



## The Death of Painting (After Plato)

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### Abstract

Whereas the entrance of the monochrome into modern art has typically been understood in light of movements in contemporary art and aesthetic theory following in its wake, this essay seeks to understand the motivations for, and the effect of, the monochrome in the work of Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1921 in reference to Plato's analysis of pure pleasure and absolute beauty in the *Philebus*. I argue that Rodchenko and Plato were motivated by a shared project to contend with the aesthetic and psychological effects of figurative semblance, or what Socrates calls the phantasm, in order to harmonize human perception with the world of sensuous material objects. It is in this shared project, I contend, that Rodchenko's strategy is to be understood as a kind of materialist Platonism that, when viewed phenomenologically, reveals Plato's objects of absolute beauty to be, in the context of industrial capitalism and the crisis of perception that Benjamin, among others, saw as its consequence, sites of loss and meaninglessness for modern consciousness, yet sites which nonetheless contain emancipatory potential for a social order that has been systematically alienated from itself and its environment.

### Keywords

Plato, painting, constructivism, pleasure, *Philebus*, Gadamer

What spirit promises, not the sensual pleasure of the observer, is the locus of the sensual element in art.

Theodor Adorno

Was it not Plato himself who pointed out the direction for the reversal of Platonism?

Gilles Deleuze

We begin with the last picture. Or to be exact, with the last three, any of which, in its very singularity, could hold an equal claim to be the last: *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Blue Color*, and *Pure Yellow Color*, a triptych of monochromatic canvases, each adhering with utter severity and discipline to the letter of its respective title. Some eighteen years later, recalling their initial

exhibition in the fall of 1921 in Moscow, Aleksandr Rodchenko formulated his achievement in equally spare terms with the famous statement: “I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation.”<sup>1</sup> The critic Nikolai Tarabukin was the first to seize upon the historical consequences of these monochromes in his address before the general assembly of the Institute of Artistic Culture (*Inkhuk*) scarcely a month after their exhibition. Singling out the red canvas as his focal point, he proclaimed: “It is not merely a stage which can be followed by new ones but it represents the last and final step of a long journey, the last word, after which painting must become silent, the last ‘picture’ made by an artist.”<sup>2</sup> The logical conclusion to which Rodchenko had pushed painting was in fact the realization of its inner teleology as a practice; in painting’s quest to demonstrate the material conditions of its possibility, to lay bare those elements according to which painting could generate its particular forms of aesthetic meaning, it encountered its own end in the form of a “meaningless, dumb and blind wall.”<sup>3</sup> Painting’s purity and self-definition was thus shown to be its death, the revelation that its essence consisted simply in illusion, in non-identity, and ultimately in its flight from the sensuous material world. Yet with regard to these last paintings, the very poverty of aesthetic content to be found therein stands in dialectical relation to the resourcefulness of their critical, and indeed emancipatory, potential.

The human epoch to which Rodchenko’s gesture puts an end, according to Tarabukin, could only now appear within its proper limits as an age marked by an aesthetic longing articulated through dream-images, whose existence presupposed that world which they could not reach and for which they could only act as consolations for a subjectivity alienated from its own sensuous existence. In freeing the canvas from its role as the bearer of images, of all signifying distinctions as such, Rodchenko’s monochromes attempt to overcome what Jay Bernstein has called art’s “Platonically decried liability,” that is, “the

<sup>1</sup> From the manuscript “Working with Maiakovsky” (1939), published in excerpts in *From Painting to Design*, exhibition catalogue (Cologne: Gallery Gmurzynska, 1981), 190–91, quoted in Magdalena Dabrowski, “Aleksandr Rodchenko: Innovation and Experiment” in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, ed. M. Dabrowski, L. Dickerman, P. Galassi (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 43.

<sup>2</sup> N. Tarabukin, “From the Easel to the Machine,” trans. C. Lodder, in *Ot Mol’berta k mashine* (Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1923). Reprinted in *Modern Art and Modernism*, ed. F. Francina, C. Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 139.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

liability which, beyond its sensuousness, has always made artworks abject, deserving of the philistine disdain for the disappointment they cannot help eliciting, namely, their being forms of mere semblance, hopelessly cut off from the domain of the real.”<sup>4</sup> The Kantian schism between appearance and existence, according to which all free judgments of taste were presumed possible,<sup>5</sup> could no longer be maintained in the face of an art form that insists upon nothing but its own material presence. As Rodchenko put it, not without a note of triumph: “We know that taste and pleasant sensations are dead for ever.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet if Rodchenko’s monochromes are aligned with the Platonic aspiration to transcend art’s pretension to embody sensuous reality, the aims of the new historical epoch that they sought to usher in can be seen, on closer inspection, as both a radicalization and, in a certain sense, an inversion of a more fundamental tendency to be discerned in Plato’s writing, a tension that rubs against the grain of Platonism as it is traditionally conceived. For, in sealing the limits of the canvas and thereby seeking to put an end to the practice of mere aesthetic contemplation—a practice criticized most forcefully by Boris Arvatov, in that it “inculcates a passive pleasure in illusion, and leads away from life”<sup>7</sup>—Rodchenko’s larger project was to rehabilitate human perceptual life, and thus the capacity for authentic experience, out of the anaesthetizing sphere of social relations in which art, and easel painting in particular, had become increasingly complicit.<sup>8</sup> The modern crisis of the human sensorium, its alienation and stultification in an expanding culture characterized by its “phantasmagoric” effect on the subject,<sup>9</sup> is, I wish to argue, the realization of a potential prefigured in the very origins of aesthetic discourse in the West. It is precisely in light of Plato’s attention to the power of the phantasm, its

<sup>4</sup> J. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 237.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in *Werke* (Cologne: Könemann, 1995), 4:57 ff.

<sup>6</sup> From the transcripts of the *Inkhuk* archives, quoted in Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Works* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 84.

<sup>7</sup> “Utopiya ili nauka,” *LEF [Levy Front Iskusstv]*, no. 4 (1924), 18. Trans. and reprinted in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 105.

<sup>8</sup> As Christina Kiaer writes: “Constructivist aesthetics was an attempt to enrich the body of the socialist subject through the most appropriate forms of modern objects—to have industrial technology amplify sensory experience, rather than sedate or lull it, as it did under capitalism” (*Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005], 37).

