gender has influenced scholarly knowledge of a woman and a man 'making art' within the same artistic field in the Soviet Union's nascent years.

While gender is an increasingly necessary and vital category of analysis, the sequential nature of the 'woman artist' label suggests gender is *always already* a notable factor in their professional lives. Even the arrangement of this label is telling, for it presents their gender in front of their profession – a qualifying aspect for immediate consideration to their work. This may not be an intended result of scholarly writings; however, it is certainly a discernible framework for the analysis of artists who are also female. The focus on solely the female gender, largely treated in isolation from other genders proves an imbalance in the predominantly Western art historiography that I engage with in this paper, which needs more examination. To see what I mean, an

[23] Ibid, 345.

analysis of the scholarship on the work and lives of artists Liubov Popova and Aleksandr Rodchenko follows.

This case study demonstrates how gender identification continues to frame much of the scholarly work about artists who are women, while men who make art escape the confines of the 'male artist' frame. It hopes to determine whether such a one-sided frame is an effective approach to balancing power dynamics and presence in the art world, or if it instead impedes the integration of a variety of identity-based artists in contemporary art-historical scholarship. My analysis will largely be focused on the Constructivist years of Popova and Rodchenko's artistic expressions, in part as their works were being created and exhibited simultaneously, a situation which lends itself well to this comparative study, and also in part because Popova died in the mid-twenties, while Rodchenko's artistic career underwent several transformations in the decades that followed. In no way does this analysis claim to make conclusions about the movement as a whole, or seek to be representative of the other artists working alongside Popova and Rodchenko, but it does raise intriguing questions about the applicability of gendered frames and I hope that my work sparks a wider re-examination of the ways in which women who make art are considered by art historians.

Chapter V: The Artists and Their Work: An Introduction

Liubov Popova and Aleksandr Rodchenko are both well known for their contributions to Moscow's Constructivist movement of the 1920s. From conceptualizing the movement's purpose in the new Soviet Union, to attempting to get their designs into mass-production, they each sought to renegotiate conceptions and boundaries of art in its

relationship with the materials, the artist, the spheres of politics and production. Although they ended up in the same art collective, debating theory, teaching technical art classes, and exhibiting their work in the same shows, they came from very different socio-economic circumstances and followed starkly contrasting paths into the avant-garde.

Popova was born in 1889 in Ivanovskoe, near Moscow, growing up in a wealthy textile merchant family that supported fine art and culture. This upper-class childhood ensured that she had an early exposure to classic and contemporary art movements. Receiving formal art lessons from age eleven onwards and enrolling in The School of Painting and Drawing in Moscow at eighteen gave her the opportunity to develop her technique at an early age. From 1909 to 1914 Popova's travels to St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Paris honed her interests in Italian Renaissance painting, and later Cubo-Futurism. Working in Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's studio from 1912 to 1915 introduced collage and the use of geometric forms into her art, further shifting her focus from fine arts to the abstract.

Popova's interest in abstract or non-objective works was complemented by concurrent ventures into more practical applications of art. For example, she employed overlapping geometric motifs in her 1917 designs for a group of peasant embroiderers in Verbovka, Ukraine.[24] Her Painterly Architectonics series of paintings (that she worked on from 1915 to 1919) was a response to Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist paintings. Although they are traditional in terms of their materials – oil and canvas – they play with solid colours and shapes on varying planes to suggest a multi-dimensional format, often emitting a sense of frenetic movement amid tightly organized geometric forms.

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[24] Christina Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design," *Tate Papers*, no. 14 (Autumn 2010), http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/liubov-popova-from-painting-to-textile-design.

This method of working in series continues with her 'Spatial Force Constructions' created from 1920 to 1922. Popova applies the same graphic elements to these works, creating grid-like compositions that would simultaneously concede to and bend the rules of mathematics. In this series canvas gives way to plywood, and her effort to sharpen the focus on each component of her work through the dynamic interplay of shape, colour, and planar arrangement continues. Her 'Spatial Force Constructions' were on display at the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition in September 1921 alongside works from The Working Group of Constructivists although at this time she was not yet a member of it. In a statement about this series Popova declares it should be viewed as a "series of preparatory experiments towards concrete material constructions" revealing a growing interest in producing works that jumped off the canvas and plywood materials into real world applications.[25]

This opportunity would come later that year with her set and costume designs for Vsevolod Meierkhold's theatre production 'The Magnanimous Cuckold'. The set consists of a skeletal frame of a mill, displaying the bare materials that make up wooden beams, stairs, and posts, without any cover or flare. It is similar to the actor's simple black and blue work overalls - production clothing known as 'Prozodezhda'. In regard to the costume design, Popova wrote that she had 'a fundamental disinclination to making any distinction between the men's and women's costumes; it just came down to changing the pants to a skirt'.[26] The minimal stylistic difference between the two outfits was in line

[25] Liubov Popova, Statement from *5 x 5 = 25 Katalog, Moscow, 1921, pg 3,* cited in Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design."
[26] Christina Kiaer, 'The Short Life of the Equal Woman', *Tate ETC*, No. 15 (Spring 2009), http://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-15-spring-2009/short-life-equal-women. [Accessed 15 June 2017].

with the perspective that both women and men were contributing members of the working class, as well as to the creative class of theatrical performance.

The actors in their uniforms and the construction of the stage mimic one another, as they are both comprised of working parts that fuel the ethos of collective production.[27] The work of the mill equates with the work of the body. In late 1921, Popova writes that "the era that humanity has entered is an era of industrial development and therefore the organization of artistic elements must be applied to the design of the materials of everyday life, i.e. to the industry or to so-called production."[28] Here is an artist who saw the shifting priorities of a new society – the mounting tensions to rapidly increase the nation's industrial production levels, and seeks to apply her design expertise formed in part by a bourgeois education to the more politically relevant realm of 'everyday life'. Popova's designs for this theatre production are a Constructivist's response to the large-scale state mandates of the early twenties – a call for collective production encased in abstract, technical, and gender-neutral themes.

In her Space Force Constructions, set and costume designs for theatrical performance, Popova's intent is hinged on the transitory nature of her work into an eventual 'real world' scenario. This desire to affect society outside of artistic circles and cultural institutions was hardly satisfied by her next contract as a textile designer for the First State Textile Printing Factory in 1923; however, the position gave her closer contact to the world of manufactured goods for everyday use.

The call for artists to work with the state factory was likely sent out in the hopes that their involvement would imbue state products with a creative commercial edge that

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[27] Nick Worrall, "Meyerhold's Production of 'The Magnificent Cuckold.'" *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1973): 14–34.
[28] Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design."

could inspire Russians to snap up their designs over privately-made goods. This would stimulate the national efforts of industrial production and weaken the semi-private market's hold on the young socialist nation. Working alongside her Constructivist colleague and friend Varvara Stepanova, the pair came up with a list of demands for the factory for their involvement in production. These demands included producing artistic designs, connecting with fashion houses and journals, observing production practices, and working on the factory's public exposure.[29] It is clear that their wish to be involved went far beyond the artistic realm, as Popova and Stepanova set their sights on the various levels of technical production and the marketing of products that would hit the shelves for public consumption. Their eagerness to associate with other major players within the industry of fashion, and their desire to influence the factory's public image through their window displays is proof of a multi-layered approach to their contributions at the factory.

Design was only one aspect of their overall attempt to connect with production, the end user, and the de-commodification of textiles and clothing. Popova and Stepanova sought to propel average Russians towards the concepts of collectivism, functionalism, and productivity from a perspective of political consciousness. The importance of textiles designed and produced in the Soviet Union at this time is emphasized by theorist Osip Brik's writings from 1924, in which he states,

> A cotton print is as much a product of artistic culture as a painting, and there is no basis for drawing a dividing line between them. Moreover … the conviction is growing that painting is dying, that it is inseparably linked with the forms of the capitalist system and its cultural ideology, and that textile design has become the focus of

[29] Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design."

> creative concern – that the textile print and work on the textile print is the height of artistic work.[30]

He aptly explains how textile design was an accessible medium that connected the outlying spheres of society in a way that painting never could, and thus had a political potential harnessed by Stepanova and Popova during their time at the textile factory. Their foray into this world of manufacturing was a challenging attempt at influencing the material, technical, and artistic production with Constructivist ideals.

On a more practical note the economization of pattern, colour, texture, and material selection in several of Popova's designs reflect the scarce fiscal and material realities of a working artist in Soviet society during the early twenties. In relying on simple graphic patterns and the element of layering, her works sought to galvanize a focus on mechanical and technological advancements, while operating as utilitarian objects for public use rather than as private commodities for solely personal gain. As historian Christina Lodder notes,

> Geometry was associated with the machine, and the machine, in turn, reflected the essential character of the industrialised working class, the new masters of the Soviet state. Geometric form also eradicated the sense of individual touch and associations with individual intuition and emotion in favour of a more mechanised and impersonal sense of shape and a more industrial sensibility. It could, therefore, be seen to express a more collective ethos.[31]

This sense of collectivity and mechanized industrialism transmuted through Popova's and Stepanova's creations marked a distinct separation from the aesthetics in the traditionally feminine domain of textile design. It enabled them to fabricate a "geometric vocabulary that had gained currency as objective, scientific, and efficient, thus denoting other 'masculine' areas of social life which were not conventionally accessible to

[30] Osip Brik, quoted in Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design."
[31] Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design."

women."[32] In designing with geometric shapes, Popova and Stepanova employ this 'masculine' coded aesthetic sensibility within the 'feminine' domain of textile design. To add another layer onto this, the sphere of technical industrialization is traditionally seen as a 'masculine' sphere, yet these two artists were the only Constructivists to successfully see their designs produced at this scale. This dual navigation of textile design and industrial production reinforces the notion that these artists actively engaged with masculine and feminine domains of art making and production for the purpose of conveying their art into production for the everyday Soviet citizen.

