Iliazd: A Meta-Biography of a Modernist is a monographic study by scholar, critic, and theorist Johanna Drucker whose work has long been addressing visual culture and the processes of knowledge production. Drucker is also a practitioner of artists’ books and has written extensively on modernism. Besides covering the career of Iliia Zdanevich (1894-1975), this monograph revisits the very form of biography by combining the narrative with the story of the study conducted by the author. Zdanevich was an artist, poet, and editor of Polish-Georgian descent who was born in Tbilisi under the rule of the Russian Empire. He was part of the futurist environment in Russia during his formative years and was also acknowledged as an innovative editor and pioneer of artists’ books in France, where he worked most of his life. His work transcended linguistic and geographic boundaries, but those same boundaries have initially limited the impact of his legacy. There are few surveys that combine equal expertise regarding his work in the Russian period and his career as editor, since they often fall under the purview of different academic fields. In recent years, there has been a surge in the scholarship about Zdanevich, also known as Iliazd, and the book by Drucker is a valuable contribution to the debate on both his work and suitable methodologies to be applied in biographical studies of artists. Notably, it embraces the entire lifespan of the artist and introduces archival materials alongside an original and personal perspective on the subject.

The structure of the book is loosely chronological with numerous flashbacks: alongside a comprehensive narrative of Zdanevich’s life and oeuvre, we are concurrently familiarized with how Drucker’s research project originated and proceeded. While the ultimate aim of the volume seems to be to embrace a rekindled form of biography, the book contextualizes various links that Iliazd's work had with major cultural figures and events across the modernist horizon. This meta-structure makes the volume very engaging.

In the introductory chapter, the author dwells on how the project originated through a personal encounter with the widow of the artist, Hélène Douard Zdanevich. It features Drucker's recollections of their Paris apartment on Rue Mazarine where Drucker, by the invitation of Hélène, conducted a large part of her research of his archive and the artworks gifted to him by fellow artists. We learn that Drucker's initial interest arose from Iliazd's experimental books. His talent in this domain unfolds in vivid descriptions highlighting the formal elements. As Françoise Le Gris-Bergmann
in the catalog of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), *Iliazd and the Illustrated Book* (1987), Drucker insists on their theatrical qualities in terms of design and layout.[1] According to her, his early poetry pieces, the five "dra" plays (experimental dramas) from the 1910s and early 1920s, were “a guiding metaphor for the theatrical staging of all his books” (p. 17). What distinguishes this study, however, is that it offers an in-depth understanding of the technical and editorial side of his book projects and traces how he acquired the skills necessary for the level he achieved toward his mature years. The books he produced between 1951 and 1974 are the focus of the monograph. Drucker compares his formal effort in typography to the endeavors of modern painters on the canvas.

The beginning of the book, encompassing Zdanevich’s youth before his arrival in Paris, explores his biographical strategies, acknowledging everyday circumstances and economic constraints. Every section is accompanied by the author’s thoughts on the very forms and elements of biography as a category of knowledge. Often, Drucker reflects on how the absence of a documentary base should not bring a scholar to the conclusion that certain events in the life of the artistic personality under scrutiny did not take place (for example, pp. 24, 142). She reiterates how the "argument from silence" might prove a fallacy in historical research, in the framework of both this project and the biographical genre overall. Furthermore, the cautious approach she picks gives an opportunity to critically look at the practices of self-mythologization, so common among the artists of the twentieth century.

The account regarding his role in the cubo-futurist environment in Russia is specific. It delves into Zdanevich’s connection to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s ideas, delineating it from his early fascination, to more critical reading in the years when he worked with Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, and finally to his disappointment after the visit of the Italian to Russia. Drucker traces how the prerevolutionary avant-garde environment and Zdanevich’s visual references, such as the illustrations of Goncharova, “might have had an influence on Iliazd’s understanding of the book as a site of intertextual play, rather than as a static presentation” (p. 41). Drucker stresses how unique the approach to the book in the futurist milieu was, mostly because it saw “artists-writers engaged with making books themselves” (p. 52). All that made Zdanevich understand the book not as a pure means but as an artistic form in its own right.

The establishment of the artistic collective and publishing enterprise 41°, which alluded to a series of personal and universal symbolic meanings, such as the latitude of Iliazd’s place of birth and body temperature in Celsius that marks the fever on the edge of delirium, was a fundamental stage for Iliazd in terms of developing his editorial skills. As Drucker affirms, at that point, “he began to think and write with an understanding of letterpress” (p. 68). During his return to Georgia in 1917-19, he experimented a lot, not the least due to encouragement from Aleksei Kruchenykh, as suggested by the author. During those years, Iliazd led numerous lectures and other events, in an innovative way exploring the boundaries of language. Drucker says that in his *zaum*, the artist-poet relied on folklore-derived elements due to the influence of both Goncharova and a naive Georgian painter, Niko Pirosmani, whose work he discovered in his younger days. However, Drucker also stresses how Zdanevich integrated those intuitions with his own topoi, sometimes hidden, such as the perception of written and spoken language, infantilism, violence, gender, and his “preoccupations with infantile sexuality” (p. 112).

