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## Report Exhibition: The Crit at Vkhutemas Anna Bokov

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One year after the Bolshevik Revolution, while still in the grip of a civil war, Soviet Russia instituted a sweeping educational reform that reorganized, among other fields, art, architecture, and design. To educate the newly empowered proletarian masses, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky's government swiftly moved to replace the traditional fine arts colleges and applied arts schools and create a radically new educational model. Beginning in September 1918, the Free State Art Studios or Workshops (*masterskie* in Russian), typically referred to by the acronym Svomas, were being set up in major cities across the state, establishing a nation-wide network. <sup>1</sup> These free-spirited studios were meant to communicate the importance of both craft and industrial production as a foundation of artistic practice – and, arguably, paved the way for the Bauhaus, founded the following year.

<sup>1</sup> The initialism SGKhm is also used.

The mission of Svomas was to make artistic training accessible, "widely opening its doors to anyone willing to dedicate themselves to art." <sup>2</sup> Anyone who was interested could enroll. The curriculum had no defined structure, entrance exams were abolished, as was tuition, giving additional meaning to the term *free* (though the course of tuition-free study was not to exceed seven years). In accordance with the spirit of the revolutionary era, Svomas was founded on principles of student governance and absolute artistic freedom, at times elevated to complete anarchy. In the Free Studios established in the new Soviet capital, "every student was given the opportunity to develop their own individuality in any direction of their choice." <sup>3</sup> The students were the ones in charge of setting up the studios and nominating and electing the professors, with the approval of the Fine Arts Committee of the Commissariat of Education (IZO Narkompros). An important aim of the educational reform in the arts was to introduce the most progressive trends of the avant-garde, and the student-run committees followed suit. The faculty, whose up-to-date composition reflected these emergent directions, included Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin, Kazimir Malevich, and Lyubov Popova, among others. Both Malevich and Kandinsky initially received only four student votes each, as evidenced by the sign-up sheets for their studios at Svomas. <sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Svomas Announcement ("October 1st of this year in Moscow open State Free Art Studios"), Moscow, 1918, Collection of MARKhi Museum. Author's translation.

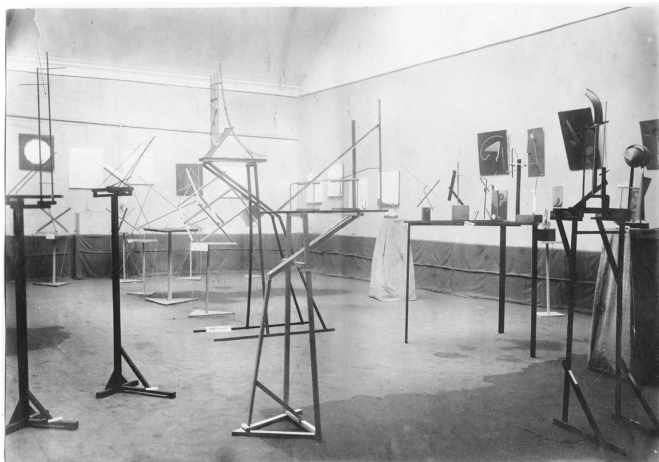
<sup>3</sup> Svomas Announcement. (see note 2)

<sup>4</sup> See Anna Bokov, *Avant-Garde as Method: Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920–1930* (Park Books: Zurich, 2020), 82.

In spite of their best efforts, in some cases none of the candidates were satisfactory, and students formed their own collectives without a senior lead. Some of the most influential contributions to the modern movement were produced in this context.

A group of Svomas students and affiliates, some of whom were members of a Society of Young Artists (known by the acronym Obmokhu), presented their body of work at an exhibition in the spring of 1921. Much of this “end of the year show” eventually ended up in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (even if only as reconstructions). <sup>fig.1</sup> Though short-lived, the Svomas experiment introduced a radical democratic pedagogical model that would eventually prevail at Vkhutemas, at the Bauhaus, and beyond: that of collaborative approach, collective authorship, and communal spirit.