Although Popova lived a youth of privilege and obtained an upper-class education that afforded her the ability to travel and explore various artistic movements, the years leading up to the creation of some of her most prolific works were marked by difficulties all too common to the average Soviet citizen in the young state. Death and illness were to crop up repeatedly in her short life. Although documentation on her personal life is sparse, we do know a few key pieces of historical evidence that tease out the ways in which her social class and life as a woman may have affected her professional activities. In March of 1918 Popova marries art historian Boris Von Eding, and gives birth to their son by November of that year. By the summer of 1919, both Popova and her husband contract typhoid fever and Von Eding passes away suddenly from the disease, while Popova manages to recover. Popova disappears, tantalizingly, from the art world after the birth of her son, and only begins working again a year later.[33]

This long absence from exhibiting and producing art reveals how Popova's new role as a single mother may have attributed to this temporary diversion from her

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[32] Briony Fer, "What's In A Line?" *Gender and Modernity: The Oxford Art Journal,* (1990*),* 86.
[33] Christina Kiaer, "His and Her Constructivism," in *Rodchenko and Popova: Defining Constructivism*, ed. Margarita Tupitsyn (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2009), 144.

profession, although it is not discussed in her historical record. In addition, there is the question of how she could have afforded such a long time of respite and recovery, which again is absent from all documentation on her person. Her ability to go back to work a year later and begin a flurry of activity leaves another question of who was taking care of her son unanswered. For Popova to emerge as one of the central figures of the budding Constructivist art movement, receiving teaching contracts, exhibiting works, and designing for the art world and sphere of mass-produced industry leaves many questions as to how she managed to continue this work while also being a single mother.

One can only surmise that the lack of information on how her personal and professional lives could be simultaneously sustained reveals the conscious separation of the personal from professional, which is again mirrored in most of the historical scholarship available on Popova. There seems to be an intentional separation of the two, without enough analysis as to how she managed both spheres. Perhaps belonging to a wealthy merchant family afforded her the connections and financial support necessary to allow her to continue, and even increase her artistic activities, but historians have no concrete ways of knowing the links, if any, between her art production, social class, and experiences as a single mother. In 1924 at the age of thirty-five Popova, along with her young son, succumbed to scarlet fever, cutting short her influential career in several mediums of art and design. Her fellow Constructivists named her an ‘Artist Constructor’ in her posthumous 1924 exhibition, celebrating her transition from a fine art painter to a boundary breaking artist working to push forward a new culture of design across an array of industries and fields.

Aleksander Rodchenko's beginnings follow a humble arc in comparison to Popova's privileged youth. Born December 5th, 1891 in Saint Petersburg, he grew up in a working-class family. In 1914 he enrolled in the Department of Figurative Arts at the Kazan Art School, and in his senior year (at the age of 22) was one of the few students selected to exhibit their works along with his professors.[34] At the Kazan Art School Rodchenko met Varvara Stepanova, another art student, and modernist Constructivist artist in her own right. Stepanova and Rodchenko began a lifelong relationship, and often collaborated on work throughout their lives. Several of Rodchenko's letters, diary entries, and essays on art have survived the years, revealing his recurrent maneuverings of scarce financial resources and limited art supplies. He would paint until the paint ran out, rent tools, and even used his bed as a makeshift easel.[35] His first chance to exhibit work in Moscow came in 1916 at the invitation of Vladimir Tatlin; Rodchenko displayed work alongside artists Liubov Popova, Aleksandra Exter, Lev Bruni, Kazimir Malevich and Tatlin himself. While the majority of the exhibitors pooled their finances to put the show on, Rodchenko was not in a position to do so. Instead, he contributed his time selling tickets at the front of the gallery.

Rodchenko's early works focus heavily on *faktura* – a Russian term for the process of making art with materials making their presence known more than the artist's stylistic presence or manipulation of the tools of the trade. This notion that the materials are the essence of art, without any symbolic meaning attached to them, allowed basic elements like paper, wood, and metal to become "liberated from the task of representation" making way for a conversation between the materials themselves, their

[34] Kirill Sokolov, 'Aleksandr Rodchenko: New Documents,' *Leonardo*, Vol. 18, No. 3, (1985): 185.
[35] Sokolov, 'Aleksandr Rodchenko: New Documents,' 186.

structures, textures, and combined forms.[36] This served to further dismiss art's traditional subjective significance. Rather, the clatter of the materials combining in these works was of sufficient interest to artists working in avant-garde circles during this time. His writings reveal a fixation with composition and construction as he moved from painting black and white lines with a ruler on canvas, to following the lines of a compass on wood to form his series of Spatial Constructions in the late 1910s to early 1920s. In a telling moment of self-reflection Rodchenko notes how he "became a painter, an artist on the extreme left of abstract art, where the problems of composition, texture and colours have destroyed the object and all figurative representation."[37]

These years signify an increasingly mechanized direction in his work that sought to eradicate any semblance of subjective style by replacing paint brush with ruler and compass.[38] Using these basic tools, Rodchenko cut out rib-like shapes from plywood and displayed their three-dimensionality; rotating them in space with wires as support. The third series of Spatial Constructions, also from 1921 brought an even more refined method of removing the artist's subjectivity from the project. These were experiments to probe how the material determines the form or shape of the piece rather than the artist's eye or hand. Having once famously written, 'nothing accidental, nothing not accounted for' Rodchenko reveals a sheer focus on exhibiting material shaped not by the producer, artist, or constructor, but by the material itself.[39]

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[36] Maria Gough, "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 36, (1999): 35.
[37] Sokolov, 188.
[38] Gough, 53.
[39] Ibid, 55. Gough further elaborates on Rodchenko's obsession with 'materialogical determination' in a series of his works from the early 1920s.

By 1921 Rodchenko joined Aleksei Gan's Working Group of Constructivists to figure out how these ideals could move from the laboratory to industrial production, seen as the 'real' world where they sought to make an impact with their artistic skills and budding theoretical framework. It became apparent throughout the debates of the Working Group that their collective role as artist-producers was encased in their ability to transform common materials into functional objects for public use. The conversation around *faktura* shifted from form following material, to form following function in an increasingly politicized context.[40] This moment of material as the sole arbiter of an artwork's meaning was reworked into the problem of creating objects that could be informed by their usefulness to the world outside of the art studios, classrooms, and exhibitions.

Rodchenko enacted this transition through a series of illustrations and designs for book covers, product advertisements, and propaganda posters, starting with his photomontages for Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "About This" in the spring of 1923. Shedding the abstract elements of past collections and embracing the power of representation, the illustrations still manage to convey the spatial organization and frenetic movement invoked in his previous works. Throughout that same year Rodchenko continued working with Vladimir Mayakovsky on a series of adverts commissioned by the state department store GUM (Gosudarstvennyi universal'nyi magazin). Their designs transformed domestic objects from items for pure consumption, to items that carry with them the potential success or failure of the socialist regime. Mayakovsky's slogans and Rodchenko's images simultaneously celebrate and mock the everyday goods provided by

[40] Ibid, 58.

the state-run business in competition with semi-private sellers.[41] The adverts functioned as a conduit for 'art into life', positioning their works at the forefront of the battle between the state and private businesses, and conversely between socialist commodities and their capitalist counterparts.

By the mid-twenties, Rodchenko began to experiment with photography, taking portraits of family and friends, including Mayakovsky, as well as extensive photos of Moscow. His photos were shown in magazines and publications, while he continued to receive commissions for film posters, and theatre set designs.

Rodchenko's identity as a male artist is never a point for discussion throughout his long career. His gender is not discussed by scholars as a factor in how he processes his work or selects materials. Nor does it inform which positions he was given or contracts he took on. It becomes a difficult task to read gender into either artist's work when it was never the focus of Constructivist theory or applications, and even more trying when historical research never pairs Rodchenko's profession and gender as a descriptive label or category of analysis. Christina Kiaer's writings are the sole attempt to analyze how gender was reflected or incorporated in Popova's and Rodchenko's works, although the focus is limited to a few caricatures and poster designs which will be discussed later on in this thesis.

[41] Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 162-164.

