

## **A QUESTION OF FORM** **GEORG SCHÖLLHAMMER**

In the Soviet Union, the late 1950s saw the emergence of the first artistic programs and architectural concepts that essentially followed the examples of Western European countries. The post-war era was, to a major extent, marked by the Cold War rivalry between the two superpowers, with their respective political systems. Nuclear power, aerospace technology, and outstanding durable consumer goods such as washing machines served as powerful symbols of this rivalry. As early as the late Stalinist period, the promise of mass consumption increasingly began to replace the prevailing ideology of asceticism in the Soviet Union.

It was in this political and social climate that Vadim Kosmatschhof began his artistic training. From 1951 to 1958 he was a student at the Moscow Secondary Art School. There he worked on the development of his first spatial concepts, which even then were conceived in relation to architecture and in contemplation of the standardized public spaces of the Stalin years. In his early sketches, Kosmatschhof developed the concept of space that was to be determinative for his entire artistic development: the space occupied by the sculpture is conceived as a resource and a means of organizing experience in order to develop a processual form of aesthetics. The buried tradition of Russian constructivism thus became a kind of fossil fuel which inspired and empowered the young art student's work. In the cellars of the nearby Tretyakov Gallery, originals from the 1920s were still stored, and the students were clandestinely introduced to this heritage by some of their teachers. This opened for Kosmatschhof, during the restrictive years of Stalin's neoclassicist socialist realism, a formal cosmos which, hidden from the prevailing doctrine of aesthetic reason, he lifted out of preconsciousness into a formalized state. The interfaces between radical abstraction, technological and vegetative structure, and the sparse information that conveyed some of what was happening in international modernism in the post-war years formed the foundation upon which Kosmatschhof's work in these early years was based.

A radical change in the aesthetic paradigms of the USSR art world followed upon Khrushchev's election as First Secretary of the CPSU in 1953, which had far-reaching consequences for fine arts and architecture in the USSR. The languages of forms that had emerged in modernism were transposed into free art, primarily by way of architecture. From the end of the 1950s, French and Soviet urbanists engaged in an intensified exchange; France became the USSR's most important Western European partner. For a time, Russian architects maintained contact with professional colleagues in Paris who were then planning the new office district La Défense. The brief thaw in the Cold War in the 1950s was followed by the rigidification of the Soviet state in the Brezhnev era, with its bureaucratic and structuralist excesses. The Soviet occupation of Prague in 1968 also fell within this period. During these years, from 1965 to 1969, Kosmatschhof attended the sculpture class at the Stroganov School of Industrial and Applied Art in Moscow, where he soon came into contact with architects. At this institution, Kosmatschhof began to experiment with the idea of large-scale sculptures in outdoor spaces, but not in the context of the rhetorical monumental sculptures that occupied the memorial spaces in the parks and squares of the Soviet imperium. He was interested in more organic interfaces. It appeared to him that the design processes of architecture would serve as a suitable methodological instrument.

The most important sources of external influence that characterized the new climate in the Soviet Union came from the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, and gradually found their way from the peripheries of the Soviet imperium to the centre.

The aesthetics of everyday life in the Soviet “Thaw” period was influenced above all by publications from Czechoslovakia and Poland, where the modern movement in architecture and design – in contrast to the Soviet Union – had proceeded. The existential angsts that had built up under the dictates of Stalinist realism had already found their first release there after 1956, in the extreme subjectivism of tachist painting. The groups and positions that now emerged, with their objects, light installations and structural and geometric abstraction, were finding their way back into the international canon of modernism.

Information from these milieus also reached the Stroganov School and so, also, Kosmatschhof. And now architecture, too, began to take an interest in elements of the “constructivist” phase of the 1920s, which Kosmatschhof had become acquainted with in the underground storage rooms of the museum, in defiance of Stalin’s prohibitions. Starting in the 1970s, there was once again more intensive collaboration between the fine arts and architecture. Architectural details from the 1930s reappeared. In the various Soviet republics, individual architectural styles developed, manifesting expressive stylistic elements in combination with influences from the respective national traditions.

It is therefore not just a biographical coincidence that Kosmatschhof’s first key work appeared not in Moscow, but in one of the Turk republics. The regional authorities, in fact, managed to retain a certain degree of independence, evinced primarily in their ability to circumvent clearly defined government policy when it came to specific administrative practice. Decisions on economic plans and fund allocations were made in Moscow, but ultimately it was the subordinate administrative machinery that decided how the available resources were actually put to use.

With a commission for a sculpture on the square in front of the new national library in Ashkhabad, the capital of the Republic of Turkmenistan, Kosmatschhof was able, for the first time, to transpose his formal experiments from the studio to large-scale form in a public space – and this genre is still the central focus of his work today: monumental, space-activating sculptures in outdoor spaces. The Karl Marx State Library was exemplary for the new movement in architecture. It was built in 1975 by the architect A. Akhmedov in close collaboration with the civil engineer S. Saparov and the head of the construction brigade, M. Danieljanu, and was awarded the USSR State Prize. In his design, Akhmedov succeeded in creating a uniform, flowing space by means of ramps. The deeper one penetrates into the interior, the more intensely one experiences an association with traditional forms and motifs that appear to derive from the jewelry designs typical of the region. Akhmedov asked the young Kosmatschhof to create a corresponding symbol for the outdoor space. Kosmatschhof’s steel sculpture “Konstrukta” (1975) was the first large-scale sculpture realized in an outdoor space in the Soviet Union that was not devoted to a specific theme. The work is an improvisation on organoform motifs and constructivist spatial configurations, which Kosmatschhof had developed in sketches. It is, one might say, a large, abstract construction extemporized into space. Technologically, too, the work presented a challenge, since it had to be assembled by the laborers of a penal colony, working only from a number of loose sketches, in a minimally equipped workshop.

