

PRESS RELEASE

Basel, April 2012

Tatlin. new art for a new world

Museum Tinguely, Basel: 6 June – 14 October 2012



Unknown photographer, Presentation of Vladimir Tatlin's Letatlin at a glider show, in Moscow, 1933, State Tretyakov-Gallery, Moscow

This year the Museum Tinguely in Basel is dedicating its large summer exhibition to one of the most important figures of the Russian avant-garde: Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953). It is now almost twenty years since the last comprehensive retrospective to be devoted to this radically innovative artist. The presented works will include early paintings, counter-reliefs that reach out into the surrounding space, reconstructions of his revolutionary tower, and the flying machine *Letatlin*. The exhibition is rounded off with examples of his work for the

theatre. The oeuvre of this outstanding artist from the watershed period at the beginning of the twentieth century will be represented in over one hundred masterpieces, mostly on loan from major collections in Moscow and St Petersburg.

Vladimir Tatlin began his career as a seaman. Until 1913 his artistic activities were limited exclusively to painting and drawing. Interested in the traditional fields of icon-painting and folk art, he later transferred his attention to the most modern avant-garde trends in Russia and Western Europe, more precisely Paris. His entire later work is founded on painting. The exhibition will show a comprehensive selection of his early paintings with their bold expanses of colour, rhythmic curves, and striking use of dark and light outlines. In these eye-catching works Tatlin achieved a highly original synthesis of the Russian tradition and the French avant-garde.

Counter-reliefs

In the year 1914, Tatlin changed from being an avant-garde painter to being a revolutionary artist: there was already a sense of what was to come in 1917. Only little has been preserved of his painterly reliefs and the counter-reliefs. These works, produced before the October Revolution, constitute his most radical and far-reaching contribution to modern art. In the exhibition the few still existing originals from Moscow and St Petersburg are complemented with a representative selection of the reconstructions made on the basis of photographs, thus shedding light on this crucial aspect in the history of art. Tatlin's *counter-reliefs*, with which he aimed to effect a total break with the bourgeois art world in all its forms, are to be understood as a "contre-attaque" in the sense of an increase in energy. As Konstantin Umansky wrote in 1920, "Tatlinism" claimed that the picture as such was dead: "The flat canvas is too restricted for what is three-dimensional."

In Tatlin's words of 1920: "We no longer believe in the eye: we are subordinating the eye to the sense of touch." His counter-reliefs shook painting to its foundations and at the same time created a new understanding of artistic material. In them Tatlin worked like a poet with his materials, which he liberated from their function of representation. Characteristic of his art is a finely calculated economy of means. Tatlin's counter-reliefs all have something of the nature of a happening. They give an impression of floating in a state of high tension. Rather than standing on any particular point, they are suspended in a rigging that replaces the plinth of earlier statues. The compositional principle contains a clear anti-static component: what is presented is a game between gravity and the negation of gravity. These works are all about distance, about the space in between, a space that is at once real and yet situated in the realm of the imagination. In literally material terms, Tatlin shifts his art into the sphere of the here-and-now; by experimenting with sculptural forms he generates the present.

Revolution, architecture and utopia – Tatlin's tower

Few twentieth-century works of art have acquired such a legendary status as Tatlin's projected Monument to the *Third International* of 1919–20, which was to have been 400 metres tall. For various reasons – Civil War, lack of material resources, and the technological limitations of the time – it was never realized. The monument – set parallel to the earth's axis with four inner bodies rotating each on its own axis at various speeds in accordance with cosmological rhythms and laws – would have been the seat of the hierarchically and justly organized government of a new social order. The rotating spatial bodies of Tatlin's "world machine" are indicative of revolution in both senses of the word. In 1920 Nikolai Punin praised the design as "an international event within the world of art" and saw it as "the organic synthesis of the principles of architecture, sculpture and painting." Had it been built, the tower would have represented the logical extension of the principles of time and space developed in Tatlin's counter-reliefs, and would have made possible a new experience of space in certain senses not dissimilar to that of flying. Tatlin's tower project acted as a catalyst in the discussion conducted by figures such as Leon Trotsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky about how life, art and the state were to function in the young post-revolutionary Soviet Union; now it ranks as an inspirational and interpretational work of the highest order. In the course of the rediscovery of Tatlin's oeuvre since the 1960s, the lost model of the tower has been reconstructed in a number of different variants. The exhibition in Basel is to juxtapose the two most outstanding examples – from Moscow and Paris – and bring them into dialogue. This spectacular presentation will generate illuminating insights into the way Tatlin's work has been received and will help visitors to understand the factors that led to its creation.

