

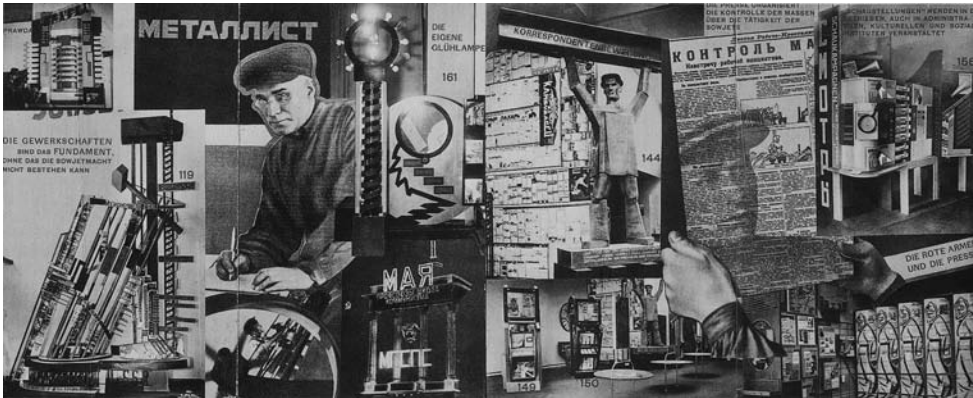
DEVIN FORE

*If facts destroy theory, then all the better for theory.*

—Viktor Shklovsky, “In Defense of  
the Sociological Method,” 1927

Any discussion of factography first has to deal, almost proleptically, with the conspicuous strangeness of the word “factography” itself, an awkward and self-consciously technicist term coined in Russia in the latter half of the 1920s to designate a certain aesthetic practice preoccupied, as the lexical roots of the neologism *fakto-grafiia* would suggest, with the inscription of facts. Those who are familiar with contemporaneous avant-garde movements in other countries and who may also be skeptical of the early Soviet zeal for linguistic invention will wonder if factography is not simply another word for documentary. Despite indisputable filiations between factography and practices outside of Russia which were similarly engaged in the project of chronicling modernization and its concomitant transformations to the conditions of human experience, there are critical distinctions to be made between the Soviet factographic avant-garde and documentary as it is traditionally conceived. The chief divergence is one of epistemological disposition: if the term “documentary,” which was created in 1926 by filmmaker John Grierson (who derived it, it seems, from the French word “documentaire”), came to designate work that strives to create the most objective depiction of reality possible, then this passive and impartial representational practice could not be farther from factography’s ambitions. Indeed, Sergei Tret’iakov, the most famous figure in the movement and the focal point of this issue of *October*, founded his entire praxeology on the notion of “operativity,” on the

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claim not to veridically reflect reality in his work, but to actively transform reality through it. The objectivism of an indifferent documentary had no place in the interventionist practices of the factographers.

Although we can thus begin to posit certain differences between factography and conventional documentary impulses, hazarding a normative definition of the factographic genre presents additional problems. The movement's manifest preference for the photo-essay and other intermedial hybrids, for example, thwarts customary aesthetic classification and complicates attempts to delimit a coherent factographic style. Futurists by provenance, the factographers who published in the journal *Novyi lef* paid little heed to the traditional divisions between the arts. Tret'iakov, who worked as a photographer, prose author, dramatist, reporter, film scenarist, radio commentator, and lyrical poet, considered genre as a shifting and protean aspect of the art work that must be dynamically and expediently negotiated in the process of aesthetic production. For him, style and genre were not fixed values. In this regard, the factographic conceptualization of genre is indebted to the model of cultural evolution described by Iurii Tynianov in his 1924 *Lef* essay "On the Literary Fact."<sup>1</sup> Because the dividing lines between genres are always shifting, because the territories of textual forms are constantly dislocating one another, Tynianov suggested, it is impossible to establish any fixed or immutable definition of genre. There is no generic "absolutism," as Nikolai Chuzhak wrote in 1929 in his introduction to the *Lef* anthology *The Literature of Fact*. Like Tynianov, the factographers viewed the aesthetic "fact" not as something apodictic and timeless, but as a phenomenon which resulted from a procedure of cultural valorization. The members of *Lef*, in other

1. Iurii Tynianov, "The Literary Fact," in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff, trans. Ann Shukman, (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 29–49. On the continuities between formalist genre theory and factography, see: Renate Lachmann, "Faktographie und formalistische Prosatheorie," in *Asthetik und Kommunikation* 4, no. 12 (1973), pp. 76–87; Aage A. Hansen-Löve, *Der russische Formalismus: Methodologische Rekonstruktion seiner Entwicklung aus dem Prinzip der Verfremdung* (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaft, 1978); and Leah Dickerman, "Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1997).



