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Kassák's Reading of Art History

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Today, when Modernist theory is being questioned,[1] it is most instructive to inquire into the attempts of the early twentieth century avant-garde to anchor art in its social and economic context. These attempts were varied, and the theory presented by Kassák differed from the equally Marxist theories of the Russian Constructivists. In fact, from the point of view of Kassák's ideas, the differences between Russian Constructivism and Russian Socialist Realism were minor.

Kassák believed that Constructivism[2] was historically inevitable, determined by the inner laws of artistic, economic and political development.[3] Accordingly, the very existence of Constructivism was sufficient proof of its necessity; its validity was axiomatic.[4] For Kassák the new art—down to its smallest detail—declared of itself that "...it could be born only now and only thus." It was on the basis of this determinist outlook that Kassák proceeded to deduce the evolution of art, and consequently, to prove the necessary alliance between Constructivism and Communism.

As noted by Júlia Szabó, it was in the wake of the publication of Wilhelm Ostwald's "Energetism"[5] that Kassák came to believe that art—much like light, heat, gravitation and electricity—was a form of energy which had existed from the beginning:[6]

> Art has no beginnings, and will never come to an end. Art has been a force since time immemorial, like ethics, like revolutions, like the whole world itself. Thus there is no new art and no old art.
>
> There is only art.[7]

He felt, moreover, that since art was a form of energy, it was invisible, dimensionless and timeless, and was only cast into perceivable and concrete forms by specific artists living in specific times. Since men differ within and between periods of history, and a work of art depends on the artist who creates it, it follows that every work

of art was the particular product of its time. Thus, Kassák felt, art changes eternally.[8]

For Kassák, changes in art, like social transformations and other events, were regulated by strict and fundamental laws—nothing was left to chance. A work of art was not an arbitrary or capricious game. On the contrary, it was the actualization of the spirit that guided the principles and praxis of social life, an intentional creation in accordance with the laws of irreversible modernity.[9] Hence Constructivism was determined by the art movements that preceded it. According to Kassák, "Constructivism developed through three phases: Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism,"[10] and was "the result of the accumulated experience and philosophy of all previous art."[11] This evolutionist approach induced Kassák to analyse the different art movements, beginning with Impressionism, in order to demonstrate how Constructivism advanced beyond them on the road to the ultimate purification of the medium. The subjects Kassák treated were all central issues of avant-garde art: the rejection of mimetic representation and the abolition of perspectival space in favor of the flat surface. The result of this was an art built up of forms that were both abstract and geometric.

According to Kassák, the three avant-garde art movements prior to Constructivism remained at the stage of mimesis. Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism exhausted, respectively, the possibilities of the dynamic, physical and psychological representability of objects and of men.[12] Futurism, according to him, was the first artistic manifestation of the active psyche, and with its explorative power it tackled the problem of movement in art. But the Futurist artist, even in his best paintings, depicted only moving bodies and not movement itself, he felt.[13]

The Cubist painter, held Kassák, did not recognize the picture as a fully independent object with its own inner laws. Consequently, he maintained, Cubism was still representational art. It was

> [...] the illustration of a scientific will by using artistic means. Their pictures are not creations for their own sake, but transpositions into painting of a world apprehended through optical or psychological means... Their forms are tied to the corporeality of objects seen or known...[14]

Thus, felt Kassák, although Cubism gave form to the inner laws of the objects it depicted, it was nonetheless the representation of an

entity that existed outside the painter, and not the realization of pictorial forms emanating from him.[15]

After Futurism and Cubism, according to Kassák, came Expressionism.[16] For a time, he felt, Expressionism was considered to be "abstract;" it seemed as if its painting really was divorced from exterior (foreign) phenomena, and that like any other process of creation—it expressed only itself. Later, he writes, it became clear that Expressionism had ventured into other fields. Though it worked with greater subjectivity than Futurism and Cubism, it had—in essence—not progressed beyond mere representation. According to Kassák, even in the works of the most typical exponents of Expressionism (such as Kandinsky, Klee and Chagall), one would be unable to find a picture which signified nothing but itself. All these pictures wished to perpetuate some psychological event or other.[17] In the manifesto of *Képarchitektúra* (Pictorial Architecture), Kassák singled out Kandinsky who, in his opinion, went the farthest on the road to non-representation, noting that "his forms scarcely have any optical bases..."[18] Nevertheless, for Kassák, these were not the "absolute paintings" Kandinsky claimed them to be, because "a painting—as a planar creation—cannot bring to mind any foreign body... and must not narrate anything... but Kandinsky's pictures have a story to tell."[19] For Kassák, Kandinsky's paintings were depictions of sensations. He did not create something out of nothing, but only transferred "life already living somewhere into the realm of the picture frame."[20]

"After them, as if it were an inevitable sequel, creative art had to follow."[21] According to Kassák the creative work of art was the Constructivist picture, since it eliminated mimetic representation and rejected illusory space entirely. Unlike Cubism, which in spite of its recognition of the flat surface still painted "three dimensional figures onto the two-dimensional plane,"[22] Constructivism repudiated perspective completely.

