

The Futurist Book, Tbilisi 1917-1919

At the beginning of 20th century the whole world became obsessed with a desire – conditioned by social-political-psychological factors – for renovation, destruction, and invention. This tendency could not be held back in art, an integral and necessary part of social life. Revolutionary character, the desire for the change, the search for the new, the creation of a new language of art - all are features of that period in art. In the process of searching for the new and different, modern art movements were changing each other; the most audacious ones wholly rejected the past way of the art and claimed to be creating an absolutely new artistic language. Such was Futurism: its “Slap in the Face of Social Taste” and its shattering and revolutionary character were not only merged with modern, mechanical, breathtakingly fast life, but even outstripped it and appeared in its vanguard. In this development, Russian Futurism was the most “aggressive” and “brave.” At the start of 1910 decade, Russian Futurists were already involved in avant-garde experiments that were clearly portrayed in the art of the Futurist book. From 1917 on, the Russians advanced their artistic creed together with their Georgian counterparts in Tbilisi. The Futurist books of 1917-1919 became one of the most important artistic events in Tbilisi’s cultural life. The Futurist brochures of that period are art objects and they present an example of the intercultural, international cooperation of artists and poets. The Tbilisi of that period fully opened the door to the new art movements. One group of avant-garde artists, founded by the brothers Ilya and Kirill Zdanevich, was notably strong proponent of Futurist ideas. Futurism opposed “boring academism” and tried to overcome the “immobility” in painting and literature. In the Manifesto of the Blue Horns, Paolo Iashvili wrote: “We want to transform Georgia into unlimited, dreaming city, where emerald flowering fields will be changed by the noise of living streets...” (P. Iashvili, 1916). So, the ideology of the Futurists was close to that of the Blue Horners, whose creations tended more toward symbolism than to any other movement. The general desire at the beginning of the 20th century for renovation and energetic activity appeared also quite topical for Georgian artistic circles.

At the end of 1910s there were Futurists among Russia's creative forces and intelligentsia who fled from the Russian Revolution and sought shelter in Tbilisi. Vasilli Kamenski, Alexei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Igor Terentiev and others, together with the brothers Zdanevich, became actively involved in Tbilisi's artistic life. Ilya Zdanevich is mentioned by almost all researchers as a Russian Futurist artist and poet. It is noteworthy that Zdanevich, whose father was a Pole and whose mother was a Georgian, was born in Tbilisi in 1894. In 1911 he moved to Russia where he became swept along by Russian avant-garde movements. Although in that period Zdanevich's art was feeding on Russian avant-garde ideas, his artistic and stylistic thinking blossomed in the Georgian cultural environment. He created his best works in this environment, i.e., after he returned to his motherland (in 1918-1921). Georgian artistic traditions and art were very important for him. Suffice it to say that Zdanevich, together with Mikhail Le Dantue, was the first to discover the creative works of the self-taught Georgian artist Niko Pirosmiani, and spared no efforts to collect and save his works. Zdanevich was actively involved in all the events of Georgian art of the period; it should be mentioned, however, that interculturalism and striving to remove boundaries between various kinds of art was generally common for avant-gardists of that period, but even when moving toward interculturalism they were always seeking "purely ethnic and zoomorphic roots" (<http://cotati.sjsu.edu/spoetry/folder6/ng64.html>) on which they wished to found their own "transnational" art.

Ilya Zdanevich's art also fed on Marinetti's Futurism. Experiments with the Italian Futurist language known as "*Parole Libera*," or "Free Words," served as a basis for Zdanevich's poetic creations, where the "mimic thinking of the words is more important than the meaning they are transmitting." In his creative activities he was trying to revive a poetic language, and as he has written himself he dreamed to bring poetry to "*zaum* (senselessness) and abstraction." Marinetti's book *Les mots en liberté futurists* (The Futurist Words-In-Freedom) (1919) was the result of 15 years' research by the author on the renovation of poetic and literary language. The book included several typographic compositions on folded sheets of paper – typed and handwritten letters of varied size and styles, upside-down letters, letters heading in different directions, etc.

are all used there. Iliadz's¹ Futurist compositions were often built on similar principles. For example, his *Asiol Na Prakat* (Donkey for Hire) from the miscellany in honor of the actress Sofia Melnikova shows evident contact with Marinetti's creations, despite essential differences.

