

John Bowlt, Marc Konecny and Evgeniia Petrova, eds, *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde*
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A FUTURIST ARK

In February 1997, a Russian artist named Aleksandr Brener was sentenced to 4 months' imprisonment by a Dutch court. His offence was to have spray-painted a large, green dollar sign on the white surface of Malevich's 'Suprematism (White Cross)', hanging in the Stedelijk Museum. In his defence, Brener claimed that his act of vandalism was intended as a protest against the merciless commercialization of art—a crude and misdirected gesture, to be sure; but the perpetrator's argument was to a certain extent borne out by the fact that deliberations at his trial focused on a monetary assessment of the damage he had caused, rather than any aesthetic harm he had inflicted. Acts such as Brener's have, however, done nothing to halt the seamless integration of Russia's revolutionary art into the circuits of the contemporary capitalist market. Works by Malevich or El Lissitzky now fetch vast sums at auction—Malevich's 'Suprematist Composition' (1919–20), for instance, sold for \$17m in May 2000. Aware of the value of such paintings, Malevich's descendants have also launched several legal claims disputing Western art institutions' ownership—in one case successfully extracting \$5m in compensation from MOMA.

The inflated prices and heightened litigiousness that now surround the Russian avant-garde are a function both of its increased art-historical status, and of the relative paucity of materials for sale: most of the key works are either in Russian state museums, or closely guarded by major Western institutions such as the Stedelijk. Any new discovery is apt to cause excitement in academia, and tremors in the market. Nikolai Khardzhiev, a Soviet scholar who amassed a vast collection of paintings, drawings and manuscripts by many of the key figures in Russian art and literature of the early twentieth

century, became the cause of much upheaval when he emigrated to the West in 1993, along with half of his archive. Khardzhiev had been instrumental in the rediscovery of the avant-garde in the 1960s, and left the turbulence of Yeltsin's Russia for Holland in an attempt to save his collection—only to find a morass of theft and corruption. *A Legacy Regained* is a huge and lavishly produced volume dedicated to his life and work, containing testimony from his acquaintances, articles written by Khardzhiev himself and texts he edited for publication, as well as materials from his archive. The core of the book is, in fact, based on a two-volume edition of Khardzhiev's writings that came out in Russia in 1997, but almost all the material is presented in English for the first time. The editors refer to their selection as a 'tantalizingly small sampling of the archive', which is still in the process of being classified and itemized; even at this stage, however, it is clear that Khardzhiev's collection will be of incalculable value to historians of the movement.

Nikolai Khardzhiev was born in 1903 in Kakhovka, in present-day Ukraine, into a white-collar family; the surname, and Khardzhiev's features, bespeak Caucasian origins, but he was seemingly loath to discuss his own biography, of which few details are available. After graduating from school in Kakhovka in 1920, he briefly worked for his local section of the Commissariat of Enlightenment before studying law in Odessa from 1922–25. Literature, however, was his true vocation, and it was on this subject that he lectured in Odessa workers' clubs and the city's State Institute of Cinema. Living in the garrulous, cosmopolitan city of Babel's tales, Khardzhiev befriended the poet Eduard Bagritskii, who was instrumental in his move to Moscow in the autumn of 1928. Bagritskii was linked to the Constructivist artists, writers and critics of *Novyi LEF*, and it was through him that Khardzhiev met Osip Brik, Viktor Shklovskii and Boris Eikhenbaum. Shklovskii—for whom Khardzhiev briefly worked as an assistant—and Brik were the two sponsors of Khardzhiev's application to join the Union of Writers in 1940; it was Eikhenbaum, meanwhile, who shortly after Khardzhiev's arrival in Moscow took him to a reading by the absurdist writers Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii and Nikolai Zabolotskii, where he met Malevich. Soon he was acquainted with what remained of the entire Russian avant-garde—artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky, the poets Vladimir Maiakovsky and Aleksei Kruchenykh, and critics such as Nikolai Punin (see NLR 10).