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough account of this crisis in perception, see Susan Buck-Mors’s “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October* no. 62 (1992): 3–41.

ever-present danger of transforming into a psychological fetish wherein desire and perception enter into an antagonistic relationship, that Rodchenko's revolutionary gesture arises as the redemption of a Platonic demand: to disclose objects in their sensuous presence, and thus to harmonize human practical life with the world. This attempt at redemption, holding true to the utopian moment in Plato's text, necessitates a sublation of the latter into a "materialist Platonism"<sup>10</sup> placed in the service of beings within the lifeworld. Yet it is also on the basis of this shared commitment that such beings, among them embodiments of pure color as displayed in the last paintings of 1921, through which perception is to be redeemed—for Plato, objects of pure, absolute beauty and pure pleasure—must, for Rodchenko, appear first and foremost as objects devoid of aesthetic meaning, objects of disappointment, frustration, and loss.

## I.

As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, the search after an understanding of the concept of the phantasm begins with the *Philebus*, wherein the representational activity of phantasy comes forth as "painting in the soul."<sup>11</sup> It is primarily with this *psycho-zoographia* that Plato contends in his search to uncover a species of pleasure that may be harmoniously mixed with knowledge in order to produce a form of life (εἶδος βίου)<sup>12</sup> that can be designated as unqualifiedly good, and thus as the model of human striving. In particular, in the *Philebus* Plato is concerned with distinguishing between true and false pleasures, conceived analogously with the status of belief (δόξα) in its quality of truth and falsity. It is in fact due to the intrinsic link between δόξα and psychic images, φαντάσματα—the latter originally owing their genesis to the former—that an inquiry into the falsity of pleasure can take place, and in which both are seen as graphics of the soul. As he has Socrates state, in the context of perception

Memory falls together with the senses, and they and the feelings which are connected with them seem to me almost to write words in our souls; and when the feeling in question

<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> G. Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 73–74.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, trans. H. N. Fowler, in *Plato VIII* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 35d; cited as *Phil.*

writes the truth, true opinions and true statements are produced within us; but when the writer within us writes falsehoods, the resulting opinions and statements are the opposite of true. . . . [To which must be added] the presence of another workman in our souls at such a time. . . . A painter, who paints in our souls pictures to illustrate the words which the writer has written. . . . [As] when a man receives from sight or some other sense the opinions and utterances of the moment and afterwards beholds in his own mind the images of those opinions and utterances. (*Phil.* 38e–39c)

If it is out of the experience of perception, as the gathering together of memory with affections and δόξα, that the mental image, the phantasm, is first generated, we find in the *Philebus* that it is in the phantasm's connection with desire, that is, where it takes on a guiding role for conscious striving after pleasure, that the effect of the phantasm threatens to inhibit the healthy functioning of perception. Specifically, Socrates refers to the experience of anticipatory pleasure wherein enjoyment is taken in the mere imaging that relates to the future in the modes of expectation and hope, for example, those “φαντάσματα . . . [in which] often a man sees an abundance of gold coming into his possession, and in its train many pleasures; and he even sees a picture of himself enjoying himself immensely” (*Phil.* 40a). In essence, the phantasm arises in such cases in the form of the wish-image. Withdrawn from an immediate orientation to the sensuous world, the pleasure arising from the phantasm that “places itself under the banner of desire,”<sup>13</sup> as Agamben puts it, bears within itself a potentiality to obscure one's own sensuous relations to what is present at hand.

This effect of obscurity subtends the ethical frame, the reason for which is not readily apparent, into which anticipatory pleasure is immediately set once it has been proposed as an object of analysis. With regard to these images of the soul that offer virtual pleasures prior to the realization of those events in which the desired pleasure is to be had, Socrates states that “those are for the most part true which are presented to the good, because they are friends of the gods, whereas those presented to the bad are for the most part false . . . [and furthermore] the bad rejoice for the most part in the false, and the good in true pleasures” (*Phil.* 40b–c).

It was Hans-Georg Gadamer who first drew out the phenomenological implications inherent in this ethical connection,<sup>14</sup> locating the decisive difference between the good and bad individual not, as it would seem, in the

<sup>13</sup>) Agamben, *Stanzas*, 74.

<sup>14</sup>) H.-G. Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the "Philebus,"* trans. R. Wallace (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 163 ff.

apparent luck of fate or in a superior power of predictive capacities on the part of the good person, but rather in the difference to be discerned in the respective *being* of each sort of individual. “A ‘bad’ person’s anticipatory enjoyment is deceptive because, in it, hope becomes a process of dreaming of pleasant things, which as such directly conceals the possibilities that are given in fact and need to be provided for, and thus sees what is present in a light in which it can never be satisfying.”<sup>15</sup> The ‘falsity’ of the virtual pleasure taken in the phantasm on the part of the ‘bad’ individual is not, as it were, merely a factual falsity, a wishing for things that will never materialize, but rather a falsity that characterizes the very form of life—the habits, motives, attentiveness—of the person in his or her fundamental relation to the world and to others. In coming to overlook the sensuously present world precisely in an excessive attachment to the wish-image of the phantasm, the inferior individual’s sought-after life of enjoyment is thereby transformed on the whole into its opposite in such a way that even its pleasure in a chimerical image of hope is devalued by subsequent disappointment.<sup>16</sup> Gadamer notes that the falsity of such pleasure—and in fact, of the phantasms giving rise to it—is “rooted in a perversion . . . in the person’s whole being”:<sup>17</sup>

Precisely by continually intensifying hopes to unfulfillable levels in this way, this perversion determines the person’s overall state-of-mind as one of displeasure. The continually repeated shifting away from what is present and from the immediate future for which one can make provision only strengthens one’s dissatisfaction with the present, and thereby one’s displeasure.<sup>18</sup>

The perversion of the soul to which Gadamer calls our attention within the *Philebus* is not to be assessed simply as one’s tendency to retreat from the world into phantasmic wish-images, nor as the inevitable process of self-forgetting in the character of pain to which one is drawn. It is also to be measured in its “anaesthetizing effect,”<sup>19</sup> which subjects one’s sensitivities to atrophication in a state of numbness that, as a concealment of one’s pain, comes to be regarded, falsely, as pleasure in its positive form. Thus, where the phantasm is increasingly held to as a value in itself, even in circumstances where its possibility of realization is no longer to be expected or hoped for, it

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 180.

takes on the character of a hypostatized wish-image, a fetish within consciousness, in the face of which material beings in one's midst are depleted of their vital connection with the subject. Instead, they are apprehended in a mode of insufficiency or lack, and cease to become objects of potential sensuous fulfillment. In this way, the perversion of the soul to which Gadamer refers effects, in its fetishization of the image, a perversion of bodily perception.

