

## **The Rayonism, the First Group of Constructivists in Action and the use of concept faktura and construction**

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### ***O Raionismo, o primeiro Grupo de Construtivistas em Ação e o uso do conceito faktura e construção***

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# The Rayonism, the First Group of Constructivists in Action and the use of the concept *faktura* and *construction*

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**Abstract:** Constructivism was an artistic movement emerging in Russia after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917 and extending up to 1932. The present work analyses the influence of Rayonism on the outline of Constructivist art, especially in the artwork initiated by that the First Working Group of Constructivist in Action in 1922. Research shown that Constructivists and Rayonists had a similar method of artwork based on laws or foundational disciplines. Furthermore, it contrasts the use of the concept *faktura* and *construction*. The results confirm that both movements used them in different ways.

**Resumo:** O construtivismo foi um movimento artístico que surgiu na Rússia após a tomada do poder pelos bolcheviques em outubro de 1917 e se estendeu até 1932. O presente trabalho analisa a influência do raionismo no contorno da arte construtivista, especialmente na obra iniciada por aquele Primeiro Grupo de Trabalho de Construtivistas em Ação em 1922. A pesquisa mostrou que Construtivistas e Raionistas tinham um método semelhante de arte baseado em leis ou disciplinas fundamentais. Além disso, contrasta o uso do conceito *faktura* e construção. Os resultados confirmam que ambos os movimentos os utilizaram de maneiras diferentes.

**Key Words:** Aesthetics; Russian art; Soviet State; Constructivism; Rayonism

**Palavras-Chave:** Estética; Arte russa; Estado Soviético; Construtivismo; Raionismo

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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**C**onstructivism was an artistic movement formed in Russia after the October Revolution. It is characterized by a wide heterogeneity of artists from different artistic movement. Given its theoretical and contextual complexity, it has been investigated from different perspectives. Some studies analyzed it from the perspective of the artists' careers;<sup>2</sup> others, from the perspective of the conceptual debates that took place inside the movement;<sup>3</sup> and some others, analyzed it as a language,<sup>4</sup> or, as an artistic project within a context of modernization.<sup>5</sup> One of the most relevant research works is *Russian Constructivism* by Christina Lodder,<sup>6</sup> who studied in detail the structure of the movement and the different theoretical positions in relation to the new art.

According to Lodder, Constructivism was mainly formed in the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (Russian: VKhUTEMAS: *Visshye Khudózhestvenno-Tekhnicheskiye Masterskiye*) and in the Institute of Artistic Culture (Russian: INKhUK: *Institut Khudozhestvenny Kultury*), both of which depended of the People's Commissariat of Instruction (Russian: NARKOMPROS: *Narodny Kommysaryat Prosveschenia*). There artists discussed and rehearsed the concepts that

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1 A preliminary study of this work was presented at the 1° Primer Congreso de Ciencias Humanas. Organized by the Universidad Nacional de San Martín. November 6 to 8, 1919.

2 GOUGH, 1998; POLLMEIER, 2014; KIAER, 1996.

3 ROWELL, 1981a; 1981b.

4 FER, 1989; 1993.

5 GASSNER, 1992.

6 LODDER, 1987.

would characterize their artwork giving rise to all kind of artistic trends from Academicism to Futurism.<sup>7</sup> In this way, and led by the new attitude of the prerevolutionary avant-garde, they advanced towards the formulation of a new art idea “not as a primary entity composed of various philosophical, emotional or inspirational elements, but as an object composed of various material elements organized by the artist obeying specific laws and techniques”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, they took old ideas to define new art as an object organized by the laws of creative activity.

The main of this work is to explore the potential relationship between Constructivism and Rayonism. The purpose is to determinate its artistic heritage. The principal hypothesis is that the Constructivism of the First Working Group of Constructivist in Action is based on the Rayonist method of work formulated in laws (color, form and *faktura* or material) to order the artistic production. Furthermore, I argue that the group reformulated these concepts in an artistic environment in turmoil that looked to the future.

In the first section, I will analyze the Rayonist movement as one of the first avant-gardes movements that performed innovative changes in the artistic scene formed after 1905. I will study the aesthetic preoccupations and the main concepts characterizing this movement and defining its work method. Further, I will investigate its main representatives' pictures and the Rayonist Manifesto, written in 1913.

