

that existed in the time of the Russian Revolution and those political events that influenced its destiny and to reflect on the reforms in media, literature, urban space and aesthetics that Russia was going through in the post-revolutionary decades.

### Overview of the contributions

Mikhail Evseyev opens this issue with an analysis of the reorganization of the Higher Artistic School that was initiated immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution in order to make art education accessible to the masses and to promote art as an important tool for the social transformations in the Soviet state. As a result of the reform, the Higher Artistic School of the Imperial Academy of Arts of St. Petersburg was transformed into the Free Art Studios (Svomas) that in its short existence became the platform for the production of iconic works of Avant-garde art such as Tatlin's model of the monument to the Third International. The Svomas managed to educate a whole generation of Avant-garde artists thus achieving its goal of providing education to the wider public, which "seems unique and unexpected in light of the grandiose socio-economic shifts of those turbulent times and considering the violent conditions of the Civil war" (Evseyev, this issue).

Robert Bird investigates the journalistic documentary project *A Day of the World*, authored by the writer Maxim Gorky and the journalist Mikhail Kol'tsov. The ambitious project aimed to collect all of the news published across the globe on a single day – September 27, 1935 – in one illustrated volume. Bird tells the story of this project as well as of its international and cross-media networks, inevitably revealing the tensions within the socialist aesthetics "between documentary and fiction, between publicity and intimacy, and between revolutionary time and the aberrant temporalities of individual experience" (Bird, this issue).

Irina Seits provides a closer reading of Walter Benjamin's essays *Experience and Poverty* and *Moscow*, by juxtaposing the records of his visit to Russia in 1926–1927 with her own reflections over the nature

of the transformations in the urban space of an early Soviet city. By using the dystopian image of Mickey Mouse as the desired inhabitant of modernity introduced by Benjamin in "Experience and Poverty" Seits provides an allegorical and comparative interpretation of the substantial changes in the living space of Moscow that were witnessed by Benjamin.

**TORA LANE CONTRIBUTES** in this issue with her reading of Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev i Pustota* (transl. as *Buddha's Little Finger or Clay Machine Gun*), by situating her analyses within the contemporary debates on realism and simulacra. She claims that Pelevin, in his story about the period of the civil war, "allegedly undermines the hegemony of the totalizing Soviet Narrative" through his use of post-Soviet language and post-modernist style of narration (Lane, this issue). Yet Tora Lane questions if Pelevin is really able "to open up for a non-totalizing narrative about Russian political history. On the contrary", she continues, "the Soviet myth of Chapaev lends itself to the totality of the private myth" (Ibid).

**THE CONTROVERSIAL LEGACY** of the Russian Revolution sparks interests in various corners of the world, which can be seen in the number of commemorative events such as international conferences, art exhibitions, and film and book releases. The most prominent exhibition that has attracted attention and raised debates in the mass media throughout Europe – "Revolution. Russian Art 1917–1932" at the Royal Academy of Art in London – is reviewed by Helene Carlbäck. ✕

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### Russian Art 1917–1932

“The painting can be positioned in the context of the public aim of liberating women from an outdated femininity.”

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# Becoming tools for artistic consciousness of the people

The higher art school and independent arts studios in Petrograd (1918–1921)

by **Mikhail Evseyev**

### abstract

In the present article, the main principles of the reforms in Revolutionary Russia in the sphere of art are analyzed through the example of the reorganization of the Higher Artistic School of the Imperial Academy of Arts of St. Petersburg into the Free Art Studios (Svomas). The studios were to become a tool for the transformation of the surrounding reality and for the development of the artistic consciousness of the people. The intended result of those transformations was the complete spiritual and material harmonization of society, while the perfection of artistic interpretation was to be replaced with the perfection of social living. The modest and delicate approach of the new government to the sphere of artistic education, including the close attention and appreciation to the Avant-garde trends in art along with the propagation of the accessibility of art and artistic education to the underprivileged classes seems unique and unexpected in light of the grandiose socio-economic shifts of those turbulent times and considering the violent conditions of the Civil war. The research presented here is based on the archival materials and is one of the very first publications on the problems associated with the reform of artistic education in the first post-revolutionary years.

**KEY WORDS:** Art education, Avant-garde, Petrograd.

On October 26, 1917 – the first day of Russia's socialist Revolution – the Second All-Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies issued a decree on the formation of the Workers' and Peasants' Government – the Council of Peoples' Commissars ("Sovnarkom"). Its leadership was assumed by Vladimir Lenin.

