

# “Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture, 1915–1935”

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“Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture, 1915–1935” (October 29, 2011–January 22, 2012) was organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, in collaboration with the State Museum for Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Costakis Collection. Curators included MaryAnne Stevens (Royal Academy) and Maria Tsantsanoglou (Costakis Collection) with the collaboration of Photographer Richard Pare. The exhibition sets out to examine the Avant-Garde period in Russian/Soviet (henceforth, “Russian” for simplicity) architecture through the correlation of artists’ research into three-dimensional construction within the picture plane, and the actual architectural constructions that emerged in the period. These relationships are proposed using three concurrent narratives: Richard Pare’s large-format color photographs of still-remaining works of architecture in Russia and other parts of the former USSR; records from the period, including small black-and-white photographs, displayed horizontally and paired with each of Pare’s photographs; and a selection of Constructivist drawings, paintings, and architectural designs taken from the Costakis collection.

The drawings and paintings selected from the Costakis collection show a development from early geometric compositions, where we are invited to make connections between, for example, Rodchenko’s circular *Linearism*, 1920, and Shukhov’s telescoping *Radio Tower*, to more speculative experiments in construction, such as Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (a model of which was recreated in for the duration of the exhibition in the Royal Academy courtyard), Lissitzky’s proposal, *Monument to Rosa Luxemburg*, and Klucis’s *Designs for Propaganda Kiosks*, which integrate typography into architectural design. Popova’s *Painterly Architectonics* series leads exhibition visitors to her photomontage theatre sets and an explosion of colorful geometric forms from the picture plane in Kudriashev’s *Decorations for the First Soviet Theatre in Orenburg*.

Pare’s photographs, taken across the Soviet Union over the past decade and a half, give us an unprecedented view of the works of architecture, most of which are in disastrous condition.

Radical ideas for new spatial and social forms are found within each of the categories into which the exhibition is divided: state communications, industry, housing, education, health, recreation, and the Lenin mausoleum (by Shchusev). This last, almost incongruously but symbolically, testifies to Stalin's termination of the climate of experiment in which Constructivism flourished. Also exhibited are some iconic and some less familiar works, including those of Ginzburg (*Narkomfin Communal House* designed together with Milinis); Melnikov (*Gosplan Garage*, *Melnikov House*, and *Rusakov Workers' Club*); and Lofan (*VTsIK Residential Complex*), as well as contributions from visiting architects Le Corbusier (*Tsentrosoyuz Building*) and Mendelsohn (*Red Banner Textile Factory*). The stripping away of the inessential, both in art and architecture, was inseparable from the symbolic economy of the new social order brought about by the 1917 Revolution. The Russian avant garde of early 20th century, which flourished after the 1917 Revolution, overturned the mimetic function of art, although it was later re-imposed in a fashion with Stalin's insistence on Socialist Realism in the early 1930s. For the avant garde, art was to become life and thus ultimately to become superfluous, transformed into a utilitarian activity.

I was intrigued by the way in which *revolution*—in the sense not simply of a seizure of power, but of a complete inversion of an existing order—in art, industry, economics, and society—was set as the backdrop to this story, rather than as its very *raison d'être*. Despite the exhibition title, we seemed to be looking at a discourse between a handful of artists and architects responding to seemingly anonymized ideological requirements, in which banded fenestration and pilotis were key features of the solution. Rather than discussing the exhibits, which has been done eloquently elsewhere, I look here at the historiography of the presentation of this work and the period to Western audiences, and in this way seek to understand the contemporary positioning of this show.<sup>1</sup>

### The Historical Development of the Reception of the Russian Avant-Garde in the West

The multifaceted period of experimentation in the early life of the Soviet Union, known cumulatively as “the Avant-Garde,” was not isolated from parallel impulses in Western Europe, where *Neues Bauen* and the *Bauhaus* in Germany, the *Esprit Nouveau* in France, and *de Stijl* in Holland shared, at the very least, a progressive agenda with a radical aesthetic, in which beauty was to be redefined in terms of rationality rather than nature or symmetry. Hence, in the 1920s and 1930s, European architects showed considerable interest in the developments in the Soviet Union, an exchange which John-Louis Cohen terms “intertextuality.”<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the very different circumstances in which figures such as