Chapter VI: Constructivism: The Uniting Force

"It is not a matter of decoration, but of the creation of new artistic objects. Art for the proletariat is not a sacred temple for lazy contemplation, but work, a factory, producing completely artistic objects."[42]

Nikolai Punin

The events of the Great War, October Revolution, and subsequent Civil War let loose a series of momentous transformations in the new Soviet Union. These successive ruptures to the social and political fabric of the state inspired avant-garde artists to enthusiastically alter their activities in anticipation of a socialist society. Soviet Constructivism was one of many artistic movements to form by taking into account key principles of the new political order.[43] A movement spurred on primarily by artists and theorists and driven by socialist undertones, this artistic expression reached its height of activity and subsequent decline from the late 1910s to the late 1920s. It found a foothold in not only many artistic mediums, but also created a stir beyond the borders of the newly minted Soviet state, inspiring and simultaneously receiving influence from other art movements across Europe, easily transgressing state borders and linguistic barriers.[44]

Constructivism has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in recent years owing to its bold yet streamlined design elements. The cover of Naomi Klein's bestseller *No Logo* (1999) plays on the black, red, and white graphics commonly found in Constructivist design, and the album artwork for Franz Ferdinand's 2005 release *You Can Have It So Much Better* is an almost exact replica of Aleksandr Rodchenko's poster for a 1924

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[42] Quoted in Christina Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937*, (London: Pindar Press, 2005), 144.
[43] Catherine Cooke, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 9.
[44] Stephen Bann, 'Russian Constructivism and Its European Resonance,' in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932*, ed. Richard Andrews (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1990), 214-215.

literacy campaign in Moscow.[45] Another homage to the movement is the luxury department store Saks Fifth Avenue's consciously ironic adoption of bold illustrations and short, urgent slogans to sell designer goods for their spring 2009 campaign.[46] Even a world-renowned hair salon has taken up Constructivist design as the inspiration behind a 2013 season campaign, praising the likes of Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitsky for their 'rigorous technique' and "creation of a new visual language."[47]

Though short lived in its original context, Constructivist ideas continue to shape design principles and marketing concepts in contemporary society, however without the radical political agenda that made the movement so salient for Soviet artists and government officials in the immediate post-Revolution era. What was once spurred on by political revolution is now co-opted for commercialism. It is fascinating to see Constructivist ideas applied in a fresh context, though it often results in the historical flattening of its political alignment, as today's designers and marketers eagerly pick apart and recycle key motifs to rejuvenate their latest projects.

During the late 1910s and early 1920s Constructivist practices blossomed throughout several fields, permeating industrial, textile, and product design as well as the realms of theatre, photography, and painting. Though formally established 1921 in Moscow by a small number of artists, philosophers, and political theorists, its informal beginnings came from a series of earlier decrees that encouraged artists to produce works in support and in celebration of the new state. From as early as 1918 the Soviet

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[45] Hugh Aldersey-Williams, 'Constructivism – The 'ism' That Just Keeps Giving,' *Creative Review*, 7 August 2008, www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2008/august/constructivism-the-ism-that-just-keeps-giving.

[46] Eric Wilson, "Consumers of the World Unite." *The New York Times*. January 7 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/08/fashion/08ROW.html?_r=0

[47] "Constructivist Sassoon." Constructivist Sassoon. https://www.sassoon.com/collections/inspiration-constructivist.php#1.

Department of Visual Arts (IZO) called for "art's penetration into industrial production" signifying a calculated shift towards using art to convey newly fomented political ideals and propaganda to the masses.[48] This new linkage between Russian production levels, politics, and art is not surprising, as artists began assembling artist trade unions and formal institutions a year earlier to discuss how best to collectively contribute to the revolution.[49] They were particularly concerned with narrowing "the gap between artist and society, specifically between the leftist painter and the ordinary worker on the one hand… and the leftist painter and the radical politician on the other".[50]

While artists self-organized to contribute to the budding socialist system, government officials and political visionaries were similarly crafting grand plans to introduce revolutionary art to the public realm. For example, Vladimir Lenin's program for investing in monumental propaganda (launched in April 1918) saw the rapid materialization of sculptures, busts, and bas-reliefs in public squares, and streets across the country. Interested in the "didactic, simplistic value of the proposed statues than in any intrinsic, aesthetic qualities" Lenin's decree was met with a mix of enthusiasm and concern from artists and organizers worried about compromising the artistic value in the execution of such a gargantuan undertaking.[51] Nevertheless the call for monumental propaganda encouraged IZO Narkompros to fund various projects that contained a revolutionary message at its core. As such, the transformation of Tsarist monuments into

[48] Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937,* 243.
[49] John Bowlt, "Russian Sculpture and Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda," in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, eds. H.A. Millon and L. Nochlin, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1978), 183-4.
[50] Bowlt, "Russian Sculpture and Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda," 184.
[51] Ibid, 184-5.

celebratory structures for the revolution, and propagandist poster designs became some of the first Constructivist works commissioned by the state.[52]

As artists were largely in charge of running IZO Narkompros and other large art institutions, they found their daily tasks expanding far beyond producing art, with the added repertoire of administrative, coordinating and teaching opportunities at state-funded art institutions.[53] Constructivists inadvertently became part-time graphic designers, advertisement illustrators, and festival planners alongside their roles as administrators, teachers, and evidently, artists. This new range of activity in support of the Party's socialist policies coincided with a shift from a conventional appreciation of art for its aesthetic qualities, towards a socially constructive, production-focused brand of activist art.[54] No longer satisfied with art's decorative appeal or purposeless aesthetic value, Constructivists began developing a discourse around art as a practical vehicle for the improvement of society. Debates around 'construction' versus 'composition' deemed the latter as an ineffective form of "tasteful selection" while the former became the central goal in how these artists thought about and created art-objects.[55]

Collectively seeking to reinvigorate the industrial productivity of the young Soviet Republic, they experimented with creating everyday objects along the lines of utilitarian ideals, re-imagining how art was conceived from a practical, material, and theoretical perspective.[56] To do so, they crafted a radical maxim declaring a 'death to art' at the first meeting of the Working Group of Constructivists, which took place on March

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[52] Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937,* 242; and Bowlt, "Russian Sculpture and Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda," 185.
[53] Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937,* 242.
[54] Ibid, 243.
[55] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Everyday Constructivism,* 8.
[56] Ibid, 92.

18, 1921. This initial group was comprised of theatre critic Aleksei Gan, artists Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetskii, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, with Liubov Popova and Aleksandr Vesnin joining by year's end.[57] Their collective motion to abandon conventional aestheticism transformed into a production-oriented, politically-minded focus across a spectrum of activities and industries. In Gan's words, "the task of the Constructivist group is the Communist expression of material structures."[58] This collective welcomed state support for their various art projects, grasped at the opportunity to teach courses, and directed operations at the newly formed studios of INKhUK (the Institute of Artistic Culture) and VkHUTEMAS (the Higher Art and Technical Studios) in Moscow. Their enthusiasm for work "in the service of the revolutionary struggle" [59] was an intentional yet highly necessary requirement matching the official plan to propagate the party line through artistic and cultural avenues in addition to political and economic spheres.

Nevertheless, Constructivists were not without agency during this dynamic political period. Their involvement in creating propaganda was an opportunity they energetically welcomed. Being able to have an impact beyond their studio spaces and art galleries entwined these artists with the revolution in a meaningful way, without sacrificing creative license during the formative years of the Soviet Union. Transforming the daily objects and symbols of a society under the yoke of imperialism to a modern socialist system required artists and politicians alike to imagine a brand entirely divorced from its predecessor.[60] Naturally a high level of artistic and political experimentation was

[57] Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937,* 263.
[58] Gough, "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," 56.
[59] Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937,* 243.
[60] Vladimir Tolstoi, *Russian Decorative Arts, 1917-1937,* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 3.

part of the adjustment to a new society and its symbolic self-representations. The plan for Monumental Propaganda exemplifies this blanket approval of stylistic freedom yet serves to remind of the ever-present reason for state support – that art, regardless of style, should offer a politically engaging message.[61]

State officials relied on artists to design educational and political posters, calendars, bank notes, lottery tickets, roadmaps, and even postcards in its effort to introduce the new system through almost every imaginable object, no matter how mundane or marginal.[62] Artist and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's 1924 slogan and satirical illustration for Red Star caramel candy showed how even candy wrappers could be a subtle conduit for propaganda.[63] Not only was this an attempt to rebrand, it effectively aided a largely illiterate population in grappling with the drastic changes occurring in their private and public lives. Unfortunately, this initial call for any and all types of art to serve the Revolution did not result in an immediately cohesive rebranding of products or public areas, as the monumental propaganda project also serves to illustrate the unsuccessful stylistic medley of artists charged with reshaping the public space.[64]

Taking note of Vladimir Lenin's writings on industrial production as the definitive key to bringing about a stage of communism, Constructivists sought to energize several industries by infusing their artistic expertise and experimental designs into the production process. They began to design a wide range of objects that could

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[61] Bowlt, "Russian Sculpture and Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda," 186.
[62] Tolstoi, *Russian Decorative Arts, 1917-1937*, 93; and Cooke, 19-20.
[63] Tolstoi, *Russian Decorative Arts, 1917-1937*, 94.
[64] John Bowlt's analysis in "Russian Sculpture and Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda," reveals how the plan for Monumental Propaganda was an idealistic program at best, which suffered greatly due to the lack of technical expertise, organizational outlook or cohesive planning on the part of government officials and artists alike. Unrecognizable figures, poor craftsmanship, and confusing quotes were the end result. Lenin was extremely disappointed in what was supposed to be a nationwide project that educated the masses on the figures and values of socialism, regardless of his insistence that the art was to come second to the political message.

disseminate socialist ideals, incorporating both grand plans for airplane hangar designs and simple concepts for book covers. From textile patterns to cookware, artists like Liubov Popova and Vladimir Tatlin experimented with simple geometric designs, and widely accessible materials to turn their ideas into products that could connect the worlds of art, industry, everyday life, and revolutionary ideology.

