

RICHARD SALTOUN

The Visual Revolution:

Russian Avant-Garde Photography, Alexander Rodchenko & the VKhUTEMAS Workshop

Exhibition dates:

9 July – 29 August, 2014 (PV Tuesday 8th July, 6 – 8 pm)

On the occasion of the 2014 UK-Russia year of culture, Richard Saltoun Gallery will be presenting a special selection of works by leading practitioners of Russian avant-garde photography, including Alexander Rodchenko and the VKhUTEMAS Workshops.

This comprehensive exhibition is drawn from a single renowned collection, which comprises more than 1,500 vintage photographs. The collection was built in the later part of the 20th century and includes photographs from the Constructivist period (1920s), the Socialist-Realist period (1930s) and World War II photography. There are over 100 photographers represented, with a significant number by Max Alpert, Simon Fridland, Naum S Granovski, Yevgeni Khaldei, Gustav Klutsis, Alexander Rodchenko, Akady Shishkin, Varvara Stepanova and Georgi Zelma.

Though used in Soviet Russia since the turn of the twentieth century, it was not until the Social Revolution of 1917 that the photographic medium was privileged over painting. Its documentary and artistic capabilities were quickly exploited for State propagandistic purposes: portraying a 'truthful' depiction of everyday life, culture, and architecture of the New Soviet State.

One of the greatest innovators of the 20th century avant-gardes and an acknowledged leader of Russian Constructivism, Alexander Rodchenko's artistic oeuvre has influenced design, architecture and 'photo-art'. A student at the Stroganov art school in Moscow, he started using photography in 1924 and it was during the first Five-Year plan (1928-32) that he truly exploited it as a medium. Recognizing the capabilities of the photographic image, he revolutionized the way it was used as a medium. Inspired by Moholy-Nagy's experimental photographic technique, Rodchenko merged traditional formal elements with innovative perspectives: 'bird's eye', 'worm's eye' views and the application of diagonal perspectives to street scenes. Photography was for him a tool to depict the discrepancy between 'high' and 'low' culture in Soviet society, balancing formal concerns with a focus on documenting contemporary social and political life.

From intimate portraits to street scenes, from dynamic architectural analysis to photomontage, his revolutionary practice re-established the role of photography and of the photographer himself. Key works to be included are *Woman With a Baby* (1928), *Portrait of Mayakovsky* (1924) and *Portrait of Varvara Stepanova* (1925). Rodchenko has deeply influenced later generations of artists, through his own work as well as through his tutelage as a leading professor of leading Moscow art school, the VKhUTEMAS Workshop.

The VKhUTEMAS Workshop had a brief but significant existence, established 1920 and dissolved in 1930. Its impact both at the time and now is tremendous, as the Workshop furthered the development of Constructivism, Suprematism and Rationalism in architecture. Though contemporaneous to the Bauhaus (1919-1933), the VKhUTEMAS Workshop has never achieved the same status or degree of prominence but its legacy endures within art historical circles. A curated selection of works by the VKhUTEMAS Workshop to be exhibited, alongside photographs by leading artists Alexander Rodchenko, Gustav Klutsis and Varvara Stepanova.

ALEXANDER RODCHENKO (1891-1956)

Considered one of the great innovators of the twentieth-century avant-garde, Rodchenko continues to influence future generations of artists. An artist under the intellectually exploratory Lenin years as well as under the strict cultural regime of Stalin, his work consistently remained daring and innovative. Major recent exhibitions include *Alexander Rodchenko* (Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 2012), *Rodchenko and Popova: Defining Constructivism* (Tate Modern, London, 2009), *Alexander Rodchenko* (Hayward Gallery, London, 2008).

VKhUTEMAS WORKSHOP (1920-1930)

Created by Vladimir Lenin in 1920 under the name 'Higher Art and Technical Studios', the school was formed by the merging of the Stroganov School of Industrial Art and the Moscow School of Painting. Abandoning traditional curriculum and encouraging the avant-garde, the school quickly became the leading art school in the post-revolutionary period. By merging art, life and technology, the VKhutemas Workshop aimed at training artist-constructors in the wake of rationalist principles. Key instructors were: Aleksandra Exter, Kazimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko and Nadezhda Udaltsova.

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Visitor Information

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Gallery Hours: Monday to Friday 10:00 am - 6:00 pm or by appointment

Nearest tube: Oxford Circus and Great Portland Street.