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Theodore Roszak's Futuristic Visions

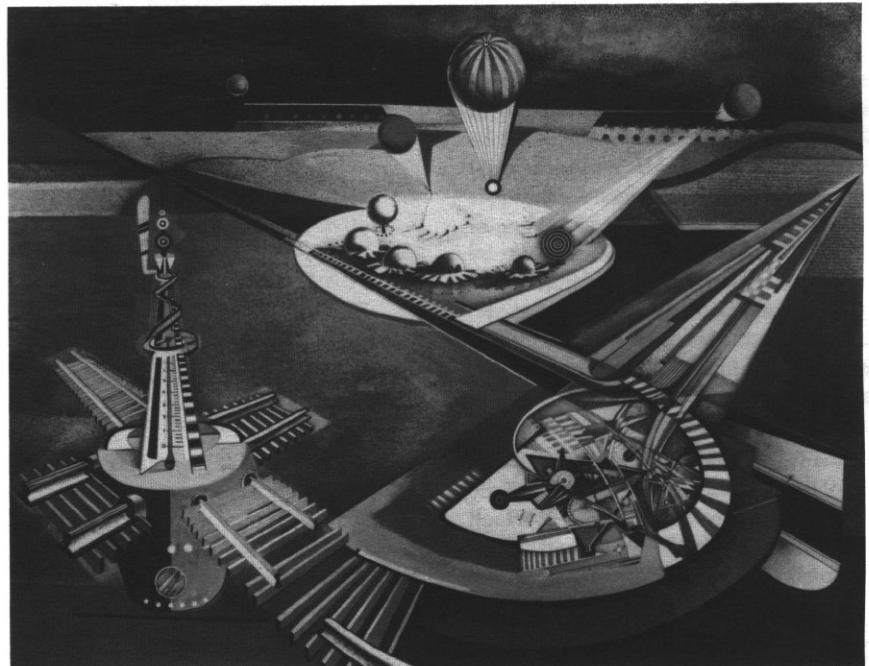


Fig. 1. Theodore Roszak, *Study for Airport*, 1934, watercolor, gouache, ink, and graphite, 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 29 in. (58.1 × 73.7 cm.). Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Joan Marter

A group of unpublished drawings by Theodore Roszak expands our growing awareness of his unparalleled achievements during the 1930s. Discovered in the artist's studio, these drawings precede his constructions and machine-related sculptures. Like his photograms of the mid-1930s, which give evidence of his close association with Bauhaus concepts,¹ these works are related to his fascination with futuristic designs. While most of the drawings remain in the artist's estate,

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Study for Airport (Fig. 1) is now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. In such works as the *Study for Strato-Hop* (Fig. 2) and *Architectural Forms* (Fig. 3), Roszak invented fantastic structures which he transformed initially into plaster sculptures (Fig. 4), and later into machinomorphic constructions in metal (Fig. 5).

Theodore Roszak's art of the 1930s forms a significant portion of his innovative production directly related to constructivist principles during that decade.² His early training at the Art Institute of Chicago led to a fellowship for travel and study in Europe in 1929. During his eight-

een months abroad, he spent most of his time in Czechoslovakia, though he made excursions to Austria, Italy, France, and Germany. Roszak was living in Prague at the time of the Exhibition of Contemporary Culture at Brno. He met Czech industrial artists who were interested in Bauhaus concepts of collaboration between artists and designers, and, through them, Roszak learned the ideology of the Bauhaus, although he did not visit the famous school. Before returning home he purchased a copy of Moholy-Nagy's *The New Vision*,³ and by 1932 he was producing drawings for space constructions based on machine esthetics and the tenets of constructivism (Fig. 3).