Porcelain and ceramics became an area of focus as commissions for celebratory works with revolutionary themes flooded the National Porcelain Factory, enabling it to become a particularly productive industry from 1918 to 1922. Plates, saucers, teacups, teapots, and serving trays with revolutionary symbols, slogans, and commemorative illustrations turned porcelain into a 'systematic means of propaganda both within the Soviet Union and abroad".[65] With sayings such as 'Hail Soviet Power' these pieces relayed a constant reminder of the strength and success of the new system. Although intended for workers and peasants, the high price tag associated with propaganda porcelain resulted in collectors and foreigners purchasing the majority of these products. As Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky states, "propaganda porcelain seldom entered the homes of the masses; nor did it help to reduce illiteracy or spread world revolution. Nevertheless, it always commanded attention."[66]

Popova's design for a porcelain teacup and saucer did not carry such an obvious homage to the revolution in the form of a slogan or depiction of proletariat workers. Instead, her work held a more subliminal message that focused on the form and shape of objects. The design mixed light and dark materials in geometric, block-like patterns that makes the teacup and saucer appear to be far more than just vessels for tea and biscuits. It

[65] Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky, *Revolutionary Ceramics: Soviet Porcelain 1917-1927* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990). 13.
[66] Ibid, 28.

is just one take on the Constructivist goal of funneling art into life. While exploring new materials and patterns, the pieces maintain their functional qualities, indicative of the movement's desire to focus on the construction of the object rather than a literal portrayal of revolutionary goals. This is perhaps why Constructivism made little headway with officials and art institutions more concerned with developing clear propaganda over contemplating new artistic methods of construction and form. For teacups to be revolutionary they had to use the blunt, repetitive language of the revolution, not simply allude to it in their form or function.

Interior spaces were similarly revolutionized, as the objectives of the new political order made it clear that every aspect of a citizen's life had to be remade so as to remove any traces of the previous society. In 1923, the Vesnin brothers' entry for a competition to create the Hall of Work in Moscow was selected as the winner, for its use of Constructivist design.[67] The brothers offered a space that could be used for social, administrative, cultural or political functions; in essence, they transformed the interior into a hybrid structure. Rodchenko won acclaim for his workers' club booth at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. Part of the Soviet Pavilion, his work was lauded for its compact geometric, and practical design which incorporated a conference room and a reading room with a 'Lenin corner' operating as the 'ideological center' of the space.[68] This submission is one of the few publicly renowned Constructivist works – rare for its international exposure, concentrated government support, and public awareness for the obscure projects the movement conceived.

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[67] Vladimir Tolstoi, *Russian Decorative Arts, 1917-1937*. 323.
[68] Ibid, 324.

While these projects were celebrated for their innovative use of space or minimalistic form, they seldom made the transition into the sphere of mass production. Industrial facilities, technological capabilities, organizational acumen, and funding were severely lacking, stifling the materialization of Constructivist designs for the general public. As historian Vladimir Tolstoi notes, the early years of the Soviet Union was "an era of daring projects which, for lack of means of production, often remained unrealized."[69] According to Kiaer, this should not be read as a failure on the part of Constructivists. Their works were largely created during a period of transition when artists shifted from creating "autonomous art objects to participating in a form of revolutionary mass culture."[70] Although not achieving mass appeal or production, Constructivist works were an exploration of art as a form of social responsibility and political engagement in an increasingly mechanized world.

Regardless of their efforts to "penetrate industrial production" this bold idea did not cement itself as a long-lasting venture. Constructivists had a difficult time aligning their projects with the bankrupt industries of the Soviet Union. This was in part due to an economy weakened by years of military expenditures at home and abroad; however financial stresses were not the sole reason artists lacked input in the production process. Historian Selim Khan-Magomedov notes,

> It was the 'authorities' who appeared to frustrate the artist-constructors in their attempts to turn art into production, not the sheer impracticality of the projects in the first place. And these were managers of NEP concerns whom it behooved to make a profit rather than build a new society.[71]

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[69] Ibid, 317.
[70] Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions,* 4.
[71] Cooke, *The Great Utopia,* 11.

From a psychological and organizational perspective, it was difficult to accept artistic input in the manufacturing process, as it would mean the redistribution of control.[72] Factory directors likely disliked the possibility of relinquishing their decision-making powers and were not interested in introducing experimental ideas that would take time and additional expenses to perfect on a mass scale. As John Bowlt notes, "a sympathetic, sophisticated manufacturer was also required to produce them—and no such person was forthcoming."[73] These industrial heads may have also regarded avant-garde involvement as too risky a move, potentially leading to creating products the average consumer would not want or purchase.

Works such as Vladimir Tatlin's 1919 model tower *Monument to the Third International* and El Lissitzky's 1920 painting *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* illustrate the politically charged orientation of art during the post-revolutionary period. However, this process of pushing artistic boundaries by linking art with the new political order was by no means a smooth process. Tensions within the Constructivist collective and critics of its activities were constantly surfacing. Khan-Magomedov concedes, "at no stage did the movement hold absolute sway over the artistic and critical scene around it."[74] Internally, the various positions towards political reform meant a consistent or coherent vision for self-ascribed Constructivists was hardly realistic.

Theorists and artists within the Working Group of Constructivists could not agree on how to participate in levels of production. Discussions during INKhUK meetings from 1922 to 1924 became increasingly abstract, and artists Stepanova, Rodchenko, Vesnin,

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[72] Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987),114.
[73] John Bowlt, "Constructivism in Early Soviet Fashion Design," in *Bolshevik Culture*, eds. A. Gleason et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 213.
[74] Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, 6.

and Popova became frustrated by a shift towards discussing theories that did not address participating in production at a practical level.[75] In an excerpt from a meeting on April 13, 1922, Rodchenko makes some apt comments regarding these difficulties:

> Perhaps they [factory workers] ought to take us aside and tell us that we really know nothing. But if we carry on discussing, there will never be any actual work… The artist, as we picture him, is different from the mere engineer who makes a given object. The engineer will perhaps… carry out a whole series of experiments, but as far as observation and the capacity to see are concerned we are different from him. The difference lies in just this fact that we know how to see.[76]

Just a year after the first meeting of the Working Group of Constructivists, divisions within the collective were evident. This effectively split artists and theorists into separate camps on the problem of how to participate in mass production.

Inroads were made as Popova and Stepanova found some success with their textile designs for a garment factory in Moscow; yet they continued to face barriers, and were barred from working within the factory, reducing their exposure to the side of technical production they sought involvement in.[77] Although considered part of the first wave of Soviet fashion, by 1924 Stepanova's textile designs received criticism from the Artistic Council of the First Printed Calico Factory for her use of geometrical motifs.[78] A year later the Council directed their artists to reintroduce floral themes, successfully closing the door on the geometrically inspired abstract Constructivist concepts, which were said to have "lacked emotion and fantasy".[79]

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[75] Ibid, 114-115.
[76] Ibid, 115.
[77] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions,* 105-6.
[78] Tolstoi, *Russian Decorative Arts, 1917-1937*, 226.
[79] Ibid, 226.

While Constructivist artists and theorists became embroiled in a long debate over how to affect industrial production, the economic and political developments continued to stifle any progression these artists were hoping to create. By early 1921 the Bolsheviks began to rein in the experimental activities afforded to individuals within the cultural sector. After winning the Civil War, the state established more conservative policies, leading to fewer opportunities for avant-garde artists at INKhUK, and IZO Narkompros.

In addition, the government's desire to reboot a bankrupt economy and stem widespread famine led to the adoption of the controversial New Economic Policy (NEP), which was disadvantageous for avant-garde artists. The NEP plan reintroduced small private businesses in an effort to alleviate the financial and manufacturing constraints of the nationalized industries. It was an attempt to appease farmers and rural workers by allowing them to sell their products privately, outside of state distribution plans. This return to a mixed economy was paired with funding cuts and closures of state enterprises, in an effort to minimize government spending while boosting the economy through independently-run businesses.[80] These massive changes had an impact on the artistic community since they brought a quick end to subsidies for experimental projects.

The termination of government funding, reintroduction of small private business, and more conservative shift in state policy allowed for a renewed interest in traditional artistic expression and form.[81] The Association of Artists of Everyday Russia (AKhRR) gained popularity for its realist depictions of everyday workers during the NEP period. Fringe movements like Constructivism that sought to create proletarian art were no longer a part of major discussions at art institutions, and artists associated with such

[80] Alec Nove, A S*urvey of Economic History of the USSR*, London: Allen Lane, 1969. 80.
[81] Cooke, *The Great Utopia,* 16.

radical groups were "particularly singled out for reprobation."[82] It became increasingly important to depict an idealized socialist life, rather than create production art or socialist objects. Works illustrating the activities of healthy, proud, and production-focused Soviet citizens became central to the marriage of art and politics.

Production art had a fleeting, yet vibrant and tumultuous moment of intense focus in the development of Soviet art. The debates between construction and composition faded away as the traditional aesthetics resurfaced, culminating in the adoption of socialist realism in the mid-1930s.[83] Similarly the gender-neutral costume and clothing designs of the early twenties were no longer appealing – cast away as an experimental shift that was unrepresentative of this increasingly regulated society.