> We know that if we are painting a picture we are not boring a tunnel or building a house. We are building a picture. *Képarchitektúra* is constructed not inwards from the plane but outwards from it. It takes the surface simply as a given foundation and does not open perspective inwards which is always illusory.[23]

For Kassák, the new work of art, non-representational and planar, had to be composed of flat abstract-geometric forms. The Cubists

were, according to him, the first to draw our attention to geometry as the essence of creation.

> They were psychologists and surgeons... they peeled off the object's epiderm... and demonstrated the essence that lives according to its own laws: universally true mathematics, rationality, and objective reassurance. And they showed the basic form of art—the geometric form—as creation.[24]

Moreover, according to Kassák, the Cubists proved that behind the exterior appearance of every work of art there was a pattern that held within it all possible variations. This was geometric form, the "universally true mathematics."[25] Kassák felt, however, that they did not draw the necessary conclusion from their discoveries:

> Through the geometrical articulation of form they paint a human being, an animal, a violin, etc... Their scientific theories borne of planar recognition have not been successfully transferred into compositional form...[26]

Evolutionist theories of art generally hold an idea of eternal destruction and rebirth according to which each new art movement at once negates the one preceding it and announces the one to follow. In his introduction to the *Book of New Artists*, Kassák cites the first destructive force to appear on the artistic scene as Futurism. Correspondingly, he saw Expressionism as a direct reaction to Futurism, similarly followed by Cubism and Dada, and finally Constructivism, the possibility for construction. Futurism was curtly dismissed by Kassák. It was

> energy without direction, purpose without force. The trumpet blast of Futurism, with its watchword of liberty and heroism, rode straight into the biggest and most voracious cannibal, the World War.

Furthermore, according to Kassák, Futurism differed from Impressionism only in its virulent gestures. Expressionism was a "puddle of sentimentality." It had succeeded too quickly, and without the slightest struggle it soon fitted into "the golden frames of exhibitions and into the china, lace and gobelins of bourgeois interiors." Cubism wasted its efforts on analysis and lost its force in compositions inherited from the past. It stopped at the stage of

confirmation, and by the time it could have revealed new laws, it had faded into dullness and immobility. He felt that Cubism did not clear the way through the debris of the past; it spent its energy on its preservation.

Then came Dada—the "tragic scream" of social existence according to Kassák—and the sudden collapse of the whole system imbued the bankruptcy of Cubism with meaning. Kassák saw Dada as coming to replace Cubism, to sweep clean the road for future construction. He saw Dada's fanatical will to destroy as its positive aspect. He felt that the Dada artists were the true revolutionaries since they did not fight in order to live in a better world, but rather because they could not bear to live in the world as it was. It was the combination of destructive Dadaism and the World War, according to Kassák, that made new creation possible:

> The world cleansed itself in the bath of blood, and chaos swallowed up the immobility. The disarray that the blind feel around themselves is already the formative stage of the order that will be born.

For Kassák, the era of construction had arrived, and he saw the first significant and decisive change in this direction as the development of Suprematism. Suprematism, in his view, was a revolutionary act which discarded all exterior aesthetics and civilization; it went back to the essentials, to basic geometric forms, and to the basic colours, black and white.[27]

This reading of art history as a series of advances towards the ultimate purification of art resulted in the recognition of the plane and of abstract-geometric forms as necessary and sufficient features of a work of art. But, unlike later Modernism, Kassák's theory of evolution and reduction presupposed the fundamental Marxist assumption that the value of art derives from social, economic and technological conditions which result in certain aspirations. The issue which interested Kassák in this respect was how planarity and geometry related to society.

Planarity for Kassák was not a value in itself. It was a definition of the work of art as an autonomous object.[28] When the artist repudiated mimetic representation and illusory perspective, the work of art became an object comparable on the one hand to any object of nature, and on the other to the products of technology. Geometry was likewise related to the idea of art as an object. According to Kassák, the world was a conglomerate of elements whose foundation

and mode of cohesive construction was geometry. Since every object was a microcosm, the components of each were identical to those of the world as a whole.[29] Hence, the basic forms of the art object had to be identical with those of the world, that is, they had to be geometric.