In order to set things in the new way and create a functioning system, which would allow the richness of Russian cultural inheritance to be equally shared and spread among the people, a new department had to be put in place, a department that fully reflected the Republican form of enlightenment. That Department was known as the Commissariat of Peoples' Enlightenment, which oversaw the elementary ("the unitary labor") and higher-education schools, research projects, the protection of historical and cultural heritage, the establishment of museums, art and architecture, theatre and cinema, music and literature. Considering the outbreak of the Civil war and the overall political situation, the Peoples' Enlightenment was justly dubbed "The Third Front", for it began the long struggle to awaken the yearning for knowledge and education among the population. The first commander of the "Narkompros" (the Russian abbreviation for the Commissariat of People's Enlightenment) was the

writer, teacher, and professional revolutionary Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharsky.

The number of tasks that lay before Lunacharsky and his Commissariat was so great that even their simple listing exceeds the size and format of this article, thus we take a look at a mere drop and its reflections to perceive the main principles of those reforms that were carried out in Russia after the October Revolution of 1917.

### Mission: create a need for art among the people

One of the main themes of the cultural socialist policies in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution was the enlightenment and education of the people. Without awakening the demand for art in the people, art could not become an organic part of individuals' lives and thus become the means for the world's transformation. The Revolutionary epoch gave birth to numerous art concepts, including art as the instrument of life-building (*zhiznestrojenie*); as the means of transformation of the material environment, of the biosphere, and of the artistic perception of life; and as the means of accomplishing the total spiritual and material harmonization of society. Such harmonization could be completed on the level of the social being, and the perfection of living itself would thus eliminate the necessity of art as the perfected interpretation of reality.

The Commissariat believed that only if the aesthetic consciousness of the half-literate peasants were raised to an adequate level could there be any hope that art could become an instrument of knowledge and a true social force. This was to be achieved through the elimination of so-called "graphic illiteracy", the preservation of cultural and historic monuments, the creation of a chain of museums throughout Russia, and the promotion and support of traditional folk art – the art of the masses.

In this striving for the total elimination of "graphic illiteracy", the problem of pedagogical personnel was especially urgent as there was a great demand for artists who were capable of not only painting traditional works for the "luxury of the others", but who could see the new reformed reality in their dreams, as Vladimir Mayakovski stated: "the streets – our brushes, the squares – our palettes".<sup>1</sup>

The poetic dreams were to be realized on the basis of the very heterogeneous human material and in the face of the very scarce resources and dire conditions of the ongoing Civil war.

New art schools, centers, projects, teachers, and constructiv-

ists were badly needed. The institutional organ that was tasked with managing this highly complicated and complex process was the Departments of Fine Arts of the Commissariat of Peoples' Enlightenment supported by the advisory colleges on the business of art and artistic production that were established in all regions of the country. Those departments employed both professional artists and art scholars who had the unprecedented opportunity to manage both creative and administrative functions.<sup>2</sup>



The Free Studios (Svomas) in the building of the Academy of Fine Arts, Petrograd, 1920s.

SOURCE: CENTRAL STATE ARCHIVE OF CINEMA, PHONO- AND PHOTO- DOCUMENTS, ST. PETERSBURG

### The total reformation of the Higher Art School

It all began in Petrograd, the former capital of the Russian Empire and the cradle of the Revolution. The first step was the reform of the Higher Art School, which originally was part of the Ministry of the Imperial Court (before 1894) and from 1894 to 1918 was a part of the Imperial Fine Arts Academy (which was, again, subject to the same Ministry).

The Fine Arts Academy was disbanded by a special decree of the Sovnarkom (Council of Peoples' Commissars) on April 12, 1918.<sup>3</sup> The Higher Art School was preserved, but reformed, in accordance with the new requirements of the Republic. In reforming the Higher Art School, the Fine Arts Department of the Narkompros (Commissariat of the Peoples' Enlightenment) sought to create a liberal school that would become a true cradle for the country's artistic life.<sup>4</sup>

The Petrograd State Liberal Art Studios – as the reformed Higher Art School was now called – became a federation of autonomous studios that shared the same organizational and financial structure.<sup>5</sup> The creation of such a federation was not, in fact, an innovation. Independent art studios, led by individual professors, had been the basis of the Higher Art School when it was formally separated from the Fine Arts Academy during the 1894 reform. Those independent studios, on a certain level, inherited some fundamental principles of Renaissance-era schools, with the visual method of training artists. Yet the Higher Art School (from 1894 onwards) was basically separated into two different courses or levels.