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- 1 Tony Wood, “At the Royal Academy,” *London Review of Books* 33, no. 22 (2011): 29; Owen Hatherley, “The Constructivists and the Russian Revolution in Art and Architecture,” *The Guardian* (November 4, 2011), [www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/nov/04/russian-avant-garde-constructivists](http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/nov/04/russian-avant-garde-constructivists) (accessed January 20, 2012); James Dunnett, “Pared Back Soviet Modernism,” *The Architectural Review*, 23 (November 2011), [www.architectural-review.com/reviews/pared-back-soviet-modernism/8622913.article](http://www.architectural-review.com/reviews/pared-back-soviet-modernism/8622913.article) (accessed January 20, 2012).
  - 2 Jean-Louis Cohen in his exhibition catalog essay, “Uneasy Crossings: The Architecture of the Russian Avant-Garde Between East and West,” *Building the Revolution* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2011), 15.

Le Corbusier, Erich Mendelsohn, and Hannes Meyer were operating necessarily curtailed the possibilities for any kind of unified conception for the future of modern architecture, as confirmed by the split at Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in 1932.

With the imposition of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, the Avant-Garde became taboo in the Soviet Union and fell into obscurity in the West. Any kind of research in the Eastern Bloc became extremely difficult for interested Western scholars, and émigré accounts of the period (e.g., from architect Lubetkin in Britain, or from artists Gabo, Kandinsky, and Chagall) became isolated sources of information.

Post-war interest in this period became inextricably linked with the political ebb and flow of attitudes toward the Soviet Union as the “real existing” manifestation of state socialism. This interest predates the Western acclaim for Constructivist art, which followed the exposure of the Costakis collection after it left the Soviet Union in 1977.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1962, British art historian Camilla Gray, piecing together information from archival sources, journals, and personal testimonials, both in the West and in Russia, produced the first major inquiry, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922*,<sup>4</sup> which accompanied a 1962 show at the Grosvenor Gallery in London.<sup>5</sup> Her book heralded the start of a period of heightened interest in this era of Russian art. Éva Forgács has argued that in the 1960s Western communists and leftists made a claim to the experimental period in Russian art as a reaffirmation of the revolutionary socialist promise.<sup>6</sup> Until then, Western reception of Russian Avant-Garde art, she argues, focused on the aesthetic rather than the ideological. Soviet Constructivism was even posited as a forerunner to American Abstract Expressionism. The West Berlin exhibition and catalogue, *AvantGarde Osteuropa 1910–1930*, presented in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution, for example, followed the curatorial line described by Forgács, presenting the Avant-Garde as having contemporary topicality. In the catalog, Eberhard Roters rails against bureaucrats’ insensitivity to the transformational potential of art, “not just in the USSR,”<sup>7</sup>—making a connection between the experience of Russian radical artists with what he viewed as the difficulty of making clear the political potential of art in the West.

By the late 1960s, the Modernist principles of architecture as they had emerged in practice in the West were subject to criticism for having lost their connection to egalitarian motivations—including those of the early Soviet Union, which did not simply represent the unsullied Communist ideal, but offered a reaffirmation of the socially transformative potential of architecture. In *Town and Revolution*,<sup>8</sup> Paris-based critic Anatole Kopp dismissed as an aberration the two decades of Socialist Realism (from the early

