

Naum Gabo's *Tête Construite*: A Dynamic Form in a Continual State of Becoming

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In January 1983, the Humana Corporation purchased *Head No. 2 (Tête Construite)*, Figure 1), a work by Russian Constructivist sculptor Naum Gabo (1890-1977). This magnificent piece, which stands six feet high (183 cm), is made of stainless steel and was considered by Gabo to be his best version of a series of large heads.

Naum Gabo's *Tête Construite* of 1975 is just that: a constructed head. It is not an object surrounded by space, for it has no closed surface; we can see inside it. The surfaces inside the *Head* are melded with the space surrounding it. Rather than being a sculpture of the type created by a carver or modeler, it is built up element by element—a work of art that is engineered like a high-rise building or a bridge. Similar to a work of architecture minus the facade, Gabo's *Tête Construite* begs to be understood as a conglomeration of spaces defined only by partitions.¹

Whereas Pablo Picasso's *Head* of 1909, to which this construction is often compared, is a portrait—that of his lover Fernande Olivier—Gabo's head is a concept of a head. It is not a portrait. It is neither man nor woman, and although popular theory contends that it is both—female on the right and male on the left—Gabo isn't saying. Gabo and the Constructivists chose to depict "constructs of the mind."² Their sculptures, or "constructions," were neutral and free from immediate psychological and artistic associations.

Tête Construite exemplifies many, if not all, of the principles set forth in Gabo's *Realist Manifesto* of August, 1920. This document, which proposed a new movement in art, was also signed by Gabo's brother, artist Antoine Pevsner (1886-1962).³ Gabo and Pevsner passed out copies of the *Realist Manifesto* at the first exhibition of their works, which they organized in their native Russia. War-weary Muscovites were assaulted with strange and unorthodox tenets such as the need for an "art to be erected on the real laws of life," and in creating works, the artists of the new movement would "take away from them the labels of their owners...leaving only the reality of the constant rhythms of the forces in them."⁴ The *Realist Manifesto* stated that the use of line in art as a descriptive device was to be abolished; "in real life there are no descriptive lines."⁵ Line should only be used to indicate direction, *i.e.*, the direction of the static forces as well as the rhythm inherent in objects.⁶ The Futurists referred to these lines as "force lines." Although Gabo is well known for his many kinetic sculptures, he believed that the visual properties of kinetic rhythms could be evoked by formal relations inher-

ent in the sculpture, thus moving only the eye of the beholder.⁷ Gabo and his brother affirmed that in their art a new element—kinetic rhythms—formed the basis of their perception of real time.⁸ Works of art were to be seen as real objects, absolute in themselves. Their only reason for existing was to be beautiful.⁹

Volume ought not be used to measure space, they said: "We affirm depth as the only pictorial and plastic form of space."¹⁰ Because mass in its static condition was renounced, a work of art could no longer be a lifeless clump existing in space. "Sculpture, from its beginnings," according to Gabo, "dealt with closed volumes and compact materials alone, so space was of no concern to the sculptor, since the solid had a space in which it stood, and that was the whole function of space in the plastic arts up to recent times."¹¹

The components of time and space were fundamental to the art of the Constructivist. As Gabo said, "The realization of our perceptions of the world in the forms of space and time is the only aim of our pictorial and plastic art."¹² Excited by the popular topic of discussion of the day—Einstein's Theories of Relativity—Gabo, Pevsner, the Cubists, Futurists, members of the De Stijl movement and others all tried to incorporate the dimensions of space and time into their works of art. At the beginning of his *Manifesto*, Gabo wrote:

Space and time are re-born to us today.
Space and time are the only focus on which
life is built and hence art must be constructed.¹³

Space was to be described in a work of art "by continuous depth," which eliminated mass. Voids would produce volumes. Space should be seen as a tangible component instead of the equivalent of nothingness, because space is, in fact, a real element of vision.¹⁴ Space is versatile. Gabo once said, "I can use the same space in different positions in the same image."¹⁵ Space is also cheap. Given the cost of metals during the war years, Gabo was able to use space as his primary constructing material.

