This text marks the end of a seven-year period during which, with the exception of a single short essay on Rudolf Schlichter (1920), Einstein had ceased writing on contemporary art; his art criticism from 1914 suggests weary disillusionment with the art world. In a brief text, “On Primitive Art” (1919), written in the wake of the German revolution, he had declared that only revolution and participation in social reconstruction could give art a purpose.1 Evidently unimpressed with Berlin Dada’s blend of art and politics, he now believed—at least for a time—that he had found such an art in Russia. The Russians “practiced absolute painting like they practiced absolute politics,” he writes. The “destruction of the object” by the artists of the Russian avant-garde was not a merely formal affair, but the destruction of both a social and epistemic order, a bourgeois order founded on possession, individualism, and the fiction of stable subjects and objects. Soaring on the wave of revolution, Einstein proclaims a dictatorship—not of the proletariat but of vision, a dynamic, functional vision, unfettered by objects, that can create a new reality. Following his argument to its radical conclusion, Einstein makes a case—for the only time in his writing—for “objectless painting,” for a nonrepresentational art, as well as vision “directed against the object,” vision as pure function. No other text of Einstein’s so closely integrates politics with art theory.

Einstein reiterated much of the argument presented here five years later in the section “Russians after the Revolution” in his Art of the Twentieth Century, but by then his political stance had softened and his verdict had soured: “In the optical experiments of these Russians there is more political conviction than painting; more Marxism than anything else . . . . The Russians began with a formal utopia . . . and ended with quite harmless canvases, despite all the talk about . . .

epochs, tendencies, dogmas. For these artists are dogmatic; the dictatorship of the painting mouth."²

The present text did not appear during Einstein’s lifetime. An inscription on the untitled manuscript, “für Russenheft Aus der Einleitung für den Russischen Maler (1921),” (For the Russian booklet [or journal, or issue] From the introduction for the Russian painter) has encouraged the supposition that it may have been intended for publication in Russia, perhaps even as an entry for the Great Soviet Encyclopedia. Einstein’s correspondence with Tony Simon-Wolfshkehl (1922–23) documents his involvement in protracted negotiations regarding planned lectures and publications in revolutionary Russia.³ German Neundorfer has, however, recently argued plausibly that the text was destined for a publication closer to home: the Berlin-based journal Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet, published by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg.⁴ Only two issues, dated March/April and May 1922, appeared, but Einstein was listed in the first issue as a future contributor. A struck-through passage at the end of the manuscript indicates that the “Russian painter” referred to in the inscription was Nathan Altmann, who spent some time in Berlin and was involved in organizing the huge state-sponsored exhibition of Russian art held at the Galerie van Diemen in Berlin, which opened in October 1922.

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Revolution smashes through history and tradition. Critique as action. Tradition piles up in the object; whatever is immediate is pushed aside, crushed.

Revolution’s task: de-reification, destruction of the object in order that humankind may be saved.

Man is fed up with describing objects; now he is trying to achieve utopia with no regard for the object or for people objectified by property.

Objects, a medium for passive thinking, the hooks for mnemotechnic, the technique of memory, a compulsion to slide everything down the same chute. At best, permission to interpret, but under threat of imprisonment.

Normally people are crushed to death by objects. This becomes a means of repetition, of eternal return for cowards and the resigned, who thereby avoid disillusionment.

Should it be objects that collapse or human beings? To assert the human person, objects, which are preserve jars, must be destroyed. This is the uncomfort-

3. Undated letters from 1923, Carl-Einstein-Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Little came of these plans and negotiations: an essay, “Ideen rasper Germanii” (The Decay of Ideas in Germany) appeared in the Russian journal Rossiya in 1924; Einstein’s play Die schlimme Botschaft (The Bad Message) appeared in Russian translation in the same year.
able risk of every revolution; as long as that revolution is not the work of romantic petit bourgeois, which is to say, as long as it is not simply avoided.

Objects anesthetize, rigidify into a myth of guaranteed continuity, into the drunken slumber of the mechanical.

Civilization represents itself in a storeroom of objects, memorized obstacles to function.

Favorite object of the bourgeois: SELF. In communism the disappearance of the self and the destruction of the object go hand in hand. SELF: a fallacy a posteriori; at the moment of action the self disappears completely. It resurfaces during unproductive states of repose, an occasion for the luxurious recuperation from function. Just like the object. The self is the pension and savings of the undynamic rentier. Both self and object are supposedly capable of guaranteeing certainty, immutability. The world as tautology. One does not subordinate oneself to an action but to a craft object, in which so-called knowledge or practice, namely the experience of Grandpa and Auntie, became calcified. To this corresponds the wish to minimize anything dynamic and to Spenglerize new experience and history into tableaux. History becomes a metaphor for a few endlessly repeated banalities. Clearly one quietly understands these as having clever applications. The peripheral objects begin as the first stimulus. Function turns into industrial application; thinking becomes considering, and vision, crippled, becomes observation. Thus does the object inhibit political freedom. Sensibility, as experience of objects, becomes a conservatively bourgeois matter. But what is the majority of the poor supposed to experience? At best the care and cultivation of objects that the rich man adores and uses.