Through Bagritskii, Khardzhiev also met Osip Mandelshtam, who would often visit his tumbledown wooden house in the Mariina Roshcha area of Moscow, and claimed that Khardzhiev had 'perfect pitch for poetry'. Akhmatova, whom Khardzhiev met in the 1930s, also appreciated his literary gifts and, until her death in 1966, would often turn to him for advice; she claimed to be delighted by Khardzhiev's admission that he didn't

actually like her poetry. It was Mandelshtam's confidence in Khardzhiev that persuaded the poet's widow to entrust him with the task of preparing Mandelshtam's works for publication. Though a selection finally appeared in 1973—no small feat in Brezhnev's USSR—Nadezhda Mandelshtam and Khardzhiev had quarrelled bitterly over the editing of the poems, their prior publication in the US, and Khardzhiev's apparent hoarding of the manuscripts. Indeed, alongside his broad and brilliant set of acquaintances, constant disagreements seem to be another feature of Khardzhiev's life. He fell out with Lili Brik, Maiakovsky's former mistress, when she married the Maiakovsky scholar Vasilii Katanian—as Khardzhiev put it in a revealing interview of 1991, included in this volume, 'Caesar's wife should not marry his janitor'. According to several of the contributors to *A Legacy Regained*, he also had some long-standing but obscure grievance against Shklovskii, with whom, according to the art historian Vasilii Rakitin, he 'feuded silently over Futurism, the exactitude of facts, and women.'

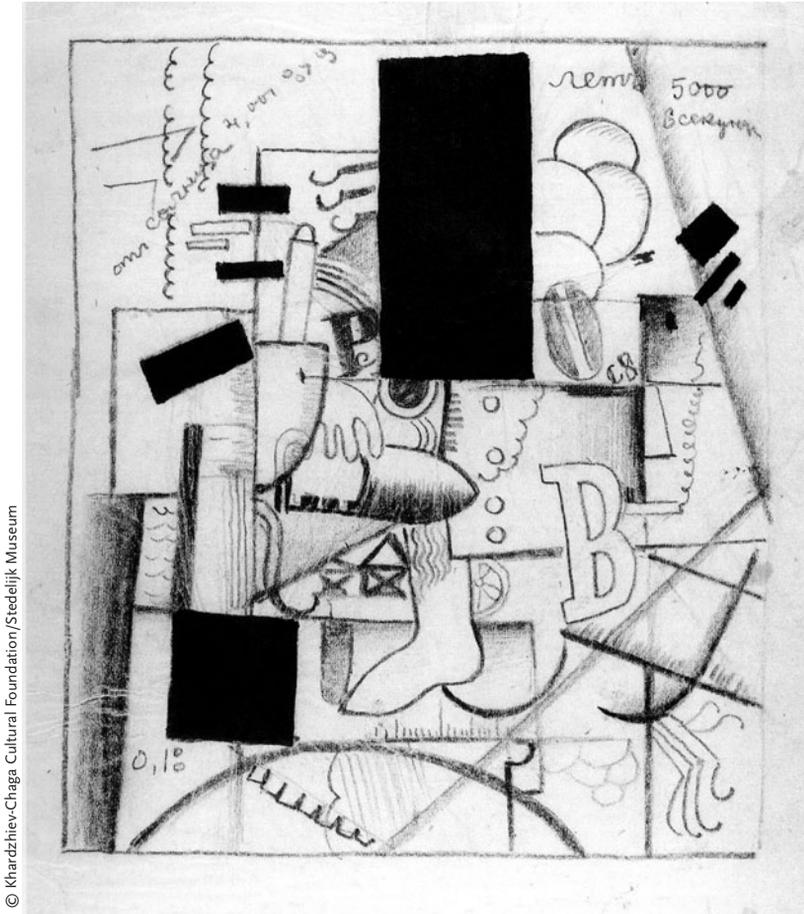
From reading Khardzhiev's own painstaking work, one can see how irritated he would have been by Shklovskii's aphoristic and oblique style. *A Legacy Regained* contains a handful of Khardzhiev's essays, notable not only for their meticulous attention to historical detail, but for an interdisciplinary approach and breadth of comparative scope that would have been rare in the USSR under Stalin. In an essay on the links between avant-garde poetry and painting, there are references to Mallarmé, Apollinaire and Cendrars, as well as to the classical poetry of Ausonius, Pentadius and Porphyry. But as time goes on, contemptuous references to the work of others multiply, whether it be memoirs by acquaintances of Velimir Khlebnikov—adjudged 'prolix', full of 'insipid word-spinning and tedious anecdotal detail'—or Western scholarship as a whole: there are dozens of corrections and reprimands for many scholars who went on to contribute to the present volume. Though many of the remembrances of Khardzhiev published here praise his energy, conversational brilliance and considerable expertise, it is clear that he was a difficult person to deal with. John Bowlt notes that Khardzhiev was 'described variously as "gruff", "a recluse", "a dog in a manger", "acerbic", "smart", and "omniscient"'; for Szymon Bojko, he was 'a dangerous, silent god upon his own Olympus'.