Art critic Nikolai Punin's incisive quotation at the beginning of this section penetrates the very heart of what artists working with and developing Constructivist ideas attempted to do. The "production of artistic objects" for the proletariat was a complicated endeavour from its very beginnings. The goal of Stepanova, Popova, Rodchenko, Tatlin and others was to anticipate and adapt their artistic designs and objects for the everyday needs of everyday people. These objects and designs were, for a brief moment, the site for political meaning and allegiance for these artists, and likely for the consumers of their products, posters, and objects of daily necessity.

Historians and scholars of Soviet art, Constructivism, and the particular artists involved in bringing the movement to the fore of avant-garde activity have illuminated the connections between the propagandist nature, economic impracticalities, and experimental process of developing Constructivist works. Yet there is a lack of

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[82] Tolstoi, *Russian Decorative Arts, 1917-1937*, 233.
[83] Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism,* xxxix.

discussion regarding the political views of gender during this time, in association with how the artists explored their own gender identifications, and whether notions of femaleness and maleness affected or imposed upon their artistic explorations. This becomes relevant when several scholars and experts have chosen to group, codify, and represent only the artists who are female of this period in academic research and gallery exhibits, whereas artists who are male have not been discussed or framed in a similarly gender explicit manner. In the specific case of Popova and Stepanova's admission to the world of textile production they were likely selected in part due to their gender as their task was to develop patterns for women's clothing. This cannot be said for all contracts or positions acquired by Constructivists, however. The sheer overlap of style, art works, and production by these artists (both male and female) helps to illustrate that other factors were at play in the determination of how they were awarded contracts, teaching positions, and their development of artistic works. As such the repeated categorization of Popova as a 'woman artist' is a fragile framing device at best.

Beyond highlighting the careers of oft-underrepresented individuals, how else does noting gender affect the historical narratives regarding these artists, and how relevant were discussions or classifications of gender during their activities as Constructivists? To further analyze this pattern of labelling Popova as a 'woman artist' by Western art historians and scholars, a review of the social realities and policies concerning art production and gender during her most active period will be explored in the next chapter. Following this the artists I have chosen to use as case studies – Popova and Rodchenko - will be discussed in relation to how they played with gender and class expectations.

These probes into the reality of the 1920s from a political, social, and personal angle will reveal some key elements into how Western scholars choose to classify, codify, and negotiate meaning of individual as well as groups of avant-garde artists. The conversations and pledges of policy changes on issues of the 'Woman Question' during the formative years of Constructivism and the Russian Revolution in official power may also shed light on how women and men faced different realities and experiences, regardless of the purported advanced gender equality platform that the Bolsheviks readily espoused in their early writings and doctrines. A look at how Soviet policy framed the role of the arts, and artists in the first years of post-Revolutionary society will also reveal an overt focus on depicting working class realities, as well as a complete silence on the question of how gender factors into artist representation and art creation.

Chapter VII: Soviet Policy on Women's Emancipation Policies and the Fine Arts

The social and political currents circulating in the late 1910s and early 1920s stimulated much discussion on how 'women workers' could embrace and support the Bolshevik party. In the few decades leading up to the Bolsheviks seizing power in 1917, advocacy for gender equality and women's economic liberation was hardly a focal point for any political faction. Instead it was seen to 'diffuse' the revolution's primary focus on class struggle, regardless of classic socialist thought that saw women's emancipation as a necessary step towards the general emancipation of the population.[84] While there is a general assumption that gender equality was an early focus of the revolutionary agenda, historian Beatrice Farnsworth reminds us that "the Russian working woman, the baba so

[84] Beatrice Farnsworth, "Bolshevism, the Woman Question, and Aleksandra Kollontai," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (1976), 294-5.

backward an element in society, seemed an unlikely recruit… [and] an inappropriate comrade" for a secret and subversive political society.[85]

Many Bolshevik party members believed gender equality required no further inquiry or activism more than simply stating and believing it now existed, and several were resistant to organizing a specific section of the party for the purpose of involving more women in the party. Justifications for this approach ranged from outrage that this would siphon from the more demanding organizational needs of the party, to worries that having women more involved in politics would distract or impede the work of the male party members.[86] One of the main advocates of women's social and economic welfare in the earliest stages of the Soviet Union, Aleksandra Kollontai kept applying pressure to create such a bureau – one that would be dedicated to increasing awareness of these issues. By 1919 this pressure succeeded; the Zhenotdel was created with Kollontai at the helm. Unfortunately, the Zhenotdel found itself in murky waters for attempting to attract more than just party support from women as it became a mobilizing apparatus through which to educate, politicize, and attempt to emancipate women from the dually oppressive capitalist and patriarchal systems.[87] This led to continued criticism (and in some cases outright sabotage or obstruction) from high and low-ranking male party officials who saw its activities as siphoning away precious funds and resources from the main objectives of the government.[88]

That same year, the Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party resolved to view women's emancipation from the sphere of domestic labour and child rearing as one

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[85] Ibid, 293.
[86] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 58.
[87] Barbara Evans Clements, *Daughters of Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R.*, 44.
[88] Ibid, 55-56.

of the Bolshevik party's main areas of focus. This strategy was employed to assist women in shifting from the secluded sphere of their private households to one of public contribution through joining the workforce. With Lenin in public support of women's economic emancipation, the rhetoric certainly seemed to be leaning towards creating gender equality; however the social reality of the early twenties told a different story. The lack of women in party leadership positions paired with increasing divestments in social welfare due to the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921, revealed the earlier motions in support of gender equality were not able to achieve lasting improvements beyond garnering greater party support from women across the Soviet Union.[89] Furthermore party support was a very different thing than official membership or influence in policy, and by 1922 only eight percent of Party members were women, hardly a feat worthy of celebration.[90] By 1929 the Zhenotdel was officially disbanded, as it had (according to officials) completed its job mobilizing support from women, and was no longer necessary to advocate on their behalf.[91]

In reality this struggle to advocate, organize, and politicize by and for women was never a primary goal in and of itself. On a related note, Bolshevik theory could not accept that gender could be a framework through which social exploitation could be analyzed, which explains the Party's resistance to the Zhenotdel's full roster of objectives.[92] Its insistence that class was the sole way to define oppression, liberation, and social organization was clearly one of the reasons that women's emancipation - while gaining

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[89] Farnsworth, 296-300.
[90] Fer, "What's In A Line?", 86.
[91] Barbara Evans Clements, *Daughters of Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R.,* 58.
[92] William G. Rosenberg, "Introduction", in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. W.G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990), 73-74.

ground in this period- never gained the full attention or support of the Party or its policies.[93]

While limited from engaging in official Party politics in large numbers, women were increasingly active in more experimental fields affected by the waves of this new socio-political order, particularly in urban avant-garde art circles.[94] While there is an increase of women working in the arts, by no means was their particular involvement in these spheres brought on by Party policy. In forming official policy on fine arts as it related to political objectives, one notices a complete lack of attention to the personal identities of those working in the arts, outside of the intense focus on inserting the 'worker' or 'proletariat' into fields of art production. At the first All-Russian Proletkult Conference in September 1918, the discussion centers on how future forms of socialist art need to be encouraged through artistic organizations and how a new type of artist - the 'artist-proletarian' can emerge to represent this burgeoning socialist culture.[95] Class, is once again the sole factor officials are interested in discussing, and placing value upon, as it related to the profession of the artist. Gender is absent from discussion, as the continued separation of the personal aspects of identity are siloed from the political debates surrounding art creation, purpose, and production.

Conference reports revealing the official policy on art's relationship to the revolutionary goals of production and industrialization indicate the complete lack of discussion on the identity of the artist in any way other than their class. As one delegate notes during the conference, their objective was to "prepare the masses for a clear class

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[93] Ibid, 74.
[94] Barbara Evans Clements, *Daughters of Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R.,* 51.
[95] A. A. Andreev, 'On The Question of Fine Arts,' in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. W.G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990), 393.

understanding of art and its role in life."[96] Personal aspects of identity were not discussed in these political meetings, unless it had to do with someone's identity as a worker. Reports also indicated the transitional nature of their measures as they in part advocated for the continued activity of bourgeois artists, writers, and actors, in order to help train the upcoming proletariat creative class.[97] In these discussions, the main project of Soviet art was to reflect a working class society unto itself, and to increase proletarian involvement in art production as well as economic industrialization. These were key factors which would enable the new government to establish its ideological and economic power within the state and projecting beyond its borders. This underlines the political flattening of identity of the artist engaged in creating new forms of art. The conference also shows how there is some resistance to entwine artistic production with revolutionary goals from a few delegates who were worried that this automatic pairing could be too narrow and forceful, thus limiting the scope of art.[98] This hesitation is quickly dismissed as another member warns that if the conference creates a resolution "devoid of political elements, [it] will sound like a rejection of participation in the struggle."[99]

These discussions on the struggle for women's emancipation and the formulation of art as a platform for proletariat culture display how Russian political policy and theory completely disregarded personal identity, and focused entirely on class identity as a binding force to their ideological foundations. This permeated every aspect of the Soviet political agenda, which is in itself not surprising, however when taken into context of how individuals living in this new society understood themselves, it reveals the top-down

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[96] Ibid, 394.
[97] V. Kerzhentsev. 'The Proletarian Theater,' in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. W.G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990), 432.
[98] Ibid, 396.
[99] Ibid, 397.

eradication of the personal in favour of the political, which it to say, in favour of the collective working-class identity.

