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FROM PERFORMER TO PETRUSHKA: A DECADE OF ALEXANDRA EXTER'S WORK IN THEATER AND FILM

by

LAURA HUNT

Under the Direction of Dr. Maria Gindhart

ABSTRACT

The subject of my thesis is Russian artist Alexandra Exter's work in the performing arts, with a focus on her theatrical set and costume designs in the Kamerny Theater, her creations for Iakov Protazanov's 1924 science fiction film, *Aelita*, and finally her exquisitely fabricated set of approximately forty marionettes. Within these colorful wooden figures are reconciled conflicting notions of stasis and dynamism, sculpture and performer, human and object. Drawing upon Victor Shklovskii's formalist definition of "enstrangement," I examine her introduction of the object in place of the human performer as a means of exposing the creative process, forcing the viewer to actively engage with the production. Thus, her manipulation and eventual replacement of the human performer not only exemplifies the interconnectivity and mutability of Russian avant-garde art, but impels the viewer to reconsider the familiar in terms of the strange, ultimately calling attention to the humanity of the dehumanized performer.

INDEX WORDS: Alexandra Exter, Russian art, Russian avant-garde, Constructivism, Futurism, Marionette, Puppet, Alexandr Tairov, *Aelita*, Iakov Protazanov, Costume design, Kamerny Theater, Formalism, Soviet art

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LAURA HUNT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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by

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Chapter One: Introduction

Alexandra Exter (1882 – 1949) is one of the most fascinating but least acknowledged figures in the history of Russian art. A native Ukrainian who spent much of her artistic career moving between Kiev, Paris, St. Petersburg, and Moscow, Exter was a shining star of the Russian avant-garde. She counted among her personal acquaintances Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Ardengo Soffici, and Guillaume Apollinaire, as well as all of the most influential and innovative Russian artists and writers of her day. Wherever her travels took her, her studio and home were frequently the sites of colorful gatherings and lively debates among many of Russia's avant-garde elite, including El Lisitskiĭ, Vladimir and David Burliuk, Alexandr Arkhipenko, and Alexander Rodchenko.¹ Throughout her lengthy career, she participated in many of the most important and progressive exhibits of the day.² Russian futurist poet and friend of Exter's, Benedikt Livshits described her as one of the "real Amazons," a designation under which she and several of her fellow Russian women artists continue to be known.³ Curiously, although she was well

¹ Ukrainian artist and dear friend of Exter's Simon Lissim fondly remembers numerous evenings spent in her Paris home: "There was always warm, friendly, interesting talk around the table...In Exter's home there was always a large crowd. There were sometimes the well-known writer Francis de Miomandre, the dancer Elsa Krueger, her students from Czechoslovakia, Cuba, the United States...(It was) a place really conducive to art work." Simon Lissim, "Alexandra Exter as I knew Her," in *Alexandra Exter: Artist of the Theater* (New York: The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, 1974), 16 – 17. I have consulted the ALA-LC (American Library Association – Library of Congress) transliteration table for Russian names and organizations throughout this thesis.

² Exter's work was shown in every one of the Moscow-based Knave of Diamonds (Bubnovyĭ Valet) exhibits from 1910 – 1914, at the First Free Futurist Exhibition in Rome in 1914, in 1915 at the Russian futurists' Tramway V show in St. Petersburg, and she was one of the five artists to participate in the famous 5x5=25 exhibit of Russian constructivism.

³ In Russia, perhaps more than anywhere else at the time, women artists were a dominant force among the avant-garde, often outnumbering their male counterparts at exhibits and pioneering their own artistic movements. Although Livshits used the term "Amazon" to describe Exter and her friend, fellow artist Olga Rozanova, it has come to include a number of Russia's elite women artists. In 1999, John Bowlit, Matthew Drutt, and Zelfira Tregulova curated an exhibit for the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin titled *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* which toured Europe and the US until 2001. In the exhibit and its catalog, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova were added to the list of "Amazons," to have emerged during the early decades of the twen-

known and greatly admired by her peers throughout Europe and Russia during her life, her work has been the subject of only one comprehensive study in recent years.⁴

As an artist, Exter is difficult to categorize. She was a great admirer of Nicholas Poussin's work, as well as that of World of Art darling, Leon Bakst, and can therefore be seen as a bit of a traditionalist.⁵ Yet she, perhaps more closely than any other member of the Russian avant-garde, associated with the Italian Futurists, an influence which is readily apparent in her work.⁶ She was skilled in many media and seemed effortlessly to draw upon Russian and Ukrainian folk traditions as well as the latest avant-garde "ism" that was fashionable at the time.⁷ As such, her work is often a fluent amalgamation of styles that never really solidifies into a single discerna-

tieth century. See John Bowlt and Matthew Drutt, ed., *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000). It should be noted here that Exter's name does not appear to be Russian in origin. In fact, she was born in Russia near the border of Poland to Belarusian parents, and took that name in 1904 when she married her cousin, a wealthy lawyer named Nicolas Evguenievich Exter. Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 8. She kept the name of Exter after her husband's death in 1918, even when she married her second husband, Gerogii Nekrasov in 1920. This seemed to trouble him little, according to Lissim, who recalls him as having introduced himself as "George Exter." "Everybody knows her, is it not simpler this way," he explained. Lissim, "As I Knew Her," 17.

⁴ The only monograph of Alexandra Exter that covers the entire scope of her life and career, from her early studies in Kiev to her final days in Paris, is Jean Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter: Monographie* (Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions), 2003, with contributions by John Bowlt and Dmytro Horbachov. Jacob Tugendkhold also published a brief monograph about Exter in 1922 which examines her painted work as well as her theatrical endeavors up to that date, J. Tugendkhold, *Alexandra Exter*. Translated by Count Petrovsky. Petrovo Solovovo, 1922. Chapters devoted to Exter's career can be found in the following works: Bowlt and Drutt, *Amazons of the Avant Garde*; M.N. Yablonskaya, *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900 – 1935*, trans. Anthony Parton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); Dmytro Horbachov, "In the Epicentre of Abstraction: Kyiv during the Time of Kurbas," in *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

⁵ The World of Art was the avant-garde group organized around the magazine of the same name that emerged during the final decades of the nineteenth century in Russia under the leadership of artist and critic Alexander Benois. The group's most famous member was Sergei Diaghilev, the charismatic force behind Les Ballets Russes. Leon Bakst's exquisite and exotic costumes and set décor for Les Ballets Russes brought him worldwide acclaim, but his art was rooted in the Symbolist tradition that quickly fell out of favor in the progressive avant-garde circles of twentieth-century Russia. Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863 – 1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 37-64.

⁶ Through her travels and numerous friends in various European artistic communities, Exter became acquainted with F.T. Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carra, and Luigi Russolo, and was especially close with Futurist painter Ardengo Soffici with whom she shared a studio in 1914.

⁷ Although she was always eager to explore the latest artistic developments in her own artwork, Exter never identified exclusively with any one movement or group. In a 1929 letter to Vera Mukhina, Exter wrote, "There is something stubborn in me, and on principle I always rebel energetically against everything fashionable." Quoted in Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 267.

ble signature look. This is not to say that Exter lacked an identifiable style, but rather that she was capable of reconciling seemingly disparate aesthetic philosophies into unlikely but ultimately harmonious associations in a variety of media.

Exter's artistic training took place in 1906 at the Kiev Art School, and then in 1908 at the Parisian Académie de la Grande Chaumière where she studied under portraitist Caro Delvall. It was in Paris that she learned the still embryonic language of Cubism, and adapted it expertly to her own work. Her days at the Académie were short lived, however, as Delvall objected to her preferential treatment of color in her canvases. So greatly did his censure offend her artistic sensibilities that Exter promptly quit the school.⁸ This incident did little to impede her career, however, and she soon returned home to Russia where she immersed herself in the burgeoning climate of modernist art and literature. As a prolific exhibitor, organizer, and educator, Exter would quickly earn a reputation as one of the most proactive members of the Russian avant-garde.

One of Exter's most significant early endeavors took place in 1909 when she helped organize the first Izdebski Salon.⁹ Described as the Russian equivalent of the Armory Show of 1913 in scale and importance, the Izdebski Salon introduced modern western art to Russia, and showcased the best and brightest of Russia's emerging artists as well.¹⁰ Among the 776 exhibited works, notable entrants included Gabriele Münter, Vasiī Kandinskiī, Odilon Redon,

⁸ Exter's exit may have been acrimonious, as Tugendkhold describes the split as a "scandal," and Chauvelin refers to her departure as "the incident of La Grande Chaumière." Ibid., 16.

⁹ Vladimir Izdebski was a Russian artist who gained notoriety for organizing exhibitions of avant-garde European and Russian art. Exter and Russian painter Nikolai Kulbin were instrumental in organizing this early exhibit, which was arguably the most important of his famous Salons.

¹⁰ This was the exhibit that caused legendary Russian realist painter, Ilia Repin to suggest that modernist art looked as though it had been painted by a donkey with a paintbrush tied to its tail. In a scathing letter published in the Stock Exchange Gazette in 1910, Repin railed against European modernism: "A brush was tied to the donkey's tail

Henri Matisse, Albert Gleizes, and Henri Le Fauconnier. Representing the Russian avant-garde were Mikhail Larionov, Alexei Jawlensky, Natalia Goncharova, and of course, Exter.¹¹ The exhibit traveled between Kiev, Odessa, Riga and St. Petersburg, creating a sensation wherever it went and inspiring a new generation of Russian artists, critics, and collectors.

1909 was an important year for Exter as well because she – as well as much of the rest of the world – was introduced to Futurism. Within a few weeks of its publication in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*, F.T. Marinetti's "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" had been translated into Russian and disseminated throughout artistic circles across the nation. The influence of this powerful, vitriolic assault on artistic tradition was swift and decisive, resulting in futurist-inspired organizations, publications and exhibits throughout Russia.¹² For Exter, it was the formal innovations of futurist artwork that appealed to her far more than its aggressive and often misogynistic rhetoric. The explosive futurist color palette was a thrilling condemnation of

and a palette with paint and a canvas placed under it...and out from under its tail came a picture by Cézanne." A portion of this letter is reproduced in Ilia Dorontchenkov, ed., *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 101.

¹¹ While focused analyses of Exter's work are rare, much greater attention has been given to the Russian avant-garde. For this thesis I have found the following works invaluable: Nancy Van Norman Baer, *Theater in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design, 1913 – 1935* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991); John E. Bowlt, ed. *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988); Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863 – 1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986); Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

¹² In 1910 Exter joined the St. Petersburg-based organization, the Union of Youth, founded earlier that year by Elena Guro and Mikhail Matiushin, which would become one of the organizations favored by the Russian futurists. It should be noted that although a strong similarity between Russian and Italian Futurism is evidenced in the respective manifestos of the groups in these early years, the Russian futurists quickly came to reject many of the more strident formal and philosophical tenets of their Italian counterparts. Known today as Cubo-Futurism, Russian Futurism was less categorical in its rejection of its own past, and many of its proponents created art that was not only a synthesis of concurrent artistic developments, but incorporated some of the forms and themes of Russian folk art as well. Leon Trotsky criticized the futurist condemnation of the past most decisively: "To reject art as a means of picturing and imagining knowledge because of one's opposition to the contemplative and impressionistic bourgeois art of the last few decades is to strike from the hands of the class which is building a new society its most important weapon." Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 135.

the drab monotony of cubist offerings that had so troubled Exter in Paris. Ultimately, however, it was the futurist tenet of dynamism that seized her imagination the most powerfully.

Unlike some of her more outspoken peers such as Natalia Goncharova or Kazimir Malevich, Exter was never exclusively bound to any particular style or group. Throughout her career, Exter researched the dynamic and rhythmic potential of color in her compositions, the study of which shaped her work more than any particular ethos. An early painted work, such as her 1913 *Firenze*, for example, reveals the clear influence of Cubism in its studied geometry of broken lines and familiar yet incomplete forms. (Figure 1.1) However, the assertive presence of color amid the dynamic interplay of planes and abbreviated force lines recalls the work of the Italian futurists. Perhaps most telling in this instance is her choice of subject matter, with “Firenze” spelled out above an Italian flag in the bottom right corner of the painting. Fractured patterns and vivid jewel tones collide to form a modern, kaleidoscopic interpretation of the historic Italian city. Although certainly a rhythmic composition, its largely vertical repetition of forms adds discipline and stability to the painting, revealing the vestiges of her cubist training. A contemporaneous untitled piece, however, is a dynamic futurist free-for-all replete with force lines, vortices, and prismatic shards of color. (Figure 1.2) Having mastered a variety of artistic styles, Exter selected freely from cubist and futurist aesthetic principles, later drawing from suprematist and constructivist canons as well, to create dynamic and vibrant work that often defied easy categorization.

Like many of her fellow artists throughout Russia and Europe, Exter found herself drawn to the artistic possibilities afforded in the theater. The theatrical venue allowed her not only the opportunity to design, but also to construct a total environment on the stage while developing

the fundamental rhythmic and compositional harmonies of her two-dimensional work in a three-dimensional arena. It is this area of her work that forms the basis of the following two chapters of this thesis. I begin with an introductory overview of the perceived crisis in the theater throughout Europe and Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, and an examination of some of the loudest voices advocating its immediate reformation.¹³ This section includes a discussion of the inescapable Wagnerian influence on the art and literature of the time, as well as early symbolist efforts to create what became known as a “painter’s theater.” I also explore the Russian conception of the theater as a laboratory in which experiments not only in stage design and construction, but also in the application of revolutionary socialist principles could be carried out. It was within this climate of reform and innovation that Exter emerged as an artist of the theater, forming a partnership with director Alexandr Tairov in 1916 that would garner her accolades from audiences and critics across Russia.

In this chapter I also introduce the concept of the performing object.¹⁴ I present a number of the central arguments against the use of the human actor in the theater, which emerged as an impassioned subject of debate at the time. Apprehensions included the unwillingness of the performer to submit to the total control of a director, the corrupting influence of the

¹³ Of the numerous excellent works available on avant-garde European and Russian theater, I have relied the most heavily upon: Günter Berghaus, *Theater, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and *Italian Futurist Theater, 1909-1944* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); René Fülöp-Miller, and Joseph Gregor, *The Russian Theater: Its Character and History with Especial Reference to the Revolutionary Period*, trans. Paul England, 1930, Reissue (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater 1905 – 1932*, ed. Dr. Lesley Milne, trans. Roxane Permer (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988); Marc Slonim, *Russian Theater: From the Empire to the Soviets* (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

¹⁴ The two essential sources for information on the history of puppets, marionettes, and other performing objects are Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio’s Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automaton, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-garde Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Scott Cutler Shershow, *Puppets and “Popular” Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

audience and its effect upon the actor's ego, as well as formal concerns regarding the incompatibility of the human material to the artificial environment of the stage, or more simply an objection to the effects of gravity on bodily movement. There were a seemingly endless variety of ways that the human proved to be an obstacle to artistic or directorial vision, and the quest to find a suitable substitute led, predictably, to the use of puppets or marionettes by a large number of artists.

Having thus established a background against which to introduce Exter's work in the theater, Chapter Three examines her projects in the 1910's – 20's in Tairov's Kamerny Theater. I begin with the 1916 production of *Famira Kifared*, for which Exter's cubist set and sparse costumes thrilled Russian audiences and earned critical acclaim. By painting the bodies of her actors, Exter had begun to experiment with the human as an artistic medium, treating it as an animate canvas. The following year, her work on the set and costume designs for Tairov's production of *Salome* created a sensation, bringing Exter international recognition as a stage designer. She envisioned the union of the set and costumed performers as a total work of art – a collaborative venture between the artist, director, performer, and even electrician that was greater than the sum of its parts.

Chapter Three concludes with Exter's set and costume designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of "Romeo and Juliet" in 1921, which truly represents the culmination of Exter's practical and pedagogical theatrical endeavors. The towering, multi-level stage set exemplifies her passion for rhythm, color, and dynamism, and demonstrates the way in which her futurist leanings melded seamlessly with a constructivist aesthetic. In her sketches for the costumes, it is clear that her interest had strayed from the human form, and was instead fixed

upon the motion of the animated fabric. Through the interaction between her scenic designs and human performers, Exter achieved her most ambitious and exciting work to date.

Chapter Four examines Exter's transition from theater to film with a look at her famous costume and set designs for Iakov Protazanov's international sensation, the 1924 film, *Aelita: Queen of Mars*. Here, Exter's performers have begun to shed some of their human qualities (they are Martians, after all) resembling beautiful and frightening movable sculptures. Disguised by elaborate costumes fabricated from modern industrial materials such as plexiglass, celluloid, and metal, the visual integration of the actors within Exter's imaginative Martian city was nearly flawless. At times playful and other times elegant, the dynamic groupings of performers amid the mechanized alien set actualized the Wagnerian vision of *gesamkunstwerk* through the lens of the camera.

The nature of film as a documentary medium was initially believed by some to frustrate the creation of new artistic forms, so the partnership between Exter and Protazanov must have seemed an ideal solution to the problem. By filming what amounted to living works of art and further sculpting the finished product through the editing process, *Aelita* demonstrates the true potential of film as an artistic medium. The performing object would thus be ideally suited as an artistic alternative to the human actor, particularly in the area of film. It is fitting, therefore, that Exter's next major project was the design of the approximately forty marionettes that she created for an unrealized film project, which will be the subject of the final chapter of this thesis.

Created in Paris in 1926, Exter's marionettes are unique among those produced at the time for a number of reasons. First, it would be difficult to find any more elegantly crafted,

innovatively designed, or wonderfully inventive examples of avant-garde performing objects. Although now only a little more than half are known to exist, the surviving collection has been the subject of display and critique for decades.¹⁵ In a fascinating twist, although the marionettes were created as performers for film, they were likely never used for this purpose. Instead, despite their dynamic potential, they were only ever known and appreciated as static objects. Within these colorful wooden figures are reconciled conflicting notions of stasis and dynamism, sculpture and performer, human and object. Ultimately, Exter's marionettes represent the culmination of numerous artistic, philosophical, and political ideologies at this specific and exciting moment in Russian and European history.

It is clear that the motivations behind the rise of the performing object were numerous and often disparate. While it is neither practical nor desirable to ascribe a specific, unifying ideology to Exter's transition from working with human actors to constructing her own inanimate performers, it is helpful to consider her approach as largely formalist. Very briefly, Russian Formalism was a literary movement in which a distinction was made between the practical use of language (language as a system of understanding predicated upon the relationship between subject and referent) and its artistic usage (syntax, meter, and phonetic qualities of a word or series of words). For the Russian avant-garde, a formalist approach to art was one in which form determined content. Simply put, formalist art was devoid of political, ideological, or

¹⁵ Exter's marionettes were exhibited throughout Germany in 1927 and 1928, most notably in Berlin's Der Sturm Gallery, in London in 1928, in Paris in 1929-1930, and in Prague in 1937. More recently they were displayed in 1975 at the Leonard Hutton Galleries in New York, and in 1980 at the Hirschorn Museum in Washington D.C.

external referent. This was crucial to the early Russian avant-garde, as its members attempted to generate life out of art, creating the forms which would in turn shape the new Russian existence.¹⁶

Identified by Trotsky as “the theorist of Futurism, and at the same time the head of the Formalist school,” Victor Shklovskii described in his work *Theory of Prose* what he dubbed the “enstrangement” of objects.¹⁷ This enstrangement is achieved by making the familiar strange, either through an overabundance of detail in literature, or through the exaggeration or disguise of familiar forms in art.¹⁸ As formalist scholar Victor Erlich explains, “Rather than translating the unfamiliar into the terms of the familiar, the poetic image ‘makes strange’ the habitual by presenting it in a novel light, by placing it in an unexpected context.”¹⁹ By forcing an audience to see and not merely recognize an object, Shklovskii maintains that the artist shakes the viewer out of his automaticized state of existence.²⁰

Following Shklovskii’s ideology, Exter’s application of formalist principles to Russian theater would have seemed logical. Russian audiences were accustomed to the tedium of the performance. They recognized the leading actor, were familiar with all of the usual plot devices,

¹⁶ In Stalinist years, however, the accusation of formalism was something any artist who possessed a spirit of self preservation would hope to avoid, as artwork devoid of easily recognizable political content was viewed with suspicion.

¹⁷ Victor Shklovskii, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 6; Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 162. The term “enstrangement” is an English translation of the Russian “ostranienie,” which Shklovskii describes as a process by which a thing is endowed with “strangeness.” See the translator’s introduction to *Theory of Prose*, xviii – xix. It is important to remember that Formalism and Futurism developed in tandem with one another – the futurists providing a laboratory for the application of formalist principles in the visual world.