The first level (known as the "Classes") taught the basics of the profession. The second level (the "Studios") was aimed at forming the artistic method of the students. The school lacked inner unity, being governed by two separate branches of the administration – the Art Council (responsible for the classes) and the Professors' Council (overseeing the Studios). This proved to be a great flaw for the Higher Art School. For example, the professors of the nature class remained clueless about what they were preparing their students for<sup>6</sup>, and the principles of the Liberal Art Studios found no proper implementation or development. Thus the attempts at creating a new art school failed. Its methodology found no proper grounds for further development, and it badly needed other conditions in order to function.<sup>7</sup> This is why such an outstanding Russian artist as Ilya Repin had a complete right to say: "I am sick

at the mere thought of continuing, no matter what happens [...] Supporting this accused, state-owned registration office of art is far beyond reprehension".<sup>8</sup> "I am leaving the administration [...]", he wrote, "I cannot take it anymore."<sup>9</sup>

In 1907 a number of the Higher Art School professors called out for its reform. The majority thought it was necessary to take the 1894 reform further – to liquidate the classes, encourage the development of the studios, and give necessary freedom of ac-

tion to the professors in developing their educational programs and methods. “There was even an idea put forward that each professor should be given a right to personally provide students with a certificate on the completion of their studies at the studio, instead of the Academy’s diploma, and the very length of the studies was to be established by the supervising professor of the studio”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Higher Art School was turned into an association of independent studios, where the final stage of professional education was to be completed after students finished their studies in provincial art schools, private studios, or had sufficient experience of self-training. The conglomerate of independent studios – as a base for the new school – was put forward as the favored model by the Commission that was responsible for the reform of the Fine Arts Academy in the summer of 1917.<sup>11</sup> “Since I was a member of the Commission and personally took part in all of its meetings,” wrote the artist and art critic V.A. Denisov in 1921, “I can rightfully say that all of the basic principles, established by the Commission, became the foundation [...] for free state art studios.”<sup>12</sup>

### The basic principles of the liberal Higher Art School

“The Conditions” of the Svomas were passed at the Conference of Petrograd and Moscow Art Students in April of 1918.<sup>13</sup> The students called for the foundation of the federation of autonomous studios, and their requests were taken into consideration by the Fine Arts Department of the Commissariat. The text of the Conditions is known from the reports written by the head of Narkompros’s Fine Arts Department D.P. Shternberg. The main aim of an independent studio’s educational program was to provide the students with specialized art training, allowing them to gain proficiency in accordance with their individual inclinations. The apprenticeship was free of charge and lasted for five years.<sup>14</sup> The studios accepted students who were 16 years of age at any time of the year they entered regardless of their gender or citizenship. No diplomas of previous educations were requested, and no entry competitions or examinations were held.<sup>15</sup> Classes took place in the evenings, which allowed students to combine studies and work. The basic principles of the application instruction, passed by the Arts Collegiate<sup>16</sup>, on August 8, 1918, directly coincided with the Sovnarkom Decree “On Higher Education Application” (passed on August 2, 1918).<sup>17</sup> The fact that no possession of previous experience or specialized training was requested from the applicants of 1918 and in the following few years obviously created substantial difficulties for the education process. The situation became even more complicated because the studios themselves were in the process of reorganization. But that was the only possible way to liberalize art schools at that time, and the road to art finally opened to the wide public of underprivileged social classes.<sup>18</sup>

The administration of the Svomas and the organization of their educational programs was taken on by an elected Council of Supervisors and the Commissar of the Fine Arts Department of the Narkompros. The studios were divided into the follow-

ing three types: studios with an elected supervisor, studios without a supervisor, and studios with a supervisor appointed by the Fine Arts Department of the Narkompros. Students, organized into groups of 20 on the basis of their artistic inclinations, had the right to choose their supervisors. If the studio was entirely dedicated to a concrete specialization, the number of students was not restricted. The experimental studio that had no supervisor allowed its students to work independently, providing them with the necessary materials and a designated area in an “artistic setting”. The third type of studios – whose supervisors were appointed by the Fine Arts Department – were tasked with examining the educational programs and were to introduce new artistic trends to the Svomas.

