I take the phrase ‘utopian geometry’ to refer to any way of organising the elements of a work of art that in the mind of an artist might point towards, or evoke, an ideal state of affairs. For the Moscow Constructivists, geometry became a way of modelling the energies of the social organism in accordance with the commitments of Marxism and Communism. ‘Everything, utterly everything, is being constructed of lines and grids’, Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote with typical enthusiasm in 1922, as if the line and the grid were the true markers of a rational and planned society, formed in the image of the technical. ‘The line, the grid, the point. Rodchenko’s laboratory’.¹ In this way, Russian Constructivism offered efficiency and functionality as the gateways to a classless future for mankind. Other European artists of the inter-war period, painters especially, availed themselves of geometries that were intended to appear immutable and transcendent, as if a state of perfection in the picture-plane offered a kind of blueprint for the building and reorganisation of society. For abstract artists generally—International Constructivists, Concrete artists, Abstraction-Création types, and others—geometry could variously mean order, simplicity, cleansing, light and air. Modernising classicists thought they could design a future built upon the ‘balanced’ proportional systems of Greek mathematics, with stability, regulation, and hierarchy as the metaphorical keys. To many of them, lofty ideals could be figured by shapes that are not found in nature, but derive from mathematical laws of formation such as equidistance from a centre (the circle), or shortest-path distance (the straight line) on a flat and carefully proportioned plane.

Various kinds of geometry, then, and various kinds of utopia. But why do none of them any longer have any force? The reasons for the ‘decay’

of utopian geometry in subsequent modernism are to be located in the decay of the ideological itself, partly; the implausibility of those metaphors, combined with the calamity of a Second World War and eventually the collapse of every kind of utopian vision; but also in ever-shifting artistic priorities, and a series of new conceptualisations of what geometry itself can do. The background to Dan Flavin’s series of ‘monuments’ to V. Tatlin—he made the first in 1964—is both marked by the time of its making, as well as by an impulse to critique the utopian ambitions of the past (Fig. 14.1). Here was a young American artist, more or less devoid of politics, making what he called a ‘pseudo-monument’ to a Constructivist pioneer—made more poignant by the fact (which Flavin well knew) that Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International of 1920 was never actually built. ‘My concern for the thought of Vladimir Tatlin’, Flavin wrote, ‘was prompted by the man’s frustrated, insistent attitude to attempts to combine artistry and engineering…My pseudo-monuments, structural designs for clear but temporary cool white fluorescent lights, were to honour the artist ironically’. It might be said that Flavin’s irony characterised the playful and mischievous in Minimalism generally, in relation to the ‘finality’ of a world-historical revolution in Russia that had arisen in optimism, but by the 1960s had clearly failed.

In fact, Flavin’s attitude to the utopian past is complicated by a broader distinction within Russian Constructivism, between Rodchenko’s insistence on the deployment of the straight line and the grid, and the no less resolute insistence of Tatlin, inspired perhaps by his friend Velimir Khlebnikov, that dynamic and mobile forms can, and should, also belong to a constructive art. Tatlin had toyed with the look of irregular geometrical curves in a few of his corner-reliefs in the years 1915–17; had welcomed irregular textures and forms inasmuch as particular materials seemed to call for them. It is not difficult to locate the dynamic, launch-pad quality of Tatlin’s Monument in the leaning spiral that winds upwards in a tightening circle from its base to its very top—a spiral whose cosmic significance arises from hints of infinitude, eternal rotation, and kinetic power.

By the time of Tatlin’s experiments with steamed bentwood construction in the later 1920s, his distance from Rodchenko’s orthogonal and linear geometry was unbridgeable. As Christina Lodder has shown us in her

---