

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Virtual programme accompanying the exhibition *John Heartfield – Photography plus Dynamite* at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2 June – 23 August 2020

Political Photomontage “A Worldwide Achievement”¹

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While travelling in the Black Sea Region to collect photographic material for his next poster, the photomontage artist Gustav Klutsis wrote to his wife and colleague Valentina Kulagina: “The most important thing is, there had been an opportunity to speak to [John] Heartfield, to [Arkady] Shaikhet, to [Max] Alpert.”² A photograph from Klutsis’ archive captures this meeting, portraying a scene of male camaraderie (ill. 1). Heartfield and Klutsis, each a stalwart communist and pioneer of political photomontage in their respective countries, sit next to each other: the latter embraces the former. Heartfield, who at the time worked for a communist weekly *AIZ*, was commissioned to design the September 1931 issue of the magazine, *USSR in Construction*. Founded in 1930, it was a multilingual publication dedicated to the coverage of the country’s swift reconstruction. The photograph shows Heartfield in what was for him an unusually cheerful mood; his cover design, printed in the *USSR in Construction*, and consisting of Lenin’s portrait superimposed over a new Moscow cityscape, shows no signs of Heartfield’s infamous sarcasm and bile (ill. 2). This suggests that he came to the communist country to temporarily remove himself from the fierce negativity his *AIZ* photomontages are saturated with. Heartfield’s expedition with Alpert and Shaikhet, the antagonists of the avant-garde practices in mass media, as well as his male embrace in the pho-

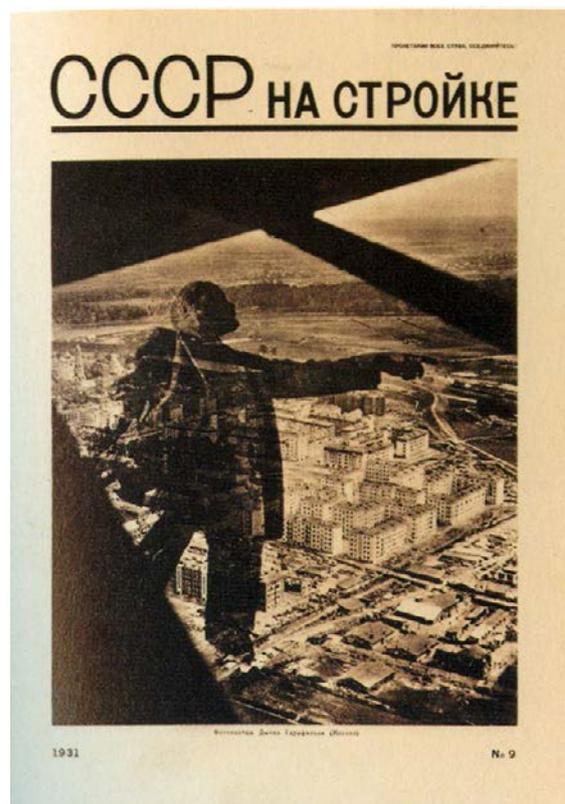


1 – Arkady Shaikhet, from left to right: Gustav Klutsis, John Heartfield, Fedor Bogorodsky, Vasily Elkin, Sergei Senkin, and Max Alpert in Batumi (on the Black Sea coast, now Georgia), 1931, Margarita Tupitsyn Archive

tograph of the conservative realist painter Fedor Bogorodsky, all speak to his obliviousness of the local socio-cultural schisms.

Soviet officials offered Heartfield an exhibition in Moscow. Kulagina (the Russian equivalent of Hannah Höch) attended the opening on 22 November and commented in her diary: (ill. 3)

“BF³ is very displeased that our team didn’t come to the opening. He says it’s politically incorrect, a mistake, etc., and what about Heartfield did not want to have a joint exhibition with us – was that correct? He insisted on an individual exhibition and he got it, we ceded him our right – and it’s obvious that there is no pleasure in honouring a man who treated his comrades as a conqueror would treat his colonies.”⁴



2 – John Heartfield, Cover for the magazine *USSR in Construction*, no. 9, 1931. ©The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

Kulagina stresses a conflict between individual and collective objectives, and raises the issue of the mass media artists' ability to suppress their authorial identity and commit to artistic collaboration for the sake of a common goal of mass agitation. Regardless of her intent to make a distinction in this respect between Heartfield and the Soviet practitioners of political photomontage, the iconic works of Heartfield and Klutsis, for example, prove the opposite. The former's self-portrait, made in 1929 with a pair of scissors decapitating his enemy, and Klutsis' emblematic poster, *Let's Fulfill the Great Projects* (1930), with his hand as a central image guiding the proletariat, are keen on preserving the artists' identity in artworks made for a vast and anonymous audience (ills. 4–5). It is worth noting that both artists apply the technique of defamiliarization that they learned from Dada and Russian formalism.