- 3 Georges Costakis, Russian-born to Greek parents, developed an interest in Constructivist art and began as early as 1946 to build up a collection in the Soviet Union that was to amount to more than a thousand works. Costakis left the USSR in 1977, donating a significant proportion of the collection to the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The remainder, which Costakis took to the West, received Western exposure the first time in 1977 at the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum, and then at the Guggenheim in New York, “Art of the Avant Garde in Russia: the George Costakis Collection,” curated by Margit Rowell, in 1981, and then at the Royal Academy, London, in 1983. Most of the exported collection is now in the custody of the State Museum for Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece, from which the artworks in the exhibition under review are borrowed.
- 4 Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962).
- 5 Camilla Gray, “Two Decades of Experiment in Russian Art, 1902–1922,” (London: Grosvenor Gallery, March 15–April 14, 1962).
- 6 Éva Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East-European Art,” *Centropa* 3, no. 2 (2003): 93–104.
- 7 *AvantGarde Osteuropa, 1910–1930*, exhibition catalog (Berlin: West Berlin Kunstverein, 1967): 6.
- 8 Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution* (Michigan: Braiziller, 1970), 2–5; originally published as *Ville et Revolution* (Paris: Anthropos, 1967).
- 9 Kopp, *Town and Revolution*, 12 (quoting *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura* [*Contemporary Architecture*], no. 1 (1928): 2).

- 10 "Russische Architectuur en Stedebouw, 1917–1933" [Russian Architecture and Urbanism], Department of Decorative Arts, Delft University, assisted by Camilla Gray; exhibition catalog (Delft: Techn. Hogeschool, 1969); Jean-Louis Cohen, Marco De Michelis, and Manfredo Tafuri, "La Ville, L'Architecture," at the Centre de Création Industrielle (CNAC) Georges Pompidou, 1978. The exhibition catalog cover, in French and Italian, bears an illustration by Roman Cieslewicz (Paris: Officina Edizioni, 1978).
- 11 "Art in Revolution: Soviet Art and Design since 1917" (London: Hayward Gallery, 1971). The show aroused controversy over the compromise of curatorial independence caused by interventions of the Soviet Ministry of Culture. Emigré artists were excluded. See also Pat Simpson, "Art, Revolution and Production," *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (1986): 56–67, for a discussion of both Soviet and Western agendas in discussions of Russian Revolutionary art and design production during this period of intensified interest.
- 12 J. Speranskaja, "Agitation and Art of the Masses from the First Years of Soviet Power," exhibition in Moscow, 1967, drawn from the collections of the Tretjakow Gallery, the State Russian Museum, and several other State museums, 6.
- 13 For example, V. E. Chazanova, *Sovetskaja Architektura Pervych Let Oktjabrja, 1917–1925 [Soviet Architecture of the Early Years, 1917–1925]* (Moscow: Nauka, 1963) and *Iz Istorii Sovetskoi Architektury, 1926–1932 [The Story of Soviet Architecture, 1926–1932]* (Moscow: Nauka, 1970). In the Soviet journal *Decorative Art in the USSR*, an article on an exhibition of the work of Gustav Klutss in Riga in 1970, "The Artist as Agitator," by L. Oginskaya, is described as "a response to the public interest which has lately arisen in regard to the pioneering artists of the 1920s," no. 162 (May 1971): 34–37. The journal also published articles on Rodchenko and Stepanova from the early 1960s.
- 14 "Paris-Moscow, 1900–1930" was an exhibition organized by the Centre Pompidou in Paris 1981, and then hosted by the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow two years later as "Moscow-Paris, 1900–1930." This exhibition, in the context of the Helsinki accords, was made in cooperation with the Soviet Ministry of Culture.

1930s to Khrushchev's 1954 reinstatement of a functionalist approach to architecture), and asserted a continuation in the late 1960s Soviet Union of the 1920s Constructivist principles, in which architecture was the means by which society was being restructured.<sup>9</sup> Kopp saw Western Modernism as trapped in a vicious circle because the architecture, constrained by political circumstances, could never actually achieve its potential as a social condenser and was reduced to a stylistic idiom.

