Writing and the 'Subject'

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It is clear from the previous chapter that the outbreak of the First World War saw a change in the Moscow avant-garde art and literary scene. Il’ja Zdanevič and Aleksej Kručenych had left for the Caucasus and though the former never returned to Moscow, Kručenych returned in 1922. At the same time, Michail Larionov and Natal’ja Gončarova had left for Paris to work with the D jagilev ballet, and Ol’ga Rozanova had died in 1918. Furthermore, new aesthetic systems and ideas had emerged from the early cubo-futurist avant-garde. A milestone in the transformation of the Russian avant-garde was the “0-10, the Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures” (December 1915) where Kazimir Malevič exhibited his black square for the first time and proclaimed a new art movement, suprematism. Another important movement had already surfaced in 1913 with Vladimir Tatlin’s counter-reliefs (three-dimensional objects made of diverse materials such as glass, wood, and metal). These reliefs initiated the works of non-utilitarian constructions. A third factor in the development of a second avant-garde movement was the participation of new young artists such as Aleksandr Rodčenko, Varvara Stepanova and Aleksej Gan who were not rooted in anti-symbolist confrontation. They were strongly influenced by both Malevič and Tatlin, but at the “10ya gosudarstvennaja vystavka: Bespredmetnoe tvorčestvo i Suprematism” (“10th State Exhibition of Non-Objective Art and Suprematism”) held in Moscow in April 1919, took sides with Tatlin. A couple of years later, they were to found the First Working Group of Constructivists, which marked the appearance of constructivism as a new major avant-garde movement in post-revolutionary Russia.

Of the constructivists, Varvara Stepanova remains known primarily as a typographical and textile designer and as the wife of Aleksandr Rodčenko, famous for his photomontages and graphic designs. At the age of 18, Stepanova had
moved to Moscow from Kazan' to continue her art studies and in 1915-17 became acquainted with cubo-futurist art and poetry. At this point in time, cubo-futurism as a major movement in art and poetry was already a closed book. However, the work of Rozanova and Kručenych had a strong impact on Stepanova and inspired her own production of handmade books and zaum' poetry. Stepanova began to write zaum' poetry in 1917 and produced a couple of handmade books and single pages with brightly colored designs intertwined with handwritten letters. In Stepanova's books, all elements of the preceding avant-garde book-production are found. However, these books also represent the gradual development of a new relationship between word and image.

Stepanova's books were made in the short and tumultuous period just after the October Revolution. Next to the development of already initiated individual artistic projects, the Revolution posed new questions to artists and poets, namely, how they felt about the new socio-political situation and how they should respond. Varvara Stepanova took an active part in discussions between individual artists and also in the new state institutions for the arts. In this chapter, I will show how the production of handmade books and the writing of zaum' poetry inscribed itself in the aesthetic development following the October Revolution. This chapter is not to mark the beginning of the end of the avant-garde movement and the handmade and handwritten books, but rather to present yet another approach to this phenomenon referred to by David Burliuk, Vasilij Kamenskij and Vladimir Majakovskij as the Third Revolution of the Spirit.2 Varvara Stepanova's books are still fairly inaccessible, a fact which is due to their nature as (mostly) unique, single hand-colored pages or as extremely rare, handmade books of limited number. The books Rtiny chomle (1918), Zigra ar (1918), and Globolkim (1918),3 consist of single pages with color poetry and were never published. Yet another book of poems with a similar design has recently been reproduced under the title Jad' (Poison) (original version dates from 1919).4 The poems are written or painted directly onto the page in between or on patches of bright colors, whereas Toft (1919) appeared as a book very similar to those produced by Kručenych during his Caucasian period. In Toft, no color is used; there are merely simple, grid-like illustrations by Rodčenko. This book
was published and a number of copies still exist. Out of all the books of this period, *Varst* (1918/19) is distinctive because it is typewritten.\(^5\)

Very different from these books and single hand-colored manuscript pages are the illustrations for Aleksej Kručenych’s play *Gly-Gly* (1919) and the book *Gaust Ėaba* (1919).\(^6\) These two books contain collage elements, and *Gaust Ėaba* uses newspaper as the basis for handwritten poems or collages. Evgenij Kovtun reproduced this book in its entirety in the book *From Surface to Space* (1974). Apart from this reproduction and a few single pages, three copies of *Gaust Ėaba* are known to exist today.\(^7\) I have had the fortune to study one of these, the copy held at the Moscow Literary Museum and to reproduce some pages. I have also been able, for the first time, to compare this copy with the two hitherto reproduced copies and to study the book in detail. Evgenij Kovtun’s article ‘Varvara Stepanova’s Anti-Book’, which accompanied the reproduction of *Gaust Ėaba* in *From Surface to Space*, is still the only substantial article written about the book.

With the analysis in this chapter, I will cast new light on some aspects of the book unnoticed by Kovtun and to challenge his notion of the “anti-book”.

Seen in a post-revolutionary context, the handwritten text acquires new meaning. It is no longer merely a negation of communication and a self-reflexive critique of the prosaic word, but also a new language of revolution: the language of the posters, and graffiti on the walls in the streets and in the squares of the city. Aleksej Kručenych (who, though not actually present in Moscow to witness the events he describes) characterizes this shift in the following way:

> Если до революции будельяне держали курс на публику аудиторий, то с первых же дней революции они целиком вышли на улицу, в толпу, слились с рабочими массами. Будельяне на заборах, рядом с правительственными газетами, расклеивали свои возвания и поэмы, стихи и картины. (1996: 100)

(If before the revolution, the Men of the Future headed for the public of auditoriums, then from the very first days of the revolution, they exclusively went out on the streets, into the crowd; they blended in with the working masses. The Men of the Future pasted their appeals and poems, verses and pictures onto the fences next to the government’s newspapers.)

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In the article ‘From Faktura to Factography’, Benjamin Buchloh claims that a profound paradigmatic change took place in post-1920 Russia: the modernist avant-garde’s concern for the self-reflexive pictorial and sculptural production was abandoned and replaced by a concern for productivist practices (1987: 80). This shift was gradually taking place in the period dating approximately from 1919 to 1922 and is clearly reflected in Stepanova’s statement ‘On Constructivism’ (1921):

Experimental cognition, as “active thought”, as the action of the contemporary epoch (rather than contemplation), produces an analytical method in art that destroys the sacred value of the work as a unique object by laying bare its material foundations [...] The formal approach is opposed to spirituality and ideas, and the work is transformed into an experiment, a form of laboratory work. (Lavrent’ev 1988a: 173-74)

The contrast between the contemplative self-reflexive artistic approach and the productivist professional approach is evident. However, as Buchloh emphasizes, these constructivist objects differ little from the “self-reflexive verification and epistemological critique” of the modernist paradigm. Therefore, a crisis was gradually recognized within this paradigm. In the 1920s, this art failed to address the audience of the new society, it was “a crisis of audience relationships, a moment in which the historical institutionalization of the avant-garde had reached its peak of credibility, from which legitimation was only to be obtained by a re-definition of its relationship with the new urban masses and their cultural demands” (Buchloh 1987: 88). Thus, around 1919, iconic imagery was reintroduced for the first time (Ibid: 90). There is, however, a problem in explaining this change, which underlies Buchloh’s outline of paradigmatic changes. As Paul Wood points out, it was a time marked by the First World War, civil war, revolution and until 1928 or 1929 when the industrialization campaigns were beginning to give results, an almost total lack of industry in Russia (1992: 358). Thus, the “new urban masses” did not exist until much later. There was, however, a pressing need to involve the artists in the construction of communist Russia and a desire among the artists and poets to become involved in influencing the development of a new culture. This involvement included a (re-)evalua-
tion of the relationship between art and life, art and state, and art and public reflected in innate struggles for power and influence in the new cultural institutions, for the right (and only) answer to the suddenly emerged problems in a multitude of artistic ways. Therefore, the first years after the revolution were distinguished by both an unprecedented freedom and variety of responses to the new situation, and by complex relations between cultural institutions and artists and among individual artists and artistic groups.

It was in the midst of this rapid development that Stepanova produced her handwritten books. Clear elements of the early avant-garde critique of representation as well as an awareness of handwriting and collage as a means of expressing a new revolutionary message can be seen in the books, i.e., the reduction of all formal and material operations to purely indexical signs, and the beginning tendency to incorporate or create iconic (representative) imagery. In the following pages, I will focus on pages containing color-poetry from Riny chomle and Zigra ar, the book Toft, the known illustrations for G/y-G/y, and the book Gaust čaba, which represents a mixture of all the anti- or representative strategies and constitutes a work of art rife with contradictions.

From ‘cveto-pis’ to poster

It is remarkable with what emotional and expressive vocabulary the poetic experiments of Rozanova and Stepanova have been described. In her major article on Rozanova, Gur'janova thus writes about Rozanova's “poetic etudes”:

“No postepenno stanovitsja uznavaem ee sobstvennyj golos, bogatstvo ego tembra, muzykal'nost' zvučanija: ego 'jarkost' i nežnost', delikatnost' ee poezii – kak i živopisi'” (“But gradually her own voice became distinguishable, the richness of its timbre, the musicality of sounds: its ‘brightness’ and tenderness, the delicacy of her poetry as well as her painting”; 1992: 89). Similarly, Aleksandr Lavrent'ev describes Stepanova's poetry as emotionally tainted landscapes:

“The sound of a poem may be rough like a rough, natural material (‘Shukh tazkhkon’), smooth-flowing like a breath of wind (‘Fianta chiol’), or impulsive (‘Afta iur inka’)” (1988a: 21). John E. Bowlt gives the following description:

“The sounds that she arranged in syncopated patterns – ‘Afta yur inka/Nair
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praží/Tavení lirka/Tauuz faj’ (Rtny khomle) – are jazzy, harsh, lapidary, as if she wished to recapture the ‘original’ utterance, the primal poem, like the baby’s gibberish or the witch doctor’s mumbo-jumbo” (1988: 10). Corresponding to the same sphere of imagery, Lavrent’ev writes about the book Poison: “This is the level of the primitive shaman’s magic, wishing to cure the illness as well as to destroy his enemies with the help of the same forces” (Stepanova 1993). These poems clearly invite an emotional interpretation – one delicate and fine, the other harsh, dark and jazzy.

