

WORDY THINGS, THINGLY SIGNS, AND OTHER POINTS OF TRANSFER

– You see!

We have to destroy things, to carve them all up!
I wasn't wrong to sense the evil in their blandishments! (*Old man with cats*)

– But maybe things just need to be loved?
Maybe things' souls have different constituents? (*Man with a stretchy face*)

– Lots of things are inside out.
They are deaf to wickedness;
Their hearts know no anger (*Man with no ears*)

– And in the place where a normal person has a mouth
Lots of things have got an ear! (*Man with a stretchy face, joyously agreeing*)

Vladimir Mayakovsky. *A Tragedy*. 1913.¹

Vladimir Mayakovsky's last pre-revolutionary poem (written in 1917) had a title that could easily be read today as a promise of a poetic exploration in the field of object-oriented ontology: *Chelovek. Veshch.* (*A Human. A Thing.*).² The poem caused quite a stir when Mayakovsky recited it in public in the winter of 1918. Back then, many experts—from writers such as Andrey Bely and Boris Pasternak to literary scholars such as Roman Jakobson and Boris Eikhenbaum—seemed to agree that the poem was “a revolt,” if not a revolution (*perevorot*).³ (FIG. 1)

A strikingly post/human title of the poem did not go unnoticed by the audience. However, the poet apparently left no explanation for his choice, and subsequent descriptions of his poem have tended to downplay the meaning of the title ever since. With time, the connection between “a human” and “a thing” was routinely explained away with the help of a clarifying commentary offered in 1955 by Vasilii Katanian, a prominent editor and publisher of Mayakovsky's work. As Katanian insisted in the first “scientifically verified edition” of Mayakovsky's oeuvre, “*veshch*” in the title “replaced” (*zamenil*) a standard *generic* definition of the work: “a poem – [is] a large

¹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy,” in *The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky*. Trans. Guy Daniels (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). I slightly amended the translation. Trans. For the Russian original, see Fig. 3a. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Chelovek. Veshch.* (Moscow: ASIS, 1918), 17.

² Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Chelovek. Veshch.* (Moscow: ASIS, 1918).

³ For the reception of the poem, see V. V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie proizvedenii v 20 tt. Vol. 5. Poemy 1915–1922* (Moscow: Nauka, 2022), 408–411. “Revolt” was a description used by Boris Eikhenbaum in his review of the poem; see: Boris Eikhenbaum, “Trubnyi glas” [1918], in *Formalnyi Metod: Antologiya Russkogo Modernizma. Vol. 2. Materialy*. Ed. Serguei Oushakine (Ekaterinburg–Moscow: Kabintenyi uchenyi, 2016), 471.

thing” (*poema – krupnaia veshch*).⁴ In other words, Maiakovsky’s “thing” played the same role in the title of poem as “tragedy” or “mystery” did in his other literary creations.

Katanian did not bother to speculate on why exactly the poem had to be objectified in this unusual way; nor why it should be objectified at all. And he may have been right. In this particular poem the “thing” could be just surface deep. Printed by the Association for Socialist Art, a publishing house created by Mayakovsky himself, his Gospel-like poem may have needed the “thing” only opportunistically—as an awkward misnomer, as a performative act that hastily heightened the importance of a tiny collection of verses.



Fig. 1. “To Whom It May Concern: every civilized person must attend! A great celebration of futurism in the Polytechnic museum On February 2 [1918].
Mayakovsky. A Human. A Thing.
 A poster for a public performance of Mayakovsky’s poem. The Russian State Museum of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Moscow. The Goskatalog No: 54402471.

And yet, given Mayakovsky’s intense interest in the power of things, Katanian’s nonchalant de-differentiation of the material (“thing”) and the discursive (“poem”) is hardly satisfactory; perhaps, it is even mistaken. Challenging this well-established tradition is beyond the scope of these comments. After all, there could have been more than one reason for reading “genre” and “thing” synonymously. Rather, I want to use Katanian’s “clarification” as an opportunity to point to a certain trend of dealing with more-than-human problematics in Russia. The routine treatment of things as interchangeable with signs is symptomatic of a larger cultural tendency to downplay, obfuscate, or simply neglect manifestations of the material: to make the thing go away, even when its presence is openly declared.

Tracing the evolution of the title of Mayakovsky’s poem is quite productive in this regard. Starting in 1918, with the very first publication of *A Human. A Thing.*, subsequent collections of the poet’s works published during his life (in 1919, 1922, and 1923), kept the human-&-nonhuman assemblage intact.⁵ Without warning, the “thing” disappeared from the title

⁴ Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sovrание sochinenii v 13 tt. Vol. 1. 1912–1917*. Ed. Vasilii Katanian (Moscow: GIKhL, 1955), 445. Katanian reproduced the same explanation in yet another collection published in the same year—a miniature tree-volume set in the prestigious series *Biblioteka poeta* (The Library of the Poet): V. V. Mayakovsky, *Stikhotvoreniia. Vol. 1* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1955), 537.