¹⁸ Shklovskii uses the work of Leo Tolstoy to demonstrate the principle of enstrangement in popular literature. He explains, “He does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time, while an incident is described as if it were happening for the first time. In addition, he foregoes the conventional names of the various parts of a thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts in other things.” Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1980).

²⁰ Shklovskii explains, “Our perception of the world has withered away, what has remained is mere recognition.” Quoted in Ibid, 176.

and applauded at the appropriate moments. Thus, performances were difficult to distinguish from one another and were therefore forgettable. By introducing an object in the place of a performer, not only is the creative process visible in the performance through its movements, the viewer is confronted with the unexpected and must actively engage with the production. The work of art on the stage will thus be experienced anew.

By continuing to present an illusion of life in its explicit detail on the stage, Konstantin Stanislavskiĭ and his followers in the naturalistic theater perpetuated the familiar and thus recreated *ad infinitum* the mundane and forgettable aspects of everyday existence. Exter, by altering her human subjects so as to make their physical attributes strange or unrecognizable, is inviting the audience to experience the bodies of the performers in a new light, and celebrate the artistry of the artificial theatrical realm. I argue, therefore, that to dehumanize the performer is in fact to call attention to his humanity, a quality which is often forgotten in the redundancy of daily existence. Exter's manipulation and eventual replacement of the performer both on the stage and in front of the camera not only exemplifies the interconnectivity and mutability of Russian avant-garde art, but forces the viewer to reconsider the familiar in terms of the strange. The device having been thus laid bare, art becomes not discovery, but rediscovery.



Figure 1.1: Alexandra Exter, *Firenze*, 1914

Source: Yablonskaya, M.N. *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900 – 1935*. Translated by Anthony Parton. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.



Figure 1.2: Alexandra Exter, *Untitled*, 1913

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

Chapter Two: The Crisis of the Theater and the Rise of the Performing Object

The beginning of the twentieth century was characterized by a pronounced restlessness in the artistic community, as artists across much of the western world began to reject traditional modes of expression, reinventing the visual arts and introducing an entirely new vocabulary better suited to the modern era in which they lived. Although diverse in method and design, a common aspiration to totally reform the theater, which many artists perceived as a nearly bankrupt artistic format, dominated theoretical discourse. Compelled by a desire to integrate artistic disciplines and incorporate rhythmic and temporal elements into their work, artists left their isolated studios and entered into collaborative relationships with directors, writers, and performers in an effort to revitalize the modern stage. This was the era of the painter's theater, and the sweeping theatrical reforms that took place resulted in a revolution not only in the formal and conceptual elements of stage design, but in the definition of performance itself. Given this climate of innovation and experimentation in what was largely unexplored territory for many of these artists-turned-theatrical reformers, it is perhaps not surprising that the role of the actor would be called into question, leading ultimately to the modification or replacement of the human actor on the stage.

Among the numerous grievances voiced by artists and theorists across Europe and Russia, the urgent need to free the theater from the control of its avaricious capitalist owners was seen as a priority of the highest order. Likewise, the theater would also have to be freed from the control of the audience, which was largely comprised of wealthy socialites who seemed incapable of appreciating, or even recognizing, an original work of art. These elite crowds were

seen as having entirely too much sway over the performance, leaving the writer or director impotent in the face of its all-powerful applause or worse, its lack thereof. In this way, it was in fact the audience who determined the parameters of artistic and dramatic content. Entire plays were written and produced for the sole purpose of providing predictable light entertainment for the bourgeois crowds who used the theater as a social club in which they could show off their latest attire and digest their evening meals.

Richard Wagner, whose influence in virtually every European and Russian avant-garde circle cannot be overstated, lamented that the modern stage was entirely too self-aware, too concerned with the hollow charade of polite applause and the simulated thanks on the part of the performers.²¹ Wagner, like many other tormented playwrights, musicians, and artists of his time found himself increasingly alienated from his own work. His “product” was not in his control. Like the proletariat who was becoming the topic of many political and philosophical conversations, the artist too found himself subject to the caprice of the bourgeoisie, manifested in the whims of popular taste. Those entrusted to perform his work were willingly manipulated by their audiences, and so the artist’s desires became inconsequential by comparison.

Futurist founding father, F.T. Marinetti, whom Alexandra Exter numbered among her many associates, was one of many avant-garde reformers to express in no uncertain terms his loathing of what was viewed as the banality and imbecility of the bourgeois audience. In his estimation, the level of quality and originality of a play can be measured in an inversely proportional relationship to the enthusiasm of the applause. Redundancy and mediocrity will, for

²¹ Russian Minister of Culture Anatoliĭ Lunacharskiĭ, for example, considered Wagner’s *Art and Revolution* to be as important a document as the “Communist Manifesto,” and had a Russian translation pressed in 1906, for which he wrote the introduction. Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 227.

example, receive the most cheers, while innovation and novelty will be met with silence, or occasionally even violence.²²

Celebrated Russian stage designer Léon Bakst echoes Marinetti's laments in an even more vitriolic rant against the ignorance of the crowd. In his essay, "Painting and Stage Design," he describes the audience as an impediment to creativity, explaining:

The thirst for instantaneous sensation, the boredom that comes over every ordinary spectator as soon as he is offered a beautiful, difficult work of art which is worth thinking about, his hatred of the effort required to familiarize himself with the author's thought – all this results in the servants of the theater being the first to pander to the demands of fashion.²³

If the artist was to gain creative control, a radical restructuring of the theater - from its literary content to its visual aesthetic - would have to be undertaken.

Until the nineteenth century, stage decoration was largely the responsibility of artisans – specialists in stage craft who were expected to comply with established traditions. The standard of the day was to create the illusion of reality on the stage through painted backdrops and lighting intended to mimic the natural light of the sun. Thus, the demand by renowned directors such as Konstantin Stanislavski in Russia or André Antoine in France for naturalism in the theater had elevated uncompromising verisimilitude to the highest and most desirable position in the arts. Grandiose backdrops of old were replaced by extremely literal recreations of the literary setting, with the aim of creating a self-contained "slice of reality."²⁴ The result of these

²² In his manifesto, "The Pleasure of Being Booed," Marinetti explains that while not everything booed is necessarily praise-worthy, applause is very often an indicator of mediocrity: "We must abolish the grotesque habit of clapping and whistling, a good enough barometer of parliamentary eloquence but certainly not of artistic worth." In *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. R.W. Flint (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 115.

²³ Léon Bakst, "Painting and Stage Design," in *Art and the Stage in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Henning Rischbieter, trans. Michael Bullock (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 45.

²⁴ This style of stage decoration is often referred to as "slice of life" theater and was itself quite revolutionary at the time of its development.

largely two-dimensional designs was that the performances took place in front of rather than within the scenery, establishing and reinforcing a strict separation between the actor and the formal composition of the stage. This had been a particular source of frustration for Wagner, whose desire to unify all of the seemingly disparate forms of art on the stage was frustrated throughout his career. Known as *gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” Wagner’s ideology was enthusiastically revived in the twentieth century, as many of the most celebrated artists of their day began to view the theater as the venue in which to achieve a total artistic synthesis which would reflect as well as shape the modern era.

In France, symbolist theater in the late nineteenth century had been the site of the first serious collaborations between painters and directors. The stage was no longer to be considered as a “slice of life”, but rather as a pure fiction. It would be artists rather than set designers who would now concern themselves with interpreting the play and experimenting with new stage formats. In Russia too it was the symbolist theater that would usher in the era of what Henning Rischbieter dubbed “the painter’s theater.”²⁵ In 1882, imperial control of Russia’s theaters was officially revoked, permitting railroad millionaire Savva Mamontov to establish the Moscow Private Russian Opera Company.²⁶ It was Mamontov who first invited Russia’s finest artists to work in the theater. As artists began to try their hands at set painting, the background gained importance on the stage and assumed a much more prominent position in the produc-

²⁵ Rischbieter, *Art and the Stage*, 12

²⁶ Mamontov is best known for having founded the Abramtsevo Art Colony, in which pre-Petrine Russian folk art was revived as a method of creating a modern art that was uniquely Russian in inspiration. A revival in the appreciation of crafts among the later avant-garde may indeed have contributed to the widespread enthusiasm for puppet theater as well. Mamontov’s interest in theater is not surprising, as his cousin was famed Moscow Art Theater director Konstantin Stanislavskii.

tion, giving rise to innumerable doctrines and ideologies concerning the form that the stage should now assume.

In addition to Wagner, two other theatrical theoreticians were instrumental in shaping the appearance of the stage at the turn of the century. Although neither of these men were themselves artists per se, Swiss designer Adolphe Appia and English director Edward Gordon Craig's heretical ideas won them favor among the European and Russian avant-gardes.²⁷ While best known for his revolutionary treatment of stage lighting, Appia was equally adamant in his belief that the conventional method of placing the performer in front of two-dimensional scenery was detrimental to the overall harmony of the production. Appia objected to the static, illusionistic painted backdrop because as soon as the actor stepped in front of it, the illusion was shattered. The very literal images which were in high demand in the naturalistic theater of the day catered specifically to what the audience would expect, and were therefore impediments to creativity or artistry. What Appia advocated instead was a three-dimensional set that would be vague enough to appear to transform throughout the performance in accord with changes in music or action, and within which the performers could move and interact.²⁸

Appia's minimalist approach to set design was echoed in Craig's vision of an architectural stage set that was vertically and spatially oriented – a fully realized space rather than a screen against which the action would occur. Craig is credited with having introduced the idea

²⁷ Exter's own pedagogy was indebted to the stage designs of Craig and Appia, as well as the costume stylings of Bakst. See Horbachov, "In the Epicentre," 170-176.

²⁸ Appia was an obsessive Wagner devotee, and nearly everything he wrote or designed for the stage was conceived for one of Wagner's operas. Nevertheless, his ideas gained widespread fame throughout Europe and the Russian Empire and were applied to many non-Wagnerian productions including a number of Exter's theatrical set designs. His stripped-down conception of stage design was intended to be supplemented through the innovative use of electric lighting. See Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 175 – 207; Richard C. Beacham, *Adolphe Appia: Artist and Visionary of the Modern Theater* (Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994).

of a multi-level stage construction that would appear to move and change, with sweeping lines and shadows creating a dynamic and interactive performative device. Craig was troubled by the disparity between the organic and inorganic elements occupying the stage (the performers and the scenery), and believed that harmony between all of its constituent parts could only be achieved with a single creative entity in total, unchecked control of all aspects of the performance. He insisted that the art of the theater, divided as it was into so many separate but congruent parts, must be reformed in its entirety or not at all. Craig saw the cure for this affliction in the person of the “artist of the theater.” He explains, “The reason why you are not given a work of art on the stage is not because the public does not want it...but because the theater lacks the artist.”²⁹ Craig’s formalist approach to theater proved inspirational for an entire generation of theatrical reformers who were dedicated to achieving the goal of *gesamtkunstwerk*, and establishing the artist as the foremost authority in the theatrical production.

Throughout Russia and Europe, theatrical reform was initiated through this new conception of the artist as a core member of the theatrical production. In Russia, at the center of Mamontov’s circle was critic, writer, and soon-to-be legendary impresario, Sergeĭ Diaghilev, who would form the most widely acclaimed and innovative ballet troupe in the early twentieth century.³⁰ Through his Ballets Russes, Diaghilev strove to achieve the Wagnerian model of total artistic collaboration that gripped much of the avant-garde consciousness at the time.

²⁹ Edward Gordon Craig, “The Art of the Theater. The First Dialogue,” in *Craig on Theater*, ed. J. Michael Walton (London: Methuen London, 1983), 56. Craig wrote this, the first of two such dialogues, in 1905.

³⁰ Sergeĭ Diaghilev was the most celebrated member of the World of Art group, which was, according to Bowlt, “the principal artistic and intellectual society with which many of the Symbolist writers were associated.” He was instrumental in organizing national and international art exhibitions, introducing many audiences to the latest in European artistic trends. Centered around the journal of the same name, Diaghilev’s associates included Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, and Konstantin Solov. See John Bowlt, *Moscow & St. Petersburg, 1900 – 1920: Art, Life & Culture*

Under Diaghilev's direction, Les Ballets Russes became the first well-funded, widely respected group to spread the remodeled, avant-garde theater throughout the world. Making use of the most innovative composers, choreographers, and artists, Diaghilev was instrumental in putting into practice many of the ideals espoused by the most radical reformers of the era. Of particular interest for this study, he routinely employed the most greatly admired and innovative artists of his day to design for his wildly imaginative stage ensembles. The list reads like a who's who of twentieth-century art: Bakst, Balla, Braque, de Chirico, Derain, Ernst, Picasso, and Matisse all transformed Diaghilev's stages, as well as his performers, into complete, living works of art. (Figure 2.1) Unlike Craig and Appia, who preferred the stark minimalism of neutral tones, Diaghilev fully embraced color. The costumes and sets of Les Ballets Russes complemented one another on the stage to create a harmonious scenic spectacle, and became hugely influential in the realms of performance and fashion throughout the western world.³¹

In Europe, the Italian futurists were among the most vocal advocates for a theater in which a total work of art could be achieved. Although the futurists did occasionally collaborate with Diaghilev, they found his brand of theater too reliant upon traditional forms of literature and stagecraft, and therefore incompatible with the realities of modern urban existence. Admittedly indebted to Wagner and Craig, Marinetti wrote a number of essays in which he called for a complete overhaul of the European theater. In his famous 1913 manifesto, "The Variety Theater," he expresses the collective frustration over the uninspired state of Italy's theat-

(New York: Vendome Press, 2008), 161 – 200; Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³¹ The most important stage designer associated with Les Ballets Russes was Russian artist Léon Bakst, whose exquisite and dramatic costumes proved to be an enormous source of inspiration for Exter. A number of the most innovative Russian artists achieved fame as designers for Les Ballets Russes. The great irony of Diaghilev's legacy is that, although its influence was felt throughout the world, Les Ballets Russes never performed in Russia.

ical affairs: “We have a deep distaste for the contemporary theater...because it oscillates stupidly between historical reconstruction...and a photographic reproduction of everyday life.” He advocates instead for a theater that is “a synthesis of everything that humanity up till now has refined within its nervous system.”³² The futurists realized that despite their best efforts to capture invisible sensations such as sound, psychological states, or even the passage of time in their canvases, it was only within the three-dimensional space of the stage that a true union of the senses could be expressed, and their ever-changing dynamic and temporal relationships explored sufficiently. This volatile synthesis of the unrestrained rhythms of the velocity of modern life and its myriad thrilling stimulations would preoccupy the artists of the theater throughout much of the world.

The creation of new forms germane to the twentieth century psyche was a paramount concern for the Russian avant-garde as well. The Russian stage became a laboratory for constructing a way of life which reflected as well as reinforced the new political and social realities during and after the Revolution of 1917. Theater assumed a prominent role for the avant-garde as an artistic model for the new society. Such a model was no longer bound to any literary source, which more often than not assumed the position formerly allotted to the scenery: a backdrop against which the action would unfold. Thus, the theater was treated with a new level of importance – as an urgent creative and procreative act which was believed to have the potential to reshape the audiences that attended these performances, and ultimately contribute to the birth of a new society. Public enthusiasm for theater in Russia has been described as

³² Filippo Tomassi Marinetti, “The Variety Theater,” in *Futurism*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 159.

nothing short of manic, as artists collaborated with directors to invent scenic spectacles, each more extraordinary than the last.³³ The conception of theater as a revolutionary model was embraced at the highest levels of the Russian government. Russian Minister of Culture Anatoly Lunacharskiĭ recognized the significant political potential of the performing arts, explaining, “Agitation and propaganda acquire particular acuity and effectiveness when they are clothed in the attractive and mighty forms of art.”³⁴ Despite the acute awareness of the propagandistic potential of the theater, this was a time of relatively unfettered creativity in the Russian art world, and although artists often willingly incorporated revolutionary themes in their work, they remained free to choose the forms these would take.

As a three-dimensional venue, the stage allowed for the kind of multi-media spectacles that were gaining popularity throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. Daring experiments in set construction and decoration, innovations in lighting techniques, modernist musical compositions, and revolutionary adaptations of literary works were combined into a fully integrated, living work of art that appealed to all of the senses. It was amid this climate of unfettered creativity and experimentation that Alexandra Exter would first emerge as a theatrical innovator, stunning audiences and critics by combining Appian minimalism in her stage constructions with her decidedly Baksitan flair for color and costume design. Like many modernist artists at the time, Exter found in the theater a venue for her unique penchant for the dynamic,

³³ Baer attributes this “mania” over the theater to the free distribution of tickets to workers during the early Soviet era. Baer, *Theater in Revolution*, 35.

³⁴ Quoted in Baer, 35. Lunacharskiĭ saw the theater as a reflection of the consciousness of the Russian people: “The theater is, in the fullest sense, the focus of the people’s conscious life, the place in which all that is best that they possess turns into the pure metal of imagery and inversely influences them, organizing their forces.” Anatoliĭ Lunacharskiĭ, *On Literature and Art*, compiled by A. Lebedev (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 345.

rhythmic interplay of color and form. Her work in Alexandr Tairov's Kamerny Theater will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

The revolution in the theater had definitively established that the presence of the artist in the theater would thereafter be felt as strongly as that of the director, replacing the cult of the actor with the spectacle of the stage itself. This new role afforded the artist freedoms unimaginable in the confines of the studio, but out of this newfound creative license arose an unexpected dilemma. Of all the diverse elements that must combine to produce a successful theatrical production - the lighting, music, sets, costumes, script - it was the human actor that ultimately proved to be the source of the greatest unease.

As painters became increasingly interested in theatrical design, they seemed at a loss as to what should be done with the performers. Many chose to apply a kind of painterly abstraction to the human figure through the use of costumes which disguised or manipulated the actors' bodies. The visual abstraction that had come to define the era spread rapidly into the realms of language and the performing arts, resulting in an explosion of revolutionary theatrical theories and designs. It was logical – perhaps even unavoidable - that at a time when the human figure was being systematically dissected, rearranged, or abolished entirely from the canvas, that in a theater now dominated by modernist artists, the human actor would have to undergo a similar transformation. This was done through the regimentation of bodily movement, costuming, or occasionally a complete rejection of the human actor. By reducing or eliminating the presence of the human performer on the stage, artists were able to focus on formal relationships, the dynamic interplay of scenic elements, and the incorporation of new technologies into their work.

Julian Olf characterizes the crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century as a struggle between analysis and synthesis: "...the integrity of their (the artists') materials...the indebtedness of form to content" on the one hand, and on the other, "an incessant drive for a total artwork whose parts were subordinated to the dynamics of the whole organism."³⁵ In either case, the human performer proved vexing both as subject matter and as a material component of an integrated theatrical production. As abstraction came to dominate the stage, color and form were increasingly seen as subject matter in their own right, thereby rendering the performer unnecessary as a communicator of narrative or emotional content. Futurist artist and theatrical pioneer Enrico Prampolini elucidates the often extreme frustration artists expressed when faced with this persistent obstacle to unity on the stage, insisting that the human actor was "a useless element in theatrical action, and, moreover, dangerous to the future of the theater."³⁶ It was the unpredictability and further, the inconsistency of this volatile medium that contributed to the widespread debate over what should be done with the displaced figure of the human actor. Although it was a paramount concern of the avant-garde, it was not a particularly new dilemma.

In German poet and dramatist Heinrich von Kleist's groundbreaking essay in 1810 titled "On the Marionette Theater," he compares the movements of a great dancer in with those of a marionette. He ultimately concludes that, due largely to human consciousness, man can never hope to achieve perfection of movement equaling that of the artificial being. He explains, "Consciousness creates disorder in the harmony of men," and continues, "Grace... appears to best

³⁵ Julian Olf, "The Man/Marionette Debate in Modern Theater," *Educational Theater Journal* 26, no. 4 (Dec., 1974): 488.

³⁶ Enrico Prampolini, "Futurist Scenic Atmosphere," trans. Victoria Nes Kirby, from Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1971): 229.

advantage in that human bodily structure that has no consciousness at all – or has infinite consciousness---in the mechanical puppet or in the God.”³⁷ Von Kleist’s rather protestant assertion that the human being may be unsuitable material with which to work due to his imperfectability struck a chord with nineteenth- and twentieth- century reformers. However, the issue often seemed to stem from frustration over an inability to bend the actor to the will of the artist rather than the fallen nature of man. In other words, it appeared that the performer’s free will was an impediment to creativity and unity on the stage. Could the human actor ever work harmoniously with the sights and sounds constructed by the artist, or would his consciousness beget willfulness and disorder?