In this sense, Arvatov's criticism of figurative painting, its function of producing a "passive pleasure in illusion," applies just as forcefully to the intrinsically valued phantasm of consciousness. The latter confers upon the subject a peculiar passivity precisely in virtue of the fact that in such cases desire is turned inward in such a way that it is incapable of exercising its powers of revealing the nature of existent things to consciousness in its practical activity. Therefore, its falsity is not based merely upon things that have not or will not happen, but as well upon an ignorance of the world in which its pretended pleasures would ostensibly take place, an ignorance that it sustains and perpetuates.<sup>20</sup> In such ignorance, concretely present objects are as well made passive in their inability to make any vital claim upon the receptive capacities of the individual, and are hence sterilized. It is this perpetuated alienation from the sensuous world precisely by means of the image-fetish that imprisons the subject in a self-contradictory form of life: its virtual pleasure associated with the phantasm actually creates the antipathy toward the world which it, in turn, seeks to escape in its dreamlike passivity. It is also in this light that Rodchenko's condemnation of art in its mode of mere exhibition—the phantasm externalized on the canvas and presented as a self-contained value<sup>21</sup>—is to be understood, as he writes: "Down with art as a means of escaping from a life that is not worth living."<sup>22</sup>

Rodchenko's conviction is in keeping with Plato's proposed alternative to such forms of passive, narcotizing pleasure; indeed, for Plato representational painting bears within it the same potential for a psychological—and therefore psycho-somatic—dynamic of self-contradiction. In the *Philebus*, even those anticipatory pleasures that are true, those of the 'good' individual whose desires are measured and appropriate, nonetheless carry with them the

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Philebus* 40c–d, wherein Socrates remarks that "he who had an opinion at all always really had an opinion but it was sometimes not based upon realities (ἐπ' οὐδόν), whether past, present, or future... must we also not grant that pleasure and pain stand in the same relation to realities?"

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Tarabukin, *From the Easel to the Machine*, 137–38.

<sup>22</sup> From "Slogans," *Khudozhestvenno—konstruktorskoe obrazovanie* [*Artistic—Constructive Education*] 4 (1973): 206. Reprinted in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, 291.

possibility of concealing worldly objects at hand, insofar as they are tied to the phantasm.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in what has come to be a famous passage,<sup>24</sup> he limits the only genuinely true pleasures of perception to encounters with specific kinds of sensuous objects, encounters that are themselves free of desire and thus free of any guiding image:

Those [pleasures] arising from what are called beautiful colors, or from shapes, most of those that arise from odors and sounds, in short all of those the want of which is unfelt and painless, whereas the satisfaction furnished by them is felt by the senses (αἰσθητὰς), pleasant, and unmixed with pain. (*Phil.* 51b)

He continues:

For when I say beauty of form, I am trying to express, not... the beauty of animals or of paintings, but... the straight line and the circle and the plane and solid figures formed from these by turning-lathes and rulers and patterns of angles... For I assert that the beauty of these is not relative, like that of other things; but they are always absolutely beautiful by nature. (*Phil.* 51b–d)

It is clear here that the “absolute beauty” (καλὰ καθ’ αὐτὰ) to which Plato refers is not the otherworldly, eidetic absolute beauty of the *Symposium*,<sup>25</sup> reserved only for the philosophical soul, but rather aesthetic, i.e., embodied, perceptual beauty. The objects so designated provide the subject with “pure

<sup>23</sup> As Sylvain Delcomminette writes, “by contrast with the φαινόμενον, the φαντάσμα is not aroused by a perception: what makes it necessary is precisely the absence of an actual perception. The function of imagination is to compensate for this absence by producing a ‘quasi-perception’ which replaces it. The main difference between such a ‘quasi-perception’ and a real perception is certainly that the first can only be purely mental, while the second has been defined earlier in the dialogue as a common motion of the body and the soul (cf. 33 d2–34 a9)” (“False Pleasures, Appearance and Imagination in the *Philebus*,” *Phronesis* 48, no. 3 (2003): 226). Cf., as well, Gadamer, *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, 178.

<sup>24</sup> This section of the *Philebus* has been frequently cited in connection with the rise of abstract art in the twentieth century, yet little work has been done to explain Plato’s choice of aesthetic objects in terms of his motivation to release consciousness from the seductions of the image. Cf., for example, Alfred Barr, Jr., Introduction to Phillip Johnson’s *Machine Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1934), 1; Ismail Tunali, “The Validity of Modern Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22, no. 2 (1963): 162; Edward Henning, “A Classic Painting by Piet Mondrian,” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 55, no. 8 (1968): 243; Karsten Harries, “Building and the Terror of Time,” *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 63.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, in *Plato III* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 211b.



pleasure” precisely in virtue of the fact that they do not presuppose the perceived lack that is concomitant with desire and the pain that attends it. Being free of desire, they are therefore also free of the phantasm that mediates one’s relation to sensuous beings, including, as seen above, the φαντάσματα depicted in paintings, which as well give rise to the associative desires of possession, consumption, or use.<sup>26</sup> And it is the latter that confer upon images their character of relative beauty, insofar as these are subject to the contingent associations, aims, and moods of differing individuals.

Yet the significance of such beautiful objects—pure, unadulterated colors, sounds, and three-dimensional shapes—lies as much in their positive character as in what is negated therein. For Plato they appear to the subject immediately, in their full sensuous presence, such that their being and their being-perceived are disclosed as a single unity of sense. In manifesting themselves as self-identical (the sense of which is contained in the Greek phrase καθ’ αὐτὰ, “with respect to themselves”), these objects possess a status that we might call ‘elemental’, because in them the very elements of all perception as such are laid bare.<sup>27</sup> Seen in this light, pure beauty and pure sensuous pleasure are for Plato naturally coextensive with complete revelation, what Gadamer refers to as “discoveredness in its extreme possible instance, and thus truth.”<sup>28</sup> In virtue of the absolutely beautiful object’s complete precedence in perception—its exclusion of any subjective factor that might limit the fullness of its manifest self-identity—it is the locus of a non-conceptual<sup>29</sup> form of aesthetic truth to which the human naturally responds in the receptive mode of pure pleasure. Such pure objects thus enable a variety of

<sup>26</sup> See Gadamer, *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, 188–89.