The optimistic attitude towards modern technology found in Roszak's early drawings reflects the influence of such industrial designers and architects as Norman Bel Geddes and Hugh Ferriss. Roszak saw Bel Geddes's visionary designs for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair on view at the Architectural League of New York,⁴ and possibly other works by Bel Geddes that were exhibited at the Museum of Science and Industry in 1931. In addition, the book *Horizons*, published by Bel Geddes in 1932, stimulated Roszak to develop a new set of images based on concepts that he shared with the designer.⁵

Even before he left for Europe in 1929, Roszak had purchased a copy of the book *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* by Hugh Ferriss.⁶ While Ferriss's drawings for an imaginary metropolis were not the direct

source for the works discussed here, his ideas about the future of the city were important to the young artist.

As an antidote to the hardships of the Depression Era, Roszak created futuristic images of travel. Airships, space observatories, dirigibles, and rockets appear in the drawings produced from 1932 to 1934 which evoke a more prosperous future for the country. Buoyed by the solo flight of Charles Lindbergh in 1927 and the discovery of the planet Pluto in 1930, and stimulated by his contact with European constructivist art, Roszak envisioned the future of aeronautics and space exploration. *Horizons* was an important resource for the artist, in both its illustrations and text. In addition to presenting his ideas about travel in the future, Bel Geddes discussed the role of the artist in a chapter entitled "Changing World":

Many of the great accomplishments in art have developed in a period of great spiritual unrest, not at all unlike the present. The struggle itself has usually resulted in the birth of new ideas, in the development of new materials, and new methods, and in the beginning of an upward step in the progress of humanity.⁷

Particularly notable in relation to Roszak's drawing, *Study for Airport* (Fig. 1), is Bel Geddes's proposal for a "rotary" airport to be constructed in New York Harbor off the lower tip of Manhattan. The

author's dramatic drawing of this airport, as if seen from an approaching aircraft,⁸ is similar to the aerial viewpoint chosen by Roszak for his study. The actual work in full color supports this comparison since Roszak's proposed airport is positioned above an expanse of blue, alluding to a body of water. While railroad ties and a switch-tower appear in this drawing, it is clear that aviation is the dominant interest in this and related works.

Optimistic pronouncements about the future uses of technology found in *Horizons* excited Roszak. In a chapter entitled "Speed Tomorrow," Bel Geddes envisioned various means of travel. He included designs for steamships, automobiles, and trains, while offering special consideration to airplanes:

Transportation by air will develop rapidly in the new era. The latest generation has been born to the air, as others of us have been born to the railroad, steamship, and automobile. This new generation will live to see mass production airplanes in daily use by the thousands.⁹

In the light of such predictions, Roszak's imagination stirred with images of spaceships of the future. In the *Study for Strato-Hop* (Fig. 2) he depicted the launching of a dirigible and several hot-air balloons. On the same sheet of graph paper the artist made some designs for rocket ships and a tower, a form that appears in many other drawings (Figs. 6 and 7).

Fig. 2. Theodore Roszak, *Study for Strato-Hop*, c. 1934, watercolor, ink, and graphite on graph paper. Estate of Theodore Roszak.