⁵ See his: *Vse sochinennoe Vladumirom Maiakovskim. 1909–1919* (Petrograd: 18-aia Gos. Tip., 1919); Vladimir Maiakovsky, *13 let raboty. Vol. 2* (Moscow: VKhUTEMAS, 1922); *Izbrannyi Maiakovskiy* (Berlin – Moskva: Nakanune, 1923); Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Lirika* (Moscow: Krug, 1923).

in the 1928 edition of Mayakovsky's poems but in 1935 (several years after the poet's death) it was back to its usual place—in what was presented as “the first complete Collection” of Mayakovsky's works.⁶

Somewhat inexplicably, it was in the “scientifically verified edition” I mentioned earlier that Katanian found it necessary not only to equate “thing” and “poem” in his commentary, but also to use this normalizing transcoding intervention to remove the troubling reference to materiality altogether: the “thing” was reduced to a sign (in the commentary) and then eliminated entirely (from the title). Following this authoritative reframing, all subsequent editions and collections of Mayakovsky's work permanently delinked the *Human* from the *Thing*.

This erasure also led to a predictable refocusing of the poem itself. In 1988, a biographer of the poet logically completed the story of the erasure by providing an explanatory formula for the solitude of the *Human* in the title that suggested approaching the poem as “a hymn glorifying the human” (*kak gimn vo slavu cheloveka*).⁷ (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The vanishing thing: covers of Mayakovsky's *A Human. A Thing* (clockwise: 1917, 1919, 1922, 1923, 1935, 1955).

It would be naïve to see the disappearance of the “thing” as the sole cause of this unabashed celebration of anthropocentrism. But it would also be wrong to deny a causal connection

⁶ See: V. V. Mayakovsky, *Tom I*. (Moscow–Leningrad: GosIzdat, 1928); V. V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Vol. I. Stikhi, poemy, stat'i. 1912–1917*. Ed. Lilia Brik (Moscow: Khud. Lit-ra, 1935).

⁷ Aleksandr Mikhailov, *Mayakovskii* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1988), 159.

between the two. In the poem, the “Human” and the “Thing” were far from being equal or even symmetric, but their coexistence underscored the heterogeneity of the space they shared. Through its initial presence in the title, the “thing” foregrounded a bifocal framing for the poem: its semantic discrepancy and narrative instability guaranteed against the default progression towards the unquestioned hegemony of the anthropocentric.

My focus on this seemingly trivial story of the erasure of the thing from the title of a strange poem by a previously important but by now almost forgotten Soviet poet may seem petty, obsessive, and even fetishistic. I am not here to reverse the anthropocentric bias by prioritizing objects, matter, or materiality. Nor am I going to reiterate a (valid) point about the importance of material conditions for shaping human beings. Instead, the Mayakovsky case helps me highlight an epistemic aspect of working with materiality within the field of humanities that often goes unproblematized. In the brief remarks that follow, I will attempt to explore a thorny process of rendering the material as discursive. Before I proceed, one more thing is in order.

Over the past two decades (or so), things, objects, matter and materiality have been actively foregrounded by scholars with diverse epistemologies and disciplinary affiliations. Media archaeologists (mostly in Germany) have drawn our attention to various material formations that had been prematurely marginalized in the past. Recovering and reexamining these abandoned things, apparatuses, and sensibilities, media archaeologists seek to expand our vocabulary for envisioning different, much less uniformed and streamlined technological futures.⁸ In the US, proponents of new materialisms have insisted on the need to bridge the radicalized divide between subjects and objects, humans and nonhumans, the mental and the material in order to acknowledge nonhuman “thing–power.”⁹ This material turn would not have been so successful without a major intellectual contribution from France with its Actor–Network–Theory, which resolutely bracketed off ontological differences and hierarchies, privileging instead a world of horizontal connectivity where “social action” is enabled, transported, and distributed by all types of actors, be they human or nonhuman.¹⁰

In these lively debates and explorations, the voices of scholars of the materiality of the Second World in general and of the Soviet Materiality in particular have been largely absent. One has to try hard to find traces of Soviet and post-Soviet material culture in the recent collections that have shaped the emerging field of new materialist studies. Undoubtedly, this absence (or erasure?) is a reflection and a consequence of the Cold War, with the ultimate neoliberal triumphalism and the end of (non–Western) history that followed it.

Until recently, studies of socialist material culture and materiality have also been few and far between. With some rare exceptions, their conceptual lexicon tends to reproduce already established global interpretative models, being strikingly disconnected from vibrant local intellectual traditions.¹¹ It would be wonderful to learn about “biographies of things” inspired by

⁸ See, e. g., Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*. Trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006).

⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹¹ For inspiring examples of recent publications, see, for instance, Steven Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life After Stalin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Christina Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life During the Khrushchev Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Tom Cubbin, *Soviet Critical Design: Senezh Studio and the Communist Surround* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019); Alexey Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca:

Igor Kopytoff *as well as* Boris Arvatov or Sergei Tretiakov, or to compare and contrast versions of the “Thing Theory” informed *not only* by Bill Brown but also, say, by David Arkin.¹² So far, such transcultural and transhistorical dialogues have been very limited, and the Russia-Ukraine war has made the revitalization and revision of the intellectual legacy of the past century even more difficult, at times—toxic and irrelevant.

But I think we should resist the temptation to erase the past, however painful that resistance may be. Wars end, and the imminent reconstruction and rebuilding cannot come out of thin air. Whether we like it or not, the past continues to shape and guide us, and we’d better know how exactly that happens.

There is another important dimension, too. The past is hardly a dead weight that keeps pushing us to the ground. At least, it shouldn’t be. In his last work, Viktor Shklovsky, the founder of Russian Formalism, provided a formula that seems quite appropriate now. Recalling his activities in the 1920s, he mused: “The past does not need to be renounced; it should be refuted and transformed instead.”¹³ I am after the same dual gesture here: one needs to know the past that should be refuted (not renounced, censured or cancelled). Yet one should also be able to turn this act of refutation into a process of productive transformation of the past.

In other words, by revisiting ubiquitous (yet overlooked) Soviet intellectual attempts to reformulate and reforge relations between subjectivity and materiality, we might better understand our current obsession with the power of things, be they peaceful or otherwise. We might even strategically appropriate, purposefully adapt, selectively borrow and productively misread ideas, methods, and approaches of the past for our current needs and interests. The goal is not to imitate, of course, but to learn and to change. Or, to slightly paraphrase a line from the editorial, written in 1922 by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg for their legendary journal «*Вещь* – *Gegenstand* – *Objet*»: it makes little sense to “reject the past in the past;” the point is to “create the present in the present.”¹⁴

THINGS AS POINTS OF TRANSFER

In the field of humanities, things tend to appear indirectly—in the form of mediated and heavily processed artifacts.¹⁵ They come discursively prepackaged (and Mayakovsky’s poem is no

Cornell University Press, 2020); Yulia Karpova, *Comradely Objects: Design and Material Culture in Soviet Russia, 1960s–80s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

¹² Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 64–91; Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),” *October* 81 (1997), 119–28; Boris Arvatov, “Laboratories for Organizing People: Selected Essays on Art and Byt,” *The Russian Review* 82, no 1 (2023), 17–49; Sergei Tretiakov, “The Biography of the Object,” *October* 118 (2006), 57–62. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no 1 (2001), 1–16.

David Arkin, *Iskusstvo bytovoi veshchi. Ocherki noveishei khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti* (Moscow: Ogiz, 1932).

¹³ Viktor Shklovsky, *O teorii prozy* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1983), 73.

¹⁴ El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, “The Blockade of Russia Moves Towards its End” [1922], in *El Lissitzky. Life. Letters. Texts*. Ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 344.

¹⁵ For a good example, see *Veshch: Metafizika predmeta v iskusstve*. Ed. Yurii Firtach (St. Petersburg: Apollon, 2013).

exception)—as descriptions in documents, as acting parts in instructions and manuals, as categories in taxonomies and nomenclatures, or as names on various lists. To frame it directly: “things” become wordy. They are transformed into signs, subjected to the rules of syntactic structures and narrative constructions, as opposed to, say, the law of gravitational attraction. Despite all the processing and packaging, such wordy things are semantically slippery entities. They are semiotic shapeshifters of sort. A poem might indeed be “a large *thing*”—until it is not. Wordy things never stop oscillating—appearing either as a collection of letters (or sounds) or acting as a discursive reincarnation of a real thing. Materiality seems to be in the eye of the beholder. The semiotic can only partially “colonize” the material, always leaving behind some kind of a remainder that resists its complete appropriation or incorporation.

In 1929, Mikhail Bakhtin crystallized this condition of discursive incompleteness as “a word with a loophole,” that is, a word that could undermine any claims to “the ultimate, final, meaning of one’s own words.”¹⁶ About the same time, Valentin Voloshinov, in his illuminating discussion of stylistic options for incorporating others’ discourses in the author’s story (“reported speech”) pointed to a similar dynamic. “Serving two masters” at once, as he put it, such utterances bring incompatible modes of expressivity together in a counterpointed way—through “an *interferential* merging of two differently oriented speech acts.”¹⁷ Much later, in the late 1980s, Donna Haraway followed this logic by bringing the discursive and the material together: “fixed locations” and “fixed vision” were to be replaced with “inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material–semiotic fields of meaning.”¹⁸

While benefitting from this epistemological commitment to preserving (and multiplying) differences within the confines of discourse, I would like to introduce another source that helps with unfolding the same dynamic relationality between “different differences” in a distinctive way. The visual nature of my example gives more texture to the idea of overlapping, layered, interferential and/or diffractive reading of things and words.