Throughout his 1872 essay, “On Actors and Singers,” which undoubtedly shaped much of Craig’s philosophy, Wagner laments the state of the German theater which he sees as having succumbed to the tragic shortcomings of the human ego. Echoing von Kleist, he writes, “Art ceases, strictly speaking, to be art from the moment it presents itself to our reflecting consciousness.”³⁸ He goes on to maintain that the actor is an impediment to the art of the theater due in large part to his own hubris. Thus, he explains, “a personal vanity, devoid of all capacity for artistically dissembling its end, gives our mimes the constant appearance of glaring stupidity.”³⁹ Whereas Wagner believed that the actor at least had the potential to become an artist, Craig saw little alternative but to rid the stage of his presence entirely.

³⁷ Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Marionette Theater,” trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *The MIT Press* 16, no.3 (Sep., 1972): 24, 26.

³⁸ Richard Wagner, *The Art Work of the Future and Other Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 162.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 167-68.

Claiming that actors are in fact *not* artists, Craig insists that the human being must be abolished from the theater, and replaced instead with the inanimate figure.⁴⁰ The problem as he sees it is that for too long the human actor has been caught up in his own vanity, nourished by the applause of the audience and subject to the whims of his own emotions. Further, it is contrary to human nature to be a slave to the will of others, and it is therefore natural that the human actor would rebel against the desires of the writer or the director. He explains, "In order to make any work of art it is clear we may work only in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of those materials."⁴¹ The problem with the human actor was, therefore, human nature.

As Craig has demonstrated, since human nature demands freedom while the director (or the artist) of the theater demands submission, the human actor may be fundamentally unsuited for this role. Even in Tairov's Kamerny Theater, in which the actor maintained a more prominent position in the production than in other venues, this battle of wills would surely have manifested itself. Exter's designs for a unified theater would have depended largely upon the subservience of the actors to her ideas. Although the alleged inability of the human actor to control either his emotions or his vanity was an important concern, it was the formal incompatibility of the actors' bodies with their surroundings that shaped many of Exter's theatrical designs, as well as those of her Russian and European cohorts. It was this conception of the human being as simply another artistic medium, no more important than any of the other mate-

⁴⁰ Craig's oft-quoted essay on the subject is often summarized in this single line: "The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the über-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name." See Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," *Craig on Movement and Dance*, ed. Arnold Rood (New York: Dance Horizons, 1977), 37-57. Craig may not have in fact been advocating for the replacement of the human by a performing object, but rather a new kind of actor that would be completely subservient to the will of the director, and capable as well of dispelling all emotion or sense of self during a performance.

⁴¹ Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," 38.

rials necessary for a scenic construction, that was perhaps the most revolutionary idea to emerge from this era of theatrical reform.

Theatrical designers who found themselves confounded by this new and aesthetically challenging material came up with a variety of strategies to incorporate the actor into the environment of the stage. German artist Kurt Schmidt, for instance, designed costumes for Oscar Schlemmer's Weimar Stage Workshop in which the actors' bodies were completely invisible behind a variety of colorful geometric shapes.⁴² Thus, the actor became little more than the mechanism by which Schmidt's sculptural costumes could be animated. Italian stage designer Fortunato Depero similarly described the function of the costumes he designed for Diaghilev's production of *Le Chant du Rossignol* in 1917. (Figure 2.2) He wanted the human actor to function as the engine which would bring his creations to life. In his autobiography, *So I Think, So I Paint*, Depero relates his idea for achieving harmonious interaction between his organic and inorganic materials: "In order to obtain a better geometrical sense and more proportional freedom in the costumes... one should completely forget man and substitute him with an invented automaton."⁴³ Eager to achieve dynamic unity on the stage, Depero was troubled by the physical presence of his performers as they interacted with their surroundings, and therefore designed his costumes to disguise the human form in a way that complemented his set. He explains:

⁴² Kurt Schmidt and Georg Teltcher's *Mechanical Ballet* was created for the Bauhaus Festival in the summer of 1923 under the supervision of Oscar Schlemmer. Schmidt's geometric shapes were fastened to the performers by straps, giving them the appearance of autonomous movement. See Berghaus, *Theater, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde*, 212-214.

⁴³ Fortunato Depero, *So I Think, So I Paint*, trans. Raffaella Lotteri (Rovereto, Italy: Mutilati E Invalidi, 1947), 74. Here Depero reflects upon his brief collaboration with Diaghilev's *Les Ballets Russes* in which he designed the set and costumes for Stravinsky's adaptation of *La Chante du Rossignol*. For reasons unknown, Diaghilev rejected Depero's colorful and imaginative designs at the last minute, thus ending his short-lived dalliance into Italian Futurism.

The human figure disappeared under the volume, the wings, and the shields of fantastical plastic appearance. The person was nothing but a hidden mechanical means to guide these magical and abstract costumes in their lively and ever-changing appearance.⁴⁴

Likewise, expressionist Lothar Schreyer transformed his actors into what he referred to as “physical shapes moving in space.”⁴⁵ This physical transformation of the actor through innovative costuming was being explored with equal enthusiasm in Russia. We will see in Chapter Two that in Exter’s sketches for the Kamerny Theater, she grew increasingly focused on the shape and material of the costumes and sets, and less on the physical properties of the performers. (Figure 2.3) On the stage, Exter found a venue for the dynamic, rhythmic interplay of color and form – a natural and felicitous extension of her painted work in a three-dimensional space. (Figure 2.4) Her designs were shaped by a profound interest in rhythm and movement, which according to Bowlt facilitated an “organic connection between the moving actors and the objects at rest.”⁴⁶ This interest in the properties of motion within the scenic environment was at the fore of the debate over the suitability of the human actor to the stage.

At the center of the man/marionette debate was the idea that purity of movement could never be achieved in a conscious being to the extent that it could in an inanimate performer. If perfection of movement is the goal, as von Kleist believed it should be, then the very consciousness that separates the animate human being from his lifeless counterpart becomes a detriment. Von Kleist succinctly explains, “The spirit cannot err where it does not exist.”⁴⁷ The perfection achieved by the unconscious act or gesture cannot be consciously duplicated. In-

⁴⁴ Quoted in Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theater*, 305.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 77-78. Schreyer wrote in his essay “The Essence of Physicality” that these shapes moving about on the stage amounted to what he dubbed “*Körpergestalt*,” which was not an organic body, but rather an artificial construction, and that the actor’s emotions or individuality were obstacles to achieving a true work of art on the stage.

⁴⁶ John Bowlt, “The Marionettes of Alexandra Exter,” *Russian History* 8 (1981): 220.

⁴⁷ von Kleist, “On the Marionette Theater,” 24.

stead, gravity must be allowed to exert its force freely upon the limbs. An actor, he maintains, will always exercise some resistance to random or unguided movement in his own body. With the marionette, by contrast, “The limbs that function as nothing more than a pendulum, swinging freely, will follow the movement in their own fashion without anyone’s aid.”⁴⁸ Thus, the vessel devoid of emotion or intention will not be distracted by its own inner motives, but will move in accordance with its own physiology.

A puppet is not bound by the laws of physics or gravity, but can hang motionless in midair or perform fantastic leaps that would be the envy of any dancer. This may all seem rather obvious, but von Kleist’s argument is exceptional in that he is using these facts to advocate for the *superiority* of the puppet over the human on the stage. He describes the movement of the marionette as a geometric ballet of sorts: “Each time the center of gravity was moved in a direct line, the limbs would start to describe a curve...the whole figure assumed a kind of rhythmic movement that was identical to dance.”⁴⁹ In this way, von Kleist seems to have pre-saged the twentieth-century trend towards evaluating the movements of the human body in terms of geometry.⁵⁰ It would thus be movement and gesture, rather than facial expression or vocalization that would communicate emotion, or often substitute for dialogue, in the newly reformed theater.

⁴⁸ Ibid. The apparent flaw in von Kleist’s argument is that a human being must operate the marionette. Its movements are therefore not entirely autonomous as they are guided by a conscious being. However, von Kleist argues that the force of gravity will have far greater freedom to act upon the lifeless body, even one controlled by a living operator.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 22.

⁵⁰ Marga Paz, “The Painter’s Theater in Avant-Garde Europe,” Chap. 1 in *Painters in the Theater of the European Avant-Garde* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2000), 31. Interestingly, Paz sees the pervasive influence of Charlie Chaplin as a factor in the overall tendency among artists to dehumanize the stage performer.

Alluding to the Wagnerian principle of expressing emotion through bodily or musical means, Russian theater director Vsevolod Meïerkhold explains his philosophy of human expressive movement on the stage: "...the actor's word in the drama is an insufficiently powerful means of conveying inner dialogue...Just as Wagner employs the orchestra to convey spiritual emotions, I employ plastic movement."⁵¹ Toward this end, Meïerkhold introduced his highly regimented system of bodily movement influenced by the modern mechanical rhythms of industry. The human body would thus remain his medium, and his theatrical exercises were intended to have real world applications germane to the revolutionary environment of early twentieth-century Russia.

In Russia, the machine and all of its aesthetic and kinetic attributes figured prominently in the visual and psychological transformation of society. Appropriately, the artists of the Russian avant-garde began to experiment with industrial forms and materials that they believed would ease the transition to socialism by creating art and architecture that would appeal directly to the working class. For many in the performing arts, this aestheticization of the proletariat amounted to a celebratory dehumanization of form and movement intended to reflect - if not accelerate - the technological transformation of the western world. A theatrical reformer such as Meïerkhold, who modeled his performers' movements after the efficient, Taylorist precision of the modern factory, can be seen as a paradigm of the mechanical idolatry that characterized much of the era.

In the early twentieth century, machines were increasingly seen not only as partners in revolutionary era Russian life, but as its saviors. As Lenin observed, "The war taught us

⁵¹ Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia*, 96.

much...those who have the best technology, organization, discipline and the best machines emerge on top...without machines, without discipline, it is impossible to live in modern society.”⁵² Hence, to model a human being after a machine was seen not as the chilling dehumanization of humankind, but rather as its improvement. It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that the mechanization of the human body through the perfection and economy of gesture was a popular interest of not only the avant-garde at the time, but industrial business owners as well. Richard Stites maintains that paragons of industry Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford, “dreamed of remodeling the human psyche and remodeling human society along the lines of machine and workshop.”⁵³ This utopian impulse was never far from the surface in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution, but in order to remodel society as a whole, one would first have to remodel its members.

Many believed that this process of mechanization was merely the acceleration of the next inevitable step in human evolution. Out of the proliferation of new technologies and mechanical innovation emerged the belief that humankind would undergo a mental and physical transformation commensurate with advances in the modern world.⁵⁴ Predictably, it was the futurists that embraced this idea with the greatest enthusiasm. In Marinetti’s 1911 “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine,” he writes:

Hence we must prepare for the imminent and inevitable identification of man and motor, facilitating and perfecting a continual interchange of institutions, rhythms, instincts and metallic disciplines...We believe in the possibility of an

⁵² Quoted in Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 147.

⁵³ Ibid, 145. Taylor famously regarded wealth as being the product of “the reduction of human beings to a mechanical assemblage of partial functions and parts of organs.” Quoted in Bernard Doray, *From Taylorism to Fordism: A Rational Madness*, Trans. David Macey (London: Free Association Books, 1988), 6.

⁵⁴ Bruce R. Elder, *Harmony + Dissent: Film and Avant-garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 251. Elder lists “new organs of sight” and “a new universal language” as two of the anticipated human evolutionary developments.

incalculable number of human transformations, and we declare without a smile that wings are waiting to be awakened within the flesh of man.⁵⁵

This new mechanized human will one day be endowed with an entirely new physiology, and will communicate with a language rooted more in sound than diction.⁵⁶ Marinetti believed that the fact that some people demonstrated a natural proclivity for mechanical work, or possessed an innate understanding of the inner workings of machines, was proof of an evolving psyche. The physical evolution would surely soon follow. Eccentric Russian thinker and author Nikolai Fëdorov predicted an even more radical future for humanity. He posited that humankind would reevaluate its passive relationship to nature, asserting control over the weather, gravity, and eventually death as well. Assisted by advances in science, he argued, the human race would soon achieve immortality.⁵⁷

It was within this climate of revolution and reevaluation that what Scott Cutler Shershow identifies as the “modernist distrust of the animate body” gradually took shape.⁵⁸ Alexandra Exter’s career in the theater, as will be discussed in the next chapter, and her transition into designing for film, as discussed in Chapter Four, exemplifies many of the numerous and often disparate philosophies to arise in the early decades of the twentieth century that have been

⁵⁵ F.T. Marinetti, “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine,” in *Futurism*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 89-92.

⁵⁶ A variety of non-sense or trans-sense languages arose in conjunction with artistic abstraction and non-objectivity, many of which reveled in the technology of the day. Depero and Marinetti employed an “imitative rumorism” in their noisy speech known respectively as *onomalingua* and “words-in-freedom”. In Russia, an attempt to develop a trans-rational language was undertaken by Victor Khlebnikov, who strove to perfect the Russian language by harnessing the pure etymological expressivity of the written word. It is worth noting, however, that although Dada performances also featured such non-languages, it was intended to express the alienation and spiritual decay that they saw as a direct result of industrialization.

⁵⁷ George M. Young, Jr., *Nikolai F. Fëdorov: An Introduction* (Belmont, MA: Norland Publishing, 1979). In Fëdorov’s one lifelong work, *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, he envisioned not only an immortal human race, but the resurrection of everyone who had ever lived.

⁵⁸ Shershow, 186. It is important to remember, as Shershow observes, that “the idea of the performing object conveniently merged with the more general modernist aestheticization of the machine.”

identified in this chapter. Through her work, it is possible to visually trace the first avant-garde challenges to the role of the audience in a theatrical production, the emergence of the artist as an authority on the stage, the transformation of the physical appearance and bodily movements of the actor, and ultimately the emergence of the performing object as the preferred vehicle of histrionic transmission. The following chapter will examine her earliest forays into theatrical set and costume design in Russia in which the human performer – while still a dominant presence on the stage – began to lose his privileged position as the artistic and dramatic focal point. A pronounced affinity for color and rhythm in her work in collaboration with Alexandr Tairov established her as one of the most daring and innovative theatrical designers of her day, and as a pioneer in the migration of the artist from the studio to the stage.

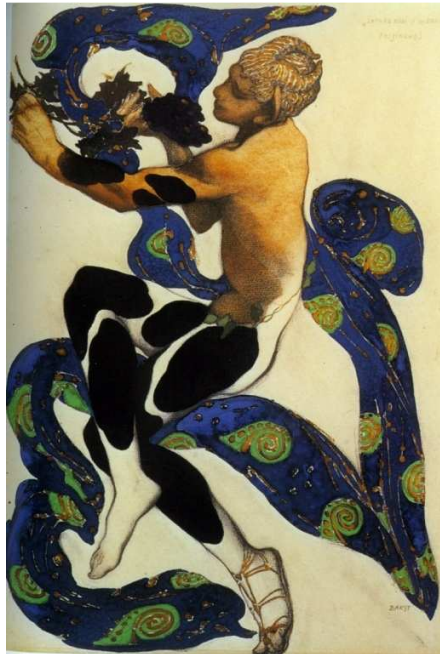


Figure 2.1: Léon Bakst, *Costume Design for Vaslav Nijinsky as the Faun in L'Après-midi d'un faune*, 1912

Source: Bowlt, John. *Moscow & St. Petersburg, 1900 – 1920: Art, Life & Culture*. New York: Vendome Press, 2008.



Figure 2.2: Fortunato Depero, *Costume design for Le Chant du Rossignol*, 1917

Source: Beretta, Marina, ed. *Depero Futurista*. Milan: Skira, 1999.



Figure 2.3: Alexandra Exter, *Le Bal Masqué*, Costume design for *Romeo and Juliette*, 1921.
Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 2.4: Alexandra Exter, Stage design for *Romeo and Juliette*, 1912
Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France:
Max Milo Editions, 2003.

Chapter Three: The Kamerny Theater

This chapter will examine Exter's earliest forays into theatrical set and costume design in Russia in which the human performer – while still a dominant presence on the stage – began to lose his privileged position as the artistic and dramatic focal point. A pronounced affinity for color and rhythm in her work in collaboration with Alexandr Tairov established her as one of the most daring and innovative theatrical designers of her day, and as a pioneer in the migration of the artist from the studio to the stage.

The turn of the century saw the emergence of the theatrical impresario and the subsequent restructuring of the traditional hierarchies within the theater. Men such as Sergei Diaghliev, Vsevolod Meïerkhold, and Alexandr Tairov sought to reform the Russian stage with the aim of creating a synthesis of all the theatrical and artistic elements. It was in Tairov's Kamerny Theater that Exter's first experiments in set and costume design took place, establishing her as one of the first true artists of the theater. As a forum for artistic experimentation and collaboration rather than a venue for the transient diversion of Russia's elite, the presence of the artist in the production would rapidly eclipse the importance of the leading actor – assuming there was one. Simon Karlinsky characterizes the era as “a new age in modernist experimentation in all artistic spheres... when the moralistic and nationalistic imperial censorship was virtually abolished and the utilitarian-realistic counter-censorship in the press lost its power and influence.”⁵⁹ With this shift in formal and conceptual concerns came new ideas about content, i.e.

⁵⁹ Simon Karlinsky, “The Early Twentieth-Century Cultural Revival and the Russian Merchant Class,” in *Theater in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design, 1913-1935*, ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 29.

what was appropriate subject matter for this new theater, and the extent to which it should rely upon traditional literary sources for its narratives. Although classic and modern plays were still often employed, many avant-garde theatrical designers and directors turned to Russian popular culture such as puppet theater, circus performance, or cabaret as inspiration for their revolutionary theatrical productions.

Much of the avant-garde interest in incorporating popular forms of entertainment on the Russian stage can be seen as a reaction against the naturalism of Stanislavskii's Moscow Art Theater. Stage design at the Moscow Art Theater was largely two-dimensional, serving as little more than a backdrop against which the drama could unfold. This neglect of the scenic environment speaks to a society enamored with the celebrity of the performer.⁶⁰ Therefore, when artists began to create sets with which the actors were required to interact, it was not only an indication of a formal reconception of the theatrical environment, but also a reflection of the revolutionary Russian political and social climate that privileged collaborative work over individual accomplishment.

Artists and directors eager to establish themselves as vital and active participants in the Revolution embraced the notion that the stage could be treated as a laboratory for society and a model of the new Russian life. In bourgeois society, art and culture had been separated from labor or physical work. One of the aims of the Revolution was to do away with this separation. It stood to reason that in a country in which society was being restructured at its very core, an entire new vocabulary of forms would be necessary to express and facilitate this transforma-

⁶⁰ It should be noted that although Russian audiences delighted in the celebrity of the star performer, Stanislavskii detested the exaggerated importance of the actor. He felt it was a distraction from the reality of the character the actor was attempting to portray.

tion; it would be up to the artist to create these forms. In Russia, the harmonious relationship between the performer and the stage set would mirror the kinship between a factory worker and his tools. In his book, *Literature in Revolution*, political theoretician Leon Trotsky writes, “The development of art is the highest test of the vitality and significance of each epoch.”⁶¹ Thus, the art of the socialist era would ultimately represent the success or failure of the revolution. It was amidst this climate of earnest and impassioned artistic reform that Alexandr Tairov emerged as a key figure in the transformation of the Russian stage.

Alexandr Tairov was born Alexander Jakovlevich Kornblit in the Ukrainian town of Romny in 1885. He abandoned his law practice to pursue acting, and eventually made his way to St. Petersburg where he worked in the company of the Komissarzhevskaya Theater. There that he met and worked with fellow theatrical innovator Vsevolod Meïerkhold, an association that would prove instrumental in shaping his own ideology. By 1912, however, Tairov had become despondent over the state of Russian theater, which he no longer believed to be a viable artistic domain, and announced his permanent departure from the stage. Nevertheless, he found himself working again in theater the following year in Moscow where he met popular actress and his future wife, Alissa Koonen. In 1914 they founded the Kamerny Theater together, the venue in which Tairov would be able to put his own theories into practice and at last bring about the theatrical reformation he had long envisioned.