All the studios welcomed first of all young masters. Students were bound to work with the chosen supervisor. They had the right to change their supervisor, but no more than once a year. Each artist had the right to offer his candidacy for the supervisor’s post, and the two-year term of the supervisor could be terminated if his studio was not visited for over three months.<sup>19</sup>

### The theoretical grounds of the Svomas program

The Arts Collegiate developed the theoretical grounds of the Svomas program, which sought to stimulate the artistic and sculptural perception of the world.

“A tested, attentive eye has opened and will open a boundless, enormous world of natural phenomena, which remains hidden for most people.<sup>20</sup> Because of this perception and an artist’s ingenuity,<sup>21</sup> these phenomena – as stated in the program – have found their reflection in artworks. But the great masterpieces reveal themselves only to a highly cultured eye. This is why the main goal of the artistic development is the comprehensive training of the eye, its perceptive powers and ingenuity as well as of the conscious choice of forms of artistic expressions.”<sup>22</sup>

The students were given a chance to decide for themselves which directions in artistic life were the most vibrant and creative, and this was achieved through the students’ right to elect those artists as their supervisors who seemed to them the most talented and capable of giving the desired forms of art education.

### The opening of the Svomas

At the opening of the Svomas on October 10, 1918, A.V. Lunacharsky gave a speech where he said: “I personally think that this small festive event, at which we’re all gathered, fully reflects the spirit of the Socialist Revolution”.<sup>23</sup> Other presenters talked about the tasks of art. “Up till now [...] 9/10 of what we did was the destruction of the old forms of art. Now [...] we enter the path of creation [...] The broadest horizons are opening before you [...] We need our houses, streets, gardens, and bridges to reflect true artistry. You must bring beauty into the homes, so



The Petrograd Collegiate on the Affairs of Arts and Artistic production of the Department of Fine Arts of the Commissariat of the People’s Enlightenment. 1918-1919.

SOURCE: FAMILY OF PANINS PRIVATE ARCHIVE

an integral part of the Svomas’ educational programs. The latter course on the sociology of art was personally taught by A.V. Lunacharsky, who officially enrolled as a professor of the Svomas.<sup>24</sup> The introduction and development of new courses could probably be ascribed to the aforementioned commission. The program of the history of art forms course included:

- 1) The historiography of art (from Plato and Aristotle to modern materialist concepts).
- 2) The history of art, with the main focus on the historic method and the evolution of artistic forms.
- 3) The analysis of the origins of

various elements of artistic forms (color, shape, space, composition, and material) and their historic evolution.

- 4) The history of the origins and developments of fields of arts.
- 5) The history of the artists’ introduction of new materials in their arsenal (stone, wood, metal, parchment, paper, canvas, reinforced concrete, and paints) as well as the history of technology of art.<sup>25</sup>

**THIS PROGRAM CLEARLY** represented an innovative spirit and shows the methodological historicity and wide range of knowledge and information that were offered to the students.

D.P. Shternberg’s decree on the establishment and increase of the hours dedicated to the study of nature in the studios<sup>26</sup> contradicted the usual misconception that reformers of the artistic education declared war on “naturalism” and disregarded the interest in the depiction of the human body as a “prejudice of the bourgeoisie”.<sup>24</sup> It was in 1921 when the alumni of the former Academy, now charged with the Svomas reform, followed their new dean’s first decree with a severe reduction of the hours given to drawing from nature. “Instead of studying nature, we were forced to look at plaster cast models. That caused some students to leave the Academy. I was among them,” remembered artist B.G. Kreitser.<sup>25</sup>

### The results of the first year of reforms

In order to develop a proper education plan, the Fine Arts Department created a special commission that united the Arts Collegiate and the Svomas’ supervisors.<sup>26</sup> Complex questions were constantly raised, including the requirements for graduation from the studios and the issuing of diplomas,<sup>27</sup> the development of an autonomous educational plan for architecture,<sup>28</sup> the organization of a monument-painting studio, the introduction of courses on the technological aspects and materials for sculptors,

that every child lives and develops in an artistic atmosphere”.<sup>24</sup> However, 20 days after the Svomas’ official opening, the Presidium of the Council of Supervisors already saw the need to send the following decision to A.E. Karev, the commissar of the Petrograd State Independent Art and Education Studios: “We ask you to issue an order right from today to stop the enrollment of new students to all faculties, since the designated commission – after inspecting our building – came to the conclusion that our facilities are unable to take in more people. Enrollment must be stopped temporarily”.<sup>25</sup> It seems that there were more than enough people willing to study in free schools (by September 16 there were 817 applicants,<sup>26</sup> and by the end of 1918 their number reached the maximum – 1,305).<sup>27</sup> Before its reform, the Higher Art School encompassed 10 studios with 365 students;<sup>28</sup> after the reform, the Svomas expanded to 29 studios with 762 students (as of October 1918).<sup>29</sup>

### The new academic approach called for new methods

In January 1919, the Arts Collegiate raised a very important question regarding the teaching of art history in the studios. The former method of teaching with its listing of archaeological, formally-aesthetic, chronological, and biographical data was completely outdated and could not, in the opinion of the Arts Collegiate, be retained in the new school. A new academic and theoretical approach was needed, but art history as a science was not yet equipped with such a method, even though it proved capable of its reception.