Russian Futurism, together with Italian Futurism, was the most important event in the world of Modernist Art. In Russia, the term "Futurism" was used from 1911, when a group of avant-gardists named themselves Ego-Futurists. Later they were replaced by the "Hylea" group, a more radical literary movement which developed Cubo-Futurist artistic ideas. Representatives of that group were Velimir Khlebnikov, the so-called "Father of Russian Futurism," who worked out the theoretical foundations for Zaum poetry, and Alexei Kruchenykh who put Khlebnikov's artistic ideas into practice. Khlebnikov's Zaum² tended to use the Russian language, stripped of any Western influences and to create a pure Russian language free from any meaning and any illusory elements; it would be expressed only by plastic sound. For that reason Kruchenykh returned to non-rational, primitive language, where the words had no meaning and the poetic system was built on irregularity and diversity. Technically it was expressed by chopping up the words, using their separate fractions, by unconscious conjunction of different words, by playing with half words, and by the lack of any punctuation and so on. Also found here was the "anarchist typographic experiment," i.e., when the same text included letters of different fonts and point sizes, small and capital letters included in the same word, typed letters followed by handwritten ones, and all the poems marked by simplicity and rough primitivism from the viewpoint of visual-textual format and its artistic representation. Kruchenykh himself attributed this kind of attitude to "the influence of African Art" (<http://cotati.sjsu.edu/spoetry/folder6/ng64.html>) though Russian Futurism often appealed to

¹ Ilya Zdanevich's pseudonym after his flight to Paris

² "The so-called "Zaum" implies words the word empty of any meaning and content. The best Georgian equivalent might be "litoni" ... as this word purely comes out of Russian Futurism and as it is a discovery of this school, we use it in Russian..." (L. Asatiani, 1928, 21)

Lubok³ art traditions. Russian Futurist poetry was close to Dadaism in its artistic and theoretical attitudes.

Although Russian Futurism was born out Italian Futurism, the difference in between them was quite essential. Russian Futurism is often described by the term Cubo-Futurism, which already speaks about that difference; in fact, Russian Futurism was nourished by both Futurist artistic means and Cubism. The two sources were almost equally joined for Russian Cubo-Futurism created a synthesis of visual and verbal languages, which was alien to Italian Futurism. From the very beginning, Italian Futurism rejected all previous artistic movements; moreover, it denied cubist forms and the visual movement of those forms. Its strongest imprint was on establishment of a new language in poetry, in which a new typographical concept was based, and which meant the destruction of the existing syntaxes of literature. In examining Italian Futurist books it is obvious that the main accent is on poetic or literary novelty and change, and this is reflected in typographic experiments as well. A good example of this is Francesco Cangiullo's Futurist book *Caffè-Concerto - Alfabeto a sorpresa (Café-Chantant - Surprising Alphabet)*, completed in 1916 and printed in 1919. The author expressed his linguistic searching with regard to letters; it drew upon typographical experiments, where Cangiullo worked by means of choosing different shapes of letters and representing the diversities of those shapes – sometimes he presented single letters, sometimes a union of letters. Cangiullo created elegant theatrical images and his typographic design present a unique example of the artist's Futurist-Dadaist vision. As for the Russian Futurist book, Maurizio Scudiero stated that it originated from "...the philosophy from which the Russian avant-garde was born. This ideology was characterized by the revival of the Russian cultural heritage... as a mystical image linking them [i.e., Futurists] to their roots, and a state of closure toward the West, which was seen as potentially threatening to their old traditions" (M. Scudiero, 1986) while those traditions were refused by Marinetti and Italian Futurism.

³ a variety of Russian folk art such as prints in woodcut characterized by simple graphics and narratives derived from oral and written folklore

The freedom and breaking of academic frames typical of Futurism in general were well reflected in the art of design of Futurist books first in Russia and then in Tbilisi. As we have already mentioned, Ilya Zdanevich, who played an important role in the development of Georgian avant-garde, and particularly in the development of Futurism, was one of the founders of the organization "41 Degrees," and was also a very active member of it. He is also considered to be the founder of "Georgian Dadaism" in 1917-1921. Though Dada itself was unknown in Georgia until 1920, Ilya Zdanevich's radical typographical experiments conducted in the publications of "41 Degrees" provide the basis for discussion of Dadaism in Tbilisi.⁴

The publishing activity of the "41 Degrees" group was a very interesting phenomenon in Tbilisi's cultural life. Under the leadership and participation of Kruchenykh, Terentiev, Zdanevich and Valishevski, the organization published many interesting books through various publishing houses. These were second editions (1917-1918) of the books published in St Petersburg and Moscow in 1912-1913, namely: *Uchites, Khudogi, Ojirenie Roz,* and *Malokholia v Kapote* by Khruchenykh; *O Sploshnim Neprilichii* by Terentiev; and *Janko – Krul Albanski* by I. Zdanevich; in 1919 the group published *Milliork* and *Lakirovannoe Triko* by Kruchenykh, *Record Nejnosti* by Terentiev, *Ostrof Paskhi,* *Zga Jakobi* by Zdanevich and other works. . . . The books were issued in very small editions (approximately 50-60 copies).