<sup>27</sup> The present reading of this passage runs in direct contradiction to the interpretation offered by Seth Benardete (*The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: Plato’s “Philebus”* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993]), who sees in Socrates’ discussion of pure pleasure only the characteristic of “lifelessness,” wherein such pleasure “is true only because it cannot be sensed to be false” (209). “In going beyond life,” he continues, the objects of absolute beauty “let us experience the pleasure of non-being” (210). Benardete’s reading here is conditioned, as I see it, by limiting his assessment of purely beautiful objects to their negative character without the corresponding awareness of their elemental status within perception. For, in the *Philebus*’ analysis, pleasure’s failing had been seen up to this point in terms of its power to conceal beings and thus to come about in direct opposition to the natural function of perception; pure pleasure, on the other hand, thus represents not non-being but, on the contrary, phenomena in their full measure of manifestness and therefore harmonizes with our perceptive faculties.

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer, 190.

<sup>29</sup> The pure pleasures connected with this revelatory aspect of elemental perception are explicitly distinguished from the pure pleasures of understanding or knowledge at *Philebus* 52a.

self-examination that complements the conceptual self-examination that is shown most explicitly within the dialogues: an analysis of the perceptual aspect of human life, alongside the cognitive one.

This disclosive relation to the sensible offered in the *Philebus* reveals not simply a variety of pleasure that is fully harmonious with the good life as Plato sees it, but represents at the same time a model of human spontaneity (spontaneous precisely because it is not shaped beforehand by δόξα and its phantasm)<sup>30</sup> and fulfillment rooted in our embodied connection with the world of things. This is to say, then, that the realization of human capacities in a particular form of life—even, as Plato would have it, our ascent to increased stages of metaphysical cognition that ultimately takes leave of the particular, contingent, and transient dimensions of existence—takes as one of its preconditions a practice of shaping the material world with the purpose of invigorating our sensory experience, its possibilities for bringing entities to full appearance, in an objective manner.

It is this overlooked (one might even say repressed) ‘utopian’ moment in Plato’s text, namely, the aspiration of forging meaningful, transparent relations with objects—that is revived in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical materialist discourses and the aesthetic practices linked to them. Yet in the social and worldly landscape of the modern period, characterized primarily in terms of cognitive and perceptual alienation and therefore of a dissolution of collectively-binding sources of meaning, the aspirations conforming to Plato’s elemental model had themselves been reduced to the status of a dream. In the context of this landscape, the foundational purity of such visions that unite Plato and Rodchenko were to be experienced in strikingly different terms.

## II.

Narratives that seek to account for the fate of perception in modern life overwhelmingly invoke the ubiquitous presence of the phantasm as an increasing presence within everyday existence under the mobilizing forces of industrial capitalism. Beginning with Baudelaire the excess of the image emblematic of

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<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon constitutes the only apparent exception to Agamben’s overhasty statement that “desire and pleasure [in the *Philebus*] are impossible without this ‘painting in the soul’” (*Stanzas*, 74). It is true that desire for Plato is never without the phantasm (a conviction shared by Aristotle in *De Anima* 3, 10), but not so, as is clear above, with respect to pure pleasure.

urban modernity, as a “phantasmagoria . . . distilled from nature,”<sup>31</sup> was dialectically linked, in its intoxicating effect, with the impoverishment of individual experience.<sup>32</sup> In being constantly oriented to the new in the form of ever more dazzling and fleeting spectacles, modern consciousness becomes less able to retain the transient sensible appearances parading before it.<sup>33</sup> And in his analysis of commodity fetishism, wherein the sensuous material properties of an object that tie it to its use value are overlooked in favor of its abstract exchange-value (that is, the primary way in which an object can make its claim upon a subject through an elusive, ever-deferred source of value), Marx as well took recourse to such language in characterizing the “metaphysical subtleties”<sup>34</sup> inherent within the commodity relation: “There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic (*phantasmagorische*) form of a relation between things.”<sup>35</sup> In Marx’s schematic, desire manifests itself predominantly as the desire for possession, in which sensuous contact between an object and the human subject is secondary to the abstract category of ownership and, therefore, where the sense of having, as a purely contemplative pleasure of the imagination, usurps actual embodied fulfillment.<sup>36</sup> As Terry Eagleton writes, in the pervasive bourgeois consciousness of capitalism, “[d]esire, unconstrained by material circumstance, becomes in [the subject] perversely self-productive, a matter of ‘refined unnatural and *imaginary* appetites’ which cynically luxuriate in their own supersubtlety.”<sup>37</sup>

In this contradictory, ascetic attitude characteristic of modern existence—contradictory because, in parallel with the aesthetic-psychological model of the bad individual in the *Philebus*, desire is continually increased while its

<sup>31</sup> C. Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. J. Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press, 1964), 12.

<sup>32</sup> “For most of us,” Baudelaire writes, “and particularly for men of affairs, for whom nature has not existence save by reference to utility, the fantastic reality of life has become singularly diluted” (*ibid.*, 15).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin: “Baudelaire describes the eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look” (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], 189).

<sup>34</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 319.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 139: “All these physical and mental senses have therefore—the sheer estrangement of all these senses—the sense of *having*.”