Throughout his early career, Tairov had thorough experience as an actor and director both in the theater of realism advocated by Stanislavskiï and the more stylized theater of Meïerkhold, and was satisfied with neither. Stanislavskiï believed that all art was of necessity

⁶¹ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 9.

imitative, and strove to faithfully reproduce nature in the unnatural setting of the theater. Meïerkhold, by contrast, saw the world of the stage and the world outside of the theater as incompatible. Following this rationale, to attempt to recreate life within the theater would be to deny it its own art. Meïerkhold's aim was not to reproduce a "slice of reality" for the audience, but to celebrate the fantasy of the theatrical realm and "to evoke in the mind of the viewer a vision of the world for which the play...was a symbol."⁶² Tairov's position was thus located somewhere between Stanislavskii's theater in which drama took place solely on the stage, and in Meïerkhold's theater in which it largely took place in the minds of the audience. For Tairov, a dialogue was present between the audience and the stage, and "in order to accomplish the necessary affective communication, neither aesthetically pleasing empty forms nor moving but formless emotionalizing was fully competent."⁶³ Situating himself squarely between these two extremes, Tairov called his brand of theater "synthetic theater."⁶⁴

Tairov conceived of his synthetic theater in terms of a Marxist dialectic. First, he argued, there was the naturalistic theater. This was the thesis for which there must be an antithesis. The antithesis of the naturalistic theater was the stylized theater of Meïerkhold in which the actor was conceived as merely a "picturesque blemish," which threatened to spoil the artist's vision. As the name suggests, Tairov's synthetic theater would be the synthesis of the two opposing forces.⁶⁵

⁶² William Kuhlke, Introduction to *Notes of a Director*, by Alexandr Tairov (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), 25.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁴ Alexandr Tairov, *Notes of a Director*, trans. William Kuhlke (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969). *Notes of a Director* is Tairov's published journal of his time at the Kamerny Theater, from its opening in 1914 until the production of "Salome" in 1917.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

Tairov's focus above all was the actor, and the costumes and scenery were designed to accentuate the performer and her craft, which he felt was in jeopardy of being lost to the homogenized rhythms of biomechanics. Despite his many quarrels with Meierkhold's philosophy, however, he objected even more strenuously to Stanislavskii's approach to performance, in which the actor was to so convincingly portray her subject that the audience would forget that it was witnessing a performance. Like Meierkhold, Tairov believed that the actor must be seen as such by the audience. An actor playing the part of Juliet, for example, must not be mistaken for the literary figure herself, as might have been the case in the naturalistic theater of the day, but be recognized as a woman creating art on the stage. Abstract stage sets and innovative costuming were used to this end, calling attention to the fact that a performance was taking place within a constructed environment and thus employing Meierkhold's axiom of laying bare the device. Nevertheless, in Tairov's estimation the device had been laid far too bare in Meierkhold's excessively theatricalized productions. As Tairov's translator William Kuhlke aptly explains, Meierkhold's theater "smacked of the circus," whereas Tairov's more closely resembled a ballet.⁶⁶ It was a refined and polished beauty that Tairov hoped to achieve through the harmonious interaction of the actor and her surroundings, as opposed to the more reckless and slapstick antics of Meierkhold's biomechanical sideshow.

Tairov was interested in creating a unified "scenic atmosphere" in the theater, one which took into account the three-dimensional reality of the actor, as well as her movements and vocalizations. The stage set therefore need not resemble the forms suggested by any text, nor in fact any forms recognizable to an audience at all, but must exist as a complementary part

⁶⁶ Kuhlke, introduction to *Notes of a Director*, 33.

of the dynamic reality of the stage and the actors moving within it. The actor would thus derive her motivation and creativity not from real life, but from the unnatural, fantastical world of the stage.

Perhaps the most revolutionary of Tairov's principles was his rejection of the authority of the written word. He felt that the literature so revered by Stanislavskiĭ had no place at all in his synthetic theater. Nevertheless, Tairov begrudgingly acknowledged that there was not a better alternative as yet, and so allowed for its use as a temporary and transitional measure at this critical moment. To believe otherwise, he admonished, would be to abandon the theater to its certain fate as "a mere good or bad tributary of literature, a phonograph record, reproducing the ideas of the author."⁶⁷ Ideally, literature would function merely as the raw material of the performance, a backdrop against which the action would occur rather than the governing source of content and narrative. Tairov insisted that his synthetic theater would therefore owe its existence only to itself.⁶⁸

It is interesting to note that despite his numerous modern innovations, Tairov did not object to the hierarchical separation within the traditional theater between the performers and the audience.⁶⁹ Unlike Meĭerkhold and a number of his contemporaries throughout Europe and Russia, Tairov believed that this distinction should be maintained. The audience should remain spectators, the performance should remain the spectacle, and the privileged positions of the artist and the director should be preserved. Kuhlke observes, "No sooner was the actor freed

⁶⁷ Tairov, *Notes of a Director*, 97.

⁶⁸ Fullop-Miller, *The Russian Theater*, 57. This would have seemed a fruitful solution to the avant-garde quest to create completely anti-imitative artwork.

⁶⁹ Although Tairov considered himself to be decidedly leftist in his ideologies, the Kamerny Theater still clung to some of the vestiges of the days of the bourgeois theater. Its small size and most obviously its name ("Kamerny" translates to "Chamber" Theater) spoke to a venue in which the time-honored role of the artist as a singular visionary was still cherished.

from the chains of verisimilitude but...he was bound by the even more demanding fetters of the director's 'theatrical' production plan."⁷⁰ Thus, Tairov's theatrical ideology was at the same time a conservative continuation of the traditional role of the actor and a radical reconception of the Russian stage. Exter, who even in her most avant-garde work demonstrates a profound respect for Russian and Ukrainian artistic traditions, proved to be an ideal partner for Tairov throughout the formative years of the Kamerny Theater.⁷¹

Exter seemed destined to work in the theater. Like a number of her contemporaries, her two-dimensional canvases were often presented as preparatory designs for three-dimensional constructions.⁷² Exter treated her canvases as workshops in which to resolve certain dynamic properties of color itself, an interest she would carry with her into the theater. On the stage, she would have the opportunity to apply her experiments in color and rhythm in their best and most logical setting. Like other theatrical innovators of her day, Exter found it absurd to "move the comedian's body in front of a static plane."⁷³ In her essay, "The Artist in the Theater," Exter identifies the conceptual problem she sees with the traditional stage. A static backdrop – flat and motionless – stands in juxtaposition rather than in harmony with the actors who perform in front of, rather than within, the scenery. She explains, "the motionless, painted background

⁷⁰ Kuhlke, introduction to *Notes of a Director*, 26.

⁷¹ Tairov met Exter one evening in 1914 at the home of Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, where the two made a date to meet for tea. After the fortuitous meeting, Tairov told his wife, "I have met an absolutely exceptional woman." Jean Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 96.

⁷² This trend became especially popular with the advent of Russian Constructivism. Exter's painted work seemed to progress along similar lines as Liubov Popova's *Spatial Force Constructions*, and she named her canvases as though they were constructions themselves, or preparations for them. However, Exter's work was characterized by a consistent interest in rhythm and movement, as evidenced by her numerous *Dynamic Compositions*, *Color Dynamics*, and *Color Rhythms* studies. In the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibit, Exter's pieces were intended to "resolve the problem of relations of colors between themselves, of their rhythms and of their new tensions, in the perspective of color constructions." Quoted in Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 163.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 104.

could not enter into rhythmic unity with the figures moving out in front.”⁷⁴ A total work of art could not, therefore, be achieved as long as these elements were considered separately. She would achieve just such a unity of scenic and performative elements in her work for Tairov.

Exter’s first foray into theatrical design took place in 1916 at the Kamerny Theater with Tairov’s production of the Greek tragedy, *Famira Kifared*.⁷⁵ Looking at her poster for the play, it is clear that an interest in movement was at the fore of her design concepts. (Figure 3.1) First and foremost, movement is an intrinsic property of the stage which distinguishes it from the other arts; it is a quality which painting or sculpture could ever only abstractly replicate. Exter maintains that “the artist may achieve this mastery over the dynamic action [only] through architectonic constructions.”⁷⁶ Three-dimensional forms must replace two-dimensional backdrops, thereby forcing the actor to interact with the set. Thus, three-dimensional scenery would become an essential component of her work, participating equally in the action and rhythm of the performance.

The set for *Famira* has been rightly described as a “monumental cubist landscape.”⁷⁷ (Figure 3.2) Touted by Russian critics as a “theatrical revolution” upon its debut in 1916, the scenic environment Exter created on the stage was a radical break from the familiar, naturalistic décor to which the public had become accustomed.⁷⁸ It was the application of cubist painting techniques presented in three dimensions, with the addition of human actors moving within

⁷⁴ Alexandra Exter, “The Artist in the Theater,” in *Amazons of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John E. Bowlit, and Matthew Drutt (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 302-304.

⁷⁵ Written by Innokenty Annensky, *Famira Kifared* was based on the myth of the bard Famira who was blinded by the muses for having challenged them to a contest on the lyre. Yablonskaya, *Women Artists*, 120; Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater*, 18-19.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Baer, *Theater in Revolution*, 42.

⁷⁸ Andrei B. Nakov, “Painting and Stage Design: A Creative Dialogue,” in *Alexandra Exter, Artist in the Theater* (New York: New York Public Library, 1974), 9.

the monumental, non-objective scenery. Exter's vision was very much in keeping with Tairov's admonition that the scenic artist must divert her attention from the back panel and instead focus upon the stage floor, which would ideally be broken up into multiple levels. A level floor is, he maintains, "manifestly inexpressive," presenting no possibility for the revelation of the spectacle.⁷⁹ Although Exter has indeed designed a set with multiple levels – the stairs allow for gradual variations in the position of the performers relative to each other as well as calling attention to the construction of the set itself – the scenery is nevertheless arranged in a hemispherical composition which leaves exposed a flat, centrally located platform reminiscent of the traditional theatrical space. However, the towering conical forms, which likely represent cypress trees, and the jumbled clusters of cubes and asymmetrical rectangles nestled at their bases make for a visually arresting and elegantly balanced architectonic assembly of forms.

Exter's impulse to construct three-dimensional environments and build architectural structures on the stage is a reflection of the era in which Russian artists felt a need to create the new forms of a revolutionary society and to assert themselves as manufacturers of utilitarian objects.⁸⁰ In his 1922 monograph on Exter, Russian art historian and critic, Jacques Tugendkhold, praises the artist for having "made with her own hands" the constructions for her theatrical compositions.⁸¹ He distinguishes her from her symbolist predecessors, insisting that for Exter the stage was:

the foundation over which she was able to erect...a building for new forms, where she was able to quench...that very thirst for construction, for holding masses in equilibrium, and for composition which a pure picture of two

⁷⁹ Tairov, *Notes of a Director*, 110.

⁸⁰ Constructivist theorist Aleksei Gan summarized this notion as "giving a new thing to the new life." Quoted in Margarita Tupitsyn, "Being-in-Production: The Constructivist Code," in *Rodchenko & Popova: Defining Constructivism*, ed. Margarita Tupitsyn (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 13.

⁸¹ J. Tugendkhold, *Alexandra Exter*, trans. Count Petrovsky Petrovo Solovovo (1922), 17.

dimensions could not satisfy.⁸²

What Exter had created for *Famira* was an abstract environment of shapes recalling the Appian precept of creating what was essentially a tabula rasa upon which an entire spectrum of emotional or dramatic content could be projected.⁸³ The sparse, conservative arrangement was thus at once a practical space for the theatrical performance and a very modern application of avant-garde theory. Her costume designs were similarly ambidextrous.

A cursory assessment of the costumes for *Famira* will not quickly identify Exter as one of the most daring of Russia's avant-garde. Although her costumes did create a sensation among some of the more conservative audience members, they did so not as a result of the design or fabrication of the materials, but for their lack thereof. Her partially nude performers were draped in wrap-around skirts, sashes, and capes reminiscent of vestments adorning antique statuary, which was appropriate given the literary context, but perhaps a bit too predictable for so modern an endeavor. (Figure 3.3) The sumptuous hues and graceful lines of her sketches reveal a Bakstian proclivity for balancing delicate forms and brilliantly expressive colors within a carefully composed yet vigorous composition. Like Bakst, Exter's designs were often so beautiful that the finished product could never hope to live up to the expectations established by her sketches.⁸⁴ Such might have been the case with *Famira* were it not for Exter's decidedly modern use of the actors' bodies.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Not only did Exter employ some of Appia's ideas regarding the stage set, she was equally intrigued by his innovations in the area of lighting. For the production of *Famira*, Tairov hired Appia's collaborator, Alexander von Salzmann, whom Tairov describes as "a magician of light." He filtered different colored lights through fabric in order to bathe the stage in vibrant hues during predetermined moments in the play. Tairov, *Notes*, 123.

⁸⁴ This was a common frustration for artists, as their designs rarely moved as they had imagined once they were fabricated and worn by a human performer. As will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, one effective

In an effort to unify the organic and inorganic components of the stage, Exter updated the futurist practice of painting the body made famous by Larionov and Goncharova.⁸⁵ As is clear in the sketch of one of the bacchantes for *Famira*, Exter painted brightly colored designs onto the skin of her performers. (Figure 3.4) The hard, cartoonish lines were intended to emphasize the performers' musculature, thus exposing the dynamic and ever-changing nature of her material, while employing the texture of the skin to her advantage. The resulting flattening and regimentation of the bodies created the illusion of relief sculpture, particularly when viewed within the scenic environment of the stage. In this way Exter cleverly reversed the traditional conceptions of the scenery and the actor, playing with the notions of two-dimensional and three-dimensional artwork, and blurring the lines between them to the point of indistinction. Within the rhythmic environment created by this interaction, Exter achieved the "choreographic resolution" of the dramatic presentation, an idea made visible in her painted frieze of the performance.⁸⁶ (Figure 3.5) Exter's colorfully attired performers could thus assemble into a picturesque grouping one minute, and reassemble themselves into an entirely new dynamic relationship in the next, leading Tugendkholtz to proclaim that "artistic truth had triumphed over every day 'truth.'"⁸⁷ Exter had thus announced her arrival upon the Russian stage.

Exter's next collaboration with Tairov was the 1917 production of Oscar Wilde's

solution to this unsatisfactory translation of artistic vision to real-world application was to construct the performers as well as their attire.

⁸⁵ In an attempt to theatricalize the world around her, Goncharova periodically transformed herself into a living work of art by painting abstract designs on her face and body, forcing art into the lives of unsuspecting passersby on the Moscow streets. See John Bowlit, "Natalia Goncharova and Futurist Theater," *Art Journal* 49, no. 1 (Spring, 1990): 44 – 51. In their 1913 "Why We Paint Ourselves: A Futurist Manifesto," Ilya Zdanevich and Mikhail Larionov elucidate this idea: "...it is time for art to invade life. The painting of our faces is the beginning of the invasion. That is why our hearts are beating so." John E. Bowlit, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 81.

⁸⁶ Konstantin Rudnitsky quoted in Baer, *Theater in Revolution*, 42. The frieze for *Famira* hung over Tairov's desk at the Kamerny Theater for many years.

⁸⁷ Tugendkholtz, *Alexandra Exter*, 19.

Salome. It was here that Exter's interest in rhythm and dynamism truly came to the fore. Although the hallmarks of Cubism and early Constructivism were undeniably present, it was a futurist impulse that most conspicuously guided her hand in this production. The model for the set of *Salome* shows a performance space that is markedly more vibrant and dynamic than the stoic symmetry of *Famira's* stage. (Figure 3.6) In a letter to Tairov, Exter excitedly wrote, "I've finished the scale model for *Salome*...I've built it as if for an exhibition, with a great freedom. In my opinion it should be viewed as a plastic arrangement of colored masses."⁸⁸ Exter's topsy-turvy stage conveys a sense of dizzy agitation that borders on delirium. The intensely rhythmic construction is disjointed and chaotic, but the powerful zigzags and force lines of the curtains steady the volatile composition. It was here that Exter premiered the dynamic use of colorfully designed curtains as devices for heightening the dramatic and emotional tension on the stage in a way that recalls a Wagnerian leitmotif.⁸⁹ She maintained that by modulating the light in harmony with the colors of the curtains, which she described simply as "colored planes that move by means of an electric current," the emotional power of the performance could be amplified or lessened depending on the nature of the drama.⁹⁰ Thus, Exter used electronically operated panels of color as a rhythmic force which not only bound the composition together, but established a continuous dynamism among the scenic elements.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 106.

⁸⁹ Although Wagner complained that the term was often misused, the use of a *leitmotif* became a popular avant-garde device for the expression of emotion or drama apart from the actions or vocalizations of a performer. Vasiil Kandinskiĭ describes Wagner's use of the device as "an attempt to characterize the hero not by theatrical props, make-up and lighting, but by a certain, precise motif – that is, by purely musical means." Vasiil Kandinskiĭ, "On the Spiritual in Art," in *Kandinskiĭ: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982.), 148. Exter uses the curtains in *Salome*, just as she used the lighting in *Famira*, in a similar fashion.

⁹⁰ Exter, "Artist in the Theater," 303. It is important to note that Exter advocated strongly for the electrician to be treated as an essential collaborator in any theatrical production. In her 1918 lecture titled "On Creating a Laboratory for Stage Performances," she insisted "It is necessary to coordinate the art of the actor, director, artist and electrician to make this art a truly collectivist endeavor." Dmytro Horbachov, "In the Epicentre of Abstraction," 175.

In the costume designs for *Salome*, Exter's desire to create a unified, dynamic arrangement of the performers within the constructed scenic environment is evidenced by her incorporation of sections of the stage set in her sketches of the performers. In her costume design for the character of Salome, the brilliant red staircase was clearly conceived as an integral extension of the actress. (Figure 3.7) Umberto Boccioni's ideas about rhythmic unity, with which Exter would certainly have been familiar, are especially informative in this area.⁹¹ In his 1912 "Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture," Boccioni advocates for an art form that will "create formal and reciprocal influences between the different planes of an object."⁹² Not only did the futurists create dynamic relationships between the components of a single object, but in the interaction of individual objects as well, as is explained in the "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto":

Our bodies penetrate the sofas upon which we sit, and the sofas penetrate our bodies, just as the tram rushes into the houses which it passes, and in their turn the houses throw themselves upon the tram and are merged with it.⁹³

Thus, in the futurist point of view, forms are not self-enclosed, impermeable structures, but living organisms that blend into one another in an ever-changing ebb and flow. Such was Exter's aim in the Kamerny Theater. Salome's sweeping vermillion sash seems to actually slash through her extended leg, while the irregularly spaced pleats of her jagged skirt mimic the staircase which thus acts as a continuation of the garment.

Exter's application of futurist dynamic principles is even more evident in her costume design for *Two Jews*. (Figure 3.8) Two things are immediately striking about this image. First,

⁹¹ In 1912, the Union of Youth (which Exter joined in 1910) published a Russian translation of Boccioni's "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting."

⁹² Umberto Boccioni, "Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture," in *Futurism*, edited by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 115.

⁹³ Umberto Boccioni, et. al., "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto," in *Futurism*, edited by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 65.

the human form is now only barely discernable beneath the heavy, angular costumes which have taken on lives of their own. Second, the two costumes seem intertwined; it is difficult to distinguish the boundaries of one or the other as they appear to have merged into a single unit. Exter appears to have utilized Boccioni's strategy of "make[ing] objects live by showing their extensions in space as perceptible, systematic, and plastic."⁹⁴ The blue and white diagonals interact dynamically, bouncing off one another, alternately ricocheting between and then binding the two figures together. Further, the non-objective design behind the pair encroaches on them as well, as the figure on the right seems to have been partially fused with the background forms. As Tugendkhold describes it, the performer on Exter's stage had thus "turned into a coloured arabesque which dissolved in that general polychromic carnival."⁹⁵ Set in motion by the actors in the midst of Exter's electrifying set, these costumes would have created their own dramatic action as they entered into an infinite number of formal and rhythmic relationships on the stage. For Exter, disrupting, accelerating, or otherwise arranging her forms in an unexpected rhythmic assembly, was a mechanism by which she was able to call attention to the fictionality of the stage.⁹⁶

The conclusion that is often drawn about Exter and her fellow artists is that their theatrical achievements are essentially the three-dimensional application of the formal principles of their two-dimensional work.⁹⁷ While it is certain that Exter's research into color rhythms and

⁹⁴ Boccioni, "Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture," 115.

⁹⁵ Tugendkhold, *Alexandra Exter*, 16.

⁹⁶ From a formalist perspective, Erlich explains that, "[a] crucial aspect of the deliberately impeded form is rhythm – a set of contrivances superimposed upon ordinary speech." Thus, the disruption of an established rhythm serves a similar function as the distortion of an otherwise recognizable form – to estrange that which is familiar. Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, 178.