In the second section, I will look into the Constructivist movement and in particular, the program of the First Working Group of Constructivist in Action. Besides, I will identify the most important creative centers and the artistic lines of thought. Using main literature –the Realistic Manifesto written in 1920, the artistic program by the First Working Group Constructivist in Action of 1922 and the Alexei Gan's *Constructivism*, published in 1922–, I will outline the main characteristics of the constructivist artwork and the form of artistic organization of the First Working Group of Constructivist in Action.

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7 LODDER, 2012.

8 LODDER, 1987, p.75.

In the third section, I will compare the differences and similarities between the Rayonism and the program by the First Working of Group Constructivists in Action in relation to the ways of defining the characteristics of the artwork and artistic production. What is more, I will analyze the uses of the concepts of *faktura* and *construction* and the innovations that took place in the artistic environment of 1920.

## The Rayonist movement

The immediately years following the Revolution of 1905 were characterized by an artistic revolutionary air: experimentation with news artistic tools –as light, time, and space– was one of the key features of this period. This atmosphere encouraged numerous movements of the previous century to radicalize their ideas about art and incorporated new elements in their practices looking at new type of powerful artwork dynamic that was in line with the Russian new air of transformation.

In the first years of the XX century, painting started several reductions in color and shape. Some artists like the Jack of Diamond Group (*Bubnovy Valet*, 1910-1916) incorporated European influences especially French and German and applied them to the Russian context. This experimentation produced a type of primitive artwork inspired in the culture of the pagan art. However, some artist like Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962) and Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964) looking for a type of work that was widely representative of the culture of the country, formed the Donkey's Tail Group (*Osliny Khovst*, 1912-1914). Despising European influences and promoting a neo-primitivism they imitated use of color, the icons and signs of the popular art (*lubky*). The group focused on showing the simplicity and poverty of the Russian worker. Their paintings were characterized by a static design, without details, with flats colors and many times with coarse forms.<sup>9</sup>

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9 MORENO, 2006.

In 1911, Larionov and Goncharova experimented with the glint of the light developing a new movement in the field of painting: Rayonism (1911-1914). As a style, it was especially interested in sensory and spatial representations, and in the creation of new formal relations inside the painting. Their main intention was to create very realistic paintings arousing the spatial sensation on the spectator (visual, tactile and temporal) by reflecting the rays of the light from objects as well by enforcing painting laws (color, shape and *faktura*). This method of artwork, formed an architectural-pictorial movement with a particular emphasis on light and space.

What has most value for every lover of painting is revealed in its most complete form in a rayonist picture—the objects that we see in life play no role here (except for realistic rayonism, in which the object serves as a point of departure); that which is the essence of painting itself can best be revealed here—the combination of colors, their saturation, the interrelation of colored masses, depth, texture; whoever is interested in painting can concentrate on all these things to the full.

The picture appears to be slippery; it imparts a sensation of the extratemporal, of the spatial. In it arises the sensation of what could be called the fourth dimension because its length, breadth, and the density of the paint layers are the only signs of the outside world.<sup>10</sup>

