In October, 1922, the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin opened the First Russian Exhibition, presenting Russian artistic developments of the last thirty years to the West. Spanning the period from 1890 through 1922, the exhibition revealed movements and tendencies, which, given the isolation of Russia imposed by World War I and the October Revolution, were until then almost entirely unknown.

The exhibition also marked an important point in the history of modernism, as the first show to introduce to the public outside Russia the latest achievements of the Constructivists, that is, the works which conceptually and formally represented a total break with the principles of traditional pictorial aesthetics. Artists such as the Stenberg brothers, Konstantin Medunetski, Alexandra Exter, Naum Gabo, Kazimir Malevich, Petr Mili, Liubov Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Vesnin, and several others (a total of 704 exhibits) were included in the show. Their revolutionary approach to the question of form and space, as well as the basic principles of artistic conception apparent in their works, were to have a far-reaching influence on twentieth-century art, the consequences of which are still with us in many respects, to cite only the developments in minimal art of the 1960s or the exploratory efforts into the “nature of materials” of the second generation of American Abstract Expressionists.

The Constructivist entries to the Van Diemen exhibition made quite apparent the fact that painting as an important form of artistic expression had lived its course and was being replaced by a new idiom—construction. Although several works shown did conform to the formal characteristics of a painting, the notion of “construction” was a dominant feature of their compositions. In view of this the question arises: What were the main postulates of Constructivist painting? Before any answer can be attempted, it should be stressed that constructivism was essentially a movement of the third dimension, that is, a movement which by its very premise rejected the conventional basis of painting—the two-dimensional picture plane. It implied the negation of the flat picture plane in its role of a carrier of illusionistic or purely planar geometric symbols organized according to the laws of a one-point spatial perspective or simply a certain abstract compositional order. Constructivist painting thus represents a fairly small fraction of the Constructivist artists' work. The central focus of their activities was the areas which lent themselves much better to the exploration of such concepts as dynamism or time,

1. See the catalogue of the exhibition: Galerie Van Diemen, Berlin, 1922 “Die Erste Russische Ausstellung.”
and which simultaneously complied with such new requirements as propagandistic activities popularizing the goal and objectives of the new political system in Russia.

In order to analyze the complexities of Constructivist painting it is necessary to make a few general remarks on the overall Constructivist philosophy in art. Historically, constructivism, being the last in the series of Russian "isms" proliferating during the first two decades of our century, closed the period of Russian liberalism in art, following the October Revolution, before the advent of socialist realism as the official artistic style. Although the designation of the movement as "constructivism" became common currency during the years 1921-22, its actual beginning as an aesthetic concept is situated slightly earlier, around 1919-20. The original impact for this development goes back to Tatlin's constructions of 1914-15 and those of Gabo of 1915-17, both of which represent the first step in the evolution of form from that of an enclosed sculptured mass to that of an open dynamic construction where real space is introduced as a pictorial factor. The concept of constructivism, as it subsequently developed, embodied the basic tenet of "construction" as a descriptive process and a metaphorical representation of the order of the work of art. On the other hand, it raised the issues of the utilitarianism of art and of the integration of the artist with the new order, as the parameters placing the construction concept within a strongly defined context and not within an aesthetic vacuum. The term constructivism thus denoted not only an artistic trend but an entire philosophy, ideologically related to the political changes that occurred in Russia in the second half of the 1910s, as Aleksei Gan so aptly stated in his pamphlet Constructivism (Konstruktivizm) of 1922: "Constructivism [was] a phenomenon of our age. It arose around 1920 amid the 'mass action' leftist painters and ideologists."3

This manifestation of "art engagé" with its main slogan "Art Into Life," reflected the philosophy that questioned not only the aesthetic conception of form, but the notion of the work of art itself. It propagated the conception of an art completely merged with life and saw it as a factor that had a practical and social function to fulfill. Its ideological premise was closely related to the new, Communist, system in Russia and was in its principle geared at bridging the everlasting gap between the creators and innovators and the public-at-large. Characteristic for constructivism was its internal logic, according to which the traditional artistic categories like painting, drawing, and sculpture lost their "artistic finitude to

2. It should be stressed that the term "Constructivism" has been interpreted until recently, in a variety of ways and that there exists in Western literature certain confusion as to the formal manifestations of art denoted as Constructivist. It used to be generally applied to describe the works of Naum Gabo and his brother Anton Pevsner, who although originally part of the Russian constructivist movement, are by no means representative of the main ideas and philosophy as they subsequently developed in Russia in the 1920s. It cannot be denied that the "Realist Manifesto" published by Gabo and Pevsner in August, 1920, on the occasion of their open-air exhibition on Tverskoi Boulevard in Moscow, marked the actual beginning of the Constructivist movement, yet they later dissociated themselves from the movement and left Russia permanently to develop their ideas in the West. The reasons of this scission were of an ideological order, relating to the understanding of the role of art. While Gabo and Pevsner viewed it (in a way parent to the point of view of Malevich and Kandinskii) as a spiritual activity whose role is to order man's vision of the world, the Russian Constructivists envisaged it as a useful activity of an artist-engineer serving utilitarian ends.

3. Aleksei Gan, Konstruktizm (Tver': Tverskoe izd-vo, 1922).