<sup>37</sup> T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 201.

potential for actual satisfaction becomes ever more diminished—concrete objects and the fulfillment they promise form the backdrop against which the ‘real’ actors are the constructions of socially-manufactured fantasy. Indeed, capital itself, to return to Eagleton, is transformed into

a phantasmal body, a monstrous *Doppelgänger* which stalks around while its master sleeps, mechanically consuming the pleasures he austerely forgoes. The more the capitalist forswears his self-delight, devoting his labors instead to the fashioning of this zombie-like *alter ego*, the more second-hand fulfillments he is able to reap.<sup>38</sup>

With an eye to Plato’s analysis of false pleasure, such formulations of modern perception can be seen in terms of a particular relation to the phantasm that has become pervasive as a mode of social practice wherein it is no longer a perversion rooted merely in the being of the individual, but rather a perversion proper to the order of social life in general. As such, this perversion transforms the everyday environment of the collective itself into a sensory dreamworld of fetishized objects. Walter Benjamin, developing his diagnosis from both Marx and Baudelaire, writes that “the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, on Benjamin’s diagnosis, objects within the urban dreamworld of the commodity relation had assumed a further alienated status wherein even exchange-value had been superceded in favor of their exhibitionary force as “representational value,”<sup>40</sup> namely, as merely aesthetic semblances, advertisements for their own ostensive worth in which the individual subject could fantasize his or her own wishes for their possession.<sup>41</sup> It was therefore no

<sup>38</sup>) Ibid., 200.

<sup>39</sup>) W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 14.

<sup>40</sup>) Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the “Arcades Project”* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 81–82. Buck-Morss’ reading of representational value deepens the connection between the extreme form of anticipatory pleasure in the *Philebus*, where the seduction of the image is no longer a matter of hope, due to the fact that its appearance as a real possibility no longer matters to the desiring subject, on the one hand, and the futile desires of the modern consumer, on the other: “Everything desirable, from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display that held the crowd enthralled even when personal possession was far beyond their reach” (ibid., 82).

<sup>41</sup>) It is this phenomenon that Guy Debord refers to as the ‘spectacle’: “The fetishism of the commodity—the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things’—attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which

longer simply the sphere of fine art in which the phantasm had been externalized in the guise of wish-images, but the perceptible world itself, whose effect was to mirror and intensify the desires of its inhabitants while numbing the very sensory apparatus through which such desires could be ultimately realized.<sup>42</sup>

One of the primary results of this dialectic between the externalized image (and the desire attached to it) and perceptive atrophy on the part of the collective was a constant psychological and practical affirmation of the social order through which commodity production—and thus, the alienation of humans from the sensory world and from each other—proceeded. Buck-Morss notes that the excess of the phantasm in everyday life carried with it a “compensatory” social function, namely,

manipulation of the synaesthetic system by control of environmental stimuli. It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism . . . through flooding the senses. These simulated sensoria alter consciousness, much like a drug, but they do so through sensory distraction rather than chemical alteration, and—most significantly—their effects are experienced collectively rather than individually.<sup>43</sup>

Traditional forms of art, which had been regarded, at least since the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, as possessing their own autonomous sphere of productive freedom, could not help but become enmeshed in this dynamic and therefore could not avoid serving as high cultural affirmations of the market society from which they pretended to be aloof.<sup>44</sup> For, as Peter Bürger puts it, even in offering utopian images of transcendence beyond the present state of alienating social relations, “bourgeois culture exiles human values to the realm of the imagination and thus precludes their realization.”<sup>45</sup>

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are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality” (*Society of the Spectacle*, trans. K. Knabb [London: Rebel Press, 1987], 19).

<sup>42</sup> It is in this sense that Buck-Morss observes that “[b]eginning in the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made out of reality itself” (“Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 22).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–23.

<sup>44</sup> As Yve-Alain Bois states, in the context of painting, “Even at the outset, industrialization meant much more for painting than the invention of photography and the incorporation of the mechanical into the artist’s process through the readymade tube of paint. It also meant a threat of the collapse of art’s special status into a fetish or a commodity. It is in reaction to this threat that the historicism and essentialism of modernism was developed” (“Painting: The Task of Mourning,” in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990], 233).

<sup>45</sup> P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11.

The purported autonomy of artworks could be secured, then, only at the cost of social and political ineffectuality. In attempting to exploit the limited degree to which it was deemed to exist untouched by mundane reality, art's efforts—those of painting, in particular—at critiquing existing hegemonic institutions from within its own aesthetic domain by means of figurative representation ended up producing psychological effects antithetical to its own liberatory intentions. Benjamin Buchloh rightly discerns that modes of painting that remain within traditional forms of representation and their attendant models of iconography can only culminate in a kind of practical resignation: “[s]uch paintings, experienced by a certain audience as sensuous, expressive, and energetic, perform and glorify the ritual of instant excitement and perpetually postponed gratification that is the bourgeois mode of experience.”<sup>46</sup> Like the fetish-character of the commodity, the projection of objects through the mists of fantasy served to affirm, as it were behind the backs of their audience, their own ultimate unattainability.

In the face of this threat of complicity with the reifying mechanics of commodity culture, avant-garde art inaugurated an inward turn, away from the affirmative character of its objects with respect to the world and toward an investigation of its own technical and historical means of production. On Clement Greenberg's famous account, the self-critique of painting, its attempt to purify itself of all inessential elements, was an attempt to solidify its position as a self-contained source of value within modern culture.<sup>47</sup> Yet such solidification of independence through self-critique was at the same time a means of laying the groundwork for a rehabilitation of human perception and, therefore, for the possibility that art could gain a measure of political salience available in no other field of practice. This is to say that with its

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<sup>46</sup> B. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” *October* 16 (1981): 57. Cf. also Peter Bürger's kindred assessment: “Art allows at least an imagined satisfaction of individual needs that are repressed in daily praxis. Through the enjoyment of art, the atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality. But because art is detached from daily life, this experience remains without tangible effect, i.e., it cannot be integrated into that life” (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 13).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. “Modernist Painting,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays*, ed. J. O'Brian, vol. 4 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 85–93. “It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered ‘pure’, and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence. ‘Purity’ meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance” (*ibid.*, 86).

entry into abstractness, the arts—and painting in particular—were aimed ultimately at an ameliorative engagement with practical life, in other words, with the concrete material conditions of their own possibility.<sup>48</sup> In order to do so, affirmation in the representational sphere, i.e., in the realm of the phantasm, was countered by its rigorous negation, not merely for the sake of art's survival against the commodity-relation, but for the sake of sensuous life as such.

