The Fabric of Home: Cotton Cloth between Ontology and Use-Value in Paul Klee's, Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov Popova's Artwork

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Our major mental and material activities like belonging, memory-work, emplacement, displacement, and migration, our modes of behavior and principles that underpin them, and our hopes, desires and projections for us and our communities, all derive from what we often vaguely describe as our sense of home. The latter binds together emotional, experiential/sensorial and physical dimensions of our lives. Home is, at once, a material, psychological, and representational site, populated by internal and external objects, and a particular form of spectacle, informed, as all our performances of living in the world are, by certain social dispositions, contexts, and practices. A host to positive unitary attributions such as the capacity to shelter, orient, comfort and nurture, home can also be stifling, discomforting, and dangerous.[1] Modernist artists and thinkers reacted to this formal and axiological ambiguity by probing the conceptual and physical boundaries of home, finding the precincts of home trembling, its "brick-and-mortar" morphing with the socium, its ontological status quivering or vanishing. More often than not, they focalized their scrutiny of these ambivalences through material, everyday objects—used, observed, made, or remade in home-space. This focus was informed by, on the one hand, the modernist more general anxiety over "thing" and "thingness" and the limits and excesses of objects and objectified images, and, on the other hand, renewed interest in epistemology, ethics, and use-value of

[1] For a wider discussion and summary of scholarship on home, see Sanja Bahun and Bojana Petrić, "Homing in on Home," *Thinking Home: Interdisciplinary Dialogues* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1-13.

material objects. Yet, the relationship between the material object and home is itself complex. The two are co-constitutive but their relationship is also one of equivalence (a physical home is an object to inhabit, as Le Corbusier would have it, a "machine to inhabit" ["*machine à habiter*"]) as well as one of part and the whole (an object such as a wardrobe or a kitchen cloth can be part of someone's home). In this last context, then, the relationship between home and the material object can be directly metonymic (a cushion stands for the comfort of home) or it could enact a complex metonymic chain (a plate signifies nourishment and nourishment is linked to home), the assumed direction and value of which can be further challenged for artistic and social commentary purposes (as in Charlie Chaplin's famous shoe-scene in *The Gold Rush*, 1925). Most importantly, modernists have realized that home and material object share one key conceptual and operational property: both are haunted by the paradox of boundaries – that is, the propensity to simultaneously assert and relinquish sovereignty, to at once confirm and challenge their own conceptual and material frontiers. Premised on a belief that there exists a profound link between the modernists' altered perception of home and a wide-scale transformation in our understanding of objects, object-making, and object-use, this essay focuses on distinct modernist artistic utterances that articulated these changes. My case studies are Paul Klee's 1921 paintings on cheesecloth and Lyubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova's textile designs from 1924.

Artistically and ideological different, Klee's and Popova and Stepanova's practices, the following will argue, were also curiously compatible in one aspect. In early 1920s, both artists posed the question of what constitutes an art-object and art-practice through the deployment of the notional scope of home and the strategic use and/or production of everyday objects made of cotton. Cotton was re-discovered, symbolically and commercially, at the end of the nineteenth century, and, by the second decade of the twentieth century, it operated precisely in the fashion Bruno Latour and object-oriented-ontologists might want it:

its varied uses both instantiated and critiqued the "modernity" of the material and the objects made out of it.[2] Cotton cloths and samples, in particular, bridged the private and the public realms in a seamless fashion and challenged assumed distinctions and hierarchies between making and finished objects. To probe how the complex operation of a humble piece of cotton can change our thinking about objects and what foreseen and unforeseen consequences it has for our production, perception, and reception of art-practice, I will be guided by two activity-images ripe with potentiality. These frozen moments of action are both real and imagined, concocted out of scraps of paper and second-hand accounts and then fortified by our scholarly passion for modernism and its objects.

