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From Rodchenko to Rubchinskiy: Adidas Tracksuits in Russian Avant-garde Context

Abstract: *With the emergence of new disciplines, and moreover, new socio-cultural phenomena, it is of great importance to rethink classically conceptualized art historical discipline. Being an increasing trend both in museum and academic sphere, fashion studies can serve as a fertile ground for interdisciplinarity in art history. As an integral aspect of visual culture, fashion can be studied by means of art historical analyses, while art history can benefit from contemporary perspectives fashion demands. One phenomenon will serve as an example of how fashion studies and art history can contribute to understanding of both historical and contemporary cultural productions. Adidas Tracksuits grew from mostly Russian material (sub)culture to global media and fashion phenomena. The paper aims to dive deeper into art history in order to provide a potential interpretation of Adidas tracksuits and formative aspects of its visual identity in the context of Russian avant-garde, most notably Constructivist textile design. While Western haute couture served elitism and aestheticism, the designs of Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova, Tatlin, and Mukhina served utility and the notion of creating functional, athletic, industrially reproducible fashions for the sake of genderless working class. These designs now considered art historical heritage alongside with the popularization of Adidas tracksuits at 1980 Moscow Olympics where many western countries boycotted participation, fashion designs of Gosha Rubchinskiy, and Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits serve as the interpretation base for the subject matter.*

Keywords: *art history, fashion, Adidas, tracksuit, Russian avant-garde, Constructivism*

Fashion studies in Eastern Europe: renowned names of fashion studies, chained by art history Christopher Breward, states that In his book simply entitled *Fashion*, art “fashion enjoys unprecedented coverage historian and now one of the most in the western media and defines the

tenor of urban life like no other visual medium”.¹ However, when Breward published his study in 2003, interestingly as a part of *Oxford History of Art* series, he was referring to the West, predominantly British and American academia, when he argued that “in the normally conservative world of academia there is a significant increase of texts that have aimed to place the study of fashion alongside other popular phenomena over the past fifteen years”.

² The author’s statement is all but surprising, given the fact that in the timeframe he is referring to, which is the late 80s and the early 90s, Eastern Europe (the Iron Curtain forged exotic unknown) was facing a turbulent geopolitical disintegration. Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia were (violently) dissolving while other “independent” Eastern European countries were as well overthrowing communist governments as the Warsaw Pact was declared disbanded. Both during and after such regimes, little space was left for Eastern European scholars to devote themselves to a “decadent” and “bourgeois” study of fashion as art history in (post)communist and socialist regimes was / is dominated by painting as the primary art form, followed by sculpture and architecture as these media were / are suitable to transcend dominant

ideologies. Applied arts, crafts, and design were, when not considered as a leisure activity of feminine sensibility, which was the case with the beginning of the 20th century; purely utilitarian, which was the case upon the establishment of communist regimes.

Let us take Serbia as an exemplary case study. In 1925, a single event of *The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts* held in Paris affirmed many decorative and industrial practices (including fashion) as artistic and significantly echoed around the world, including the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes which had good ties with France. Even though its metropolises (Belgrade and Zagreb) were having their fair share of the roaring twenties, actual social and economic changes that could lead to the affirmation of applied arts in the Kingdom were only at the very beginning. In Belgrade, The School for Applied Art opened in 1937, while the Museum of Applied Art opened in 1950, 70 years after Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb. When it comes to the studies of art history that alongside anthropology, initiated the establishment of fashion studies in many western countries, The Chair for History of Art was founded in 1905 at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. In 1927, it was promoted into a History of Art Study Group, while

1 Breward 2003, p. 9.

2 Ibid.

following *The Decree* from 1963 once the study group then became the Department of History of Art. However, there is not yet a single course conducted at the Department that would examine history and theory of applied arts and design separately whereas a few courses at the Department of Anthropology examine fashion as an inevitable aspect of material culture rather than aesthetic and artistic phenomenon. After 2000, and especially in the last few years, an increase in exhibiting, and hence studying fashion in Eastern Europe, was noted as many of the countries entered European Union and followed its standards within the academia and museology. In 2000, after recovering from Milosevic's regime and the cataclysm of NATO bombing, Serbia greeted (symbolically speaking) the new millennia with the exhibit *Fashion in Belgrade 1918 – 1941* (Bojana Popovic, Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade). Exhibits of costume design, clerical and royal clothing, and to a certain extent some aspects of fashion, had indeed been organized in Serbia prior to 2000, but the mentioned exhibit was the first to offer a coherent museological presentation of fashion and read it without marginalizing it as inherent to other cultural phenomena.³ The desire

to simply be "in fashion" and get closer to the West by taking off the imposed veil of exoticism soon led to a gradual introduction of fashion within museums and academia.

