



Tango with Cows: Book Art of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910–1917

The formal beginnings of what came to be called Russian Futurism date to December 1911, when David Burliuk invited a young law student and aspiring poet named Benedikt Livshits to spend the Christmas holidays with his family in Chernianka, near the Black Sea. Here Livshits, Burliuk, and Burliuk's brothers, Vladimir and Nikolai, formed an association they called Hylaea, the ancient Greek name for Chernianka. Soon after, the poets Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, and Vladimir Mayakovsky joined the association.

In his memoirs, Livshits recalls that while traveling to Chernianka, David Burliuk showed him and Vladimir a photograph of Pablo Picasso's latest painting, unidentified by Livshits, but possibly *Ma jolie* (1911–12). The photograph, brought from Paris by the Russian painter Alexandra Exter, marked Livshits and the Burliuks' first encounter with French Cubism. They shared the belief that Cubist methods of depicting space and volume through multiple viewpoints and shifting planes could potentially alter one's vision of the world. In describing his early days in Chernianka, Livshits also writes vividly of another influence: Khlebnikov's new form of poetry, which he discovered for the first time in the manuscripts that Khlebnikov had left during his summer stay in 1910 with Larionov. Livshits contrasts the "limits of a language already constituted," already fixed in its planetary sphere, with Khlebnikov's poetry, which broke loose from the sphere and "overcame the law of gravity": "I saw language *come alive* with my very own eyes. The breath of the primordial word wafted into my face." Livshits marvels at Khlebnikov's exposure of the Slavic roots of words and of dormant meanings that give rise to new ones. As he recalls, the "wisdom of the East" thus multiplied "the experience of the West," and Chernianka became, in retrospect, "the intersection of coordinates [East and West, ancient and modern, word and image] which brought forth the movement in Russian poetry and painting called Futurism."

Notwithstanding their common absorption of Cubism, the Russian Futurists' allegiance to primitive Slavic forms and traditions highlights important differences between their art and that of the Italian Futurists. The poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of Italian Futurism, wrote in 1909 about deep changes in technology, science, and concepts of time and space, and called

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for the reinvention of all the arts. The Russian Futurists shared Marinetti's interest in new verbal and visual genres, but they were more inclined to "create new things, grown on the magnificent traditions of Russian antiquity." In 1922, a Russian critic noted that the neologism *budetlianstvo*—coined from the Russian word for "will be" and translated as "future-ness" or "will-be-ness"—described the Russian movement more accurately than Futurism, because it replaced the borrowed Western term with a word formed from Slavic roots.

The painterly component of Russian Futurism, called "Cubo-Futurism," drew upon the Cubist dissolution of the body into geometric planes and upon the Hylaeian poets' reawakening of ancient primitive and sacred traditions. Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov introduced Neoprimitivism in December 1909, when they displayed their paintings alongside folk, primitive, and religious objects, including ancient Scythian sculpture of the southern Russian Steppes (*kamennaia baba*), *lubki* (popular prints), icon paintings, and embroidery. Their parodic recasting of archaic forms and their secular representations of Orthodox imagery paralleled Khlebnikov's transformations of Russian words and Alexei Kruchenykh's crude and nonsensical word combinations. Poets and painters thus sought to express the dialogue between the ancient and modern, past and present, and sacred and secular that characterized modern Russian culture.

During the seven years before the Russian Revolution, these dualities played out in the medium of the book. In contrast to luxurious Symbolist book art, the Russian Futurist poets were often their own publishers and used the thin, brittle, wood-pulp paper they could afford. They cultivated a handcrafted quality through the use of unevenly cut, stapled, and pocket-sized pages that were written, drawn, or rubber-stamped rather than printed. The unpretentious results constituted an anti-establishment gesture.

Russian Futurism thus encompassed Neoprimitivism, Cubo-Futurism, and a new discourse about past and future. During the war years, poets and artists dispersed. A few, including Kruchenykh, Vasily Kamensky, Ilia Zdanevich, and his brother Kirill, established a Futurist artists' colony in Tblisi, Georgia. They continued to experiment with the transrational language they called *zaum'*, or "beyondsense," based on the autonomous nature of words. Other Futurists, such as Kazimir Malevich, abandoned the world of representation for painterly Suprematism. Despite the brief

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life of the Futurist movement, zaum' poetry and Russian avant-garde book art live on to the present day in Fluxus books and event scores, contemporary sound and visual poetry, artists' books, and most recently digital books. These draw in different ways upon ephemerality, materials, and the relation of word, image, and sound to reimagine the book as an autonomous, nonreferential, and experimental art form.

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