

GEORGII KOVALENKO

Alexandra Exter's Dynamic City in 1913



Georgii Kovalenko is a Doctor of Art History, head of the Department of 20th century Russian Art at the Research Institute of the Theory and History of Fine Arts at the Russian Academy of Art, and the lead scientist at the State Institute of Art History. He is the deputy chairman of the Commission for the Study of Avant-Garde Art of the 1910s and 1920s at the Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as the editor of the series "Avant-Garde Art of the 1910s and 1920s" (in 12 volumes) and "Russian Art. 20th Century" (in 3 volumes). His publications include *Alexandra Exter – Farbrhythmen* (State Russian Museum, 2001) and *Alexandra Exter • A Retrospective* (Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

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Alexandra Exter painted one night landscape after another. Night time streets, buildings with darkened windows, deep shadows on gleaming sidewalks and sharp rays diverging in a cone shape – light from streetlamps and from car headlights, tram lights.

Exter sometimes indicated the relevant city in the titles of her works – *Kiev (Fundakleyevskaya Street)*, *Florence* – but more often it is just *City at Night*, just *Night Time City*. And geographical details add little, in essence, to the painting: speaking generally we are looking at one and the same city. And the important thing is that it is a city at night. And it so resembles the Paris described by Apollinaire:

Night of Paris, drunk on gin,
Filled with electric light.
The rails became music. Trams
A wave of madness swept through.
And they fly, rending fog.
This is truly the night time city in Exter's work.

When first viewed, *Fudakleyevskaya Street* (also titled *City at Night*, 1913) (1 •), literally blinds you with its lights tearing out of the darkness. The eye must adjust to it in order to see that they are the lights of automobiles hurrying down a steep slope. That everything here has truly been "swept by a wave of madness", everything has yielded to it, shifted and also seems to be hurrying somewhere down below.

There is something bewitching in Exter's landscape. You get the distinct impression that it is forcing you to look closely

into it, demanding to be remembered, as if in another minute it will change unrecognizably, disappear, go out and be carried away along with the frantically flying lights.



1 • *Fudakleyevskaya Street / City at Night*, 1913
Oil on canvas, 88 x 71 cm.
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



2 • *City at Night*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 88.5 x 70.5 cm.
Vologda Regional Picture Gallery



3 • *City at Night*, 1913-1914, Oil on canvas, 90.7 x 72.5 cm.
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

It is basically possible to think of this landscape not as a landscape at all but as a provisional dynamic composition. You could say that the artist is pursuing purely experimental aims, trying to create a certain colour structure charged with the energy of movement and endowed with the ability to change or, at any rate, to authoritatively suggest to the viewer that its movement and changes are inevitable.

In *Fundukleyevskaya Street*, however, everything is balanced on a certain boundary. The planes seized by light are piled on top of each other, they are sliding off, moving down, slanting, forming bizarre constructions all together. Light brings colour, pours it onto even surfaces and also erases it as it leaves.

Light brings movement as well. Movement has an entirely precise direction in the landscape – from the concrete to the provisional, from the indivisibility of forms to their separated elements. In the upper part of the landscape can be seen a densely built-up street, the ledges of buildings, quite generalised but with entirely distinguishable details. Then, closer to the centre of the canvas, closer to the lights of the automobiles, the forms seem to disintegrate, elements are liberated and detach themselves, hyperbolize, absorb colour. This happens by leaps and bounds, with the speed increasing sharply, nearly instantly. It is, if anything, a cinematographic effect rather than a camera moving, it seems that buildings, lampposts, bridges have torn

themselves from their hinges and are moving towards the viewer. The analogy is not random. Exter is not at all interested here in the movement of the automobile itself – or interested only to the extent that she cares about the effect of “reported” moment, of conveying the energy of the hurtling automobile to everything else – the surrounding environment. In this way the artist paints the reflection of movement. She paints motorless forms that are nonetheless transformed by the speed of the moving object.