A commission to develop a new method of art history teaching was formed,<sup>30</sup> but nothing is known on the course of its work. However, in July 1919 the Arts Collegiate issued a decree introducing lecture courses on the history of artistic styles, the history of art forms, and the sociology of art. All of these became



visual education for painters, topography for landscape artists, etc.<sup>39</sup> In July of 1920, the Arts Collegiate, in response to a request from the Student Conference, decided to organize a joint architectural class that was mandatory for all architecture students before their admission to the independent studios.<sup>40</sup>

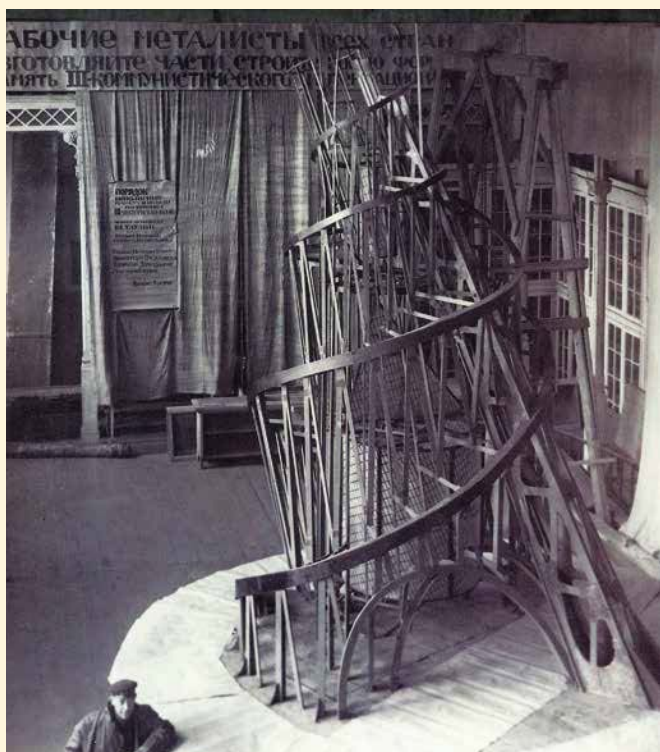
During one of the Supervisor Council's Presidium sessions, D.P. Shternberg said that the reinstatement of the Professors' Council would not be tolerated because it posed a direct threat to the autonomy of the students, and the Fine Arts Department would never concede to it;<sup>41</sup> however, a Board of Academics was nevertheless soon established because the students proved unable to handle all of the issues that came up in the routine life of the Svomas.<sup>42</sup>

On the first anniversary of the Petrograd State Free Art and Educational Studios, on October 10, 1919, the *Art Life* newspaper wrote:

**“The results of the first year might not be as grand as the studio founders expected.**

Like all higher education schools, the studios went through a very difficult year, in the face of the hardship that the whole country was living through. Nevertheless, the studios undertook a great amount of creative work. Students were liberated from the suffocating boundaries of old academism and left free to explore the world of art. Of course there were some mistakes, but no new enterprise was ever free from them.”<sup>43</sup>

Sometimes the studios had to be closed due to heating or power outages;<sup>44</sup> sometimes they were emptied due to military mobilization; and sometimes academic life came to a standstill, for example, when both the supervisors and the students had to paint posters for the “Propaganda Windows of the Russian Telegraph” (the so-called “ROST windows”).<sup>45</sup> Provisional troops, consisting of artists, went on expeditions to get bread for the capital cities. Such inconsistencies in the program compelled D.P. Shternberg to write:



The Model of the monument to the Third Communist International in the space of the former Mosaic studio in the building of the Svomas (Academy of Fine Arts). 1920. V. E. Tatlin is standing next to the Model.