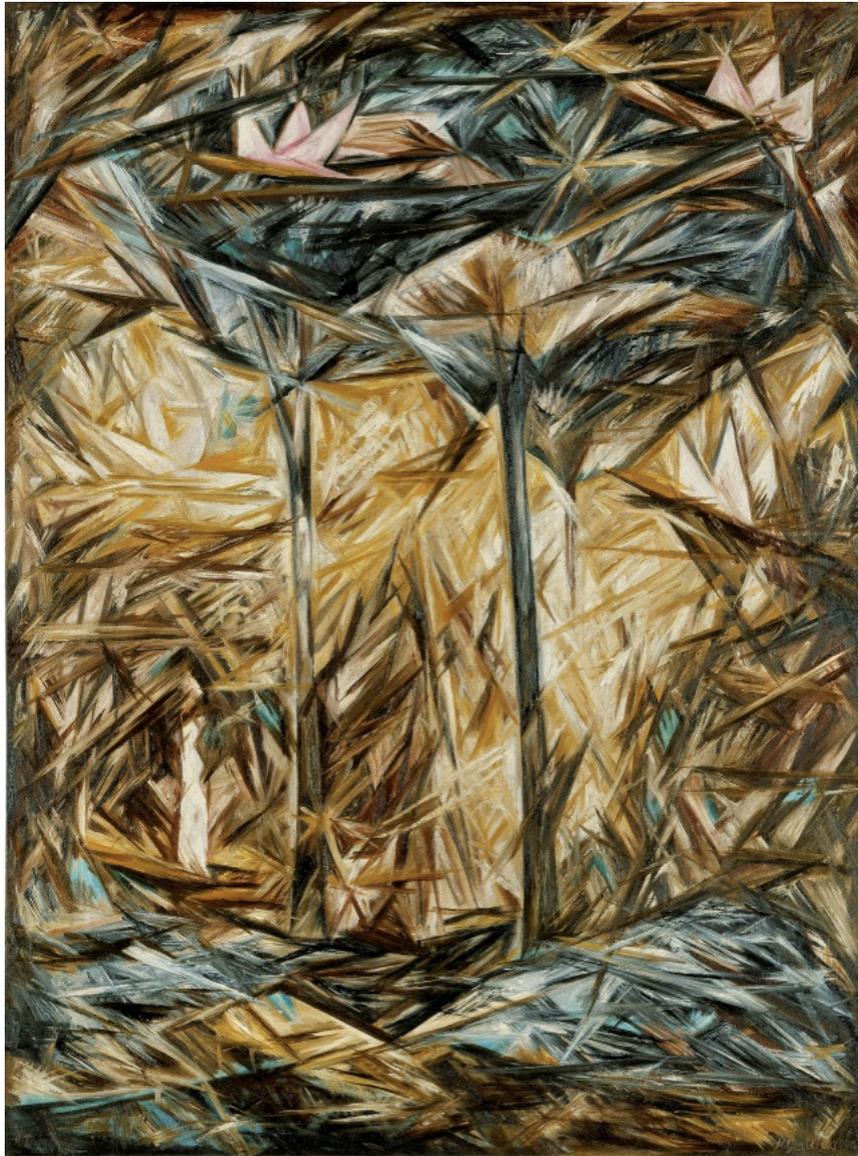
Boundary-crossings across subject areas was common in the creative institutions; however, the dynamic exploration of reality –an Italian Futurism feature– was unusual. Rayonists examined this by drawing the light ray's projection and the geometric shapes created in the space between the rays. Rayonism was significantly influenced by cubism in the use of color and the broken palette.<sup>11</sup>

Rayonism stood out as a style largely based on the laws of paintings. These rules founded the explorational work with geometric shapes, light, space and sensations.

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10 BOWLT, 1976, p.99.

11 MORENO, Op. cit.



Mikhail Larionov (1913)  
The Forest  
Oil on burlap, 35x50cm.  
Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, Madrid.



Natalia Goncharova (1913)  
Street with Lampposts  
Oil on canvas, 130x97 cm.  
Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, Madrid.

In fact, painting must be constructed according to its own laws—just as music is constructed according to its own musical laws; the laws germane only to painting are:

Colored line and texture.

*Any picture consists of a colored surface and a texture (the state of this colored surface is its timbre) and of the sensation that arises from these two things.*<sup>12</sup>

The Rayonist discourse showed new concepts about the work of art. On the one hand, Rayonism defined the basic principles –also called laws- of painting like the colored line and the texture (*faktura*), and on other hand, introduced the concepts of *faktura* and *construction* (*stroy*, in Russian) in the painting. This change signed a new attitude concerning the work of art and also, a different intention of experimenting with the sensorial space.

As Benjamin Buchloh<sup>13</sup> explained, the first definitions of *faktura* began to appear in 1912, in the futurist manifest *A slap in the Face of Public Taste* and then, in the Rayonist manifesto. Larionov applied the concept to the painting and used the real object not as a reference but as an incentive for the artistic work: “The painter can be expected to possess complete mastery of all existing types of techniques (tradition plays a very important role in this) and to work according to the laws of painting, turning to extrinsic life only as a stimulant”.<sup>14</sup> For the Rayonist artist, the shape, the color, and the *faktura* were structuring laws that molded the artistic work. The artist experimented with the law painting and observing the crossover between the light rays and the objects in order to represent the spatial and tactile sensations of this moment of artwork.