### III.

It is within the context of these aesthetic and political dimensions, in their intrinsic connection with the enchantments of the phantasm, that Rodchenko's monochromes are to be viewed. The latter constitute the most radical manifestations of this self-critical tendency within avant-garde painting, a "reduction" of painting to its essence, and thus, as he puts it, to its "conclusion." In their resolute flatness and chromatic uniformity, bereft of discernible marks and even of texture, all that is left to perception is their color and support structure. No narrative or literary elements intrude upon the canvas, which is to say, in Platonic terms, that no δόξα visibly infects its mode of appearance, and color is allowed to come forth without subordination to the figurative form, the illusion, to which δόξα gives rise. With his own achievement of the monochrome in mind, Rodchenko writes:

Once artists began to look at the problem of color separately from that of representation, the significance of the pictorial surface emerged in all its clarity, as a substitute for the illusory nature of figurative painting. The surface took on the whole of its function.<sup>49</sup>

This analysis and separation, while freeing color from its traditional bondage to any sort of subject matter, was at the same time a phenomenological analysis,<sup>50</sup> in practice, of the bare elements of perception, an analysis

<sup>48</sup> Rodchenko characterizes the practice of overlooking the material qualities of painting in terms reminiscent of the alienation of the self from the world in the mode of anticipatory pleasure in the *Philebus*, namely, as a kind of forgetting: "Through illusion, the trompe l'oeil of reality, [figurative art] tried to make the observer forget the presence of the flat surface of the picture" ("The Line," in *Rodchenko*, 292).

<sup>49</sup> "The Line" (1921), from the *Inkhuk* Archives, trans. S. O. Khan-Magomedov; reprinted in Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, 292–94 (here 293).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Benjamin Buchloh's assessment of the Russian constructivist program as a whole, in particular his statement that these artists, Rodchenko among them, ultimately "developed the first

consistent with the laying-open of pure sensuous elements in the *Philebus*. Yet at the same time, in superseding the predominance of the figure in painting, Rodchenko presents the painted surface as no longer the necessary backdrop that must become invisible for a figure to appear against it, but as present materiality whose presence refuses to recede under the pressures of representational semblance. In this way, the monochrome is no longer painting-as-semblance, but rather painting-as-object, inserted into the world of real objects in such a way that its embodied existence would be inseparable from its mode of appearance. “A new approach to painting has emerged,” writes Rodchenko, “and the picture has ceased to be picture, so as to become painting and object.”<sup>51</sup>

In its standing as a material object, Rodchenko envisioned the monochrome as fulfilling an indexical function for human perception, a zero-point of meaning upon which a universal perceptual logic could be constructed, in distinction from what he took to be the irreducibly arbitrary significance of painted compositions. In the latter, meaning was subject to the conventional or even capricious views of individual fancy, mood, and most importantly, social class—what he dismissed as mere ‘taste.’<sup>52</sup> With these ‘last paintings,’ on the other hand, the pure manifestation of color and surface were to neutralize the spell of the phantasm precisely because there was no illusory matter into which consciousness could invest its *doxic* tendencies and, therefore, also no room for ideological mediation within the act of perception itself. Thus, for Rodchenko the monochrome had not only the potential to allow sensuous materiality to appear to the subject on its own terms, as it were, but also to appear in an objective, i.e., universally valid, manner, making an identical claim upon the consciousness of all viewers alike, regardless of any contingent factors.<sup>53</sup>

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systematic phenomenological grammar of painting and sculpture” (“From Faktura to Factography,” *October* 30 [1984]: 82–119 [here 87–88]).

<sup>51</sup> “The Line,” 293.

<sup>52</sup> It was in fact Rodchenko’s antipathy toward arbitrary compositional effects in painting that ultimately led to his refusal to follow Kandinsky, who had been appointed the director of *Inkhuk* in 1920, and whose methods had been deemed too mystical in their criteria, relying as they did upon the artist’s (linguistically) inexpressible attitudes, moods, and feelings. For a more detailed account of this controversy, see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 28–33.

<sup>53</sup> This sentiment is echoed some forty years later in Tony Smith’s minimalist investigations of shape and form (deeply indebted to Russian Constructivism), taking as his supreme value of reception a kind of “direct and primitive experience” as “something everyone can understand” (Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., “Talking with Tony Smith: ‘I view art as something vast,’” *Artforum* 5,



Yet if, as Tarabukin observed, the monochromes succeeded in embodying a kind of painting that resisted all aesthetic meaningfulness (associated, again, with the phantasmic effect of semblance and all that it implies: beauty, taste, and those “pleasurable sensations” that Rodchenko saw fit to dismiss), they were also intended to inaugurate the end of the sort of contemplative comportment upon which art-objects—as well as commodities—live: the passive orientation to phenomena criticized by Arvatov and, as we have seen, by Plato as well. Despite the fact that Rodchenko claimed to have transformed the painting from semblance to object, he would have certainly been aware that such transformation does not amount, at the same time, to an immediate transformation of socially and historically conditioned modes of seeing and of the habitual comportment toward art-objects that betrayed an implicit consciousness of their circumscription within—or rather, their relegation to—a non-worldly sphere. This latter transformation begins with a confrontation of the very conventions of viewing that have been shaped by an overriding orientation to the phantasm as such. Rather than being initially seen in terms of their proper objecthood, his monochromes are haunted by what they exclude; this is to say that they come forth to the viewer in a mode of absence wherein the desiring vision attuned to φαντάσματα scours the surface of the paintings, searching after the semblance that articulates its form, that gives it a meaning and thus an ever-deferred telos, and thereby claims desire’s allegiance.<sup>54</sup> Neither beauty nor aesthetic pleasure is to be gleaned from their surfaces, but instead the disappointment of an aimless contemplative wandering without resolution.<sup>55</sup>

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no. 4 [December 1966], 14–19. Quoted in Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 158.

<sup>54</sup> In this vein Tarabukin proclaims that the “artist working on pure form and pure form alone has ultimately deprived his creation of meaning because an unadorned, empty form can never satisfy us, who seek always for a content in it. A work created by a traditional artist had its meaning in its aesthetic effect, on which its author counted. A construction made by a contemporary artist has lost this last meaning because the ‘aesthetic’ was consciously rejected from the very first step which determined the path of the new art” (“From the Easel to the Machine,” 138).