SOURCE: CENTRAL STATE ARCHIVE OF CINEMA, PHOTO- AND PHOTO DOCUMENTS, ST. PETERSBURG

“We were dreaming of tubes of paint, reproductions, and paper. We tried to solve the painful question of the students' attendance<sup>46</sup> with the decree on monthly registration of the students.<sup>47</sup> All students must work. There cannot be any exception – neither for the ‘left’, nor for the ‘right’. Those who miss classes discredit our new deed.”<sup>48</sup>

Yet in comparison with other Petrograd colleges and universities, which were almost empty, the retained an almost normal form of academic life, as was highlighted by the aforementioned article in *Art Life*.<sup>49</sup> “The former academic Korovin told me,” noted A.V. Lunacharsky at a meeting of the SKSO Council Commissars<sup>50</sup>, “that the artistic life was blossoming in those higher education facilities, which previously were seen as death traps for any form of talent.”<sup>51</sup>

Svomas students actively participated in the life of revolutionary Petrograd. For instance, during the course of the night of January 18 to 19, 1919, the students and supervisors of the Free

Studios were commissioned by the Petrograd District Military Commissariat No 71 to paint a colossal 500 square meter mourning poster in memory of Karl Liebknecht and Rose Luxemburg.<sup>52</sup> In February of the same year, students decorated the library-train *Books-to the People*, which was sent to the frontline by the Union of Communes of the Northern Region.<sup>53</sup> The task of decorating Petrograd before the Second Comintern Congress was also undertaken by the Svomas.<sup>54</sup> Many more examples could, of course, be mentioned.

Wishing to improve the economic conditions of the students, the Fine Arts Department organized an Art Labor Bureau at the Svomas. The Bureau accepted commissions for posters, portraits of revolutionary leaders (paintings and sculptures), banners, decorations, monumental sculptures, and graphic works, and it supplied the schools and clubs with lecturers and teachers capable of teaching painting, drawing, and sculpture classes.<sup>55</sup> The students welcomed the organization of the Bureau, calling it “the long-expected liberation of art from any pressure of consumers and patrons” and “a sufficing and necessary help from the State”.<sup>56</sup>

In November 1919, the first exhibition of the Svomas students' works was opened, and in the first two months it was visited by several thousand people. In October 1920, a second exhibition followed. The best works were purchased by the State.<sup>57</sup> In December of 1920, the Latvian-born painter P.A. Vikhvellin, the talented disciple of landscape artist A.A. Rylov, was the first one in two years of the Svomas' existence to be awarded with the official title of “Artist”.<sup>58</sup>

### The “lefts” and the “rights” at Svomas

There was a lot of deliberation on the “left-wing dominance” in the Art School during the Narkompress Fine Arts Department's era, probably in reference to N.I. Altman, V.D. Baranov-Rossine, A.E. Karev, K.S. Malevich, and V.E. Tatlin. However, such a perception could hardly be supported by documentary evidence if one were to examine the list of studios established as part of the Svomas movement in 1918 and led by the non-leftist masters such as A.A. Andreeva, V.V. Belyaev, L.N. Benoit, I.Y. Ginsburg, V.I. Dubnetsky, G.R. Zaleman, L.A. Ilyin, D.N. Kardovsky, V.I. Kozlinskii, V.A. Kosyakov, V.V. Lishev, A.T. Matveyev, O.R. Munz, K.S. Petrov-Vodkin, A.N. Popov, I.A. Puni, L.V. Rudnev, A.A. Rylov, V.E. Savinskii, I.A. Fomin, E.Y. Stalberg, L.V. Shervud, and V.I. Shukhaev, as well as the separate studios without supervisors.<sup>59</sup> The list itself suggests that the numbers were not in favor of the “left-wing” artists.

Another subject of criticism was the creation of special studios that were “appointed” to the Svomas by the Fine Arts Department. These were seen as being lobbied for by the Department to eliminate the possibility for unexpected results.<sup>60</sup> Although there was initial opposition, this was one of the means through which modernist Russian art made its way into the Svomas. The Fine Arts Department introduced new supervisors, offering the students the chance to meet and accept them. Through the appointment of Avant-garde supervisors, the students were, in fact, introduced to a new form of conceptual

art that was radically different from the late academism and “*peredvizhnik*” realism of the masters who had been teaching at the Academy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and that the students who had started their studies before the Revolution and who had continued their training during the reforms were accustomed to.