By combining the laws of painting, the Rayonist artist sought to express the dimensions of the plane with the aim of achieving a very realistic and sensitive artwork but through a non-mimetic representation of the object, taking geometry, color and the *faktura* as the structural axes of the work. The

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12 BOWLT, Op. cit., p.96. The italics are from the original.

13 BUCHLOH, 2004.

14 BOWLT, Op. cit., p.97.

artist expressed his own experience of the relation between the light and the objects in the space and the result could be pleasing or not to the academic public.

## **The Constructivist movement: The First Working Group of Constructivists in Action**

Constructivism was born between 1920 and 1921 in the art institutes like the VKhUTEMAS and INKhUK where Futurists, Rayonists, Suprematists and independent artists converged, united in their tendencies to abandon the easel painting and in their fascination for technique, movement, and experimentation. The INKhUK and the VKhUTEMAS were important centers of debate and experiments with the new art. As Susan Buck-Morss<sup>15</sup> explained, in this period the artists became interested in the everyday life of the working class; however, they were isolated from workers and competed with each other for the parties' financing and legitimation.

In general, different styles can be mentioned as constructivist such as Naum Gabo (1890-1977), Antoine Pevsner (1888-1962), or the members of VKhUTEMAS and the artwork development in INKhUK. The most important and representative form of Constructivism developed in the INKhUK because it was a direct result of the theoretical debates of the moment. This institute gradually became an important theorizing center.<sup>16</sup> However, it went through different stages of research since its creation apparently, at the initiative of Vasily Kandisky (1866-1944). It mainly focused on the production of theoretical practical and technical knowledge and it was closely linked to the new mass art in Russia. "The INKhUK theorists set out to establish a scientific explanation of the intuitive elements of creativity and thus establish a scientific basis of art".<sup>17</sup>

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15 BUCK-MORSS, 2004.

16 LODDER, Op. cit.

17 Ibidem, p. 81.

In March 1921, the First Working Group of Constructivists in Action was formed, subordinated to INKhUK and directed mainly by Rodchenko, Stepanova, Alexei Gan (1893-1942), Karl Ioganson (1890-1929), Konstantin Medunestsky (1899-1935) and the brothers Georgy (1900-1933) and Vladimir Stenberg (1899-1982). Their program tried to give course to the artistic production and, in a certain sense, to end the disputes about the true revolutionary way of making art. The style they proposed tried to give a common channel of expression to the extraordinary artistic proliferation that had emerged in the new political and ideological context.

The group considered it essential to “synthesize the ideological part and the formal part for the real transfer of laboratory work to the channels of practical activity”;<sup>18</sup> thus, trying to find the communist expression of the work of art, they investigated “the solution of this problem based on scientific hypotheses”.<sup>19</sup> In this way, they organized the artistic production on the basis of three fundamental disciplines: tectonics (the style and the appropriate social use of the material), *faktura* (the conscious way of its manipulation) and *construction* (the organization of the material according to a functional purpose):

In order to master the creation of practical structures in a really scientific and disciplined way, the Constructivists have established three disciplines: *Tectonics*, *Faktura* and *Construction*.

A. Tectonic or tectonic style is tempered and formed on the one hand from the properties of communism and on the other from the expedient use of industrial material.

B. *Faktura* is the organic state of the work materials or the result of a new state of its organism. Therefore, the group considers that *faktura* is the material consciously worked and effectively used, without hampering the construction or restricting tectonics.

C. Construction should be understood as the organizational function of Constructivism.

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18 Cited in *ibidem*, p.95.

19 FERNANDEZ BUEY, 1973, p. 83.

If tectonics comprises the relationship between the ideology and the formal which gives unity to the practical design, and *faktura* is the material, the Construction reveals the very process of that structuring.

In this way the third discipline is the discipline of the realization of the design through the use of the worked material.

