The Russian Futurist movement lasted little more than a decade, but the leaders of the movement wasted no time in upending conventions of 20th century print. In their 1912 opening salvo, a manifesto called, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” the Futurist writers David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Victor Khlebnikov commanded readers to throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy “overboard from the steamship of modernity.” The manifesto—bound in burlap and printed on cheap, dingy paper—sent two signals: not only would literary conventions be “thrown overboard”, but so too would the conventional book. The Futurists challenged conventions in poetry, art, theater, fashion, and even conceptions of space and time: is it any wonder they didn't spare Johannes Gutenberg?

Nina Gurianova explains the Futurist rationale for a new, “Futurist book,” as a “strong reaction against the creation of any absolute model, against any perception of art as an ordered, rational structure.”¹ In short, the Futurists wished not to annihilate the book beyond recognition, but rather to broaden the scope of what a book could be. The Russian typographer and artist El Lissitzky was among them. In his essay “Our Book,” Lissitzky bemoaned the fact that, “...in this present day and age we still have no new shape for the book as a body,” and offered eight

innovations of print, including that “the design of the book-space through the material of the type, according to the laws of typographical mechanics, must correspond to the strains and stresses of the content.” Lissitzky also wrote that, “the new book demands the new writer. Inkstand and goose-quill are dead.” Lissitzky was in luck – he would work with and alongside several talented “new writers” who would offer their own innovations in book production and pioneer the new Futurist book movement.

Several approaches taken by the Futurists stand out for not only rising to Lissitzky’s challenge, but also for raising questions about the authenticity of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. This paper examines two approaches I argue most successfully transformed the conventional book and in doing so, challenged Walter Benjamin’s paradigm for art in the “age of mechanical reproduction.” These includes the neo-primitivist approach, in which artists looked to a pre-Gutenberg era for inspiration, and the ferroconcrete approach which looked to redefine the artist’s relationship to typography. To illustrate my argument, I examine the works of two Russian Futurists, Aleksei Kruchenykh who typifies the primitivist approach, and Vasily Kamensky, who invented the ferroconcrete approach.

A brief note about the scope: This paper does not include the Italian Futurists in its scope. This is not only because I’m a Russianist and cannot read Italian, but also because in my view, the Italian Futurists approach to books was quite different from that of the Russian approach – the works I discuss here are quite different from anything I know to exist in the realm of Italian futurist works.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
**Kruchenykh and Reproducibility**

In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argues that a work of art is only authentic to the extent it is not technically reproducible. Benjamin writes, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. **the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.**” The book, by Benjamin's measure, is therefore an inauthentic work because it is the “mechanical reproduction of writing.” The author of a text and her work are ultimately separated by the mechanical printing process; thus the “authenticity” of the work is removed.

Futurist books pushed against this boundary between authenticity and reproducibility in several ways. The Futurists who identified as neo-primitivists were among the most successful in provoking questions about “reproducability.” The neo-primitivist agenda was born from a belief that in order to move forward, it was necessary to look back. Raymond Cooke explains that, “what they saw as the stale art of the present had to be reinvigorated by a return to the more genuine and unspoiled art of the past.”\(^1\) Aleksei Kruchenykh exemplified the primitivist approach to book-making by taking his inspiration from pre-Gutenburg manuscripts. Kruchenykh’s so-called “manuscript books” challenge the technical reproducibility of books in several ways.

The first and most obvious consequence of mass printing is the uniformity of the letters and text found in the book. Kruchenykh rejected typeset words in favor of
words hand-written by the author or an artist. Kruchenykh was guided in this by a manifesto he penned with Velemir Khlebnikov called, “The Letter as Such,” which offers two guidelines for a new script: 1) that mood influences handwriting during writing, and 2) that the handwriting, idiosyncratically influenced by mood, conveys this mood to the reader independently of words.” 4 Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov stipulate that the handwriting need not be necessarily in the author’s hand: “Indeed,” they write, “it would be better if this were entrusted to an artist.” 5 The important thing was to capture the originality of the script “at the moment of the awesome snowstorm of inspiration.” 6

The advent of transfer lithography allowed artists to prepare text and illustrations in their own hand and print them together. Crucially, the use of transfer papers allowed the artist to work when and where she wanted – a feature important to the Futurists who wanted to be able to capture their initial moment of inspiration. The finished result would then be handed over to a printer who was able to render the designs onto paper using stone or zinc plates.