Kassák, therefore, conceived of the artist as a creator of objects. The new constructive picture was a product of creation, just as natural objects such as trees, mountains and oceans were. It did not narrate anything, and "its creations, as concrete realities, as experiences and memories, could be the subject of representation by others."[30] In Kassák's thought the gift of the ability to create was not limited to the artist, but was, rather, an essential capacity of all people. As such, in spite of art's historicity, it possessed an absolute value in and of itself. He asserted that man was a creator by nature, and that his life would have no meaning if he did not add something to the world that had not existed until then.

> After the enormous stone blocks of the pyramids, Greek model carving, Gothic towers aspiring to heaven... man stands again in front of his creator, with his soul and his sinews, and his undefeatable will to create.[31]

In Kassák's aesthetics, it is this idea of art as creation necessarily related to planarity and geometry that forms the link with the new technological and communist society.

Creation is also a quality of technology; the engineer and the technician create wholly new objects. There is no doubt that Kassák, like other theorists of the avant-garde, admired the beauty of the machine.[32] Above all, however, he viewed the machine as proof of man's creativity, and as a source of inspiration for creating the art object. For this reason he published pictures of machines, appliances, silos and skyscrapers alongside reproductions of works of art. For Kassák "Art, science and technology meet at one point;"[33] the meeting point is creation, when "technology as invention shows the way".[34]

The link between "creation" and Communism is equally crucial. According to Kassák the aim of Communism is to liberate the worker from the yoke of Capitalism, and to restore to him the will to create.[35] The new creations of technology and art have convinced man that he can indeed possess his creative powers and exploit them. Furthermore, the possibilities offered by technology—transportation,

electricity, and radio, for instance—demonstrate man's ability to construct a new world order.[36]

In this context geometry has wider implications. As the embodiment of order and logic, it symbolizes the formal quality not only of art and technology, but also of social systems. According to Kassák, the constructive artist and the technician-constructor both create new objects based on the human need for order, which therefore radiate the coming order of the world.[37] The strict methods of the inventor, the engineer and the artist carry within them the promise of a future constructive society; their work announces what is to come.[38]

The trinity of Communism, Constructivism and Technology, originated from Kassák's Marxist philosophy. All three are inevitable and determined by historical materialism according to Kassák, though he sees technology as the pivotal point around which the other two evolved.

Kassák, following Marx, explains that the bankruptcy of Capitalism was not the result of the backwardness of the bourgeois political system, but rather the ultimate result of the development of technology in accordance with its inner laws. The Capitalist mode of production had to collapse because technology—although it was first developed by private enterprise—would abolish the enslavement of the individual, restore a collective mode of production and thus bring about the final victory of the proletariat. The Communist mode of production, by fully exploiting the machine, would liberate man and thus give birth to the collective society.[39] It was the notion of collectivity that underlay and formed Kassák's concept of Constructivism.

For Kassák the term "construction" applied to all these spheres of life: politics, technology, and art. The will to construct was collective, and it was this will that united all members of society and assured the advent of Communism.[40] Hence it is not surprising that Kassák equated Communism with Christianity and *ipso facto*, Constructivism with "Gothic" art.[41] This four-term equation determined the basic link between Communism and Constructivism. For Kassák, true art—namely art which was the synthesis of life at a given period of time—was possible only in a society with a unified world concept.[42] This was the case in the Christian era, and it would also be the case in the future Communist society. For Kassák, the proof was historical.

Accordingly—holds Kassák—ever since the disintegration of the Christian social order and its "Gothic" art, man has sought absolute

form and the "repose in the One".[43] In the long period of disintegration since the decline of the "Gothic," he felt, art mirrored the chaotic state of the world, and became the expression of individual longings. With Impressionism's zigzag lines and loud colour combinations, the individual life of disjoint surfaces came to the fore for the first time, he held. The artist, like all humanity, was separated from the productive "unity of heaven and earth." Hence, he concluded, art no longer represented the human spirit aspiring to order, but depicted rather particular corners of the disintegrated world around the artist.[44]

In this respect, according to Kassák, Expressionism did not differ from Impressionism. He saw Expressionism as evidence of the religious longing of man to withdraw into himself since he was incapable of confronting the horrors of appearances.[45] Expressionism was the art of somnambulists, he felt, whose ultimate aim was to represent the individual's state of mind, or rather his mood.[46] Therefore, Expressionism was divorced from the aspirations of the collectivity and lacked the support of the community.

