

Modernism and Utopia

Saturday 27 February

at Churchill College, Storeys Way, Cambridge, CB3 0DS

Coffee will be available from 10.30

Each talk will be followed by a short film clip.

11.00 Introduction – Lutz Becker

11.15 Dr Nina Lübbren – Time's paths to modernism
+ film 'Degenerate Art Exhibition, Munich 1937' (8 mins)

12.05 Professor Iain Boyd White – The German Utopia: Expressionism, National
Socialism, and the Fable of Community
+ film 'Albert Speer's Berlin 1939' (8 mins)

13.00 Finger buffet lunch

14.00 Professor Christina Lodder – Transforming the World: Constructivism vs
Suprematism and Gustav Klucis's *Dynamic City* 1920
+ film 'Electricity and the Music of the Spheres' (8 mins)

14.50 Professor Tim Benton – Modernist Architecture and the State: Italian debate
of the 1930s
+ film 'Mussolini's new cities', (9 mins)

15.40 Panel discussion
+ film 'Paris World Fair 1937' (8 mins)

16.30 Tea and close

Kettle's Yard gallery will be open until 18.00

Lutz Becker

Lutz Becker is currently Curatorial Fellow at Kettle's Yard and has curated the exhibition **Modern Times: responding to chaos**, for which he was asked to trace his own path through the art of the 20th and 21st centuries.

He was born in 1941 and brought up in East and West Berlin. He studied in Berlin, Hanover and then at the Slade School of Fine Art, London. He graduated under Thorold Dickinson and became a distinguished director of political and art documentaries such as 'Art in Revolution' 1971, 'Double Headed Eagle' 1972, 'Lion of Judah' 1981 and 'Vita Futurista' 1987.

A practicing painter, he is also a curator of exhibitions. He collaborated with the Hayward Gallery on 'The Romantic Spirit in German Art' 1994, 'Art and Power' 1995 and Tate Modern on 'Century City' 2001. He curated the South Bank Centre touring exhibition 'Avant-Garde Graphics' and the recent exhibition at the Estorick Foundation, 'Cut and Paste – European photomontage 1920-45'.

Lutz Becker is currently reconstructing Sergei Eisenstein's film 'Que viva Mexico'.

Nina Lübbren

Time's paths to modernism

This paper addresses two distinct strands of nineteenth-century painting: landscape and history. Each addresses one of the period's key preoccupations, to do with different understandings of time: the linear time of narrative versus the cyclical time of nostalgia and nature. Both strands represent a response to the temporalities of the modern world.

On the one hand, landscapes conjured up an immersion in nature that led to an awareness of the artifice of painterly representation which, ultimately, led to abstraction. On the other hand, pictorial story-telling invited viewers to be active participants in the narrative process and, in effect, to tame time by rendering the modern world intelligible.

In the twentieth century, the old structures of meaning-making broke apart. Abstraction did not soothe audiences, as landscapes had done. And pictorial narrative migrated into cinema where it continues to make safe the multiple anxieties of our present-day lives.

Nina Lübbren is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and a Learning and Teaching Advisor within the Department of English, Communication, Film and Media at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. Prior to this, she was Senior Lecturer in Art History and Modern Visual Culture at the Cambridge School of Art. Her main focus is on the History and Theory of Cinema, and the Aesthetics of Film as Art. Further more Dr Lübbren teaches research students in the area of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century art, particularly aspects of visual narratives.

Nina Lübbren studied at the Freie Universität, Berlin, at the University of California in Berkeley and gained her PhD at the University of Leeds. She also taught at Leeds, Birkbeck College and the Open University.

Her research interests are in the area of nineteenth-century European art, in particular landscape and academic painting. She is the author of *'Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910'* (2001) and the co-editor of *'Visual Culture and Tourism'* (2003). In 2002-03, Dr Lübbren was the recipient of a Leverhulme Research Fellowship. She is currently writing a book on visual narrative in nineteenth-century painting.

Iain Boyd Whyte

The German Utopia: Expressionism, National Socialism, and the Fable of Community

'Community' was one of the principle refrains of the modern movement in architecture. In contrast to society (*Gesellschaft* in the Tönnies analysis), which was formed by the structures of industry, commerce and finance, and community. Community (*Gemeinschaft*) stood for the closer associations of family, kinship, village, faith, and similar. The architectural avant-garde of the first-half of the twentieth century invariably focused on the claims of the latter rather than the former.