Paul Klee, Revolving Houses, and the Lure of Cotton-cloth

Exhibit 1. Paul Klee, a Swiss painter and occasional poet and composer, is stirring soup with the opposite side of the paintbrush he has just used to add texture to a painting, one of his thick-impasto canvases in which the architecture of houses, villages and cities is analyzed, dissembled, and recomposed on a piece of fabric. As his son Felix related posthumously, Klee often exploited household objects for both domestic and professional use: he is remembered as, indeed, stirring soup with the opposite side of the paintbrush (particularly while he was painting in the kitchen of their Munich home in 1906-1909) and transforming the cloths used to make or wrap cheese or bread into canvases (especially as his exploration of canvas material peaked in the 1920s).[3] Almost all Klee's homes, in Bern, Munich,

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[2] See, influentially, Bruno Latour, "Interobjectivity," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3/4 (1996): 228-245, esp. 240, and, more recently, Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq, eds. *Reset Modernity!* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[3] I am indebted to Marie Kakinuma, Art Historical Researcher for Collection and Exhibitions, and Eva Wiederkehr Sladeczek, Head of Archive and Documentation, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, for this anecdotal detail.

Weimar, Dessau, were mixtures of working and family spaces where the realms of professional and homely activities intersected and material objects were cross-purposed. One can reconstruct these homes from photographs and visitors' remembrances. One such is an account of Klee's home in Dessau that featured in the Paul Klee catalogue for the 1930 MoMA exhibition of Paul Klee's, Wilhelm Lehmbruck's, Aristide Maillol's, and Max Weber's artworks. Alfred Barr, the author of the introduction to the catalogue, describes Klee's home-place, designed by Walter Gropius and shared with Wassily Kandinsky, as a precise, brightly colored, ordered space, at the center of which is a high-ceiling, spacious studio. Barr excitedly focuses on a corner table in the studio that "break[s] the logical severity of Gropius interior and Bauhaus furniture." This table is consumed by curiosities: shells, a skate's egg, bits of dried moss, a pinecone, a piece of coral, a couple of children's drawings, and samples of burlap, gauze, textile. These material objects, Barr hypothesizes, "serve as catalytics to Klee's creative activity."[4] This insight is astute and it reflects the future curator's own collecting passion: on his 1927/28 European journey, in the course of which he visited Klee, he acquired hundreds of material objects and ephemera that would later serve as "catalytics" to his own work as the founding Director and Curator of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Yet, Barr's reasoning also bespeaks outdated assumptions about the utility of material objects and some inherited ideas about what constitutes a work of art. Objects such one could find on Klee's corner table were in fact more integral participants in creative act than Barr envisioned: they not only inspired, but also fueled and shaped Klee's art production.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Felix Klee's testimony is also treated in Christophe Badoux's graphic biography *Klee*, ed. Zentrum Paul Klee (Bern: Zurich, 2008), 23.

[4] Alfred Barr, "Introduction," *Paul Klee*, catalogue of the exhibition March 13 – April 2 1930 (New York: MoMA, 1930), 8.

Figure 1: *Unsettled Weather* [*Gemischtes Wetter*] 1929, 343, oil and watercolor on muslin cheesecloth; reconstructed frame, 49 x 41 cm. Private collection. Deposited in the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Zentrum Paul Klee.

Klee's 1929 painting *Unsettled Weather* (*Gemmischtes Wetter*, 1929, oil and watercolor on muslin cheesecloth, Figure 1), featured in the 1930 MoMA exhibition curated by Barr, is a case in point. The painting, often interpreted symbolically, hosts a few distinct shapes evocative rather than connotative of weather and its changes: one furry, possibly fluttering, reddish-brown shape at the forefront; a splash reminiscent of a mud pond or a dark-brown leaf; an arc-line; some indistinct, floating vegetation-like shapes; and a faint sun-shaped disc. All this seeming randomness is kept in check by a technical black arrow pointing to the observer's right—a frequent feature in Klee's production of the late 1920s and a weighty balancing point that renders his paired down compositions of this period so tight and precise. Yet, the aspect of *Unsettled Weather* that absorbs the viewer most is the background, awash with the earthly ochre, thinning into nuances of yellow and grey, and, at the deepest end of the fine layers of color, white. The colors are applied unevenly, without covering the entire surface, on a supple, interactive material: muslin cheesecloth. Rather than being confined to its apparent use-value, this muslin cloth is a dynamic, meaning-constitutive and affect-generating element of *Unsettled Weather*. Its weave being visible in patches, its texture influencing the depth of color and precision of shapes, and its context signaling the imbrication of culture into nature, the cloth parades as a materialized metaphor for change and transformation, of environments and of humans.

