

Models and Fragments: Ian Kiaer's Studio

On a rainy day just after the turn of the new year I visited Ian Kiaer in his studio, which is on an upper floor of what used to be part of a nunnery close to the ancient Church of St Mary le Bow at Cheapside in the East End of London. The studio is quite large, containing a table with books and wrapped parts of works stacked against a wall. The peeling paint of the ceiling seemed appropriate to the materials marked with traces of their past life that Kiaer favors. The room has the feeling of being a place of contemplation and study as much as of making. While the idea of the studio as a privileged locus for the mysterious process of artistic creation has been criticized, and indeed since the 1960s abandoned by many artists for the sake of social practice in the everyday world, for Kiaer the studio remains a place of disclosure, where objects and materials resonate with each other and provoke thinking.

For all the research that goes into his work, Kiaer's method is simple and straightforward. He finds things and materials and brings them to the studio, where they may or may not be altered. Often the alteration turns an object or bit of material into what could be called a painting or a sculpture. In addition he makes small models and has elements of his work, such as what he terms an "inflatable," fabricated. In the studio, Kiaer explores relations between these things, moving back and forth to make an adjustment, sometimes a very tiny one. The process will be repeated when the elements are moved to the gallery, where the configuration of the space will present a different opportunity. So a work may go through a number of variations, just like a piece of music.

Kiaer's *Melnikov Project* is about the role of the studio as a place where things are subject to a particular kind of attention and take on new valences in relation to each other, thanks to the artist's alterations or simply by being there. The studio as it has come to us involves the merging of the workshop, as a place of making where skills and conventions are exercised, and the *studiolo*, dating from the fifteenth century, as a place of withdrawal, an inner room where the duke or prince went to read, think, and write away from the hubbub of his public duties. Workshop and *studiolo* meet in the modern artist's studio when subjective experience comes to be understood as the source of authenticity.¹

The avant-garde idea that artists should leave the studio in order to transform the world originates in the Soviet Union of the 1920s: the artist is supposed to take part in the planning and execution of a total transformation of society for the sake of the people conceived as a collective. The last painting was announced when artists of this era were called upon to turn themselves into constructors, and it took the form of a monochrome. From the beginning two possibilities for the monochrome were evident. On the one hand, Kazimir Malevich's





Black Square (1915) placed itself within the legacy of the icon, as is apparent from the way that it was hung high in a corner, just as icons traditionally were, in the First Suprematist Exhibition in St. Petersburg, thus evoking some notion of the absolute in its new beginning. The chair in Kiaer's *Melnikov Project*, placed against the wall with pieces of fabric that become abstract paintings—found monochromes—echoes the famous documentary photograph of that exhibition. On the other hand, Aleksandr Rodchenko in his three monochromes made from red, yellow, and blue pure pigment roughly applied (1921) asserted the sheer materiality of paint and the labor of painting without any notion of transcendence. Even this was too retrograde for the critic Nikolai Tarabukin, for whom monochrome painting was a “blind wall.”² As Tarabukin and his fellow revolutionaries argued, artists must abandon the making of objects of contemplation for the practical transformation of the social environment as a place for collective life.

Melnikov is exemplary according to Kiaer in part because, in his private studio constructed like a fortress tower, he returned from architecture to painting after the announced end of painting. What would it be to make a painting after painting that would not be a return to what painting was before its purported end? Around the time Malevich was making paintings that effaced the past in the name of a radical new beginning, Marcel Duchamp was taking existing objects and designating them as “readymade” artworks. For Kiaer, to make a painting after painting is to make a painting as a readymade—to take an already existing piece of fabric and pin it to a stretcher, for example, or to hang a piece of card.³ Just as Duchamp altered his readymades, so Kiaer will sometimes add paint or some faint drawing to those surfaces that already constitute paintings before he begins to work on them.