⁹⁷ Ronny H. Cohen sees Exter's early stage work as her paintings set in motion in a three-dimensional venue. Ronny H. Cohen, "Alexandra Exter's Designs for the Theater," *Artforum* 19, no. 10 (Summer, 1981): 46-49; Yablonskaya

planar constructions in her canvases informed many of her dynamic sensibilities, what she in fact achieved through the venue of the theater was unity -- the coveted *gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagner. Exter designed all of the various elements to work in unison to achieve a greater whole than the sum of their parts could allow. Costumes, as demonstrated above, were therefore not considered as separate entities, but rather as integral elements within a unified whole. It was in her designs for Tairov's 1921 production of *Romeo and Juliet* that Exter's unique application of futurist principles merged with a more pronounced constructivist aesthetic, resulting in her most dynamic and exciting work on the stage to date.

Compared to the designs for *Famira*, Exter's costumes for *Romeo and Juliet* demonstrate a profound shift in her treatment of the human form and its relationship to its surroundings. One needs but a cursory glance at her sketch for *Le Bal Masqué* to understand that the human figure is of secondary concern to the sculptural dynamism of the swirling fabric that now surrounds it. (Figure 1.3) Unlike the posed and painted models for Exter's *Famira*, the performer's body is scarcely visible beneath the jutting sweeps of fiery fabric and bulbous ripples of the black material beneath. Exter is now treating her costuming in very much the same way she approaches the stage ensemble: as a three-dimensional construction.⁹⁸ However architectonically her designs may have been conceived, they are nonetheless bestowed with an internal kinetic energy and fluidity not typical of Russian Constructivism at the time.

Exter's costumes for *Romeo and Juliet* were created the same year as Luibov Popova's breakthrough constructivist designs for Meierkhold's *Magnanimous Cuckhold*, and the disparity

quotes Nakov as having commented that, "Exter's theatrical creations are parallel to her pictorial evolution and they cannot be disassociated." Yablonskaya, *Women Artists*, 137.

⁹⁸ Nakov describes her costumes as "striking examples of Exter's dynamic interpretation of the movement of planes." Nakov, "Painting and Stage Design," 14.

between the two styles is illuminating. (Figures 3.9 – 3.11) Whereas Popova's blocky, androgynous forms epitomize the constructivist tendency to conceive of the actor as a worker in the machinery of the stage, Exter incorporates the vibrant colors and dynamic lines of Futurism into the architecture of her costumed performers. Her insistent use of color as the foundation of both structure and rhythm stems not just from futurist aesthetics, but from her lifelong interest in the folk culture of her native Ukraine. In her Kiev studio, Exter taught that rhythm was the driving force of art, which could be observed in "primitive rhythms in the *kilim* [woven carpet]...to a dynamic rhythm [captured by] painted Easter eggs."⁹⁹ Inspired by what she saw as the vibrant "color sounds" which characterized the art of Slavic nations, she advocated the use of color both on canvas and on the stage as the primary way to establish and to interrupt rhythm.¹⁰⁰ Thus, Exter's generous application of color in the costumes, scenery, and lighting of the stage resulted in a kind of dance, even before the music began and the performers set it all in motion.

Despite her decidedly less rigid adherence to the constructivist take on the look of the modern human, Exter's costume designs for *Romeo and Juliet* nevertheless witness her running headlong into the dilemma that had plagued so many of her colleagues: what was to be done

⁹⁹ Quoted in Horbachov, "In the Epicentre of Abstraction," 171. Italics and brackets are original. In 1918, Exter established a teaching studio in Kiev, where stage design was designated as a full-fledged course of studies, "probably for the first time in history," according to Horbachov. It only lasted for several months during 1918, but was nevertheless a ground-breaking approach to the theater as its own distinct art form, and for the artist's involvement in all areas of theatrical production. Exter's studio attracted a number of Jewish artists who were involved with the Kultur-Lige, an organization designed to promote Jewish culture in the Ukraine. While in Kiev, Exter also co-founded a society of applied arts with the aim of revitalizing Ukraine's handicraft tradition, encouraging Ukrainian peasant women to produce Suprematist rugs and embroidery, and invited Kazimir Malevich to work with peasant women artists in Verbivka. For information on her work in Kiev, see Gennady Estraiikh, "The Yiddish Kultur-Lige," in *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 197-217, Horbachov, 170-195.

¹⁰⁰ Horbachov credits symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud as the source of her ideas regarding "the color of sound," but Vasiil Kandinski's seminal work on the subject of the interrelationship of colors and sounds in his 1911 "On the Spiritual in Art" would undoubtedly have been familiar to Exter as well.

with the human as an artistic medium?¹⁰¹ In figures 3.9 – 3.10 it is clear that the individual identity, or in fact the existence in reality of the human performer, has been eclipsed by the swirling, knotted constructions of sturdy drapes and luminous sashes which predominate the figures. This treatment led Chauvelin to complain that “the principle actors ...had been turned into marionettes at Exter’s service, and not Shakespeare’s.”¹⁰² Exter would of course argue that to design costumes in keeping with what an audience might expect a production of Shakespeare to look like would have been a passeist approach to the modern theater. “The spectator,” she maintained, “must be taken hold of by the artist’s idea and must not discuss whether this or that is historically true.”¹⁰³ Furthermore, since Exter conceived of the costumed performers as integral facets of her scenic spectacle, their figural compositions and rhythmic interactions with the stunning multi-leveled stage set trumped their function as singular and unique conveyers of dramatic action. In fact, the sheer complexity of her dynamic stage composition dwarfed the efforts of the performers, leading to confusion amongst theatergoers and critics alike.

In Exter’s lectures on stage design in her Kiev studio in 1918, she described the stage as “a field for action,” in which architectural or skeletal constructions would serve to unite the upper and lower volumes of the “stage cube,” allowing space to pulsate.¹⁰⁴ Toward this end, Exter relied upon the formative value of light – its transparency and reflectivity – to experiment with spatial arrangements and to further establish rhythmic diversity on the stage.¹⁰⁵ To add to the

¹⁰¹ Constructivist artists and theatrical designers Stepanova and Popova adhered to the principle of *prozodezhda* in their costume designs – that attire should be specialized to maximize efficiency in a given activity, and that aesthetic considerations should be rejected entirely. Yablonskaya, *Women Artists*, 144.

¹⁰² Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 170.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Tugendkhold, *Alexandra Exter*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ Horbachov, “In the Epicentre,” 175.

¹⁰⁵ It is evident that Exter utilized some type of reflective material in her designs for *Romeo and Juliet*, but to what extent it was actualized on the stage is unclear. Baer and Nakov write of mirrors that reflected the acting of the

momentum, she reprised her use of curtains as the primary sources of momentum and as conveyers of narrative and emotional transitions throughout the production. Her vibrantly colored and boldly designed curtains rapidly furled and unfurled, establishing the momentum of the play and creating an ever-changing dynamic environment in which the actors – costumed in Exter’s dramatic ensembles – could perform. (Figure 3.12) Thus, Exter’s set did not have to be mechanized as was Popova’s contemporary design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, (sometimes translated “*The Magnificent Cuckold*”), because the curtains provided a similar and more practical function that allowed for a greater array of dynamic possibilities while permitting the free experimentation of the emotive and constructive potential of color in space.

Another significant innovation in the set of *Romeo and Juliet* was Exter’s vertical treatment of the stage space, representing an important development in constructivist theatrical design. The seven-level set has been described as a “dynamic three-dimensional construction comprising ladders, platforms, rails, and inclined planes which were brought to life by their bold intersection and the bright colors of the beams of light that played on them.”¹⁰⁶ Two houses were situated on either side of the stage, connected by a number of white, angular bridges. An early sketch reveals the relative simplicity of the composition, which is anchored by the balanced treatment of the towers and the strong diagonals of the central bridges. (Figure 3.13)

performers and created the illusion of a multiplicity of spatial planes (Baer, *Theater in Revolution*, 44; Nakov, “Painting and Stage Design,” 14), while Tugendkhold mentions that illuminated tin was used to represent water, but does not refer to any mirrors (Tugendkhold, *Alexandra Exter*, 22). Exter’s use of colored lights to create atmospheric effects and intensify moods recalls futurist artist Enrico Prampolini’s luminous “actor gasses” which he proposed would replace the human performer on the stage. See Prampolini, “Futurist Scenography,” in Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1971).

¹⁰⁶ Yablonskaya, *Women Artists*, 137.

Further studies, however, reveal the true complexity of Exter's vision.¹⁰⁷ (Figure 3.14) Clusters of fragmented force lines collide and splinter into crystalline fan-like formations, obscuring the original architecture and amassing into towering explosions of abstract shards of color. When combined with Exter's frenzied curtains, the spectacle must have been truly dizzying.

The dramatic potential of the set is most effective in the quieter moments of the play, such as the famous balcony scene. Here the lines of the performers are exaggerated by the architecture of the set, resulting in an arresting image which calls to mind a crucifixion. (Figure 3.15) However, photographs of the costumed cast assembled on the stage reveal that the innovation and artistry of the set and the costumes may in fact have swallowed up the performers, leaving them little room in which to move. (Figure 3.16) The scenic environment envisioned by Tairov and actualized by Exter had thus taken on a life of its own, eclipsing the importance of both the literary source and the performers. According to Chauvelin, Exter's intent was to "represent the city as a deadly and explosive machine," but that audiences were unable to understand her efforts.¹⁰⁸ While the Russian avant-garde had by that time embraced a machine aesthetic on and off the stage, Exter's concern with *Romeo and Juliet* relied more upon the dynamic manipulation of space and light to reflect the modern era. While the production may have indeed suffered from an overabundance of ideas, Exter had constructed her most ambitious and visually exciting project to date, establishing her as an internationally respected artist and designer in the theater.

¹⁰⁷ Critic Abraham Efros visited Exter's studio during her work on *Romeo and Juliet*, and described an enormous quantity of scale models and studies for the set and costumes. Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter* 166.

¹⁰⁸ Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 166.



Figure 3.1 : Alexandra Exter, poster for *Famira Kifared*, 1916.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003

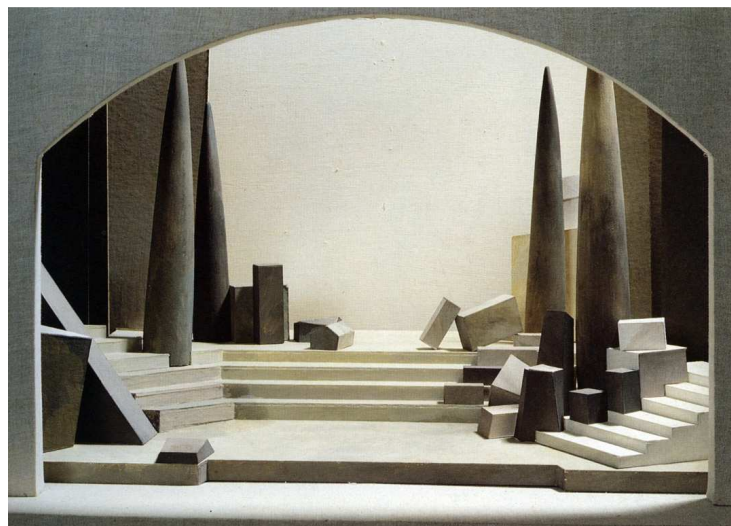


Figure 3.2: Alexandra Exter, *Set for Famira Kifared*, 1916.

Source: Ciofi degli Atti, Fabio, and Mikhail m. Kolesnikov. *Alexandra Exter e I Teatro da Camera*. Milan: Electa, 1991.



Figure 3.3: Alexandra Exter, *Costume for Famira*, 1916.

Source: Rudnitsky, Konstantin. *Russian and Soviet Theater 1905 – 1932*. Edited by Dr. Lesley Milne. Translated by Roxane Permer. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988.

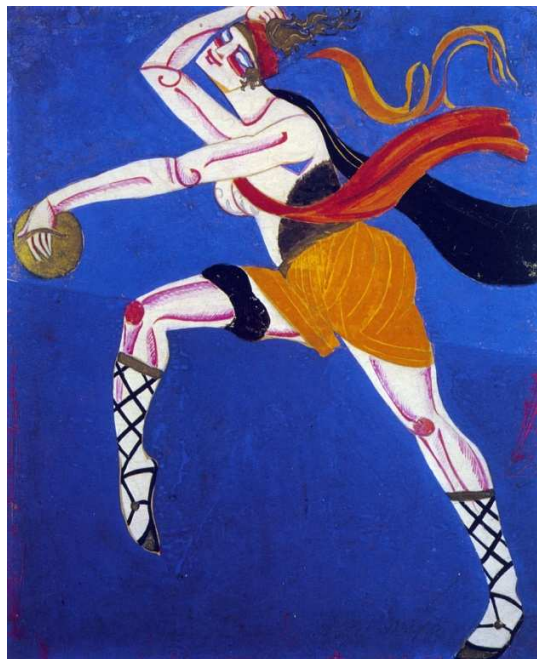


Figure 3.4: Alexandra Exter, *Costume for a Bacchante for Famira Kifared*, 1916.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 3.5: Alexandra Exter, *Costume Frieze for Famira Kifared*, 1916.

Source: Yablonskaya, M.N. *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900 – 1935*. Translated by Anthony Parton. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.



Figure 3.6: Alexandra Exter, *Model of the set for Salome*, 1917.

Source: Ciofi degli Atti, Fabio, and Mikhail m. Kolesnikov. *Alexandra Exter e I Teatro da Camera*. Milan: Electa, 1991.



Figure 3.7: Alexandra Exter, *Costume for Salome*, 1917
 Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003



Figure 3.8: Alexandra Exter, *Costumes for Two Jews*, 1917.
 Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 3.9: Alexandra Exter, Costume for *Romeo and Juliet*, 1921.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003

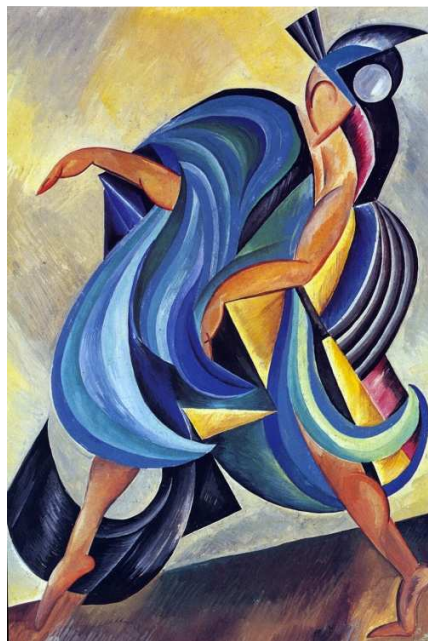


Figure 3.10: Alexandra Exter, Costume for *Romeo and Juliet*, 1921.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 3.11: Liubov Popova, *Working Clothes for Actor No. 5 and Actor No. 6*, 1921.
Source: Dabrowski, Magdalena. *Liubov Popova*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991.



Figure 3.12: Alexandra Exter, design for a curtain for *Romeo and Juliet*, 1921.
Source: Yablonskaya, M.N. *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900 – 1935*. Translated by Anthony Par-
ton. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.



Figure 3.13: Alexandra Exter, Sketch for the set of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1921.
 Source: Ciofi degli Atti, Fabio, and Mikhail m. Kolesnikov. *Alexandra Exter e I Teatro da Camera*. Milan: Electa, 1991.



Figure 3.14: Alexandra Exter, Sketch for the set of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1921.
 Source: Source: Ciofi degli Atti, Fabio, and Mikhail m. Kolesnikov. *Alexandra Exter e I Teatro da Camera*. Milan: Electa, 1991.

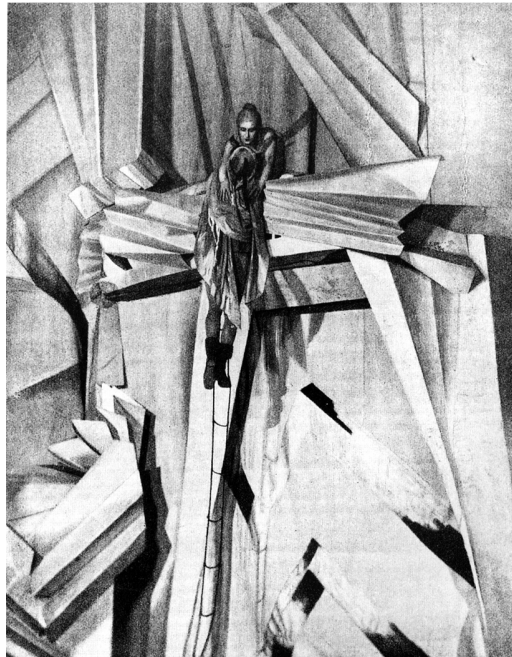


Figure 3.15: The balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Kamerny Theater, 1921.
Source: Bowlt, John, and Matthew Drutt, ed. *Amazons of the Avant Garde*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000.



Figure 3.16: Scene from *Romeo and Juliet* at the Kamerny Theater, 1921.
Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

Chapter Four: From the Stage to the Screen

Through Exter's scenic environments and costumes for the Kamerny Theater discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible to witness her evolving conception of the actor in his or her relation to the total theatrical space. What began as a sculptural treatment of the performer as a complement to the set in *Famira* reached its apex in the fully integrated stage of *Romeo and Juliet*. Her obvious talent for creating fantastic interactive environments would soon find fertile ground in the newest arena to preoccupy the Russian avant-garde, the technological and artistic possibilities of film.

The advent of the moving picture gave rise to many questions concerning the purpose and possibilities of this new medium. Many artists saw it as the ultimate mechanism by which to capture unadulterated reality in a way superior even to the photograph. Others, such as Russian film pioneers Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov, saw instead endless possibilities for creating and manipulating time, space, and meaning through the arrangement of film images, thus inventing a completely fictional reality that would be absorbed and accepted by the viewer. Almost from the time of its invention, film had also been recognized by governments worldwide for its potential to communicate with illiterate audiences. It was not long before its potential as a powerful tool for political propaganda was recognized in Russia, and agit-trains carried pro-Bolshevik newsreels and educational films to even the most remote regions of the nation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Lenin was quick to utilize art as a vehicle of propaganda. The term "agit-art" or "agit-prop" is an abbreviation of the Russian *agitatsiya propaganda*. In order to bring the pro-revolutionary message to the vast Russian countryside, specially equipped "agit-trains" were dispatched throughout the nation. Carrying leaflets, printing presses and movie projectors, these trains (and occasionally ships) were intended to educate the masses through a barrage of pro-Bolshevik art, literature, and film. At Exter's Kiev studio,

Nevertheless, the existence of film devoid of political content as both art and entertainment remained largely accepted by Russian audiences and politicians alike throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century.

A close relationship existed between Russian theater and film in its early years of development, and a number of Russia's most successful film directors and actors got their start on the stage. Influenced in part by Meierkhold's theatrical philosophy, Sergei Eisenstein applied a rudimentary version of his theory of montage to his early work in the theater. He would organize a play into a series of spectacles rooted in the *comedia dell'arte* tradition, rather than the expected literary acts or scenes.¹¹⁰ David Cook describes it as a process whereby "independent and arbitrary units of 'attraction' or 'impression' were assembled to produce a total emotional effect different from the sum of its parts."¹¹¹ Eisenstein thus created a juxtaposition of explosive vignettes and assailed his audience with a barrage of sensory information. These individual scenes were presented together in a way that created a narrative not through the dialogue, but through the relationship of the vignettes to one another.¹¹² This unexpected montage of familiar scenarios or images served as a means of perpetually reminding the audience that it was

she and her students created the agitational art that would adorn these trains and boats, spreading Exter's bold suprematist-inspired designs throughout the vast Russian landscape and supporting the causes of the Revolution.

¹¹⁰ Characterized by comedic improvisation or pantomime, the *commedia dell'arte* originated in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century, and subsequently spread throughout Europe and Russia. A number of stock characters retained their appearances and attributes, if not their names, as the tradition was adapted in each new country. The Italian Pulcinella, for example, came to be known as Punch in England. J. Douglas Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd: The Commedia dell'arte/Balagan in Twentieth-Century Russian Theater and Drama* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 16-43.

¹¹¹ David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 143.

¹¹² As one of Russia's most innovative filmmakers, Eisenstein was famous for his concept of "dialectical montage." Essentially an artistic application of Marxist theory, Eisenstein believed that all art was the result of the conflict between thesis and antithesis, and that the interaction of the two was the source of artistic dynamism. Thus, the relationship between shots in a film would function as dialectic pairs, and the resulting synthesis would then serve as the thesis for the next opposing shot. The rhythm of the film was guided by this perpetual conflict. See Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 45-63.

witnessing a work of art rather than a slice of life recreated on the stage. Ultimately, the physical and temporal constraints of the stage proved insufficient for Eisenstein's visions. He lamented, "It is absurd to perfect a wooden plough; you must order a tractor."¹¹³ Gradually, many of Russia's most celebrated theatrical pioneers followed suit.

