

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOVIET ICARUS: FROM THE DREAM OF FREE FLIGHT TO THE NIGHTMARE OF FREE FALL

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The replica of a fascinating and grandiose design stood in the courtyard of London's Academy of Arts from October 2011 until January 2012, during the exhibition *Building the Revolution—Soviet Art and Architecture 1915–1935*. It was the *Model for the Monument to the Third International*, by the artist Vladimir Tatlin, or, as it is more widely known, *Tatlin's Tower*. The original design, dating from 1920, existed only in the form of drawings and models—it was never actually constructed. The idea was based on a synthesis of diverse elements from architecture, sculpture and painting, with carefully designed rotating forms of metal and glass, electric elevators, heating and projection systems, and telephone and radio transmitters. Naturally the question was asked: is this art? The critic, Nikolai Punin hastened to its defence, claiming that it was indeed a work of art—a form created 'on the basis of the organic synthesis of those principles that govern painting, sculpture and architecture, and offering a new type of monumental construction—one that would combine creative form with utility'.¹

Ten years later, during the period 1929–1932, Vladimir Tatlin set up a workshop in Moscow's Novodevichii Monastery and worked—with the help of students from the Moscow VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie—The Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops)—on one of the most bizarre, utopian, and daring of all his projects: the construction of a flying machine, an air-bicycle, which he called the *Letatlin* (a compound of the artist's own surname and the Russian verb 'letat'—to fly (Fig. 3.1). What Tatlin sought to create was a machine driven solely by human power. His air-bicycle was to free man from the bonds of gravity and give him the sense of flight as enjoyed by

¹ N. Punin, *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala* (Petrograd: Otdel IZO Narkompros, 1920); reprinted in N. Punin, *O Tatline*, eds. I.N. Punina and V.I. Rakitin (Moscow: RA, 1994), p. 18; English translation in Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, ed., *Tatlin*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 344–346.

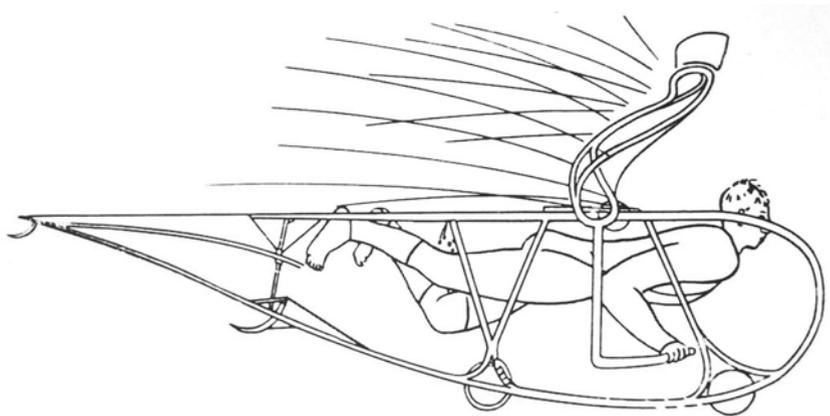


Fig. 3.1 Vladimir Tatlin, Sketch plan of *Letatlin*, 1929–32, pencil on paper, A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow.

birds. In its construction, Tatlin laid more emphasis on its organic nature than on technology, using such materials as wood, cork, silk, leather and steel thread. Progress in the field of aviation, various studies on the laws of flight, his own research into the ‘culture of materials’, and a profound study of natural forms and structures—all these played their part in shaping Tatlin’s work. He produced at least three models of the *Letatlin*. Yet, despite all its creator’s efforts, the *Letatlin* never flew more than a few metres.

It is important to remember that the *Letatlin* was conceived at a time when people were already regularly flying in aeroplanes and Zeppelins, and the first gliders of the nineteenth century were already a part of aviation history. Why, then, was Tatlin so interested in constructing a flying machine—when aircraft had already been in production for almost three decades? This is another key question, like that concerning the artistic value of the *Model for a Monument to the Third International*.

In his diary, Punin recorded that he met Tatlin in 1924 and that the artist had talked about his plans to create a flying machine.² This indicates that Tatlin had started designing such a device much earlier than 1929, when he started working on the actual construction.

In the booklet, which was published for the catalogue of the *Exhibition of the Works of the Operative Vladimir Tatlin* at the Pushkin Museum in

² See Sidney Monas and Jennifer Greene Krupala, eds., *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904–1953* (Austin: University of Texas, 1999), p. 128.