Speaking of exoticism, the notion of the exotic other has always been attributed to Eastern Europe and the Balkans most dominantly, especially when it comes to fashion, or at least clothing in a broader sense. The reason for that simply lies in the fact that Eastern Europe has never had, at least not until recently, the production of haute couture to the extent that would institutionalize it or affirm it as a discipline of national (artistic) expression. Additionally, Eastern European folk costumes, traditional garments, and ritual masks have indeed been studied by scholars both from the East and the West due to which actual fashion (in moments when it has been produced) has never been branded as nothing but a consumer product. Given all aforementioned statements, the question is what happens when Eastern Europe responds to the western production of haute couture, and even more so, does that not just by occupying the media space, but also by appropriating the most renowned "cultural brand" or be it heritage of the Slavic world, which is Russian avant-garde? Through interdisciplinary approach by utilizing tools of both art and fashion history, the author aims to provide a potential

3 On the history of both fashion museology and musealization of fashion in Serbia see: Žarić, 2015

reading of Adidas tracksuits and to emphasize the importance of fashion studies on national and regional level.

Interpreting art history through fashion, interpreting fashion through art history

Russian avant-garde holds its rightful place on the map of global heritage. But when we say Russian avant-garde, the first thing that comes to our mind undoubtedly is Kazimir Malevich's infamous *Black Square*, followed by El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, and Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. All of these artworks were quite revolutionary and monumental in their intention to represent the new collective consciousness through painting, cinema, and sculpture/architecture and denounce the previous, Tsarist regime. While many artists embraced this idea by returning to primordial, spontaneous, barbaric, primitive, and spiritual, which led to the emergence of Neoprimitivism, Luchism, Cubofuturism, and Suprematism with Malevich as their guidance, the other group followed Tatlin's Constructivist principles by physically deconstructing the painting and turning to different design disciplines. Even though art history did not fully recognize these design disciplines until the recent affirmation of fashion and design studies, they were equally institutionalized mechanisms of

the new state through which designers could realize their ideas same as painters, sculptors, and architects could. As such, designers were able to express their creativity without altering the new ideology and, moreover, to align with the social revolution that required material production, industrialization, and labor. The so-called "technical and urban intelligence" that accentuated the material reality was the product of this revolution with Constructivists as its representatives.⁴ However, when we are talking about Constructivists and their relation to the subject matter (Adidas tracksuits) we must bear in mind that Constructivism itself, same as Russian avant-garde overall, had its phases characterized by different poetics.

Even though the first phase, to art history known as the pre-October or proto-Constructivist phase, was characterized by explorations of non-utilitarian, self-sufficient objects, it did lay the foundation for the phase to come, which favored utilitarian designs. In that sense, "Tatlin's concept of the culture of materials and the process of media transgression"⁵ from painting to sculpture inspired further media explorations, particularly the activity of Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova, Alexandra

⁴ Mijušković 1998.

⁵ Ibid.

Ekster, and Vera Mukhina among many within the field of textile design.

In his *Design for men's leisure suit* (1923/4), Tatlin executed practically what he will then put in words in 1929 in the text *The artist as a life-style organizer*. In his writing, the Russian Constructivist stated that “a human is an organic being, made of skeleton, nerves, and muscles, and that as such requires constructions (whether clothes or furniture) that are not concerned with the outside effect”⁶ but that are practical, inexpensive, and comfortable or, in other words, “body-friendly”. He criticized American and Viennese designs for prioritizing aestheticism and lacking the comfort, and he was not alone in denouncing the Western influences. Alexandra Ekster warned that designers must not be governed by the influences from the West because of different ideologies, and a renowned tsarist fashion and costume designer Nadezhda Lamanova abandoned opulent designs for the favor of the clothes for the masses. While Western haute couture served elitism and aestheticism, Constructivist designs aimed to serve utility, and the notion of creating functional, athletic, industrially reproducible fashions for the sake of genderless working class.