After two academic years the free-spirited, albeit chaotic, Free State Art Studios were consolidated into Higher Art and Technical Studios, collectively known as Vkhutemas, in the fall of 1920. Vkhutemas, this time following the lead of the Bauhaus, was conceived as a single interdisciplinary institution that sought



to further erase the difference between art and mass production, not least due to the efforts of Kandinsky and his circle. Conceived as a “specialized educational institution for advanced artistic and technical training in order to prepare highly qualified artist-practition-

**fig.1** Second spring exhibition of Obmokhu (Society of Young Artists), Moscow, May 1921. The exhibition featured work by several former students of the Svomas (Free State Art Studios) and members of the Working Group of Constructivists at Inkhuk (Institute of Artistic Culture). Participants included Alexander Rodchenko, Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetsky, Vladimir Stenbergs, and Georgy Stenbergs. Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive

ers for the modern industry,” the new school combined eight departments: painting, sculpture, architecture, graphics (or printing), woodworking, metalworking, ceramics, and textiles. <sup>5</sup> In 1927 Vkhutemas was reorganized into the Higher Art and Technical Institute, known as Vkhutein, signaling further unitary consolidation. <sup>6</sup> In 1930 the school was forcefully shut down by Stalinist authorities, who cited its inefficiency in fulfilling its educational mandate and accused it of “formalism” — a term that became a pejorative and even outright dangerous in the totalitarian Soviet Union.

The decade of Vkhutemas’ existence, conventionally considered the avant-garde era, was filled with constant debate, whether constructive, instructive, or destructive. Conducted in an adversarial environment, novel ideas were put to the test through pedagogical experiments iterated on a massive scale. Normative educational processes devised for passing on a set of professional skills were suspended in favor of fostering experimental free-spirited creativity. The iterative process and the resultant body of work, rather than simply a technique or medium (as in traditional

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “Dekret Sovnarkoma ob obrazovanii Vkhutemasa” [Sovnarkom decree on the establishment of Vkhutemas], December 19, 1920, in *Complete Works of V.I. Lenin*, vol. 52 (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Politicheskoy Literatury, 1967), 17. Author’s translation.

<sup>6</sup> In this text the title Vkhutemas is used throughout, including for the Vkhutein period (between 1927 and 1930).

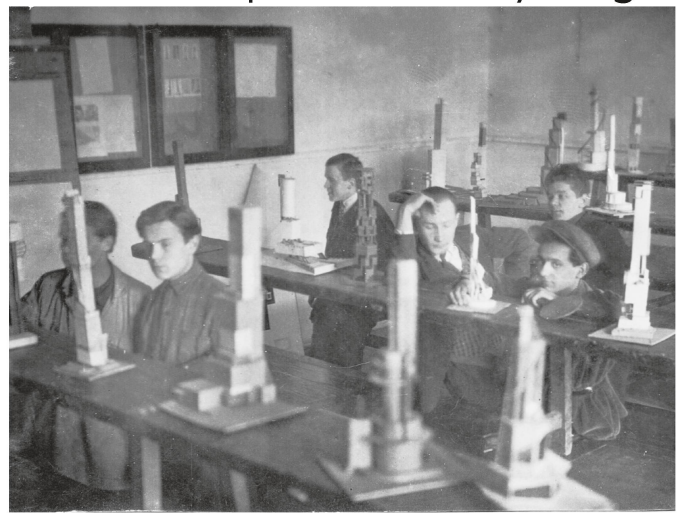


educational settings), became the focus of Vkhutemas pedagogy. Student work had to speak for itself. That imperative defined a widely used mode of crit at Vkhutemas—the so-called “report exhibition.” While inherited from the academic Beaux-Arts tradition, as a setting for top-down judgment the objectives of this type of evaluation in the context of Vkhutemas were entirely different. In a traditional setting the collective display of results and the ensuing comparative process were meant to ensure adherence to an established canon. At Vkhutemas, with its commitment to continuous experimentation, the crit would become an essential step for the next leap and would itself serve to establish a new canon.