As an art form without a past, produced using the latest technology and created with industrial materials, film rapidly became viewed as the most progressive artistic medium, and resolved the doubts plaguing young artists as to whether traditional art forms could maintain a level of innovation that equaled that of industry. It is not surprising, therefore, that themes involving modern industry, such as those featured in Vertov's famous *Man with a Movie Camera*, were especially successful in the early stages of Russian cinema.¹¹⁴ Likewise, science fiction became a hugely popular genre, not only for its utopian interpretation of Communism in a just and egalitarian future world, but for its limitless faith in the technological progress of humankind as a means of achieving a prosperous and peaceful society. It is therefore fitting that celebrated film director Iakov Protazanov chose the popular work, *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, as his first offering upon his return to Moscow in 1923.

Protazanov grew up in Moscow where he and his wealthy family frequented the theater, instilling in him an early interest in stagecraft. As was the case with a number of his peers, his love of the theater led quite naturally to an interest in the blossoming Russian motion picture industry. Although he became one of Russia's most prolific and successful film directors, he

¹¹³ Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, 144.

¹¹⁴ Vertov's 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera* featured sequences of industrial factories, trains, and power plants, and even demonstrated the process by which the film was shot and edited. Additionally, film was seen as part of the physical and physiological improvement of humanity as it merged inevitably with the machine. A film camera, for example was considered an extension of the cameraman, and his "film eye" was capable of perception vastly superior to human optical abilities. For a detailed analysis of *Man with a Movie Camera* see Petrić, *Constructivism in Film*.

consistently preferred to work with theatrical actors.¹¹⁵ It is therefore reasonable to suggest that his interest in Exter for his 1924 science fiction offering, *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, was very likely based on her designs for the theater.

Following the Revolution of 1917, the climate of social and political upheaval impelled Protazanov into voluntary exile.¹¹⁶ He accepted the Soviet government's invitation to return to Moscow in 1923, but found himself unprepared for the new political climate, the reach of which had by that time extended firmly and authoritatively into the world of art. Although Protazanov very much enjoyed directing big-budget adaptations of classic literary works (*War and Peace*, for example, in 1915), his most successful films had been based on popular fiction. Aleksey Tolstoy's science fiction novel, *Aelita*, with its pro-Communist message and futuristic setting would have seemed an appropriate choice for his Soviet-era debut. Protazanov would quickly discover, however, just how dramatically the motion picture industry had come under critical and governmental scrutiny since his departure.

According to Russian film historian Denise J. Youngblood, "No other film of early Soviet cinema was attacked as consistently or over so long a period as *Aelita*."¹¹⁷ Protazanov's *Aelita* was a loose adaptation of Aleksey Tolstoy's novel of the same name. In short, a young worker named Los becomes obsessed with the idea of traveling to Mars. He builds a spaceship in secret and arrives on Mars in time to fall in love with the beautiful Queen Aelita, as well as lead a pro-

¹¹⁵ Since his directorial debut in 1911, Protazanov directed more than 80 films, prompting Denise J. Youngblood to refer to him as "The Russian Griffith." Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 105-124.

¹¹⁶ During the winter of 1918 – 1919, the head of Ermolev studio, for whom Protazanov worked, relocated the entire operation to Yalta. From there, Protazanov moved to France and later to Germany, completing six movies between 1921 and 1923, and establishing himself as a successful international film director. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses*, 108.

¹¹⁷ Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses*, 110.

letarian revolution against the totalitarian Martian government, urging the formation of a Martian Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. One might expect such a tale to have met with the approval of the Soviet citizenry, but Protazanov had altered the story in a controversial way. In the end, Los realizes that the entire Martian adventure has been a dream, thus stripping the film of its ideological value and reducing it to pure entertainment. Further, the fact that the leading man was prone to seeking respite from his daily routine through his dreams suggested that life in Soviet Russia was somehow less than satisfying. The consensus seemed to be that one must not seek to escape life in Soviet Russia, even in one's dreams. Accused of formalism, which was now a popular indictment of art that was perceived to be anti-Soviet, as well as the deliberate incorporation of western political ideology, *Aelita* generated a good deal of public and critical rancor.

Although the film was eventually banned in Russia, *Aelita* was a great international success. Perhaps most telling of the new politically charged atmosphere in Russia was that the criticism of the film was universally aimed at the content, ideology, and political motivations of the director. Little if any mention was made regarding the cinematography, dramatic performance, or scenic design of *Aelita*. Protazanov got the message. He would henceforth abandon the expensive, fanciful sets of *Aelita* in favor of the socialist realism mandated by the new Soviet leaders.¹¹⁸

Despite widespread and often scathing criticism, the set and costumes of the Martian world seemed to epitomize Soviet longing for a technologically superior nation. Once the work-

¹¹⁸ Following Lenin's death in January of 1924, the powers in charge of Soviet Russia proved far less progressive than their predecessors. While initially tolerant of avant-garde endeavors, they ultimately opted for the comprehensibility of Socialist Realism over formal and methodological innovation. The propagandistic potential of constructivist art was simply not as great as that which made use of familiar imagery.

ers had been liberated from their oppressors, the advanced civilization of Mars could be seen as a model toward which the new Russia could aspire. In accordance with Marxist ideology, new means of production must inevitably give rise to new artistic forms. Exter's costumes and sets for *Aelita* were fabricated from the latest materials and technologies of the Soviet era. In order to create a futuristic alien environment that was at once breathtaking and intimidating, she employed materials that offered the most transparency and reflectivity, including celluloid, plexiglass, and a variety of metals. Her costumes were cut from the same materials, blending seamlessly with the Martian environment of the set, and calling to mind the harmonious interaction of formal elements which characterized Exter's theatrical endeavors.¹¹⁹ The assertive modernity of her creation is magnified by the fact that she was now designing for film – the most modern of the arts. Exter's use of celluloid for her costumes and sets may be interpreted as a bold statement announcing the triumph of the new technology of film as an artistic, rather than entertaining or educational, format. It is thus possible to read her work as formalist, while at the same time acknowledging its tacit reflection of Soviet ideals.

The sketches for the many imaginative costumes for *Aelita* demonstrate a dramatic shift in Exter's treatment of color, rhythm, and the human form. The woman in figure 4.1 is eerily rigid and mechanical, but at the same time elegant, translucent, and airy. With much of her

¹¹⁹ From both a formalist and philosophical perspective, Exter did indeed achieve a *gesamtkunstwerk* in her theatrical work. Not only did painting, sculpture, architecture, music, performance, and dance come together to form a total work of art, but it was made possible only through the collective efforts of the director, artist, composer, musicians, electricians, and actors. It is therefore difficult to conceive of *Aelita* as having achieved the same end, if for no other reason than film at the time was silent and without color. However, as Matthew Wilson Smith argues, the medium of film owes much to Wagnerian tradition. "When the moviehouse was thrust into darkness and the spectators stared forward at images....," the viewer had little choice other than complete absorption into the artificial world that had been created. Add to this idea the fact that *Aelita* participated in the utopian creation – and therefore fictive reification -- of the ideal Soviet state, and it becomes clear that the spirit of *gesamtkunstwerk* flourished in the age of mechanical reproduction. As Wagner maintained, *gesamtkunstwerk* "cannot arise alone, but only in the fullest harmony with the conditions of our whole life." Quoted in Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 93, 9.

body either exposed or revealed beneath diaphanous garb, it would appear that the human figure has regained its prominence in Exter's work, however its movements have become stiff and mechanized. It is easily recognizable as a human figure, but its vast, empty eyes and unnatural pose enstrange it in a way that establishes it as an artistic creation rather than an actor playing a role. Her designs for the costume itself reveal once again Exter's proclivity for mastering the latest developments in avant-garde art and extracting from this knowledge the most aesthetically and rhythmically appealing elements. For instance, the series of concentric broken arcs and circles that make up the striking headdress recall the constructivist sculpture of Alexander Rodchenko or Liubov Popova's painted "Space-Force Constructions." The metallic pleats of the woman's skirt fan out from the industrial mechanism at her waist, aestheticizing the devices of modern industry and establishing the dependable rhythm of technology. Although Exter's actress is not a robot, she appears strangely and appealingly other than human. Despite the fact that she is, of course, a Martian, she can be seen as the embodiment of the Soviet longing to improve Russia through technology.

Of the entire cast of characters, "Aelita's Favorite Maid" wears the most remarkable attire. (Figure 4.2) Composed of metal rods attached by springs, her pants (for lack of a better word) bounce with an accordion-like rhythm into expanding and contracting diamond shapes as she walks. Seen here in a charming moment of playful mimicry, Aelita's maid poses with one of Los's companions who happens to have brought with him an actual accordion. The comical formal comparison between the musical instrument and the maid's outfit is obvious, as is the juxtaposition between traditional and contemporary conceptions of beauty. Even without a

corresponding auditory component, one can imagine the jingling of the metallic costume as the modern music of an advanced industrial society.

As in Exter's plays, the bodies of the actors – enhanced by inventive costuming – were intended to exist in harmony with the scenery. Thus, the severe diagonals of the interiors, dramatic spiraling staircases, and translucent architecture were echoed in the dress of the performers, who combined to form sculptural groupings within Exter's constructivist set. (Figure 4.3)

In this image, Aelita and her maid pose momentarily upon the massive staircase, showcasing their exaggerated and otherwise manipulated figures. While the maid's springy attire has expanded in all its mechanical glory, the supple organic forms of Aelita's trademark dress are at once sensual and disconcerting. The three consecutive circles which progress diagonally over her chest are immediately reminiscent of breasts, but it quickly becomes obvious that something is amiss. Not only are they not quite in the right place, there is a third 'breast' in the composition. Despite her otherwise obvious femininity, Exter has created Aelita as a character of slightly ambiguous gender through the technique of enstranging the otherwise very familiar shape of the female body. The viewer is not allowed to succumb to the desensitization of predictability, but will remain focused upon the artistry and artificiality of the performers' bodily constructions.

With considerably more time and a much larger budget with which to work, Exter's designs for her Martian cityscapes and interiors were more successfully realized than those of her theatrical endeavors. Perhaps the biggest point of departure for Exter in her transition to film work was the necessary abandonment of color in a black and white medium. Due in large part to necessity, Exter's work took on a decidedly more linear quality. Her interest in the interac-

tion of planes and the use of light in place of color as a formative element in her often transparent constructions were concretely realized in *Aelita*, making it the most ambitious presentation of futurist-inspired constructivist art and architecture in her repertoire.

The model of the Martian city, seen from Los's spaceship upon its approach, is a marvel of cold, grey masses; sweeping, repetitive arcs; angular towers; and a network of metal rods and wires creating dramatic force lines in the sky above. (Figure 4.4) It is a vision of the future – a modern electrified urban center which, although alien, appears potentially attainable.¹²⁰ The rhythm created by the gentle pulse of the bridges softens and unifies the blocky fortifications and spindly peaks of the towers. As she had done on the stage, Exter has constructed an environment which although not overtly political nevertheless contributes to the building of the new Soviet society by introducing the forms and rhythms of the new life.

In the underground realm of the exploited Martian workers, the relationship between the machines and their operators is less congruous. (Figure 4.5) The identically clad workers, while great in number, appear overwhelmed by the size and velocity of the great spinning cog wheels and tremendous levers among which they labor. Exter's constructivist interpretation of the mobile set occupied by indistinguishable performers again calls to mind her friend Popova's work on the stage. (Figure 4.6) Popova created her costumes for Meierkhold's production of

¹²⁰ Following the virtually incessant warfare from WWI through the end of the civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian infrastructure was in ruins, and industrial production had ground nearly to a halt. The urgent need to rebuild would be at the fore of political discourse and policy making for the foreseeable future. Lenin famously called for the complete electrification of the nation as an important step toward the solution to the crisis of modernization in Russia.

“The Magnanimous Cuckold” according to the principle of *prozodezhda*, defined by Varvara Stepanova as “working clothes differentiated according to profession and industry.”¹²¹

Whereas Popova’s workers wear their uniforms with pride and solidarity, Exter’s faceless Martian proletariats have not achieved a class consciousness as yet, and are thus condemned to enslavement and alienation from their work. As a total work of art, however, the underground workplace is a thrilling kinetic environment in which fantastic machines dominate the dramatic action and can themselves be viewed as performers in Protazanov’s production. The identical human performers are thus of equal importance to the mechanical devices in Exter’s scenic vision of the Martian underworld.

The interior scenes reveal Exter’s experimentation with the plastic value of light through its interaction with a variety of modern materials. (Figure 4.7) An image of Gor, the guardian of Martian energy, bent over a remarkable futuristic device, displays the delicacy with which Exter manipulated her media. Guided by an unseen force, the translucent triangular planes of Gor’s machine arrange themselves into startling compositions seemingly at the will of the machine’s operator. Cold white light washes over the scene, illuminating the lustrous details on Gor’s angular costume and glassy headdress. The metallic stripes on his uniform appear almost as rays extending from the luminous triangular planes, establishing an incandescent rhythmic connection between his body and the machine he operates.¹²² Thus the two exist in synchronicity, the mechanism guided fluidly by the subtle motions of the human performer. The lines

¹²¹ Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 149. All of the actors in the play wore matching blue overalls appropriately unadorned so as to emphasize their expressive biomechanical movements, and to render them relatively indistinguishable from one another. Additionally, the set of “Cuckold” featured several rotating wheels which functioned to establish the pace of the dramatic action.

¹²² A comparison to Larionov and Goncharova’s short-lived Rayonist movement is appropriate, in that their ideology centered around the rays of light that they believed emitted from and connected every object. Larionov ex-

between man and machine are thus exquisitely indistinct in the technologically superior civilization of Mars.

In her transition from the stage to film, Exter demonstrated an innate understanding of three-dimensional design, both in the architecture of her dramatic sets, as well as through the sculptural conception of the costumed performer. Throughout her dramatic work, Exter consistently altered, masked, disguised, or otherwise reconfigured the bodies of the actors in order to create working material congruous with the artificial environment of the set. In so doing, she transformed what is arguably the most recognizable form of all into a curiosity. The immediate result of this human enstrangement is to instill in the viewer a hyper-awareness of the fictionality of the spectacle before him. On the surface, to deliberately emphasize the individual elements of a composition in this way would seem incommensurate with the very idea of *gesamtkunstwerk*. For Exter, however, the enstrangement of the human form may have been the sole means toward achieving this end. Looking back to her designs for *Famira*, the bodies of her performers clearly posed an obstacle to scenic unity in her mind. Her solution was to flatten and exaggerate them through the application of solid, unnatural lines of bright pigment. As her theatrical work became more sophisticated, her designs became more involved, and the human figure resembled itself less and less. Had she allowed the actors to remain undisguised, the reality of their organic compositions and familiar movements would have stood in contradiction to the fantastic abstraction of Exter's stages, jeopardizing the harmonious interaction of the component parts of the production. Thus, the human performer would have to be substantially

plains, "Every form exists objectively in space by reason of the rays from the other forms that surround it...there exists a real and undeniable intersection of rays proceeding from various forms. Where the rays from different objects meet, new immaterial objects are created in space." Mikhail Larionov, "Pictorial Rayonism," in Bowlit, *Theory and Criticism*, 100.

modified, both in outward appearance and internal rhythm in order to contribute in a meaningful way to the totality of the theatrical or filmic environment. It seems almost inevitable, therefore, that for Exter's next film project, she would build her performers entirely from scratch.



Figure 4.1: Costume design for *Aelita*, 1924.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 4.2: Still from *Aelita*, 1924.

Source: *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, 1924.



Figure 4.3: Still from *Aelita*, Aelita and her maid, 1924.
Source: *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, 1924.

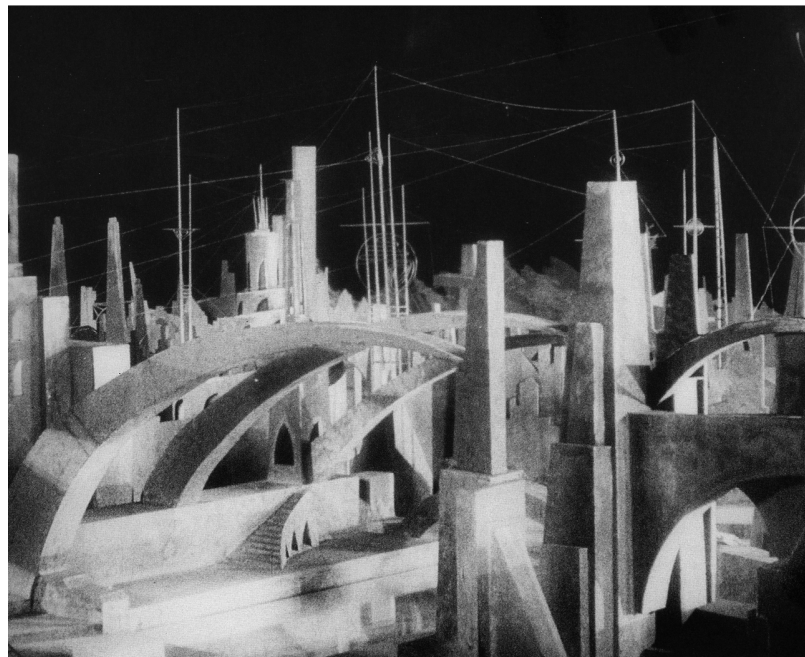


Figure 4.4: Alexandra Exter, model of Martian city for *Aelita*, 1924.
Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

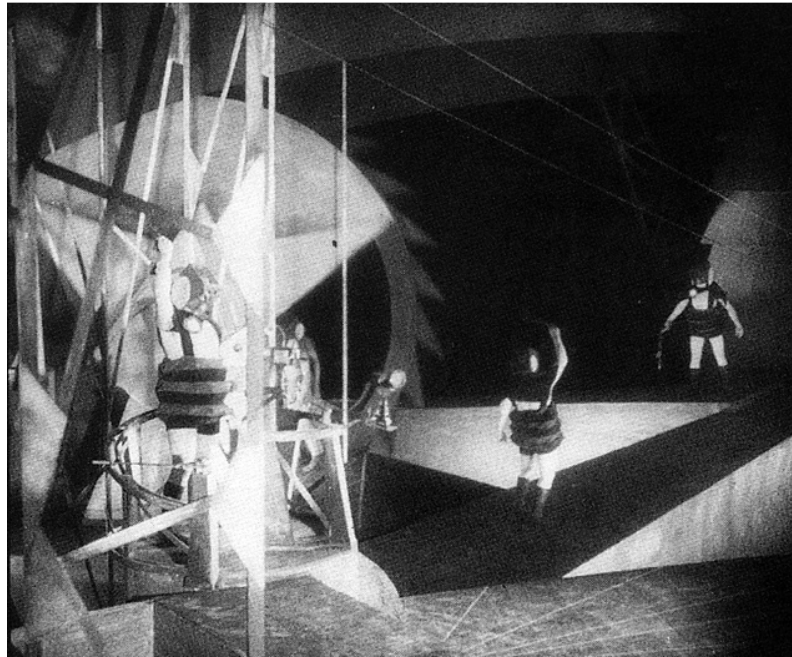


Figure 4.5: Film still from *Aelita*, underground scene, 1924.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

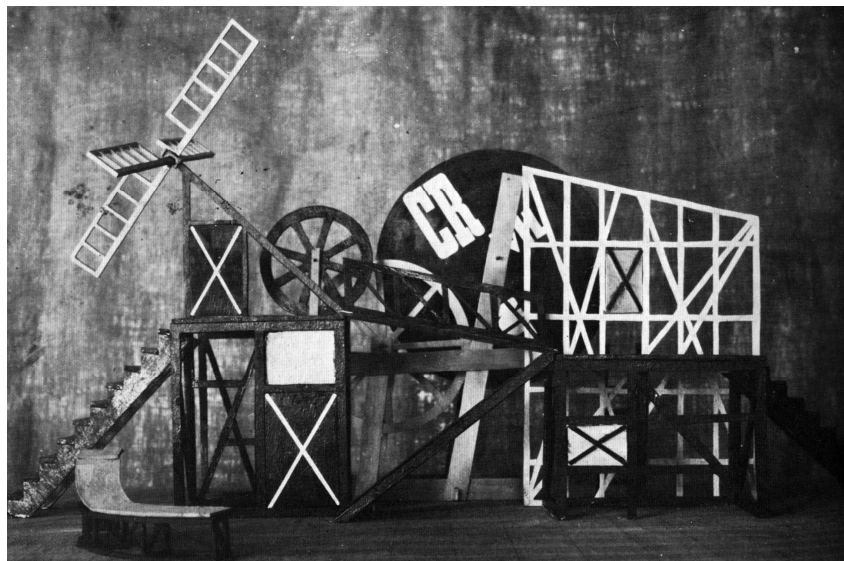


Figure 4.6: Liubov Popova, *Acting Apparatus for "The Magnanimous Cuckold,"* 1922.