Furthermore, what concerned Tatlin and the others and in regard to their standpoint towards the West was something that Christopher Wilk in his study *The Healthy Body Culture* sees as “one of the defining aspects of modernism’s social agenda, which is the response to the interrelated problems of poor housing and poor health”.⁷ As the author finds, “the body continued to be used as a metaphor for the nation state, but it was also widely used to describe individual cultures or races, or even western society as a whole”.⁸ In between the two wars, the common vitality has been vastly endangered and all sides needed to regenerate, to improve and repair their bodies, both nationally and individually. Germany did so by pursuing the ideal of Greek beauty, France, the USA and quite the rest of Western allies by dancing along in their light flappers to the roaring twenties and Russia by building proletarian masses. In all of the cases, sport played crucial role in establishing the new visual identity. “Widespread participation in sport (whether Olympic or in a public park) and exercise saw men, and even more so women, dressing in both practical clothing for sport and in fashionable sportswear, which drew attention to their bodies.”⁹ What is even more important to underline is that “as with

6 Tatlin 2003, pp. 238–9.

7 Wilk 2006, p. 250.

8 Ibid., pp. 252–3.

9 Wilk 2006, pp. 252–3.

most aspects of cultural life, dance, and gymnastics, sport especially became politically charged”¹⁰ most dominantly in Italy and Germany due to fascism, and in Russia due to communism. On the relation between sport and design Wilk elaborates:

“In Soviet Russia, politics effected terminology: The term ‘physical culture’ was used rather than ‘sport’ to remove the competitive dimension, which was considered antithetical and, indeed, damaging to the universal values of physical culture, and to the main aim of exercise, the recreation of the masses. The association between politics and exercise was closer in Russia than anywhere else, due to its adoption as official state policy in a revolutionary society, and because leading designers were responsible for the design of dress and uniforms, and all of the printed material and publicity associated with the public events.”¹¹

It is in such environment that creative energies of designers like Rodchenko and Stepanova, nourished by Tatlin’s ideas, were able to propose an appropriate mode of clothing for the

new era, and moreover, influence the creation of the tracksuit. In her programmatic article from 1923, *The Dress of Our Times*, Varvara Stepanova stated that “there are only two types of contemporary clothes: production clothes and sport clothes” adding that “the sport clothes subordinates to the production clothes”.¹² Stepanova started to develop this idea one year prior to publishing the article, when she made a two-piece outfit, *Production Clothing*, designed by her husband, Alexander Rodchenko. “This piece enabled the designer to portray himself as a worker, dressed in an attire that would be (at least in its essence) familiar to the many, and which would be associated with the forward-looking technological agenda of Modernism. Such everyday clothing or workers’ uniforms also suggested the collective nature of Soviet society.”¹³

Adidas tracksuit, (un)intentional legacy of Russian avant-garde

While Gregory Babcock in his article *The Brief History of the Tracksuit* (Complex, 2015) argues that “the tracksuit was born in the mid-60s as the mid-century prosperity gave way to the space age,”¹⁴ it can be counter-argued that designs of Constructivists already developed

10 Ibid. p. 262.

11 Ibid.

12 Stepanova 2003, p. 232.

13 Green 2006, p. 93.

14 Babcock 2015,
<http://www.complex.com/style/2015/11/history-of-the-tracksuit>, (Accessed November 6, 2017.)

tracksuit in its “primitive” form. Combining synthetic nylon fabrics and a monochromatic pant and jacket set, the astronaut uniform has indeed shaped the tracksuit as we know it today. However, we must not overlook the fact that during the Cold War and the space race, the West and the East were competing in design as well, which led to the appropriation of foreign design productions from both sides. It is not a wonder then that the tracksuit, “patented” in the East, was created in the West, by Germans. As such, both astronaut uniforms and tracksuits can be seen as products of Constructivism, as with their form, function, and color they represent the ideal combination of production and sports clothes.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the mid-war era was characterized by sport obsession both in Russia and Germany with the difference that Germany could put its ideas into production while Constructivists couldn't due to the lack of resources in the difficult economic circumstances after the revolution. This obsession, with the Olympics especially, served as a fertile ground for Adolf (Adi) and Rudolf Dassler, members of the Nazi party, to develop their sports shoes business in Herzogenaurach, Germany. The success of the U.S. sprinter Jesse Owens who wore shoes at Berlin's 1936 Olympics by Adi Dassler and won four medals cemented the reputation of the

shoemaker internationally and in 1949 Adi established his firm, Adidas. In 1967, Adidas created the first tracksuit and further success of both the brand and athletes wearing it in a way persuaded the Soviet Union to hire Adidas to manufacture attires for Soviet athletes.