Report exhibitions were conducted on a regular basis, not just at the end of the semester. Often makeshift and hastily thrown together, they marked the completion of every assignment.

**fig.2** Students with models expressing the “articulation of vertical rhythm,” developed for the Space course at Vkhutemas, ca. 1924. Museum of the Moscow Architectural Institute

These displays were common for foundational exercises, as well as for advanced projects. While on the surface their goal was to evaluate and critique student work, their deeper significance was to demonstrate work back to the students, to allow space for reflection and learning. The opportunity to compare and contrast exercises produced according to the



same brief, often with specific guidelines, allowed for nearly scientific rigor in what was traditionally understood as an artistic domain. Nonetheless, at Vkhutemas an entirely new aesthetic paradigm was shaped in the matter of a few years or even months. In the context of Vkhutemas, the traditional Beaux-Arts educational mode—that is, learning by copying, saying by drawing fragments of historical precedents, and studying elements of a classical order—was no longer feasible. Instead, the new operational mode recalled the pragmatists’ “learning by doing” dictum, where producing student work would serve as precedent for the next round of exercises. The resultant “comradely competition” was an essential feature of Vkhutemas’s pedagogical approach—which was not about selecting a single best case but about generating solutions that could be “harvested” and, if necessary, recomposed in new ways to achieve a common goal. **fig.2**

For the most part, teaching was verbal, sometimes supplemented by sketching rather than by referring to historical examples.



Though For his part, Nikolay Ladovsky, one of the main figures in developing the new rationalists pedagogy at Vkhutemas, preferred to put his assignments in writing (preferably in typed form), reflecting not only the need to communicate to dozens of students but also indicative of an attempt to develop a sci-



entific approach, where an assignment is treated as an algorithm of operations. Ladovsky wanted students to discover and invent by working directly with spatial form and to experiment with models through physical making. **fig.3** During a period of paradigmatic change in architecture, one that

**fig.3** Students work on clay models for an exercise on the "articulation and expression of mass and weight" for the "Space" course at Vkhutemas, ca. 1927. Museum of the Moscow Architectural Institute

the rationalists were agents of, showing precedents to students might have limited their free-flowing creativity. The written and verbal assignments, on the other hand, allowed an objective framework to be established but were detached—at least in theory—from the instructor's immediate control. This pedagogical experiment had the additional benefits of both training and learning from the work of an unprecedented number of students.

One of the more captivating images elucidating the pedagogy of Vkhutemas shows a formidable display of clay models for the school's "Space" course. Most likely taken during the fall of 1927, the photograph depicts a typical "report exhibition" of the exercises done for the assignment on the "articulation and



expression of mass and weight." **fig.4** Developed by Ladovsky and his colleagues Vladimir Krinsky and Nikolay Dokuchaev at the onset of the "Space" course in 1920, the assignment was intended to test the visual effect of gravity on spatial form. A rectangular prism of certain proportions, (or mass), was supposed to deform under the downward force (or weight) and simultaneously resist it, resulting in some cases in an appearance of weightlessness. Despite their apparent similarities, the models vary from one to the next, constituting

**fig.4** An exhibition of clay models made by students in the "Space" course at Vkhutemas, ca. 1927. The models were made in response to an assignment on the "articulation and expression of mass and weight." Museum of the Moscow Architectural Institute

portions, (or mass), was supposed to deform under the downward force (or weight) and simultaneously resist it, resulting in some cases in an appearance of weightlessness. Despite their apparent similarities, the models vary from one to the next, constituting

similar-but-different iterations stemming from a rigorous method that underscores the logic behind their making. The rigid set of instructions determining the parameters of the modeling process undoubtedly limited the students' freedom; at the same time, by suspending the "burdens" of typical architectural "distractions," such as program, use, or site, it allowed students to focus on the form itself.