Conceived in 1973 and realized in 1975, this procedure was also a comment on the standardizing seriality and technological limitations to which art and architecture were subject in the context of the large design studios, which were organized like factories. The title of the work alludes to the enthusiasm of the constructivists in the 1920s for integrating art into everyday life. Moreover, the use of non-structural, organoform elements symbolizes, even in this early work, Kosmatschhof’s rejection of the rigorism of functional architecture that was typical at the beginning of the Brezhnev era.

Kosmatschhof freed himself from the technologically abstract forms of the new genre which had developed in association with architecture and to which many of

his colleagues still felt bound, and was able to initiate an accelerated stylistic development. For him, the reference to Russian constructivism also meant taking the constructivist propensity for symbolism as well as the constructivists' interest in the interface between form and the outside world a step further, and making selective use of them. The contrast between serial production in architecture and the improvised assembly of the elements of Kosmatschhof's sculpture was almost symbolic for the restrictions placed on the range of artistic expression in the Soviet state.

Rebuffs from the official system of artistic unions and competitions soon put a damper on the optimism that had been awakened in Kosmatschhof by the success of his sculpture in Ashkhabad – for example, when he was not permitted to realize his designs for large-scale sculptures outside the new Soviet embassy in Mauritania, which he had developed in porcelain. Kosmatschhof had created a series of studies for this work, which he was able to produce in a ceramics studio: man-sized sculptures or groups of sculptures which decline mechanic/organic themes in a surrealistically schooled vocabulary of forms and which in today's canon can be placed, in retrospect, between Oldenburg, Luginbühl and New Realism. Nevertheless, the work's language of forms, which, as well, is always developed from modular assemblages, is original and foreshadows his later development in the direction of large-scale sculptures created as interfaces between technology and organic forms.

For this work, Kosmatschhof had been experimenting since 1972 in a sanitary porcelain combine. However, this was an exception; the "new" art was still subject to state regulation, and its developments were dictated by the major construction combines. Artists had to gear their designs to a catalogue of prefabricated elements, which offered such a limited selection that there was not much scope left for design. In this climate, Kosmatschhof's surreal, constructive sculptures only met with a response outside of the nomenklatura of the Soviet art world.

Other representatives of this generation also attempted to formulate the heroic image of the Soviet regime in an international language of new aesthetics, but in a simplified form and within the limits of a group of themes whose core consisted of the conquest of outer space and the Antarctic, the opening up of Siberia and the new terrain of scientific revolution. Often, art that followed up on the great avant-garde traditions of the 1910s and 1920s had to be masked as applied arts, for example as the design of a suspended ceiling in a Party villa, as decoration in the foyers of youth or sport halls, or as structural ornamentation in the building lines of a provincial winter circus. Economics, technology and construction management were linked with artistic commissions and quality issues.

In 1976, on an office building in Moscow, Kosmatschhof created a work that looked like an apparatus for measuring the spheres, carried pickaback by the building itself – a kind of imaginary instrument for measuring and analyzing the structural and ideological tensions between the private utopias of Soviet citizens and those of the apparatus. But Kosmatschhof's political and aesthetic insubordination prevented him from getting other commissions, and he applied for emigration.

In 1979, Kosmatschhof emigrated to the West via Vienna and Graz. Here, in a post-pop milieu associated with the creative ORF Director Kuno Knöbl and the multi-talented Horst Georg Haberl, he found acceptance and a studio situation which permitted him to work off the traumas of being forced out of the official Soviet art world. A direct consequence of Kosmatschhof's emigration was a work that he conceived for public space in the city of Graz as part of the contemporary art festival *steirischer herbst* in 1981: a negative of the visa that had enabled him to leave the Soviet Union, in the form of a black-and-white, billboard-sized acrylic picture. Formally this appears to be an erratum among all his other works, which otherwise form a series of organoform abstract creations. In content, however, it fits seamlessly into the figure of thought of a reciprocal relationship between sculptural logic and cosmological imagery, which Kosmatschhof developed in the West, where he

lived from 1983 in Mainz and from 1994 in Wiesbaden, his current place of residence.

In his later works, Vadim Kosmatschof embodies cosmologies of aesthetic and technological transformation energy. The new technological possibilities at his disposal have contributed to an increased precision of workmanship and brilliance. The parallel worlds of sketches and small objects that accompany the studies for his major project, recognizable since the mid-1980s, of directly integrating processes of nature and aggregation states into sculpture for outdoor spaces, evolve into meditations on man/technology/nature in their own right. His very first large-scale commissioned work in the West, the sky-measuring object in front of the police headquarters in Mainz (1984), indicated the direction in which Vadim Kosmatschof was headed. His work gradually moved away from the surreal, imaginary apparatuses characteristic of his art in the 1970s, which, for example, can still be clearly seen in the fountain sculpture "Klepsydra" in Pirmasens (1985). The last great emanation of this art is the "Kugelstoßer" ("Shotputter", 1987) in front of the Landeszentralbank in Mainz, which once more recapitulates the motifs of Soviet modernism and constructivist spatial configurations.

The network of similarities and structural correspondences with which Kosmatschof manifests organic motifs ultimately becomes a *techne poetike*. It is a system of equivalences, correspondences and hierarchies that has developed into a new sculptural project which achieves a differentiation between organic and technological themes: the huge, almost breathing and pulsating objects which Vadim Kosmatschof is creating at the present time – a project unequaled in art today.