Starting from the critique of community penned in 1924 by the German philosopher, Helmuth Plessner, as *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* (limits of community), this paper will suggest that the singleminded pursuit of communitarianism brought architectural design into a risky proximity with radical and totalitarian ideologies.

This argument will be pursued principally in the German context, focusing on the Expressionist vision of socially harmony achieved through architecture, the National Socialist construct of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (the community of the people) and the interrelations between the two.

Iain Boyd Whyte is Professor of Architectural History, School of Arts, Culture and Environment (ACE), University of Edinburgh, and Director of VARIE. Visual Research Institute Edinburgh.

He sees architecture as a potent vehicle for cultural history, embracing visual arts, social and political history, and the building sciences. He says that: 'No other human artefact offers such a rich and multi-layered frame of historical enquiry as a building - be it a great cathedral or a modest suburban house.'

In his research he has concentrated on cultural and architectural modernism, with a particular focus on the German-speaking countries and the Netherlands. He's a former Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung and a Getty Scholar. In 1996/97 he was co-curator of the Council of Europe exhibition *'Art and Power: Europe under the*

Dictators, 1930-45, shown in London, Barcelona and Berlin. Current research interests include visual cognition in the arts and sciences, and translation as cultural exchange.

Publications:

Modernism and the Spirit of the City (2003)

Man-made Future: Planning, Education and Design in Mid-20th Century Britain (2006)

Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism

Christina Lodder

Transforming the World: Constructivism vs Suprematism and Gustav Klucis's *Dynamic City* 1920

In this paper, I shall look at the dialogue between Gustav Klucis and Kazimir Malevich in terms of artistic approach and the relationship between the Constructivist and Suprematist utopias that their approaches ultimately represent.

Klucis is well known as a Soviet artist who was a member of the Communist Party, fought with the Latvian Rifles in support of the October revolution of 1917, and used photomontage to produce propaganda posters promoting Stalin and his policies of Collectivization of Agriculture and the First Five Year Plan, at the end of the 1920s. In contrast, Malevich is celebrated as the pioneer of Suprematism, a completely non-objective or objectless style of painting, who in the early 1920s started applying the ideas of Suprematism to making models of architectural complexes, called architectons, and drawing plans or architectural ensembles that would travel in space.

Although the two artists seem very different, there is a point of contact. In c. 1920, Klucis produced a painting entitled *The Dynamic City*. This is painted on an icon board that Klucis built and painstakingly prepared, and it depicts a multileveled circular structure employing a range of different materials and textures (including asphalt) against a white ground.

I shall argue that this work was painted at a particular moment of transition in Russian art, embodying several strands of aesthetic discourse surrounding abstraction at the time, and indeed could be considered as a summation of these discourses. It refers to both Suprematism and emergent Constructivism. In terms of Suprematist ideology it relates to Kazimir Malevich's concept of pictorial space, including the fourth dimension, as well as to theories concerning the metaphysical resonances of icon painting and El Lissitzky's notion of the Proun (Project for the Affirmation of the New). At the same time, *Dynamic City* embodies interests that underpinned the development of Constructivism, including notions of material and *faktura* (texture), contemporary concerns with the role of art in building a new communist society in the wake of the 1917 revolution, and visions of that new socialist world as expressed in the science fiction of Aleksandr Bogdanov and Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and in the work of Vladimir Tatlin.

Christina Lodder is Emeritus Professor of Art History at the University of St. Andrews, and is now attached to the School of Arts, Culture and Environment at the University of Edinburgh.

Her research focuses on Russian painting, sculpture and architecture of the first decades of the twentieth century and the relationship of the Russian avant-garde with the West, particularly the interactions with artists from Germany and France.

She has written extensively on the movement of Constructivism and its development in Russia and Western Europe. She has greatly contributed to the study of the work of Kasimir Malevich and is Vice-President of the Malevich Society, New York.