While the Beaux-Arts atelier was a collective formed around a master, Vkhutemas sought to replace this singular figure of authority with an "objective" method. Its aim was to develop a system of knowledge to counteract the subjective preferences and stylistic biases of an individualized approach and replace them with scientific principles presumably inherent in any creative field. Yet, despite the efforts to standardize instruction and streamline design curriculum to a coherent set of exercises, an active exchange between teacher and student was still necessary. According to Krinsky, "These forms of education require great activity from the teacher and students, who work in contact and collaboration."<sup>7</sup> At Vkhutemas, students were considered associates and colleagues. The Vesnin brothers brought their student Ivan Leonidov, a talented young man of modest background, into their highbrow critiques because of his ability to sense the "spirit of the moment." Ladovsky expanded his teaching crew by hiring seven of his students after just the second year of Vkhutemas's existence, none of whom had received their diplomas at that point. Indeed, "joint creative work," as Krinsky called it, was as fundamental to the Vkhutemas pedagogy as were the standard assignments and the process of turning those into "seeds" for subsequent projects.<sup>8</sup> The line between instruction and collaboration was consistently blurred, allowing for both the horizontal and vertical exchange of knowledge, whereby the school served as a type of a "social condenser," a term coined by constructivist architects in the late 1920s.

In spite, or perhaps because of, this symbiotic relationship between faculty and students, the atmosphere at both Svomas and Vkhutemas remained highly contentious, according to numerous accounts. Competing factions among the faculty included proponents of traditional, academic models and the new avant-garde movements. Osip Brik, considered one of the founding fathers of Vkhutemas, reported that what he called the "breakdown" of the school stemmed from the disconnect between the productivist and the fine arts departments.

*"The ideological and organizational breakdown of Vkhutemas is a fact that has already taken place. The only Higher State Artistic School in Soviet Russia ekes out a miserable existence,*

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Krinsky, *Novoe v obuchenii kompozitsii* [New in teaching composition] (1970), in M.G. Barkhin, ed., *Mastera Sovetskoy arkhitektury ob arkhitekture*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975), 125. Author's translation.

<sup>8</sup> Krinsky, *Novoe v obuchenii kompozitsii* (see note 7), 125.



*disconnected from the ideological and practical tasks of today and of future proletarian culture. The production departments are empty. Technical equipment is being sold or rented. People are leaving. But to make up for this, various individual studios of painting and sculpture are being opened by second- and third-rank easel artists.”* <sup>9</sup>

The original Vkhutemas mission was to integrate the production departments with the so-called pure half—that is, the traditional fine arts—an undertaking that required a major conceptual shift. Despite the best efforts of the avant-garde protagonists to bring “art into life,” the majority of the students and faculty still preferred what were historically considered to be more prestigious disciplines. Painting remained the largest and most popular department in the first half of the 1920s, followed by architecture.

Vigorous debates, arguments, and even scandals were part of the daily experience at Vkhutemas. Constructivists and rationalists fought with the traditionalists and with each other, easel painters with the artist-constructors—Tatlin with Malevich, Rodchenko with Kandinsky, Ladovsky with Ivan Zholtovsky and Moisey Ginzburg. Yet these antagonistic interactions, which sometimes took the form of months-long debates, were essential to forging the new aesthetic, for shaping new concepts of form and space. All that to say that critique, even in the form of the harshest and seemingly most destructive criticism, can perhaps be healthy and even crucial. Whether enabled through exhibition, competition, or conversation, as a mode of communication, critique is imperative if we are to move beyond simply transferring existing knowledge patterns to generating new ones.

<sup>9</sup> Osip Brik, “The Breakdown of Vkhutemas: Report on the Condition of the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops,” *October* 134 (2010), 87, [https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO\\_a\\_00013](https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00013). Originally published in *Lef* 4 (1924), 27.