The poor man lives functionally, objectlessly; above all locked in a struggle with the fetishized excrements of history.

Self and object are supposed to vouch for a continuum of time, the return of nephews, in-laws, etc. A time, therefore, that is arrested, fixed in objects; so much so that it is no longer time at all but, emaciated, becomes a mere static connection between objects and memorized bon mots.

The poor are—mostly against their wishes—forced into asceticism; they are, as it were, condemned to dynamic time, to history, to the catastrophe of the interval. Objects have slipped away from them. They are condemned to the poverty of function with a chance for change or to an empty time continuum. And so asceticism, or the technique for murdering objects, mysticism, and utopianism are the primary stimulants imposed on them. They dynamize objectlessly. Look at early Christianity, the peasants’ wars, etc. The poor own nothing that they could observe or describe; they have no self with which dialectically to oppose an object, and so they move about as a selfless mass.

If the poor merely seized the objects of the bourgeois without destroying them—except for those objects that are functional, i.e., objects of their labor—then the poor immediately would become bourgeois themselves. The object would nudge them, force them into the same culture, civilization, so that objects might use those they had caused to fail.
Every destruction of objects is justified.

The bourgeois is a paraphrase of the milieu of objects; he is a component, a relation between objects. It is justified to destroy the bourgeois for the sake of rescuing what is dynamic. In revolution man breaks apart, insofar as he is a component of objects that are to be destroyed.

A dictatorship of man is seizing power, directed against an experience of which humanity saw only the vulgar backside that besat it; individuality is the sentimental excuse for rule by objects. The history of intervals, in which time rushes most quickly, must be written. Since all one does is describe, producing *le joli tableau*, since science does not adapt itself to time, it is precisely time that is being suppressed. One describes the stagnation of reification, but not the six-day race of deconsolidation; and if one does do that, then it is with a discreet smile, glancing sideways toward a fatalistically reassuring restoration, in which the bourgeois continuum of objects is once again revived so that the thingless person may die.

Law collapses along with things, since it is precisely as a relationship between things that law was established, a posteriori, in order to sanctify them.

Vision, the consumption of objects, suggests that one is oneself an inert object, indeed, in the face of these objects one happily senses the continuity of one’s own superior person.

One ought to write the history of the expansion and diminution of thing and self.

Undoubtedly, there was a conflict between pictorial space and wildly proliferating painterly means. Inventive visual experience was struck dead by descriptive painting. One wound up with tasteful arrangements. If there was invention at all, it hardly sprang from visual experience; rather, subject matter was imported from literature. Poeticizing is description by dilettantes, who replace form with the touchingly decorated object.

Most often one is content to fill up the ill-fated canvas with dead visual experiences. These can be facilely preserved in contrived arrangements. Since the so-called composition was encapsulated secondhand in feigned objects, the helplessly repeated recipes were preserved together with those very objects that had been pasted onto them.

Composition is not to be confused with visual experience. It is worth no more than any other arrangement, or a crease in a pair of trousers.

The object in combination with its associated pose had become a metaphor of form, of unmediated vision. Any given spatial experience was consumed without too much effort; one was content with variants and regroupings.

Since Cubism, painters have dared to destroy pictorial convention for the sake of creating space. It became clear that what mattered was not a likeness but the act of vision, which, through a focus on interesting subject matter and technical questions of painting, had withered away to become no more than a conventional *truc*, but now painters no longer confined themselves to investigating form as a
means for the clarification of objects; they dared to conceive of vision as a creative activity.

At first one abandoned the old, carefully weighed opportunism of balance between picture and object, instead emphasizing space, the *structure imaginative*, which dominates the object. The important thing was to leave behind the old rationalism, which presupposed that vision could ultimately be subordinated to some kind of reason; for should any picture so much as suggest the achievement of totality, one may rightly assume that vision itself proceeds as a total act, bearing its legitimation in itself, that it need not agreeably repeat the conventional schemata of objects.

The object no longer determines vision; rather vision is now directed against the object, ruthlessly, dictatorially. The object had to be identical with the visual experience, and whenever it was deemed necessary, one invented objects that were nothing more than representations of the subjective act of vision, of the formation of space. Object-related vision, in which the object overwhelms pictorial form, is passive. Certainly the object comfortably leads the beholder back to his practical existence as a whole, just as in this case every judgment on art gets mixed up with the mental representation of real depicted objects. To see was something like a remembering of objects, and one tried to achieve a maximum equilibrium between the remnants of active vision and objects fixed in memory.

In objects, modes of vision died out, and those objects, as depositories of worn-out vision, hindered the advance toward the autonomous subjective act of vision.