El Lissitzky. Foldout from the catalogue for the Soviet pavilion at the Pressa exhibition. Cologne, 1928.

words, understood factography not as a static genre, but as a mode of praxis. For them, the fact was the outcome of a process of production. The very etymology of the word *fact*, which comes from the Latin word *facere*—“to make” or “to do” (this derivation is also reflected in the French word *le fait*, the past participle of the verb *faire*)—bears witness to the fact’s constructed nature. The fact is quite literally *made*. While some would align the fact with the *Ding an sich* of Idealist philosophy, and others would equate it with objective matter, the stuff of ontological materialism, Tret’iakov rejected both the Scylla of noumenalism and Charybdis of phenomenalism, advocating instead a conception of the fact as an action, a process, an operation. His stance thus recalled the famous adage of Vico, *verum factum*: “the truth is an act.”

And so while it may be nearly impossible to specify steadfast stylistic or generic markers for factographic work, its modal and act-oriented practice nonetheless prompts an observation about its genealogy, namely, that factography was the immediate heir to the Soviet production art of the early 1920s. Both movements pursued an art whose task was not to reflect human experience, but to actively construct and organize it. Yet there was a pronounced divergence between first-generation production art and factography in the way that their practitioners understood experience. In an effort to correct the error of a nonutilitarian laboratory Constructivism that reduced the art work to a combinatory scheme made of conventional signs, production art recognized only the sensuous and somatic features of objects that were designed for everyday deployment;<sup>2</sup> and factography in turn challenged the one-sided positivism of this production art by reincorporating into its conception of the object the symbolic and ideological systems that had been neglected by its predecessor. In this regard, factography can be understood as a sublation of laboratory Constructivism’s formalist-structuralist logic and early production art’s hypermaterialism. As Benjamin H. D. Buchloh demonstrated in his formative essay “From

2. On first-generation production art, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

Faktura to Factography,” the factographers engaged not just with physical and dimensional bodies, but also with bodies of collective social knowledge and networks of communication.<sup>3</sup> Within this reorientation of artistic practices toward information and discourse, moreover, they conceived of signification not as a mere system of mimetic reflection, but as an act of productive labor.

This sweeping reconceptualization of the relationship between work and semi-osis belonged to a specific historical moment in the 1920s, that of the precipitate transformation of the Soviet Union into a modern media society. It is indeed impossible to comprehend the factographic project without taking into account the concurrent explosion of new media technologies and their attending mass cultural formations. This decade not only underwent a media revolution effected by the advent of radio broadcasting, the introduction of sound into film, and the photomechanical procedures which enabled the proliferation of the illustrated press, but it also witnessed the emergence of popular photography organizations, widespread literacy campaigns that drastically changed the lived relationship to language, and a worker-correspondent movement which aspired to transform the consumer of information into its author. New media became ordinary facts of life. That factography began to reach the apogee of its influence and methodological cogency around 1927, the year which Guy Debord later established as the inaugural year of the society of the spectacle,<sup>4</sup> is thus in no way incidental, for factographic practices presupposed a society on the cusp of the modern media age. In this society, where the distinction between the object and its image grew increasingly tenuous, the factographers understood acts of signification not as veridical reflections or reduplications of an ontologically more primary reality, but as actual and objective components of everyday, lived experience. The era that saw the closure of the gap between life and its representation challenged the Soviet avant-garde to develop models of production and manufacture that encompassed physical and psychic experience alike.