This mirrors the silence historians have encountered in their efforts to tease out the personal details of historical subjects, as evidenced by the first oral history project conducted on Russian women who lived through the tumultuous experiences of the Soviet era. In *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Soviet Women in History* authors Barbara Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Venderbeck detail the difficulties of accessing personal aspects of their interviewees lives, and the stifling divisions between the personal and political. In the introduction to their interview with Sofia Nikandrovna Pavlova, a working class woman who rapidly advanced the ranks of the Bolshevik party hierarchy, there is a great resistance from Pavlova to opening up about the 'trivial' details of her life.[100] In their analysis of her historical narrative, Engel and Posadskaya-Vanderbeck note that while her gender and proletarian background were both factors contributing to her professional success, Pavlova is hesitant to acknowledge how women were likely limited from reaching the Party's upper echelons.[101]

This historical analysis shows how her shift away from gender and identity meant it was harder for the historians to access these personal details and relate them to the political trajectory of her life. To some extent this is similar to the silence on Popova's personal identity, as Western art history scholars do not factor in gender or class as influencing factors on her career activities. Instead, they largely frame her as a woman artist, and do not connect that her lived experience as a woman and as a member of bourgeois society affected her art.

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[100] Barbara Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, eds. *A Revolution of Their Own* (Westview Press, 1998), 44.
[101] Ibid, 50.

Chapter VIII: Artists Working Against the Gendered Grain of Tradition

The stark reality of inner-party struggle with the issues surrounding women's welfare was not closely followed by Constructivists who were largely wrapped up in the process of determining how their various works could be seen as contributions to the revolution. While this was not their main focus, the ideological potency of the message of gender equality and the attempts to advance women's rights in society were not lost on artists like Popova and Rodchenko. Some of their works, personal notes, and letters touched on the advancements for women paved by socialist thought and society, while others point to how gender stereotypes were both enforced and subverted by their art practice.

An excerpt from a letter Rodchenko wrote to his partner Varvara Stepanova during a visit to Paris in 1925 reveals his belief of how this new ideological system affects women in particular. He remarks "the light from the East is not only the liberation of workers… [it] is in the new relation to the person, to woman, to things."[102] Here, Rodchenko signals he is keenly aware of how socialism seeks to confront the passivity, and hyper-commodification of both women and objects in Parisian culture, and to an extent – Western capitalist society in general. His idealism reflects the independence and freedom felt by many advocates of Soviet socialism, helping to fuel a collective spirit of productivity and equality. By co-opting individuals and objects alike, the Soviet regime hoped to engulf every corner of society, calling them all to participate in this drive towards a socialist future.

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[102] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 1.

This awareness of gender equality as a strategic facet of the new regime's agenda is on display in Rodchenko's 1925 work on a trade-union poster focusing on women's labour in the public sphere.[103] In collaboration with Vladimir Mayakovsky (who wrote the text accompanying the image), Rodchenko's work uses three photographs of women absorbed in the productive activities of industrial labour and literacy. Mayakovsky's rhyming text reads: 'The trade union is a blow to women's enslavement; The trade union is a defender of female labour.' Part of a series of posters promoting trade unions that the two artists collaborated on, the poster has black and red triangles to spur the sober photographs into a more visually arresting and modern setting. Despite the use of graphic elements, this particularly plain illustration does not exhibit Rodchenko's usual innovative use of design. Kiaer explains Rodchenko's lack of investment in the series by noting that trade unions were often more useful in garnering obedience from Party workers than defending their labour rights, hence the commissioned work was not an entirely innovative or inspiring piece for either artist.[104] Nevertheless the poster illustrates socialism's support of women in public life and production.

In a far more compelling series of works that were not commissioned by the state – they were published instead in Stepanova and Rodchenko's newspaper *Nash gaz* – Rodchenko's caricatures of himself and fellow artists reveal a highly comical take on traditional gender and class stereotypes. Far from the studious, work-oriented, and strong images of women in everyday propaganda, these works play with the extremes of gender performativity and give us a closer look into the personal lives of these artists. A photomontage from 1924 depicts Popova and Rodchenko with photographs of their heads

[103] Christina Kiaer, "His and Her Constructivism."149.
[104] Ibid, 150.

pasted onto hand drawn outlines of their bodies, while various fabrics are cut and pasted on to resemble self-made clothing. Popova's stance implies a self-awareness, with her hands on her hips, and one foot crossed over the other. Her impossibly large bedazzled belt and contrasting patterned skirt and top mock her work in textile design for a state-run garment factory. Including such a wide range of clothing and accessories in a single outfit during a time of overall rationing and inflation evokes the choice to portray Popova's upper-class background as a central aspect of her persona and self-representation.

On the other hand, Rodchenko's muscular shape and wide stance is in full display, only to be called into question by a pair of lacy see-through boxers which represent the sole piece of clothing he is able to afford. The figure combines ~~a lack of~~ hyper-masculinity with the lack of necessary financial means to clothe himself. In this work, physical masculine strength is paired with vulnerability instead of the usual virility. Rodchenko also positions his figure much lower on the page, which could be meant to highlight the stark class contrast between Popova, a member of the former elite who literally is shown to exist on a higher plane, in comparison to his own working-class upbringing.

These images create a hyperbolic version of both artists as categorized by gender and class, perhaps in an attempt to break them down as absurd, irrelevant, and ironic constructs. After all, Constructivist artists sought to destabilize the foundational concepts of art practice, theory, and production through their work, and so this disruption of gender and class could be seen as an extension of their urge to remake what was known and what was expected from their art and their lives.

This caricature garners more of an impact when considered in relation to a rare analysis of Popova by Rodchenko when he wrote about their first meeting in 1916. Written years after they became colleagues and friends, it suggests that class was the definitive point of contention between the two artists:

> Popova, who was one of the rich, related to us with condescension and scorn, because she considered us to be unsuitable company, a class that she wanted nothing to do with… She almost never talked with me, and came by only rarely, leaving behind her in the gallery the scent of expensive perfume and the memory of beautiful clothing… later, after the revolution, she changed a lot and became a real comrade.[105]

Rodchenko's words view the abundance of wealth, and materialism with which Popova entered the art scene as liabilities preventing her from understanding the political purpose of avant-garde work. She transitions from a bourgeois pearl-adorned elitist to a class-conscious worker, which signifies the reality of class operating as the ruling framework for these artists during this time. They lived and breathed class issues leading up to and following the Revolution, conscious of how their lives and work reflected and supported the ruling narrative of the times, thus ensuring support for their works and experiments.

Perhaps Popova can be read and categorized as a woman-artist in the moment she is hired to design textiles with Varvara Stepanova at the garment factory, seeing as textiles have long been considered a domain of the domestic world, which women have traditionally occupied. If we speculate that they were awarded this specific contract due to the fact that they were both artists and also both women, then the link between profession and gender is clear and logical for this specific event in their careers. In other moments it is more difficult to link the two, as Popova does not reference or enact art practices or techniques specifically linked with more feminized domains when creating

[105] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 139.

other works in a discernible way. Moreover, Kiaer notes that "a conscious retrieval of fabric design as a typically feminine practice was emphatically not how Popova and Stepanova themselves articulated their practice."[106] Stepanova and Popova's identities as Constructivist artists enabled them to translate their artistic pursuits into production to stimulate national economic investment over NEP industries, and also to find fulfillment in a movement hinged on the transference of 'art into life'. Referred to as ‘comrade’ – a word that is gender neutral in Russian – in her lectures at INKhUK, it is possible to surmise that her identity was more readily informed by her involvement in the arts with a revolutionary purpose. Her intentions in producing such a wide range of designs and products was in part to streamline and activate objects for the working class, even though Constructivist works were inaccessible or unavailable to the public save for a few celebrated works that garnered more acclaim abroad then at home.

In addition, her class awareness can be seen as a deeper influencing factor on Popova’s persona when taking into consideration Rodchenko’s personal writings and caricatures. She is far more than a Constructivist-Productivist artist, avant-garde creator, or revolutionary artist, yet these are all terms that could perhaps be as fitting if not more so than ‘woman artist’ for her lasting historical identity in connection to her professional activities.

In Rodchenko's case, he is not once described as a ‘male artist’ by Western scholars, which reveals an implicit bias in how they choose to categorize and frame their research on these two figures in regards to their genders and profession. Popova and Rodchenko pursued theories and aesthetic platforms from which they could convey the practical applications of their works. These artists challenged themselves to re-

[106] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions,* 90.

conceptualize textile designs, fine art, public monuments, and graphic posters with the intent of creating active, autonomous, and modern objects that would relate to a public undergoing a socio-political upheaval. In the analysis of their works, many scholars refuse to attempt the re-conceptualization of their identities in a way that gives due to how gender affected their personal and professional lives without completely wiping it from the record as in the case of works on Rodchenko or including it as the overused and individual precursor to profession- so frequent in the case of Popova. To borrow a line of analysis from Kiaer's work, Constructivism is "not according to the sex of the maker, but according to its radical practice within the historically feminine domains of consumption and everyday life."[107] This statement reframes the one-sided focus on gender and profession that scholars employ, to acknowledge the subversive power dynamics and social structures at play in both artist's works.