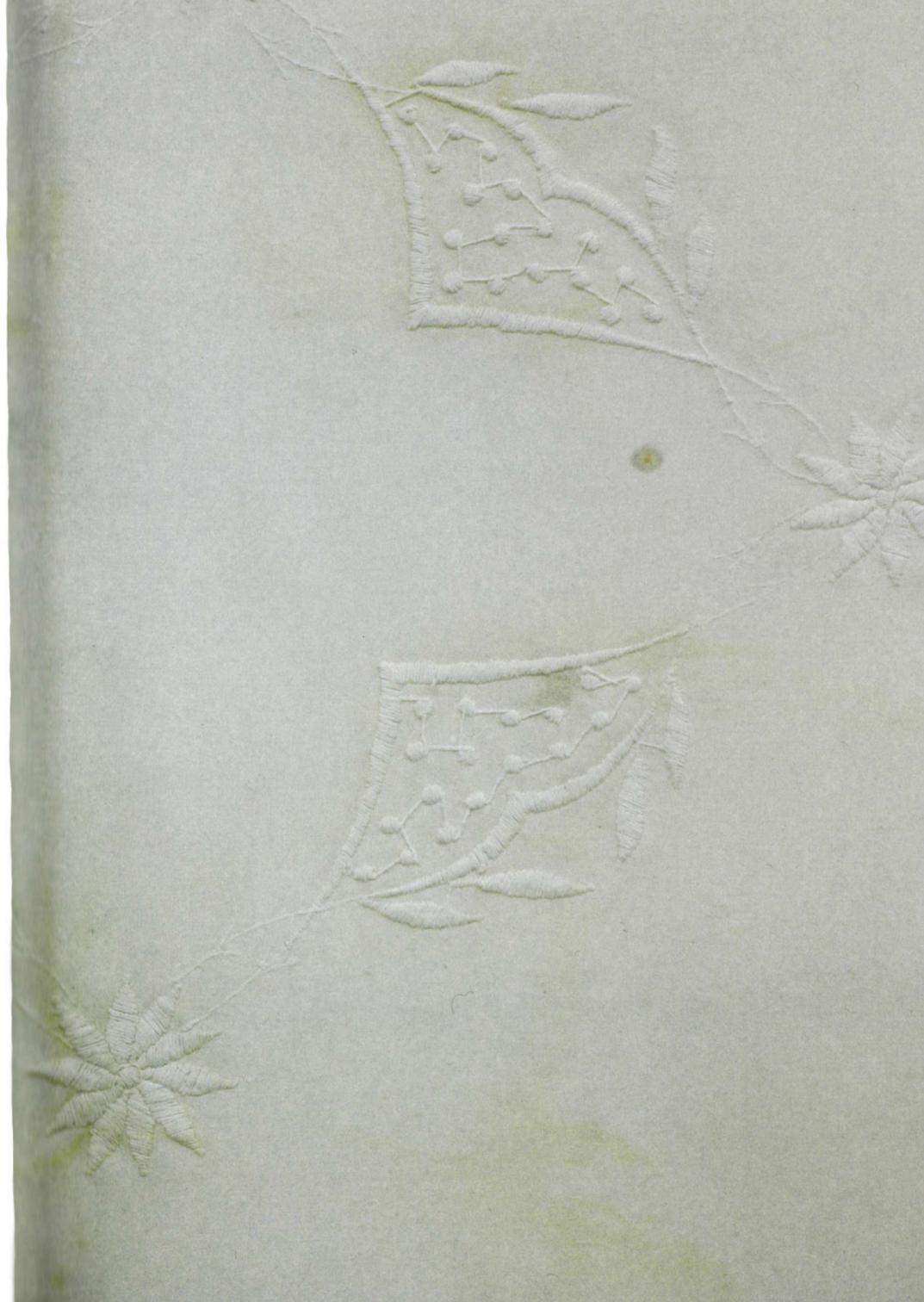
The things that Kiaer brings into the studio often bear a record through marks, stains, crinkles, and cracks of the times and places through which they have passed. One piece of fabric used for *Melnikov Project* is one half of a tablecloth, the other half of which had been burned, its embroidered flowers joined by the stains left from a meal. Kiaer's activity is not to “make it new” but to allow the object to manifest itself as it is, sometimes contributing a further trace or track of paint to the marks that commemorate what it has undergone. As an artist, Kiaer acts as an enabler (though his interventions, discreet as they may be, are crucial) but he is also a producer, in the sense of bringing the thing into presence in a particular way. In our discussion at the studio, he mentioned the classical Greek distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*. *Praxis* involves a willed making or doing that produces a determinate result. It depends on a linear idea of time where effect follows cause. *Poiesis*, or production as bringing into presence, involves a disclosure in which the human participates but does not necessarily will.⁴