It was the Russians in particular who, as it were, elevated the viewing subject to be the unfettered bearer of the image, just as they had dared politically to proclaim the dictatorship of humankind over objects that had grown rigid. They practiced absolute painting as they practiced absolute politics. The object was destroyed for the sake of the dynamic visual act. From this affirmation of the pure, self-contained act of vision, corresponding roughly to freely invented objects arising from the dictatorship of vision, we gained an insight that is especially important for us. This painting of the absolute, this grasping after the pure visual function, demonstrated that the absolute is not some ideological generality, but always a perfectly concrete individual experience that has nothing to do with any metaphysical or posthumously retrospective theoretical product. As function, the absolute is thoroughly unmetaphysical and untranscendent. The experience of the absolute can be represented as fully or as inadequately as any other experience, once the artist, instead of representing lazy, run-down metaphorical objects, turns to inventing freely the forms appropriate to this function.

Here we will not address the conflicting specific spatial qualities of the work, the qualitatively different mode of producing the work, and the judgment of the beholder.

This absolute, confined as it is within the limits of an experience, is simply a marker of the intensity of human self-assertion. To want to pass it off somehow as
an overarching concept, an idea, or some other theoretical construct is nonsense. This disposes of the objection to nonrepresentational painting by those who view it only as the product of theoretical speculation. Whoever takes this position assumes subject and object to be metaphysical destiny and has never progressed to function, of which both object and subject are mere residues, conventions of petrification—precisely what is shattered by revolution. If one paints an object one indicates one’s own viewpoint, how I see it; if one paints one’s functional vision, one posits function itself, rather than the retroactively feigned I that vainly mirrors and embellishes itself in the object.

This absolute, as it is represented intuitively, does not claim for itself the status of a law. Rather, it clearly demonstrates precisely the arbitrariness of what is ostensibly based on law. Hence the retreat of the bourgeois into a tranquil, law-based world is rendered virtually impossible, since he becomes transfixed in a dictatorial function, which yet makes no claim to be anything more than concrete experience. In place of credulously venerated but calcified laws beyond and ostensibly above function, he is, with hallucinations of pure act, made into an object, and this seeks to assert itself not through some other existence, but through the intensity of suggestion. Dictatorship of vision, ascetics of the object, destruction of facts, and, accordingly, renunciation of the self.

In Russia such painting has been incorporated into a more revolutionary conception.

Understandably, such a subjectively oriented painting will no longer feel bound by old painting tricks. If space was to be achieved, then painting, striking a decorative pose when faced with unmediated vision, had to be destroyed.

The Russians decided in favor of function and relentlessly sacrificed to it inherited modes of vision with which objects had become encrusted. Often such painting is scorned as “insensible,” as inaccessible to the senses, but this is precisely a confusion of object with vision.

Russian artists expropriated objects from the old painting and were urged on by Lenin’s revolution to the investigation and unmediated representation of pictorial vision itself.

The object was eaten away by the functional, the fluctuant experience of space; the function, alien to the object, was seized. However, one avoided the error of antiquarian metaphysics, according to which, say, some universality is enthroned behind de-objectification, and in tune with which one likes to practice some rough version of applied logic as craft.

Through function one advanced to the struggle between specific qualities of space. Such a form was self-sufficient as an object. One renounces the obliging classic reconciliation between a so-called reality, namely petrifications, and an inherited taste; one renounces those objects that merely serve to inhibit revolutionary action, and one renounces the continuity between premise and the given world. What, after all, was one supposed to do with that world, considering that one had rejected it out of utopian zeal? Since what mattered was not to allow objects to
repeat themselves conservatively and tautologically, but to clear them out of the way so that utopia could be realized? Utopia is function prevented from realization by the mass of accumulated calcifications. The visual process was no longer conceived as peripheral excitation by objects, but as an act of subjective domination. Vision had become dictatorial. The object collapsed under the intensity of naive experience. Space was no longer the site of a pose; it was exploded, split, layered—it became function instead of system or relation between things. It is precisely the concretely experienced “absolute” that tremendously increases the skepticism toward metaphysics, thing, and self. Thus the intuition of the “absolute” in mystic thought is indeed bound up with the annihilation of self and thing, yet it remains a fixed singular experience. The concretized absolute is simply alien to science.

Nothing is more endangered by words than a function that is interpreted. To call art objectless does not mean that no object is produced, but rather that the object that is produced is roughly identical to function, which in this particular case means the visualization of pictorial space. It is not an object, then, that would for the most part exist independently of aesthetic visual experience.

When it is precisely the visual process that is at stake, then that is more important than flowerpots or rounded hips. The diagonal, a mediation of experience, is removed. The subject creates an object identical to self; looking at pictures then becomes a unification of the creative subject with self in the act of spatial creation rather than an association grounded in memory. Space, an expression of function, is no longer suppressed by objects; dictatorship of the eye.

In the same measure, politics purged Russia of objects. Politics was no longer about the approval of conservatively tautological things; it had become overwhelmingly a subjective function, a dictatorship of the thingless.