The relation to sound and color, the relationship between phonemes and music and between phonemes and color is described in a similar manner. There is a remarkable congruence in the descriptions of these relations in the work of the two artists, of which I will give just a few examples. Stepanova’s color poetry is characterized as an “optophonic synthesis”:

[B]ut none of them [Filonov, Malević, Rozanova] accompanied their verses with dynamic visual structures which […] act as colored counterpoints to these brusque phonemes. The result is an audacious optophonic synthesis of radical neologism and abstract painting, a formal stenography that a number of writers and musicians […] were also exploring. It is interesting to note the reference to Russia’s most avant-garde composer, Nikolai Roslavets, in one of Stepanova’s illustrations to Gly-Gly. (Bowlt 1988: 10)

Similarly, Rozanova’s zaum’ poetry is characterized as musical etudes:

(At the basis of her zaum’ poetry are always two or three phonemes that she varies, arranges, playing on “vowel” and “consonant” rhymes, like it is done with the sounds in a musical etude. One could say that her poems are made “for the voice” – not in space, but in time.)

Stepanova makes use of contrasts between colors, just as the sounds in her poetry emphasize contrast and conflict:
Color plays a major role in Stepanova’s work. One might even speak of the text’s color-facture. Color may be cool and recede deep into the page, or bright and warm, pulling off the surface of the page. Cool shades are in constant conflict with warm ones, just as in Stepanova’s poetry vowels and consonants are in conflict. (Lavrent’ev 1988a: 21)

Similarly, the contrast between colors is emphasized in Rozanova’s work:

(The theme of every one of her suprematist compositions is the “birth” of color (in her poetry it is the birth of sound) in dissonant contrasting combinations of light and dark, heavy and light, warm and cold, harmonious and atonal. The light structure of her painterly color corresponds to the openness and purity of sound in her poetry.

Yet, there is a difference between Rozanova’s poetry and use of color and the color poetry of Stepanova. While comparing Rozanova’s poetic experiments with those of Stepanova, there can be no doubt regarding its influence, but there is also a tinge of parody in the latter’s poetry.

It is interesting to compare the two poems ‘lefanta čiol…” by Rozanova and ‘Afta jur inka…” by Stepanova:

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<th>Леванта чио</th>
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<th>neulomae</th>
<th>сана смьетт</th>
<th>ае</th>
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<td>Afta юр инка</td>
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<td>Таевено лирка</td>
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<td>(Rozanova 1992: 100)</td>
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<td>O mali totti</td>
<td>Ole majaft</td>
<td>Ifta lijart)</td>
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These poems are very similar in their sound structure in which the vowels ‘a’ and ‘i’ stand out and in both poems a more or less complex net of repetition,
syllabic metathesis, and inner rhyme can be distinguished. Both poems have a simple metric structure (Rozanova’s poem is consistently trochaic, while Stepanova’s poem is iambic in its metric structure); they even have a simple rhyme structure. Thus, both poems are conventional in their formal structure. Moreover, the words do not break the phonetic laws and can be pronounced without strain (Stepanova’s poem is provided with stressed syllables). This suggests that these poems were meant for recitation. At first sight, the poems are in every respect so similar that the direct influence of Rozanova’s poetry on that of Stepanova is indubitable. Nevertheless, the sound structure of Stepanova’s poem is easily distinguishable from that of Rozanova. In the fifth line of Stepanova’s poem, the sound structure changes from a consistent ‘a-i’ structure to a completely different tone: “O mali totti / ole majaft”, and then again to “Izva lefatti”. While the first half of the poem has some words that bear resemblance to English (“ink”, “lirka” [similar to “lyrics”], “afta jur” [similar to “after you’”] and “(ta)ven’o” [similar to “when you’”]), the middle part is more similar in sound to Spanish or Italian, and the third part to yet another, unknown language. The poetic emotional strain, equally present in Rozanova’s poetry, appears to shift towards parody: are these lines a parody of a foreign language, romantic love poetry, or of zaum? Is Stepanova mocking the early avant-garde zaum? It is difficult to say. But the foreign sounding words in her zaum’ poetry (“post kard” [similar to “post-card”] and “mont ognittta” [a name of a mountain?] in Gaust taba and “komsita” [sounds like the French “comme c’i comme ça” or a non-existing word with a Spanish or Italian sounding ending] in Tof) are a recurrent element. In a poem in Gaust taba, the initial line (“O te ta”) lends an expressive quality to the poem:

This poem almost echoes a poem by Rozanova: “O Klementina / otvet’ na lju
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bov’/ tvoj mračnyj vid / gorit prekrasno / [tvoja] devič’ja gibel’ / [tebja] zovet / nebrežno / k otrovnym čaram” ("Oh Klementina / answer my love / your gloomy look / burns beautifully / [your] maidenly downfall / calls you / carelessly / to poisonous charms"; Rozanova 1992: 100). This proto-poem was deconstructed and transformed into a zaum’ poem: “A. Klementina! / Uvaž’ at mesta! / Tvoj čarnyj [a]kvar[i]um / Gorit jakmisto! / Divańe more / Uvaet marem / Igra é zvae t / O / K / Marém / Čarém!...”. In this de-constructed zaum’ poem, Rozanova parodies romantic love poetry, whereas Stepanova’s poem poses as a real poem without transforming the high-flown pathos into a degraded, absurd text. Instead, in this poem Stepanova preserves the pathos though the words are unintelligible. Therefore, it has a touch of parody which is significantly different from Kručenych’s ‘Dyr bul ščyl’ or from Rozanova’s ‘A. Klementina’.

The sound structure of Stepanova’s poems is also somewhat different from that of her predecessor’s and on the verge of becoming a parody of zaum’. While Rozanova invents ingenious and humorous semantic meanings with her metathetic transformations of the sounds (“Vul’gark’ ach bul’varov / varvary gusary / val’s Ara bik / Arab bar arapy / Turk gubjat tara” (“Vulgarian ah! Boulevards / barbars hussars / waltz Arab bik / Arabs bar tricks / Turk destroy tara”; Rozanova 1992: 100), Stepanova does not play with the sound structure, it seems, in order to open up new semantic meaning. In a poem from Tof, she creates metathetic transformations (“nyg oglob / gly o …” and “engary raibary”), but the words remain empty signifiers. In this poem, the words “o idiče zdrait” are possibly derived from the Russian “idti” [to go] and the English word “straight”.

They are contrasted to the otherwise completely unintelligible words in the rest of the poems and become a parody not of traditional high art poetry, but of zaum’ itself. This effect is perhaps unintentional, but the difference between this poetry and that of Rozanova is obvious.

There are also significant similarities, however, with the poetry of Kručenych. Stepanova uses paradigmatic chains similar to the zaum’ poems of Kručenych’s Caucasian period: “zist / ligs / mast / kžems / usdr…” (Ziga ra) or “zanistra / stargl / mimn / oneb / glips / kilele / ogle / mesin / rabs / dsm / tesm / osma
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/ meos …” (Zigra ar). This last poem is drawn in black capital letters along the inside rim of a bright yellow circle. It is in this kind of composition that Stepanova’s work becomes interesting. As Bowlt and Lavrent’ev remark, in these compositions, a strong interaction between color planes and *zaum*’ words is evident. In Russian modernism, there was considerable interest not only in the close relationship between color and sound in music, but also between color and phonemes in poetry. Referring to Rimbaud’s ‘Voyelles’, Kul’bin gave every consonant a specific color:

Каждая согласная имеет свой цвет: р – красная (кровь, драка, вражда, рок); ж – желтая (желание, вожделение, жажда); с – синяя; з – зеленая; х – черно-желтая; к – черная. Цвет существует в живописи, звук – в музыке. […] Слово как таковое не материально и не энергетично. Синтез его с музыкой дает фонетику слова (звук). Синтез с живописью дает начертание слова. (2000: 45-46)

(Every consonant has its own color: ‘r’ is red (blood, fight, enemy, destiny) [all Russian words are spelled with a ‘r’]; ‘z’ is yellow (desire, lust, craving) [all Russian words are spelled with a ‘z’]; ‘s’ is blue; ‘z’ is green; ‘ch’ is black-yellow; ‘k’ is black. Color belongs to painting, sound to music. […] The word as such is not material and not energetic. The synthesis with painting provides the graphics of words.)

Similarly, in the new variant of ‘The Declaration of the Word as Such’ (1917), Kručenykh writes “V muzyke – zvuk, v živopisi – kraski, v poézii – bukva (mysl’ = prozrenie + zvuk + načertanie + kraski)” (“In music there is sound, in painting paint, in poetry letters (thought = insight + sound + graphics + paint)”; 1999: 204). As I have mentioned in chapter three, at this time, there was an intimate artistic interchange of ideas between Kručenykh and Malevič, and Malevič’ ideas on this subject very likely influenced Kručenykh’s sudden interest in color. In the letter from Malevič to Marjušin mentioned above, Malevič expressed his ideas about the close connection between poetry and painting. In fact, as Gur’janova points out, Malevič writes about the visual letter, and not about the phoneme:11 “raspredelenie bukvennych zvukovykh mass v prostranstve podobno živopisnomu suprematizmu” (“The distribution of letter-sound masses in space like painterly suprematism”; Kvtun 1976: 191). The letter should be freed from the line and drawn on the page according to painterly
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rather than linguistic lines. It should be presented as letter masses in the same way that planes of color should be placed on a white canvas: “Povešennaja že ploskost’ živopisnogo cveta na prostyne belogo cholsta daet neposredstvenno našemu soznaniya sil’noe oščušenie prostranstva” (“The plane of painterly color hung on the sheet of canvas directly brings forth in our consciousness a strong feeling of space”; Kevtun 1976: 191-192).

It was probably under the influence of Malevič’ ideas about letter masses that Rozanova wrote her curious poem entitled ‘Kubok sozvučij’:

Збржест дебан (Zbržest dzeban
жбзмеч дексагатан žbzmec deksagatan
жмагуц этта žmagauc ētta
жмуц дехха žmuc dechcha
иттера ittera)
(Gur’janova 1992: 105)

This poem is seething with a metathetic sound structure, alliteration, repetition and rhyme, so much so that the cube almost cracks in the middle. The poem is from 1916, and is probably an attempt to apply Malevič’ ideas very literally to her own poetry. More successfully, Rozanova made a few examples of applying color to Kručenych’s poetry. To Kručenych Rozanova writes:

Твои беспредметные из вертящимся буквами страшно интересно, а в печати будут изумительно, быть может даже хорошо их напечатать разными красками или буквы одним цветом, а фигуры направления их движения другим. Как по твоему? Перерисую во Владимире. (1999: 73)

(Your non-objective [poems] of letters in movement are awfully interesting, and in print they will become amazing. Perhaps it would even be good to print them in different colors, or the letters with one color, and with another one for the figures directing their movements. What do you think? I will draw them again in Vladimir.)