Heartfield's refusal to exhibit with the photomontage artists he had joined in the photograph infers that his submission to teamwork on the issue of the *USSR in Construction* was an authorial compromise. He left the Soviet Union just in time, for in the summer of 1932, Kulagina declared: “Photomontage is being attacked on every point.”⁵ A year later when Heartfield was forced to leave Berlin for Prague as a result of Hitler's rise to power, the situation also worsened in Moscow. “I told them ... that they needed paper-pasters, not artists,”⁶ Kulagina angrily stated in her diary. Here “they” refers to the editors of State pub-

lishing houses, who had by then intensified censorship of photomontage designs. Kulagina's negative use of the term “pasters,” undermined the structural foundation of the medium. If the cut is now made by a censor, then the paste that seals the particular model of a social order, was equally ruined.

Within this paradigm shift in political photomontage, painting, which only a decade earlier was dubbed obsolete, dawned on the horizon as the salvation. “Artists really begin to feel like doing things that would remain as they are made painting in this respect, lives up to its expectations,”⁷ naively concluded Kulagina on the brink of the government granting a monopoly to Socialist Realist style. Just as Klutsis had convinced Kulagina to switch from painting to photomontage in the 1920s, Kulagina was now committed to “persuade[-ing] Gustav to take up painting,” characterizing his work in mass media as “wasting his enormous talent.”⁸ Given that both Heartfield and Klutsis fell victims to their strident loyalty to political photomontage, Kulagina's verdict was unjust.⁹ The verdict was also erroneous, for the censors' fixation on the medium only validated its historical importance and its ability to be equally effective for artists who exposed political manipulations as well as for those who conceptualized utopian structures. Perhaps it is this dialectical potential of political photomontage that worked against it in the virtual space where it became a mere operational, immaterial technique adopted to serve multiple agendas and ideologies. The fate of such an originally quite powerful and radical art form resonates with Klutsis' caution, voiced in the publication of the October group the year Heartfield visited Russia: “It is absolutely necessary to continue to combat the numerous epigones and char-



3 – John Heartfield, Installation view of John Heartfield's solo exhibition, Moscow, 1931, Margarita Tupitsyn Archive



4 – John Heartfield, *Self-Portrait*, 1929. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

latans who vulgarize this method and use it to rejuvenate their already obsolete techniques for purposes of hackwork.”¹⁰

- 1 My title is taken from Gustav Klutsis, “A Worldwide Achievement”, reprinted in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina, Photography and Montage After Constructivism* (New York: International Center of Photography and Gottingen: Steidl, 2004), pp. 241–243.
- 2 Gustav Klutsis’ letter to Valentina Kulagina, 3 September 1931 in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina, Photography and Montage After Constructivism*, p. 193.
- 3 Boris Fedorovich Malkin was the director of the State Publishing House of Fine Arts (IZOGIZ)
- 4 Valentina Kulagina’s diary, 23 November 1931 in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina, op.cit.*, p. 201.
- 5 VK’s diary, 26 August 1932, p. 205.
- 6 VK’s diary, undated entry, 1933, p. 206.
- 7 VK’s diary, 24 February 1932, p. 201.
- 8 VK’s diary, p. 201..
- 9 Paradoxically, Klutsis, a communist, was arrested on 17 January 1938. He was accused of being a member of the Latvian fascist-nationalist organization and sentenced to be shot on 11 February 1938.
- 10 Gustav Klutsis, “The Photomontage as a New Kind of Agitation Art” in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina, op.cit.*, p. 240. Originally published as “Fotomontazh kak novyi vid agitatsionnogo iskusstva” in *Izofront: Klassovaia bor’ba na fronte prostranstvennykh iskusstv. Sbornik statei ob’edineniia Oktiabr’* (Leningrad: Izofront, 1931), pp. 119–33.



5 – Gustav Klutsis, *Let’s Fulfill the Great Projects*, 1930, Margarita Tupitsyn Archive