Communism, like Christianity, offered a new collective world concept:

> There is no doubt: Like the collective belief of the first Christians,... we have once again come close to achieving a constructive *Weltanschauung*. But this world view is not one of Christian religiosity, but rather of Communism, in whose essence totality is akin to the One, but, as opposed to the hierarchical structure of Christianity, the One is also akin to totality.[47]

Thus, held Kassák, Constructivism was not a new artistic "ism" in the long succession of "isms" around the turn of the century.[48] Constructive art was "the synthesis of a new order."[49] Hence the Constructivist artist—together with the Communist politician and the technician-constructor—represented for Kassák the potential of society.[50] The artist worked with the inventor and the engineer,[51] and it was in this sense as well that Constructivism was "collective."[52]

Kassák saw the link between Constructivism and Communism as being historical. Constructivism began in liberated, revolutionary Russia, that is, in a country where the wish to construct a new world was the strongest and where it had a chance to be realized.[53] Both Constructivism and Communism were preceded by revolutions: Contructivism by Dada, and Communism by the Revolution of the

Proletariat. Thus, according to Kassák, highly developed technology in itself was not enough to engender the advent of either Communism or Constructivism. Both required, in addition, the conscious will of the people and of the artist. It is for this reason, felt Kassák, that "in America there are no Constructivist artists".[54]

The idea that Communism necessitates a particular form of art was not peculiar to Kassák. It was shared, most notably, by the Russian Constructivists and the Russian Socialist Realists. There is, however, a crucial difference between Kassák's viewpoint and those of these movements, one that involves the idea of the autonomy of art. The autonomy of art was central to two, interrelated concepts in Kassák's aesthetics: his concept of creation, and his concept of collectivity. In both cases he was at variance both with Russian Constructivism and Socialist Realism.

Unlike the Russian Constructivists, Kassák refused to denounce art as a superfluous activity. He was opposed to the ideas of the death of art and the concomitant absorbtion of art into industry.[55] For Kassák, the artist, like the technician, was to be an integrated member of the Communist state, and thus works of art were not to be considered to be secondary to products of technology—they were creations of equal importance. Art, like economics, was to be an active agent in the development of society, and like technology it was indispensable to society's construction. Since the world is constantly changing, the task of construction is never-ending. In other words, art is eternal.

The ideas of creation and collectivity were equally opposed to Socialist Realism. As we have seen, Kassák felt that art developed according to its own inner laws, and its production was an act of "creation" like any other God- or man-created object. He held that because art involved creation it was an end in itself. Hence the idea of art being in the service of politics, political parties or the Revolution was for Kassák a contradiction in terms. Moreover, political parties and even the proletariat were only elements of society, he felt, and the exploitation of art for the promotion of their particular interests was in flagrant contradiction to "art as synthesis." The role of art was to present the masses with a unified image of the world rather than to educate them, or in Kassák's words: "The artistic creation, like any other synthetic creation is, in its essence, demonstrative and not pedagogic."[56]

In the final analysis, although Kassák held that art was historically determined and that Constructivism was the historically inevitable

art of Communist society, art as creation, i.e. an independent and autotelic activity, was for him of absolute and eternal value.

Notes

1. The question of the validity of Modernist theory and criticism is the subject of numerous recent studies. For example, on the relations between American abstract-expressionist art, and social, political and economic factors, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).
2. I use the term "Constructivism" to refer to what has become known as "International Constructivism," that is the loose groupings of central European artists during the 1920s espousing a connection between politics, technology and art—as well as a geometrical-abstract aesthetic. This usage is not meant to refer to Constructivism proper, the Russian artists of the early 1920s grouped around Rodchenko at the Moscow VKhUTEMAS (Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops). On Constructivism proper, see Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983). Note that Kassák, like most of his contemporaries, did not distinguish between Constructivism's Russian and "International" variants.
3. Lajos Kassák, "Jegyzetek az új művészethez" [Notes on the New Art], *Bécsi Magyar Újság*, 6 August 1922. In *Éljünk a mi időnkben, irások a képzőművészetről*, Zsuzsa Ferenc, ed. (Budapest: Magvető, 1978), p. 70.
4. According to Kassák, to question the validity of Constructivism made as little sense as to ask "why day was not night." Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy, *Új művészek könyve* [Book of New Artists] (Vienna: Verlag Julius Fischer, 1922) Facsimile, (Budapest: Corvina and Magyar Helikon, 1977), n.p.
5. Júlia Szabó, "Ideas and Programmes: The Philosophical Background of the Hungarian Avant-garde," *The Hungarian Avant-Garde, The Eight and the Activists* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1980), p. 13
6. Lajos Kassák "Az új művészetről" (On the New Art), *Diogenes*, no. 1 (1923). In: *Éljünk a mi időnkben, irások a képzőművészetről*, p. 79.
7. Lajos Kassák, "Képarchitektúra," *MA* /VII/4, March 1922, p. 52. Translated by George Cushing, in *The Hungarian Avant-Garde, The Eight and the Activists*. Translation revised by Oliver Botar, *The Structurist*, 25–26 (November 1986), pp. 96–98. All translations of the manifesto are taken from Oliver Botar's revised version.
8. Kassák, "Az új művészetről," p. 79.
9. Kassák, "Jegyzetek as új művészethez," p. 69.
10. Lajos Kassák, "Ábrázoló és teremtő festészet" [Representational and Creative Painting], *Bécsi Magyar Újság* (August 1922). In: *Éljünk a mi időnkben, irások a képzőművészetről*, p. 76. Kassák's analysis did not follow the chronological order of the art movement, but varied in each of his articles according to the particular subject, or specific problem he wished to treat. Thus, on one occasion the order was: Cubism, Expressionism, Merz ("Képarchitektúra"), on another: Futurism, Expressionism, Dada (Új művészek könyve) and on yet another: Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism ("Ábrázoló és teremtő festészet").
11. Kassák, "Az új művészetről," p. 82–83.
12. Kassák, "Ábrázoló és teremtő festészet," p. 77.