However, the USSR Communist party leaders banned the labels of the capitalist company on tracksuits of Soviet athletes. Traditional three stripes were limited to one red or white, depending on the base color of the attire, or in most cases, one red bordered by two white stripes. Such “bending” of the capitalist product perfectly aligns with ideas Stepanova presented in *The Dress of Our Times*, where she elaborated sports clothes in depth. As the designer stated, “the form of sport attire has to come out of various color combinations, as audience is unable to distinguish players by cut of their clothes, but rather by color”¹⁵. As ideal sport clothes, Stepanova proposes a three-colored garment with an emblem on chest (red star), two-colored garment with stripes, and one-color garment with the chest emblem. The USSR team's clothes (as of many other national teams) were (and still are) designed in such a manner. However, at the 1980 Olympics, they were not featuring the Adidas logo – only the state emblem. Given this fact, it is

¹⁵ Stepanova, p. 232.

interesting to see how far the “fear” of the west and the penetration of its iconography went by praising the body-friendly and environment-adjusted domestic design from the governmental bodies, just like Tatlin did. Regarding the visit of Helmut Schmidt, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union reported:

“I suggest giving Schmidt a passenger car Niva. The car features completely Soviet design and combines high cross-country ability and comfort of the interior. In Germany this car costs 16,000 marks, which is about 6,000 foreign currency rubles. Our wholesale price is 3,000 rubles. Schmidt has a cabin on the Kiel coast, where the roads are not very good. Schmidt’s wife drives a car and studies marsh plants. I think, in this context he will be very pleased with this gift.”¹⁶

Such statement further strengthens the fact that during the Soviet times Russians had very limited exposure to Western products and fashion, which gradually started to change after the

Olympics. Although the name of Adidas Company did not appear on clothing, shoes and sportswear, Western iconography – its material product – inscribed itself into the consciousness of the Soviet Union’s citizens, irreversibly altering their visual identity and becoming the most defining formative aspect of that identity fashion-wise.

“The first and only model of trainer available – blue with three white stripes and ochre sole – had a cult status for decades after it went out of fashion in the West. All over the USSR, Adidas trainers have become a prized artifact of status, connections or simply luck.”¹⁷ As if they were Constructivist designs – genderless and multi-practical, they were “so precious and rare that they could be worn to the theatre or a restaurant”.¹⁸ Small criminals, self-proclaimed entrepreneurs, former athletes-turned-bodyguards to criminal bosses, gopniks or be it *Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits* – seems that everyone is wearing them, just that now it is the iconic black tracksuit with white stripes rather than the blue one. Black and white were, in its essence, primary chromatic starting points of Russian avant-garde, followed by red blue, and yellow, all of which dominate Malevich’s

16 Sudakov 2010, http://www.pravdareport.com/history/20-07-2010/114288-moscow_olympics-0/ (accessed 6. 11. 2017).

17 Feodorova 2017, <http://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/8676/adidas-brand-russia-rubchinskiy> (accessed 6. 11. 2017).

18 Ibid.

works as well as the works of the other Russian avant-garde artists. In her text *In Constructivist Clothes* (1923) Alexandra Ekster proclaimed that “both production clothes and any other form of clothing intended for a wider usage have to be based on the simplest geometric shapes and primary colors having on mind various rhythms and dynamics of the human body”.¹⁹

These very principles on which Russian avant-garde was built on fashion designer Gosha Rubchinskiy resurrected (if they were ever dead?) in the present moment. Juxtaposing cultural references both from the East and the West, Rubchinskiy’s designs (most notably fall 2017 collection) confirm what this paper aimed to convey, which is the possibility of a new reading of art history. Through his collaboration with Adidas, the Russian designer combined, or rather collaged, emblematic aspects of Russian material culture: Malevich’s geometric shapes in primary colors from his *Suprematist Compositions* and Rodchenko’s *Production Clothing* with Adidas tracksuits.

In that sense Adidas tracksuits, despite their Western provenance, through Rubchinskiy collaboration with the brand completely coded themselves as an authentic aspect of material culture of Russia and Eastern Europe. The history itself comes a full circle, as Rubchinskiy’s

engagement for Adidas is regarding Russia being the host of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Three host cities, Kaliningrad, St Petersburg, and Moscow are as well places where Rubchinskiy is showcasing his collection. By incorporating Russian avant-garde into high fashion and turning that high fashion into Adidas – Russia’s collective (sub) conscious fashion code – Rubchinskiy reached Tatlin’s ideal of the artist as a life-style organizer. Moreover, Adidas tracksuits became more exemplary case of “Art in everyday life”, the crucial Constructivist idea, than any of actual Constructivist pieces and proposals.

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