Around 1920, El Lissitzky, a Soviet architect, artist, graphic designer, and media theorist began working on a series of post-Suprematist paintings called Prouns (an abbreviation for the Project of the Affirmation of the New, *proekt utverzhdeniia novogo*). I will leave aside Lissitzky’s most insightful elaborations on the nature and meaning of his Prouns. Here, I will only briefly discuss the Proun’s ability to introduce “the idea of plural creation” through the iterative production of “a new creative whole.”¹⁹

Visually, Lissitzky’s Prouns presented a noticeable departure from his earlier works, which were deeply inspired by Kazimir Malevich. While continuing to rely on formal conventions of Suprematism (basic geometric shapes, primary colors, dynamic composition), Lissitzky changed the tone and orientation of his own work. Malevich’s negational approach (“non-objectivity”) was replaced with a clear affirmative stance. Lissitzky’s pronounced desire to build something new overshadowed his mentor’s deconstructive/destructive impulse. These changes were achieved through the introduction of “material forms,” as Lissitzky himself

¹⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. [1929]. Trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 233.

¹⁷ Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. [1929]. Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 136–137.

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no 3 (Autumn 1988): 588.

¹⁹ El Lissitzky, “Proun. Not World Visions, But—World Reality,” in *El Lissitzky. Life. Letters. Texts*, 348.

defined them.²⁰ Suprematist flat shapes were supplemented with three-dimensional “objects”—cubes, parallelepipeds, planes, etc. (**FIG. 3abc**) The addition may seem unremarkable, but it proved to be a game changer. It dramatically reformatted the visual space of the painting and the conventions of its perception: the dichotomy between representation and materiality was overcome.

Typically, geometric figures draw the viewer’s attention to the surface, inviting them to follow sequences, harmonies and/or contrasts of colors, shapes, lines, etc. Volumes, in turn, require a different kind of optical literacy—the one that is comfortable with the idioms of depth, movement, and dynamism. By situating flattened Suprematist figures next to three-dimensional volumes in his Prouns, Lissitzky simultaneously activated optical orientations that normally do not overlap. Similar to Voloshinov, he also brought two different modes of expressivity within the borders of one visual utterance, as it were. But unlike Voloshinov, he did not have to refract one mode through the other. The artist’s visual medium allowed him to retain “different differences” without subjecting them to an interferential fusion. Ontologically distinct forms coexisted, and their coexistence dynamized the nature of the shared space. As Lissitzky later recolled, “I created the Proun as a transfer station (*peresadochnaia stantsiia*) between painting and architecture. I treated the canvas and the wooden board as a building site.”²¹



Figs. 3abc. El Lissitzky, left to right: *Proun 1C: A House above the Ground*, 1918; *Proun 99*, ca. 1923–25; *Proun 6*, ca. 1920.

The “transfer station” in Lissitzky’s formula usefully bridges the world of iconography with the world of material structures; his Proun partakes in both, while being neither. Also, and perhaps more crucially, the metaphor of the transfer station implied the altering approach to the medium itself: canvases and boards were not mere *vehicles* for representations anymore; they were *sites* where new creations could take place. Or, in Lissitzky’s own words:

²⁰ Lissitzky, *Proun. Not World Visions*, 347.

²¹ El Lissitzky, “The Film of El’s Life,” in *El Lissitzky. Life. Letters. Texts*, 329.

Proun begins as a level surface, turns into a model of three-dimensional space, and goes on to construct all the objects of everyday life. In this way Proun goes beyond painting and the artist, on the one hand, and the machine and the engineer, on the other; it advances to the construction of space, divides it by the elements of all dimensions, and creates a new, many-faceted unity as a formal representation of our nature.²²

As hyperbolic as this statement may be, it underscores the basic point that is crucial for my discussion: the introduction of a three-dimensional object into what used to be perceived as a two-dimensional space significantly changes the range of possibilities. Simply put, the 3D object becomes a catalyst for other optic and semiotic transfers, leaving the choice of the direction to the viewer. In this respect, Proun 99 (center) is an ideal example. The off-centered cube in the upper part of the work powerfully redirects the viewer's gaze, introducing not only a sense of spatial depth but also a feeling of vertical orientation. Depending on one's point of view, the cube could appear not only *in front* of the dark gray vertical band in the middle but also *above* or *over* it. The off-centered intervention thus becomes a decentering move that destabilizes the apparent organizing dominance of the band.