Khardzhiev's seemingly unassailable authority stemmed, of course, from his personal knowledge of many of the key figures of the avant-garde. By the late 1920s, he had evidently decided that his life's mission would be to preserve the textual and pictorial traces of the Russian pre-Revolutionary art scene; at first, he envisaged writing a 'History of Russian Futurism', and under this pretext began to amass paintings, manuscripts and books. He acquired a pristine set of Futurist publications, and the extremely rare output of the Supremus group of Malevich's pupils from his Vitebsk phase.

Khardzhiev's documentary wealth amounts to several dozen files, and includes an unfinished autobiography by Malevich, written at his prompting in the early 1930s—though Khardzhiev published much of this in Sweden in 1976, with the help of his friend Roman Jakobson. There are also manuscripts of theoretical articles by Malevich and Lissitzky, and correspondence between the two; letters from Olga Rozanova to Kruchenykh; a handwritten version of the latter's seminal 'transrational' manifesto, 'Declaration of the Word as Such'; sections of Goncharova's diary; and much more that has yet to be catalogued, including various papers relating to figures such as Khlebnikov, Mandelshtam and Akhmatova.

The documentary part of Khardzhiev's collection is currently divided between Amsterdam and Moscow; however, the paintings and drawings that many will regard as the jewels of the collection—over 1,600, of which around a hundred are handsomely reproduced here—were all smuggled out of Russia in 1993. According to the Stedelijk's chief curator Geurt Imanse, Khardzhiev had amassed 172 works by Malevich, 122 by Mikhail Larionov, 51 by El Lissitzky, 46 by Rozanova, as well as a handful of drawings and paintings each by Tatlin, Natalia Goncharova, Maiakovsky, Vasilii Kandinsky, Gustav Klucis and the Burliuk brothers. The Malevich drawings are notable above all for the unprecedentedly clear picture they give of the evolution of Suprematism from the painter's Cubist and Alogist phases. Several different painterly languages inhabit the preparatory sketches he made (see opposite) for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* in 1913—Cubism's dissections of space, the absurd juxtapositions of Alogism, the floating geometric shapes of Suprematism—acting as both visual *summa* and incubator for future forms. They have made an immediate impact; indeed, the organizers of last year's impressive 'Suprematism' exhibition at the New York Guggenheim described the drawings from Khardzhiev's collection as its 'raison d'être'. Given the comparative lack of reliable materials on the avant-garde as a whole, Khardzhiev's vast trove of undeniably authentic works and texts not only fills various gaps in our knowledge of the period, but provides a solid basis for authentication in a field awash with fakes. An *Art News* article of 1996 estimated there to be between 6,000 and 8,000 forged works purportedly by members of the Russian avant-garde, and pointed out that for some artists—notably Nina Kogan, a pupil of Malevich—an entire oeuvre has been faked.

By the mid 1930s, Khardzhiev's researches into the avant-garde had become an increasingly dangerous undertaking, and his gathering of materials a secretive, underground activity. His ostensible occupation, as of 1932, was that of a Maiakovsky scholar. The poet's suicide in 1930 left the way open for his sanctification by the Stalinist literary establishment, which duly began the process of encasing Maiakovsky's revolutionary verse in a suitably austere thirteen-part *Complete Works*; Khardzhiev edited the first two



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Kazimir Malevich, Curtain design for *Victory over the Sun*, 1913

volumes. In 1947, after working on patriotic film scripts in Alma-Ata during the war, Khardzhiev joined the academic council of the Maiakovsky Museum. It was here that during the Khrushchev thaw he organized a series of exhibitions—under the tenuous rubric of ‘Illustrators of Maiakovsky’—that played a crucial role in the rediscovery of the avant-garde. Shows devoted to Lissitzky, Klucis and Pavel Filonov in 1960 and 61 were followed by displays of works by Malevich and Tatlin (1962) and Goncharova and Larionov (1965).

