



Fig. 1: *Tango with Cows* by Vasily Kamensky, 1914. Cover.

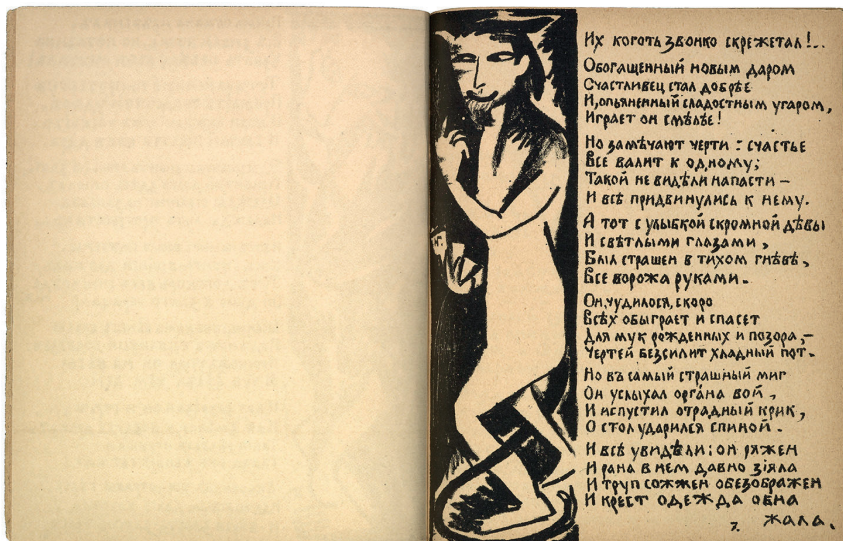


Fig. 2: *A Game in Hell* by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh with images by Natalia Goncharova. Leaf 7.

Typographic Decisions

an Essay by Daniel Mellis

Vasily Kamensky's *Tango with Cows*, published in Moscow in 1914, is a masterpiece of Futurist typography (figure 1). Printed on the reverse of five-color floral wallpaper, all of the book's poems have a prominent visual form created entirely with type and the most experimental works in the book—the six so-called “ferroconcrete poems”—dispense with linear order and explore the spatial possibilities of the printed page.

Although the book's typography can be overwhelming at first glance, it can be understood via a step-by-step unpacking of the production decisions made by Kamensky and the others involved in its production.

The first decision was made by Kamensky and it was the choice of letterpress printing. It would have been easier and cheaper to produce visual poems with transfer lithography. This print technology had already been used by Aleksei Kruchenykh, his fellow Russian Futurist, to print over ten books in editions of up to five hundred copies (figure 2). Transfer lithography allowed for drawings on paper to be transferred to a stone or plate for lithographic printing in large quantities. Letterpress printing required a skilled craftsman to carefully assemble metal type into a finished page, and so it was far more expensive, as well as heavily constrained by the materiality of type. Printing the book with metal type in contemporary typefaces may have seemed more modern, although lithography was hundreds of years younger than letterpress printing.



Fig. 3: Sheet music for Amara: The Original Brazilian Tango by Juca Storoni, printed by N.M. Yakovlev. Cover.



Fig. 4: "New Task" Library Catalog: Supplement for the Years 1909-1915 printed by N.M. Yakovlev. Title page.

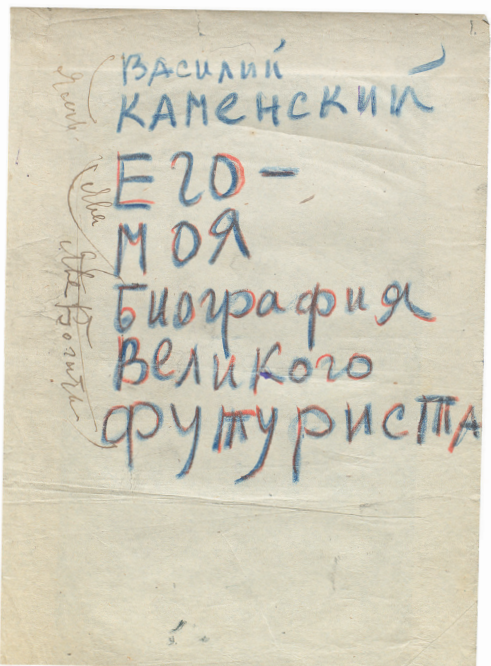


Fig. 5: Sketch for the cover of His-My Biography of a Great Futurist by Vasily Kamensky, 1918.

