PAVEL MANSUROV AND ORGANIC CULTURE

Two basic interpretations of the concept of organic culture seem to dominate the Russian experience, especially in the time of Symbolism and the avant-garde. One entails the identification of organicity with the wholeness of nature and elicits the idea of a pulsating totality encompassing both dynamic and static manifestations such as a flower and a rock; this conception of organic culture can be associated with the work of Boris Ender, Pavel Filonov, Elena Guro, and Mikhail Matiushin, in particular, for they often intended their works of art to be illustrations of a "universal flowering," a synthesis wherein there was no essential difference between an insect and a crystal, a human being and a tree. The second approach to organic culture relies more on dissection and analysis in the sense that the artists representing this tendency such as Petr Miturich and Vladimir Tatlin responded to the natural world and natural materials in a reductive and formulaic way; they seemed concerned more with a "scientific" assessment of each segment of nature (the pattern of a leaf or the grain of a piece of wood) than with Nature; for them nature was nature observed and separated from the artist.

These two different attitudes towards the organic world come together in the work of Pavel Andreevich Mansurov (1896-1982) and the key to the mystery of Mansurov's art lies precisely in his endeavor to integrate the "vegetable" and the "industrial." As he affirmed in a commentary on Filonov: "There is the struggle of the vegetable and the agricultural world with the industrial world. It is a case of two conceptions at war with each other, although both of them should coexist harmoniously." Mansurov's paintings, reliefs, designs, and tabulations express this impetus and make a strong contribution to the organic esthetic of the Russian avant-garde, even though the abstract "painterly formulae," for which Mansurov is known best, seem to reject the world of natural appearances. We should remember that Mansurov received his primary training at the Society for the

1. Filonov used the term "universal flowering" on many occasions. See, for example, his manifesto, "Deklaratsiia 'Mirovogo rastsveta'" in Zhizn iskusstva, 20 (Petrograd, May 1923), pp. 13-15.
Encouragement of the Arts in 1911-15 in St. Petersburg just when Nikolai Roerich was director and that Mansurov took lessons from Yan Tsionglinsky, also an early teacher of Guro and Matiushin. In turn, both Roerich and Tsionglinsky were disciples of Kuindzhi and shared their mentor’s fascination with the “cosmic tones” of nature. This common pedagogical derivation might explain the striking similarity between Mansurov’s studies of the 1910s and those of Guro and Matiushin and helps us to understand the “natural” or organic consistency of Mansurov’s abstract painting. The catalog of the exhibition, “Paul Mansouroff et l’avant-garde russe à Pétrograd” at the Musée d’art moderne et d’art contemporain, Nice, 1995, reproduces several such oil studies by Mansurov—which could easily be mistaken for early studies by Matiushin.

In the manner of Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian with their careful combinations of horizontals and verticals, Mansurov remained loyal to a set of “formulae”—long rectangular monochromes, calculated and cool. Indeed, in works such as the Painterly Formula of 1918 (Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne) Mansurov seems to be inventing a pictorial metaphor for the psycho-physiological formulae that his scientific colleagues and acquaintances, Vladimir Bekhterev and Ivan Pavlov, were encoding in the 1910s and 1920s. Like them, Mansurov wished to disclose rather than disguise the essential harmony of the natural world and thus to control it, a desire in keeping with a fundamental orientation in nineteenth and twentieth century Positivist thinking. This may also explain why Mansurov created close variants of so many of his paintings throughout the years—as is clear from this sequence of three slides. In other words, the countless vertical paintings should be viewed as beholden to a single, timeless principle and as manifestoes thereof; whether one painting duplicates the next or has been predated consciously is irrelevant to this mandate.

The position of Mansurov within the Museum of Artistic Culture/State Institute of Artistic Culture (MKhK became Ginkhuk in October, 1924) is uncertain and ambiguous. Often remembered as head of the Experimental Department there, Mansurov was something of a misfit in the institution and, despite rumors to the contrary, was not especially close to Malevich or Matiushin (as he himself admitted), even though Matiushin referred to him as the “secret spring behind the entire project.” True, there exist at least two documentary photographs showing Mansurov in the immediate company of Matiushin and other Petrograd artists in ca. 1920 and we may see outward