Her publications include *Russian Constructivism* (1983), the *Catalogue Raisonné of the Constructions and Sculptures of Naum Gabo* (1985), which she produced with Colin Sanderson. She co-authored with her husband, Martin Hammer, *Constructing Modernity: The Art and Career of Naum Gabo* (2000) and *Gabo on Gabo: Texts and Interviews* (2000). Her latest book is *Constructive Strands in Russian Art* (2005).

Tim Benton

Modernist Architecture and the state: Italian debates of the 1930s

Most modernist architects had issues with the concepts of state architecture, representative buildings, nationalism and monumentality. The twin roots of the Modern Movement lie in social utility, but also, paradoxically, an autonomous search for an abstract formal repertoire uncontaminated by the styles. As Siegfried Giedion astutely remarked, Modernism in the 1930s might have taken a different turn if Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret had won the competition for the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva in 1927. The debate between Karel Teige and Le Corbusier which followed revealed the underlying contradiction in the programme of the Modern Movement. In many countries, Modernist architects refused in principle to compete for municipal or state commissions in the 1930s, and only in a very few countries was municipal or state Modernism attempted.

It was in Fascist Italy, especially between 1931 and 1934, that a fierce and well grounded debate took place on the possibility of representing the state with an architecture that was also 'pure' and abstract, devoid of explicit political iconography. The debate was launched not by a regime architect but by the spokesperson of the hard-line Rationalists, Pier Maria Bardi, in 1931. Picking up from his Modernist tract *Rapporto sull'architettura*, presented to Mussolini at the opening of the second Rationalist exhibition in the same year, Bardi proposed a state art in which Modernist architects would be given a privileged position to compete for government contracts, in which their burning Fascist ardour might find expression without any artistic control of the solutions adopted. Bardi was specifically hostile to the rhetorical effects used by most architects to add political content to their buildings; neither the Duce, nor the young Rationalists, he insisted, had need of a megaphone to amplify their message. On the other side, Giuseppe Pagano stoutly rejected monumentality in any form and appealed to the vernacular tradition and the ruins of antiquity (stripped of their ornament) as precedents for a noble

Italian architecture without decoration.

The first competition for the construction of a Palazzo del Littorio (1934) on the newly created via del Impero was an exercise ground for the testing of these different approaches. The building had to house the Fascist party headquarters, the museum of the Fascist Revolution, a 'sacrario' dedicated to the Fascist martyrs and an apartment for the Duce, as well as other offices. It had the impossible brief of evoking both the Fascist revolution and the authority of Imperial Rome, over whose ruins the via del Impero ran. Many of the Rationalist projects demonstrated convincingly that a Modernist state architecture was not only possible but potentially highly effective as political propaganda. Just as Mies van der Rohe's project for the German pavilion at the Brussels exhibition in 1935 had shown the effective propaganda weapon the Nazi officials might have had at their disposal, Rationalist designs for the Opera Nazionale Balilla, for railway stations, post offices and the Fascist party demonstrated a face of Fascism which could meet the needs both of the state and the growing taste for modern architecture.

I will explore the tensions in an *architecture parlante* without adjectives in the service of a totalitarian state.

Tim Benton is Professor of Art History at the Open University
He has been in 2008 Visiting Professor in the Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University and in 2009 Robert Sterling Clark Visiting Professor of Art History at Williams College, Massachusetts.

His research interests focus on the history of modern architecture and design and in particular on Le Corbusier's work of the 1920s and 1930s. For several years he has been working on Le Corbusier's domestic architectural designs (1914-1935) which includes a study of all the architectural drawings and documents associated with these projects. As part of this research he developed computer software for the analysis of architectural drawings.

We met during our collaboration on the exhibition '*Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930-45*' (1997).

He contributed to major exhibitions at the V&A: '*Art Deco 1910-1939*' (2003) and '*Modernism Designing a new world*' (2006) and to the first major retrospective exhibition of the work of Charlotte Perriand at Centre Pompidou, Paris (2006).

His classic study of the design of Le Corbusier's Villas in Paris in the 1920s was republished in 2007. His book *Le Corbusier conférencier* published in French a and English in 2008 is a study of the rhetorical methods used by Le Corbusier in his lectures. He is currently working on a life of Le Corbusier (Reaktion Books) and a book on Le Corbusier's domestic architecture (1910-1935).