Once Kamensky had decided on the printing method, the next decision was to choose the book's printer: N.M. Yakovlev. This was a significant typographical choice as it limited the design to the shop's typefaces as well as the skill and cooperation of its typesetter. It appears that the shop was a small one; it does not appear in directories of Moscow printers, and despite extensive research, I was only able to find eight other items printed by Yakovlev, of which six were the covers of sheet music (figure 3). This material indicates that the book was typeset with almost every available font of type in the shop, but not with any of the available Art Nouveau ornament. I doubt that Kamensky chose the printer based on his typographic resources, but rather for its pricing and willingness to typeset such an outlandish publication.

The next set of decisions were made not by Kamensky but by Yakovlev when outfitting his shop. As far as I can tell from the typefaces used in his extant publications, the shop had essentially one sans-serif typeface, Akzidenz Grotesk, and one serifed, Lateinisch, in a range of sizes and styles, along with eight decorative display faces. This modest selection would have been sufficient for unprepossessing work (figure 4). Most of the typefaces were designed within the last twenty-five years, and the decorative faces were used for advertising or display, never for literary texts.

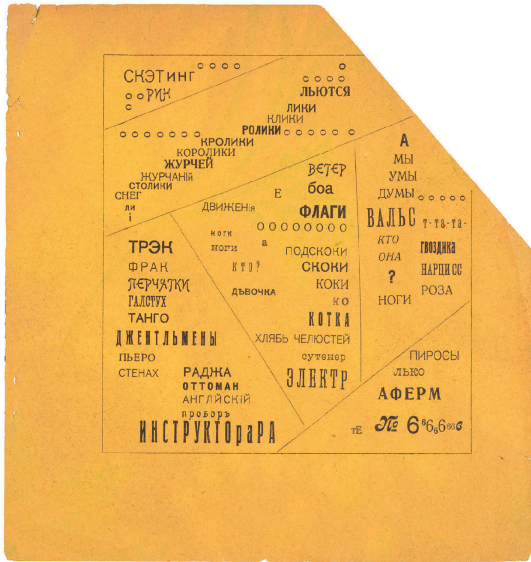


Fig. 6: "Skating Rin" in *Tango with Cows* by Vasily Kamensky, 1914. Leaf 15.



Fig. 7: "Skating Rin" in the *First Journal of Russian Futurists*. Page 27.

Here it is interesting to note that these designs all originated in the Latin alphabet, so the state of Russian manufacturing and the influence of the West on Russian typefounders also played a role in the book's appearance.

Printing *Tango with Cows* by letterpress meant that Kamensky had to provide sketches and general instructions to the typesetter (figure 5). He could not have typeset the book himself nor could he have provided detailed specifications. This means that its final typographic appearance was a collaboration between the author and craftsman. Their individual contributions can be somewhat distinguished by a careful analysis of how the pages were put together with type, spacing, leading and rule, and a principle of least action: design decisions that simplified the work of the typesetter were made by him but any remaining complexity was specified by Kamensky. We can also compare the poem "Skating Rin" with a version that appeared in the *First Journal of the Russian Futurists*, also from 1914 and quite likely from the same sketch but a different printer (figures 6 and 7).

Two examples of this principle of least action are shown here (figure 8 and 9). The detail from the poem "Telephone" is set in seven different fonts, but all are sixteen points. The irregular visual appearance is due to the varying proportions of the letterforms but since the individual pieces of type are the same size it would not be difficult to typeset except for the wrangling of seven type cases. The title line of the poem "Flight of Vasya Kamensky" is also instructive.