Source: Lodder, Christina, *Russian Constructivism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

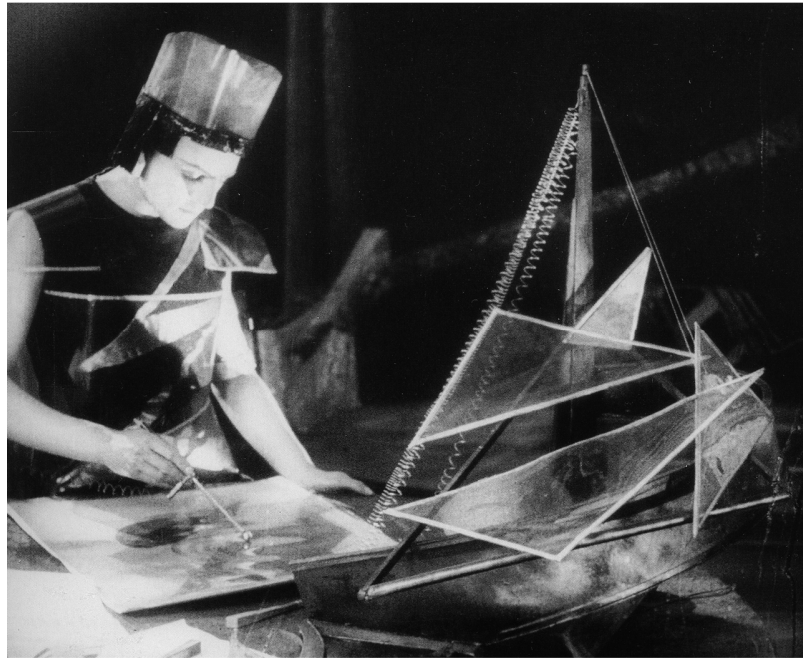


Figure 4.7: Film still from *Aelita*, Gor, Guardian of Martian Energy, 1924.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

Chapter Five: Exter's Marionettes

This final chapter will explore Exter's famous marionettes as the culmination of her research into three-dimensional construction, pictorial dynamism, and the rhythmic arrangement of forms in space. Created for an unrealized film project, these performing objects existed both as a formally and rhythmically innovative alternative to the human performer, and as a comment on the potential of film to invent its own reality. As an example, consider Lev Kuleshov's theory of montage: "With montage one can destroy, repair, or completely recast material."¹²³ He demonstrated this idea in a 1923 short film in which he created an imaginary film-person out of the body parts of four different girls. The arrangements of the still film clips suggested a relationship between the parts, communicating the idea of a human being that was unquestioned by the viewer. This rhythmic arrangement of the images of disconnected and unrelated body parts conveyed the essence of a complete living person as effectively as would an actual image of a human being – a kind of reverse estrangement. In either case, the result remains an artistic rendering of a human, but Exter's marionettes can be seen as a rejection of this deception. Unlike Kuleshov, Exter did not intend to trick the audience into believing in the existence of a flesh and blood human. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, her marionettes laid bare her design in a way that recalls the stage theory of Meierhold, and acted as demonstrable models of both the rhythmic potential of the performing object, and the logical culmination of her

¹²³ Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 164.

theatrical constructions. As was the case with her enticingly de-humanized Martians, Exter's marionettes demonstrate the potential of the constructed object to remind the viewer of his own humanity.

In 1926, Exter created approximately forty marionettes for a project by prolific Danish filmmaker, Urban Gad. Whereas her previous work in the performing arts had yielded a number of innovative solutions for manipulating or disguising the human form, her newest performers were now entirely inanimate. Constructed of a variety of materials and fabrics, Exter's marionettes ran the gamut from traditional puppet theater favorites to charming new additions that playfully reflected the visual culture of the modern era. Although the film was never realized, her delightful constructions quickly became star attractions at exhibits throughout Europe and Russia. Exter created her marionettes while she was living in Paris, after having accepted Fernand Léger's invitation to teach at his newly founded Académie Moderne. An interest in the visual expression of the modern rhythms and forms of the mechanical age predominated the curriculum at the school, and it is in this context that I will examine Exter's marionettes.

Exter arrived in Paris in 1925, the city that would be her home for the remainder of her life.¹²⁴ Why she left Russia when she did is not clear, nor is it known whether she intended the relocation to be permanent. One can only speculate the reasons for this self-imposed exile, but the timing of her departure may reveal a concern over the rapidly changing politics in her home country. Regardless of her motives, the move proved to be a fortuitous career decision. Of par-

¹²⁴ Prior to her arrival in France, the characteristically nomadic artist lived briefly in Venice where, in 1924, she participated in the 14th Venice Biennial. She was part of a strong Russian contingent at the event, and exhibited designs for *Famira*, *Salome*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Aelita*, as well as a number of new painted works. The Soviet Pavilion at the Venice Biennial sold forty-one works that year, attesting to a strong international interest in Russian art at the time.

ticular note was her work for the 1925 Parisian Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, for which she won the gold medal. As in Venice, this exhibition revealed just how deeply engrained the art of the Russian avant-garde had become in the western world. It is hardly surprising then that when Léger opened his art school in Paris, Exter was one of the first artists he hired as a lecturer.

Founded in 1924 by Léger and Amédée Ozenfant, The Académie Moderne was a teaching school dedicated to expounding the tenets of Purism and Constructivism. Léger's interest in the mechanical rhythms of the modern city, as well as the music produced within it, guided much of the art he produced at this time. In addition to his staccato cityscapes, he took an interest in the human figure in the urban setting. Like Exter, Léger had explored the three-dimensional application of his own work in the theater and film, most notably with his work with Rolf de Maré and Jean Börlin's Swedish Ballet.¹²⁵ He also designed the fantastic machine-inspired set for the film *Inhuman* by Marcel L'Herbier in 1922, and in 1924 created his own avant-garde film classic, *Le Ballet Mécanique*, which was itself a study of the rhythms of objects. The short film featured, among other things, a shuffling collage of shapes and body parts that assembled themselves into the form of a puppet identified as cubist artist Jean Charlot. It was particularly in the medium of film that Léger's appreciation of the potential of the performing object was fully realized, allowing the object-as-actor to assume the role of the main character.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Léger created the sets and costumes for *Skating Rink* in 1922 and his famous *La Création du Monde* in 1924. See Gilles Néret, "The Temptation of the Cinema and the Attraction to Set Design," in *Fernand Léger*, trans. Susan D. Resnick (New York: BDD Illustrated Books, 1993), 119-129.

¹²⁶ Léger explained, "I thought that *the object*, treated in similar fashion to what I was doing in painting, would also have a filmic value." In the theater as well, he strove to "break with the visual aspects of the stage...and to use

Exter had known Léger since her earlier stays in Paris, and the two had exhibited together in Moscow in 1912. She began lecturing at the Académie in 1925, and also offered courses on theatrical art and scenic design in her own Parisian studio. Very little of Exter's teaching lectures or materials survives. However, a number of "pedagogical plates" offer a glimpse into her methodology at the time. These geometric studies clearly demonstrate Exter's continued interest in linear movement, the interaction of planes, and the conception of the human form within the parameters established by the two. In this context, it is appropriate to read her marionettes as fully realized constructions of the principles she was promoting in her lessons. Although her marionettes can be conceived as innovative applications of her ongoing research into modern performative rhythm, she was also drawing upon a long and cherished tradition of puppet theater which was especially strong in Russia.

Reaching its apex between 1830 and 1930, puppet theater was a beloved form of popular entertainment in Russia for many years, especially *The Comedy of Petrushka* – the Russian equivalent of the *Punch and Judy* show.¹²⁷ Its appeal was broad; all classes, ages, and ethnicities were entertained by the antics of Petrushka, "the fairground's favorite hero."¹²⁸ The cultural significance of this little puppet show should not be underestimated. The hero found perhaps his most prestigious incarnation in the Benois-Stravinsky ballet *Petrouchka*, but the influence of

human material at the expense of the individual...to create an invented stage on which human material held a value comparable to the object and to the set design." Néret, *Fernand Léger*, 122-129.

¹²⁷ Exter would undoubtedly have been familiar as well with the Ukrainian puppet theater known as *vertep*. *Vertep* was a portable wooden box, often consisting of two levels, in which puppets mounted on rods performed by moving back and forth along single tracks in the wood. The movement of these rod puppets would have been severely restricted largely to their horizontal path, with only limited gestures possible.

¹²⁸ Catriona Kelly, *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

puppet theater was most obvious in the art and literature of the Russian avant-garde.¹²⁹ Most notably, Meierkhold's production of Alexander Blok's "Fairground Booth" in 1906 re-introduced Russian audiences to the traditional characters of the puppet show in a very modern scenic interpretation. On Meierkhold's stage, all scenic illusion was rejected, and live actors and cardboard stand-ins were treated as equals, the difference between the two being repeatedly called into question.¹³⁰

Russian audiences and artists would have been familiar as well with the Italian commedia dell'arte tradition, which Exter references directly in some of her marionettes. Columbine, for example, is a stock character in these performances. She was the love interest, and beloved of Harlequin – the nimble and wily romantic hero of the play. Also enamored of Columbine is Pierrot, the tragic clown whose love remains unrequited. True to form, Exter felt free to sample from a variety of traditions, while experimenting with the latest formal and theoretical principles to create a group of performing objects both familiar and novel.

John Bowlt refers to puppet theater as "a kinetic spectacle subordinate to the artist's directive."¹³¹ The key word here is "kinetic," as Exter was undoubtedly motivated by her research into issues of movement manifested in the organization and manipulation of forms in space. It would appear that this research reached its logical conclusion in her three-dimensional

¹²⁹ Bowlt addresses the long history of Russian puppet theater, which was at that time experiencing a revival amongst the avant-garde circles, as were other forms of "low" art such as circus or fairground performance. Bowlt, "Marionettes," 221.

¹³⁰ *The Fairground Booth* is also known as *The Little Balagan*. The word *balagan* translates roughly to "wooden theater." It is derived from the Persian word for balcony, but by the early nineteenth century it came to refer to the temporary wooden theaters at fairgrounds, and later as a pejorative word for the performances within them. Kelly, *Petrushka*, 24. Incidentally, Russian audiences and critics generally dismissed Meierkhold's production as a bad joke. In the words of one critic, *The Fairground Booth* "must be regarded as an insult not only to the theater, but also to literature, poetry, and dramatic writing." Quoted in Edward Braun, *The Director and the Stage* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 123.

¹³¹ Bowlt, "Marionettes," 221.

performers.¹³² Whether Exter's marionettes ever actually performed, however, is not entirely clear. As mentioned above, it is widely believed that they were constructed for one of Gad's final productions, which for reasons unknown was never completed.¹³³ An intriguing article written in 1928 by Ukrainian artist Louis Lozowick, however, suggests that they may have been brought to life at least once.¹³⁴ Regardless of whether they ever performed, or were enjoyed only as immobile sculptures with suspended limbs, it is reasonable to assume that they were at least intended to function as kinetic, performing objects, and will be treated as such in this chapter.

Adolphe Appia advocated taking the living actor "as a point of departure, placing him not before, but in the midst of planes and lines which are rightly intended for him, and which harmonize with the spaces and the time-units dictated by the music of his role."¹³⁵ Exter seems to have taken the next inevitable step in Appia's instruction, creating performers that will exist in perfect visual and rhythmic harmony with the constructed environment because they are made of the same forms and materials as their surroundings. Indeed, Exter's marionettes ap-

¹³² It should be noted that although Exter was solely responsible for the designs and the selection of the materials for her marionettes, an artist named Nechama Szmuszkowicz was in charge of their manufacture.

¹³³ For references to Urban Gad's proposed film collaboration, see Bowlt, "Marionettes," 219-232; Segal, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, 244-245; Yablonskaya, *Woman Artists*, 139; Roberta Reeder, "Puppets: Moving Sculpture," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Russian/Soviet Theme Issue 11, no. 2 (Winter, 1989), 124.

¹³⁴ Artist Louis Lozowick published a review in a 1928 edition of *Theater Arts Monthly* in which he describes a performance of Exter's marionettes. Unfortunately, it is unclear where or in what context this occurred. Although the National Gallery of Australia questions the authenticity of his account (two of Exter's marionettes are owned by the NGA), there is little reason to doubt Lozowick's description of what amounted to an exciting and innovative performance. He gives a brief account of a *commedia dell'Arte*-style performance with a modern plot twist in which the leading characters travel to New York and engage in various entertaining antics. It is difficult to imagine that Lozowick might have invented this scenario, or that his description of the ever-changing geometric configurations of the marionettes in action was inauthentic. He writes, "At various intervals there are lively carnival crowds, meeting, separating, gesticulating...geometric forms running parallel, crossing, intersecting in rhythmic play." The answer to exactly what kind of performance Lozowick witnessed will need to be addressed in future research. Louis Lozowick, "Alexandra Exter's Marionettes." *Theater Arts Monthly* 12, no. 7 (July, 1928): 516.

¹³⁵ Quoted in Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theater*, 176.

pear to represent a solution to her many years of research into the movement and dynamic arrangement of her costumed performers, which was at best only partially successful in its translation from concept to reification. A comparison of a few of Exter's pedagogical plates, specifically numbers ten and eleven, with the marionettes she constructed during her tenure at L'Académie Moderne demonstrates at last the effective realization of her formal and philosophical ideals. (Figures 5.1-5.2)

Nineteen of these demonstrative sketches are all that remain of Exter's teachings from 1925 – 1930, but they reveal much about her conception of pictorial and plastic representation. To a greater extent than some of her seemingly rougher experiments, these linear studies display a mobile, geometrical understanding of the existence of an object in space. In each plate, diagonal lines converge, or nearly converge, at the top of the page, creating central pyramidal constructions around and through which a variety of planes and forms intersect. The result is a highly rhythmic assembly of linear shapes, some barely more than erasures, others much more dominate in their presence. The ghostly remnants of background lines and shapes suggest a temporal as well as three-dimensional composition, as though these figures were created by a body in motion, calling to mind von Kleist's description of a puppet ballet discussed in Chapter Two. Having been created at approximately the same time as these pedagogical studies, Exter's marionettes appear to represent the real-world application of this research.

The marionette known as *Longhi I* begs a comparison most readily with *Plate 10*. Immediately striking are the circular metal disks which comprise the figure's skirt. The horizontal rows of red material to which they are attached extend from tense diagonal swathes of fabric at its waist, creating a clunky, voluminous assembly of linear and geometric elements. A dark,

circular shape over the left forearm echoes the blackened, oval face, unifying the construction through the repetition of form and the colorful details in the eyes and headdress. *Plate 10* appears to describe the transient arabesques of a figure such as *Longhi I*, although of course it cannot be established with any certainty that the two share so literal a bond.

Similarly, the harder edges of *Longhi II* recall the ricocheting astral configurations and complicated planar relationships that characterize *Plate 11*. A playful cascade of diamond shapes dangles from the figure's shiny metallic skirt, suggesting a sonorous, jangling quality even while at rest. Further diagonals and wedges created by the arms and torso of the figure imbue it with an internal rhythm established both by the redundancy of the individual shapes and the patterns created by the empty spaces between them. Set in motion by its operator and subject only to the laws of physics, it is easy to imagine that the zigzag impressions left in the air would resemble Exter's design in *Plate 11*.

Of equal importance to the potential motion of the bodies of the animated marionettes is Exter's obvious interest in the compositional possibilities not only of the puppets themselves, but the strings to which their limbs are attached. The charming figure of *Colombine*, for example, illustrates the deliberate use of both strings and the wooden stand as significant compositional elements. (Figure 5.3) The most dynamic feature of the construction is the silver ball hanging from the puppet's right arm. Although the ball's string is not attached to the stand, and was thus not intended to be manipulated independently, its movement would have corresponded to a tug on that of the upper arm, resulting in a gentle, pendulum-like motion elegantly following the curve of the stiff pleats of the skirt. Made of rigid metal, the *Colombine's* perpetually flirtatious skirt would not move like that of *Longhi's*, but was designed to remain immo-

bile. Thus, the gentle arc of the swaying ornament would reinforce the predominantly linear construction of the figure. The strings governing bodily movement, three of which are attached to the head, continue to insist upon the single plane in which *Colombine* appears to exist. Undoubtedly intended to tilt coyly from side to side, the motion of the head and shoulders would remain subtle and restrained. The strings themselves mirror the triangular composition of the puppet's wooden legs, anchoring the restrained and delicate figure of Harlequin's paramour.

In lively contrast to the demure, yet coquettish pose of *Columbine*, *Black Harlequin* seems to leap from its stand with clownish abandon. (Figure 5.4) The loose joints at its knees and elbows permit a freedom of movement not seen in many of Exter's marionettes. The position of the string just above the spherical knee of the right leg indicates that it was intended to be raised at an exaggerated angle, allowing the massive, pendulous diamond calf to swing wildly in response. The arms are equally unrestrained, connected to strings only at the wrists and thus suggesting a potential for movement subject more to chance than to the will of the puppeteer.

Of course, though these marionettes are successful as autonomous constructions, the contiguous presence of the operator, even when absent, cannot be completely detached from their existence. Scott Cutler Shershow contrasts the actor's art with that of the marionette, noting that the living performer depends on "the fallible and imperfect union of conscious intention and bodily motion." However, in keeping with von Kleist's assertions, the use of the performing object "privileges an authorial relationship by which intention expresses itself by inspiring some passive, external vehicle."¹³⁶ As such, Exter's marionettes have a metonymic relation-

¹³⁶ Shershow, *Puppets*, 185.

ship with their human inventors and animators, even when they bear little formal resemblance to a human being.

Two of the most original and endearing of Exter's marionettes are not inspired by traditional puppet theater, but are instead cartoonishly modern in appearance. *Sandwich Man* and *Advertising Man* were ostensibly created for a scene that was to take place in New York City.¹³⁷ (Figures 5.5 – 5.6) In his monograph of Exter, Chauvelin has included an image of a painting which he identifies as having been intended as a background design for the film project with Gad.¹³⁸ (Figure 5.7) Léger's influence is undeniable in this cityscape, the strong vertical lines and bold lettering of which are echoed in Exter's urban puppets. In stark contrast to the identifiable characters in the group such as Harlequin and Columbine, *Sandwich Man* and *Advertising Man* were built as the embodiment of life in a twentieth-century city.

Sandwich Man is perhaps the more comedic of the two; its clumsy stance and crooked eyes lend it an absurd presence, affording Exter the opportunity to experiment with a more mechanical assembly of forms while engaging in a little shameless self-promotion. Plastered across its chest, wrapped around its legs, and displayed billboard-style beside its head is information advertising the International Theater Exhibition at the Steinway Building in New York City, a show in which Exter was participating. She thus quite literally links her marionettes to

¹³⁷ Lozowick briefly describes the scenario: "The wind...carries the two of them to New York. Here Columbine's eyes grow big at surrounding riches and Punch turns thief to satisfy her craving for jewels. Arrest is followed by escape." Lozowick, "Alexandra Exter's Marionettes," 516. Reeder echoes Lozowick's assertion, though the source of her information is unclear: "The Peter Gad film in which Exter's puppets were to perform is a modern day Commedia dell'Arte piece which takes place in New York." "Moving Sculpture," 124.

¹³⁸ See Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 284; Lozowick also mentions "the addition of a modern background for contrast." If the background Lozowick describes was the two-dimensional painted image seen in Chauvelin's book, this would seem to contradict much of Exter's previous work in set design. Additionally, its small size (22 x 28") would have been poorly suited for the marionettes, each of which is approximately two feet in height. It is likelier that this image was a design for an unfinished set. It may have been exhibited along with the marionettes, however, which would account for Lozowick's description. "Marionettes," 516.

the theatrical tradition out of which they emerged, while at the same time situating them unmistakably in a modern context.

Advertising Man, even more strikingly than its counterpart, appears as a rambunctious, kinetic collage, adorned with disconnected lettering and scraps of random imagery, conveying a bit of the sensory overload characteristic of the modern urban environment. Inexplicable juxtapositions, such as letters spelling out the word “BAKE” displayed beside three photographs of men in clown make-up, serve to alternately intrigue and confuse the viewer. As is the case with *Sandwich Man* as well, its construction calls to mind Soviet propaganda kiosks, the designs of which Exter was undoubtedly familiar.¹³⁹ (Figure 5.8) Rather than broadcasting political slogans or news reports, however, Exter’s marionettes seem to present colorful, nonsensical advertising as America’s propaganda, spreading their consumerist agenda as they lurch clumsily and noisily through the city streets.