Other interesting examples of Rozanova’s use of color from these years are her color collages. In these, Rozanova assembled pieces of colored paper or cloth in abstract compositions that (similar to the relief) “convey a special sense of space”.12 Influenced by Rozanova, Kručenych made the book Universal War' B,
which included 9 poems and 12 color collages. Unlike Rozanova’s color collages, however, the theme of war is evident in Kručenych’s collages. They show more or less absurd allegories of war, with Germany, the number one enemy. However, it is evident that these experiments were influenced both by Malevič’ ideas of the “letters that fly” and the close relationship between “letter masses” and “color planes”.

However, as Gur’janova points out, the disparity between Malevich and Rozanova can be detected in Malevich’ use of the word “paint” and Rozanova’s use of the word “color”: “[W]hen he [Malevich] uses the word ‘color’ in his writings [...] he still means ‘paint’, the materiality of color contingent on texture” (Gur’janova 2000: 113). Whereas Malevič is primarily concerned with texture (i.e., the inter-relationship or contrast between pigment, form and line), Rozanova is primarily concerned with a non-material expression of “pure” color. Therefore, texture contaminates the nature of color (Gur’janova 2000: 113). In her review of Rozanova’s posthumous exhibition in 1919, Stepanova characterizes Rozanova and Malevič’ experiments with color as distinctly different:

Olga Rozanova’s art is the play and movement of colour. Colour is alive in her pictures, hence there is no texture [фактура C.G.] to interfere with the perfect expression of colour. […] Characteristic of Olga Rozanova’s creative work is the Great Colourfulness which drives painting from rooms and museums into streets and squares. […] Analysing Rozanova’s Suprematist period we may see that her Suprematism is the reverse of that of Malevich’s. His works are based on the composition of squares, Rozanova’s – on colour. Malevich employs colour to contrast different planes while on Rozanova’s canvases composition serves to reveal all the potentialities of colour on a planar surface. In Suprematism she produced the Suprematism of the painting rather than that of a square. [In the pieces of the last period] we witness a transition from the planes of Suprematism to an extensive reduction of colour intensity, which makes colour independent of form and plane. (Rozanova 1992: 106)

In light of the ongoing power struggle between Rodčenko and Malevič in connection with the “The 10th State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism”, it is understandable that it was Stepanova’s clear intention to characterize Rozanova’s work as different to that of Malevič’. However, it is also a
document in which Stepanova expresses her own priorities and artistic values. In this review, it is interesting to see that (as markedly different from the cubist or futurist manifestos preceding it) there is a distinction between the clearly positively valued “color” and the negatively valued “faktura”. “Color” means movement, expression, spirituality paired with technique, integrity and independence, and it is connected with streets and squares, while “faktura” signifies square forms, contrast between different planes, form and plane, suprematism, futurism and cubism, and rooms and museums. The use of the term faktura, however, is not simple. Reviewing Rodčenko’s contributions for the “10th State Exhibition”, Stepanova appears to take the opposite stance:

Here, the distinction between “kraska” and “cvet” is somewhat muddled. It
seems that Stepanova applies both the words “kraska” and “cvet” to Malevič’ works, while the real quality of Rodčenko’s works, to Stepanova, is the absence of both. Avoiding color altogether, the painting stands out as a material object, i.e., as a painted surface. The texture of the paint itself affects the spectator as a real object; there is no color to distract him or her from the object quality of paintings. The difference between Malevič’ materiality and Rodčenko’s object-art is that, in the paintings of the former, both color and painting are used to enhance the plane and square, which are placed on a canvas in a contrasting relationship in order to give a transcendental spatial experience. In the paintings of Rodčenko, however, the paint covers the canvas and points towards the indexicality of the pictorial surface. It is clear that the concept of faktura has developed a step further towards the pure objectiveness of the material and the professional handicraft of production:

The physicality of the painting as an object, and the physicality of the execution, became the new criteria in the appreciation of the work of art. Material itself – in this case paint – and the method of its application influence the perception of the object. This unprecedented approach to the painting as an object in itself marks a major development in Rodchenko’s art, and indeed a crucial innovation in the history of the avant-garde. It also represented their utopian conception of the aesthetic needs of the new mass viewer. (Dabrowski 1998: 30)

Turning to Stepanova’s own use of color in her hand-colored pages with “non-objective” poetry, I will suggest that her use of color is marked by an expressiveness that can be used on posters, which are hung on the walls of street corners. Stepanova directly addresses visual poetry as a contrast to the “dead monotony” of printed letters:

Новое движение беспредметного стиха как звука и буквы связываю с живописным восприятием, которое влияет новое живое зрительное впечатление в звук стиха. Разрывающая через живописную графику мертвую монотонность снятых печатных букв, иду к новому виду творчества. С другой стороны, воспроизводя живописной графикой беспредметную поэзию двух книг «Зигра ар» и «Ртны хомле», я вхожу в живопись графики звук как новое качество, увеличивая этим её (графики) количественные возможности. (1994: 41)
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(I connect the new movement of non-objective poetry as sound and letter with painterly perception, and this imbues the sound of poetry with a new and vital visual impression. By blowing up the deadly monotony of fused printed letters by means of painterly graphics, I am approaching a new type of creativity. On the other hand, by using painterly graphics to reproduce the non-objective poetry of the two books Zigra ar and Riny chomle, I am introducing the graphics of sound as a new quality into painting, thereby augmenting its quantitative possibilities.)

Stepanova intends to create a “living visual impression of sound” and extend its quantitative possibilities of the graphic expression.

Her visual poetry was exhibited as individual pages attached to display boards. The pages are therefore presented as a series with a title. It was not unusual for single pages from books to be exhibited or to figure as leaflets, but with the exception of Toft and Gaust ĭaba, none of Stepanova’s books were ever to be realized as a book in which the leaves were assembled in the binding and in which the pages could be turned, and they were never printed. Besides, the brightness of the colors could never have been reproduced using the hectography of Rozanova and Kruchenych’s book Te li le, and color lithography was both an expensive and very complex printing technique. Therefore, the books Zigra ar, Globolkim, and Riny chomle, exist only as unique copies and as single pages.

The pages are painted with tempera in an array of very bright colors: bright yellow, red, green, blue, and orange. The colors are often composed to contrast with each other as in the page from Riny chomle on which three triangular shaped fat lines are painted in the middle of the page (the green inside the red inside the yellow), while the block letters are painted in blue (see Lavrent’ev 1988: 22). The line “Teasfor naju” is painted in the top left corner on a horizontal line that is somewhat detached from the rest of the lines, which are painted inside the yellow, red and green triangles. In a page from Zigra ar, bright red lines are drawn in a grid on top of a similar black grid and further down the page, the poem is drawn in black or a brownish red (see Rodchenko and Stepanova 1991: 73). There is movement in the page developing from the contrast between the red and black, but also from the visual impression of the written text. The somewhat lighter lines “Afta jur inka / nair prazir Taven’o lirka” recede into the depth of the page-space as the letters in the next lines become lar-
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ger and more pronounced (some syllables are underlined: “Tajuz fai / O mali
totii / Ole majaft / Izva lejatt”), After these lines, the last line “ifta lijart” again
recedes into the background because of the size of the letters. In the handwritten
text, the words “Fai”, “O mali”, “ole”, and “izva” stand out, but, perhaps
more importantly, the illustration’s grid-like structure corresponds to the crossing
lines in the script reminiscent of Larionov’s illustration of Kručenych’s
poem ‘Dyr bul šcyl” five years previously. Regarding such illustrations, Sergej
Bobrov wrote that the goal of the new illustration was to create an analogy be-
tween poetry and drawing using painterly means (1913: 156). This is very similar
to Stepanova’s characterization of her visual poetry. However, in Stepanova’s
visual poetry, color stands out while letters are at times almost invisible.
In another page from the series Rtny chomle, a red circle is drawn in the middle
of the page on top of a bright yellow cross (figure 19). Furthermore, on top of
the bottom left part of the red circle, two fat blue lines cross in a triangular
shape with a yellow circle between the legs. At the very top of the page, a fat
green-black stripe is painted in which some purplish or light yellow-green let-
ters are drawn. Similarly, in the yellow cross, words are drawn in green, red, and
blue. One might argue, that the words drawn inside the rectangular shaped
color stripes enact Malevič’ request for letter-masses, but the letters here seem
to be secondary to the contrast of bright colors, or most significantly, to the
large calligraphic-like shape which dominates the page.
In her visual poetry, Stepanova usually uses simple block letters painted in vari-
ous colors in between or inside colored patches. However, in an illustration for
Ziga ar, which reminds one of the contrasting black and red grid structure
mentioned before, the red and black colors explode on the page (see Bowlt and
Drett 2000: 255). A black strip is painted as if it has been rolled onto the bot-
tom right corner of the page, while on the top of the page the borders dissolve
into vibrant traces. On top of this, red patches are painted as impressions from
a sponge. To the right side of the page, words are painted in black and red:
“Nuks / zims / tesfor / Brazdf / biziaks / sizeniu / op!” Under the word
“biziaks” a red line has been drawn and the rest of the letters are painted in red.
Here, not only the thickness of the letter-lines and the size of the letters vary,
but also the script. Thus, the word “sizenium” is written in a beautiful handwriting, whereas the last word “opl” is drawn with block letters similar to type set letters. Similarly on another page from Zigra ar, one word, “Osma”, is written with fat block letters similar to printed lettering (see Bowlt and Dratt 2000: 254). The varying size of the words as they proceed from the top to the bottom together with the intersecting lines give an impression of space and movement.
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The referred to pages have very distinct color shapes and the contrast between the letters and colored patches, and the contrast between the different colors, are very pronounced. However, on some pages the compositions are more complex, and the contrast less distinct. This can be seen on a page from Zigara, where the lines between the blue, black and red in the circular form dominating the composition are blurred. A sponge has been used to apply some of the color giving the shapes a vibrant outline. The letters are drawn inside the circular shape or fall out of it to the bottom right corner of the page. But still, the colors and the color-shape dominate the page, and the letters (perhaps due to the lighter yellow, blue or red colors) recede into the background.

As a result of the bright colors and simple expressive shapes (which are at times similar to large calligraphic signs), the compositions on most pages can be perceived at some distance, whereas the letters become blurred or blend into the shapes. The shapes break up the poems into lines (drawn in rectangular stripes) or individual words (falling out of the color patches, or isolated in the contrast between the background color and the color of the letters), and sometimes the grid-like look of the letters is repeated in the grid of crossing lines. But still, it is the colors and the shapes that dominate the reception of the words; reading becomes unnecessary, because the design speaks for itself. Similar to the paintings of Rozanova, the use of tempera in Stepanova’ color-poetry does not give an impression of “paint” but of “color” alone. Furthermore, the contrast between the colors, the letters, the colors and lettering and so on (i.e. the composition’s faktura) do not transcend the page on which they are written or painted unlike Malevič’ squares, circles and rectangles. In her comments at the posthumous exhibition of Rozanova’s painting, Stepanova emphasized expression, movement, and color above all. These are the very same elements that stand out in her visual poetic compositions.