Just as Rodchenko's self-caricature destabilizes his strong, bold, muscular persona by rendering its very existence a transparent farce, so too do Popova's textile designs imbued with the momentum of industrialism challenge preexisting notions of standard clothing aesthetics for women. This is not to say that imprints of gender cannot be found within their art works, consciously or unconsciously, however the one-sided application of gender as a precursor to profession in the case of Popova should call for a moment of reflection in order to properly balance the scales of scholarly categorization, and the weight of these framing devices as qualifiers of historical representation. Historian Briony Fer comments on the categories on rotation in scholarly works:

> What was at stake here was a sliding scale of metaphorical references; the male-female axis was not the sole axis on which the symbolic order of geometric abstraction operated, but one of several

[107] Kiaer, "His and Her Constructivism," 156.

> including, of course, that of class; rather than the fixed terms of binary opposition, there was a diffusion, as [literary theorist Viktor] Shklovsky put it, a 'blizzard of associations'.[108]

Rodchenko was obsessed with showcasing the artistic materials themselves and the raw process of their construction, using regimented tools to produce objects imbued with logic, movement, and mathematical precision. He did so using the materials available to him in a scarce, fragmented economy to convey the multiple uses of a furniture piece, or the dynamic movement of curved plywood. Rodchenko's reliance upon the bare minimum to emphasize a raw form and hybrid functionality relates heavily to the everyday realities and necessities of his fellow workers outside of his artistic sphere. This association is imperative to understanding how his class status as a non-privileged individual informed his methods of artistic creation. The narrative of class as a factor on his profession is not considered greatly by scholars, except for Kiaer in her comparative analysis of the two artists' upbringing and points of reference. It could be that the dialogues surrounding gender became more potent as these key scholars crafted their research while class fell out of favour as a framework for analysis.

Popova is more celebrated for works that closely align with the feminized sphere, such as her textile designs, while Rodchenko has garnered more attention for his forays into the masculinized fields of architecture and graphic advertisements during this period. While this may be a reflection of the avenues available to them at the time, it is essential to highlight that "tarrying with the feminized domains of the everyday and the commodity were part and parcel of Constructivist art-into-life practice."[109] In the next two chapters I shall review the scholarly treatment of each artist to help determine how

[108] Fer, "What's In A Line?", 87.
[109] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions,* 92.

gender identity has been attached to and disconnected from each artist's historical narrative.

Chapter IX: Historical Treatments of Liubov Popova

In *Amazons of the Avant-Garde*, the subjects of analysis are six female artists working in Moscow's avant-garde groups from the fin-de-siècle period to the interwar years. In compiling this publication, John Bowlt's reasoning for highlighting the lives and works of these artists is to re-insert them into the canon of Russia's avant-garde artists.[110] This source states that both male and female artists working at the fore of the avant-garde painted, exhibited, demonstrated their political leanings, and participated in conferences together. Despite this assertion, the historians assembling the publication only included women. In limiting the focus solely to 'women artists' dubbed 'amazons' Bowlt and his colleagues fall into the trap of a homogeneous categorization that distinguishes artists based on gender identification as the common denominator.

Grouping these artists together due to their supposedly 'amazonian' like qualities seems to be a strange justification for this work, as it connotes that each of these artists independently fought to challenge the status quo when in fact artists like Popova were heavily involved in an art movement that communally developed and discussed their ideas and artistic platform. Although there is indeed a minority of women operating in avant-garde groups this label makes them out to be exotic warriors who were unlike their male counterparts – another generalization that does not hold up when the activities of particular individuals are expanded upon throughout the chapters. Lastly this text chooses

[110] John Bowlt, ed. *Amazons of the Avant-garde: Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2000), 25.

to compare female artists from differing art movements without analysis of the particular movements and time periods.

In the same vein, Nicoletta Misler's essay reveals an exclusionary approach to analyzing the occupations and creations of artists Varvara Stepanova, Alexandra Exter, and Liubov Popova among others. Misler's piece, "Dressing Up and Dressing Down: The Body of the Avant-Garde," discusses how women artists held onto their femininity during the revolutionary years by continuing to make and wear embroideries, purses, and evening bags.[111] Misler goes on to explain that male artists also designed and made the exact same objects within the same timeframe, yet there is no similar assessment pertaining to the occupations and creations of male artists regarding these objects that are so readily coded in 'feminine' terms.

Misler's work seeks to identify how traditional feminine pursuits persist during this era for the high number of female artists yet lacks an exploration into how this same femininity was interpreted or exhibited by male artists engaging in identical forms of material production. She notes how although Popova "resisted the temptation of creating a Suprematist evening bag for herself, she did have a weakness for female bric-a-brac" which is Misler's attempt to once again connect the artists she profiles through their shared tendency to continue creating and wearing feminine accoutrements.[112] The essay credits artists Kazimir Malevich and Ivan Puni for similarly designing handbags and embroidery, yet there is no similar argument to suggest that they too are holding onto "female occupations or the particularly female creativity that such occupations entail."[113]

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[111] Nicoletta Misler, "Dressing Up and Dressing Down: The Body of the Avant-Garde," in *Amazons of the Avant-Garde,* 96-7.
[112] Ibid, 2.
[113] Ibid, 1.

Herein lies the crux of the problem with Misler's essay, as she qualifies the artists profiled by their womanhood, as if it should be an automatically considered facet of their professional identities. When artists both male and female chose to (at various times) incorporate or steer away from traditionally feminine or masculine coded occupations and forms of art making, what is the relevance of solely framing artists who are women by their femininity or attachments to female occupations? Why is there a scholarly silence towards discussing how artists who are men also created works within the feminized spheres of applied arts? Misler's essay does not entertain these questions as she uses the artists' femininity as a way to frame their collective histories.

Anthony Parton and Miuda Yablonskaya's exhibit catalogue *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900 – 1935* analyzes the art works and personal lives of 14 female artists across various movements. In the section on Popova, the source notes that her transition by 1921 towards art as a vehicle for improving everyday objects was shared by other female artists of the time.[114] The source does not comment on how male artists likewise shifted towards this practical approach to art, revealing the consciously exclusive handling of Popova and other female artists. This text reveals that framing groups solely by gender identification can result in a reductive analysis riddled with absences in historical narrative, thereby fueling the notion of a 'separate sphere' for discussions of artists who are women.

Bowlt, Misler, Yablonskaya, and Parton exemplify how framing Popova as a 'woman artist' hinders a complete analysis of her work and is at odds with what I have said concerning the Constructivist movement as a whole. While Christina Lodder's

[114] Anthony Parton and Miuda Yablonskaya, *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900 – 1935,* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 113.

article "Lyubov Popova: A Revolutionary Woman Artist" pairs her profession with her identity as a woman in the title, the contents of the article do not make any overt assumptions regarding how her lived experience as a woman factored into her artistic occupations or development. Instead Lodder focuses on how Popova, along with her contemporaries, sought to explicitly develop their artistic creativity for the "organisation of the material environment", aligning their work with political and economic priorities.[115] Utility and economic efficiency pervaded Popova's costume, textile, and industrial designs as the idea of the artist-as-producer became central to the Constructivist movement.[116]

Christina Kiaer's *Imagine No Possessions* (2005) presents Liubov Popova as a prominent Constructivist revolutionary artist along with several others yet does not engage gender specific dialogue as a way to brand her subject. Unlike previous scholars, Kiaer situates Popova as an artist and state employee absorbed in designing textiles that would appeal to the Soviet masses during the New Economic Policy (NEP) era of the early 1920s.[117] This analysis displays Popova's involvement in state-run activities, as she geared her creative work towards the mass-production of goods.

In a semi-capitalist and hybrid market-based economy, state enterprises had to compete with private companies for consumer loyalty. Popova's work at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory was conceived to boost sales and apply a socialist approach to consumer culture in NEP-era Russia. This perspective challenges Nicoletta Misler's claim regarding the persistence of feminine occupations and creativity for artists who are women, as Kiaer acknowledges that both male and female artists created objects often

[115] Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art 1914-1937,* 432.
[116] Ibid, 439.
[117] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 105-6.

associated with the feminized domestic sphere.[118] Aleksandr Rodchenko, for example, created cookie advertisements for the state-owned Mossel'prom corporation, while Vladimir Tatlin designed stoves, pots, and utensils using similar principles as Popova in her textile designs. Traditional gender roles and activities were not found to dominate the scope of these Constructivist artists' activities, as both female and male artists connected to Constructivism were engrossed in the recreation and reorganization of domestic things, and subsequently of domestic life.

In the article "His and Her Constructivism" (2009) when historian Christina Kiaer asks, "if 'her' Constructivism exists, would it have to be made by a woman artist like Liubov Popova" she notes that this question is a modern preoccupation, as artists such as Rodchenko and Popova would not have been equipped with the vocabulary of gender theory that is employed today.[119] Kiaer concedes that Popova "… saw herself and was seen by others, not as a woman artist, but simply as an artist whose position as a woman had no acknowledged effects on her practice."[120] This statement has the ability to expose some of the aforementioned scholarly works on the artist as problematic for their steadfast linkage between her identity as a woman, and as an artist.

Even so, Kiaer insists on exploring Popova's "lived experience as a woman artist" and claims she "embodies the ideological ideal of the woman artist: individual in style, intelligent and thoughtful, but also beautiful and a little ethereal."[121] This statement reveals how persistent the accepted framework and terminology has become when even

[118] Ibid, 92.
[119] Kiaer, "His and Her Constructivism," 143.
[120] Ibid, 143.
[121] Ibid, 143.