The “extreme attention” that the philosopher Simone Weil stated “is what constitutes the creative faculty”⁵ may be a good way of describing what for Kiaer is facilitated by the artist’s studio. Among the elements of Kiaer’s *Melnikov Project* we find part of a tablecloth and two mattress covers unaltered except for being stretched. A sheet of corrugated cardboard, painted white with touches of silver, is arguably a painting that is also an altered readymade. This is not painting as construction or Romantic “creation from nothing.” Rather, already existing objects and materials become the focus of a particular kind of attention, involving both thought and perception, by being arranged in relation to each other in a place that is somewhat set apart from life governed by function and instrumentality.

Cast away, ruined, and discarded things become fragments of a whole that is not given in advance, which is a way of actively involving the reader or viewer in seeking or inferring what would complete the fragment.⁶ The incompleteness of the fragment challenges the idea of totality—the idea that lay behind Constructivism as the “total” transformation of society. The continuum of progressive realization, where what the future will be is anticipated and to be attained by construction, gives way in the *Melnikov Project* to the discontinuity of a present interrupted by both the contingency of the past and a future that is not determined by the present.

The fragment carries three implications. It is a piece of something larger, a broken off part of a whole that it gestures towards, yet it is also a complete, singular thing with its particular characteristics, and therefore it raises the question—a social question—of the relation of the individual to the community. The fragment also involves a reference to a past when it may have been complete and pristine, whereas in the present it is a ruin and a palimpsest of traces, a record of the events that impacted it. And as incomplete the fragment gestures towards a future when it might achieve its wholeness. The fragment is united with the model under the rubric of the “project.” Kiaer’s model of the home studio in *Melnikov Project* is left incomplete, open to one side. It involves a reference to the past—the home studio that was built in Moscow—that, rendered as an incomplete model, recovers in the form of potential—at our contemporary moment when the studio is once again being declared obsolete—the very idea of the studio in which Kiaer’s work finds its first dwelling.

As something reduced in scale, even miniature, the model in the installation becomes at once something very distant and at the same time very close, indeed even internalized as a form of thinking. The model can come after something that it represents or before something that it proposes: it recedes into the past and also implies a projection into the future. Since *Bruegel Project* (1999), Kiaer has titled many of his installations with the word “project,” which says something about his method, which is, out of a combination of research and encounter, to bring together disparate elements that will stimulate a form of thoughtful,





questioning seeing on the part of the viewer. Aided by the presence of the model, the other parts of the installation begin to assume aspects that diverge from their sheer materiality: for example, a piece of Styrofoam may suggest part of a ruin. It is as if the viewer becomes involved in looking for the question to which the exact way in which the elements are disposed is the answer. The model thus draws attention to the “as” in the Wittgensteinian “seeing something as something” that affects all perception, whether implicitly or explicitly, although in Kiaer’s installations what comes after the “as” is left open.⁷