<sup>55</sup> I find this point to be a much-needed corrective to common, and undoubtedly Platonic, misunderstandings of *Pure Red*, *Pure Yellow* and *Pure Blue*, namely, that the latter are instituted to recapitulate the ancient Greek vision of beauty in pure forms. Dabrowski, for example, writes in regard to Rodchenko’s monochromes that “[t]he viewer was to focus on the physical parameters of the surface, admiring this styleless artistic object for the straightforward beauty of its shape and color” (*Aleksandr Rodchenko*, 43). As I have been arguing, however, for Rodchenko

The monochromes cannot, then, first appear as unambiguous sites of pure “discoveredness” in the way that the objects of absolute beauty are perceived in the *Philebus*. In their function of frustrating consciousness’ anticipation of, and in, φαντάσματα, *Pure Red*, *Pure Yellow*, and *Pure Blue* evince the loss of semblance as the reverse side of the loss of the sensuous world for modern consciousness. In their liminal metaphysical position, they gesture to the world of objects only by implicitly gesturing at the same time to those constructed forms of mediation through which objects no longer have their own sensible vitality for the intuiting subject. Whereas the emptiness or lack that makes possible the sensation of pure pleasure in the *Philebus* is an unperceived lack<sup>56</sup> (which therefore makes the pleasure of the absolutely beautiful objects a pleasure without antecedent desire), in this context it is the lack of mediation itself that becomes palpable in the face of these canvases. Rodchenko’s monochromes present us, then, at least *prima facie*, with *materiality in the guise of absence*, of a painting sufficiently direct and strong enough to negate the phantasm, yet without being able thereby to become wholly part of the world (i.e., mere object) nor to stand wholly at a distance from it. To put it otherwise, Rodchenko’s attempt to overcome the “Platonic lament” of art and its semblance-character, by Platonic formal means, culminates in a moment of conspicuous aesthetic meaninglessness that points to a necessary sublation of art itself. This sublation, he understood, must begin from within the context of modern aesthetic comportment, must of itself reveal the social and psychological bankruptcy of painting’s essential connection with illusion and the unfulfillable desire that it provokes.<sup>57</sup> In his commentary accompanying the 1921 exhibitions, Rodchenko writes: “This is the final achievement in the battle with representation, illusion in art, and the fantastic.”<sup>58</sup> The death of painting had to be achieved by its own hand.<sup>59</sup>

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beauty as well as the contemplative, “admiring” comportment to artworks belonged to the same set of ideological practices and categories that served to anaesthetize the modern subject.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Philebus* 34e–35a, 51e–52b.

<sup>57</sup> As Bernstein states, “The anti-art moment of modernist works, the moment that Duchamp and Rodchenko attempt to make complete, enacts art’s desire to be world and not art; but only as art, as semblance, can art evince its desire, perform it” (*Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 247).

<sup>58</sup> From manuscripts in the A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova archive, Moscow. Reprinted in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, 51.

<sup>59</sup> Yve-Alain Bois notes here that “[i]f Rodchenko’s gesture was so important . . . it was because it showed that painting could have a real existence only if it claimed its end . . . Rodchenko’s painting needed to attain the status of a real (nonimaginary) object, which meant its end as art” (*Painting as Model*, 238).

This death was, then, the revelation of painting's own historical essence as semblance; yet at the same time, Rodchenko's monochromes constituted a re-definition of the essence of painting in its effort to undo the divide between the concrete lifeworld and, as he puts it, "the fantastic." This essence he referred to as 'faktura,' that is, the material elements of the surface of the work.<sup>60</sup> In concert with painting's transition from site of semblance to site of material presence is the shift toward a new practical relation between subject and object, a new relation that seeks to overturn the passive, contemplative stance toward phenomena and to rehabilitate the connection between concrete sensuous qualities and use-value. And in this connection the artwork receives its new objective and universal meaning, namely, its relevance for social utility. Art's new "socially justified" content, according to Tarabukin, once it has been firmly anchored in the world of real objects, "is the utility and expediency of the object, its tectonism which conditions its form and construction, and which justifies its social purpose and function."<sup>61</sup>

In this light, the monochromes can be seen as an unparalleled achievement of meaninglessness in both the old and new senses, a revelation of the medium of painting in its utter ineffectuality. Yet they nonetheless maintain a critical, historical meaning insofar as they serve to clear the ground for a mode of creative production aligned with the perceptual faculties and the vital needs of humanity as such, free of all ideological mediation.<sup>62</sup> The move that the monochromes inaugurated from two- to three-dimensional objects—dynamic and practically oriented—in the constructivist program was to be a subsumption of artistic impulses under the discipline of engineering, the shaping of materials for the requirements of practical social life. Objects were thus to be designed not first and foremost for the admiring contemplation of the subject, but for her embodied interaction with them, supplanting the

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<sup>60</sup> "The Line," 294.

<sup>61</sup> "From the Easel to the Machine," 142. Tarabukin refers to this new practical art as truly "democratic": "Life no longer justifies art objects which are solely dependent on their form and content. The new democratic art is social in essence, just as individualistic art is anarchic and finds its justification among separate individuals or groups. If the teleological art of the past found its meaning in recognition by the individual, then the art of the future will find such meaning in recognition by society" (ibid.).

<sup>62</sup> For critics such as Arvatov, this critical dimension of the monochrome could actually be subsumed under the heading of a kind of utilitarian purposefulness. As Kiaer writes, in relation to Arvatov's theory of art, "the purpose [of a construction] in question is not necessarily only the mechanical purpose of the thing, but can be interpreted as the larger purpose of confronting the phantasmic power that the commodity wields in capitalism" (*Imagine No Possessions*, 35).

pleasurable sensations of detached and passive comportment with appearances with the sensuous fulfillment of active, unmediated engagement with the concrete properties of real things.<sup>63</sup> The latter were in turn to be forged and recognized in the status “of equals, comrades,” Rodchenko writes in a letter to Varvara Stepanova, “and not these black and mournful slaves”<sup>64</sup> that he encountered on his trips abroad through the commodity culture of Western Europe.