Bowlit describes the two urban puppets as exhibiting a profound tension between movement and stillness, and between construction and destruction, but the same could be said of all of Exter’s marionettes.¹⁴⁰ In this context, Boccioni’s theories of sculpture and relative motion are particularly useful as a means of examining Exter’s designs for her marionettes. He writes, “Futurist sculpture...will be architectural, and not just as a construction of masses, but in the way that the sculptural block itself will contain the architectonic elements of the sculptural

¹³⁹ Klutis’ Radio Orators developed as small, portable variations of Soviet “agit-stands.” Unlike these propaganda kiosks, which offered books and various other pro-Soviet literature, the Radio Orators were designed as audio-visual displays for revolutionary slogans. Lodder notes that no effort was made to disguise their intended functions, and thus the loudspeakers served as both functional and formal elements in the design. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 163.

¹⁴⁰ Bowlit, “Marionettes,” 224.

environment in which the object exists.”¹⁴¹ If we consider the platform and stand upon which the puppets are displayed, and the surrounding space carved out by the strings to which they are attached, as a theatrical environment for Exter’s kinetic sculptures, we can begin to imagine these performing objects as the realization of similar principles. Exter has achieved architectonic construction in the form of a puppet, the planes, strings and platforms of which complete the object even as it rests, and provide a venue in which it can move about amid an ever-changing spatial environment dictated by its own movements. The concept of the total work of art, documented and promoted in these futurist writings, is therefore realized in the figures of Exter’s dynamic creations, even as they hang motionless.¹⁴²

Boccioni would argue that Exter’s marionettes were not in fact ever truly motionless, but contained within them the infinite potential for kinetic activity. He explains, “The plastic construction of the object...has to be concerned with the motion which an object has within itself.” Boccioni repeatedly reminds the reader that there is no such thing as an object “at rest,” but only in a relative state of motion. “Dynamism,” he continues, “is the lyrical conception of forms...in which their identity resides in the shifting relationship between absolute motion and relative motion, between object and environment, ultimately forming the apparition of a whole.”¹⁴³ This relationship would be most readily apparent during a performance in which the individual marionettes would interact with one another within a theatrical venue of some type. However, even if Exter’s marionettes are to be understood as static “kinetic sculpto-paintings,”

¹⁴¹ Boccioni, “Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture,” 116.

¹⁴² The concept of *gesamtkunstwerk* was fundamental to many of the early Italian Futurists’ endeavors. Boccioni explains, “We want the entire visible world to tumble down on top of us, merging and creating a harmony on purely intuitive grounds; a leg, and arm, or an object has no importance except as an element in the plastic rhythm of the whole.” Boccioni, “Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture,” 117.

¹⁴³ Boccioni, “Futurist Painting,” 187 – 190.

as Lozowick described them, they can nevertheless be considered as rhythmic objects in a relative state of rest.¹⁴⁴

Boccioni urges that one must not concern oneself with the static treatment of the object but rather “the form that is created by the succession of its states of motion.”¹⁴⁵ Exter’s pedagogical plates discussed above attest to her profound interest in the study of the potential rhythm of the object in a performative space. In her lectures, Exter conceived of the stage (or “stage cube” as she called it) as “a field for action.” Her individual marionettes may be thought to exist in a similar space. She explained that “architectural or skeletal constructions would serve to unite the upper and lower volumes of the cube,” thus the puppet cannot be considered apart from the immediate environment to which it is attached.¹⁴⁶ Unlike the human performer which, despite numerous creative attempts to modify his form or material, can only ever exist as a transient presence within a scenic environment, the marionette is a total work of art in itself.

It would seem that Exter’s creation of performing objects did indeed solve the problems of rhythmic and scenic unity that had continuously frustrated her throughout her career as a designer for theater and film. However, it is likely that she was attracted to the marionette for other than purely histrionic reasons. Although Exter was not an active participant in the great constructivist debates which took place at the beginning of the 1920s, she would certainly have been aware of the growing obsession among the Russian avant-garde with the constructed ob-

¹⁴⁴ See Lozowick, “Alexandra Exter’s Marionettes,” 516. Lozowick’s apparent inability to denote a suitable category for Exter’s work speaks to the success she achieved in combining numerous modes of art into one form.

¹⁴⁵ Boccioni, “Futurist Painting,” 191. Boccioni believed that the dynamic element in art amounted to a fourth dimension, and believed that stasis in painting or sculpture was a “counternatural abstraction.”

¹⁴⁶ Chauvelin, *Alexandra Exter*, 175.

ject.¹⁴⁷ Christina Kiaer identifies the new relationship to the object following the Bolshevik Revolution – an application of Marxist ideology to the product of human labor which she has dubbed “the comradely object of socialist modernity.” In the new Soviet society, the manufactured object will no longer be amassed for personal pleasure, but will become “an active, almost animate participant in social life.”¹⁴⁸ The new socialist object would ideally be one that would extend all of the senses in order to “amplify sensory experience, rather than sedate or lull it as it did under capitalism.”¹⁴⁹ This new conception of the object would signal the end of capitalist commodity fetishism.

The years 1923 – 1925 saw an intense period of Productivism, the constructivist artists’ response to the need to create utilitarian objects in the spirit of Socialism. Productivism would ideally achieve the constructivist goal of introducing art into life in a meaningful and practical way. Exter’s marionettes may have been born in part of this tradition, but they reflect the conflict that many artists felt about converting themselves into engineers of useful things. Though Exter’s designs did result in a number of constructed objects, they could hardly have been believed to have the same utilitarian value as did the clothing and houseware designs being produced by Stepanova or Rodchenko at the time. Exter’s marionettes may have come closer in spirit to her friend Popova’s constructivist faction, The Working Group of Objectivists, who agreed that practical objects must be created, but expanded their definition of “objects” to in-

¹⁴⁷ Briefly, these debates were initiated in part as a response against Kandinskii’s program as director of the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), which many in the avant-garde considered overly individualistic and subjective. The constructivists, who themselves would form a number of splinter groups due to disagreements concerning definitions of terms and concepts, emphasized the objective and collective construction of objects as the future of art in post-revolutionary Russian society.

¹⁴⁸ Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 1.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

clude art forms such as painting. Ultimately, Exter's creations reflect the traditional Russian affinity for colorful wooden toys and knickknacks, or more generally the constructed object itself, comprised of its many surfaces and planes, textures and materials. With her marionettes, Exter again achieved a balance between tradition and innovation in her artwork, creating objects in which visual and tactile considerations contribute to their functionality.

In an article from 1916 titled "Marionetka," literary critic Yulia Slonimskaya identifies a fundamental distinction between the function of human and marionette theater. She suggests that while human theater strives unsuccessfully to create an illusion, the puppet theater creates an illusion that "so dominates the spectator that he forgets about the laws of real life." She continues, "Such an illusion is the only necessary theatrical illusion when everything is organically fused, everything is suggested by the law of artistic necessity."¹⁵⁰ It is perhaps an irony, therefore, that to achieve this artistic totality, it was necessary to very deliberately call attention to one of the scenic elements by emphasizing the strangeness of the performer. In so doing, the individuality of the organic performer was exchanged for the greater cause of rhythmic and scenic unity. Thus, to make the viewer aware of the presence of the actor as an element of a constructed set was in fact to contribute to the overall harmony of the scenic environment.

This estrangement did not, however, diminish the humanity of the performers, even when they assumed the form of objects. Roberta Reeder notes that the use of puppets was traditionally not conceived of as an imitation of the human theater, but rather as a way to utilize the latent potential of puppets as their own art form. She observes that "the puppet cannot

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, 242.

depict a highly complex, individual human being, but can depict man in general or universal terms far better than any one human actor can.” Likewise, she continues, a sculpture by Praxiteles depicting a young girl “embodies beauty and youth on a much more universal level than a live young girl.”¹⁵¹ Exter achieved a similar result by painting the bodies of her actors in *Famira*, through the use of unusual costumes in *Aelita*, and finally in the undeniably beguiling figures of her marionettes. Exter’s formalist enstrangement of the human body was thus a means of conveying the most fundamental aspects of humanity in a way superior to an individual performer. As substitutes for living actors, Exter’s marionettes should not, therefore, be viewed as dehumanized actors, but rather as abstractions, permitting a not only the realization of physical and rhythmic unity on the stage, but the universal expression of that which is human.

¹⁵¹ Reeder, “Moving Sculpture,” 116.

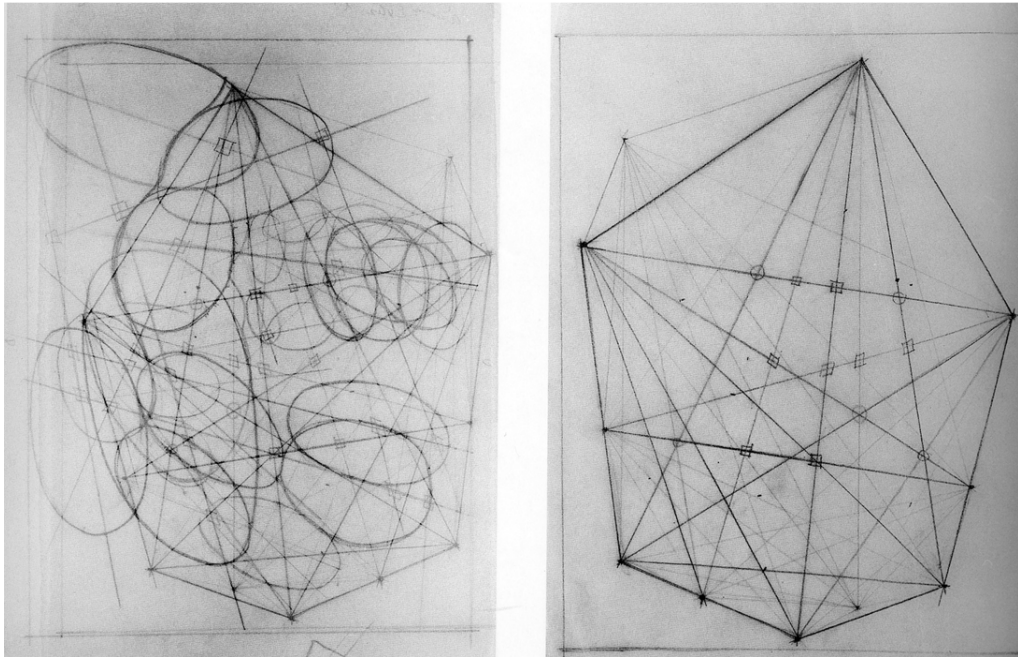


Figure 5.1: Alexandra Exter, Plates no. 10 and 11, 1925-1930.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 5.2: Alexandra Exter, *Longhi I* and *Lohghi II*, 1926.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 5.3: Alexandra Exter: *Columbine*, 1926.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 5.4: Alexandra Exter: *Black Harelquin*, 1926.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

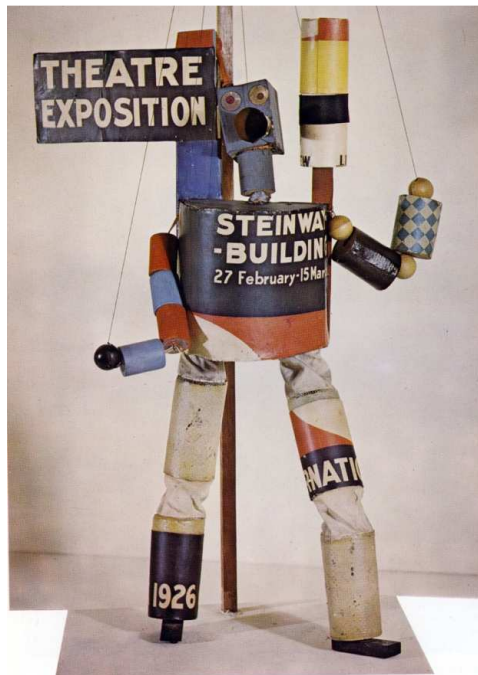


Figure 5.5: Alexandra Exter, *Sandwich Man*, 1926.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.



Figure 5.6: Alexandra Exter, *Advertising Man*, 1926.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

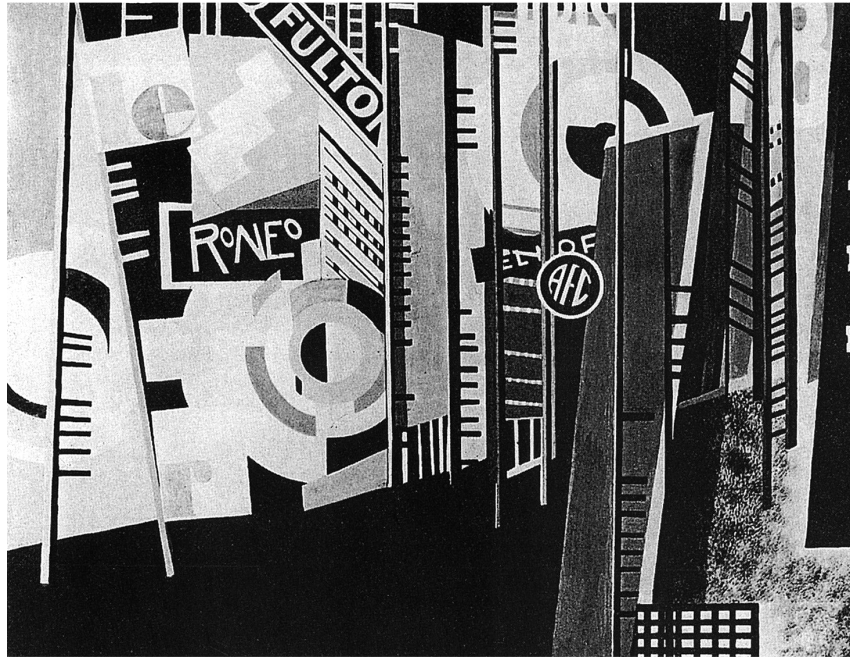


Figure 5.7: Alexandra Exter, Design for film project, ca. 1926.

Source: Chauvelin, Jean. *Alexandra Exter: Monographie*. Chevilly-Larue, France: Max Milo Editions, 2003.

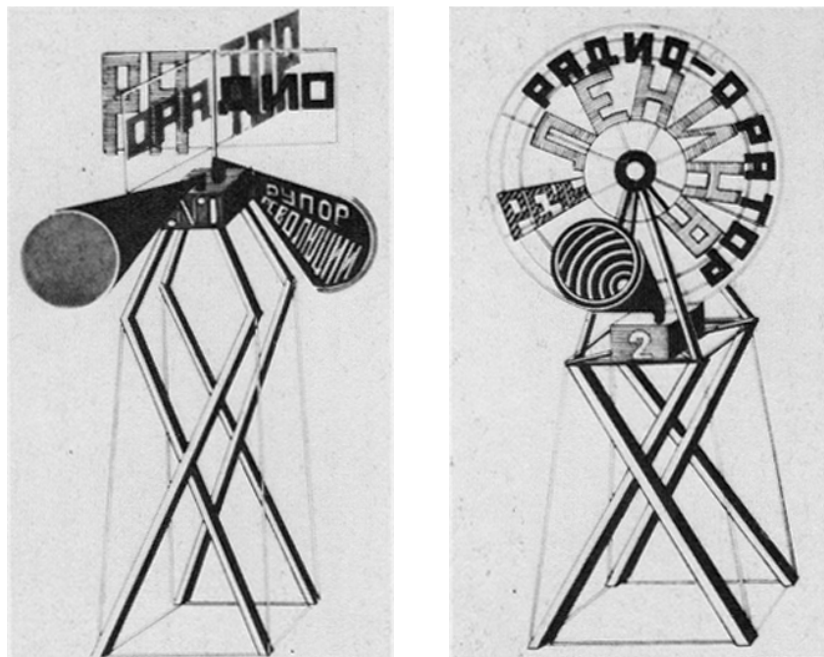


Figure 5.8: Gustav Klutsis, Designs for Radio Orators, 1922.

Source: Christina Lodder. *Russian Constructivism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined Alexandra Exter's designs for theater and film during a ten-year span of her career. I introduced Exter in Chapter Two, in which I contextualized her work amid the era of theatrical crisis and reform. Chapter Three explores Exter's earliest endeavors at Alexander Tairov's Kamerny Theater, where she strove to integrate her performers into the total scenic environment through the use of costuming designed to abstract the human figure. By so enstranging the familiar human form, she presented her performers as artistic material capable of countering the naturalistic theater of the day, and contributing to a total work of art on the stage. In Chapter Four I looked at Exter's transition from theater to film, presenting her work on the sets and costumes of *Aelita* as a continuation of her attempts to synthesize the organic and inorganic elements of the performative space. Her use of modern materials in her designs for both the scenery and the actors amounted to her greatest success in the quest for scenic unity. Lastly, her construction of a troupe of marionettes demonstrates the ways in which the performing object – in addition to its greater potential for rhythmic unity with its surroundings – could be used to communicate human emotion and expression more universally and fundamentally than is possible by a living performer. Thus, this ten-year sampling of Exter's work exemplifies a number of the most pressing concerns of avant-garde theater, as well as some of the most successful resolutions to the crisis of the theater.¹⁵²

¹⁵² My research for this thesis was limited primarily to English language sources. Primary source material for Exter is scant, but English translations of her written correspondence or lecture notes are even less prolific. I had no direct access to the Russian archives, however, a number of my sources such as Jean Chauvelin's monograph made use of archival materials.

While further research is necessary in a number of areas of Exter's life and career, of special importance to this thesis is the ambiguity surrounding the construction and function of her marionettes. As I have noted in Chapter Five, it is widely accepted that Exter designed her marionettes as part of a proposed, but never realized, film project with Danish filmmaker Urban Peter Gad. With the exception of Louis Lozowick, most scholarship indicates that her marionettes were never known or appreciated as anything other than static objects. Lozowick's 1928 review in which he describes in some detail a performance of these marionettes raises serious questions about their original function. The specific circumstances surrounding the collaboration between Exter and Gad on the alleged film project need to be addressed in much greater detail. For example, how did the two meet, and what was to be the nature of this film? Much of Gad's fame was due in no small part to the popularity of his wife, Asta Nielson, one of the biggest stars of German silent film. He was not known for non-traditional film work such as that suggested by Exter's marionettes, so it will be important to establish the specific plans for the project, if in fact there were any. Of course, if there was no film in the works, was Exter's marionette troupe created with another purpose in mind? If Lozowick did indeed witness a performance, was it in conjunction with a gallery exhibition, or in preparation for the film project? And what should be made of the background design discussed in Chapter Five? Until the intent behind and actual function of Exter's marionettes can be established with certainty, a thorough analysis of the remaining collection is not possible.

While this study is the first to consider at length certain formal and theoretical aspects of her work with human and non-human performers, it is by no means exhaustive. I chose some of the best examples of her work for the purposes of analyzing her treatment of the human fig-

ure within the greater avant-garde context of theatrical reformation, and the transition into the medium of film that followed. However, a number of her other theatrical endeavors warrant study which could not be undertaken at this time. For example, despite her consistent rejection of the naturalistic theater, Exter accepted a commission by Stanislavskiĭ in 1920 to design the costumes for a Spanish production titled *Intremeses*. Then in 1921 she designed for *The Death of Tarelkin* and *The Contemporary Khlestakov*, the latter of which included plans for her most geometric, suprematist-inspired costumes to date. Her 1924 constructivist set and costumes for *La Dame Invisible*, as well as the lesser known *La Fille de Hélios* starring her close friend Elsa Krüger, were all important contributions to the theatrical experiments of the avant-garde. Of course, Exter's work in textile design, book illustration, easel painting, and Soviet agit-prop would each make excellent studies on their own as well.

Exter is an especially provocative subject in that the study of her work can be undertaken within a number of larger contexts. In addition to her place as a pioneer of avant-garde theater, she is an important figure in the history of women artists, particularly within the complex dynamic of Russian modernism. It would additionally be fruitful to examine her pedagogical contributions in Kiev and Paris, especially her later career as a lecturer at Léger's Académie Moderne. The structure and philosophical foundation of the school, especially as it compared to other institutions of its kind, warrants further study. Her work with Ardengo Soffici, and her relationship to Italian Futurism is worth exploring in greater depth as well, as it would further establish the intercultural exchange between Russia and Europe in the twentieth century, a subject that I broached in this thesis, but which has yet to be sufficiently explored.

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