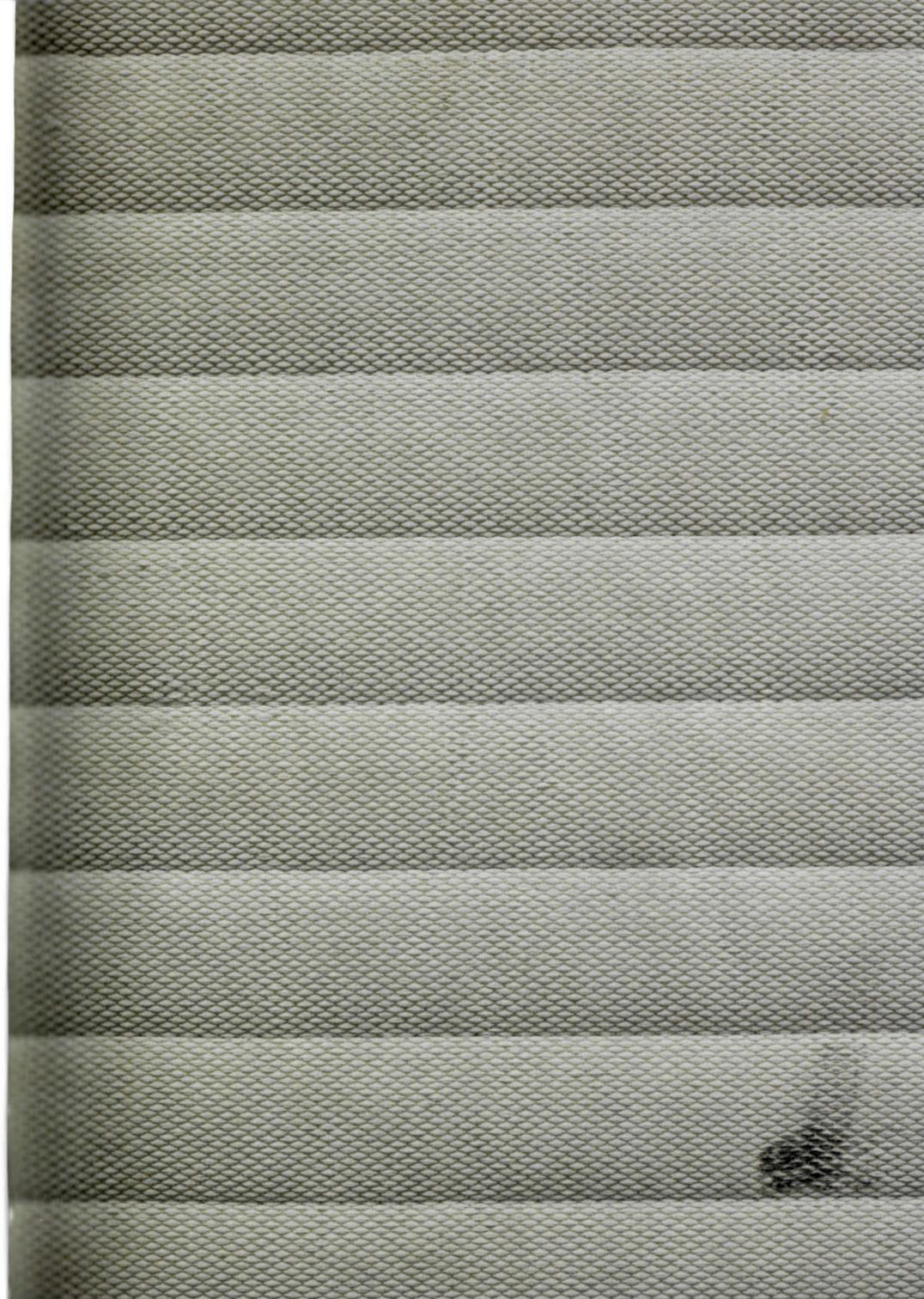
Kiaer’s model of part of the Melnikov studio and house is left deliberately unfinished: the circle is not completed. What is disclosed in Kiaer’s studio is the potential of things.⁸ If the consideration of the artwork as a formal composition would imply that it necessarily has to be the way that it is as a bounded whole—as ideas of “organic unity” suggest—Kiaer’s work, rather, emphasizes openness and contingency. The things he uses have been marked by the events that have befallen them: stains, scratches, abrasions, folds, crumples, tears, and all the impressions of their circumstances and histories. There is no “necessity” to these marks, they could have been otherwise, which is precisely what is meant by the word “contingent.” Contingency thus involves potentiality.⁹ The very materiality of the work is allowed to emerge insofar as the elements brought into the studio are freed from the linear time of means and ends and released into a virtual multiplicity of possible configurations, echoed in the degree to which the installations may vary in different locations. Through the insertion of the model and other decisions and adjustments, the artist creates a work that is determinate and specific in its character while open to being seen and interpreted in ways that change as the viewer moves near to or back from a piece of fabric on the wall or bends down to take a closer look at an object on the floor. Indeed, in the encounter with the installation, embodied seeing and thinking are inseparable.