It was natural that it took some time to digest the artistic projecting and constructivism of V. Tatlin and K. Malevich as well as to digest the Avant-garde art methods of N. Altman, K. Petrov-Vodkin, and V. Kozlinsky. But the historical times demanded such changes and demanded new art. And even if a supervisor were to be appointed, it was still impossible to tie up students to him because they still possessed freedom in choosing the studio they would attend. The supervisors, as was said before, were removed from the office if their studios were not visited for more than three months. Such was the case with Y.P. Annenkov, appointed as the painting studio supervisor in April of 1919 and sacked from his position in June 1920 because no one attended his studio.<sup>61</sup> But that precedent was rather exceptional. The results of the voting for supervisors, which took place in September 1918, were not surprising, even though not a single student wished to take classes with N.I. Altman, only two joined V.E. Tatlin's studio, and an incredible number of 99 chose L.N. Benoit as their supervisor.<sup>62</sup> L.N. Benoit was well known because the students enrolled before 1918 were continuing their classes, while V.E. Tatlin, N.I. Altman, and L.A. Bruni had not yet established reputations as teachers. However, the state of affairs began to change rapidly. For instance, after October 15, 1918, L.N. Benoit's studio retained only 50 students, while N.I. Altman gained 38. The number of students taking classes under V.D. Baranov-Rossine increased from 15 to 35, while D.N. Kardovsky's class decreased from 83 to 43 and Hugo Zaleman lost 8 out of his 22 students.<sup>63</sup> V.E. Tatlin – who practiced the most unusual and Avant-garde methods in his work – had steadily gained a substantial number of followers, and by the fall of 1920 there were no less than 18 students in his class.<sup>64</sup>

### Studios were reformed and the “red students” took power

In March 1921 – during the reorganization of the Commissariat of Peoples' Enlightenment taking place in the turmoil of the first phase of the country's New Economic Policy – the Petrograd Free State Art and Education Studios were transferred to the care of the Petrograd Department of Education (Petroproforb).<sup>65</sup> The studios were reformed, and because the reformation was led by the former graduates of the old Imperial Academy, they succeeded in creating a “proper and elegant decoration” of the new academy. Under the pretense of introducing stricter academic plans and countering economic impracticalities, the school was now bound by impracticalities of a different sort – the vision of art and its functions was once again limited, the newly-forged connections with contemporary life were cut, the school was forced to give up its democratic principles, and the training was again dominated exclusively by classic, traditional art.

The new reformers who took power over the Svomas (the so-

called Provisional Presidium of the Svomas headed by E.Y. Shtalberg) began with the liquidation of those studios that did not fit in with the old views on the goals and forms of art.<sup>66</sup> The studios of A.A. Andreyev (so called Proletcult) and V.E. Tatlin – which identified themselves outside the boundaries of tradition – were closed. It is more difficult to explain the closure of A.T. Matveyev's studio<sup>67</sup> because he and two of his students – Karl Zale and Victor Sinaisky – together were responsible for over half of the monuments erected in Petrograd in 1918–1919. The same happened to V.E. Savinsky – to the great surprise of the artist himself because he was a known disciple of the famous Russian artist P.P. Chistyakov – as well as to the shock of the 50 students of his studio. “When the Academy was led by the commissars Karev and Shkolnik,” said the students with regards to the Provisional Presidium's actions, “they, in spite of being left-wing artists, truly valued Savinski's great experience and provided him with a studio.”<sup>68</sup>

A.A. Andreyev's studio was filled with recruits from different Soviet organizations and political departments of the Red Army. It was a studio composed exclusively of the proletariat and the new “red students” movement. The Union of the Workers of Art called his studio “the leading fighters” in propaganda artwork.<sup>69</sup>

The project of the architectural memorial to the Comintern, developed by V.E. Tatlin and widely known since its presentation in 1921 at the 8th Congress of the Soviets, revealed the great perspective of the artist's endeavors, and A.V. Lunacharsky's intervention allowed Tatlin, as well as other suspended supervisors, to continue their work.<sup>70</sup> A special directive decree, issued by Commissar Lunacharsky, called all education programs in art schools to be invalid “before they are affirmed by the State.”<sup>71</sup>

The one-sided nature of the 1921 reform was discussed on October 29 of the same year at a special congress of delegates from the Narkompress's Academic Center and other Soviet organizations, such as the Glavprofob, Petrogubpolitprosvet, etc. The congress acknowledged the right for equal recognition of traditional academic forms alongside the new art movements aimed at bringing artistry to the working-class environment.<sup>72</sup> A similar decision was made by the 5th Petrograd Conference of the Union of the Workers of Arts and the All-Russian Conference on Artistic Enlightenment.<sup>73</sup> The Svomas were reformed into an organization known as VHUTEMAS – 2 (to differentiate from VHUTEMAS – 1, which was based in Moscow). The prolonged series of reforms, which took place in the Petrograd art school, continued over the next ten years – a period that lies outside of the chronological boundaries of this article.


