

Charlotte Greve, *Writing and the 'Subject': Image-Text Relations in the Early Russian Avant-Garde and Contemporary Russian Visual Poetry* (Pegasus Oost-Europese Studies 3), Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2004. 344 p. ISBN: 90-6143-292-8

When the Russian Futurists proposed to throw Pushkin and others from the steamship of modernity, part of what they had in mind was a revalorisation of the poetic word. Whereas for previous generations of writers the word had been valued for either its connotative or its suggestive meaning or both, for the Futurists it was the 'word as such', independent of meaning, which was the primary focus of attention. Two consequences of this cognitive shift were the invention of *zaum* 'or 'trans-sense' language, and an emphasis on the graphic properties of words and letters: where the Symbolists had given music the highest place in their hierarchy of the arts, the Futurist world view drew its inspiration chiefly from the visual. It is the complex relationship between language and visual art as it developed in avant-garde literary practice and in the visual poetry of present-day Russia that forms the topic of Charlotte Greve's book. Her meticulous analyses proceed from a thorough knowledge of primary and secondary published work in the area, supplemented by extensive use of rare archival material, and by interviews with the contemporary visual artists whose work she discusses.

Writing and the 'Subject' begins with a theoretical introduction which threads its way expertly through such central issues as the avant-garde's approach to Potebnia's triadic understanding of the sign; the notion of *faktura*, or the materiality (physical technique) of painting, as an index of the painterly 'subject', which was taken up and applied to the verbal arts by the Cubo-Futurist group in particular; the notion of 'signature' and the inscription of multiple 'subjects' in the 'image-text' through the multiple techniques simultaneously in evidence in works of visual poetry; and the centrality of handwriting, that is, written language in its personalised aspect, to this project. In doing this Greve shows an easy familiarity with scholars from the formalists to Derrida and Barthes.

The material manifestation of the 'handwriting subject' is particularly in evidence in the handmade books produced between 1912 and 1918 by Aleksei Kruchenykh and others in collaboration with the painters Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova. Greve analyses several of these in some detail, concluding that the ways in which Kruchenykh in particular consciously plays

on the instability of subject-object and image-text relations serve ultimately to question the very notion of any stable form of representation. Greve then examines Velimir Khlebnikov's use of *zaum*', with particular attention to its visual aspect: his insistence on the ontological significance of individual letters separate from the referential meanings of the words in which they occur again produces an unstable horizon of signification. Greve sees a different form of *zaum*' in the books produced by Kruchenykh in the Caucasus in 1915-19 under the influence of Kazimir Malevich and Suprematist thinking on art. Here, she concludes, syllables are more suggestive of everyday-language utterances, and their inclusion parallels Kruchenykh's use of purely graphic gestures. In the handwritten books of Varvara Stepanova, which she made between 1917 and 1919, Greve sees a reinterpretation of previous avant-garde practice in the light of revolutionary events. The different layers of meaning implicit in the image-text, and reinforced by the use of collage as well as handwriting, are seen partly as a political statement in favour of the new communist order.

In turning to the work of the contemporary visual poets Ry Nikonova and Sergei Sigei, Greve identifies as central to their oeuvre the structural principle of palimpsest, through which they have sought to preserve avant-garde semiotic traditions against years of Soviet mistrust, and also to link them with parallel movements in European and American art from the 1960s onwards. While Nikonova relies on a rhetoric of transformation to co-ordinate different levels of meaning, Sigei rather integrates found texts into new cultural artefacts, making them his own by the technique of signature.

Greve's book is an important contribution to both to the history of the Russian avant-garde and to the theory of artistic and literary communication. Her arguments are presented compellingly and lucidly (notwithstanding occasional slavisms such as the use of 'principal' to mean 'based on principle', and a failure to distinguish between defining and non-defining relative clauses). The text is supported by sixty-one illustrations from avant-garde books, many of them published here for the first time. Even though the *faktura* and colour could not be reproduced, these still convey much of the sense of discovery which informed their original creation.

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