

The Revolution is Dead. Long live the Revolution! From Malevich to Judd, from Deineka to Bartana

A collaboration between the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Zentrum Paul Klee
April 13 – July 9, 2017

Big show in Bern: On the occasion of the October Revolution centenary, the Zentrum Paul Klee and the Kunstmuseum Bern are dedicating their joint exhibition «The Revolution is Dead. Long live the Revolution! From Malevich to Judd, from Deineka to Bartana» to this epoch-making event. The comprehensive exhibition offers unique insights into the history of revolutionary art and inquires into the repercussions and ramifications thereof through to the present. The two Bern museums are pursuing two diverging art-historical traditions, that are irrevocably entwined with the Russian Revolution and which left their stamp on twentieth-century art in a radical way – the Russian avant-garde and socialist realism.



Vladimir Dubossarsky / Alexander Vinogradov, What the Homeland Begins With, 2006

The October Revolution in 1917 shook the foundations of society in Russia. The events of the revolution brought centuries of tsarist autocracy to an abrupt end. The Russian Revolution not only led to radical social changes. Also in art history it is the milestone for radical departures with nonobjective art. It is the beginning of a new artistic visual language of which we still find echoes today, echoes that reverberate throughout Europe, spreading to the United States and South America.

Famous artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Alexander Rodchenko were among those who experienced the fateful events of 1917. As the very foundations of Russian society were shaken, vehement debates began over the social and political relevance of art in keeping with the spirit of the Revolution. The art of the Russian avant-garde was to pervade life completely and include painting, sculpture, architecture, and design. This movement, however, came to an abrupt and brutal end because of Stalin, who deprived art of its creative autonomy and placed it in the immediate service of the state and educating the populace.

While the exhibition *The Revolution is Dead. Long live the Revolution!* at Kunstmuseum Bern engages with the milestones of socialist realism following Stalin's takeover through to the present, at the Zentrum Paul Klee it hones in on the radical, nonobjective art of the Russian avant-garde and ensuing art movements in the twentieth century right through to the present.



Zentrum Paul Klee: From Malevich to Judd

This exhibition has as its point of departure not only the revolutionary art of the Russian suprematists associated with Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky but also the constructivists associated with Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko. Presages of the revolution had been discernible in the arts in the years prior to it. *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10 (Zero Ten)* marked the turning point to radical, nonobjective art. The exhibition was organized by Malevich and held in Petrograd in 1915/16. With this exhibition and the presentation of his *Black Square*, Malevich sought to bring visual art to a zero form and created an icon of twentieth-century painting, which in turn provided a springboard for subsequent artist generations. For their part, the constructivists demanded from the start that their art change society and put their nonobjective visual imagery at the service of architecture and design. The new art of the Russian avant-garde hoped to shape a new society.

A selection of approaches of this radical art will illustrate its impact throughout the twentieth century. The Dutch De Stijl artists, Bauhaus in Germany, as well as the Abstraction-Création artists in Paris demonstrate the immediate influence of the Russian avant-garde on the constructivist movement in Europe during the 1920s and 30s. After World War II, Zurich concrete art and the South American art avant-garde engaged with the legacy of constructivism. Parallel to the social upheavals during the 1960s, the exponents of minimal art in New York, the BPMT Paris-based art group, and the students of Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf developed a radical, nonobjective art. Taking recourse to minimalist strategies, such as reduction in visual imagery and employing industrial materials, their approaches opposed traditional notions of art and challenged cultural and social norms – just like their Russian predecessors. Although Rodchenko in 1921 actually hailed the end of painting with his monochrome pieces, radical painting interpreted it anew during the 1970s and 80s.

The exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee shows that the Russian avant-garde – with its proclivity toward a radical, nonobjective visual language, or, to use Malevich's words, a trend to zero form – did not signify the end of art but instead proved a fascinating point of departure for artistic investigation throughout the twentieth century.

Kunstmuseum Bern: From Deineka to Bartana

Preceded as it was by an aesthetic revolution with Kazimir Malevich's radical monochrome and nonobjective *Black Square* (1915), how could it be that the revolutionary social and political upheavals in Russia then reverted to the art of socialist realism? The Kunstmuseum Bern will be presenting an account of this part of history, of how the visual imagery of socialist realism is cited even in contemporary art, of how it diversified over time, of the intrinsic irony it deployed and thereby repeatedly evaded the dictates of propaganda.

The Soviet government demanded that artists be staunch helpers of the party in educating workers about communism. Art was to be comprehensible for all and arouse enthusiasm in its viewers, in particular because a large part of the population was illiterate. The goal of art was henceforth to represent reality as a "revolutionary development" and school the people in the spirit of communism. The most successful painters of the period from the 1930s through to the 50s, such as Alexander Deineka and Alexander Gerasimov, were admired for their monumental formats in treating Soviet achievements and heroes – farmers, workers, and party leaders – in art, works that hid the problematic truths like the terrible famines caused by the catastrophic agricultural collectivization. These painters portrayed the communist utopia in visual terms.



Socialist realism underwent further ideological and stylistic processing within the German Democratic Republic during the period from the 1960s through to the 80s. Its influence even extended to the German Federal Republic and such artists as Martin Kippenberger or Jörg Immendorff. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought in their train a younger generation of artists who settled accounts with the ideological freight of Soviet art. The fact that socialist realism and its manifold forms and purport are still prevalent in art today can be studied at the Kunstmuseum Bern in the work of the Israeli multimedia artist Yael Bartana, for example. In her three-part film *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, she cites the film imagery of socialist realism and in this way demonstrates the ideological appropriation of art.

Opening: Wednesday, April 12, 2017, 6:00 p.m.

Beginning at the Kunstmuseum Bern, then the shuttle bus will take you to the Zentrum Paul Klee

Curators: Kathleen Bühler, Kunstmuseum Bern,
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