

# THREE CONSTRUCTIVISTS

## A Historical Parallel to Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs' *Lightning Tree*

by Kevin Moore

*We are witnesses to the fact that modern youth is rising up in revolt against merciless materialism and intellectualism, dictated by the rapid progress of our time, and is returning to nature with elemental vigour.*

Karl Nierendorf, introduction to Karl Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst*, 1928

You may be familiar with Karl Blossfeldt's plant photographs from the 1920s, encountered as examples of avant-garde art, as design prototypes, or as botanical illustrations featured on posters and calendars. Even if you don't know the artist's name, you have no doubt seen the images—monumentally, seductively detailed black-and-white photographs of plant parts: a young shoot of monkshood magnified six times; tendrils of a pumpkin magnified four times; a flower head of a common teasel magnified six times.

An instructor of architectural modeling at the School of the Royal Museum of Arts and Crafts in Berlin, Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932) made these photographs with a series of homemade cameras and with instructional intent. Yet when he published the body of work in 1928, in an unexpected and much celebrated book called *Urformen der Kunst* (published in English as *Art Forms in Nature*), Blossfeldt's reputation careened suddenly toward that of avant-garde artist. Specifically, Blossfeldt became an unwitting agent of the New Objectivity, an art position defined by a cool and utilitarian attitude toward modern life, something Germans at the time admiringly thought of as distinctly American: *all business*. Camera vision—mechanically conceived, coldly appraising, supposedly objective—seemed to assert best the movement's outlook, even when depicting plants.

Weimar Germany of the 1920s, bear in mind, was a social and political battleground between past and future. Technological innovations were transforming modern life: architecture was being made of glass and steel and losing its ornament; objects were being mass-produced instead of handcrafted; homes were becoming “machines for living.” In the visual arts, there was a markedly ambivalent turning away from romantic and subjective forms of expression, such as easel painting, toward the production of functional design. Students at the Bauhaus—Germany's premier institution for this radical shift—brooded during the 1920s not so much on personal creativity but on floor lamps and collapsible chairs.

For all their astringent clarity, Blossfeldt's photographs carried the seeds of a paradox inherent within modernism itself. Latent in the notion that, through the rational structures of science, democracy, and mass production, modern life would become increasingly hygienic, egalitarian, and efficient, lurked an even more handsomely raucous reality: this new technological utopia was being invented and operated by biological organisms—human beings. Envisioning a perfected world through industry and science, these soft-bodied, emotional, fallible creatures with big imaginations had conjured a compellingly sleek mechanical god whom they both worshipped and feared. For an alluring and chilling illustration of this modern phantasm, search no further than Fritz Lang's 1927 film, *Metropolis*, an impressive hellfire vision of an automated, dehumanizing technological dystopia.

All this on the shoulders of some plant pictures. Blossfeldt was rather quiet about his work, offering others undue latitude, perhaps, in terms of interpretation. The artist's magnification technique, for example, impressed some as a triumph of scientific observation, with photography serving as a kind of optical prosthesis to human vision. Yet this “improved seeing” was in fact a divergence from natural perception, distorting through amplification and amputation (the subjects were shown rootless, radically cropped) the various plant parts' forms, rendering them unrecognizable, gangly, grotesque, and, in some instances, anthropomorphized, sexual, *surreal*. In “The Language of Flowers” (1929), Georges Bataille observed the great eroticism and morbidity inherent in plants: they bred and they died. Photography's gelatin silver process transformed Blossfeldt's plants into latently erotic bronze sculptures, extracting the “art” from the plants' original form in nature and preserving them, *in perpetuity*, as photographic prints.

Blossfeldt is an example of the non-revolutionary, non-manifesto-writing artist of the avant-garde period, due largely to the fact that he was of an older generation. If you were younger and had lived through the great catastrophe of World War I, art likely carried a more urgent and political charge. Following an initial late-1910s period of delirious absurdity, embodied in the Dada movement (Futurism's death-wish tendencies having gone up in flames by 1914 with the war itself), consensus formed around the urge to reconstruct, to reinvent the tattered world, and thus emerged a new art “ism,” Constructivism. Naturally, Blossfeldt was not a card-carrying Constructivist, but he exhibited many Constructivist tendencies, namely, an applied-arts impulse, which implied directing art's working methods toward functional design, plus a *primitivist* instinct, the desire to go back to basics, to look to the natural world for examples of how to start fresh and build anew.

Odd, perhaps, that nature might be seen as a “primitive” model for machine-age modernism. Blossfeldt saw in nature exemplary structures; he saw form as it served function, which became a mantra for modern architecture. Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), who was a card-carrying Russian Constructivist, took a more synthetic approach, imagining in nature a harmonization with the technical world, noting resemblances between existing natural forms and newly forged modern ones. This was most vividly realized in a series of photographs of pine trees he made in 1927. Photographing straight up their trunks (the precipitous or tilted angle was a common strategy among New Objectivity photographers), Rodchenko described the trees as, “tall, naked, like telephone poles.” It was the discovery of a new kind of beauty, a geometric beauty of straight lines and utilitarian structures—telephone poles, of all things.