Throughout his life, Klee experimented with the use of surfaces, engaging with traditional canvases as well as metal foils, newsprint, gauze, cardboard, and wallpaper.[5] The

[5] Andrew Kagan, *Paul Klee at the Guggenheim Museum* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1993), 29.

varieties of cotton textile (muslin, burlap, gauze, and other kinds of cotton weave) dominate this selection. Klee often repurposed or multi-purposed pieces of household cloth, in particular, cheesecloths and napkins made of muslin or gauze. While such repurposing might appear as an exigence for a struggling artist in early paintings like *Nude* (*Akt*, 1910, watercolor and oil on muslin cheesecloth on cardboard), one finds it operative in Klee's opus as late as in the 1930s—in paintings like *Cowardly* (*Feige*, 1934, chalk and pencil and watercolor on muslin cheesecloth mounted on cardboard), *Rehearsal* (*Stell Probe*, 1934, chalk and pigment paste on a muslin cheesecloth mounted on double cardboard), *Evening in N* (*Abend in N*, 1937, oil on muslin cheesecloth), and the puppets he made in the 1920s and 1930s. This consistent interest in experimentation with household cloth suggests a strategy. Its effects are perhaps most visible in Klee's tactic use of cheesecloth and (baby) gauze in his 1920s artwork that examines the semantic, emotional, and expressive particulars of home. Paintings like *Untitled (Two Windows in a Red-Green Composition)* (*Ohne Titel [Zwei Fenster in rot-grüner Komposition],* 1921; oil on muslin cheesecloth mounted on cardboard), *Revolving House* (*Drehbares Haus*, 1921; oil and pencil on cotton cheesecloth mounted on paper), *Landscape at the Pivotal Point* (*Landschaft im Drehpunkt*, 1928; tempera on a cheese cloth), and *Bescheidene Heimat* (*Modest Homeland*, 1928; oil on a gessoed gauze cloth over plaster) all depend for their scope of home-meanings on (possibly pre-used) pieces of cotton cloth. Of these deployments, Klee's use of cheesecloth in his 1921 *Revolving House* (Fig. 2) is particularly illuminating.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Figure 2: *Revolving House* [*Drehbares Haus*], 1921, 183, oil and pencil on cotton cheesecloth mounted on paper, 37.7 x 52.2 cm, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Revolving House appears to depict a city whose architectural geometry is unsettled by dynamic rotational movement, but the real semantic and emotive subject of the painting is the idea of home, or a house, as appearing at the crossroads of the social and the individual, of the material and the immaterial, of nature and its architectural captures. In this deliberately naïve, semi-mythical image, the architectural form of house has been reduced to essentials, fractaled, and set into spiral motion. Multiple angles of vision steep the image in visual ambiguities, fragments that render the experience of the (dislocated) self and (fleeting) home. Klee relates this theme to the medium and "texture": he has mounted on the paper support a piece of coarse cotton—a cotton cheesecloth—, secured it loosely, scrubbed the oil paint into the grain, and, like in *Unsettled Weather*, applied it freely without covering the entire surface. The color-scheme is telluric: the center of the painting is dominated by bright yellows and pinks while the darker color scheme of raw and burnt umbers emphasizes the rugged edges of the cloth. The agility and texture of the cloth create the unevenness of color and hue, consistently resetting the rhythm of the painting as it wavers between material substance and immaterial projection. The weave of the rough fabric thus remains visible in some parts of the painting whereas in others, where the paint has been absorbed, one experiences deep texture. Together, the texture and the paint signal the properties of sand and cement—materials from which houses are built—and emphasize the unfinishedness and processual nature of house/homemaking. The use of cheesecloth itself establishes an intriguing continuity between a material object with a distinct utility in a household, the image of house/houses, and the affective and connotative scope of home. The agile cloth operates as a stubborn reminder of everyday materiality, a plane of messy humanity, in tension with geometry and the organizing vision of the structured ontology of home. The way Klee uses the cloth mimics the fashion in which one such object could be used in a household: lightly extended (to lay

cheese or curds on it) or loosely wrapping or securing a content (to drain whey through it). The cheesecloth thus determines the *texture of expression*—its rhythm, its syntax, but also its mode, affect-content, dialogic openness or closure of the utterance—simply put, what happens in this painting. All these pictorial, genre and medium ambiguities make this image of house, or home, mobile (instead of static), unstable (instead of constant), and intuitive (instead of definitive).