Fundukleyevskaya Street and other Exter landscapes of the time are usually considered works of Cubo-Futurism. There is no sense in going into the details of this turn-of-the-century movement in Russian art, especially when we can just repeat what Dimitri Sarabianov wrote:

“Cubo-Futurism acquired indistinct contours and became a ‘transfer station’. The distinctiveness of the Russian situation in the phenomenon of Cubo-Futurism was manifest in the very commixture of nearly antipathetic movements, in the rejection of foreign experience in its pure form, in the potential form of presentiment of an exit from Cubo-Futurism and entrance into a new quality.”¹

Exter did not accept the experience of Italian Futurism in its “pure form”. But note some passages from the manifesto

published for the first exhibition Futurist painting (Paris, 1912) that seem to directly confirm a number of her artistic principles of the 1910s. For instance, this one:

“Our bodies penetrate the sofas upon which we sit, and the sofas penetrate our bodies. The motor bus rushes into the houses which it passes, and in their turn the houses throw themselves upon the motor bus and are blended with it.”²

Or this one:

“We have declared in our manifesto that what must be rendered is the *dynamic sensation*, that is to say, the particular rhythm of each object, its inclination, in movement, or, more exactly, its interior force.”³

Naturally, such coincidences do not confirm anything. It is easy to see that Futurist states are formulated very generally and metaphorically – that is what a manifesto is for. And the distance between them and real practice often turns out to be significant – this is especially obvious today. But Exter took Futurist ideas seriously – there is no doubt of that. Her frequent interactions with Umberto Boccioni left their mark.

The uninhibited palettes, the tendency towards living and resonant colour, the energy of colourist collisions – in this respect the work of Exter and Boccioni dovetailed, shared much in common. Both Exter and Boccioni had no doubt that colour contained a certain self-sufficiency, an independent sense and its own strength. Much in their paintings is built with confidence in this conviction.

Their approach and understanding of the morphology of Cubism also shows many commonalities: without denying that morphology and still taking it as a foundation, as a generally firm principle, they both expanded and supplemented it. Exter was more careful with this than Boccioni. But no less decisive. In *Fundukleyevskaya Street* the ray-like stripes, circular and elliptical shapes and complicated systems of diagonals are energetic and active.

Their similarity and congruity basically end here. Exter was aware of overstepping the boundary that the Futurists avoided with such ease. We are talking about the materiality of forms, of the world.

No matter how interested Exter was in problems of colour dynamics, no matter how captivated she was by effects of light and its transformative power over objects and bodies, the artist's sense of the world remained material. She was not in the slightest drawn to the invisible, intangible, that which lay outside reality. And if we turn again to Futurist manifestos, Exter's paintings do not in the slightest relate to Carlo Carrà's certainty that “our

paintings will express the visual equivalents of sounds, noises, and scents”, that,

“...sounds, noises and scents are incorporated in the expression of lines, volume and colours, just as lines, volumes and colours are incorporated in the architecture of a musical work.”⁴

No matter how drastically the real world, its delineations and expression, its “lines, dimensions and colours” might be transformed beneath the artist's brush, with Exter they were always the “lines, dimensions and colours” of this world – they were not allowed to forget their origin.

There is one more extremely important difference here between Exter's Cubo-Futurism and the Futurism of Boccioni, Severini and Carrà. This is the problem of movement – one of the central problems, if not the main one, in Futurist painting.

Note: Exter very rarely depicts the moving objects so beloved of the Futurists. So rarely that *Fundukleyevskaya Street* could be considered an exception. And at the same time we have had occasion more than once to talk about movement as one of the foundations of her work, as an internal quality of many of her paintings. An explanation is due.

On the one hand, it all has to do with terminology. And when we talk about movement, we may as well be talking about the dynamics of Exter's figural compositions. The compositions as a whole and naturally their elements: lines, contours, dimensions and mass. And if you recall that dynamics in the sense given this term in physics – the science of the forces behind movement, the displacement of material bodies in space – then use of the term “movement” seems to make sense.

Of course, we were just talking about the forces included in Exter's paintings. About the readiness to movement they cause, their state of being charged with movement, with the anticipation of movement – about everything that so distinctly fills many of the artist's constructs.