Constructivism was, for artists such as Rodchenko, not a style but a working method, a way to conceive of new forms suitable to modern life. Counter-intuitively, this working method involved a great amount of “de-constructivism,” or *defamiliarization*, or going around taking pictures of ordinary things—such as pine trees—from odd angles, in order to see them as something else, “to find the unusual in the usual,” to use Rodchenko's words. Of course, the handheld Leica camera and other such devices were essential to this journey of visual rediscovery. You could point it up, you could point it down, and by way of complicating the common wisdom of photography as the most literal of artistic media, suddenly the whole world looked different, was abstracted.

Photography was for Rodchenko a great synthetic medium because it shook up the visual status quo, disassembling the visible world and letting it fall back into place differently. This topsy-turvy process facilitated a rather convoluted political agenda, in which ideology might intersect industrial manufacture. In a manifesto of sorts, written in 1922 with his wife Varvara Stepanova, Rodchenko described the challenge of the post-revolutionary artist, “of finding the communistic expression of material structures.” Overwrought and incredible though this may sound, Rodchenko and his fellow Constructivists announced the establishment of three disciplines: *Tectonics*, *Faktura*, and *Construction*. *Tectonics* suggested a communist style—not so much what we think of today as fascist architecture, as a stripped down and overblown version of classicism, rather a utilitarian technology-based aesthetic, as glimpsed in Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (proposed in 1920), never built and perhaps described as an enormous, listing Eiffel Tower. *Faktura* referenced raw natural materials—indeed, wood from pine trees, but also more distinctively modern materials, such as steel and glass. *Construction* entailed putting it all together in the forms of telephone poles, communication wires, and monumental radio towers. Industrial prowess was beautiful too.

Arguably, the most fervently inventive, mechanically minded, and endearingly self-contradictory of the Constructivists was Hungarian-born Bauhaus instructor László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946). A self-styled artist-engineer, Moholy-Nagy proclaimed allegiance to art in service to technology and industry—to applied arts—but went about

producing one of the most idiosyncratic, humanistic, art-for-art's-sake bodies of work of the period. We might as well start with the self-contradiction: despite Moholy-Nagy's institutional lip service to an applied art future, his own approach to art-making remained fundamentally romantic, expressive, *primal*. As one of the artist's Bauhaus colleagues noted, “Moholy the constructivist is fascinated by the energies, the rhythms and technical power of new life,” and in the same breath described Moholy's “naïve admiration of the eternal-primitive child-barbarian.”

Moholy-Nagy's fantasies of the “biotechnical,” an imaginary world in which soft bodies and hard machines—the organic and the inorganic—coexisted in a perfectly harmonious and complementary state, found realization in myriad photographs, photograms, and photocollages. In these images, dynamic and irregular human forms were seen to animate, to *complete*, severely rational and minimal architectural spaces. Call to mind, if you can, Walter Gropius' Bauhaus building in Dessau, with its blocks of factory windows, white plaster façade, and orderly protruding balconies, “ornamented” by a well-placed human figure or two. Such visions of man in harmony with his modern environment were just that: fantasies organized within the pictorial space of the photograph, as calculatingly pacifying as Lang's *Metropolis* was unnerving.

The biological metaphor had long been at the heart of conceptions of modernism, as both an organizing principle and a reminder of humankind's natural origins. Epic historico-philosophical writings of the period, such as Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1918), were rife with plant metaphors: civilizations were born, they flowered, and they died. This one rather dour example does not acknowledge a redeeming fact of biological life: while individual organisms, like political structures and economies, take part in a natural life cycle, flowering and dying in their time, new individuals are born to take their place—a *natural and rational order persists*. Here was the unifying thread for an optimistic modern future. Rational progress would be based on the immutable logic of biology: fecundity, regularity, and multiplicity. Cars roll off assembly lines as trees leaf out in forests.

Moholy-Nagy's biotechnical tableaux, depicting humans contentedly ensconced in modern environments, strike one today as somewhat didactic, especially when compared to the artist's more abstract works, such as the photograms. These speak a purer language of modernism and offer a great deal of delight. Exploring modern materials, such as cellophane and metals, and modern forms, such as coils and crankshafts, Moholy-Nagy created, through the use of light, a sensual and seductive modern world.

These effects came to life most dramatically in the Light-Space Modulator, conceived in 1922, and first displayed in 1930. Comprising three moveable disks of metal and glass, the modulator had a sort of kitchen utensil aesthetic, oscillating like a hand-mixer, yet generating a dazzling display of shadow and light. It had no purpose other than to give pleasure and to demonstrate the potential beauty of the modern age, albeit as a byproduct. In that sense, the Light-Space Modulator is a redemptive vision of modernism. Functionless, its mechanistic materials, forms, and actions converge as a demonstration of physical animation. Operating according to its own laws of physics, the modulator provides nothing more than optical delight. It is a frivolity perhaps in the grand scheme of modern progress, but that is a good bit more than you can say for most machines.