Kopp's revivalist interest was also resonant in exhibitions during this period, for example in the 1969 "Russian Architecture and Urbanism," at Delft University and later in "La Ville, L'Architecture," at the Pompidou Centre in 1978.<sup>10</sup> The latter exhibition attempted, somewhat less polemically than Kopp, to re-evaluate the way in which Russian Avant-Garde architecture approached new modes of living, and to place it within its political and economic context. These forays into the architecture of the period no doubt had a less cultural impact than the major survey exhibitions later in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although none of these exhibitions specifically addressed architecture, they significantly raised awareness of the Constructivist movement among the interested public. "Art in Revolution" at London's Hayward Gallery (1971), curated by Camilla Gray in collaboration with the Russian Ministry of Culture, was the most notable endeavour; reproducing contemporaneous Soviet accounts, it shifted the critical agenda away from established Western perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

Concurrent with the politically interested 1960s revival in the West, the Soviet post-revolutionary period was coming in from the cold in the Soviet Union itself. A Moscow exhibition, also in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution, selected artists of the Avant-Garde to represent "Agitation and Art of the Masses." The commentary for the exhibition carefully positions the selected works between utopian and visionary, "This work is romantic in its fundamental mood, but its romanticism has a revolutionary character: It points to the future, and affirms the revolutionary transformation of the world."<sup>12</sup> Soviet publications for a more specialist audience went much further, and by the early 1970s, a number of revivals of the Avant-Garde in art and architecture were published in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup>

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the major cultural institutions in the United States, France, and Germany began to make a claim on the Russian Avant-Garde, which had established itself in the West through the efforts of both commercial galleries and the Western Left. The major institutions were keen to insert the Russian contribution into the Modernist canon.<sup>14</sup> The Guggenheim in New York had been first to secure much of the Costakis collection, which it presented in 1981; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art compiled its 1980 survey exhibition, "The Avant-Garde in

The poster and catalog cover, which typographically converges Paris and Moscow into a single block, was designed by Roman Cieslewicz.

- 15 "Art of the Avant Garde in Russia: the George Costakis collection," (Guggenheim, New York, 1981) curated by Margit Rowell; "The Avant-Garde In Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives," (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, July 8–September 28, 1980), curated by Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman; Stephanie Barron, "The Russian Avant Garde: A View from the West," *The Avant-Garde In Russia* exhibition catalog (Los Angeles: Museum Associates of LACMA, 1980), 13. (The monochrome photomontage catalog cover was designed by Louis Danziger.)
- 16 Maurice Tuchman, "The Russian Avant-Garde and the Contemporary Artist," in *The Avant-Garde in Russia* exhibition catalog, 118.
- 17 Kandinsky projected a synthesis of the arts as "an edifice which is the result of thinking in all kinds of art, adapted for all kinds of art, those that exist already and those that we still only dream of." W. Kandinsky, "Velikaia Utopiia" [*The Great Utopia*], *Khudozhestvennaia Zhizn* [*Artistic Life*]3 (1920).
- 18 Paul Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde" in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* exhibition catalog (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 1–21.
- 19 John Bowlt, "Introduction," to *Soviet Textile Design of the Revolutionary Period*, I. Yasinskaya, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983).
- 20 Wood, "The Politics of the Avant Garde," 2, quoting John Bowlt, "The Old New Wave," *New York Times Review of Books* (February 16, 1984), 28.
- 21 Vladimir Gusev (State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) and Iurii Korolev (State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow) in preface to *The Great Utopia*, xiii.
- 22 "Amazons of the Avant Garde," Solomon R. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, July 1999 and other venues), co-curated by John E. Bowlt, Matthew Drutt, and Zelfira Tregulova; "Light and Colour of the Avant-Garde: The George Costakis Collection," Martin Gropius Bau, curated by Miltiades Papanikolaou, Thessaloniki with Maria Tsantsanoglou, (Berlin, 2004); and "Rodchenko and Popova. "Defining Constructivism," (Tate Modern, February

Russia, 1910-30," without relying on any loans from the Soviet Union itself, out of fear that they would be forced to subscribe to "an unacceptable interpretation of the period."<sup>15</sup> The possibility of placing contemporaneous American abstraction alongside the Russian Avant-Garde had even been mooted, which, given that American-Soviet relations had entered a period of heightened belligerence, would have been audacious to say the least.<sup>16</sup> The significance accorded to the October Revolution was as a facilitator, empowering artists to experiment and offering a brief and unprecedented state endorsement of abstract art.