Umberto Boccioni's phrase "unique form which gives continuity in space" best describes Gabo's *Tête Construite*.¹⁶ A unique form that gives continuity in space would be a dynamic form, and could not be so without affirming the three dimensions that determine volume: height, width and depth.¹⁷ A dynamic form must exhibit an infinite unfolding of changes integral to that form as well as continuous projections of forces—hence, the term "force lines."¹⁸ When discussing the use of "force lines," regarding Gabo's *Tête Construite* and

Boccioni's sculptures, it must be noted that the "force lines" are contained in the edges of the sculptures. Rather than applied lines, such as one would see in a Futurist painting, the edges in these sculptures force our eye to follow them in a continual motion. A dynamic form, then, would also express time, for Gabo said, "Time to us is the faculty of experiencing the continuity of the present."¹⁹

Gabo's *Tête Construite* exhibits its dynamism only when seen in the proper context. In a dimly lit room, the figure is imposing but static. Put it in the spotlight, and the metamorphosis is astounding (Figures 2 and 3). As I adjusted lights from various angles, I was astonished by the transformation caused by the various shifts of light. Gabo knew that *Tête Construite* would be in a continual state of becoming with the ever-changing light of the outdoors reflecting on the stainless-steel planes, so he placed *Tête Construite*—fully equipped with drainage holes to carry off rain water—in his garden. There it stood exposed to all the elements except snow, from which he protected it.²⁰

Gabo said that it "became clear to me that the image of Nature which is created by the scientist in his art and by me in my art by painting the landscapes of Nature as seen from my window is not the whole truth...we were both looking at Nature as outsiders."²¹ Gabo felt that the visual image of an experience of an object is something different from the object itself—that is an event of our consciousness.²² He said that the only source of an experience is our own personal, unique consciousness of that experience.²³ This idea was not new, for since before the turn of the century, modern artists were intent upon creating and not reproducing. Modern physics would no longer insist on absolutes. Rather, a new tradition was encouraged in which science recognized individual conceptions of reality.²⁴

In his earliest sculptures, Gabo followed the Cubists in their disintegration of a continuous surface and their elimination of a frontal focus.²⁵ Gabo's pencil sketch for *Head No. 2* (Figure 4) very much resembles the multi-faceted paintings of the analytic Cubists. The dematerialization of the surface, such as we see in *Tête Construite*, allowed Gabo to exhibit his training in stereometry and "massless" construction.²⁶ Stereometric figures are geometric designs that translate solid masses into cellular webs (Figure 5). While Cubism taught Gabo how to disintegrate, stereometry taught him how to build.²⁷ As seen in Analytic Cubism, boundaries are suggested in Gabo's heads and torsos, but are never completely defined.²⁸ In that regard, Gabo has been credited with surpassing the Analytic Cubists by achieving what they never tried: a three-dimensional equivalent of Analytic Cubist painting.²⁹ Gabo reasoned that if fixed spatial relations could be rejected by the continued shifting and rearrangement of planes, so too could fixed temporal relations.³⁰ Gabo never called himself a Cubist for he believed they were too intent on destruction; Gabo called himself a Constructivist because he felt that "in the realm of ideas, we are entering on the period of reconstruction."³¹

Gabo's first attempt at sculpting did not produce a stereometric, Cubist-inspired figure. His first known work,

now lost, was his clay head of *The Slave* (Figure 6) from the winter of 1912-13. While on his way to a lecture in Munich, where he was studying the sciences, he passed a black man on the street. Gabo said he was so touched by the suffering in the man's face that he went straight home and modeled the face in only twenty minutes.³²

Gabo's next attempt at sculpting was his *Head No. 1* of 1915 (Figure 7). In his plywood version, 53.5 cm. high, we see Gabo's realization of art that reflected the new reality—a far cry from the sentimental sculpture of *The Slave* just a few years before. Instead of depicting a human being fraught with pain and despair, we see an android, half human and half stereometric diagram.

Tête Construite (Figure 1, also known as *Head No. 2*) was copied from Gabo's *Head No. 2* of 1916 (Figure 8). While *Head No. 1* (Figure 7) may appear slightly tentative, *Head No. 2* (Figure 8) is the stereometric method of construction perfected. Gabo admitted that he considered *Head No. 1* only partially successful because of an insufficient concavity, especially in the lower section of the sculpture.³³ In retrospect, Gabo felt that *Head No. 2* embodied all of his Constructivist objectives.³⁴

Often referred to as an icon of Constructivism, *Head No. 2* may have been based on the dematerialized figures of icons once so prevalent in Russia. Icons were probably the first forms of art Gabo ever saw. He recalls, "in our nursery on the wall opposite me hung an icon and in nanny's corner another icon and a lamp that was always lit...we went to bed and slept at night and woke up in the morning with its image."³⁵ Perhaps the hands seen below the head in the series of *Head No. 2* constructions represent hands folded in prayer.