### Art became secondary to the economy and ideology

The Independent Studios of 1918–1920 were the logical conclusion of a process that had been in the works for many years, which was a tendency to transform traditional academic schools into a federation of studios, which seemed a panacea to the *peredvizhniki* that predominated at the end of the 19th century. The new rules of admittance tore down the social barriers that had blocked many students from entering the schools, and

a new type of art student appeared. The system of academic awards, which cultivated artistic conformism in the old school, was done away with. The Free Studios welcomed and united all existing art movements. The freedom and equality of every trend in the Petrograd State Free Educational Studios was recognized by the commission of the Working Class Inspecting Committee, which inspected the Svomas' work in late 1920. That tendency was also recorded in A.A. Rylov's memoirs.<sup>74</sup> All those aspects made the Svomas the main center of development and creation of a new art school, which – despite all of the trials and mistakes – was brought to life in response to the call of the times. Certainly, if the country's economic situation had been better, the Svomas reforms might have achieved more. The Fine Arts Department clearly understood that the improvement of the studios' working environment depended on the overall conditions in the country and that the blame for the students' low level of preparation was to be placed on the Republican government's decision to allow first of all members of underprivileged classes to enroll in the art schools. But the latter decision was one of the essential aims of the Sovnarkom (Council of Peoples' Commissars), whose decree on the order of admittance to higher schools and universities sought to democratize culture. That problem was very accurately verbalized in a poetic matter by V.V. Mayakovski when he said: “If there were people – the art would apply itself.”<sup>75</sup>

As a materialization of social conscience, art was secondary to the economy and ideology, and in the eyes of the new government art needed to concentrate not on the mastery of old techniques, but on the manifestation of the new revolutionary principles. The definition and further development of those principles was the only factor that could build a new method of art school training. The old art school could provide its students with professionalism in their craft, but not with new principles. The new school, on the other hand, was organized on new principles and on a new approach to the problems of art, yet it could not immediately develop the new means of their expression. This naturally led to a dialectic struggle of unity and opposites within the old and new art schools that took place in the first years after the Revolution. As a result of three years of work, the Svomas developed different approaches to the very function of art, including “art as an ideology” and “art as production”. Passionate fights and arguments revolved around those two approaches, especially because the latter was only recently introduced and was not easily accepted by the disciples of the old Academy. The young artists, on the other hand, felt that the place of art in social and cultural life was rapidly changing, that its impact was widening, and that its future was connected more with change rather than with tradition.

A few years passed, and by the end of the 1920s a new generation of artists was formed. This generation would see revolutionary Russia as their natural habitat, to which they were genetically bound. This generation would become capable of dealing with the problems of the subjective environment and with the concepts of art as life-building and art as production. However, the Avant-gardist concept of art that had developed ahead of its time

was accepted neither by the people nor by the state. The Socialist realism that followed the era of the Avant-garde was satisfied with the aesthetics of late academism and late realism. Nevertheless, the Free Studios had raised a generation of OST artists (a union of painters in 1925–1932), whose works would become an important ingredient in the art of the following decades. Finally, it is important not to forget that it was in the Svomas where the model for the monument to the III International by V. Tatlin was created, and of which the famous Russian art historian Nickolay Punin wrote: “The present project is the first revolutionary work that we can send and that we are sending to Europe”.<sup>76</sup> 

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- The Arts and Art Production Collegium – a consulting agency, attached to the Fine Arts Department of the Narkompress in 1918–1921.
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- On August 2, 1918, the Sovnarkom issued a decree “On the Preferential Admittance of Proletariat and Poorest Peasantry Members to Colleges and Higher Education Facilities”. Ibid.
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- Ibid., 54. Among the studios, 5 were dedicated to painting, 1 to sculpture, 1 to etchings, and 3 to architecture.
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- The first meeting took place on August 23, 1919. A Praesidium was elected, consisting of L.N. Benoit from the painters, V.V. Ellonen from the sculptors, and three communist representatives (the latter being directly appointed by communist members of the Studios). – RGIA. F. 789. Op. 19. D. 1833. L. 1-2.