Although many elements within its program were articulated already by the mid-1920s, the dehiscence of the factographic movement in the final years of the decade coincided with the massive industrial prometheanism of the first Five-Year Plan, which was launched in 1928. This conjunction confirms a general pattern of historical consonance between industrialization campaigns and the documentary projects that intended to record and archive these transformations. For documentary enterprises have always been drawn to the sites of rapid modernization and social reorganization: consider the great photographic commission of the 1850s, the *Mission Héliographique*, one of whose tasks was to record Paris at the threshold of Haussmannization; or the lure of Germany’s Ruhrgebiet for the New Objectivity journalists who regarded the industrial province as the epicenter of new cultural formations in the 1920s; or the photographic archive of the Farm Security

3. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* 30 (Fall 1984), pp. 82–119.

4. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1990), p. 3. Jonathan Crary discusses this historical threshold in “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” *October* 50 (Fall 1989), pp. 96–107.

Administration, which captured premodern, small-town America at the moment of its extinction during the era of the New Deal reforms. Soviet factography was similarly fixated on colossal enterprises such as the organization of collective farms, the construction of the dam on the Dnepr River, or Magnitogorsk's feat of urban and social engineering. Within a single decade, a country that had been almost completely deindustrialized by the civil war became one of the most dramatic lessons in accelerated modernization. Looking back on that epoch, one Soviet reporter marveled that "everything was new, everything was for the first time. The first factories, the first *kolkhozes*, the first collective kitchens. . . . Just information in and of itself was interesting."<sup>5</sup> With so many cultural and technical revolutions occurring simultaneously, the Soviet Union in the 1920s was, to borrow Dziga Vertov's phrase, a "factory of facts."<sup>6</sup>

At the same time that we can infer a prevailing historical correspondence between modernization and a variety of documentary projects designed to record these transformations, we additionally note that, in the case of factography, the Five-Year Plan clearly contributed more than just content or thematics. The factographers not only depicted the construction of factories and reorganization of society, but also actively participated in these changes by incorporating advanced technical methods and media into their own practices. In making the Five-Year Plan the foundation of their art, the members of Lef were not only witnesses to but also collaborators in the modernization of culture itself. Mayakovsky would summarize this strategy in a laconic poetological formula from 1927: "Less AKhRR, more industrialization."<sup>7</sup> Their sweeping reassessment of the technics of genre and their manufacture of innovative aesthetic "facts" commensurate with the new socialist reality belonged to a moment of radical transvaluation in the systems of signification. Seeking to recoordinate the symbolic codes of language and art with the new social configurations and forces of production that emerged in the postrevolutionary epoch,<sup>8</sup> the Futurist factographers responded to the demand for a novel language that could not only designate the objects of socialist modernity but that could also give expression to the new human relations, institutions, and ideological principles that had come into being in the wake of 1917. From his 1923 "Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art" to his "The Writer and the Socialist Village" of 1931, so many of Tret'iakov's

5. E. Mikulin, "Gody i dni," quoted in L. A. Az'muko, "Eshche raz o 'literature fakta' (K voprosu ob evoliutsii teoreticheskikh vzgliadov S. M. Tret'iakov vo vtoroi polovine 20-kh godov)," in *Problemy stanovleniia sotsialisticheskogo realizma v russkoi i zarubzhenoi literature*, ed. N. V. Kovrigina (Irkutsk: 1972), p. 59.

6. Dziga Vertov, "The Factory of Facts," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 59.

7. Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Tol'ko ne vospominaniia," *Novyi lef*, nos. 8–9 (1927), p. 38. AKhRR was the acronym for the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, an organization of artists who depicted revolutionary thematics with techniques borrowed from the critical realists of the nineteenth century.

8. The Bolsheviks responded to this challenge through a host of lexical and structural interventions within the Russian language. Linguistic reforms were responsible for everything from abolishing obsolete letters of the Cyrillic alphabet to introducing massive numbers of neologisms and abbreviations into everyday speech. Afanasii Selishchev's encyclopedic *Language of the Revolutionary Epoch, 1917–1926*, documented the extensive transformations in the lexicon of the Russian language. *Iazyk revoliutsionnoi epokhi. Iz nabliudenii nad russkim iazykom poslednikh let, 1917–1926* (Moscow: Rabotnik progressheniia, 1928).

texts take as their point of departure the observation that factography both facilitated, and was itself conditioned by, a revolution in language.