Tête Construite has an intriguing history. The design for *Head No. 2* was probably first worked out in cardboard or wood, although this version is now lost. Gabo's finished version of *Head No. 2*, 45 cm. high, was done in galvanized iron, which was covered with yellow-ochre paint (Figure 8).³⁶ After showing the construction in Berlin and Amsterdam in 1916, it was returned to Russia. Gabo, however, did not return to Russia.³⁷ He must have given up all hope of ever retrieving the *Head*, for he immediately made another version of *Head No. 2*, this time in celluloid.³⁸ This version, 43 cm. high, came closer to Analytic Cubism than the galvanized iron version because the translucent quality of the celluloid allowed for even greater visual depth and spatial complexity.³⁹ This work is believed to be the first ever executed in celluloid.⁴⁰ Gabo so loved working with light and space that in 1920 he began working in clear plastic, eventually producing his first shadowless sculpture, *Linear Construction No. 1* of 1942-3.⁴¹

Using the celluloid version of *Head No. 2* as a model, Gabo made a bronze copy, approximately 4 cm. high, in 1953-7.⁴² That might have been the end of the saga of *Head No. 2*, except that in the late 1950s, Gabo received a package from Russia containing, disassembled, the original galvanized iron version.⁴³ If Gabo knew the identity of the sender, he never revealed that information to anyone.⁴⁴ Once reassembled, he

stripped the galvanized iron *Head No. 2* of its yellow-ochre paint, possibly to emphasize the industrial look of the natural metal.⁴⁵

His first *Head* sculptures were rather small, averaging about 44 cm. each. This was possibly due to the fact that materials were hard to come by during the war years, as well as the probability that Gabo lacked patrons who would have allowed him to produce these works on a larger scale.⁴⁶ The next four versions of *Head No. 2*, however, were considerably larger. In 1965, Gabo made a version of *Head No. 2* in Cor-ten steel that was 95 cm. high—more than twice as tall as the previous versions. In 1966 he constructed another version in Cor-ten steel that he painted gray-green. This was 178 cm. high. In 1966 Gabo produced a third version of *Head No. 2* in Cor-ten, slightly smaller, at 175.3 cm. high, which he left unpainted.

In 1975 Gabo produced his largest version of the *Head*, and entitled it *Tête Construite*. This version, his last, of *Head No. 2*, is of stainless steel and stands 183 cm. high. Gabo considered this to be the best large version of *Head No. 2* and refused to exhibit it publicly during his lifetime.⁴⁷ He preferred the material and the shape of the head of this version over those of the other versions.⁴⁸ This final version of *Head No. 2* was installed in the garden outside Gabo's home in Waterbury, Connecticut.⁴⁹

Gabo made only a few more stereometric constructions before turning to non-representational sculpture. His catalogue raisonné is extensive and contains works just as innovative and inspiring as those in his constructed *Head* series. Possibly because his father was a metallurgist and owned his own rolling mill in Russia, Gabo felt at home working with metals of all kinds.⁵⁰ Although he frequently used such light-reflecting materials as glass and plastic in his constructions, he always reverted back to metal. No one else in the history of modern sculpture has handled metal with such facility.

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- 1 Frank Whitford, "Gabo and Constructivism," *Architectural Review* 139 (1966): 469.
 - 2 Albert E. Elsen, *Modern European Sculpture 1918-1945: Unknown Beings and Other Realities* (New York: George Braziller, 1979) 75.
 - 3 Born Naum (Necmia) Borisovich Pevsner, he changed his name to Naum Gabo when he became a sculptor, so as to avoid being confused with his brother Antoine. Steven A. Nash and Jorn Merkert, eds., *Naum Gabo: Sixty Years of Constructivism*, (Munich, 1985) 17.
 - 4 Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 328.
 - 5 Chipp 329.
 - 6 Chipp 329.
 - 7 George Heard Hamilton, *The Pelican History of Art: Painting and Sculpture in Europe: 1880-1940* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962) 353.
 - 8 Chipp 329.
 - 9 Hamilton 354.
 - 10 Chipp 329.
 - 11 Naum Gabo, *Of Divers Arts* (Princeton: Pantheon Books, 1962) 99.
 - 12 Chipp 328.
 - 13 Chipp 328.
 - 14 Nash and Merkert 26.
 - 15 Hamilton 353.
 - 16 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 114. It is probable that Gabo was aware of Boccioni's extrapolation of Johann Zollner's text on four-dimensional transcendental physics, in