The cheesecloth in *Revolving House*, however, also operates as a texture-point around which some questions that animated the art-world at the time are posed: can everyday household objects be not only subjects but also organizers of representation; what is the relationship between design and painting; and, does what the Russian Constructivists called *фактура* (*faktura*), the working of the material, constitute the artwork itself? Klee lectured at the Bauhaus from 1921 onwards, and this painting marked the beginning of his tenure. It appeared at the peak-point in a period of intense exploration of processes and procedures of making in a series of paintings and written reflections that are seen today as the most significant and most evocative documents of art theory in the early twentieth century. With a tenor equal part materialist, ontological, and existentialist, these reflections and their artistic performatives insist, repeatedly, that "art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it *makes* visible."[6] Forms as such are "the end, dead;" it is "form-giving" that is "movement, action," "life," Klee writes in one of his notebooks.[7] A token-gesture of making and unfinalizable eliciting, Klee's reappropriation of the cheesecloth and recasting of its use-value in paintings like *Unsettled Weather* and *Revolving House*, then, disquiets ontologies and accepted wisdoms at various planes. Crucially, Klee repositions our thinking about modernist objects in general. Rather than seeking "objecthood" in finished or found objects/forms, as enclosed

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[6] Paul Klee, *Notebooks*, Vol. 1: *The Thinking Eye*, trans. Ralph Manheim, ed. J. Spiller (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 76.
[7] Paul Klee, *Notebooks*, Vol. 2: *The Nature of Nature*, trans. Hainz Norden, ed. J. Spiller (London: Lund Humphries, 1973), 269.

commencers or outcomes of art activity, he suggests that we should expand our inquiries by finding objecthood *within* objects, and, more specifically, within *processes* of object-production. I insist on the processual nature of object-generation here for a reason. For, the fragments of textile that piled up on Klee's studio table did so also on the table of one Varvara Stepanova, a few hundred kilometers east, in her and Aleksandr Rodchenko's family home.

Varvara Stepanova, Lyubov Popova, and the Object as Comrade

Exhibit 2. On a cold winter morning in 1924, two women wrapped up well came out of their communal flats, which also served as their workshops and teaching spaces. They battled snow, carrying in their handbags piles of papers, and rolling along a further heap of papers on a cart. They were heading to the First State Textile Printing Factory (formerly Tsindel' factory) on the banks of the Moscow River, in Moscow, USSR, and the papers contained the drawings of textile designs on which the two women were working. They were small women with a big task, and their names were Lyubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova. The image I am mentally drawing fo the reader is based on a cartoon sketch made by one of them, Stepanova (or, perhaps, her husband Rodchenko), featured in the Stepanova-Rodchenko household's informal newspaper *Our Gazette* [*Наш газ*]. The sketch shows the two artists hurrying to the factory with their last evening's work. Its unfinished nature and collage-like construction embody well the artists' aim to put into practice their belief in the role of the female artist as an engineer of reality.[8]

[8] Varvara Stepanova (or Aleksandr Rodchenko), sketch, *Наш газ*, 1924. A copy of this issue of *Наш газ* has been unfortunately lost, but its reproductions appear in Dmitri V. Sarabianov and Natalia L. Adaskina, *Popova*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 313, and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005), 105.

Popova and Stepanova, the key figures of Russian Constructivism, were active members of the General Working Group of Object Analysis that formed in November 1920. The group initiated the critique of the bourgeois psychologization of the object and commodity fetish under high capitalism—a commitment they shared with the Bauhaus and, in my unusual constellation, Paul Klee. At about the same time Klee decided to put his cheesecloth to a good use, the Soviet group started demanding that art be approached as a mode of production and that the artists themselves participate in production in order to overcome art's putative autonomy within the organization of social life.[9] In a manuscript dated 21 December 1921 Popova imagines "[a] particular kind of industrial production, in which artistic creativity should play a role," and which "will differ fundamentally from the earlier aesthetic approach to the object, in that most attention will be given not to decorating the object with artistic devices (applied art), but to making the artistic organization of the object into the principle guiding the creation of even the most practical, everyday things."[10] Artists like Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova, Vladimir Tatlin, and Karl Ioganson found themselves aspiring to enter the Soviet mass production as "artists-producers," keen not so much to craft objects as to design the processes of and conditions for their production. They called themselves – the Productionists.