On the other hand, another circumstance is also of principal importance: Futurist painting often equalizes the concepts of movement and rhythm. Still more frequently, rhythm is entirely destroyed by movement, subjugated to it and annihilated. Rhythm for Exter is an extraordinarily important category that she never disregarded. The potential for movement is laid precisely in the rhythmic structures of her paintings. In Exter's work, rhythm is always an element of movement. In this way,

“being an element of movement, rhythm is its drawing and not the canvas. Its ‘soul’ rather than its skeleton. Its organic rather than mechanical quality. Therefore, rhythm assumes a certain stable substance on the basis of which unfolds its free, spontaneous movement.”⁵



4 • *Florence*, 1914 Oil on canvas, 109 x 145 cm. State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow

These aphorism-like theoretical theses of Nikolai Tarabukin in *Towards a Theory of Painting* (1923) confirm Exter's understanding of rhythm better than any of hers could.

In fact, the presence of "stable substance" is one of the most obvious features in her Cubo-Futurist works. The dynamic subject plays out on its basis but the former's "free, spontaneous movement" is not capable of destroying this basis. It can be as authoritative and impulsive as possible, and as insistent in undermining the basis of the depiction (the "stable substance"), but it is nevertheless "drawn" to it, only confirming its stability and superiority.

Is this not why Exter was so devoted to architectural motifs, by far the most common in Futurist painting?

Exter stubbornly stuck to her principles. In her Cubo-Futurism the accent nevertheless was on Cubism. Its principles were dominant although Futurist phrases noticeably entered its lexicon. But they only underscored and highlighted the clarity of the artist's language. Indeed, with Exter,

"Cubism was a barrier erected on the path of an elemental lyrical flood. It defended itself from chaos by means of certain shape-

generating principles, perhaps believing that the experience of 'pure forms' was similar (or homologous) to internal experiences in a more general, wider sense, like experiencing sounds in music (music was, of course, an ideal model of art for both the new poetry and the new painting)." ⁶

Impeding chaos, the shape-generating principles in Exter's work in no way impeded the expression of the painting temperament. In yet another cityscape – *Florence* (1914), (4 •) – everything is built on the contrasting relationships of pure colours of the spectrum and on the interactions of the planes corresponding to and filled with each colour. The planes are all different: more often we see rectangles, tapered or nearly squares, narrow stripes and trapezoids. There are also graduated figures and many arcs, segments, sectors, discs.

And a curious effect: at first the thrust of the colouring, the intensity of the colour structure in *Florence* gives the impression of a mechanical pile-up of forms, their complete disorderliness and the unmotivated quality of their existence. But only at first. And this seems to have been anticipated by the artist.

One must assume that Exter needed this transition, at first a sharp and powerful colour chord, and then a wave of colour that becomes apparent and immediately manifest, that seems to run across the entire surface of the canvas. Its movement is obvious: the spatial colour planes are distinctly distributed, the rises and falls of its energy are clear. In one spot colour is laid down in a thin, nearly transparent layer, the white primer showing through, while in another it takes on materiality and mass. Its texture sometimes becomes almost incorporeal while elsewhere heavily exuding – the concentration of paint everywhere seems to hang onto the surface with great difficulty.

Exter virtuosically plays with all of these colour effects. Her fantasy might seem uninhibited and utterly unconcerned with reality if the viewer's gaze did not stop time and time again on certain details and did not constantly return to them.

They are all concentrated in the upper part of the canvas, nearly at the edge. They are real depictions of fragments, of real architecture: part of a wall and an archway, a piece of brickwork, steps.

It would seem that these details have nothing in common with the whole colour element filling up the majority of the painting. And if you mentally cut away the lower third of the canvas, the image that remains will very much resemble the non-objective compositions that Exter would shortly become so captivated by. But in *Florence* there are no separate and independent zones of images. Everything here is integrated and whole. And the transition from realistically painted details to provisional forms occurs naturally. It has direction, it is goal-oriented, but there is no violence to it. Real forms gradually enter into a new, other form of existence, they are transformed there, abstracted, generalized, they enter new relationships with each other. But no matter how their situation develops, the plastic rhythms within it do not fade and the connections make themselves felt all the more insistently. The development of the situation is effected in the search for spatial assonances similar to the “experience of sounds in music”, their endless reflections and returns.