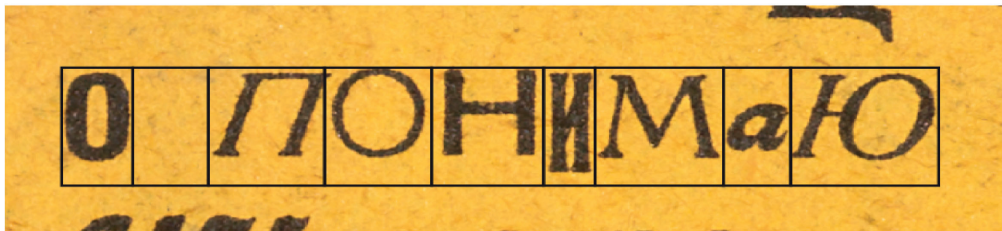


Fig. 8: Detail from "Telephone" in *Tango with Cows* by Vasily Kamensky, 1914. Leaf 2. Superimposed with outlines of each piece of type.



Fig. 9: Detail from "Flight of Vasya Kamensky" in Tango with Cows by Vasily Kamensky, 1914. Leaf 1. Superimposed with a reconstruction of the spacing and leading.

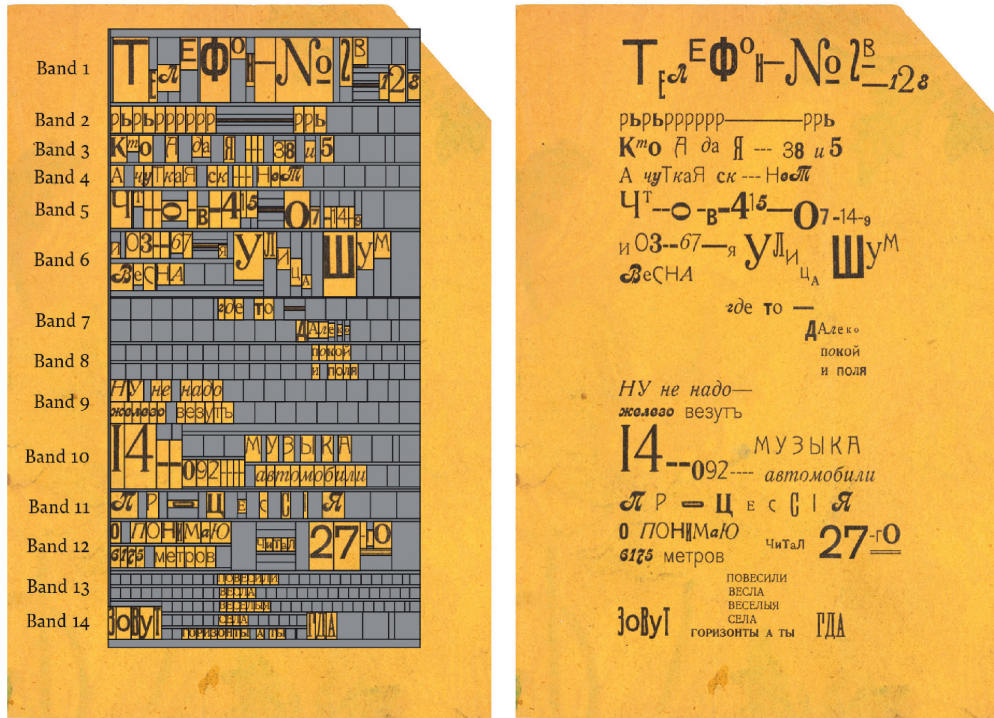


Fig. 10: "Telephone" in Tango with Cows by Vasily Kamensky, 1914. Leaf 2. Cropped with a reconstruction of the spacing and leading.