This expressiveness in color, shape and composition, is also to be found in Stepanova’s posters during these years. In fact, these are strikingly similar to some of her visual poetic compositions. The pages were exhibited at the “10th State Exhibition” and designated as “Non- Objective Creativity and Suprematism”. On the same occasion, Stepanova also exhibited a number of slogans from the
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newspaper *Iskusstvo kommunity* (*Art of the Commune*): “Buduščee – edinstvennaja naša cel’” (“The future is our only goal”), “Strojte avangard revoljucionnogo proletarskogo iskusstva” (“Build the avant-garde of revolutionary proletarian art”), and “Tovarišči, nesite vaši moloty, čtoby vykovat' novoe slovo” (“Comrades, take up your hammers to forge the new word!”) (Rodčenko and Stepanova 1991: 20). Stepanova’s posters followed the same principles as those of her visual poetry in *Zigra ar, Riny chomle*, and *Globolkim*. Thus, in one poster from 1919 the text (“Comrades, take up your hammers to forge the new word!”) is drawn in a grayish color inside a bright red square (figure 20). At the top left corner, bright blue lines are drawn making a grid at the very top and proceeding in just a single blue line along the left side of the paper. At the bottom, there is a black patch of color applied with a sponge. Although the words “novoe slovo” [new word] on this poster are very pronounced, it is still the color shapes that stand out and dominate. Similarly, the poster with the text “proletarij tvorec buduščego a ne naslednik prošlogo” (“The proletarian is the creator of the future, and not an inheritor of the past”) has very bright contrasting red, blue and black colors. Here words are written in white on a black background, while red and black color shapes are glued onto the blue paper in a collage composition.

On these posters, bright patches of color, fat lines or squares accompanied the handwritten inscriptions. Lavrent’ev says: “Breaks in intonation and stress were reproduced graphically through variations in scale, color and form. The overall invocatory nature of the text was expressed through its abstract geometric construction” (1988a: 25). Exactly the same words can be used to characterize Stepanova’s color poetry. Thus, Stepanova’s posters with communist slogans are similar to her compositions with *zaum*’ poetry. In both cases, the colors speak louder than the words. “[H]er posters and book illustrations convey their message loud and clear”, as Bowlt puts it (Bowlt 1988: 8).
Fig. 20

ТОВАРИЩИ!
несите ваши молоты!
чтобы
выковать
новое
cлово
Kručenych and Rodčenko

Kručenych returned from the Caucasus on August 17, 1921 and shortly afterwards (August 23), met Stepanova. They had never met until this time, and at this meeting Kručenych made a somewhat disappointing impression on her. According to Stepanova, Kručenych was already a leftover from the futurist past with a touch of “God’s fool” about him characteristic of this generation of the avant-garde: Tatlin, Malevič, Matjušin, Miturić, Chlebnikov, Gnedov and so forth. He did not appear to understand the new art and saw “only color” (Stepanova 1994: 150). Kručenych must have known Rodčenko’s black paintings though. In the catalogue for the “10th State Exhibition”, a statement (“Sistema Rodčenko” [Rodčenko’s system]) is included explaining Rodčenko’s views with among others a quotation from Kručenych: “colors disappear – everything merges into black” (Dabrowski 1998: 31). However, Kručenych could very likely not have known of the latest productivist art of 1920, whereas Stepanova must have known of his Caucasian books. Examples of these books were sent to various friends in St. Petersburg and Moscow including Rozanova, who, until her early death in 1918, was apparently close to Stepanova. Therefore, it is likely that Stepanova knew these books and was possibly also in possession of some of them. The fact that in 1919 Stepanova made illustrations for Kruče

nych’s play Gly-Gly also suggests that Stepanova and Rodčenko had corresponded with Kručenych during his Caucasian years. These illustrations were exhibited at the “10th State Exhibition” in 1919. Furthermore, upon his return, Kručenych re-issued a number of his Caucasian books. Some of these books had a larger carbon cover with illustrations by Rodčenko. Inside, they contained pages or whole books from his Caucasian period (Nestroye, Tunšap and so forth).

In 1919, Stepanova’s book Toft appeared. It was handmade and very similar to Kručenych’s books from the Caucasus. According to the MOMA catalogue The Russian Avant-Garde Book 1910-1934, the book is copied with simple carbon paper. However, judging from the appearance of the book and the amount of copies made, one could imagine it was made with hectography. Kručenych’s carbon copied books from the Caucasus were made in only 6 copies each,
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whereas Stepanova’s book was made in 30 copies. Stepanova’s book is very similar to Kručenych’s Caucasian books, and the inner cover especially is testimony to Stepanova’s familiarity with these books. At the top of the page, she has written: “On the right of a manuscript”. Comparing the appearance of Stepanova’s line with that of Kručenych’s handwriting, one almost suspects that Stepanova has imitated Kručenych’s handwriting. However, Toft is also very different from Kručenych’s books. 

Toft is a book of poems by Stepanova and drawings by Rodčenko. Not featuring on the same page as the poems, but on every other page, these drawings are illustrations in a more traditional sense than is typical of handmade avant-garde books. They are not drawn on the same pages as the poems; therefore, they do not interact with these in a direct way. In Kručenych’s books, the drawn lines break up the space of the page and, therefore, lines and words in the poem. This is clearly not the case in Toft. Rodčenko’s drawings consist of lines, which are drawn in a grid, geometrically, or as rays. Unlike Kručenych’s drawings on the pages of his Caucasian books, these lines are drawn with a ruler. Ekaterina Degot’ calls Rodčenko’s proclamation of the line as the only element of his paintings, the first step towards constructivism (2000: 64). In Rodčenko’s aesthetics, the line was isolated as a beginning, as a skeleton of all painting, and as a final step away from color, faktura, and the plane (undoubtedly as a polemic attack on suprematism):

Кисть [...] стала недостаточным и неточным инструментом в новой беспредметной живописи, и ее вытеснил пресс, валик, рейсфедер, циркуль и т.д. [...] Линия есть первое и последнее [...]. Линия есть путь прохождения, движение, столкновение, грани, соединение, разрез. Таким образом, линия победила все и уничтожила последнее цитадели живописи – цвет, фактуру и плоскость. На живопись поставила красный крест. (Rodčenko and Stepanova 1991: 134-135)

(The brush [...] has become an insufficient and inaccurate instrument for the new non-objective painting, and it has been forced out by the press, the roller, drawing-pen, compasses and so forth [...]. The line is the first and last [...]. The line is the passageway, the movement, collision, edge, conjunction, section. Thus, the line defeated everything and destroyed the last citadel of painting: color, faktura and the plane. It drew a red cross over painting.)18

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Rodčenko’s “professional approach” to painting can be seen clearly in the ruler drawn illustrations of Toft. There is a significant difference between the gesture-writing in Kručenych’s books and the technical line in Rodčenko’s drawings. Stepanova’s poems, however, differ little from Kručenych’s phonetic zuum’.

The basic structure of Stepanova’s poems is the three-syllable line with two beats and a trochaic metric system. This provides the poems with a steady although slightly stiff rhythm. The third poem in the book is perhaps the most ingeniously constructed. With an accent on every third syllable, this poem has a very distinct rhythmic structure and even a rhyme structure. Various permutations of the words “raj” [paradise] and “argo” [argot] constitute the poem’s anagrammatic structure:

Whereas Rodčenko’s drawings seem to have no connection with the poems, the handwritten script appears to transgress the borders between illustration and text. The script varies considerably: block letters, shorthand, and a mixture of both. In the poem mentioned above, every line has its own individualized handwriting. The lines stand out independently, not only because of the different handwriting, but also because each line slants differently from the others, some of the letters even turn in different directions within one line. In this poem, individual letters or words are written with upper case letters, while others are written in lower case. This makes some letters stand out, while others recede into the background. In the poem ‘Urdaks latan’, the first half is written in very distinct upper case letters, whereas the second half has either only lower case or mixture of lower and upper case lettering. This creates a contrast between the upper and lower part of the poem. Like in her color poems (using color to create contrasts), Stepanova uses lettering to create contrast between
the lines, the upper and lower parts of the poem, or between single words and
the rest of the poem. Thus, she uses purely pictorial means to enhance poetic
expressiveness.

**Collage**

During the years 1918 to 1919, Stepanova worked with collage illustrations for
Kručenych’s play Gly-Gly (which first appeared in 1918 in the book *Obesity of
Roses*), and on the book *Gaust taha* (1919) with her own *zaum* poetry. Although
Stepanova seems to be the first artist and poet to write her poems directly onto
newspaper, she drew on an already established tradition (in early avant-garde
paintings and books) of using collage. In Russia, the collage technique was in-
troduced in Malevič’ pre-suprematist paintings Častiñoj zatmenie. *Kompozicija c
Monoj Lisoj* (*Partial Eclipse. Composition with Mona Lisa*) (1914) and *Dama u ašišnogo
stolba* (*Woman at a Poster Column*) (1914); in the painting *Ratnik pervogo razrjada
(Reservist of the First Division)* (1914), a thermometer was included. More radically,
Tatlin included all kinds of material in his three-dimensional objects. During
the same period of time, Ivan Puni included a variety of objects in his composi-
tions, and Kamenskij exhibited a mouse trap at the Moscow “Exhibition of
Painting” held in the spring of 1915. But even before, the book *A Slap in the
Face of Public Taste* had appeared with its subversive sackcloth cover. *Sadok sudej
was printed on the backside of wallpaper, and Kamenskij used brightly colored
wallpaper in his book *Tango with Cows*. Thus, low art products had already been
introduced as a basis for books. Gončarova introduced the collage element in
book form in her cover-illustration for *Worldbackwards*. It had a rose (cut out of
various kinds of paper) glued onto the cover and in *Zaumnaja Gniga*, Rozanova
illustrated the cover with a heart cut out of glossy red paper with a glued on
button. Malevič had incorporated newspaper into his paintings such as *Woman
at a Poster Column* and Rozanova had included it in her painting *Pivnaja (Pub)
(1914).