The two contradictory trends that marked the early Soviet socio-economic context are key for our understanding of why objects and their production became such prominent

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The sketch is accompanied by a record of an imaginary dialogue between an interlocutor named Anton and each of the women. Anton asks Popova, who is rolling a cart full of drawings, where she is heading, and she replies: "I'm going to Tsindal' factory, to deliver my weekly production of designs." Anton, then, poses the same question to Stepanova who is holding a much slimmer load. Stepanova answers: "I'm taking to Tsindal' factory only these two drawings so that the factory doesn't get airs!" The sketch comments on Popova's unusual productivity and Stepanova's wittiness in justifying her own pace of production.

[9] See Osip Brik, "В производство!," ("Into Production!") *ЛЕФ* (*LEF*) 1 (1923): 105-108.

[10] Lyubov Popova, untitled manuscript, 21 December 1921, Manuscript Department, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow (fond 148, op.17, l. 3–4), trans. and cited in Margarita Tupitsyn, ed., *Rodchenko&Popova: Defining Constructivism* (London: TATE Publishing, 2009), 160.

concerns for Soviet modernist avant-gardists. First of these was a wide socio-ideological restructuring of everyday experience, known as "new everyday life" (*novyi byt*). Advocated already in the pre-revolutionary period but put into practice in the 1920s, this new vision for everyday life was based on the belief that the ideals of the October Revolution could be realized through transformations of the quotidian experience, in particular, through the building of more equitable relationships between the sexes.[11] Leon Trotsky's 1923 book *Questions of Everyday Life* (*Вопросы быта*) specifies mechanisms to achieve this aim, ranging from the construction of appropriate infrastructure (social childcare), through the revision of matrimonial laws and the legalization of abortion, to the technology inventions aimed to make home-life and, increasingly, communal housing/home-making, easier. The key impulse behind this vision-made-practice—namely, the abandonment of bourgeois domesticity—was, however, partly counteracted by the simultaneous development of the New Economic Policy (*новая экономическая политика*, 1921-1928). Proposed by V. I. Lenin in 1921, the latter was a temporary retreat to semi-capitalist mode of economy, a market expedient to jumpstart the struggling Soviet economy.[12] Mixing capitalist and socialist models of economy, NEP meant freedom to re-indulge in the pleasures (if not always possession) of objects after years of austerity. The newly emancipated Soviet woman was at the center of the multidirectional pulls of this NEP "new everyday." Both Popova and Stepanova designed dresses for her, Popova's flapper-dress designs appealing to the taste of NEP customers keen on reengaging fashion while Stepanova's utilitarian geometric designs of sport-clothes and work-clothes celebrating the expanded scope of activities and work opportunities for Soviet women.

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[11] Lav Trotskii, *Вопросы быта* (Moscow: Красная новь, 1923).
[12] See, for the context, V. I. Lenin, "The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions under the New Economic Policy," Decision of the C.C., R.C.P. (B.) (January 12, 1922), *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), vol. 33, 184.

The role of objects within the NEP "new everyday life" was articulated most thoroughly by Productivist art critic Boris Arvatov in his 1925 essay "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Towards the Formulation of the Question)" ("Быть и культура вещи (К постановке вопроса)"). As a socialist society transits towards the communist future, it needs to reappropriate the commodity fetish for strategic use, Arvatov reasons in this text. "Transitional," well presented yet socialistically produced, objects will feed our desires while transforming the bourgeois everyday incrementally in the process of "everyday-life-creation" (*бытотворчество*). The goal is gradually to move from possessive relationship with objects to that of active appreciation. How does one appreciate objects as something other than servants to our needs, though? To answer this question, Arvatov reconceptualizes the object as "the fulfillment of the physiological-laboring capacities of the organism, as a social-laboring force, as an instrument and as a co-worker."[13] Object is conceived here as both an extension of the artist-engineer's body and imagination and a vital aide in creating conditions for a society of equals. The latter would include equitable relationships between humans and objects themselves. In his 1925 letter to Stepanova from Paris, Rodchenko stressed the contrast between the relationship to objects in the West, as one of "slave" ownership, and the treatment of things (вещи; materials and objects) as "equals, comrades" in the USSR. As Christine Kiaer comments on this letter, this line of thinking supposed the replacement of "the pleasure of commodity possession not with its presumed Communist opposite of material renunciation but with something far more peculiar and psychologically powerful: [the appreciation of] the material object as an active, almost animate participant in social life."[14] That the idea of equitable cooperation between humans and things in the production