The line's thirty-eight characters were set from nineteen fonts of type in seven sizes ranging from eight to twenty-eight points. The use of multiple sizes of type in the same line required the typesetter to carefully fill in the space above and below the letters with spacing or leading, but as can be seen in the image, most of the type is placed at the bottom or top of the line which saved the typesetter the trouble of placing spacing material on both sides. The typesetter here would never have used so many sizes and styles of type without a specific request by Kamensky.

The poem "Telephone" is full of negotiations between author and printer (figure 10). For example, the word "Далеко" or "Distant" is typeset in progressively smaller type. Kamensky must have insisted on this, given how demanding this technique is and the resonance of visual form and meaning. Similarly, the overturned "O" in "Procession" could only have been specified by Kamensky; he says in a later memoir that it was meant to represent a coffin in a funeral procession.

However, the composition as a whole shows how the affordances of metal type led the typesetter to simplify the design. The poem is typeset in horizontal bands, and each band probably fit in a composing stick (an adjustable hand-held gauge used to set type). Where possible, presumably as indicated in Kamensky's sketch, the typesetter has mingled lines together within the same horizontal, such as in bands six, twelve and fourteen. This creates a non-linear order to the poem that evokes the new experience of telephony. But the typesetter was not able or willing to integrate band nine with seven and eight and this resulted in the somewhat incongruous white space in the middle of the poem.

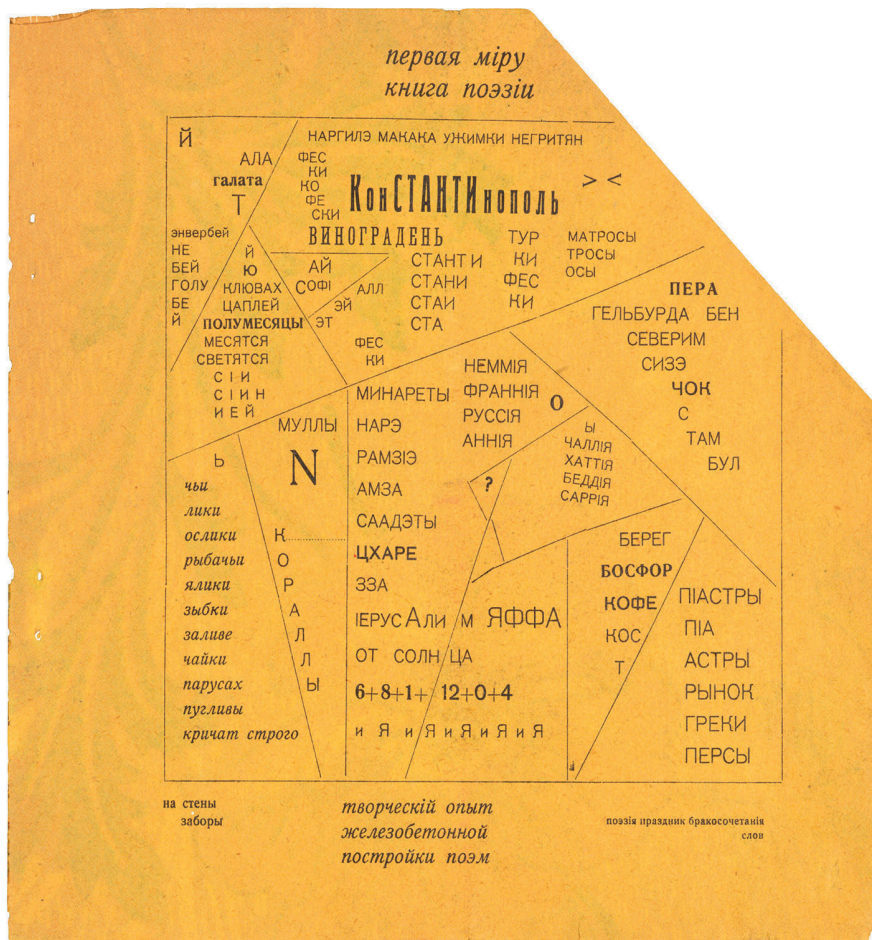


Fig.11: "Constantinople" in Tango with Cows by Vasily Kamensky, 1914. Leaf 10.

