

## Alexandra Hopf: A Private Collection

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by Annabelle von Girsewald

“Future is our only objective:“ Alexander Rodchenko

For her solo show entitled *A Private Collection* Alexandra Hopf revisits Russia in the year 1922, a year after The First Working Group of Constructivists was formed. The collective was organized around such concepts as the economy of materials, meticulousness and the reduction of any means of décor. In the aftermath of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919-1920), Alexander Rodchenko was one significant member. A central figure of Russian Constructivism, Rodchenko served the second post-revolution state and industry after 1917. He personified the identity of a new kind of artist, the “constructor“ or builder, and he believed that the power of art could reshape society. Condemning the traditional concept of art and painting he preferred to work with industrial materials to improve the quality of objects. The constructivists identified their work as ‘intellectual production’.<sup>1</sup>

Hopf presents three female mannequins, each wearing a newly designed overall, posed as if they were viewers within the exhibition space. Overalls or production clothing were worn by Rodchenko and by actors on the first constructivist stage set of Vsevolod Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. The costumes were designed by Lyubov Popova. Rodchenko's overalls were designed by Varvara Stepanova, his wife, and were originally made of leather and wool, inspired by biomechanics and robots.<sup>2</sup> For this exhibition Hopf has recreated the overalls<sup>3</sup> in the same vein, abiding by the ethic truth of their materials.

Each model wears a simple pair of overalls made of canvas, lightweight, with four large square pockets: two on the upper body and two below the waist. Just below the hips, the material becomes wider while the length of the trouser legs tapers to a point reminiscent of angular constructivist shapes. The primed canvas is like a blank painting that serves as a projection surface for the viewer. Yet projection is accompanied by introjection. The overalls both define and deindividualize the figures, framing and mediating while representing the new socialist self. For the self can only exist through its own representation.<sup>4</sup> Thus the self is only knowable through appearance. The three models form a reinvented modernist collective embodying the ideals of the genderless constructor.

On the walls the viewer is confronted with posters of patterns and autonomous images. Using text sparingly, Hopf applies the language of constructivist graphic design and at times with abstraction; inadvertently they carry the potential of meaning. While Rodchenko's utilitarian ethos of constructivism was visible in his designs for magazines and posters through his use of striking typography with abstract designs (he also grasped the implications of new technology, creating imagery that could be mass produced),<sup>5</sup> Hopf also uses flat geometric designs, some misaligned, in her posters. One suggests space and the use of straight lines that don't quite meet and one faded circle echoes the larger one encircling it thereby unifying both types of lines. Using gouache and acrylic, Hopf works and reworks the surface of the posters, they now and again appear faded, making them transparent and fragile. They are self-referential; lettering and lines suggest the passing of time advertising the exhibition *A Private Collection* and works to come.

The exhibition continues in the basement with the installation entitled *The Estate of A. Rodchenko* where Hopf presents her new film and reverse paintings. In the space we encounter the video, *A Private Collection*, a documentary about a 16 mm fragment originally shot by Rodchenko. The film has recently been rediscovered depicting Rodchenko's stage design which was commissioned by theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Newly reworked in Hopf's film, the setting is dark and the camera circles endlessly around architectural elements.<sup>6</sup> It is unclear where the actual location is. Is this a house, a stage set, or do these modernist elements, which emerge and then disappear, represent Rodchenko's estate? Hopf touches upon the topics of private ownership and Rodchenko's legacy. To what extent can an artist permanently claim his own significant contributions and how can they be protected? In contemporary post-revolutionary Russia, the NEP (New Economic Policy) has reintroduced private ownership and the spirit of the free market economy is on the rise. The policy stands for everything the constructivists had fought against.

Consistently working within the ideology of construction, Hopf has created images of intricate constructivist costumes on panes of glass. These eight panes entail reverse painting. Hopf has covered each pane of glass with a base color of paint, etched outlines of angular costumes with diagonal elements and filled them with stark planes of color, which often bleed into one another. This collection of miniature costumes could easily be illustrating roles from a Deistvo drama, combining ritual, myth and drama, recalling a time when theatre received unlimited funds and was a great mass spectacle.<sup>7</sup> Hopf's costumes have aprons, squared off shoulders, and the dresses have an angular shape, as do the overalls, thereby expressing their functional purpose. The ascetic and asexual Bolshevik man and woman were expected to build a new world and destruct the previous bourgeois culture.<sup>8</sup>

Each costume is preserved yet now spotty and is set within their own frame of cubist patterns. They represent roles once performed and mediated both on and off stage. Fashion created by and worn by female actresses and artists represented the socialist female artist, who was a legal citizen far earlier than her Western counterparts. She was able to hold office, divorce and abortion were legal and pay equity was enforced.

One may be left asking what is the desired image for artists today? What roles are available and visible through fashion and or on stage? In post-revolutionary Russia, artists met the demand and challenge to build and make images for the state. Who is producing for whom now? Alexandra Hopf presents the viewer with multiple forms of identity. The identity of the artist is visible through her display of overalls, through her glass paintings of costume design, within the staged context of her film, and as announced in her posters. Translating the language of constructivism into her own she reminds us of how fashion and resulting representations of the self are framed and mediated. On or off stage the roles of the artist are equally real. In this exhibition Hopf portrays the identity of the artist as representing multiple unstable personas, whose roles are interchangeable based on variations from Russia 1922. The artist appropriates the past for the present within her unique futuristic historical language of intellectual production.

Working in the media of video, painting, and sculpture, Alexandra Hopf reconstructs the avantgarde within her own museological approach. Hopf creates discourses of knowledge in her work appearing from the past yet from a contemporary polyphonic position. The viewer is lead anew into the enticing past to rediscover. Hopf questions not only past frames of reference but makes us aware of our own. She is the auteur of all forces, creating signifying systems referencing psychoanalysis, design, film, theatre and exhibition history.

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<sup>1</sup> Constructivism, Oxford University Press, 2009, [http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme\\_id=10955&section\\_id=T019195](http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10955&section_id=T019195)

<sup>2</sup> Djurdja Bartlett, *FashionEast: the spectre that haunted socialism*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2010). p. 15

<sup>3</sup> Developed and conceived together with Min Stiller.

<sup>4</sup> See Lynda Nead quoted in Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame. Boundaries, Dress and the Body*, (New York, NY: Berg 1988), p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Constructivism, Oxford University Press, 2009, [http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme\\_id=10955&section\\_id=T019195](http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10955&section_id=T019195)

<sup>6</sup> Model for the film built by Luis Berrios Negrón.

<sup>7</sup> James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917 – 1920*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 3, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Bartlett, *FashionEast*, p. 14.