

Alexander Rodchenko, Revolution in Photography



Rodchenko, 'Girl with a Leica', circa 1934

★★★★★

FOAM until 17 March

Why *must* we love Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956), the famous Russian artist who came of age during the crucial events of the October Revolution, Lenin's cultural revolution and Stalin's rise to power? Because he is one of the very few visual artists who realised the modern myth of the avant-garde.

Rodchenko put his art in the service of progressive politics and showed society an image of a better future during a time of great political upheaval. For a very brief moment from 1917 until Lenin's death in 1924, artistic experimentation was considered a form of activism, and the Russian avant-gardes were treated as comrades in the war against bourgeois culture. Rodchenko helped found the movement called constructivism, which blurred divisions between art and life as a way to transform society.

The more than 200 vintage prints now on display at FOAM retrace Rodchenko's steady embrace of photography to express his vision. He began his career-making photomontages, in the vein of Dada, for book covers, film posters and other mass media. Despite being relatively small, the graphic artworks showcased at FOAM have a lasting visual appeal. Next, he turned wholeheartedly to photography, creating an angular style with low- and high-angle shots that was to become one of his most prevailing legacies.

He used the camera to explore psychology in memorable portraits of friends and family, capturing intelligence in the deliberative eyes of the Russian Futurist poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky as beautifully as he explores the round curves in the distraught expression of his mother, holding her spectacles to her face. Later, Rodchenko focused on abstract patterns in urban landscapes and architecture to show the formal beauty of modern life.

Meanwhile, the political landscape was shifting around him: Stalin's new regime called his work 'elitist' and 'decadent'. Hired as a photojournalist, Rodchenko depicted sporting events and military parades using the same extreme close-ups and bold perspectives he'd developed earlier in his career. These photographs, in the last galleries of the show, presage social realism, the official aesthetic style of Stalin's repressive regime. His dream had become a nightmare and, in 1943, he wrote in his diary, 'Art must be separated from politics.' He found an escape in the fantasy world of the performing arts, his subject in the 1930s.

Rodchenko died three years after Stalin. By that time he had stopped shoot-

ing and instead collaborated with the regime by curating photo exhibitions, among the few activities it allowed him to pursue in spite of Rodchenko's continued efforts to adapt.

Reality had long shown it was stronger than art. Yet, with this exhibition, one can still get the feeling that image-makers can save the world. *Catherine Somzé*