The ferroconcrete poems are more typographically exuberant than the rest of the poems (figure 11). Together they use fourteen styles and fifty-nine fonts of type out of the fifteen styles and sixty-five fonts used in the book, and three of the styles do not appear in any of the other poems. These numbers are quite impressive, considering that only sixteen styles and seventy-one fonts are known to have been in Yakovlev's shop. Despite this complexity, the poems "Constantinople" and "Nikitin Circus" have less variety than the others. The explanation for "Constantinople" might be because it appears to have been typeset first; it appeared as a stand-alone broadside as early as January 16. The other ferroconcrete poems came out about a month later, around the middle of February, in the earlier publication *Naked Among the Clad*. Perhaps "Nikitin Circus" was the second poem to be typeset and then Kamensky intervened and asked for more typographic variety.

The ferroconcrete poems also show the marked affordances of metal type. While the ferroconcrete poems appear to be composed of words freely scattered about the page, they are mostly built from smaller modules of stacked horizontal lines, and their complexity consists almost entirely in how these modules are put together. The lines dividing the pages into compartments are printed from strips of metal (called rule). This not only creates a visual effect but also simplified the typesetting as each compartment could be set up individually.



Fig. 12: "Constantinople" in Tango with Cows by Vasily Kamensky, 1914. Leaf 13.



Fig. 13: Cine-Phono, December 21, 1913. Page 71.



Fig. 14: Lithographic poster for Kal'fa Brothers cigarettes.

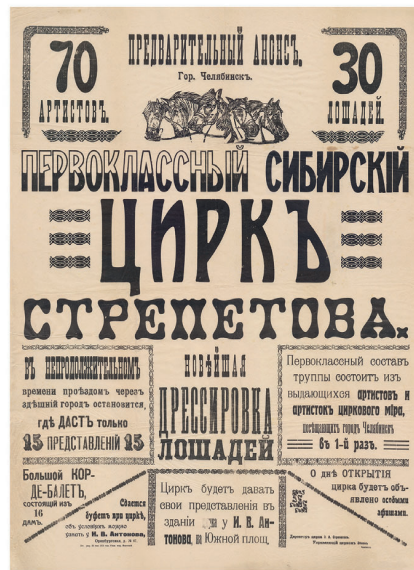


Fig. 15: Letterpress poster for the Strepetov Circus.

The most complicated poem is "Cabaret Zon," which has only three main compartments with relatively unstructured interiors and has the only example of diagonal type in the book (figure 12). Diagonal type is challenging to typeset because all type is cast on a rectilinear base. The marked horizontality of the ferroconcrete poems can be seen in comparison to advertising in contemporary movie magazines, with bigger budgets and more highly skilled craftsmen (figure 13).

These ads also demonstrate how Kamensky and his typesetter relied on advertising as visual models for the poems. Typographic ads and posters used novelty and variety in their choice of types and in their arrangement on the page to attract a pedestrian or reader's eye (figure 14). This typography was not just decorative but also functional; it presented hierarchically structured information rather than a linearly ordered text. And just like the ferroconcrete poems, posters often featured discrete modules of type separated by linear elements (figure 15). The poem "Nikitin Circus" may have been directly inspired by a circus poster. It was almost a transcription of the program of an actual circus performance that ran at Moscow's Nikitin Circus between January 1 and January 17, 1914.

Along with works by Stéphane Mallarmé, Blaise Cendrars, and Sonia Delaunay, and F.T. Marinetti, *Tango with Cows* is one of the first works of literature to use the page as a space. It is the most innovative of these both in its enthusiastic embrace of display typefaces and in the non-linearity of the ferroconcrete poems. At the same time, it was still highly constrained both by its cultural context and the available technology.