According to Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde, the cubists’ insertion of
reality-fragments into painting invalidated the artistic system of representation
and destroyed the unity of the painting as a whole:
The insertion of reality fragments into the work of art fundamentally transforms that work. The artist not only renounces shaping a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they are reality. (1999:78)

The collage marked the destruction of the organic work of art, and the creation of a new non-organic work of art. Bürger uses the cubist collage to epitomize the avant-garde, or non-organic, work of art defining it as a scene of conflict: “It is no longer the harmony of the individual parts that constitutes the whole; it is the contradictory relationship of heterogeneous elements” (1999: 82). In this way, he excludes a number of collage techniques and phenomena (such as photomontage) that cannot be used to support his theory of the avant-garde. Bürger characterizes the photomontages as “an entirely different type. They are not primarily aesthetic objects, but rather images for reading (Lesebilder)” (1999: 75). There are two different types of collage lined up: the cubist collage (which constitutes a contradictory relationship of heterogeneous elements) and the photomontage (which constitutes images for reading). Thus, despite Bürger’s description of the main characteristic of the avant-garde as the destruction of the “institution of art”, he bases his theory on the cubist collage seen as self-enclosed aesthetic works of art that ostensibly disrupt the division between art and life, but never really challenge the “institution of art”.

In relation to the Russian avant-garde, Dubravka Oraić-Tolić has developed Bürger’s theory into a theory of the avant-garde collage. In the essay ‘Collage’ (1989), two types of collage are singled out and characterized as the “Avant-Garde Collage I” and “Avant-Garde Collage II” (ACI and ACII). Dominant in collages of the first type is the “great quotation polemic”; while in the second type the “great quotation dialogue” is dominant. The first type is dominated by a polemic attack on the traditional aesthetic strongholds: “die große Destruktion der vier Grundprinzipien der traditionellen und modernen europäischen Kunst: des Mimetismus, der Autonomie, der organischen Komposition und der individuellen schöpferischen Potenz”. The second type is dominated by a dialogue with contemporary society: “die große Konstruktion eines Text-typus,
bei dem die Kunst frei ins Leben übergehen und umgekehrt das Leben selbst zur Kunst werden könnte“ (1989: 176-177). The function of the first type is to destroy the institution of traditional European art, while the function of the second type is to create a new type of art. In the first type the relationship with the public is broken; in the second type an attempt is made to re-establish the broken relationship with the public (1989: 176).

**Gly-Gly**

Kručenych’s play *Gly-Gly* was printed in *Obesity of Roses* under the heading: “Iz p‘esny A. Kručenych ... ‘Gly-Gly’” (“From A. Kručenych’s play ... ‘Gly-Gly’”). This indicates that only part of the play was printed here. However, the play never came out in another edition, and the only signs of the existence of additional lines is Kručenych’s remark (in *Obesity of Roses*) that the artist personified by Ol’ga Rozanova ought to be a character in the play pronouncing the lines of her own poem: “Lefanta čiol / Mial anta” and Stepanova’s illustrations for the play that contain fragments of texts. In recent years, a number of these illustrations have been reproduced. Except from one page, all known pages have the inscription: “from Gly-Gly A. Kručenych” beneath a text written in Stepanova’s handwriting. It is therefore likely that these illustrations were intended for publication in a new version of Kručenych’s play. However, there is some uncertainty as to the relation of these illustrations to Kručenych’s play. Some of them are dated from 1918 (before the publication of *Obesity of Roses*) and with the exception of two, all of the illustrated pages bear texts that are not part of the version of the play printed in *Obesity of Roses*. Nevertheless, these illustrations add new, interesting aspects to the relationship between text and illustration, and between Kručenych and Stepanova.

The setting in Kručenych’s play (as printed in *Obesity of Roses*) is a train station, where a crowd is waiting for the train. The main protagonists are Malevič, Chlebnikov, Chrjašč, and the Crowd consisting of a number of differently named characters: (Vzvi, “devuška” [a Girl], “bezpalyj” [Fingerless], Chudoj [Thin], “Vino” [Wine], “Voin 1-j, 2-j, 3-j” [First, Second, and Third Warrior]). In addition, a number of other voices are heard from the crowd. The world is
in a state of confusion and uproar, and everything is turned up side down: horses fall from the sky, the sun is a black revolving button, and a house bends like a staircase and pursues pedestrians, and so on.

Malevič pronounces the opening lines: “Gamlet el’ tetku tek” (“Hamlet el his woman (or aunt) flowed”). Like the general mode of speech in the play, this sentence is a mixture of zaum’ and absurd realism. In his third line, Malevič plays the part of the leader or organizer: “skažite im, čt poezd budet v svoe vremja – pust’ kuricy ne volnujutsja – doedut vo vremja .. Posadi chromogo na ploščad’ i on ee zagonit …” (“Tell them that the train will be here in its own time – don’t let the hens worry – they will arrive on time … Put the lame out on the square, and he will tire it out”)24. At the end, Chlebnikov stands on his head and says: “Net, vy mne skažite, čto že nam delat’? ni odin Pariž ešče ne vidal takogo skandala” (“No, you tell me, what are we to do? Even Paris has yet to see such a scandal …”; Kručenych 1919c: 30 [Janecek 1996: 259]).25 Other central characters are A Girl, who speaks in a mixture of zaum’ and absurd prose: “U menja segodnja prazdnik – mne prinesli cvety, a ony vykrašeny černoj kraskoj i promokli naskvoz’ (...) jubja jubkoj, jukna juknoj” (“I am celebrating today – people brought me flowers, but they were dyed black and got soaking wet (...) jubja, skirt, jukna, juknoj”), Wine who speaks in the language of phonetic zaum’: “ko-vo-bo …”, and Chrjašč who speaks in the manner of morphological zaum’: “nulevo pulevo kulevo … dyž”,26 or in absurd prose style: “slnce – černaja vraščajuščaja sja pugovica – ja prišil ee k štanam” (“The sun is a black revolving button – I have sewn it onto my trousers”).

Sergej Sigej (Sigov) interprets the play as an amalgam of three themes, the revolt of things, zero, and “documental poetry”, represented by Wine, the Futurists, and the crowd respectively. The conflict centers on the latter two groups. Wine, in Sigov’s conception, suggests the Resurrection through its association with Christ the Saviour and also Zeus, the god of wine (Janecek 1996: 259). However, the part of the play, which is printed in Obesity of Roses, does not give many clues to an actual action, or conflict (except for the lines by Malevič that designate a role of leader and protector to him). It does seem, as Janecek has pointed out, that this piece is very similar in content and style to Kručenynch’s opera Po-
beda nad solncem (Victory over the Sun) (1913). The darkness, zero and violent conflict are the dominant features.

Fig. 21

In Varvara Stepanova’s illustrations for the play, some elements from the concrete part of the play printed in obesity of roses feature, but only two lines written in the margin of the illustrations are derived directly from it. The first is written beneath a suprematist cross (fig. 21). The text in the illustration says:
“K. Malevič. ‘Èto ja namaleval / Chudog mira / Kazimir / Kaznič / Gamlet em tetku tek(n)’ iz Gly-Gly A. Kručenych” (“K. Malevič ‘I painted this / Arter of the world / Kazimir / the executioner / Hamlet I eat his woman flowed’ from Gly-Gly by A. Kručenych”). The other line is similar to Wine’s phonetic çauµ: “cho bo ro čo ro …”. In addition to Malevič’s character, other characters from the play can be found in the inscriptions on Stepanova’s illustrations: First Warrior and Third Warrior. It is not known how the collaboration between Stepanova and Kručenych came about, or if there was any direct contact at all. At the time, when Stepanova ventured on this task, Kručenych was still in the Caucasus. But no matter how the connection came about, Stepanova seemed to be in possession of some unknown parts of the play (unless she made the extra lines up herself).

The illustrations fall into five kinds: drawings with ink in a grid structure with abstract motifs or figures (characteristic of Stepanova’s early period, 1918-1920), collage compositions with cut-outs from everyday utilitarian products or magazines, collage compositions with cut-outs from magazines or musical scores with a formal equivalence or correspondence to glued on appliqués, a suprematist composition, and finally calligraphic signs.27 Except from two illustrations, all the texts refer directly to Gly-Gly. There can therefore be no doubt that these have been made specifically for the play.

One illustration seems to be the cover for the book. It is drawn with black ink lines crossing over the text (Rodčenko and Stepanova 1991: 164). It is similar to an abstract composition of ink lines and a circular form with the text (“Gory, momenty, nuli, kuvaldy, steny pičuat” [“Mountains, zeros, sledge-hammers, walls of pičuats”28]) (Beeren et al. 1992: 284), and an abstract illustration with the text “Ptica-skeleto / tresčit” (“Bird-skeleton / clatter”) (Rodčenko and Stepanova 1991: 162). Similarly, the illustrations with figures are drawn in a system of crossing black ink lines (See figure 22). This technique reminds one of Larionov’s rayonist drawings. However, there is nothing degrading about Stepanova’s drawings of women. They also do not deconstruct the canonical depiction of the female body, which is often the case in Larionov’s drawings and paintings. Stepanova simply draws the forms of the female figure in various
poses giving them an anonymous robot-like appearance. They have no face and
their forms are reduced to square lines. nulja” [“An aquarium full of letters of
feeble-mindedness. Sápe-rol’-Nop-t’e-mnol’ Life is shorter than a zero’)], while
the illustrations show (female) figures. One of these is clearly a drawing of a
woman with curvy lines in a classical pose with one hand raised towards her
head (or hat) (see Lavrent’ev 1988b: 28). The other drawing shows an androgy-
nous figure, but the text indicates a female figure (figure 22). There is, there-
fore, a clear analogy between text and image, and none of these interact with
each other in a direct way.

Fig. 22
These drawings are illustrations in a traditional sense. The texts in one illustration indicate the speaker: a Woman (saying “Ja odna...otoprime dver’ Kto menja chočet s’est” [“I am alone ... unlock the door for me. Who wants to eat me”]), and in another a Lady with a Golden Eye (speaking a more abstract language: “Akvarium bukv skudoumija. Sápe-rol’-Nop-t’e-mnol’ Žizn’ koroče” The same can be said for the two collage compositions from the first category of collages. These collages illustrate the First Warrior and the Third Warrior. Both of the texts are more or less abstract. The First Warrior speaks a complex anagrammatic language with the word “t’ma” [darkness] as its basis: “Pervyj voin ‘Zametaetsja temja / Tmeni v temnote / Ogi čajny ord”, while the Third Warrior speaks an unintelligible phonetic “zaum” language with one line consisting of consonants only: “azanmazm1l – 1 k t r l t bučantnt”. The illustrations are also abstract, although the square figures composed by the rectangular shaped cut-outs could indicate human forms. Thus, the illustration for the First Warrior has a wax seal at the top on a white square piece of paper (figure 23). On this round seal, a triangular shaped black piece of paper is glued indicating the left arm. From the top downwards there is long strip forming one side of the body ending in a leg, while there is a double triangular shape to the right side indicating the other side of the body under which a white cut-out could indicate the right leg and a horizontal piece, the shoulders. The other figure is taken from a cardboard carton with the word “Krem” [here, it seems, the carton contained shoe polish, but the word also means cream or moisturizer] at the very top in a horizontal rectangular shape that could indicate a head, while two long vertical strips of paper at the bottom could signify legs (see Beeren et al. 1992: ill. 482).