The real layer in *Florence* is that “stable substance” from which everything began – all the rhythms, all the spatial forces, the drawing of movement.

Here we have reason to recall Boccioni's paintings of the early 1910s. (5 •) Disregarding its subjects and themes, we have no trouble discovering that it shares with *Florence* at the very least a similar charge of spectral colour, the same degree of intensity in the colouristic structure. And perhaps the passion for segmented forms, various arcs and sectors.

But what is entirely missing in Boccioni is that “stable substance”. Whatever the object of his depictions, whether it be an initially very stable object, its stability is compromised, essentially destroyed and annihilated.



5 • U. Boccioni, *Dynamism of a Cyclist*, 1913, Oil on canvas, 70 x 95 cm. Mattioli Collection, Milan

It is impossible to find visual rhymes in Boccioni's Futurist paintings. Impossible because there simply are not any. There could not be – they have been erased by an irrepressible bolt of movement that equalises everything, transforms everything into uniform colour plasma.

In this movement, connections are severed, structural laws are broken, form and colour lose each other. That is, in this case, any talk of composition, its expressions and principles is very provisional. Boccioni himself, by the way, often named his works “decompositions”.

With Exter things are different, as we have already seen. Besides everything that has been said, there is a tangible unity of the pictorial organisation in her Cubist landscapes, a vivid logic of connections between various zones of depiction and distinct structural laws. None of this is diminished either by the powerful dynamics of forms or the colouristic freedom.

In *Florence* there is a strict, somehow even solemn, vertical articulation of the surface. The organising principle can be read in any fragment of the painting. Each of them is issued a precisely calculated place, each has its role in the pictorial subject determined.

All of this relates both to Exter's works with closed form and to the ones in which the artist emphasises its open-ended quality. The open-ended quality in the latter works by no means indicates a loss of structure but, rather that the structure is maintained even beyond the limits of the image and is not diffused in its continuation. In other words, the open-ended form of such works infers not faceless emptiness and neutrality, but the space of those same laws that are in force inside the painting.

Abraham Efros, pondering on Futurism concluded:

“Futurism is infertile and artless as an abstract school of art pretending to supremacy. But Futurism is significant and beautiful

as the plastic confession of an artist who feels dissolved in the breakers, outgoing tide and whirlpools of city life.”⁷

Exter was a true poet of the city, an inspired poet. She was interested in the city and loved it in the entirety of its past and present, in its never-ceasing history and its constant anticipation of the future. Whether Exter was painting actual urban motifs or inventing them – evidence of times past and tokens of the technological age found their way into both. The artist never opposed them but saw the natural unification of the new and the old.

This is probably why Exter so loved to paint cities at night. Then everything took on even greater closeness, everything somehow naturally became unified. And transformed, reflected in each other: old architecture illuminated by electric light, the glare of headlights reflecting on old sidewalks, advertisements on centuries-old walls, the smooth surface of canals criss-crossed by triangles of light.

The melody of the night city was always a major one for Exter. Sparkling, inviting, attractive. Scattering melancholy and sadness. In this respect, Exter was a true Parisian.

Footnotes

- [1] D. Sarabianov, *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant Garde*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990. Russian edition p. 152.
- [2] U. Boccioni, C. Carrà, L. Russolo, G. Balla, G. Severini, “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto”, 1910, in *Futurist Manifestos*, Umbro Apollonio, Editor. London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, 28.
- [3] U. Boccioni, C. Carrà, L. Russolo, G. Balla, G. Severini, “The Exhibitors to the Public”, 1912, in *Ibid.*, 47.
- [4] Carlo Carrà, “The Painting of Sounds, Noises, Smells”, 1913, in *Ibid.*, 114.
- [5] N. Tarabukin, *Towards a Theory of Painting*. Moscow, 1923, 39.
- [6] N. A. Dmitrieva, Moscow 1984, 23.
- [7] A. Efros, *Profiles*, Moscow, 1930, 229.