The material. The material as substance or matter. Its investigations and industrial application, properties and significance. Furthermore, time, space, volume, plane, color, line and light are also material for the Constructivists, without which they cannot construct material structures.<sup>20</sup>

Their program was published in response to the *Realist Manifesto* of Gabo and Pevsner, in an exhibition organized by Rodchenko and Stepanova.<sup>21</sup> In 1922, Alexei Gan published the book *Constructivism* in order to expose the concepts announced by the First Working Group of Constructivists in Action and to displace the pure or formalist visions of the new art. This publication synthesized the method of work and the theoretical and materialist style of the movement.

According to the group, the constructivist work of art needs to maintain an organic relationship between the materials used, its form and its ideological purpose. They promoted artistic activity towards a style that could be put to use by the masses an utilitarian art and the production of artistic objects that would serve as a visual representation of Russia's progress. In this way, their conception of the artistic object was accompanied by a strategy of dissemination and exhibition of the art works. The group organized exhibitions, weekly publications and interventions in the public space through the development of architectural works:

Our age is the age of industry.  
And sculpture must give way to a spatial solution of the object.  
Painting cannot compete with photography.  
The theater becomes ludicrous when the outbursts of "mass action" are presented as the product of our times.  
Architecture is powerless to halt the

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20 HARRISON and WOOD, 1993, pp. 317-318. The italics are from de original.

21 FERNÁNDEZ BUEY, Op. cit.

development of constructivism.

Constructivism and mass action are indissolubly linked to the labor system of our revolutionary way of life.<sup>22</sup>

For these artists, the art work should not be in the sanctuaries of museums and private exhibitions; it should go out to the streets, factories and squares. As Buck Morss explains, the avant-garde understood the work of art and its work not “as a documentation of the revolution but as a realization of it, serving (and also leading) the proletariat in the active construction of a new society”.<sup>23</sup>

## Points in common between Rayonists and Constructivists

Constructivism distinguished itself from other styles as being an advanced movement but strongly anchored in revolutionary ideas and the construction of Soviet Russia, which placed it at the center of the artistic and political scene. It was characterized by the experimentation processes carried out by the artists and by the wide heterogeneity visible in workshops and private rooms. If one had to find a common thread among all of them, it can be said that they all had a new attitude towards artistic production which, as Lodder points out, saw the work of art as an organized object that obeyed laws and specific techniques.<sup>24</sup>

The program of the First Working Group of Constructivists in Action sought to order artistic activity by proclaiming concepts that unified production and that identified the artistic object through foundational disciplines or laws as previously done by the Rayonism. The constructivist program established that the *tectonics*, *faktura* and *construction* as the fun-

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22 BANN, 1974, p. 38.

23 BUCK-MORSS, Op. cit., p.73.

24 LODDER, Op. cit.

damental disciplines of the movement,<sup>25</sup> in the same way that Larionov had proclaimed form, color and *faktura* as the only laws of construction of the painting in 1913.<sup>26</sup> In this way, both movements set laws or principles to order the artistic production and defined what art was and what it was not.

In contrast to Rayonism, the First Working Group of Constructivists in Action rejected pure art and linked the properties of matter to the industry, the everyday life, and the communism, underlining innovation by the group compared to others avant-garde movements. This transformation was founded in the resignification of the terms *faktura* and *construction*. For Rayonists, *faktura* referred to how the elements were made its raw materiality and how it was later captured by the artist in the most realistic way possible. In contrast, for constructivist group, the *faktura* was an efficient mode of work production of the shape united to the functionality of the material and to the construction of the new political order in Russia.

As Gan expressed about the term *faktura*:

To the extent that we transform and rework, we say *faktura* (...) *Faktura* consists in consciously taking a certain material and using it functionally in a way that is linked to its function, without interrupting the dynamics of the construction or limiting its tectonics.<sup>27</sup>

Constructivism linking *faktura* to *tectonics* and *construction* modified the Rayonist sense of the concept altering also the way of conceiving the work of the artist who ceased to be an observer of matter and became an architect or transformer of it. If the Rayonist work tried to express the *faktura* as real as possible and as an effective incentive for artwork creation. Constructivists considered *faktura* was the functionality of real matter with which the artist consciously worked or transformed a specific object.

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25 See HARRISON and WOOD, Op. cit., pp. 317-318.