Thus, these compositions are not without figurative associations. Furthermore, the one figure has the word “polish” written on the head while the other has an official letter seal. Both figures are composed of cut-outs from commercial paper: a carton of shoe-polish in one and a picture of fashionable footwear from a popular magazine in the other. It is likely that these compositions indicate two bourgeois personalities (one feeble-minded as the greasy polish; the other the bureaucratic dandy).
WRITING AND THE 'SUBJECT'

Fig. 23
As I have mentioned, one composition is an illustration for the figure K. Malevič depicting a rectangular shaped black cross transgressing a white background at the bottom right corner (figure 21). This figure corresponds perfectly to the Malevič figure. The use of proper names of various characters from the Russian avant-garde is characteristic of Stepanova’s Gly-Gly illustrations. In one collage, the text says: “O. Rozanova tancuet” (“O. Rozanova dances”), and the illustration is a composition of four intertwined cut-outs of colored paper, which form a beautiful illustration for the “dance” (see Rodčenko and Stepanova 1991: 162). Two illustrations mention the composers Michail Matjušin and Nikolaj Roslavec respectively. The composers are named with the neologism “zvučar” from the word “zvučat” [to sound] and possibly “zvonar” [a sacristan]. Both of the texts are written in Kručenych’s phonetic zaum’ language that was predominant in his Caucasian period. Thus, beneath the words “Sounder Roslavec”, a long paradigmatic chain stretches out in the left margin: “cho bo ro čo ro če ge re so bo ro čak žamkog kažva” (Lavrent’ev 1988b: 29), while the text for the Sounder M. Matjušin is more complex: “Ga šam gam / Giš škvoren’ šuk bta odin dva boro sorkb ba ararych škiv čorb čok toporišče” (Lavrent’ev 2000: 29).30 While the illustration for the Sounder M. Matjušin has a musical score incorporated in the composition, the illustration for the Sounder Roslavec is abstract. There is a formal equivalence between a zigzag shaped black piece of paper, which is glued onto the upper half of a photograph of what seems to be an industrial site, with a similar zigzag structure in a horizontal steel shaped pillar or tower. The photograph is turned on its side, and a number of lines (from lamps, pillars or construction bars) form a grating that could indicate a musical score, however, the composition is very abstract and the formal equivalences stands out as the basic compositional feature. The last two known reproductions of illustrations for Gly-Gly have a similar principle of formal equivalences as the basis for the abstract compositions of cut-outs from colored paper and magazines. The first has the text “Vse kružatsja i raz’ezžajutsja vwerch i vniž” (“Everything whirls around and move about, up and down”) written at the bottom of the page beneath a large sickle-shaped cut-out from dark paper (Lavrent’ev 1988: 29). The round shape is
crossed by a vertically placed thinner cut-out from lighter colored paper, and in the background, the round figure of the sickle is echoed in the round shaped plates richly decorated with what seems to be Greek mythology inspired pastoral scenes. The illustration corresponds on a formal level to the text. This text reminds one of *Victory over the Sun* in which the “ten countries” deprive the characters of the feeling of up and down, here and there, and now and then:

“Vnimatel’nyj rabočij: nazad obe srazu pered obedom a teper’ tol’ko bašnja, kolesa – vidiš’? [...] Tolstjak: ba, oj upadu (zagljadyvaet v razrez časov: bašnja nebo ulicy vniz veršinami – kk v zerkale)” (“An Attentive Worker: back both at once before lunch and now there is only a tower, a wheel – you see? [...] A Fat Man: well! Oops! I fall (he stares at the section of the clock: the tower the heaven down to the street with the peaks – like in a mirror)” ; Erbslöh 1976: 19). In the other illustration, there seems to be no correspondence between the illustration (which is a grid-like structure in a photograph repeated or contrasted with the glued-on colored paper strips) and the text. Except for the first word, “odin” [one], the text is also purely abstract: “Odin ordy-čjuč / Ėkis gon / Chyvk birk vyrk / Kisloky” (Rowell and Wye 2002: 186). Thus, Stepanova’s illustrations for *Gly-Gly* vary greatly from compositions of ink lines to more or less complex collage compositions. However, in most of the illustrations there is a formal, associative, or direct analogous correspondence between the text and the image, which indicates that Stepanova worked thoroughly with the material. Furthermore, the texts indicate (as Janecek has pointed out) that the piece of *Gly-Gly*, which is printed in *Obesity of Roses*, is merely one part of a larger text.

In Stepanova’s texts, there are a number of characters (Matjušin, Roslavec, a Woman, and a Lady with a Golden Eye), which are not found in the text in *Obesity of Roses*. The inclusion of the composers Matjušin and Roslavec and the artists Rozanova and Malević indicates that the idea permeating *Victory over the Sun* of Gesamtkunstwerk with music, dance and painterly decorations was a part of *Gly-Gly*’s conception. In Stepanova’s compositions, it is also evident that, in her interpretation, one of the play’s major themes is the fight between old and new. The inclusion of bourgeois magazines and photographs in the illustrations for the two Warriors indicate not only two bureaucrats, one feeble-minded, the
other a dandy, but also that these figures represent an opposition to Rozanova’s lively *dance* and Matjušin and Roslavec’ *music*. Furthermore, the text of K. Malevič is an ironic commentary on this artist’s aspiration to the “Artist of the World”.

In this text, Malevič is also both executioner and Hamlet who is somehow associated with the degrading word for a woman, “tetka”. Kručenych’s text, as it is printed in *Obesity of Roses*, contains the line: “Hamlet el’ his woman (or aunt) flowed”. Stepanova may have added the ironic first four lines in the illustration or Kručenych may have added these lines in a later version. One might initially think that at this particular time, Stepanova would have reason to be ironic about Malevič’ aspirations.

**Gaust ėcba**

Stepanova’s book, *Gaust ėcba*, came out in 1919 in only 54 numbered copies (in copy no. 28, reproduced by Evgenij Kovtun it is indicated that in addition to the initial 50 copies, four separate copies were made) and only a few copies and a number of individual pages have survived.

All the books appear to contain six collages and eight poems, a front and back cover. The book was not printed, but the poems were painted in watercolors of different hues, most frequently: red, green and brownish red. The newspaper, on which the poems were written, was the official government news organ *Izvestija Vserossijskogo Central’nogo Ispol’nitel’nogo Komiteta Sovetov* (News from the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets) of July 1918. All the pages have been turned 90 degrees and can be read from the bookbinding towards the margin or from the margin towards the bookbinding. The poems are written diagonally on the newspaper text and on uneven or slanting lines.

In his analysis of Stepanova’s book, Kovtun places it in the dada aesthetics of psychological shock. According to Kovtun, the *shock* is created in *Gaust ėcba* in a series of psychological *shifts*. First, the typeset is utilized as a background for lines in manuscript. Second, the *gaum*’ verses are juxtaposed with the intelligible newspaper lines. Third, collages of typographical collages are used as illustration in combination with non-objective appliqués. Concluding, Kovtun somewhat exaggerates the obtrusive effect of Stepanova’s book by stating that “Stepanova...
brought the Futurists' experiment to its conclusive point – by creating the 'back to front book', a kind of anti-book which, for the reader, is hermetically sealed as a 'thing in itself'” (1974: 140). After having studied three copies of this book, this last characteristic is not entirely clear to me. The only justification for this is that the back cover appears as the last page of the book and thus faces the front cover, but does this make the book a “hermetically sealed thing in itself”? The pages can be turned as in any book, the written pages are placed on every other right-side page, they can be read from top to bottom, and the book has a cover, thus, the conception of the “anti-book” loses its edge.

I will argue that, just as Stepanova's color poetry presented itself as a kind of poster, this book can be seen as a new aesthetic response to a changed political situation, which Stepanova very explicitly related her art to. By stressing the negative destructive mode of it (the negation of the typeset text, the negation of the book, and the negation of the letter by turning it into an image), Kovtun overlooks the positive element of this book (the substitution of the old typewritten language by an new language of the future, znam'), and the neutral (the use of the elements which were set free by the destruction of the old as well as of newly included materials to create new constructions).

While Kovtun thus interprets Stepanova's book Gaust ëaba as belonging to the first type of avant-garde collage (AC I), I will suggest (like Ekaterina Degot') that a paradigmatic change was visibly discernible in Gaust ëaba as a developing new attitude to the collage. Degot' claims that in the collage-books by Stepanova (from 1919), the collage has been turned into a political instrument, an instrument of power and not only of criticism (2000: 62). According to such a view, the collage develops in the direction of a second kind of collage (AC II), in which an attempt is made to overcome the modernist barrier between art and the public.

The first impression of the book is (as Kovtun has pointed out), that there is an obvious conflict between the painted znam' words and the newspaper text and, therefore, between the poetic language and the instrumentalized language of the newspaper. It is, therefore, interesting to interpret the book in the context of the modernist tradition in which poets and painters struggled to respond to the
huge production of newspapers at the turn of the century. To this new challenge, Mallarmé and Apollinaire responded very differently. Epitomized by the fold, Mallarmé sees the book as a symbol of everything which the newspaper is not: “[W]ithout the folding of the paper and the secrets it establishes, the shadow sprinkled in black characters would offer no reason to be spread like the wreckage of a mystery on the surface, in the gap raised by the finger” (1965: 192). The newspaper is perceived as a fully displayed flat sheet with a “sheer blur” of printed letters. In the newspaper, the column directs our gaze into an austere monotony: “Plus the ceaseless, successive coming and going of the glance, when one line is finished to begin again at the following” (1965: 193). In the book, on the other hand, the letters are presented as fragmented notation which insists on the reader’s attentive perception happily relieved from tedious everyday life:

[S]uch a practice does not represent the delight of translating one’s vain imaginings, having immortally broken with everything for an hour. Otherwise or apart from an active execution, as if of pieces on a keyboard, measured by the pages – why do we not shut our eyes to dream? This is not presumption or tedious slavery: but the initiative, whose lightning flash resides in anyone, connects the fragmented notation. (1965: 193)

In his own poetry, Mallarmé dispersed the letters over page upon page and created a poetics of suspension, incorporating the fold into the very structure of the poem. Inspired by Blaise Cendrars who celebrated the newspaper column in his Prose du transsibirién (1913) and by the futurists, Apollinaire responded very differently to this challenge. Rosalind Krauss argues:

[G]lorying in the very flatness of the page (…) [Apollinaire] clearly believes that the typographic revolution, already at work in the pages of the newspaper and on the billboards and advertisements, has loosened up the sheet of print, allowing many different voices to enter, creating in fact a cacophony of tones and speakers. (1992: 277)

Thus, in 1912 in Zone, Apollinaire wrote: “You read the handbills, catalogues, posters that sing out loud and clear – / That’s the morning’s poetry, and for prose there are the newspapers, / There are tabloids lurid with police reports, / Por-
traits of the great and a thousand assorted stories” (Krauss 1992: 277).