In their struggle to industrialize and restructure the conventions of signification itself, in their pursuit of what the poet and scientist Aleksei Gastev called the “technification of the word” [*tekhničatsiia slova*], the factographers rejected the legacy of belles lettres and fine arts, and instead turned to science as the discursive basis for their work. In 1928 Tret’iakov, for example, proclaimed his agreement with a statement by a Komsomol member that “one technician is much more necessary than ten bad poets”; Tret’iakov moreover added that “we would be agreeable even to omitting the word ‘bad’” from this statement.<sup>9</sup> For it was in applied technological and scientific methods that the factographers discovered a deautonomized and functionalist sphere of knowledge-production that promised to deskill obscurantist traditions of aesthetic creation and reorganize outmoded, artisanal conditions of authorship in accordance with collective methods of modern production. Here we must point out, however, that the experimental science pursued by the factographers was quite dissimilar to the abstract calculus of Western rationalism. Unlike the latter, an idealist method that begins its inquiry with already reified theorems and ends by only reconfirming these hypotheses once again, factography was an inductive, epistemologically compromised science that took the absolute particular, rather than the universal, as its point of departure.<sup>10</sup> By thinking *through* its objects rather than theorizing axiomatically *about* them, this empirical, sociological science reestablished points of contact between the chaotic contingency of material phenomena and the speculative logic of abstract cognition. Their efforts to redress the gap between abstract knowledge and lived quotidian existence situate the factographers within the current of “phenomenological Marxism,” which thrived in the 1920s and which undertook the construction of what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have described as a comprehensive “context of living” [*Lebenszusammenhang*]<sup>11</sup>—a framework for human experience that is cognitively coherent yet experientially concrete and sensuous.

An art of theorizing the unique specimen, of mediating fact and law, factography was an indexical art. The singularity and incommensurability of factographic work returns us again to the vexing question of factography as a genre. Since each object produced by the factographers represented a singular impression, a “deracinated particular,”<sup>12</sup> the strategies presented by Futurist factography consequently had

9. Sergei Tret’iakov, “Happy New Year! Happy *New Left*,” in *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes*, ed. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 267.

10. In its attempted conjunction of art and science, factography has a resemblance to certain sociological projects that were pursued contemporaneously in France by the ethnographic Surrealists and appeared in the journal *Documents*.

11. See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

12. Lorraine Daston uses the phrase “deracinated particular” to characterize the fact in her essay “Baconian Facts,” *Annals of Scholarship* 8, nos. 3–4 (1991), pp. 337–64, where she examines the emergence of the modern usage of the work “fact” in the seventeenth century. See also Mary Poovey’s discussion of the fact as a “deracinated particular,” in *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

few, if any, generic precedents. Unlike today's documentaries, which have in the era of reality television been exhaustively consolidated into a recognizable style that signifies authenticity and immediacy, in the 1920s these techniques had not yet been codified as an established set of reality effects. The plurality of names by which this practice was designated in the Soviet Union—factography, reportage, factism, documentarity—suggest that there was no single methodology or conceptual model that could encompass all of the manifestations of this tentative practice. Hence Georg Lukács's disdainful characterization of documentary in 1932 as an “experiment in form” [*Formexperiment*].<sup>13</sup> Using a phrase from one of László Moholy-Nagy's essays, we could describe the photographic work of the members of Lef as “unprecedented” [*beispiellos*].<sup>14</sup> The literary texts of the factographers, each of which was similarly an equivalent only to itself, assumed the form of the *ocherk*, a prose genre that was part scientific inquiry, part literary composition, and whose closest approximates in the Western European tradition would be the essay or the short sketch. And yet we should be circumspect about describing the *ocherk* as a genre at all, as Tret'iakov cautioned in his prefatory remarks to a talk about the *ocherk*, which he delivered in Moscow in 1934: “I don't want to use the word ‘genre’ here, even though I can't find a different word. The *ocherk* is not a genre. The *ocherk* is a great movement. You have dozens of diverse genres there—an intersection of strata, as they say in geology. The *ocherk* is located at the point of contact between artistic literature and the newspaper.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Tret'iakov's remarks on the volatility of the *ocherk* as a literary category resonate with comments that Benjamin made in Paris the same year, when he suggested that the Soviet newspaper had set a “mighty recasting of literary forms” in motion.<sup>16</sup> The *ocherk* was in this regard the perfect literary analogue to the “unprecedented” snapshot, a constitutionally minor form that resisted generic classification and that, indeed, destroyed the very conditions of the discrete aesthetic medium.<sup>17</sup> Somewhere between science and literature, this “experiment in form” could be more accurately described as a rhetorical practice than as an identifiable class of aesthetic work.

