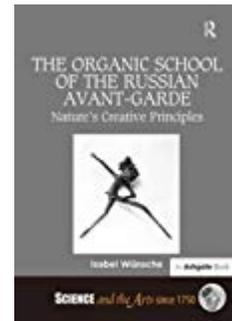


Isabel Wünsche. *The Organic School of the Russian Avant-garde: Nature's Creative Principles.* Science and the Arts since 1750 Series. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. 242 pp. \$104.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4724-3269-8.



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In her book, Isabel Wünsche provides a systematic overview of what has become known as the “organic school” within the Russian avant-garde. Formed in St. Petersburg in the first and second decades of the twentieth century around a group of artists that included Nikolai Kulbin, Elena Guro, Mikhail Matiushin, and Volde-mars Matvejs, it propagated a harmonious view of the world as an organic system, in which the relations between objects could be intuited with the help of the senses. As one of the first publications in English about a phenomenon that has been known in Russia for close to a century, the book is a welcome addition to a reading list of anyone who is interested in the history of the avant-garde and Russian culture in general.

The book is arranged chronologically around individual artists representative of the organic school, with periodic explanations of theoretical sources interspersed throughout the text. The introductory chapter provides a survey of basic terms and historical contexts operating in the book, such as “the Russian avant-garde”; “the organic school”; “biocentrism”; “organicism”; “modernist discourse”; and the Union of Youth, an artistic organization formed in St. Petersburg in 1910 and considered to be a cradle of the school. In the introduction, the author formulates her argument as a counterpoint to the

prevalent view of the Russian avant-garde as formed by the “Cubist-Constructivist tradition” (p. 1). Here one of the major strengths of the book becomes evident—a comprehensive up-to-date bibliography of English-, Russian-, and German-language publications relating to various aspects of the author’s treatment of the subject.

The chapter “Nature as the Artist’s Model” presents a summary of diverse scientific and philosophical writings at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries that facilitated artists’ positioning of nature as a creative principle in art. Here the author introduces the “organic perspective” in opposition to the “analytical-reductionist” one as a “holistic” way to view the world as absolute, eternal, and whole, every part of which is linked to another. In this chapter we learn that “organic approach” and “holistic interpretation of the world” often carry with them attempts to “reach beyond logic ... for forms and sensations found in the realm of the subconscious, including empathy, creative intuition, meditation, and mystical experience” (p. 14). This statement, although correct, is a sign of a possible weakness within the structure of Wünsche’s argument, because she does not explain in what way the widely varying “forms and sensations” she lists may belong to the same psychic realm: empathy, for example, may not

necessarily have much in common with either the subconscious, mystical experience, or meditation. This point may be overlooked as insignificant, but further in the text, the author's tendency to a synthetic style of presentation leads her to bring under the same heading of organicism such different artists as Matiushin, Kazimir Malevich, Pavel Filonov, and Vladimir Tatlin without emphasizing substantial differences in their approaches or explaining a meaning of logical contradictions in these artists' pronouncements. For example, the author quotes Malevich as saying "evolution and revolution in art have the same aim, which is to arrive at a unity of creation—the formation of signs instead of the repetition of nature" (p. 20). This striking but confusing statement appears to contradict Malevich's allegiance to the organic school and emphasizes instead his belonging to the camp of "analysts-reductionists." Wünsche, however, does not unpack it but leaves the reader wondering about Malevich's own ambivalent position in relation to either organic or cubist trends. Occasional overarching formulations made by the author alternate with helpful research that brings in new ideas and interpretations. For example, in the paragraph directly following her statement about the subconscious, Wünsche quotes an architectural historian, Caroline van Eck, who points to the metaphor as the engine driving artistic imagination by defining organicism as the "attempt to imitate nature—not to turn out a copy or a reproduction, but rather to create the illusion of life" (ibid.).