[13] Boris Arvatov, "Быть и культура вещи (К постановке вопроса)," *Альманах пролеткульта* (*Almanac of the Proletkult*) (1925): 75-82. Herein I use the English translation, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)," trans. Christina Kiaer, *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 124.
[14] Kiaer, 1.

of future also entails a reimagining of the object as processual, or marked by processes, is what I would like to focus on next.

The 1925 reconceptualization of object as a comrade relied on the developments that had unfolded two years before. In March 1923 Arvatov delivered a lecture at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), highlighting the dearth of good designs in Soviet textile industry and the specific need for artistic involvement with factory production. In June 1923, Aleksandr Arkhangelskii, the new director of the First State Textile Printing Factory in Moscow (formerly the factory of Emil Zindel) published an open letter in the daily *Pravda* (*Правда)*, inviting artists to work in the factory. Stepanova and Popova applied for the position and were appointed on the expectation that their textile design would help improve the profits of the factory in the precarious market conditions of NEP. Prior to this engagement, both Popova and Stepanova successfully designed clothes and costumes. Rather than designing such finished textile products, though, Stepanova and Popova were supposed to make conditions or ornamenting inventions for textile objects at the First State Textile Printing Factory. To ward off any associations of their work with that of traditional applied artist, the two women submitted a contractual memo to the factory management, expressing their desire to be involved in all the organizational and technical aspects of manufacturing process: "to participate in the work of the production organs, to work closely with or to direct the artistic side of things, with the right to vote on production plans and models, design acquisitions, and recruiting colleagues for artistic work," to observe "the coloration process" in laboratory, to design "block-printed fabrics," "to establish contact with the sewing workshops, fashion houses, and journals," even to "undertake agitational work for the factory" and "contribute designs for store windows.[15]

[15] The Rodchenko-Stepanova archive, as quoted by Alexander Lavrentiev in *Varvara Stepanova: A Constructivist Life*, ed. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 81.

The managerial aspects of this commitment, like the right to vote, agitate, and market products, received a lukewarm response from the factory management, and, after a few months of work, somewhat disenchanted Stepanova reported the "isolation of the drawing department from the production and marketing organs of the factory."[16] There is evidence, though, that Stepanova and Popova did observe some processes of production, and that, for the two artists, the experience was one of active learning. As the *Our Gazette* sketch suggests, the artists embarked on their task of predicting and shaping the consumer tastes of diverse Soviet populations with substantive enthusiasm. Although Stepanova and Popova worked in the factory for a limited period,[17] they produced more than 300 designs, and several dozens of their fabrics were printed and distributed throughout the USSR. Witnesses reported that these designs were widely seen in the streets of Soviet cities; and Stepanova even purchased some yards of textile with her own design and made a dress for herself. Tellingly, however, Stepanova and Popova treated the future of these designs and fabrics, that is, their prospect to transform into actual products, with studied detachment. For, their role was not to create final objects but to produce the conditions for their creation, to be a participant-inventor. For Stepanova, to buy the material with the print she has designed and then make a dress for herself out of it—as any other Soviet woman might have done—only confirmed this positionality.

It is important to note at this point that, while sharing the initial impulses, Stepanova and Popova's use of textile presents a step beyond Klee's practice. Whereas Klee exposes a mundane textile object to a creative use, Popova and Stepanova make *creative conditions* for

[16] As cited in T. K. Strizhenova and I.A. Alpatova in "Текстиль" ("Textile"), in Irina Bibikova, Elena Yakovleva, and Vladimir Tolstoi, *Советское декоративное искусство 1917-1945* (*Soviet Decorative Art, 1917-1945*) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984), 137, and reproduced and translated by Christina Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design," in *Tate Papers*, no. 14, (Autumn 2010), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/liubov-popova-from-painting-to-textile-design. Accessed 1 August 2019.