#### IV.

This shift to a new form of sensuous fulfillment in interaction with objects—both in their production and in their use and consumption—through the turn toward engineering is, in light of our attention to the *Philebus*, less a step away from Platonic thinking than a salient point of accord with it. For, of the forms of practical, worldly knowledge with which pure pleasure may be harmonized in the composition of one’s ideal form of life, Plato has Socrates identify the art of construction (τεκτονική) as the supreme mode of knowledge due to its rigorous observation of measure and, hence, exactness.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the tools according to which the primary objects of absolute beauty are created, “turning-lathes, rulers, and patterns of angles,”<sup>66</sup> are precisely those with which the tectonic craftsman operates. Through an adherence to the demands of measure and accuracy, the senses for Plato are, on the one hand, to be habituated in the direction of pure intuition in both the construction of objects as well as in beholding and making use of them and, on the other, to be protected from the obscurity and uncertainty of obfuscating

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<sup>63</sup> The strategies of minimalism, the work of Donald Judd, Tony Smith, Robert Morris and others, could be said to comprise a re-instantiation of an interactive relation between viewer and object that is to this extent faithful to the constructivist program. Yet in withdrawing their objects from the world of utility and concentrating on the relational context between viewer and object without directing that object to a particular social use, the minimalists open themselves to the same critique that Buchloh levels at El Lissitzky’s 1926 installation of *Demonstration Rooms*, namely, that the objects in question, while “introduc[ing] a revolution of the perceptual apparatus” into art, nonetheless are inserted into “an otherwise totally unchanged social institution, one that constantly reaffirms both the contemplative behavior and the sanctity of historically rooted works of art” (“From Faktura to Factography,” 92–93).

<sup>64</sup> Letter of May 4, 1925, translated by G. Varese, M. Weaver, G. Tihanov. Excerpted in Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Philebus* 55d–56c.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 51c.

appearances.<sup>67</sup> We find this attitude echoed by Rodchenko in 1921, at the threshold of his transition from construction on canvas to construction of practical objects:

The paintbrush, so essential for a painting that had to convey the illusion of an object in all its detail, has become an inadequate instrument and been replaced by others. . . . Press, roller, pen, rule and compass have come into use.<sup>68</sup>

This emphasis on tectonic measure was not, however, for Rodchenko a superimposition of mathematical formulae onto matter, but was to be guided by a consciousness of the specific qualities of the matter itself. While having recourse to the resources of measurement, the artist-producer took as her primary point of orientation those material properties of the object with which she was to work, conceiving out of them the object's formal possibilities and laws of construction in relation to human bodily needs and capacities.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the ideologically-neutral reliance upon mathematical and geometrical measure was to occupy a dialectical relation with the measured perception of material quality, bringing to the human organism a consistent, disciplined awareness of the physical conditions and preconditions of her existence. In this way, it was hoped that the desire of the modern individual would not starve itself on abstractions of exchange value or semblances, that is, on the collective ideological alienation of embodied existence from intellectual and imaginative *φαντάσματα*, but would be coordinated essentially with the intuitions of real material use-value presented to it in the mode of a reshaped cultural landscape, a landscape directed to reunifying the individual in his or her

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<sup>67</sup> This is a point overlooked by H.J.M. Broos in his essay "Plato and Art: A New Analysis of the *Philebus*" (*Mnemosyne* 4, [1951]), where he states, to my mind erroneously, that "the absolutely beautiful objects of pleasure are made by Plato as unsensuous as a Greek could possibly imagine them" (123). Plato's emphasis here on the crafting of such objects should serve as an indication that such objects are the product of sensuous contact and shaping of material. The sensuousness that Broos seems to have in mind, on the other hand, would appear to be aligned with the phantasmic impulse, tending to result, as we have seen above, in anaesthesia.

<sup>68</sup> "The Line," 293.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Boris Arvatov, *Art and Class*: "[F]or the first time, thanks to the abstract [constructivist] school, which teaches the mastery of materials in their pure form, the artist can create a form for a given objective or content not from a stereotype and not photographically, but by proceeding from a given concrete case and from experimental, laboratory practice. This affords the possibility of artistic creation, in essence, contemporary, socially, technologically, and ideologically useful, profoundly vital and evolutionary" (translated by J. Bowlit, excerpted in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. S. Bann [New York: Da Capo Press, 1974], 43–48 [here 46]).

comportment to the world. Such unification, and the production of objects fostering it, would be the expression of a free society, delivered from the reproduced perversions of desire and perception that constitute the crisis of contemporary social life.<sup>70</sup>

Behind the loss made thematic by the monochrome, then, lay the hope for constructing a society in which traditional art and the pleasurable, consoling sensations it occasioned would no longer have any place, where art, as Tarabukin explains, “continues to live not as a definite form but as a creative substance.”<sup>71</sup> This ‘creative substance’ would be born out of constant contact with objects in their concrete particularity, bringing about a form of objective sensuous fulfillment that manifests itself as the modern correlate of Plato’s postulation of a pure pleasure in absolute beauty. Only thus, in accordance with Rodchenko’s aspirations, could the dream of pure discoveredness inaugurated in the *Philebus* be realized in practice, a dream that seeks to put an end to the distorting dreamworld of the phantasm and leads to that harmony of sense and consciousness, the life defined by measure and unification, which Socrates refers to as happiness.<sup>72</sup> For Rodchenko, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, it went by another name, utopia, wherein every individual would be capable of emulating “the man who has organized his life, his work, and himself,”<sup>73</sup> and would thereby become “a genuine artist.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> This was, in fact, the direction toward which Rodchenko’s production moved in the 1920s, where he, Stepanova, and Vladimir Tatlin designed a series of functional objects for everyday socialist life, including beds, clothing, theater sets as well as the interior of a worker’s club, complete with tables, chairs, and a speaker’s platform. For a more complete study of this phase of constructivism, see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*.

<sup>71</sup> “From the Easel to the Machine,” 142.

<sup>72</sup> *Philebus* 11d.

<sup>73</sup> Rodchenko, “Slogans,” 206.

<sup>74</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2009 New England Society for Continental Philosophy in Fairfield, Connecticut, at The University of Texas–Pan American, and at the 2010 Conference of the Pacific Association of the Continental Tradition in San Francisco. Thanks are due to Adriel Trott, Jeffrey Gower, Marjolein Oele, Gerard Kuperus, Michael Eng, Anne-Marie Schultz, and especially Sara Brill for their helpful comments on, and encouragement throughout, various drafts of this essay.