Among the Futurists, Kruchenykh especially capitalized on the use of lithographed copies of poems and drawings. This I argue made many of his works only technically reproducible and yet allowed them to maintain authenticity because the artist rendered the final work in their own hand. We can see this authenticity at work in two of Kruchenykh’s early books, *Starrinaya Lyubov* and *Igra v Adu*. (both printed in 1912).

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
For Starrinaya Lyubov, or *Old-Time Love*, Kruchenykh worked with the artist, Mikhail Larionov to provide the illustrations and calligraphy. *Old-Time Love* takes one small but significant cue from illuminated manuscripts: it eliminated the barrier between text and illustration. On the first page, a headpiece illustration of a nude woman reclining near a vase of flowers hovers above the text. The petals from the flowers float down the page, falling just above letters as if to disguise themselves as accents. The script is not neat or uniform – it looks clumsily and hastily written as someone in the throws of love might feverishly pen a love-note. This well-chosen script reflects the narrative of the poem about a man who is tormented by the love of a woman who terrifies him.

*Igra v Adu*, or *A Game In Hell* is a bolder rejection of the modern book and fully embraces elements of illuminated manuscripts. The poem, written by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, is about a card game played in hell by a group of sinners, devils and spirits. The handwriting is done in an odd archaic style. Gerald Janacek identifies it as an imitation of a medieval Church Slavonic script used by scribes in 14th century Rus called “poluustav.” Polustaav is characterized by having “straight lines that curve slightly and rounded letters that do not form regular arcs,” but in general, lacked “calligraphic regularity.” Thus, the poems’ folkloric, mythical themes are reinforced by the irregular, archaic script rendered in Natalia Goncharova’s hand.

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8 Ibid.
Goncharova also provided the illustrations for *A Game*. Her drawings are unique because they are an early example of the inspiration she and several other Futurist artists took from the Russian *lubok*. Lubok was a popular genre of Russian printing in the 17th and 18th centuries consisting of simple woodcut illustrations that accompanied a short text. Goncharova’s illustrations for *A Game* have a deliberate simple quality to them that suggests she intended them to resemble woodcuts. Two features that point to woodcuts are 1) the stark contrast between the pure white of the areas which would have been cut away from the woodblock and the pure black that would have covered the remaining wood; and 2) the fact that every illustration is framed in a square or rectangular border.10 Goncharova’s devils and ghouls are similarly shrouded in blackness, and, not unlike illuminated manuscripts, often take up the left or right column or headpiece of a page.

In short, Kruchenykh restored the “authenticity” at stake by removing the typesetter from the process and keeping the artist close to her final work. Kruchenykh’s books mimic manuscripts’ closely in this way: once a scribe put down the text and illustrations on a page, the work was completed. Once Larionov and Goncharova, [pause] working as Kruchenykh’s chosen scribes, [pause] put the text and illustrations on transfer papers, the work was then lithographed, but similarly maintained its original design.

The obvious challenge to the proposal that Kruchenykh works were not truly authentic is that once lithographed, the poem and illustrations are technically reproducible. A scribe makes one authentic copy of work, Kruchenykh had the

opportunity for virtually limitless copies. This also concerned Kruchenykh, who decided to go a step further in a later book, *Mir s Kontsa*, or *World Backwords*. In *World Backwards*, Kruchenykh used a combination of lower and upper case stamps and symbols to make a labor-intensive, but truly irreproducible book. Susan Compton writes that the groups of words “look as though they were set up on a child’s printing outfit,” because of the use of colored letters, stencils and potato-cuts. Kruchenykh was able to introduce even further variation between copies of *World Backwards* by having Goncharova make a unique leaf collage for each book cover. The result is a book with a hand-made quality that looks as though it was made personally for each reader. Nancy Perloff writes that the effect is one of “giving precedence to process over product, movement over stasis, difference over similarity, fabrication over production.” In this way, I argue Kruchenykh not only achieved an irreproducible book, but also paved the way for future so-called “artist’s books” which would also be irreproducible.