As events unfolded in the mid-1980s, exposure of the Russian Avant-Garde in the West was on the threshold of a new era, in which the label "utopian" in respect of the artists' ambitions was to become more prescient: Gorbachev's *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) not only facilitated greater access to work in Soviet custody, but also signalled the acknowledgement of the failure of the communist ambition in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. This shift in the political climate saw a repositioning at the extensive Guggenheim exhibition of the Avant-Garde in 1990 as "The Great Utopia," no doubt in reference to Kandinsky's 1920 use of the term.<sup>17</sup> Paul Wood has argued that "utopian" has been instrumentalized in Western scholarship that characterizes Avant-Garde artists' aspirations either as blissfully innocent or naively tempting fate, "purlblind to the politics [it] entertained."<sup>18</sup> In his compelling review of the scholarly trends and schools of thought around the Russian avant-garde, he states, "The revolutionary avant-garde is not interesting for its normativity." John Bowlt, in an introduction to textile designs of the revolutionary period, had proposed that we "disregard the original purpose [...] and perceive them as 'works of art.'"<sup>19</sup> He went on in 1984 to state that "perhaps the most dangerous rumour concerning the Russian Avant-Garde has been to do with its alleged support of radical politics, and radical political philosophy in general."<sup>20</sup>

The Moscow co-organizers Vladimir Gusev and Iurii Korolev of the "The Great Utopia" went further in disconnecting the art from its revolutionary context, claiming, "These artists [...] were absorbed as never before by questions of pure aesthetics." They went on: "Since the 1980s, the idea of romantic underpinnings of the Revolution has lost popularity. Yet the artistic might of this era [...] has continued to hold its ground against more short-lived political ideologies and economies."<sup>21</sup>

As the collapse of the Soviet empire has emancipated the curatorial enterprise from Cold War subtexts, and the novelty of the collections has waned, there has been a move toward selective shows, such as "Amazons of the Avant-Garde," "Light and Colour of the Avant-Garde," and the Tate Modern's "Rodchenko and Popova, Defining Constructivism."<sup>22</sup>

### "Building the Revolution" in the Contemporary Cultural and Political Context

Where does "Building the Revolution" sit within the contemporary landscape of post Cold War thinking? While the catalog offers three very informative contextual essays, biographies, and a detailed glossary of terms, the show itself effectively sidesteps the revolutionary context. The narrative of this exhibition neglects the transformational potential of architecture in communalizing domestic labor; the care of children and social life; the conceptual differences between the *Rationalists in Aassotsiatsiia Novykh Arkhitektorov* (*Association of New Architects*) and the *Constructivists in Obedinenie Sovremennykh Arkhitektorov* (*Union of Contemporary Architects*), or the role played by the *Institut Khudozhe Stvennoi Kul'tury* (*The Institute of Artistic Culture*), by Moscow's *Vysshii Gosudarstvennie Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheski Masterskie* (*Higher Artistic Technical Workshops*); the fantastical paper architectural projects of "hanging, floating, flying, and jutting structures;"<sup>23</sup> Melnikov's extendable buildings; Chernikohov's *Architectural Fantasies*; Krutikov's "Flying City;" disputes between "urbanists" and "disurbanists" in the visions for socialist planning; the pioneering urgency of building in the rush to industrialization, such as in the steel city Magnitogorsk; and the broader interchanges with Western intellectual circles, including and through the activities of CIAM, the advance of the ideas of *Neues Bauen* from Germany, and the arrival of Ernst May's brigade of planners from Frankfurt in 1930 and Hannes Meyer's "Bauhaus Brigade."