[17] The start and end dates of their engagement have not been precisely established, but it is estimated that they started working in early autumn of 1923, that Popova was still employed by the factory at the time of her death on May 25, 1924, and Stepanova continued to work there until 1925. See Kiaer, 287, n. 8.

mundane objects-to-be-used. Whereas the cheesecloth may be Klee's co-worker, asserting its material presence, it is still the artistic subjectivity producing on or with the material that shapes what is understood, quite rightly, as a painting. In Stepanova and Popova's working of the material the very idea of artistic subjectivity withdraws; off goes, also, painting as such—and the traditional vision of the object. The primary thrust of such practice is not to present objects but to generate and facilitate the apparatuses and systems of production: the platform is process-driven. This circumstance has led scholars like Maria Gough to argue that the Productionists abandoned the object as such.[18] I do not think it is an entirely accurate assessment, though. Rather than abandoning it, the Productionists established a dynamic approach to the object, seeing neither themselves (artists) nor the objects (art-products) as masters but as co-producers of what Jacques Rancière has described, in *Le destin des images* (*The Future of Images*), as the new texture of a shared material world.[19] That the world they were living in and the world they believed in was characterized by the idea of incompletion, of transition, helped the Productionists reconceive modernist object as dynamically posed between the hand of the artist, transformations that enable its future use, and their joint social life. The Productionists' object, I suggest, is a processual entity.

To understand how objects are not renounced but transformed into processes let us turn to an actual object. Few original weaving samples of fabric survived from Stepanova and Popova's factory work in the 1920s. One of them is preserved in the Rodchenko-Stepanova Private Collection in the Pushkin Museum, and reproduced in Figure 3 below.

[INSERT FIGURE 3]

[18] Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
[19] Jacques Rancière, *Le destin des images* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2003), 111, 121.

Figure 3: Varvara Stepanova, textile sample, 1924, Varvara Stepanova and Aleksandar Rodchenko Private Collection, cat. no. 508. Courtesy of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

In certain ways, this piece of thick yet pliable cotton velour is a supreme non-object: not even a part-object, it merely serves the forging of the preconditions for an object to come into being by means of mass-production. The design is simple, featuring bidirectional abstract lines of partly superimposed triangles or arrows (or a series of the Cyrillic letter "Л" ["L"]) in alternating dark green and brown-red. The fabric to which the design is matched is a surprisingly soft kind of cotton velour, as may be used for pajamas or children's robe, that is, dress associated with home-space. On the sample, however, one can see the sown-on hooks, which indicate that this piece of cloth may have been selected as a design-demonstration piece at the factory – one to display with hope of commission. At the same time, there is no certainty that this piece, about 30x20cm, presents the entirety of one such sample; perhaps this is simply a discarded edge of sampling yardage, a cast off of a bigger object. The survival of this piece of fabric could be thanked only to the circumstance that Stepanova took it from the factory and kept it repurposed not as an exhibition piece but as a practice-reminder and, potentially, even an object of entirely different order. Its likely trajectory is illuminating. What started as a drawing sketched at home travelled to the factory; there it was pre-tested for the future use, subjected to a set of production processes (yarn weaving, printing, coloration, cutting), and made into a display piece; it was likely mass-produced and used in creation of unforeseeable variety of (home-)clothes (albeit the fragility of the medium and dispersion of design may never afford us the opportunity to ascertain this point with material evidence); the sketch-made-object (or part of an object) was then reintroduced in the very home where it originated. The torn edges and some remembrances suggest that the sample might have been used domestically as a cloth.

By reintroducing this textile piece in her household, Stepanova blurred the boundary between spaces, uses, and modes of existence, quite in line with her and her husband's re-articulation of home-space as such. At the time, they lived in a flat on the eight (seventh) floor of a communal housing building at Myasnitskaya street in Moscow, a setting that inspired Rodchenko for his vertiginous photographs from the series *Home on Myasnitskaya Street* (*Дом на Мясницкой*, 1925-27). Theirs was a crammed space, at once private and public, serving as both a family home and a working laboratory, hosting on daily basis students, collaborators, and friends, and a plethora of objects that traversed artistic work and private and public uses; it was, like those objects themselves, a social site-in-making. This reconfiguration of home space facilitates, then, a fundamental restructuring of our thinking about objects, and the two seem to work only in tandem. As boundaries between home and non-home become permeable and the uses of home expand, so the material object ceases to be a whole, in terms of both its "completeness" and its unique use-trajectory, and opens up to the non-determinate and the unforeseeable.[20] For, this piece of cloth did not end its life at Stepanova and Rodchenko's home. Rescued from their household and placed into a public archive-private collection of the Stepanova-Rodchenko family many decades after its production, the sample continued to straddle the public and the private realms, and entice social practices. Its careful confinement between two pieces of parchment nowadays signals the fragility and new uses of the sample: sitting uncomfortably between a scholarly attraction and a fetish of an era long gone, it speaks about both material history and history of interpretation. It is as such that I encountered it in 2018 and have reproduced the 2019 image of it here, marking with the camera the deterioration from its previous visual capture, in a 2014 catalogue.[21] In the next ten years, this textile object may disintegrate or become too