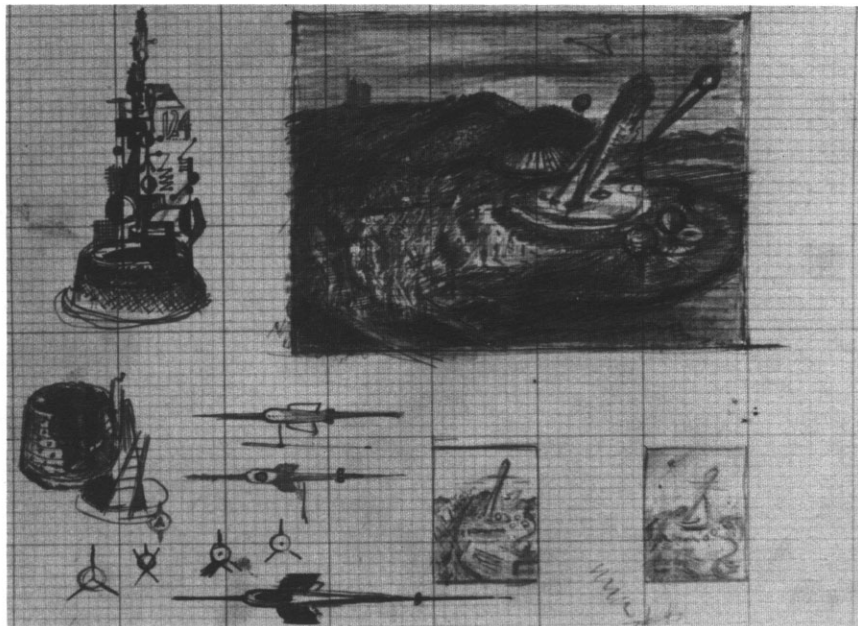


Fig. 3. Theodore Roszak, *Architectural Forms*, c. 1932, ink and graphite. Estate of Theodore Roszak.

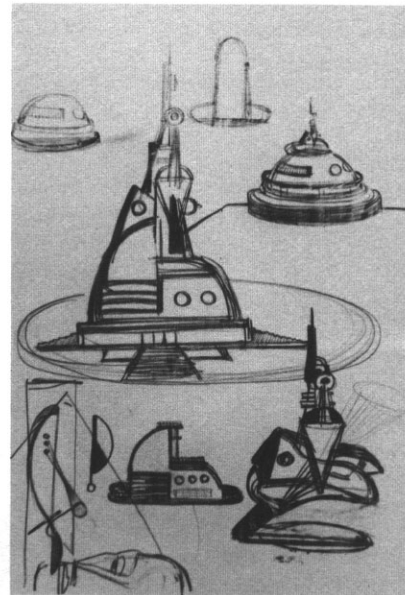




Fig. 4. Theodore Roszak, *Architectural Tower*, 1931-32 (destroyed). Estate of Theodore Roszak.

The theatrical and industrial designs of Norman Bel Geddes offer some parallels to the tower images that preoccupied Roszak in the early 1930s,¹⁰ but there are other sources. In *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, Hugh Ferriss envisioned an "imaginary metropolis" that included a tower positioned at the juncture of the civic zones where art and science meet. This tower, which in plan "seems to show, at all levels, variations of a nine-pointed star—in other words, of three superimposed triangles," is intended to represent the "Center of Philosophy."¹¹ While the drawing by Ferriss finds no direct parallel among Roszak's studies, the idea of a tower as a monument to man's intellec-

Fig. 6. Theodore Roszak, *Tower*, c. 1932, watercolor, ink, and graphite, 12½ × 9½ in. (31.8 × 24.1 cm.). Estate of Theodore Roszak.