Among the elements Kiaer has prepared for *Melnikov Project* are a pair of padded, striped, dirty white mattress covers, distantly resembling, once they are stretched, the *Achrome* paintings begun in 1957 by the Italian Piero Manzoni, which themselves have a somewhat medical connotation of bandages and plaster. In addition Kiaer had fabricated an inflatable using a reflective foil emergency blanket with a crumpled surface, which at the time of writing he is considering leaving flaccidly horizontal, like an air bed. These are allusions to Melnikov’s “Laboratory of Sleep,” part of the utopian Green City where industrial workers would recover from the strain of the workload under Stalin’s plan. There scientists would control the temperature, humidity, and air pressure; the rustle of leaves and cooing of nightingales would be heard; and scents would waft through the building. If that did not work, the beds would start to gently rock to ease tension and anxiety.¹⁰

As Kiaer reminds us, Melnikov also designed the sarcophagus for Lenin's tomb and in his home created great concrete slabs on which to sleep.¹¹ The little yellow transparent plastic dome as a possible element of the installation may have a double allusion to the greenhouse of this garden city and the crystalline cover of Lenin's sarcophagus. It is as if Kiaer is hinting that the renewal of sleep involves more than a natural cycle of refreshment, but rather an awakening that passes through death, just as painting takes on a potential after its end. In the *Melnikov Project* this is reflected in the play between the horizontal and the vertical: bedcovers stretched and raised to the vertical on the wall; a broken sheet of polystyrene placed horizontally on the floor abutting a wall; and in the studio, where the exhibit is being prepared, the serendipity of an inflatable containing a foil emergency blanket that wouldn't stand erect but sank to the floor looking like nothing other than an air mattress.

Kiaer's relation to his materials could be seen as acts of salvage. Crumpled foil, corrugated cardboard, a broken slab of Styrofoam, a piece of colored lighting gel, a half-burned tablecloth, and old high chair are cherished. If the work consisted of formal arrangements of these elements, its beauty would be too easily won, as if the studio or gallery were to become the surface for a poignant collage. Rather, the way the work is disposed summons questions concerning why the pieces or fragments matter—how the insignificant, the marginal, the used-up, the abject, and the tiny are no less important than the monumental, and perhaps infinitely more so. This cannot be brought about by monumentalizing the small or the ordinary. As Walter Benjamin writes in his essay on Franz Kafka, the coming of the Messiah will not be an overwhelming force, brought about by an act of will resulting in a total transformation, but will rather conform to the words of "a great rabbi" who "once said that he did not wish to change the world by force, but would only make a slight adjustment in it."¹² A slight adjustment that makes all the difference.

Michael Newman





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¹ See Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner, eds., *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

² For a discussion of Tarabukin's essay, see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 121–49.

³ See Thierry de Duve, "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas," in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 199–279.

⁴ For the account of *poiesis* and *praxis* that Kiaer referred to in conversation with the author, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 59–93.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd, quoted in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 212.

⁶ For the philosophical and poetic implications of the incompleteness of the Romantic fragment, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 39–58.

⁷ For "seeing as" see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 193–214.

⁸ See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁹ For the relation of contingency to potentiality, see Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 243–71.

¹⁰ S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 179.

¹¹ See Ian Kiaer, "Cylindrical House Studio, 1929," in this publication.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 134.

