

The Model of Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International: Reconstruction as an Instrument of Research and States of Knowledge

Nathalie Leleu

'History is not data but conquest, renewed in time and space by a thorough knowledge, unceasingly continued, unceasingly supplemented. This is indeed the lesson which we must learn from Paris-Moscow'.¹ In these words Pontus Hultén introduced, in his lead article in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, the project of the *Paris-Moscow* exhibition, organised in the spring of 1979 at the Centre Pompidou. At the crossroad of the exhibition's main axes sat an object undoubtedly invested with the spirit of 'conquest' which motivated Pontus Hultén as an art historian: the *Model of the Monument to the Third International* by Vladimir Tatlin. This lost work has been reconstructed several times and each artefact synthesises and formalises a different state of knowledge in a given form and time. Pontus Hultén has been a major protagonist in at least two of these reconstructions. Various exhibitions justified their production, a recurrent circumstance in the history of replicas and reconstitutions of twentieth-century works of art.

With [Malevich](#), Tatlin was the principal artist to benefit from the rediscovery and rehabilitation of the Russian avant-gardes carried out by Hultén with the help of Willem Sandberg, the director of the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam and Troels Andersen, the Danish historian. With Andersen, Hultén, then director at the Moderna Museet of Stockholm, conceived a retrospective of Tatlin's work which opened its doors in the summer of 1968. The retrospective was based on research Andersen undertook mainly through T.M. Shapiro, one of Tatlin's assistants for the construction of the first *Model of the Monument to the Third International* in Pétrograd in 1919–20. Hultén wished to resuscitate one of the symbols of the Revolution in Russian art and society: 'For the first time, it seemed possible that an artist-engineer materialises the synthesis of architecture and sculpture.'²

Perceived as the outcome of Tatlin's spatial experiments which began in 1913 and his first *Counter-Reliefs*, the *Monument* was also the prototype for many examples of monumental architecture of propaganda commissioned by the Bolsheviks to glorify the Revolution. Although never built, this 400 metre-high tower of glass and steel spanning the Neva was to rise in a slope of two latticed spirals in which four geometrical volumes were meant to be superimposed (a cube, a pyramid, a hemisphere and a cylinder) rotating on their own axis. On 8 November, 1920, the anniversary of the Revolution, Tatlin exhibited a five-metre high model in his 'space, materials and construction workshop'. One month later, for the VIIIth Soviet Congress, he relocated it to the Trade Union House in Moscow. For the 1925 International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts held in Paris Tatlin built a smaller tower (approximately three metres high), whose spirals looked radically different from the first model. These two original 'towers' have been lost.

Two drafts and three photographs of the first model published in 1921 with the text 'Tatlin against Cubism' by Nicolaï Punin, along with indications provided by Shapiro, were originally the only material brought to the historian Ulf Linde and the artist Per Olof Ultvedt, in charge of the reconstruction of the Stockholm 'tower'. A 1:10 scale model had been initially produced. Then, the study of a photograph of the 1925 model, together with a high-angle view of the top of the first 'tower' under construction, improved knowledge of Tatlin's architectonic system. These new elements helped the construction of the wood and iron full-scale model built by carpenters Arne Holm and Eskil Nandorf and ironworker Henrik Östberg. The satisfaction of Hultén and Andersen was considerably tempered by the difficulties they encountered with Russian museums when negotiating loans requested for the retrospective. The discussions ended in March

1968 with an outright objection from the Soviet Ministry of Culture. Deprived of original works by Tatlin, the project focused exclusively on reconstructions: the *Model of the Monument to the Third International*, three *Counter-Reliefs* from Portsmouth College of Art realised by the artist Martyn Chalk, the flying machine *Letatlin* 1930–31, the costumes for the *Zanguézi* show of 1923 and a model for a seat designed in 1927 by Tatlin and his student Rogogine (from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne).

