For those living in Stockholm, Russia has come much closer during the last decade or so. Walking the streets of the Swedish capital you hear Russian spoken everywhere. And contemporary Russian artists are once again requested participants in the Western art scene.

Not that we have returned to the heyday of the 1910s and 1920s, when Russian culture occupied a central position in the Western world. But the increasing exchange between former East and West will, it is hoped, from an art historical point of view, lead to a broader and richer understanding of important parts of art history. I am thinking in particular of socialist realism and post-Stalinist art, which has been almost completely omitted from Western art history.

Since Mikhail Matiushin (1861–1934) was not one of those who emigrated in the early 1920s, or among those who exhibited and sold their art in Western Europe before Stalin closed the borders, he has been excluded from the surveys of modernism. It is mainly those of the Russian avant-garde who were included in the most prominent collections in the USA, France, Holland and Germany who have been canonized (i.e. Malevich, Kandinsky, El Lissitzky, Larionov and Goncharova). This gives us quite a distorted view of the art in the Soviet Union, as well as of the avant-garde in the 1920s. Hence Margareta Tillberg’s dissertation, Coloured Universe and the Russian Avant-Garde: Matiushin on Colour Vision in Stalin’s Russia 1932, not only adds another name to the list of neglected artists, but also makes an important contribution.
to the discourse on twentieth-century art, since it displaces positions in the Russian art world of the 1910s and 1920s.

Today, Matiushin is probably best known as one of the creators of the futuristic opera Victory of the Sun in 1913, and maybe, to a lesser extent, as a professor at Svomas and GINKhUK. It is worth reminding the reader that he was also an excellent violinist, composer and a central person in the cultural world in St. Petersburg in the early twentieth century. The aspect of Matiushin that is emphasized in Tillberg’s dissertation is yet another of his many faces: the theorist and researcher.

Matiushin and his second wife, Elena Guro, were among the first artists to connect with art the discourses concerning the fourth dimension. In 1912 Matiushin and Malevich met and became friends. They developed a common interest in the artistic possibilities of the new theories concerning higher dimensions, although their results were rather different. While Malevich tried to represent higher dimensions, Matiushin’s goal was to gain access to them, through visual experiments and training.

In a kind of review in 1913, Matiushin merged the ideas expressed by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in Du Cubisme with pseudoscientific speculations about the fourth dimension by Pëtr Uspenskii. In that same year Guro died and Matiushin changed his life. He gave up being a professional musician and focused on art and theory. After the October revolution of 1917, new possibilities occurred for the so-called avant-garde. In the vacuum following the old regime and its artistic associates, avant-garde artists were put into leading posts at the museums and art schools. In this way Matiushin had the opportunity to carry out experiments concerning his theory about higher dimensions, and the possibilities for mankind to experience them through training in »extended vision«, at institutions such as Svomas and GINKhUK. The present situation for mankind was depressing, according to Matiushin, but just round the corner a new colorful world was waiting. In 1926 he wrote:

_The majority of people see only the small bit in front of them, hardly grasping anything else, and almost always running the eye from a small sector of length to a small sector of width while staying within a narrow corridor. And the possessor of this corridor, seemingly never turning around, will always see one and a half dimensions thinking that he is seeing three. And even such a little of the visible world is perceived terribly fractionally, the parts eternally occupying us and distracting us from the whole… One must learn to grasp the visible widely with the eyes as if they were hands and, as it were, to run the eyes behind a volume… I suggest that during all the experiments and exercises combining further ahead and behind, you don’t remember, but learn to see with the lower back of the head, the parietal bone, the temple and even the soles of the feet, just as the Indian yogis learn to breathe not only with their lungs but with all parts of the body._

1 The goal was to widen the visual angle of man to a full 360°. Albert Benois has described how he saw Matiushin and his students at GINKhUK sitting with their backs to the Neva River while painting it. Benois was convinced he had met a group of lunatics. 2 In his research Matiushin was especially interested in afterimages as a way to grasp the nature of higher dimensions – and to find a way to experience them. He was interested in not only the first complementary color that occurs but also changes in the afterimage that come about after a longer time. Another of Matiushin’s beliefs was that forms create afterimages in similar ways to colors, i.e. complementary forms,
and that there are connections between colors and forms. Through painstaking experiments, often carried out during quite difficult circumstances, especially during the late 1920s and early 1930s when Stalin decreased the freedom of movement for the avant-garde, color relations and afterimages were studied by Matiushin and his assistants.