In pictorial art, Picasso and Braque introduced the new technique of *papier collé* in 1912. In the essay ‘The Motivation of the Sign’, Krauss argues that Picasso’s *papier collés* represented a third way between the exclusion and the embracing of the newspaper. Where Mallarmé sought to exclude the arbitrariness of the vertical column and standard typography, Picasso retained it. She maintains that the inclusion of newspaper clippings in Picasso’s collages shows that even these symbols of the instrumentality of language (the column and the flat sheet) can be deinstrumentalized. The newspaper fragments function as signs of what is absent in Picasso’s compositions; namely light and shade.

Thus without jettisoning its flatness and its columnal monotony, Picasso deploys newsprint to create, at the level of the sign, those precious aesthetic possibilities that Mallarmé had insisted were the exclusive prerogative of the book: the capacity to figure forth the fold as that metaphysical “turning” of the page that opens the work of art onto the abyss or chasm of meaning; and the ability to transmute the gray drone of the marks on the page into the very sign or constellation for light. (1992: 282)

However, in the essay ‘Cubist Collage, the Public, and the Culture of Commodities’, Christine Poggi maintains that the Cubists included products of mass culture as a response to symbolist exclusion on the one hand, and as a critique of prevailing market conditions on the other:

In the light of contemporary social conditions and expectations about the production and pace of art in society, many of the innovations of Cubist collage can be interpreted as a series of ironic refusals or negations. The practice of collage techniques indicates a denial of the precious, fine art status of traditional works of art as well as an attempt to subvert the seemingly inevitable process by which art becomes a commodity in the modern world. (1992: 128)

The claim to originality is subverted by the inclusion of ready-made reality-fragments and thereby also the distinction between pure art and mass-culture:

The Cubists seem to have conceived their collages, in particular, as sites where fragments of the cultural codes that circulate through our lives might continue to do so, albeit according to an altered imperative. Certain-
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ly these fragments – calling cards, cinema programs, popular musical scores, cigarette and liqueur labels, packing paper – retain their identity as cultural commodities. (1992: 157)

As reality-fragments, the pieces of newspaper can be read and, where Mallarmé sought to negate the representational function of words and to de-instrumentalize language by excluding any reference to the exterior world, Picasso included newspaper clippings with the intention of making puns and political statements. Two examples, which are rare because a newspaper sheet constitutes the background for the composition, are strikingly similar to the pages in Stepanova’s book. In Still Life with Bottle (1912) a composition is drawn and paper is pasted on a newspaper sheet with the headline “La semaine economique & financière”. Although the page is turned upside down, the text is readable. Similarly, Study for a Figure (1913) has a composition drawn in ink on newspaper. On the newspaper page, the words “Le commerce” are visible and readable despite the fact that the page is turned on its side. Poggi interprets this background text as a comment on art as a commodity: “Rather than fetishize the virginial white sheet of the page [like Mallarmé], in works such as these Picasso chose a ground that was already traversed by the market” (1992: 148).

Although Stepanova was probably not familiar with Picasso’s Still Life with Bottle and Study for a Figure, she almost certainly knew the papier collé either from an exhibition, the collection of the merchant and major art collector S. I. Ščukin, or (more likely) second hand from Tatlin, who visited Picasso in his studio in 1913-14. However, the socio-political situation in France in 1912-1914 and in Russia after the Revolution differs considerably. Although the political situation in 1918/1919 was somewhat muddled, it seems strange that Stepanova, who sympathized with the revolution, would wish to deny the rhetoric of an official communist newspaper.

Just after the revolution, most of the avant-garde artists refused to submit to government control; they felt more attracted to the anarchists. Until April 1918, the anarchist groups were popular among avant-garde artists in general, and Stepanova’s husband, Rodčenko, was apparently associated with the anarchist movement as a member of the “Moskovskija asociacij a anarchistov” (Moscow
Association of Anarchist Groups), which published the newspaper Anarchija (Anarchy) (Dabrowski 1998: 31). Both Rodčenko and Malevič wrote for this newspaper, and on its pages, exhibitions by Tatlin, Rozanova, Malevič, Rodčenko and so forth were reviewed. It was also in this newspaper that Rodčenko’s article ‘Dinamizm ploskosti’ (‘The Dynamism of the Plane’) was published. Furthermore, in the text for the catalogue of the “10th State Exhibition”, Rodčenko quotes the anarchist writer Max Stirner. Since the group around Tatlin and Malevič, among them Udal’cova, Vesnin, Drevin, Rodčenko, and Rozanova, appears to have been associated with or to have sympathized with the editorial line of Anarchy, it seems likely that Stepanova did too. However, by the end of 1918 most of the avant-garde artists had joined the central state organ NARKOMPROS, an abbreviation of “Narodnyj komissariat prosveščenija” (People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment). They continued, nevertheless, to fight the “backwardness”, as they saw it, of the leaders of this organization who were equivalent to the individuals, who had excluded the avant-garde from being exhibited and published before the Revolution. This is evident from Rodčenko and Stepanova’s manifesto from 1919 ‘Manifest suprematistov i bespredmetnikov’ (‘Manifest for the Suprematists and Non-Objectivists’):

(We painted our frenzied canvases under whistles and laughter from well-fed bureaucrats and petty bourgeoisie. Today we repeat that now we did also not give in to the so-called proletariat of licksprite to the monarchy, the intelligentsia, who have occupied the places of the former bureaucrats. In 20 years, the Soviet republic will be proud of these canvases.)

During the short period following the Revolution until around 1921, the artists and poets struggled to come to terms with and respond artistically to the new situation. This initial response was to create actionist art in line with the early futurist carnegivalistic manifestations. Majakovskij, who went to Moscow just af-
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ter the revolution, opened the “Kafe poetov” together with Vasilij Kamenskij and David Burljuk. The cafe was frequented by the “Federacija futuristov” (Federation of Futurists) (the name was perhaps inspired by the anarchist group “Federacija chudoznikov ‘Svoboda iskusstvu’” (“Freedom for the Arts Federation’)). A futurist newspaper was issued in which spontaneous graffiti was elevated to revolutionary art (Gassner 1992: 193):

Во имя великой поступи равенства каждого пред культурой Свободное слово творческой личности пусть будет написано на перекрестках домовых стен, заборов, крыш, улиц наших городов, селений и на спинах автомобилей, экипажей, трамваев и на платьях всех граждан. […] Художники и писатели обязаны немедля взять горшки с красками и кистями своего мастерства иллюминировать, разрисовать все бока, лба и груди городов, вокзалов и вечно бегущих стай железнодорожных вагонов. (Jangfeldt 1977: 23)

(In the name of the great step forward of everybody’s equality before the culture, let the Free word of the creative personality be written everywhere: on the walls of houses, fences, roofs, the streets of our cities, greens and on the backs of cars, equipages, trams and on the clothes of all citizens. […] It is the artists’ and writers’ duty immediately to grab a pot of paint and illuminate, paint all over all sides, foreheads and breasts of the cities, stations and the eternally running packs of railroad carriages with his paintbrushes.)

This actionism of handwriting reminds one of Larionov and Zdanovič’s declaration ‘Why We Paint Ourselves’ (1913). The newspaper called for a third “revolution of the spirit” (Gassner 1992: 193). The cafe did not last long (it was closed down by the authorities in April 1918), the same pathos, however, can still be found in Majakovskij’s poem ‘Prikaz po armii iskusstva’ (‘Order to the Army of Art’) printed on the front page of the first issue of the journal Iskusstvo kommunity (Art of the Commune) published in Petrograd from December 1918 to April 1919 (Lodder 1983: 76): “Na ulice taščite rojali, / Baraban, / rojal’ ras-kroja li, / no čtob grochot byl, / čtob grom/ […] Ulicy – naši kist. / Ploščadi – naši palitry / Knigoj vremen / tysjačelistoj / revolucion dni ne vospety. / Na ulicy, futuristy, / barabanščiki i poéty!” (“Drag pianos into the streets, / and a drum, / when opening the pianos up wide / let there be a crash / let there be thunder / […] We bring our brushes into the street / our palettes into the
squares / With the thousand-page book of time / Revolution’s days have yet to be sung. / Into the streets, futurists, / drummers and poets!”; Majakovskij 1963: 249-250). A similar poem was published in the fifth edition of Iskusstvo (Art) (the follower of Art of the Commune) apparently as a polemic response to a number of attacks launched in the newspaper Večernie Moskvy (Moscow Evening) by, among others, the head of two sections of MONO, Moskovskij Otdel Narodnogo Obrazovanija (the Moscow Department of People’s Education), IZO “izobrazitel’nye iskusstva” (Fine arts) and “narodnye prazdnestva” (People’s festivities), the government official Vladimir Friče. This conflict was at its climax in February-March 1919 (Jangfeldt 1977: 42).

In the poem ‘My idem’ (‘We Are Coming’), Majakovskij opposes “we”, the “conquerors”, “architects” and “illuminators of tomorrow’s cities” to the “old evil-minded men”, who fight them in the newspapers:


(The new architect of the future – / that is we, the illuminators of tomorrow’s cities. / We are coming / inviolably, / cheerfully. / Hey, twenty-year-olds! / You are called for. / Drumming, / carry pots of paint. / Let us get soaked in paint again. / Shine, Moscow! / And just let / any newspapers’ degenerate / strike us / (on the stomach))

The futurists were excluded from the decorations in relation to the May 1 celebrations in 1919, and in the dedication in a copy of Vojna i mir (War and Peace), which Majakovskij gave to Stepanova. On March 4, 1919, he wrote: “Tov. Stepanovoj na pamjat’ ob atake na Friče V. Majakovskij” (“For comrade Stepanova in the memory of the attack on Friče. V. Majakovskij”; Jangfeldt 1977: 50). This indicates that Stepanova had been involved in or at least sympathized with Majakovskij in his struggle with Friče in the newspaper columns. The question is, if this political and cultural climate could have influenced Stepanova’s choice of writing her handwritten qaum’ poetry on the pages of Izvestija.
The poems in *Gaust čaba* do not differ from the poems in Stepanova’s color poetic compositions and some poems are even repeated. They have a very clear rhythm and a somewhat conventional formal structure. Unlike Kručenych’s poem ‘Dyr bul ščyl’, Stepanova’s poems are pronounceable, and some words even seem to remind one of Russian and foreign words. The main feature though is repetitions of sounds, rhythm or morphological constructs, which seem to constitute the structuring element. As I have mentioned, Stepanova’s poetry is very expressive and seen in this light, the handwritten *zaum‘* texts in *Gaust čaba* are in line with the initial aesthetic response to the Revolution. It was the gesture of a political pathos that did not exclude the newspaper text, but responded artistically and poetically to the politics of the new rulers of the country. Thus, Kručenych in a later apology for *zaum‘* language wrote:

Нельзя вести себя языково одинаково и в комнате своей, и на улице и в заседании законодательного учреждения. Эту истину первым созна-
(One cannot behave language-wise in the same way in one’s own room, and on the street and at meetings in the legislative institution. The futurist poets were the first to consciously adopt this truth. They proved that the poetic language is a completely isolated language category [...] *Zaum*’ language is first of all the language of public events, its tempo and rhythm which in speed and dynamics by far surpasses the slowness of ordinary human speech.)