13. *Ibid.*
14. Kassák, "Képarchitektúra," pp. 96–97.
15. Kassák, "Ábrázoló és teremtő festészet," p. 77.
16. "After Futurism that heralded motion, and Cubism that searched for stability, came the 'je m'en foutiste' art: Expressionism, which was entirely closed in on itself, and divorced from earthly realities." "Ábrázoló és teremtő festészet," p. 77.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
18. Kassák,"Képarchitektúra," p. 97.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Kassák, "Ábrázoló és teremtő festészet," p. 78.
22. Kassák, "Képarchitektúra," p. 97.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
24. Kassák, "Jegyzetek az új művészethez," p. 71.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
26. Kassák, "Képarchitektúra," p. 97.
27. Lajos Kassák, "A berlini orosz kiállításhoz" [On the Russian Exhibition in Berlin], *MA* vol. 8, no. 2–3 (December 1922), n.p. "Suprematism" was an artistic direction founded by the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich just before the First World War, which called for "non-objectivity" in art, that is for an art which was geometrical and abstract.
28. On the socio-cultural significance of the flat surface in modern art see: T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life, Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 13.
29. Kassák, "Jegyzetek az új művészethez," p. 71.
30. Kassák, "Ábrázoló és teremtő festészet," p. 76.
31. Kassák and Moholy-Nagy, *Új művészek könyve*, n.p.
32. Kassák wrote of the "wondrous creations of technology," and used exalted language when writing about them: "Today we see for the first time man's invincible force in New York's skyscrapers, the viaducts that run over mountains, the locomotives that cross the prairies, the bridges across waters, the x-ray and all that signifies man's victory over God's creation. *Új művészek könyve*, n.p.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Kassák, *Álláspont, tények és új lehetőségek* [Point of View, Facts, and New Possibilities] (Vienna: MA edition, 1924), p. 40.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 40–41.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
41. Kassák did not distinguish in this context between the various phases of Medieval art, but referred to them all with the general term "Gothic".
42. This idea is expressed in different writings: "Képarchitektúra," *Álláspont, tények és új lehetőségek*, p. 70.
43. Kassák and Moholy-Nagy, *Új művészek könyve*, n.p.
44. Kassák, "Az új művészetről," p. 82.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Kassák and Moholy-Nagy, *Új művészek könyve*, n.p.
47. Kassák, "Képarchitektúra," p. 96.

48. Kassák, "Rechenschaft," *MA* vol. 8, no. 5–6 (March 1923), n.p. and *Álláspont, tények és új lehetőségek*, p. 37.
49. Kassák, "Képarchitektúra," p. 98.
50. Kassák, *Álláspont, tények és új lehetőségek*, p. 38.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 44
52. *Ibid.*, p. 38
53. Kassák, "Az új művészetről," p. 83 and *Álláspont, tények és új lehetőségek*, p. 44–45.
54. *Ibid.*
55. On the Marxist/Saint-Simonist nature of the productivist idea in Russian Constructivism see Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetics, Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge University Press, 1984) chs. 6–7, p. 99-136. On Kassák's anti-productivist views see my article "Lajos Kassák, *MA* and the New Artist 1916–1925," *The Structurist*, 25–26 (November 1986), pp. 78–84.
56. Kassák, *Álláspont, tények és új lehetőségek*, p. 46.