The books of this new type were issued in the form of brochures; they were lithographed, and the texts were often written handwritten by the artists or authors themselves. In these books the narrative character of the illustrations was moved to the background and the major role was played by their plastic and graphic expression. The

⁴ The abovementioned play (Dra) of Ilya Zdanevich "Donkey for Hire" from "The Miscellany in Honor of the Actress Sofia Melnikova" is the best example of "Zaumni" poetry, where the author goes to extreme lengths to achieve a coincidence of poetic sound and its artistic representation. The artist creates a special form of graphic image, where the words for simultaneous reading are combined together (as in musical partiture for the instruments and voices for being sounded in unison). Here the words and the parts of the words (for simultaneous reading) are written one above other and include capital letters within the words, so that they are part of the words. The chopped-up words and parts of the words for simultaneous reading and their strange sounds create a peculiar verbal-musical and artistic expressiveness, which is close to Dadaist absurdity and to the Dadaists' extreme artistic experiments.

Zaum language of Futurist poetry was built on the play of words, while the words themselves had no meaning and improvisation was the main tool. Actually, "*Futurist book*" was an experiment, probing the ways to create new art and for this reason the Futurists were playing with words and artistic forms. Futurist artists and poets considered that a handwritten text could express the character of the poetry and that that mood was lost in simply printed verses. To overcome the "boring straightforwardness" of monotonous lines of printed words members of "41 Degrees" were using various fonts, different-sized letters and handwritten texts, where the words and illustrations often are interlaced, creating united artistic-and-plastic pictures. Sometimes they used wall-paper instead of writing paper. The appearance of the books was characterized by an emphasized primitivism; the covers were made of cardboard, the drawings were hand-made, and the whole book was characterized by simplicity in which one could find a kind of effortless and artistic-aesthetic entity.

It is noteworthy that Futurist books published in Tbilisi, though sticking to Russian Futurist book traditions, still had their own peculiarities – these books are versatile from the viewpoint of the artistic approaches taken. In other words, the different poetic samples were processed in particular ways and in every individual case the artistic solution was specific. From this viewpoint, we can distinguish between brochures of several types: those which contained only a text, and thus letters and words, worked through most of the manipulations. Presented in this form, the text was never stripped of versatility and originality. Often in such text letters resembled drawings, which was particularly true when the letters were handwritten and were perceived as live organisms, a plastic image of a word; in other words, the entire text was alive and mobile. There were brochures in which the texts and drawings created a united integrated form, and it was nearly impossible to separate the text and drawings from each other. In such cases we are dealing with a unified graphic concept in which words, letters and drawings represented the visual and plastic expression of a poetic work. In another type of brochure the text and drawings were more or less separated; in other words, the images illustrating the text were predominantly included on separate

pages, but even though they were perceived as a continuation of a text and the graphic decoration of the book.

It might be mentioned that in the books printed in Tbilisi, Georgian themes were revealed. The authors sometimes used Georgian words in the texts; in some cases they used Georgian names, and in one brochure there even appeared an artistic representation of the map of Tbilisi (*Jelezobetonnia poemi*, Kamenskii, Kruchenykh and K. Zdanevich, Tbilisi 1918).

The finale of the Futurist books was a collection of works issued in Tbilisi in September 1919, dedicated to the actress Sofia Melnikova. This book became an established anthology of Futurist poetry and art. The book contained samples of Russian, Armenian, and Georgian poetry. The illustrations were printed on separate sheets and then bound into a collection. In the end of the book was a list of speeches and articles read in artistic cafe “Fantastic Tavern” in 1917, 1918, 1919. This miscellany mainly is distinguished by the fact that we are dealing with union of poets: Russian, Kruchenykh, Igor Terentiev, Tatiana Vechorka and Nina Vasilieva; Georgian, Ilya Zdanevich, Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili and Grigol Robakidze; Armenian Kara Darvish and the Ukrainian Vasili Katanian. A union of artists also; Georgian, Kirill Zdanevich, Lado Gudiashvili; Polish, Ziga Valishevski and Kolau Cherniavski; Armenian Alexander Bashbeuk Melikov; Russian, Natalia Goncharova and Igor Terentiev; as well as others. The special characteristic of this book is that it is a significant achievement not only in Georgian and Russian but also in European contemporary graphic art as well.