*Zaum*’ was the new expressive language just like brightly colored images were the new images for the streets and squares, so wrote Stepanova in her review of Rozanova’s paintings. Indeed, the handwritten letters in *Gaust čaba* remind one of graffiti scrawled across a wall and there is no sign of any hidden pun or comment in the newspaper texts that might cast light on her use of this background for her poems (see figure 24). Although the Mallarméan exclusion of the typeset lettering and the monotony of the column is obviously the modernist context of Stepanova’s book, *Gaust čaba* is not so much an anti-book as a new book, a book that speaks the language of the streets and squares, loud and clear. One language is individual, singular and un-repeatable; the other is public and relies on the exact repetition of identical signs. One language should be perceived and felt; therefore, the letters should be visible and palpable. The other should be understood as signs of an absent meaning; therefore, the letters should be absent as well. There is no sign of a direct response to the newspaper text or any indication that the graffiti text on top of the newspaper typeset is the result of a struggle between academicians such as Friče and the futurists of the columns of *Večernje Moskvy*. However, there is a clear indication, that this graffiti should indeed be seen as a new revolutionary language with all its “épatage and defiant individualism” (Jangfeldt 1977: 92).

The six collages in Stepanova’s book, which are reproduced in their entirety by Evgenij Kovtun, have clippings from popular magazines glued onto the newspaper page. The clippings show fragments of pictures and text, and seem
to be cut very deliberately. This is characteristic of all the collages that I have been able to study. The play with formal equivalences or contrasts, which were the dominant qualities of Stepanova’s illustrations for Gly-Gly, are also dominant features in the collages in Gaust čaba, and like the former illustrations, some pages in Gaust čaba also include semantic puns. The three copies of the book, which I am familiar with, have a similar collage on the cover (see figure 25).

Fig. 25
On the cover, a piece of pink paper (one with remnants of the word “gosudarstvennyj” [state-], another with remnants of the words “vystavka kartin, gravjur” [exhibition of paintings, engravings], and a third (without words) in a rectangular shape with two wing-like shapes at the sides is glued onto the newspaper page. On top of this, a white piece of paper is glued which has an axe-like shape. The proportions and forms of the cut-outs seem to be exactly the same, which indicates that Stepanova did attempt to create a sense of uniformity between the copies. Similarly, the cut-outs of the collages in figures 26, 27 and 28 have exactly the same shapes, although the paper used is different. I have been able to compare the two already reproduced copies with the one, which is held at the Literary Museum in Moscow, and it appears that the pages and the forms of all the collages of these copies correspond completely.
Some pages presumed to be a part of Gaust Žaba are very different, however, which indicates that these might not have been part of the original books and may have been produced at a later stage or in a different context; or there was some variation among the different copies. These pages differ in look from those included in the book by being more complex in their compositions, and including popular photographs or fashion imagery from many different sources (see figure 30).

I will therefore regard these compositions, not as parts of Gaust Žaba, but as individual compositions.

Even in the black and white reproductions given here, it is obvious that there are significant contrasts in the tone of colors between the clip-outs and between the clippings and the typeset of the newspaper page. The white seems to cut holes in the page as in figure 27, while the darker clippings set off against the background of white. On this page, the mostly white piece of paper is contrasted with a dark clip-out of what seems like an image from a popular magazine of a ball with men in black suits. Similarly, on another page, two clippings with large black letters are added to the fine clip-out with fragments of a lithograph the color of which is contrasted to the darker newspaper background (see figure 29). This formal contrast or equivalence between the texture of the printed texts, images or letters seems to be the main feature in these constructions.

Thus, one page has a clipping from an advertisement for rugs and carpets (see Bowlt et al. 1974: 149). The text is written (black on white) on a whitish page and next to the advertisement there is an image of some kind of obelisk. But the background is a very finely crossed net of black lines. Onto this clipping, another rectangular clipping of a very rough and textured quality has been glued. This page shows very clearly the three-doubling of the idea of a rug, and the texture of different rug-like surfaces. In figure 26, a ceiling is shown in a clipping from a magazine. It is richly decorated and shows a chandelier indicating that it is derived from a rich mansion or palace. In this image, there is a round shape in the very middle, which is echoed in the clipping beneath with has an image of a pipe in front of a piece of cardboard with a round shape on it. Similarly, the round shapes in the rectangular-shaped image from a popular magazine are echoed in the technical drawing for a foundation of a building in figure 27.
Thus, the newspaper, which serves as a page, is the carrier of the pictorial composition. The canvas is doubled and thereby symbolized by a newspaper page, which has a certain texture. This texture is contrasted by the texture of the other paper qualities. In this way, the collages in this book actualize the theory of faktura. The contrast between the different faktura (texture, color and shape) constitutes the meaning of the composition. In this perspective, the forms of the clippings are strictly formal contrasts between round and square, light and dark. The letters and images of both the newspaper page and the clippings lose their referentiality; they gain meaning only within the formal context of the page.
However, the collages can also be read as in figure 28. On this page a picture of a staircase in what seems like a hall in a rich patrician home or a castle is glued onto the page. It has a marble floor and pedestal with a vase in the middle of the hall. Beneath this pedestal, the inscription, “Escalier d’honneur” is preserved in the clipping. This image is glued onto another clipping from the page of a book. The text in English and the image of this clipping concern a lace dress, and has the word Netherlands in the text. Beneath the text, a golden horn is placed as a kind of vignette. Thus, in this page, four countries are represented: Netherlands, France, Russia, and England. Similarly, another collage has a clipping with a fragment of an image from Manchester and a clipping with a text in German. One page has images of Siamese twins from a Russian popular magazine (see Bowlt et al. 1974: 147) and another has a German advertisement for carpets and rugs inserted into the collage. This last clipping has the year 1902 written at the bottom. If the collages are read in this way, there is no doubt, that the glued-on clippings represent the old bourgeois world, which is contrasted with the Russian communist newspaper text. This reading is supported by the page in figure 30, which does not seem to belong to Gaust īaba, but is, however, composed with a newspaper sheet as a background. The composition shows images from popular magazines, which are cut into one or two strips. Two strips from the same image show Rasputin featured by aristocratic women (compare photos in Radzinsky 2000). The faces all look directly towards the beholder. Between these two strips from the same photograph (it has the inscription, G.E. Rasputin, in the lower left corner) the head of a variety girl has been inserted. Beneath these strips, two strips from a photograph of Nikolas II have been placed with the head cut through. Nikolas II wears a uniform and between these strips and another strip showing soldiers from Napoleon’s era, a naked torso of a woman has been placed. There can be no doubt that this collage is a comment on the old regime’s degenerated passion, which is shattered by the scissors. Perhaps the red cutting in the upper right corner with the word “Snarjadi” [projectiles] represents the Red army that overthrew this regime. Such a reading can be supported by the fact that this is not the only time Stepanova uses collages to a polemical end.
As Ekaterina Degot’ points out, this kind of *political* collage can also be seen in the 1922 collage made as part of the ongoing rejection of Malevič’ suprematism around and following the 1919 “10th State Exhibition”. Stepanova inserted a newspaper advertisement for hypnosis, from the publishing house, “The Spiritualist”, onto the book cover, thereby ridiculing Malevič’ book, *Bog ne skinut (God has not been abandoned)* (figure 31). In the collage, the clippings cover the word “ne” [not] in the title as a comment on Malevič’ aesthetics (Degot’ 2000: 62). This collage has become a readable text and the self-reflexive attention to the individual elements; the *reality fragment* has shifted in favor of allegory.
Thus, Stepanova’s book is a curious mixture of artistic strategies. On the one hand the predominant mode of representation is strictly formal and corresponds to a “neutral” element in the book. This interpretation corresponds with Rosalind Krauss’ reading of Picasso’s *Papier collé*, i.e., the newspaper is included to spark a contrast between the various kinds of *faktura*. On the other hand, the contrast between the handwritten letters and the typeset newspaper can be interpreted as a negation of the instrumentalized language of communication corresponding to Mallermé’s modernist exclusion of the newspaper. It is
also true of this book, that in comparison to the early avant-garde books, *Gaust taba* is the single most hand-made book. The *collages* are composed of different newspaper in each and every book. Similarly, the letters of the poems are handwritten directly on the page. It is also important to note that this book was numbered. Thus, although Stepanova apparently attempted to create uniform collages, the paper quality and origin are very different, and every book is unique and authentic. It is to a much higher degree a work of art than the hand-written lithographed books of the cubo-futurists. It can, therefore, be interpreted as a reaction to the commoditization of art and the “loss of aura” in an age of mass reproduction, as Walter Benjamin would put it. According to such an interpretation, the book is inscribed in a modernist critique of the market conditions of capitalist society. However, this can hardly be said to be the case in post-revolutionary Russia. Although the artists for a short period of time fought for the autonomy of art, they were at this point not submitted to the market, and they fully supported the revolution and although reluctantly at first, in reality, they very quickly joined the state regulated artistic organizations.

As I have shown, a political reading is possible: the handwritten *zaum* texts may have negated the monotony of the typeset newspaper text, but only to present this actionist script as a new mode of artistic expression in a revolutionary Russia. In 1919, Stepanova probably felt her views to be in line with the content of government politics, or at least that they should be the right and only answer to the need for a revolutionary art form. This is a situation which differs considerably from that of Picasso’s or Mallarmé’s France. This book is very complex and full of contradictions, and a few months into 1919, Stepanova probably abandoned the actionist gesture-writing along with *zaum* poetry, whereas she retained and developed the polygraphic techniques explored in these early books: the expressiveness of the lettering, the line, the coloring, the use of contrast, the collage and so forth, and she moved hastily towards an art, which must be characterized as examples of what Oraić-Tolić called avant-garde collage II, an art which could freely transgress the border between art and life.