Similarly, the cube itself, as a proper transfer point, presents the viewer with a choice that needs some deliberation: is it receding or is it protruding? is it in relief or is it hollow?²³ Both options are equally available for the viewer but only one of them can be activated at a time. In other words, the structure of the painting, its spatial organization and perception, could vary, without changing its shape. For the viewer, the cube here plays the same role as Tolstoy's couch did for Viktor Shklovsky in his famous "Art as Device": the cube jolts them out of an automatized sleepwalking and forces them to pay attention to itself. It pushes them to question their own practice of reading; it repositions them in relation to an environment that has become barely perceptible.²⁴ It makes the familiar strange.

The impact of the Proun was not limited to the space of the painting only. The Proun's dynamic internal organization demanded a similarly dynamic viewer. "The traditional painting has been exploded, like a being with a temple and soles..., – Lissitzky maintained in 1929, – it was transformed into a world floating in space. We have carried both the painting and the viewer beyond the confines of the earth, and the viewer must circle like a planet round the revolving painting to comprehend it fully."²⁵ Constantly alternating between two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces, the viewer had to continuously adjust their optical habits and change their perceptual regimes.

²² Lissitzky, Proun. *Not World Visions*, 348.

²³ For an extensive discussion of Lissitzky's technique, see Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* (April 1988), 160–182.

²⁴ In his *Art as Device*, Shklovsky famously quotes an entry from Tolstoy's diary: "As I was walking around dusting things off in my room, I came to the sofa. For the life of me, I couldn't recall whether I had already dusted it off or not. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I felt that it was already impossible to remember it. If I had in fact dusted the sofa and forgotten that I had done so, i.e., if I had acted unconsciously, then this is tantamount to not having done it at all." It is precisely this process of individualizing the previously undifferentiated and unnoticeable sofa – or, to reverse the formula, it is the sofa's insistence on being taken seriously (and autonomously) – which ultimately results in Shklovsky's seminal idea that one recovers a sense of life by recovering the sense of a thing: for instance, by making a stone "stony" again. For more discussion, see my "Shklovsky and Things, or Why Tolstoy's Sofa Should Matter," in *Viktor Shklovsky's Heritage in Literature, Arts, and Philosophy*. Ed. Slav N. Gratchev and Howard Mancing (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 93–108.

²⁵ El Lissitzky, "Suprematism and the World Reconstruction," 332. Translation is amended.

There was yet another important technical solution that enabled the viewer's immersive and multi-faceted experience of the Proun. Lissitzky "volumized" Suprematist planes and figures in a very special way: the three-dimensional effect was achieved through axonometry with its distinctive spatial organization. Unlike the perspectival organization of space that is built around the vanishing point that positions the spectator in a fixed location (the viewer's *point of view*), Lissitzky's axonometric organization of space offers no "perceptual security."²⁶ As a result, the viewing subject had to actively locate their temporary viewing position along the available axonometric lines, which in turn could be infinitely extended forwards and backwards. Moreover, the Proun could have multiple points of view suggested by differently oriented axonometric projections within the same frame, unlike the perspectival paintings: "the surface of the Proun ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below."²⁷

The Proun does appear as a "many-faceted unity" organized as "a formal representation." It is an effective combination that keeps the semiotic and the material in a productive tension; it is a "plural creation" that re-constitutes itself in a somewhat different form in each act of iteration. Unlike Dadaist collages or Sergei Eisenstein's montages of incommensurable attractions, Lissitzky's Prouns are not so much intended to visually assault the viewer as to activate and foreground alternative modes of seeing.

The unfolding logic of Lissitzky's transfer stations is a productive visual analogy for understanding "material-discursive phenomena" that I mentioned earlier. Here, as in Mayakovsky's poem, the addition of a (three-dimensional) thing could dramatically disrupt the organization of space by opening up new facets, suggesting new directions, and multiplying points of view. As points of transfer, such "things" allow for new movements without overdetermining their destination; they break up the monotony of spatial organization not so much by offering new paths as by indexing their possibility. They embed new potentialities, giving the viewer/reader a chance to bring them to life.