**Authenticity and Kamensky**

Vasili Kamensky was another Futurist who rose to Lissitzky’s challenge of needing **new writers** for **new books**. But where Kruchenykh confronted the traditional book by doing away with typography all together, Kamensky chose to wrench back authority over typography from the typesetter. Kamensky’s works dispense with linear, uniform typography, as many Russian and Italian Futurist

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works did; however, I argue his works extended beyond the realm of experimental typography to actually create an authentic experience for his readers. Thus, Kamensky’s works call into question Walter Benjamin’s conviction that mechanically reproduced art lacks the authentic “aura” of its source.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin writes, “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.” He defines a work’s “aura” as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be,” and compares it to resting on a summer afternoon: [here he says] “You follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you; you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.” By Benjamin’s measure, a statue or painting maintains an aura thanks to its autonomy as an artifact – its value is self-evident and free from human intervention, like the mountain. A book, on the other hand, is reproduced and circulated in a mechanical process alien to its inception. A book is therefore divorced from its aura as a work of art.

But what if a work of art depends on the mechanical process to achieve its effect? What if, not unlike a painter regards his paintbrush and canvas, the Futurist poet regarded the printing press at his artistic disposal; regarded the printing press, not as a mechanical process that got in the way of the artist and her work, but as the process for achieving the work? Vasili Kamensky was such an artist. Kamensky produced nine zhelezobetonny or “ferroconcrete” (meaning reinforced concrete) poems which, Gerald Janacek points out, shared the following characteristics:
1) Each is one page long
2) They use the entire page as free space for distributing text
3) They are essentially nominal, that is, they are lists of nouns, though parts of words and non-nominal words are sometimes included
4) They generally lack overt syntactic structures
5) The text is organized by word association, which is made by semantic, contextual, and visual links between words
6) The structure is free in that the reader is free to read the elements of the poem in any order he chooses, letting his eye wander over the page at will as he would in examining a painting.

Thus, Kamensky appears to have used the page of a book as a canvas and placed the text of his poems across the space as he saw fit. A glance at one of Kamensky’s ferroconcrete poems may convince a reader that the placement of his text is random or purposefully disorienting, but interpretations can be divined. A quick but somewhat close reading of a poem can show us how Kamensky made typography a crucial part of his work. Let’s look at the poem “Telephone” from his book, Tango s Korovami or Tango with the Cows. Immediately our senses are overwhelmed with numbers, fonts, italics, small words, and big letters. In the poem, the narrator answers a phone call but becomes distracted with thoughts of spring and the peaceful retreat of a field. Noises from the loud street crowd his thoughts; noises in the form of музыка, автомобили, процессия (procession or a parade). He ends the poem, “The horizons call, but where are you?”

Notice, that the words which describe the cacophony of his city are big, bolded, and playfully rendered. The words which describe peace and quiet (покой, поля, весна, горизонты) are smaller, understated, and share a uniformity among one another. In this way, Kamensky employs typography in the service of his poem.

13 Janecek, The Look of Russian Literature.
The work is authentic because of Kamensky's intentionality and mastery over the use of type. There is no separation of the work from the artist.

Kamensky's works also maintain an aura not unlike the mountain and branch Benjamin describes in his essay. As noted by Janecek, the structure of Kamensky's poems are such that the reader is free to let his eye wander over the page at will, as he would examine a painting. In several poems, including “Konstantinople”, the title is in bold, which I interpret as an attempt to draw the reader's attention to it first. But from there, the reader's eye is drawn at random to other words on the page until she has taken in all of its essential elements. Each person's experience taking in the mountain, the branch, the painting, or the ferroconcrete poem will differ because the order in which each poem is read will necessarily differ. Hence, Kamensky's work maintain not only their authenticity, but also their aura.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, though many Futurists not mentioned here contributed to the new Futurist book, it is Kruchenykh and Kamensky who, in my view, best represent the two approaches which most successfully departed from Gutenberg's legacy and broadened the scope for what a book in the age of mechanical reproduction could be.

Thank you.

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14 Ibid.