By this time, Khardzhiev’s expertise and fabled collection had become the object of pilgrimages by scholars from both East and West. The

Chuvash poet and former colleague of Khardzhiev, Gennadii Aigi, recounts how Khardzhiev personally, in a single sitting, corrected the manuscript of Camilla Gray's groundbreaking *The Russian Experiment in Art* (1962). Describing a 1968 visit to Khardzhiev's apartment, the art historian Galina Demosfenova recalls 'a dark entrance hall, a dimly lit room, many sealed bookcases and a large desk. The walls were covered with pictures, but I was too timid to examine them. All in all, the surroundings were those of the old Moscow intelligentsia'. If initially he seemed forbidding, later visitors found Khardzhiev mistrustful—occasionally refusing even to undo the chain, preferring to talk from behind the door. By the early nineties, he was obsessed by the possibility of his collection being stolen or dispersed. His mistrust of the new Russian authorities' willingness to preserve it intact, and fear of the mafia, led him to emigrate to the Netherlands in November 1993 with half of the collection stashed in his suitcases.

If Khardzhiev's experience of the Soviet Union had been one of evasive, quiet labours of historical preservation, his arrival in the West set off a shabby sequence of betrayals and frauds. Prior to his emigration, he had signed a contract with the Swiss-based Galerie Gmurzynska whereby he was given \$2.5m in exchange for four Malevich paintings and two drawings—around a tenth of their actual value. In Amsterdam, he and his wife lived surrounded by shady advisers, one of whom quietly sold items from the collection and compelled them to change their wills and the by-laws of the foundation they established to protect the archive. Khardzhiev's wife Lydia Chaga died in suspicious circumstances in late 1995; though no foul play is alleged regarding the death of Khardzhiev himself in March 1996, several more paintings—at least \$12.5m worth—were sold to the Galerie Gmurzynska after his death, before the Dutch journalist Hella Rottenberg raised the alarm. The pictorial materials and the half of the textual archive Khardzhiev succeeded in smuggling out of Russia are now in the custody of the Stedelijk Museum, despite intermittent grumbling from the Russian authorities, who in February 1994 impounded the other half of the documents and manuscripts at Moscow airport—a customs officer had recognized a photograph of Maiakovsky. Yet although the Russian government was able to stop what it saw as invaluable cultural patrimony from leaving the country, the materials remained Khardzhiev's private property, and he was therefore legally entitled to take the vindictive step, shortly before his death, of sealing off the impounded part of his archive until 2015. So far, only the FSB, the KGB's successor agency, has had access to these papers; work on cataloguing items currently in Holland, meanwhile, has only just begun, and is rendered all the more difficult by the collection's dispersal and inaccessibility. Proposals have recently been floated for its reunification, with the Stedelijk perhaps keeping electronic or microfilm copies in exchange for the return of the

originals to Russia. Any negotiations along these lines, though, are likely to be lengthy and labyrinthine.

Few of the squalid details of Khardzhiev's last years are to be found in *A Legacy Regained*—perhaps not surprisingly, since the volume was put out as a combined initiative of the Galerie Gmurzynska and the publishing arm of the State Russian Museum, and contains contributions from staff of the Stedelijk. The tone throughout is one of reconciliation and dignified commemoration—in notable contrast to the lyricism of the voluminous *Festschrift* for Khardzhiev published in Moscow in 2000—perhaps tinged with a certain relief that this cantankerous character, with his biting tongue and what one contributor calls his 'territorial fanaticism', will no longer disturb the critical and commercial peace. But *A Legacy Regained* performs a valuable service in acquainting Anglophone readers with a figure who served as a living link between the revolutionary artistic vanguard and the present, and the materials in the Khardzhiev collection are a stunning record of the turbulent, unprecedented creativity of that period.