THINGS TO REVOLT

In the epigraph for this article, I quote from Mayakovsky's early play "*Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*" (1913) to show his complicated (but never-ending) love-hate relation with "things." Undoubtedly, the first edition of this small book was a real, palpable thing, too. In the text itself, various objects exhibited their strange logic, otherworldly souls, and their "inside out" morphologies. The organization of the book—its layouts, fonts, and black-and-white graphic images— contributed significantly to this general sense of materialized anarchy. The linearity of reading was deliberately violated. Words were no longer smooth; they lost their usual transparency. Emboldened, italicized or broken in unexpected places, they were converted into thingly signs, revealing some hidden meanings and (im)plausible connections. The text became textured.²⁸

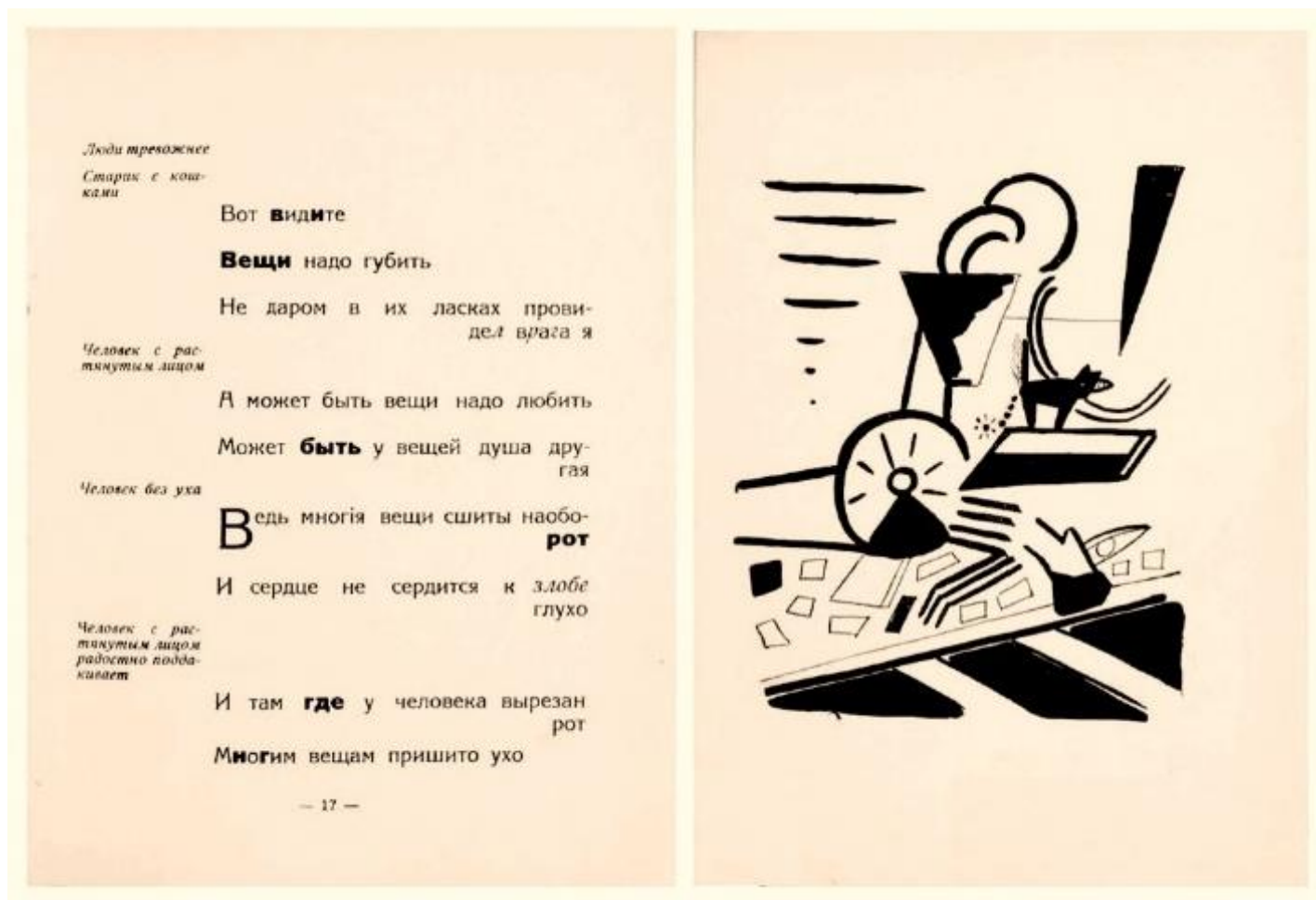
²⁶ Bois, *El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility*, 172.

²⁷ Lissitzky, *Proun. Not World Visions*, 347.

²⁸ *Vladimir Mayakovsky. Tragedia*. Ills. Vladimir and David Burliuk (Moscow: Tip. I. N. Gryzunova, 1914).

In addition, Vladimir and David Burliuk further intensified Mayakovsky's early speculative realism by graphically conveying in their illustrations the poet's message about unpredictability and incomprehensibility of human and more-than-human knots, twists, and formations. In the book, "things" constituted "realities deeper than any of the relations in which they might become involved."²⁹ (FIG. 4ab)

There is a fascinating family resemblance between Mayakovsky's *Tragedy* and *A Human. A Thing*. Commenting on the 1913 play, Katanian usefully tells us that one of the earliest titles of the tragedy was, in fact, "*A Revolt of Things*" (*Vosstanie veshchei*).³⁰ Interestingly, but hardly surprising, in both cases, "things" in the titles had to fade into oblivion to free up the prime real estate (on the covers) for a human-centric vision.