Given the deliberate mutability and ephemerality of its compositions, it is apt that this “literature of becoming,” as Chuzhak called factography, produced no

13. Georg Lukács, “Reportage or Portrayal?,” in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980), p. 59.

14. László Moholy-Nagy, “Unprecedented Photography,” trans. Joel Agee, in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 83–85.

15. Tret'iakov's talk at the *Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie po khudozhestvennomu ocherku*, RGALI, f. 631, o. 1, d. 70–73, p. 18. Even decades after Tret'iakov's death, one expert remarked that the *ocherk* continues to be elusive: “as a formal entity, the *ocherk* remains largely undefined.” D. Brown, “The *Ocherk*: Suggestions Toward a Redefinition,” in *American Contributions to the Sixth International Congress of Slavists II* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), p. 31.

16. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 771.

17. In an essay on photography, Rosalind Krauss has suggested that mechanical reproduction in all of its guises undermines the very possibility of medium-specificity. See her “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 289–305.

masterpieces and no canon. Scarcely fit for monumentalization, the presentist *ocherk* “expires quickly,” Shklovsky noted, and “can’t survive past its own moment.”<sup>18</sup> So what is left of the factographic movement today? A prodigious number of documents and records, a scattered assemblage of works which have been largely ignored by students of the great movements in fine arts and belles lettres. Already anticipating this future disinterest of scholars, the apostate of reportage Joseph Roth observed from Germany in 1930 that the “current Russian literature is in fact, with few exceptions, a collection of material for cultural historians,” and nothing more.<sup>19</sup> Dismissive as Roth’s remark is, it nonetheless quite accurately portrays the encyclopedic ambitions of the factographic program: Tret’iakov demanded that every single corner of the country be scrutinized and documented by the masses of worker-correspondents; Maksim Gorky called for the production of 10,000 biographies of Russians, chronicles of the quotidian lives of typical, even unremarkable, citizens; and Aleksandr Rodchenko proposed that individuals’ lives be captured in an open-ended photographic archive that would be composed of an infinite number of momentary snapshots. Like Borges’s story about a seventeenth-century cartographer who tried to create a map of the Empire that was the exact size of the kingdom itself—a sprawling representation of the world that coincided at every point with it—the factographers went about constructing a vast archive that was coextensive with reality itself. Perennially “in search of the present tense,”<sup>20</sup> these projects engaged operatively in their own historical moment and expired with the passage of the reality to which these interventions corresponded.

This issue of *October* will not advance a master theory of factography, nor will it even propose the actuality or direct applicability of these projects for the present day. The texts assembled here are as old as yesterday’s newspaper. But insofar as they uncover a forgotten response to the media of modernity, these fossils possess a certain archaeological value for us. They return us to a critical juncture in the development of spectacle society and point out a path that was not taken: in contrast to the technological determinism that today increasingly dominates contemporary theoretical perspectives on the media, factography insisted that these media are historically variable constructions that are the precipitates of concrete social and political systems; and against the positivist approaches that currently underwrite this determinism, factography recalls a moment when technologies of representation such as photography did not constitute a discrete medium or a stable genre. The case of factography reminds us that the information media which continue to structure experience to this day are in no way ontological givens, but are themselves generated through operative acts of cognitive and perceptual labor. A production art fit for a media age, Soviet factography shows us that the consumption of information is never simply a passive act.

18. Viktor Shklovsky, *Poiski optimizma* (Moscow: Izd-vo Federatsiia, 1931), p. 4.

19. Joseph Roth, “Schluß mit der ‘neuen Sachlichkeit’!,” in *Das journalistische Werk 1929–1939*, vol. 3 of *Werke*, ed. Klaus Westermann (Cologne: Kiepenhauer and Witsch, 1989), p. 159.

20. This was the title of one of Boris Agapov’s *ocherki*, which was reprinted in his *Tekhnicheskie rasskazy* (Moscow: Izd-vo Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1936).