Regarding the part that deals with his period of transition due to emigration and other interests that entered his life (hiking, medieval architecture of the Caucasus, etc.), Iliazd’s letters to Morgan Phillips Price, a British politician and war corres-
pondent, provided Drucker with a retrospective but first-hand account of those years and often the struggles he experienced. Especially noteworthy is the way Drucker links the life phases of Iliazd to global political events, in particular World Wars I and II. Emphasizing his apparently apolitical attitude as an inconsistency and a deliberate gesture, she brings to the surface the struggles of an artist and a man amid turbulent times.

Iliazd’s early years in Paris (1921-26) are presented as complex, and thanks to the details included by Drucker, the reader can fully realize the challenges he faced in continuing his artistic practice. The author also provides a summary of the lectures he held in the early 1920s, combining chronology with interpretation of those performances through discourse analysis. Moreover, Drucker juxtaposes his editorial production with the concepts he promoted through these Paris lectures, such as sdvig and verbal mass. Sdvig was one of the key ideas of Russian futurist poetry, advocated first and foremost by Kruchenykh. It was described in Zdanevich’s lectures as a “deformation” of a word by the displacement of its verbal mass. His approach matured with the final “dra,” lidantIU faram, dedicated to his deceased friend, Mikhail Le-Dantiu, in 1923, which was characterized by the application of “orchestral scoring” the artist deemed as his major import to poetics. Following Drucker’s narrative, one can also get the idea of how, even though Iliazd did not have much contact with surrealism in the late 1920s, his two novels Parizhach’i (1994, written in 1923-26) and Rapture (1930) bear clear similarities with surrealist agenda in their semi-hidden explorations of sexuality, often in a satirical way.

Drucker also dwells on the conflict with the letterists that is presented in the study as a preparatory ground for Iliazd’s key work, The Poetry of Unknown Words (Poésie de mots inconnus [1949]), which includes graphic pieces by major artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Its structure is based on a series of creative dialogues, always centered on the relation between image and text.

The later professional life of Iliazd was a constant tension between his quest for historical recognition and his interest in topics and use of expressive tools often unavailable to a wider audience. Indeed, Viktor Shklovsky once called him “a writer for writers,” as a letter revealed by Drucker testifies (pp. 131-32). Iliazd often lost himself in research and minor details: examples range from the edition of 65 Maximiliana or the Illegal Practice of Astronomy (65 Maximiliana ou l'exercice illégal de l'astronomie [1964]), which uncovered the work of an astronomer Guillaume Tempel, to his in-depth knowledge about Yoruba culture Iliazd acquired when producing The Wandering Friar (Le Frère mendiant [1959]) or his expertise in Byzantine art. Paradoxically, Zdanevich was extremely private in his personal life while being highly preoccupied with the categories of oblivion and rediscovery.

The final part of the book, addressing the lavish publications from his later career, is particularly worth appreciation because it includes unpublished correspondence and analysis that accentuates tactile aspects of these objects and allows Drucker’s expertise in typography to shine. The reconstructions of the design and production process in his mature phase projects provided by the author are rich in references and include the exchange with fellow artists with whom he collaborated.

The strongest aspects of the book are Drucker’s commentaries on Iliazd’s editorial activity; thanks to her proficiency in the field, she also makes important connections between his perspectives and activities and the modernist paradigm. These two aspects come together in one of the key leitmotifs of the book. As Drucker states, “By calling attention to the materiality of formal features, Iliazd’s approach feels completely integral to the aesthetic agenda of modernism” (p. 185).
Finally, the font used in the monograph is apparently Gill Sans, the one Iliazd used many times, and applied in *The Poetry of Unknown Words*.

To sum up, this book on Zdanevich is a well-documented overview of his work, as well as a far-reaching project that goes beyond the objectives of a biography. This might seem too extensive for those looking for a brief account of his work, but one must say that his life, with all its lacunae and pluralism in terms of languages and geography, is perfect material to reflect on what a biography of an artist might be. The book can serve as an excellent introduction to the work of Zdanevich in English and may prove suitable for students of art history and general readers. Thanks to a solid analysis of Iliazd's formal efforts, it may also be of interest to scholars of design and book art, while specialists in Slavonic studies may benefit from previously unknown correspondence that complements the narrative of this survey.

Notes


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