The flight of the *Letatlin*

The 1920s saw Tatlin engaging in a search for new dimensions in human flight. In 1929/32 he gave expression to the dreams of a collectively regulated society with his visionary flying machine *Letatlin*. With his strong penchant for mysticism, Tatlin considered that flying was a kind of primordial human experience lost in the course of evolution and wished to reappropriate it for modern man. *Letatlin* – a flying machine displaying a remarkable synthesis of art, technology and utopia – can be regarded as the culmination and end result of the exploration of the scope and limits of sculpture that the artist began in Tsarist times with his counter-reliefs and raised onto a monumental scale with the revolutionary tower model. Tatlin's highly suggestive flying sculpture can be interpreted variously as a metaphor for acceleration, a vehicle for extending the imagination, or a *deus ex machina* of modernism. However we interpret it, Tatlin's dream of flying was to remain unfulfilled – even today, *Letatlin* has not yet left the ground.

The theatre as the stage of the new world

Tatlin had a life-long interest in theatre. He was a passionate admirer of Richard Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman*, with which his own life had certain elements in common. Tatlin took its gripping musical sea- and soul-scapes and attempted to match them with a late Romantic Rayonist painted equivalent, taking tone colour and translating it into colour combinations full of drama and life. The peak of Tatlin's creative work for the theatre came in 1923 with his staging of Velimir Chlebnikov's futuristic super saga *Zangezi*. Tatlin decided "to juxtapose the word constructions with a material construction." For Tatlin the linguistic material of poetry and the materials of visual art were two

articulations of the same world energy. The fascination of his avant-gardistic experiment with *Zangezi* lay in the synesthetic correspondences he discovered between sounds, colours, textures and light.

Today Tatlin still retains his power to fascinate because his work was always done in the light of the total social context and with the intention of bringing about change. Furthermore, almost a century ago, he paved the way for currents that have still not lost their relevance and power to inspire in the field of contemporary art. Tatlin had no fear of stepping beyond the bounds of his field and liked to work collectively. He was a master of inter-disciplinarity and synthesis, in the art of bringing things and materials together, and of techniques and forms of presentation that were entirely unprecedented in his day.

From 6 June to 14 October the Tinguely Museum in Basel will show over one hundred works on loan from Moscow (Tretyakov-Gallery; A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow; State Archive for Literature and Art; Schusev Museum of Architecture; Museum of the Moscow Art Theatre), St. Petersburg (Russian Museum), Kostroma (Museum for History, Architecture and the Visual Arts), Wiesbaden (Museum Wiesbaden), Friedrichshafen (Zeppelin Museum), Vienna (Austrian Theatre Museum), Paris (Centre Georges Pompidou), London (Annely Juda Fine Art; Grosvenor Gallery), Thessaloniki (State Museum of Contemporary Art – Costakis Collection), Penza (Russia), and Athens.

Curator and Catalogue

The exhibition curator is Gian Casper Bott. The retrospective exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue that will present the life and work of Vladimir Tatlin in the light of the latest research, with contributions by Simon Baier, Gian Casper Bott, Dmitrii Dimakov, Jürgen Harten, Yevgraf Kipatop, Nathalie Leleu, Maria Lipatova, Anna Szech, David Walsh, and Roland Wetzels (edition in German or English, 240 pages, 208 illustrations, published by Hatje Cantz Verlag 52.00 CHF, ISBN 978-3-9523990-1-9).

General information:

Opening hours: Thursday – Sunday 11 - 18 h (closed on Mondays)

Admission prices:

Adults CHF 15

Students, trainees, seniors, people with disabilities CHF 10

Groups of 20 people or more CHF 10 (per person)

Children aged 16 or under: free

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