The curation is driven by Pare's subject matter, "which goes beyond the canon of radicalism;"<sup>24</sup> the parallel narratives fall within this frame and defy any convenient formal or theoretical categorization. The modest vintage images offer glimpses into the social picture and urban setting of the buildings and frame them as functional pieces of architecture once more. Most of the images were taken by unknown photographers, but they testify to innovation in the composition of their subject matter. This compositional innovation is particularly clear in the photographs by Ilyin. Where the relative sizes between the vintage images and Pare's images are reversed in the catalog, this allows a comparison of conventions in architectural photography. Pare's images are generally more closely framed, cropping out social detail and even occasionally sacrificing the overall form of the building to the attention to surface. This approach has rather the opposite effect to that of the period images: In Pare's images, the sensitively exposed disintegration of building surface and substance, and their apparent superfluity and vulnerability in the new, speculative landscape to which so many buildings have already fallen victim, clearly invite the viewer to reflect not so much on the past or failed utopias, but on the present and the troubling questions of

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12–May 17, 2009), curated by Dr Margarita Tupitsyn, Vicente Todolí, Ben Borthwick, and Christina Kiaer.

23 Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 197.

24 Jean-Louis Cohen, *Uneasy Crossings*, 13.

heritage and preservation. In the 2008 configuration of this show, the vintage images were titled, “Lost;” and the Pare photographs, “Found.”<sup>25</sup> The subject matter propels the viewer from readings informed by attitudes to Soviet Communism and into the current day oligarchy and the architecture of capitalist realism that has taken its place. There is a clear subtext referring to the handling of the Modernist heritage in current day Russia.

The exhibition is dedicated to the memory of the late David Sarkisyan, who until his death in 2010 championed the cause of protecting Moscow’s architectural heritage; although his efforts often were to no avail, he nonetheless drew international attention to the cause. The fact is that the length of time since the fall of Communism—about a generation—is just about what it takes for the combined effects of neglect, obsolescence, and speculation to result in the irrevocable loss of works of architecture. The span also is about as long as it takes for a new, unencumbered generation of observers to emerge and reconceive as “heritage” what the earlier generation dismissed as “failure.” Such changes in perception are evident in the current wave of interest in the manifestations of Modernism, both in East and in West. This interest is more than just a rediscovery, however. The emotional effect of Pare’s images has to do with the scale, the preoccupation with detail, and most importantly their color: This completely fresh view of Avant-Garde architecture is at once contemporary. Just as Frederic Chaubin’s and Roman Bezjak’s images have brought instant fame to the late period of socialist Modern architecture, the broad appeal of high-end photographic publications has a role to play here.<sup>26</sup> David King’s 1970s catalog designs for “Rodchenko,” as well as other Oxford Museum of Modern Art exhibitions, carry with them the same feel of urgency and economy as the subject matter itself.<sup>27</sup> Anatole Kopp stated in 1970 that he had resisted making a coffee table book: “The illustrations cannot speak for themselves.”<sup>28</sup> In this exhibition, Pare’s images do the talking, and they can be heard as a lament very much situated in the current day.

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25 The Royal Academy exhibition reconfigures the original concept of “Lost Vanguard Found: A Synthesis of Architecture and Art in Russia (1915-1935),” shown in 2008 at the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki. Pare’s photographs have also been shown alone in the “Ruins” annex of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture (MUAR) in Moscow, and at the MoMA in New York, where they were supplemented by Soviet periodicals.

26 See Frédéric Chaubin, *CCCP – Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed* (Cologne: Taschen, 2011), and Roman Bezjak, *Sozialistische Moderne* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

27 “Rodchenko,” (Oxford: MoMA, 1979 and other venues), curated by David Elliot.

28 Kopp, *Town*, 12.