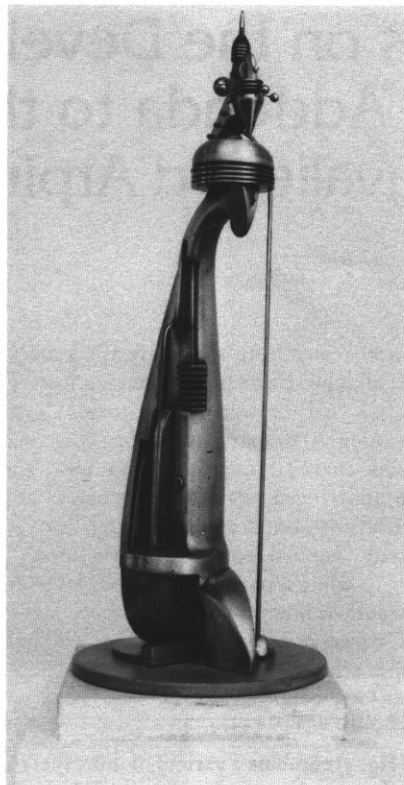
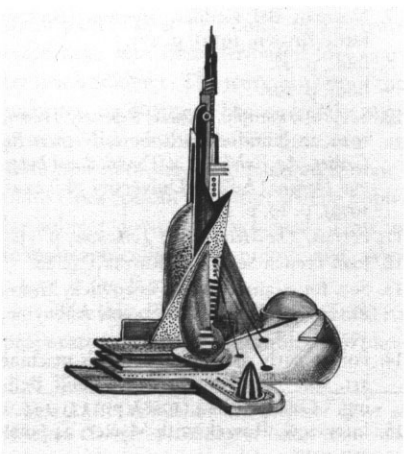
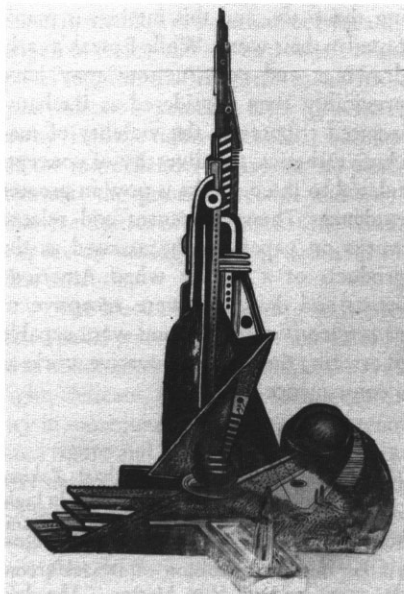


Fig. 5. Theodore Roszak, *Air-Port Structure*, 1932, aluminum, copper, steel, and brass, 23 in. high (58.4 cm.). Collection Newark Museum, Newark, N.J.

tual and scientific achievements attracted his interest.

Study for Tower (Fig. 6) is closely related to *Architectural Tower* (Fig. 4), a

Fig. 7. Theodore Roszak, *Tower*, c. 1932, watercolor, ink, and graphite, 15⅞ × 9½ in. (40.3 × 24.1 cm.). Estate of Theodore Roszak.



human-scale sculpture in plaster that is now lost. The drawing includes many segments that are painted in contrasting colors of yellow, red, black, and white to suggest that this tower is to be constructed of varying materials. As in the plaster version, the function proposed for the tower is ambiguous. It can be viewed as a monument to advanced technology, as an astronomical laboratory complete with observatory, as a rocket launching pad, or as an airport control tower.

There was one real tower for which Roszak acknowledged great admiration. He saw the Einstein Tower in Potsdam, designed by Erich Mendelsohn in 1919, during his travels in Germany in 1929-30, and the structure seemed to him a monument to man's investigation of the universe.¹² Undoubtedly, Roszak was also aware of Vladimir Tatlin's unrealized design, *Monument to the Third International* (1919), since the model for this tower was reproduced in various American publications.¹³ Other examples of towers that can be related to Roszak's works are Naum Gabo's *Model of a Monument for an Observatory* (1922) and his sketches for architectural towers.

While Roszak was inspired by the constructivists who attempted to use industrial materials and geometric elements to symbolize the technological age, he was also interested in images derived from popular culture, such as space stations and rocket ships as they were described in films and in science fiction literature of the period. The adventures of Buck Rogers were popular in the 1930s, as were various films on interplanetary journeys. Thus, Roszak's futuristic drawings arise from various interests. He believed in the potential of advanced technology to improve life, and responded with fantastic visions of the future of aviation and space travel.

After completing six large plaster casts that were based on his futuristic drawings, Roszak became dissatisfied with plaster as a medium. In 1934 he set up his own tool shop in his New York studio where he created pristine objects and reliefs which paralleled the polished metals of Bauhaus artists Moholy-Nagy, Rudolf Belling,¹⁴ and Oskar Schlemmer. His involvement with constructivist concepts was given additional focus in 1938 when he was appointed as an instructor in two- and three-dimensional design in the experimental workshop at the Design Laboratory. Sponsored by the Fine Arts Project of the WPA, this experimental