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## The Paradox of Vladimir Tatlin's "Monument to the Third International"



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Published: July 29, 2011

Believe it or not, you may actually need to know something about the Third International to understand the significance of Vladimir Tatlin's "Monument to the Third International."

The never-realized architectural project was famously meant to stand some 1,300 feet high — a defiant 300 feet taller than the Eiffel Tower — and was loaded with cosmic symbolism: its tilt was designed to mirror the tilt of the earth, it was meant to be aimed at the North Star, and it was to contain massive glass chambers modeled after the primary Platonic forms (sphere, cube, pyramid) that were to rotate slowly, the lowest once every year, the next once every month, and the highest once every day.

The 16-foot model of the iconic tower that is just about to end [its run at Tony Shafrazi Gallery](#), was commissioned by Swedish curator Pontus Hulten for his pioneering Tatlin survey in 1968. How true it is to Tatlin's vision is [not without controversy](#), but it is probably as close as we'll get to experiencing the visionary project as his contemporaries would have, since it was built with the license of the artist's widow and the help of one of the original engineers.

Up close, the model doesn't exactly disappoint, but it doesn't exactly stop the heart either. There is something jarring about the contrast between "Monument"'s shimmering life as a symbol and its actual gray materiality here. The painted spiral of wood struts that forms its dynamic profile appears a

bit prosaic up close. The rotating chambers at the heart of the tower, powered by some kind of motor with a very visible chain, jerk and creak and generally do not convince that they represent a functional design.

"What happened in '17 in a social sense had been carried out in our finecraft in 1914, when 'material, volume, and construction' were established as a principle," Tatlin wrote in 1920, aligning his brand of non-objective abstraction with social revolution. But this is an obvious subreption: the February and October Revolutions of 1917 involved millions of people, while Russia's avant garde never had more than a small audience. The two are simply phenomena of different orders, and there is no reason to think that the one was the logical reflection of the other.

Before the revolution, Russia was a country where precocious capitalist industry — the Putilov Plant in St. Petersburg, cradle of the communist uprising, was by some estimates the world's largest factory — existed side-by-side with a despotism that was overwhelmingly peasant-based and illiterate. Tatlin was a onetime icon painter, and his entire aesthetic framework bore his country's contradictions: He was both ultramodern and attracted to the mystical. Even post-revolution, at the time of the "Tower" proposal, Tatlin approvingly cites the numerological gobbledygook of Velimir Khlebnikov — a linguist who tried to interpret world history via the mystical significance of the number 317 — in his 1919 manifesto "The Initiating Unit in Collective Creativity."

Tatlin was himself not exactly politically constant. [Like most of the rest of the Russian avant garde](#), he had briefly converted to pro-war patriotism at the outset of World War I (unlike the Bolsheviks, who were consistently antiwar). The famous 1915 "0.10" show is mainly remembered in art history texts as a standoff between Tatlin's so-called corner-reliefs and his arch-nemesis Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square." But, it was also a political event: 50 percent of the proceeds were promised to war charities as a gesture of patriotic fervor.

World War I was a disaster for Russia. Three million Russians, military and civilian, perished, and the collapse of Russian society under this pressure led to the democratic and socialist revolutions of 1917. The hardships of the war strangled the audience for avant-garde art, and artists turned antiwar with the rest of the population as life became impossible and the cynicism and brutality of the conflict became clear. After the fall of the czar, the well-respected Tatlin was appointed director of the art section of the Commissariat of Enlightenment, helping to implement a plan for monumental propaganda in Moscow. It was in during this stint that he hatched the scheme for his "Monument."

The same years when Tatlin was focused on that project, 1918-1921, brought the Russian civil war, waged between socialist Reds and czarist, bourgeois Whites. Millions more died. Russian industry was all but wiped out. There was famine in the cities. The organization that the proposed "Monument" was supposedly to serve as headquarters for, the Third International, also known as Comintern, was a coordinating body of world communist parties whose purpose was to spread the revolution — until Stalin adopted the theory of "Communism in One Country" to justify his rule, the common-sense view among all Russian Marxists was that the country had neither the industrial capacity to marshal nor the wealth to redistribute to carry the torch of socialism on its own. But the Comintern bungled its support for an uprising in revolutionary Germany; by 1921, the social experiments of the USSR were being strangled in their cradle, when a pragmatic Lenin reintroduced a temporary form of capitalism via the New Economic Policy as a stopgap.

Tatlin's scheme for a massive, triumphalist tower, while inspiringly experimental and thrillingly ambitious, also could not help but appear a wee bit preoccupied with fantasy at a time when people were starving. "We must still put off all large-scale construction," Trotsky remarks in a tetchy critique in his "Literature and Revolution" (drafted in 1922 and 1923). "The originators of gigantic projects, men like Tatlin, are given involuntarily a respite for more thought, for revision, and for radical

reexamination." The fact that the tower, with its epic industrial-esoteric symbolism, was pitched as a real project speaks of the sheer sense of collective possibility in building a new society opened up by the revolution, but its megalomaniacal unwieldiness speaks of an inability to think about the specifics of how actually to act on that possibility, or interface with that new society, a legacy of the avant garde's isolated place in Russian society. Tatlin's "Monument" was unrealized because it was unrealizable. For an artist who coined the Constructivist's motivating motto, "Art Into Life," it is remarkably far from even attempting to make the leap "into life."

And yet, along with Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin" of 1925, the "Monument to the Third International" remains one of the most enduring images of Russia's period of revolutionary optimism (in 1932, Stalin introduced Socialist Realism as a state style, and Tatlin died in obscurity as a conventional easel painter). Even today, Tatlin's artistic practice is occasionally romanticized as some kind of model for socially engaged artists. But it is, finally, important to take his "Monument" in its entire complexity. What its story shows, in fact, is the tragic rift between art and politics; it speaks of a great avant-garde artist's inability to connect his imagination with his present — even if it also shows the vast space for the imagination opened up by that particular moment.

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