- which the Italian Futurist describes this interpretation of reality as interpenetrating forms filling space. (The phrase "interpenetrating forms filling space" describes Gabo's *Tête Construite* perfectly.)
- ¹⁷ Henderson 110.
- ¹⁸ Henderson 111.
- ¹⁹ Gabo 101.
- ²⁰ Nina S. Williams, née Gabo, letter to Humana Corporation, undated, corporate files, Humana Corporation, Louisville, KY.
- ²¹ Gabo 21.
- ²² Gabo 119.
- ²³ Gabo 192.
- ²⁴ Elsen 98.
- ²⁵ Albert E. Elsen, *Origins of Modern Sculpture: Pioneers and Premises* (New York: George Braziller, 1974) 102.
- ²⁶ Elsen, *Modern* 82.
- ²⁷ Albert Elsen, "The Quiet Voice of Naum Gabo (1890-1977)," *ARTnews* October 1977: 62.
- ²⁸ Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982) 294.
- ²⁹ Rosenblum 294.
- ³⁰ Rosenblum 43.
- ³¹ Nash and Merkert 57.
- ³² Steven A. Nash, "A Head of Its Time," *ARTnews* May 1983: 200.
- ³³ Nash 15.
- ³⁴ Nash 15.
- ³⁵ Nash and Merkert 48.
- ³⁶ Nash and Merkert 200.
- ³⁷ Nash 122.
- ³⁸ Nash 122.
- ³⁹ Hamilton 354.
- ⁴⁰ Hamilton 354.
- ⁴¹ Elsen, *Modern* 82.
- ⁴² Nash 122.
- ⁴³ Nash 122.
- ⁴⁴ Nash 122.
- ⁴⁵ Nash and Merkert 15.
- ⁴⁶ Elsen, "Quiet" 62.
- ⁴⁷ Williams.
- ⁴⁸ Williams.
- ⁴⁹ Williams.
- ⁵⁰ Nash and Merkert 12.



Figure 1. Naum Gabo, *Head No. 2 (Tête Construite)*, 1916/1975, stainless steel, H. 183 cm, Louisville, KY. Collection of the Humana Corporation. Photo: Rick Mattingly.



Figure 2. Naum Gabo, *Head No. 2 (Tête Construite)*, 1916/1975, stainless steel, H. 183 cm, Louisville, KY. Collection of the Humana Corporation. Photo: Rick Mattingly.



Figure 3. Naum Gabo, *Head No. 2 (Tête Construite)*, 1916/1975, stainless steel, H. 183 cm, Louisville, KY. Collection of the Humana Corporation. Photo: Rick Mattingly.



Figure 4. Naum Gabo, *Study for Head No. 2*, 1915, pencil on paper, 43 1/2 x 34 1/2 cm. Collection of Nina and Graham Williams. Photograph copyright Nina and Graham Williams. Works by Gabo. Reproduced by permission of Nina Williams.

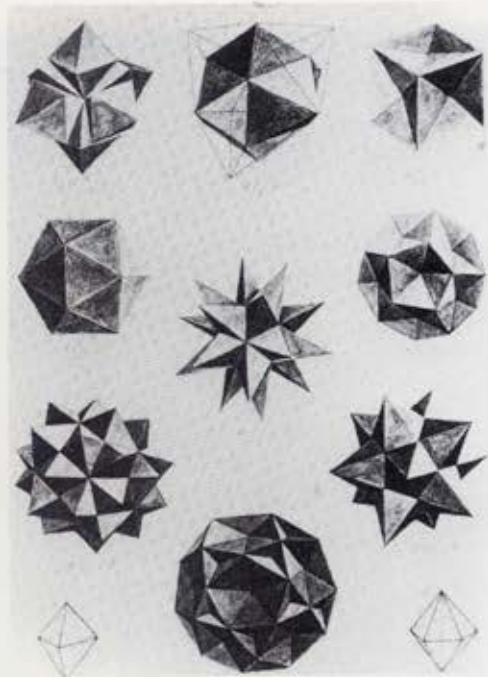


Figure 5. Stereometric Figures, W. I. Stringham, "Regular Figures in n-Dimensional Space," *American Journal of Mathematics*, vol III, 1880, pl II.



Figure 6. Naum Gabo, *The Slave (Head of a Negro)*, 1912-13, clay. Lost in 1914; presumed destroyed. Photograph copyright Nina and Graham Williams. Works by Gabo. Reproduced by permission of Nina Williams.



Figure 7. Naum Gabo, *Constructed Head No. 1*, 1915/reassembled 1985, triple-layered plywood, H. 53 1/2cm. Collection Miriam Gabo. Photograph copyright Nina and Graham Williams. Works by Gabo. Reproduced by permission of Nina Williams.



Figure 8. Naum Gabo, *Constructed Head No. 2*, 1916, galvanized steel, originally covered with yellow ochre paint; paint removed 1962/3. Collection Nina Williams. Photograph copyright Nina and Graham Williams. Works by Gabo. Reproduced by permission of Nina Williams.