The cover of Tillberg’s dissertation reminds me of Soviet postcards, with pale colors, but its significance is much greater. It is built on the color charts that Matiushin and his staff (the siblings Maria, Ksenia, Boris and Georgii Ender, and Nikolai Grinberg) developed during the 1920s, and which are included in »The Laws Governing the Variability of Color Combinations«, 1932. The fact that it was published at all, though there were only 400 copies, is remarkable. It is one of the last materializations of the ideas of the Soviet avant-garde. Matiushin probably had to print it in a somewhat adjusted form to get it through the censorship. But its content is nevertheless astonishing and opposes the official ideology (the diamat).

Even if Matiushin’s theories about color and other dimensions did not fit into the Stalinist ideology, another aspect of his work surely did: Just like leading Bolsheviks he believed in the possibilities to create a New Man. Just like Lysenko, Matiushin thought that acquired characteristics could be inherited by later generations. Maybe we should be grateful that Matiushin did not get any support from Stalin for his theories. Nightmarish pictures of school-children training to see through their feet and necks come to mind.

I have mentioned Guro several times in this text. She is very much present in Tillberg’s dissertation, and it seems as if Guro was the driving force behind both Matiushin and Tillberg. The author has been working on Matiushin and Guro since 1990, and she has published several essays and articles about them. It seems that her main interest, from the beginning, was Guro. That is also evident in the dissertation. One of its theories is that it is Guro who was the source of Matiushin’s fascination with color effects. However I do not feel fully convinced that Guro had such a total and long-lasting influence on her husband. Matiushin seems to have been quite open-minded, creative and quick at grasping new ideas. From a methodological point of view I am dissatisfied with having a main agent of the story acting in the shadows. According to Tillberg:

[t]he person who really was a source of inspiration for Matiushin was Elen Guro. Although Guro died in 1913, as far back as nineteen years before Laws was published, her impact and influence on Matiushin’s colour theory was crucial. But, because of her premature death at the age of thirty-six, she did not realize all her ideas on cross-modalities and colour. Instead it was Matiushin who used her notebooks, sketches and diaries as constant sources of inspiration in his work on colour and colour theory.3

This is in no way qualified in the dissertation. Tillberg’s footnote relates to her own, unpublished, research. If Guro is as important as suggested in the quotation, this ought to have been elaborated further in the text. I hope that Tillberg will have the opportunity to discuss Guro’s influence on Matiushin at greater length in a future study.

Another thing that surprises me is that Tillberg does not use the visual material more. There are a lot of paintings, drawings and sculptures from Matiushin’s studio(s) that are probably at least as interesting to investigate as his textual remains, and perhaps should be related to these and vice versa, in particular because Tillberg states that his color concept
visually represents his philosophy. I suspect that Tillberg as an art historian has a lot more to say about his art and other visual remains, but in the dissertation they are left out of the limelight.

However, my objections, questions and other remarks should not be understood as severe criticism. On the contrary, I would like to emphasize what I said at the beginning. This is an important contribution to twentieth-century art history in general, and particularly to its Russian field. I hope that Tillberg will have the opportunity to continue her research, and to have it published in widely distributed forms. As one result of reading the dissertation I am really longing for a big exhibition of Matiushin’s work.

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Endnotes
1. Mikhail Matiushin, »An Artist’s Experience of the New Space«, The Structurist, 1975/76, no. 15/16 p 75 (pp 74-77).
3. Tillberg p 205.