[20] On the general Productionists' espousal of non-determinancy and unpredictability, see Gough 17.

[21] Aleksandr Lavrentiev, Ala Lukanova, and Aleksei Savinov, *В гостях у Родченко и Степановой* (*At Home with Rodchenko and Stepanova*), Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts (26 November 2014–8 March, 2015), catalogue (Moscow: Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, 2014), 88.

fragile for viewing but, due to its processual nature and its role as a co-producer, it will not disappear. This non-object thus reveals itself as a modernist object par excellence: an entity continuously in process and adaptable to shifting forms of inhabiting the material world.

Object tremors

Juxtaposing the textile tremors in Klee's paintings and Popova and Stepanova's textile design samples has unearthed a hidden axial point in which the modernists' perception of home, as a physical environment, projective phantasy and constitutive emotion, and their understanding of objects, as products and bearers of our experiences and activities of living in the world, transformed. In what must have been an inspiring juxtaposition, Alfred Barr visited Klee's Dessau home and Stepanova and Rodchenko's Moscow home on the occasion of the same European trip in 1927-28. Having seen Klee in his home-working space in November 1927, on 3 January 1928 he visited Stepanova's and Rodchenko's home. The less-than-complimentary record of his first visit, which forced the artists to "turn [their] home upside down" in search of their early paintings demanded by Barr, remains in their archive.[22] Stepanova was unnerved by what she perceived to be young Barr's bygone interpretation of the processual object that is artwork. These initial misunderstandings aside, the visit was also a beginning of long-lasting exchange and an opportunity for Barr to amass Soviet material objects, which, then, "catalyzed" his own 1928 article about the LEF, where he praised the Soviet artists' as "idealists of materialism."[23] This European trip and, specifically, his visits to home-spaces of Klee, Stepanova and Rodchenko, forced Barr to move away from the traditional understanding of artwork and towards reflection about artistic engagements with

[22] Evangelos Kotsioris, "Unpacking Barr's Library: The Paper Trail from the Bauhaus to VKhUTEMAS," *Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art around the Globe*, MoMA, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1215-unpacking-barr-s-library-the-paper-trail-from-the-bauhaus-to-vkhutemas. Accessed on 2 August 2019.

[23] Alfred H. Barr Jr, "The 'LEF' and Soviet Art," *Transition* 14 (Fall 1928): 270.

material objects and the non-objective—a reflection that would become a cornerstone of one of the most important collections of modernist art.

More than just a series of exquisite paintings and textile prints thus came out of Klee's exploration of cotton cloth and Popova and Stepanova's textile design: our ideas about both the artist and the object (and the object of art) changed. They helped us re-identify the artist as a producer attuned and adjustable to the demands of the material object and the vital contributor to the shaping of a processual cultural sphere. And their practices reconfigured the idea of the object as such. Using cotton cloth to signal the processual nature of both homes and objects, both Klee and Stepanova treated a piece of cotton as a "comrade"—that is, an animate participant in the creation process, itself involving the replication of geometric forms and lines of threaded cotton. This textured "co-worker" helped them avoid the pitfalls of falling into either psychologization and/or ontologization of the material object, and explore, instead, a more general continuity between the visible (painterly) and the legible (scribable, readable), and the ways in which it can communicate everyday affects and experiences, above all the socially transformed experience of home. In turn, the object became marked by the unforeseeable: materially, ontologically, and emotionally incomplete, open to various uses, and continuously active. It is one of the greatest transformations in our thinking about objects, and a tensional trajectory of this thinking would shape art and everyday life in much of the twentieth and twenty-first century.