Cylindrical House Studio, 1929

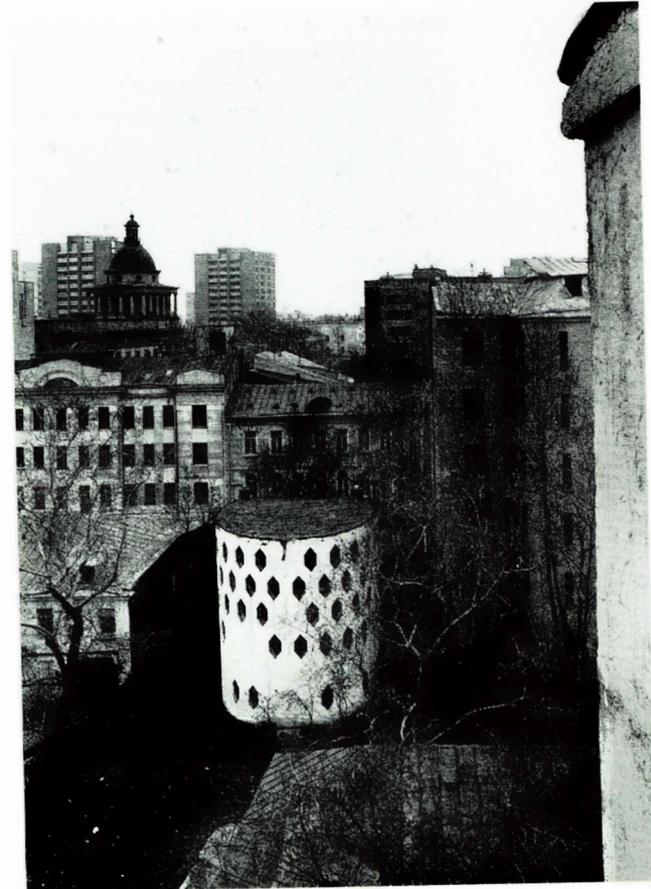
The distinctive shape of Melnikov's two conjoined cylinders and strange hexagonal windows speak of a structure beyond everyday dwelling. Its geometry, white surface, and remote, singular poise appear designed to provoke rumor of more complex workings within; as if the circular solution and eclipsing diameters might conform to some mystical planetary alignment or map an overlapping design of halos for an icon of orthodox saints. There can be few buildings with this many windows, over sixty in all, that remain so insistently insular. It may even be the quantity that works to deny any notion of view and emphasize their alternative function as luminaries. They absorb light from outside but hardly provide an inward glimpse in return. There can be no looking in. It is somehow appropriate that their origin can be traced to a fortification surrounding Moscow's ancient Belgorod district as they affect to alienate and repel the world.

It's not only the windows' honeycomb shape that might prompt the idea of bees but the way in which its smooth exterior wall, if sliced open, would reveal a complex of interlocking work and living spaces where the incubation of thought and sleep meet. The architect wanted to integrate sleeping and working, dwelling, and thinking throughout his building; hence living-room, studio, and bedroom alternate and dissect like a layered Venn diagram. It is said of the cylindrical motif that he had the Russian hearth in mind¹—the hearth as core of the house with the notion of warmth enclosed, its most interior part. To conceive this notion of hearth/heart is to turn the whole building inwards. To think of Melnikov's building is to think from its inside.

In the house, work and sleep are curiously connected. The circular bedroom is directly below the circular studio. The walls are painted warm yellow, the beds are stone slabs that rise up from the floor like altars that render sleep an almost-sacred inactivity. For Melnikov sleep was an area of intense study.² He wrote about a lifetime of sleep,

twenty years of lying down without consciousness, without guidance as one journeys into the sphere of mysterious worlds to touch unexplored depths of the sources of curative sacraments, and perhaps of miracles.³

Here sleep becomes a means of passing from one world to another, mysterious and indeterminate, a place for work's reserve to be restored and nourished. However, such spaces have a way of shifting tone, from sleep's place to death's space. From the thirties on, sleep's curative sacraments turned to restless slumber as Stalin's censure became the architect's incubus, frustrating any possibility for practice. In such light the warm glow darkens into night, and those concrete beds come ever closer to mortuary slabs. Without course to sleep Melnikov turned to dreaming, closing inwards to past projects and painting pictures.



The beginning of those concrete beds perhaps lay in the commission the architect received to design Lenin's glass sarcophagus. In this, his first built structure, he had to provide a plinth of sleep for a cadaver forever preserved, a place of pilgrimage and peering—a windowed tomb. There is something determinedly circular in how this first work, which signals his professional birth, presents itself as a death work. As if somehow opportunity demanded he earn through experience what he had conceived through commission. He could not know his cylindrical house studio, designed with such optimism, as an ideal space for living and work, would become in time a place for sleep, a house for a corpse.

Ian Kiaer

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¹A. A. Strigalev, "The Cylindrical House-Studio of 1927," in *Konstantin Mel'nikov, and the Construction of Moscow*, eds. Mario Fosso and Maurizio Meriggi (Milan: Skira editore, 2000), 90.

²In 1929 Melnikov designed a "Laboratory of Sleep" for workers in the "Green City." See S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 179.

³Ibid., 177.