Kiaer focuses attention on Popova's gender as an aspect of automatic consideration in describing her profession, while it is absent in her assessment of Rodchenko.

It is noteworthy that Kiaer frequently uses the term 'woman artist' to describe Popova, while hinting at Popova and her colleagues' unwillingness to accept it. Even in a movement that struck down social conventions and artistic norms, and sought to create revolutionary artworks that would inspire production, criticism was delivered through the lens of gender as was the case with one of Popova's students who confused the gender of her person with that of her art, in his statements describing her 'domestication of her own, to some extent ladylike Suprematism' in comparison to that of Malevich's.[122] Regarding this criticism, Kaier notes that "the continued, implacable existence of such gendered judgments helps to explain why Popova and her female cohorts in the Russian avant-garde never embraced the identity of 'woman artist.'"[123]

The persistence of this term to describe the professional identities of artists such as Popova is perplexing and continues to expose a unique fissure in this artist's historiography that is incomparable to the other subject of this case study- Aleksandr Rodchenko. Though Lodder, Kiaer, Bowlt, Misler, Yablonskaya, and Parton employ varying levels of acceptance and analysis of the term 'woman artist' in their historical reviews of Liubov Popova, each scholar exhibits a propensity for employing the term without a sustained analysis of its usefulness. Further inquiry must be made into whether activity in traditionally masculinized or femininized occupations creates a valid defense for describing an artist with their gender. Similar probes must be made into how

[122] Kiaer, "His and Her Constructivism," 151.
[123] Ibid, 151.

historians connect and accurately identify artists who work outside of traditional industries easily associated with gender.

Chapter X: Historical Treatments of Aleksandr Rodchenko

While the Western historical literature on Liubov Popova readily embraces the subject's female identity in connection to her profession, a similar treatment of her colleague Aleksandr Rodchenko is absent in the monographs, exhibit catalogues, and historical narratives profiling his life and work. Rodchenko is not referred to as a 'male artist' – instead, the focus is on his revolutionary writings, artistic forms, and even his activity in the creation of domestic everyday things – an arena traditionally reserved for women. Masculinity and 'maleness' are not explored, in striking contrast to the frequent forays into representations of female identity and feminine occupations as in the case of Popova.

While Kiaer does pose the question, "does it matter that one artist was a man and one a woman?" in her essay "His and Her Constructivism," she does not pay particular attention to answering or elaborating on how Rodchenko's male identity affects his artistic work to the same degree as her analysis of Popova's female identity. Kiaer correctly notes, "Constructivism's purported sexual indifference often ended up repressing imagery and practice associated with the feminine in favour of an inherently masculine 'neuter'."[124] Nevertheless she complicates this statement in displaying the Constructivists' pre-occupation with objects belonging traditionally to the feminine domain of everyday life and the domestic household. Rodchenko is noted to have made cigarette packaging, cookie and sweets advertisements, while Popova was designing

[124] Kiaer, "His and Her Constructivism," 146.

clothing, fabric patterns, and both of them created designs for fine porcelain. Both artists explored the 'feminine' arena of domestic objects, yet Popova is repeatedly singled out as a 'woman artist' whereas Rodchenko is discussed as an artist without his male identity considered as a relevant or associated label.

John Milner's book *Design: Rodchenko* (2009) also refrains from classifying the artist as a 'male artist'; instead, he presents a non-gendered reading of Rodchenko's artistic activities. Milner notes his artistic range in designing for a wide variety of publications, from "bookmarks, to detective novels, books about mass catering, posters for cocoa, rubber galoshes, pencils, and films," yet Rodchenko's works which interspersed domestic, public, and government industries are never discussed through the lens of a 'male artist'.[125]

In *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Moholy-Nagy 1917-1946* Victor Margolin's text considers three artists often in collaboration or conversation with one another; however the analysis consistently abstains from discussing gender as a shared factor of their identities. Margolin selects these 'representatives of the artistic-social avant-garde' for their numerous publications on their individual artistic visions, their engagement in political discussions and high output of artistic production.[126] All three men are notable for their activities and writings, helping to shape how art and politics could intersect and influence one another in the early years after the Russian Revolution. Margolin frames Rodchenko's attempts to fuse the possibilities of Constructivist art with the constraints of designing objects for daily use, as a focal tension in his transition from artist to designer, and from inaccessible high art to accessible

[125] John Milner, *Design: Rodchenko,* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2009), 30.
[126] Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy 1917-1946,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4.

everyday art. This transition is enforced by Rodchenko's perception of 'construction' as the new frontier of art, influenced by rational organization, technological advancements, and engineering.[127]

This source analyzes the political implications of Rodchenko's designs for public information kiosks from 1919, and his drawings for the House of Soviet Deputies (Sovdep) of 1920. Margolin focuses on how the kiosks' intended use as a political broadcasting tool, has the possibility to intensify a one-way, top-down conduit of information, resulting in a passive urban proletariat. Such a multimedia communication tool would be largely ineffective in a rural setting as the design "lacked the accessibility for small-town folks and rural peasants."[128] It is clear that Margolin's work is critical of other scholars (citing Magomedov's work as one example) for their sustained focus on what Rodchenko himself was more concerned with - the form and organization of objects as they embody a 'revolutionary consciousness' instead of how these objects would be utilized by a society and its government.[129]

In this way Margolin's work offers us a valuable look into how Rodchenko's work could be read as an attempt to streamline, and improve communication means between the state and the general urban populace, yet while this has a positive connotation for its ability to increase organization, speed, and accuracy of directives coming from the government, it does not provide a venue for citizen participation, program suggestions, or provide feedback – which is itself a downfall of the Soviet experimentation with socialism.

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[127] Ibid, 15.
[128] Ibid, 19.
[129] Ibid, 22.

The absence of gender in the historical framing of Rodchenko, like the ones mentioned above, is striking when it is compared to the prominent place gender is given in the Western historical treatment of Popova. It reveals an asymmetrical representation of these two revolutionary artists. This seems like an obvious statement given that the canon of art history that Nochlin, Pollock, and others have sharply critiqued has too often focused on artists who are male, and so no careful inclusion of their gender identity is ascribed in historical analyses of their lives and works, as theirs is the norm and therefore there is a general understanding that this norm requires no mention – thus the term 'male artist' seems redundant when included in titles of articles, or frequent descriptions of individuals or groups.

While women artists have only recently emerged into art literatures as worthy of equal attention, the focus on their gender identification remains a predominant avenue by which to describe or discuss their person, and their professions. Male artists, perhaps due to the sheer number and visibility of them within art history literature, have managed to skip a similar cataloguing of profession and gender as automatically linked identities. Therefore, it is not common to see artists of both sexes framed and discussed with regard to their gender identifications; only women are treated this way.

Chapter XI: Conclusion

While the early contextual example of Wikipedia's "American Women Novelists" points to a simplistic and crude erasure of women from the main category into a derivative subheading, renowned scholars have liberally employed the 'woman artist' label in their categorization of artists who happen to be women. To some degree this distinction of 'woman artist' mirrors the derivative Wikipedia classification of the

'American Women Novelists' by distinguishing a difference based solely on gender. This concept needs to be further explored to sidestep the risk of quantifying notably diverse and distinct artistic individuals across various art movements and periods as a conglomerate group separated from the norm – the 'artist' that does not need specific gender identification. Similarly, the absence of gendering artists who are male needs to be addressed so as to reconfigure historical approaches to artists in an inclusive and equal manner.

The stereotypical gender differences in artists producing their works carries over into how we talk about artists and label or classify them with or without gender as a descriptor. Is it an inherently gendered choice to view women's artistic production via their femaleness and if so what does that mean? In the same vein, how do we perceive art made by men, and does their masculinity factor into how we describe or understand their work? How can we disrupt the expectation to label only artists who are female, with their gender in order to renegotiate our selective framing of these individuals' works? These questions become intensely vital in exploring, especially when we consider that the artists in question produced designs that campaigned for gender equality, subverted traditional gender expectations, and worked in overlapping fields of design.

Western literature on Popova reveals that taking on a gender specific label has a great impact on how we understand her as an artist, yet such a label is completely absent in the case of writings on Rodchenko. This dichotomy reveals a choice we make as historians and scholars – which influences our attitudes towards men and women occupying the title of artists, and creating objects and works, as gender-specific subjects. Clearly our evaluation of art is not always about the art itself. It is caught up in

judgements about the artists and their identities. Ultimately my intent in pursuing this line of research has been to pose questions around the framing of historical information in order to create narratives authentic to the real lived experiences of the individual, and to probe the automatic pairing of identities for historical consideration.

The overwhelming human condition and preference for codifying individuals according to a plethora of identifications means that certain individuals get lumped together as the normative group where their identity requires no specific attention, whereas others are often solely considered in clusters distinguished by their shared minority traits. Historical narratives are thus perpetuated within the confines of the norm versus the minority categories. A pattern as seemingly harmless as writing about women artists to celebrate and highlight their works and lives has the potential to create a reified formula identifying gender as an important and automatic aspect of consideration in relation to their profession regardless of whether the artists themselves felt this connection as a crucial means of representation.

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