Figs. 3ab. Left: Thingly words: a page of the poem. Right: A revolt of things; an illustration for the poem by Vladimir and David Burliuk. *Vladimir Mayakovsky. Tragedia*. Moscow: Tip. I. N. Gryzunova, 1914. The first edition of the poem.

Things won't disappear, though. Nor would they lose their agency: they continued their subversive activity between the covers. As if taking revenge, they would create a major ontological and discursive revolt:

²⁹ Graham Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 196.

³⁰ See his comment in Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sovrание*, 439.

Suddenly, all things went rushing off, ripping their voices, and casting off tatters of outworn names. Wineshop windows, all on their own, splashed in the bottoms of bottles, as though stirred by the finger of Satan. From the shop of a tailor who'd fainted, trousers escaped and went walking along — alone, without human buttocks! Out of a bedroom, a drunken commode — its black maw agape — came stumbling. Corsets wept, afraid of tumbling down from signs reading "<i>Robes et modes</i>." Every galosh was stern and straitlaced. Stockings, like sluts, winked flirty eyes. I flew along like a violent curse. My other leg is still trying to catch up — it's a block behind.³¹	И вдруг все вещи кинулись, раздирая голос, скидывать лохмотья изношенных имен. Винные витрины, как по пальцу сатаны, сами плеснули в днища фляжек. У обмершего портного сбежали штаны и пошли — одни! — без человеческих ляжек! Пьяный — разинув черную пасть — вывалился из спальни комод. Корсеты слезали, боясь упасть, из вывесок «<i>Robes et modes</i>». Каждая калоша недоступна и строга. Чулки-коготки игриво шурятся. Я летел, как ругань. Другая нога еще добегают в соседней улице.³²
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Vibrant beyond belief, these “things” resolutely separated themselves—performatively and ontologically—from their “outworn names” and outdated owners. Displaying their “agentic capacities,” they “went walking along—alone,” material and semiotic at the same time. The “vital things” here are indeed replacements, even substitutes—no longer for poems, but for humans themselves. They are other than humans. Yet in their interferential fusion, they are still *like* humans—drunken, flirty, or stern.³³

Anthropomorphism and animation, however, were not the only ways of recognizing and rendering the power of things. In *A Human. A Thing*, mashups of people and objects were less cubo-futurist but just as whimsical, mind-twisting, and body-bending. Perhaps in this poem, things emerge most vividly as points of transfer. Consider, for example, the following lines from the section *Mayakovsky's Nativity*:

A bakery. The baker. Bakes his rolls. What is he? A flour-bespattered zero.	Булочная. Булочник. Булки выпек. Что булочник? Мукой измусоленный ноль.
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³¹ *Mayakovsky—Plays*. Trans. by Guy Daniels. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 67.

³² *Vladimir Mayakovsky. Tragedia*, 28–29.

³³ For an extensive discussion of agentic capacities and vital things, see Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

And suddenly rolls grow fiddle-necks, get souls. He plays them. He's everyone's love and hero.	И вдруг у булок загибаются грифы скрипок. Он играет. Всё в него влюблено.
A cobbler's shop. The cobbler. A scoundrel and beggar. Puts leggin's on boots or something of the sort. Then look – into a harp turns every leggin'. He's crowned, he's a prince, vivacious and smart. ³⁴	Сапожная. Сапожник. Прохвост и нищий. Надо на сапоги какие-то головки. Взглянул — и в арфы распускаются голенища. Он в короне. Он принц. Веселый и ловкий. ³⁵

Here, “humans no longer figure as subjects that observe or oppose the realm of objects but are an integral part of it” (to use a language from a recent book on new materialism).³⁶ Humans are profoundly impacted by things: a baker is “a flour-bespattered zero.” Progressing from this zero stage—to rolls, then—to fiddle-necks, and, finally,—to the hero, they unleash new modalities of their own being, utilizing as points of transfer things that they themselves created. Indeed: “an assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it.”³⁷ Ivanov-Razumnik, a Russian literary critic, defined Mayakovsky’s investment in things as “naïve realism,”³⁸ but, certainly, the poet’s reality was far, “far weirder than realists have ever guessed.”³⁹ As in Lissitzky’s Prouns, ontologies, materiality, subjects objects, and signs become fused here in some peculiar,—nonlinear but highly dynamic—relationality. **(FIG.5ab)**

This fusion does not exhaust the complexity of Mayakovsky’s object-oriented ontology. Humans change but so do things. Notice the transversal object-formations that emerge in the process of the incomplete fusion of humans and nonhumans: those baked rolls that grow their “fiddle-necks” (and souls!), or those bootlegs that turn themselves into harps. The musical references, of course, are not arbitrary here. As monstrous and surreal as they are, all these bready fiddles and leathery harps, nonetheless, are purposefully orchestrated to add a possibility of harmony to the initially discordant relationality of humans and things.