References to the history of the organic metaphor in the philosophy of romanticism follow with a mention of developments in biology and natural sciences, which rejected Cartesian dualism of mind and matter and emphasized interconnectedness of functions of a biological organism and the surrounding world. A selective list of philosophers and scientists who supported such a view follows, with an argument that the artists and theoreticians of the St. Petersburg avant-garde, such as Kulbin, Filonov, Matiushin, Olga Rozanova, and Malevich himself, were influenced by the ideas of organicism as developed in the writings of "Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, Gustav Theodor Fechner and Wilhelm Wundt, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson," among others (p. 16). It is helpful to have the connection to the intellectual influences of the time, and the author explains well the ways in which innovative scientific theories, such as Darwinism, may have influenced the artists. However, her message about extensive scientific influences coming mostly from the West is counterposed by a section that describes the philosophy

of a Russian mystic, Petr Ouspensky, as one of the major influences for the organic school. Wünsche connects Ouspensky's ideas expressed in his treatise *The Fourth Dimension: An Experiment in the Examination of the Realm of the Immeasurable* (1909) to holistic ideals of spiritual renewal and cosmic consciousness, which were part and parcel of the avant-garde's worldview. In her text, however, Wünsche does not reconcile differences between the Darwinist evolution and a mystic "fourth dimension" within the organic paradigm; nowhere does she say that different aspects of these theories or discourses around them were used by artists as tropes for generating their own interpretations through theoretical and visual experimentation.

Wünsche does an excellent job of outlining the history of the organic school, beginning with a description of the Polish painter Jan Ciagliński's role in its formation. Ciagliński was a popular teacher; he opened a studio in St. Petersburg in 1885 and was later elected to the Art Academy. Among his students were the artists who later formed the core of the organic school, such as Guro, Filonov, Matiushin, and Matvejs. Introduction of Ciagliński's name into the discourse of English-language art history is a significant contribution, since he has been virtually unknown. Although Kulbin and Guro are better known to most readers, chapters devoted to these two key representatives of the organic school still bring in new information. For example, it has long been known that Kulbin's ideas played a pivotal role in influencing the Union of Youth artists, but Wünsche examines them systematically. Her study of Kulbin's scientific and psychological writings contributes greatly to our understanding of his ideas about sensory perception and their relation to art. Most important is the author's emphasis on Kulbin's psycho-physiological bent. Trained as a medical doctor, he became convinced that "the work of art ... is a symbol ... a reflection of the artist's subjective experience of the world and perception of nature and an expression of the artist's psyche" (p. 45).

The chapter on Matiushin is equally superb, giving us a detailed account of the artist's training in Ciagliński's studio, his relationships with Kulbin and Guro, and his elaboration of the concept of organic culture. A section on Matiushin's visualization of universal space is especially revealing, because it demarcates in great detail esoteric roots of his thinking and its difference from the approach of someone like Tatlin, for example. Apparently, Matiushin propagated Platonic understanding of vision, when he makes such pronouncements as: "The power of visualization is not limited by the power of vision. We

see objects distorted, but we know them as they are” (p. 100). Matiushin’s unwavering emphasis on vision and on the expansion of its possibilities into the realm of intuition and spiritual knowledge turned his theory of “organic culture” into a comprehensive albeit esoteric epistemology. Working alongside Malevich at the Museum of Artistic Culture in Petrograd (MKhK) and later at the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK), Matiushin elaborated his ideas about virtually unlimited possibilities of extended viewing, which was used by Malevich in his presentations of Russian art abroad.

While the author outlines clearly the tenets of the organic school under Matiushin’s leadership, extending it into the foundation of Vladimir Sterligov’s group in post-war Leningrad, her conceptualization of Tatlin’s place within the history of this school is not entirely convincing. Despite her detailed overview of the concept of *fak-*

tura in the history of the avant-garde, she still categorizes as “abstraction” the manifestation of this phenomenon in Tatlin’s reliefs and three-dimensional constructions (p. 153). It seems, however, that Tatlin made every effort to differentiate his approach of “material culture” from that of the “organic culture” created by Matiushin and supported by Malevich not only by emphasizing touch instead of vision but also by turning his attention to practical construction of things for everyday use instead of the elaboration of scientifically sounding theories. It is also well known that he violently argued with Malevich to the point of leaving GINKhUK for Kiev in 1926 to escape his nemesis. This difference within the organic metaphor may be a good subject for another book. For now, Wünsche made an important step in outlining historical foundations of the organic school for an English-speaking reader.

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