The catalogue's critical apparatus assessed the current knowledge on the artist. The welcoming of Tatlin's work by his contemporaries – Ehrenbourg, Trotski, [Lissitzky](#), Malevich, Eisenstein – has been particularly well documented, along with the process of rebuilding of the 'tower'. The lack of original works in the exhibition compared to the profusion of documents, led Hultén to describe his show as 'conceptual' – paradoxically, a feature which undoubtedly contributed to legitimise Hultén and Andersen's historical speech on the theory ruling Tatlin's constructivism as much as it did the reconstruction process: 'Tatlin's ideas were not only revolutionary in the sense that they were new and radical, but were also related to the political revolution which took place at the end of the first decade in Russia. ... Tatlin's work is more important due to the initiatives he took than to the projects he actually built.'³

The perseverance of the Moderna Museet team bore fruit; the acknowledgement of Tatlin's work crossed borders. The exhibition travelled to the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in autumn 1969. Many loans of the *Monument* were requested in the following months and years, and assistance from the Moderna Museet was sought to document the various 'tower' reconstruction projects, in particular those of London and Washington.

Eleven years later, in the exhibition *Paris-Moscow* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Pontus Hultén again echoed the 'initiatives' of Tatlin embodied in the *Monument to the Third International*. Hultén made a decisive step by correcting the Stockholm 'tower'. The latter had been sent to Paris to be used as a prototype for a new reconstruction. Perhaps the criticism that historian Anatoly Strigalëv (who directed the London reconstruction of the *Monument* in 1971) had expressed concerning the Swedish model, considered oversimplified and crisp, distorted in its proportions and layout of the spirals had been taken into account. However, it is certain that the documentary material collected in Moscow by the *Paris-Moscow* team – in particular, a set of diagrams established by Shapiro during the reconstruction that he made of the *Monument* in 1975 (Museum of Chthchoussev Architecture) – was used for the version built in Paris by the Longépé Joiner Studio in January 1979, as opposed to the Stockholm model. This new artefact was exhibited in *Paris-Moscow* and was then included in the Musée national d'art moderne collection in June 1979. A combination of circumstances allowed the Moderna Museet to profit from the same corrections in its own *Monument*. When the 'tower' was returned to Sweden in the spring of 1980, the museum's conservators noted that some elements were missing and were therefore unable to reassemble the *Monument*. After much negotiation, the insurance policy covering the loan of the *Paris-Moscow* model dealt with the damage and financed the rebuilding of the 'tower' by the Longépé Studio, identical to that of the Paris model.

The French and Swedish collections today own two artefacts born neither from the hand nor the will of Tatlin. Both provide a formal synthesis of research undertaken on his work at a certain time. The latest reconstruction was produced in 1993–1994 for the *Vladimir Tatlin* retrospective, and is now permanently exhibited at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Today, it is the ultimate tangible proof given to us by art historians regarding their knowledge on the *Monument*. The succession of these objects generates a genealogy in a process in which historians are its principal agents.

Notes

¹ *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no. 2, Oct – Dec. 1979, p.172.

² Pontus Hultén, *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, exh. cat., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968, p.108. Hultén became interested in the *Monument* long before 1968. For example, the tower is mentioned and reproduced in the 1961 catalogue of the exhibition *Bewogen beweging* (Movement in Art) organised by Hultén for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

³ *Vladimir Tatlin*, exh. cat., Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1968, p.4–5.

Acknowledgements

This text is based on a longer article by the author, “Mettre le regard sous le contrôle du toucher” – Répliques, copies et reconstitutions au XXe siècle: Les tentations de l'historien de l'art', *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no.93, Paris, Autumn 2005, pp.84–103.

Tate Papers Autumn 2007 © Nathalie Leleu

*This paper was written as a short discussion document for the Inherent Vice: The Replica and its Implications in Modern Sculpture Workshop, held at Tate Modern, 18–19 October 2007, and supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Other papers produced for this workshop can be found in [issue no.8](#) of *Tate Papers*.*