It would take nearly a century to conceptualize this way of bringing together humans, objects, and discourses. In 2007, Karen Barad would describe a similar mode of reading one thing through another as a *diffractive methodology*. For Barad, words and things become co-constitutive elements of her approach. In order to be fully understood, differently oriented modes of expressivity have to be rendered as “a material-discursive phenomenon that makes the effects

³⁴ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Man,” in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Works in Three Volumes. Vol. 2. Longer Poems*. Trans. Dorian Rottenberg (Moscow: Raduga, 1986): 60.

³⁵ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Chelovek,” in Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sovrание sochinenii. Vol. 1*, 249.

³⁶ Thomas Lemke, *The Government of Things: Foucault and the New Materialisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2021): 5.

³⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 34.

³⁸ Razumnik Ivanov-Razumnik, “Futurizm” i “Veshch,” *Kniga i revoliutsiia* 8–9 (1921): 23.

³⁹ Harman, *The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer*, 184.

of different differences evident.”⁴⁰ Relying on logic and lexicon of quantum physics, Barad insisted that “practices of knowing are specific material engagements,” attentive to fine detail.⁴¹ The focus on differential detail allows the diffractive reader to avoid collapsing things together or mechanically superimposing them on one another. Thus, the resulting entanglement is “a cutting together–apart, where cuts do violence but also open up and rework the agential conditions of possibility.”⁴² That is to say, unexpectedly, rolls would grow “fiddle-necks” that could be played on by a flour-bespattered baker.



Figs. 5ab. Left: El Lissitzky, *The New Man (Neuer)* from *Figurines: The Three-Dimensional Design of the Electro-Mechanical Show Victory over the Sun*, 1920–21.

Right: Vladimir and David Burliuk, an illustration for the poem *Vladimir Mayakovsky. Tragedia*. Moscow: Tip. I. N. Gryzunova, 1914.

Informed by Haraway (and somewhat replicating Voloshinov’s logic of interferential reading), Barad’s diffractive method similarly overcomes “the representation/materiality dichotomy”⁴³ by enabling “entangled relationalities to make connections between entities that do not appear to be proximate in space and time.”⁴⁴ Harps, boots, crowns, and cobblers somehow end up in the same network of relationships. Just like Barad, Mayakovsky in his *A Human. A Thing* “does not take the boundaries of any of the objects or subjects ... for granted but rather

⁴⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 88.

⁴¹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 91.

⁴² Interview with Karen Barad, 52.

⁴³ Dolphijn, and van der Tuin. *New Materialism*, 108.

⁴⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 74.

investigates the material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce “objects” and “subjects” and other differences out of, and in terms of, a changing relationality.”⁴⁵

I am deliberately diffracting Mayakovsky and new materialists here, reading them through each other. I am less interested in claiming that Mayakovsky “knew it first” (though this is not irrelevant). Nor am I trying to anachronistically discover in the poet’s works some early traces of agential or speculative realism (though that might be illuminating). I am not concerned with possible epistemic homologues, nor with alternative genealogies of concepts and theories. Instead, I find it important to explore the possibility of reactivating those overlooked, abandoned, erased, or even unnoticed trends and potentialities that seem strikingly relevant today—the trends that somehow have remained dormant or sidelined for more than they deserve.

Simply put, what I am proposing here is not that different from the logic of the decolonizing retrieval, and Mayakovsky acts here as my proverbial canary in the coal mine of the past. An author who persistently foregrounded and explored polymorphous entanglements of things, people, affects, and discourses is now hollowed out, caricatured, and discarded. Of course, Mayakovsky is only the tip of the iceberg (to flip my material metaphor). The list of similarly misread, misplaced, and otherwise “scientifically verified” authors and sources could easily be extended. By discovering, dismantling, and removing the layers of subsequent erasures and obfuscations, I suggest, we could bring back those material-discursive realities—wordy things? thingy signs?—that have been completely overshadowed by the hegemony of the “human.”

Following Lissitzky. I think, it would be useful “to *Proun*” Soviet texts by turning their “things” and “objects” into points of transfer, where established trajectories of reading could take an unpredictable direction. Through interferential and diffractive readings such “plural creations” could be approached as “words with a loophole,” capable of undermining any claim to the ultimate, final meaning of a poem, a poet, an object, or a period.

We can refute the past, and we can transform it, too.

⁴⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 93.