26 See Rayonist Manifest in BOWLT, Op. cit., p. 87-90.

27 FERNANDEZ BUEY, 1973, p.150.

In the case of the term *construction*, both Rayonism and Constructivism used it instead of composition; however, in different ways. As Gabo explains in an interview with I. Bolutovsky and A. Lassa in 1956:

Until 1920 there were no Constructivists. We called ourselves “builders”, inspired by the *postroyeniya* Russian term, meaning construction. Instead of carving or molding a sculpture out of a single piece, we lifted it in space, in the same way that an engineer does when building a bridge. We constantly used the word “realism” because we were convinced that what we were represented a new reality.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, until 1920 the term *construction* was used by artists with the idea of building, lifting the object up to design the real space; however, as Lodder explains, for constructivist artists, *construction* was “the specific use of specific materials” and “there is only construction in real space”.<sup>29</sup> In the words of Nikolai Tarabukin, secretary of the INKhUK between 1921 and 1924:

If in the past the visual arts were clearly broken down into three typical forms painting, sculpture and architecture we have, on the other hand, in the central counter-relief, volume constructions (and spatial painting), a sort of attempt to synthesize these forms (...) In volume spatial constructions, the creator who works with wood, iron, glass, always relates to authentic and non-artificial materials. Consequently, the problem of space has, through its three-dimensional construction, a real and not arbitrary solution as on the plane of the two-dimensional canvas in one word, both in terms of forms and for construction and the materials used, the artist creates an authentically real object.<sup>30</sup>

In the Constructivism proposed by the First Working Group of Constructivists in Action, the elements that participated in the work had to be organized with a specific purpose (utility) and the elimination of any of its elements could destroy the artistic object whereas in Rayonism, the elimination of an element affected the realistic representation of that moment,

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28 Food note in *ibidem*, p. 23.

29 LODDER, *Op. cit.*, p.88.

30 TARABUKIN, 1977, p. 41.

without destroying the work. The group of constructivists closely linked the idea of *construction* to utility and real materiality while in Rayonist painting, the *construction* responded to the distribution of the forms in the painting.

In Rodchenko words it can be said that “Construction = organization of the elements”<sup>31</sup> while for Larionov and the Rayonists, construction work was associated with a type of realistic representation connected to the sensory values of the work and to the design of the space inside the painting:

Now, if we concern ourselves not with the objects themselves but with the sums of rays from them, we can build the painting in the following way: The sum of the rays from object A intersects the sum from object B, in the space between them a certain form appears, and this is isolated by the artist’s will.<sup>32</sup>

As Buck-Morss expresses, this change of meaning could have been motivated by the revolutionary context due to in this time “every artistic group competed with the others to demonstrate that theirs was the authentic piece of art in terms of being politically revolutionary, culturally proletarian and historically progressive”.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to give a general and historical view of some characteristic features of revolutionary art. In order to recognize their aesthetical heritage, I analyzed the main coincidences and theoretical differences between the Rayonism and the Constructivism. I found that the Rayonists announced the formal basis of the constructivist method of art work. In the words of Tatlin: “the events of 1917 in the social field, were already brought about in our art in 1914 when the

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31 HARRISON and WOOD, Op. cit., p. 315.

32 BOWLT, Op. cit., p.99.

33 BUCK-MORSS, Op. cit., p. 78.

‘material, volume and construction’ were laid as its ‘basis’.<sup>34</sup> Although there was a coincidence in the use of terms *faktura* and *construction*, their significance varies according to the avant-garde. As Buck-Morss expresses the differences could have been motivated by the revolutionary context.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, the present work sought to contribute to the investigation about the Constructivism from a different perspective. Not as a foundational hinge fact in the historiography of the arts<sup>36</sup> but as an expected continuum. Constructivism was a temporary movement of experimentation in which its actors developed and put into practice conceptions of art that they had already been exploring and that were adapting to a boiling revolutionary context looking to the future. In this situation, interdisciplinary experimentation and the re-significance of concepts became fundamental tools for adapt to their new period. The constructivist work was constituted as a complex artistic object that took the foundations of its prerevolutionary tradition, the form of its revolutionary present and the symbology of the future becoming a timeless but, above all, vital artistic object.

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34 GRAY, 1962, p.219.

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