The book united the works of the poets of various nationalities in the way that the entire collection was perceived as a unified artistic organism. Characteristic of such a synthesis is the fact that the peculiarities of various textual and artistic solutions only make the book more versatile, “revives” the book, making its structure and architectonics more mobile and flexible, and the book itself is represented as a visual art object. It is also noteworthy that poetic works written in various languages were illustrated by the artists of different nationalities, for example, Kirill Zdanevich illustrated Nina Vasilieva’s poem; Ziga Valishevski illustrated Tatiana Vechorka’s;

Kiune that of Gordeev; Ilya Zdanevich and Natalia Goncharova that of Ilya Zdanevich; Ziga Valishevski that of Kara Darvish and Katanian; Kirill Zdanevich and Bajbeuk-Melikov that of Kruchenykh; Lado Gudiashvili that of Grigol Robakidze; Terentiev that of Titsian Tabidze and Paolo Iashvili; Terentiev illustrated his own poems; Bajbeuk-Melikov that of Alexander Chachikov; Mikheil Kalashnikov that of Kolau Cherniavski and Kirill Zdanevich that of Grigol Shaikevich. In summary, here again is the certain synthesis and unity of poetry and drawing, bearing different national features.

The literary and artistic aspects of this book are of great interest as well. From the viewpoint of poetic language, the samples of Russian poetry have more expressed signs of Futurism than do the Georgian ones. The Georgian poetic works tend more toward symbolism. Their contextual aspect is also stronger, the imagery and visual expression are achieved mainly through words and their logical links with more pronounced contents and Futurist-Dadaist absurdity is absent. It should also be mentioned that the words are not “chopped” and the letters are of the same size, printed in one font. In this way the authors of this collection wished to stress the striving of the Georgian poets toward symbolic thinking and picturesqueness. However, notwithstanding such approaches, the Georgian poetic works were perfectly integrated with the general body of the book and, as has already been mentioned, even contributed to its variety. One can say that “Sofia Melnikova’s Miscellany” is a unique phenomenon in the history of the art of the Futurist book, where poetic works of absolutely different artistic styles and varied artistic forms alternated with each other and combined in one integral unity.

Such intensive creative activities of the Futurists left their impact on Georgian art of that time. There were individual artists and poets who rather actively were trying themselves in this direction of avant-garde art. I. Gamrekeli (“Portrait of Lev Trotsky,” “Portrait of Lenin”), M. Gotsiridze (“Dance”), Z. Valishevski (“Compositions for the Miscellany in Honor of Sofia Melnikova”), B. Gordeziani (“Revolution”) and others were carried out by in the style of Futurist art. Some of the artists remained true to this passion and the quest for Futurism for rather a long time – up to the middle of the 1930s, though it was a temporary event continuing through a specific period. Being of a

fragmentary nature, Futurism failed to develop into a more important phenomenon in Georgian art because of certain objective historical circumstances (namely, the intervention of the Soviet army in independent Georgia and because of the social-political dictates of the Soviet state and its pressure on art).

Of interest also is the fact that for a while the artistic processes that started at the beginning of the century continued under their own momentum, till the end of the 1920s. In 1924, Georgian writers, poets and artists, like their Russian colleagues, issued the Futurist-Dadaist almanac *H₂SO₄*. Among the editors were Beno Gordeziani, Akaki Beliashvili, Simon Chikovani, Irakli Gamrekeli, Nikoloz Shengelaia, Shalva Alkhazishvili and others. This was one more attempt to break through the canonical frames of literature, poetry and art and create a new artistic “reality” where experiments and play had leading roles, while artistic language shifted from Futurism to Dada, where the authors’ creative thoughts were hidden behind nearly childish primitivism and, at the first sight, behind disordered, absurd artistic images.

The phenomenon of the Futurist book in Tbilisi was also very important for the further development of the Russian Futurist book, which became more diverse due to the involvement of local artistic forces in the abovementioned processes. The Futurist book gained a more multicultural and multinational character that was appropriate for the cosmopolitan nature of the ideology of Futuristic philosophy.

The Tbilisi Futurist book is an important achievement in book design art. Its compounding components, such as text (which itself became an artistic element due to above-described attitude, when each letter, segment of the word or whole word had graphical-representational meaning) or artistic image/drawing, (which was an integral part of the text and was included in its artistic-aesthetic body), together create the whole inseparable representational system of the book.

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