THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE AND RADICAL MODERNISM

An Introductory Reader

Edited by Dennis G. IOFFE
and Frederick H. WHITE

Boston 2012

Contents

2. Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s[1]

Christina Lodder

> "All forms of everyday life, morals, philosophy, and art must be recreated on communist principles. Without this the further development of the communist revolution is not possible."[2]

Boris Kushner's comment of early 1919 expresses the strong identification that artists were beginning to make, in the first years after the October Revolution, between their own activity and the social and political aims of the new state. His words epitomize the artists' aspiration to use their art in the service of the Revolution, a desire that underpinned the formulation of Productivist theory and Constructivist practice during this period. In this essay, I should like to look at some of the ways in which this theory and practice developed in the following decade, in response both to external pressures and internal debates.

A practical and ideological emphasis on industrial technology is inherent in Lenin's famous remark of 1920 "Communism equals Soviet Power plus the electrification of Russia." Indeed, the idea of uniting art and industrial manufacture appeared soon after the October Revolution. David Shterenberg, the head of the Department of Fine Arts of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Otdel izobrazitelnykh iskusstv pri Narodnom komissariate po prosveshcheniu, IZO, Narkompros) asserted that as soon as it was established in 1918 the department was committed to "art's penetration" into production.[3] As another writer observed, "the theory of production art was developed in 1918-19 and formulated in the pages of the newspaper *Art of the Commune* (Iskusstvo kommuny)."[4] The paper was published by IZO in Petrograd between 7 December 1918 and 13 April 1919. Its contributors included theorists and critics like Osip Brik, Nikolai Punin and Boris Kushner, artists such as Natan Altman and the poet Vladimir Mayakovskii. As the official organ of IZO, the journal expounded a whole range of ideas that

were being discussed by avant-garde artists at the time, including such fundamental issues as the nature of proletarian art, the role of art in a socialist society, and whether art itself was not an essentially bourgeois phenomenon. It is not surprising that the journal was eclectic and never formulated a coherent program. Nevertheless, many of the ideas that were later developed by the Constructivists were first articulated within its pages. As Nikolai Chuzhak later pointed out, "It was a time of happy attacks on the most inviolable 'cultural values' . . . all the most important words used later were employed in *Art of the Commune* . . . but half were issued by accident."[5]

In the first number, Mayakovskii issued his famous poem, "Order to the Army of Art," which exhorted artists to go out into the urban environment, proclaiming "the streets are our brushes; the squares are our palettes."[6] Brik went further in bringing art into closer contact with everyday life. He declared, "Do not distort, but create . . . art is like any other means of production . . . not ideas, but a real object is the aim of all true creativity".[7] As soon as Brik defined art as a category of work, or rather of industrial work, he opened up the way for the concept of production art. He declared that the existing division between art and production was "a survival of bourgeois structures". Punin tried to distinguish between this new relationship between art and industry and the already established category of applied art. He stated, "It is not a matter of decoration, but of the creation of new artistic objects. Art for the proletariat is not a scared temple for lazy contemplation, but work, a factory, producing completely artistic objects."[8]

Some of these ideas were developed at greater length in a small collection of essays entitled *Art in Production*, written in November 1920 and published the following year by the Art and Production subsection of IZO Narkompros.[9] According to the editorial, "The problem of art in production in the light of the new culture is, for us, one of the basic problems of liberated work, linked in the closest way to the problem of the transformation of production culture on the one hand, and with the problem of the transformation of everyday life on the other."[10]

The booklet was not at all unified in the solutions that it offered, which suggests that in the winter of 1920-21 a clearly formulated theory of production art had not as yet emerged. Indeed, the phrase "artistic production" (khudozhestvennoe proizvodstvo) seems to have been used almost as much as the term "production art" (proizvodstvennoe iskusst-

vo). At this point, the two terms seem to have been employed almost interchangeably; both were used to denote the rather imprecise and general involvement of art in the manufacturing industries. In his own article, Shterenberg emphasized the role that art could play in improving the quality of factory-made items, and highlighted the importance that Narkompros and the government placed on this aspect in their official policies, which were geared to promoting the coming together of art and industry.[11] Yet, his praise of revolutionary ceramics as a paradigm of the potentials of what he called "artistic production" (khudozhestvennoe proizvodstvo) suggested that his idea of production art differed very little from the old concept of applied art. Brik's contribution was far more visionary. Clearly influenced by the recent publication of fragments of Karl Marx's *The German Ideology*, with its liberating vision of the future, communist society, Brik foresaw the eventual destruction of the existing divisions between work and art. He argued therefore that the aim had to be a "conscious and creative attitude towards the production process" which would result in "not a beautifully decorated object, but a consciously made object." To achieve this, he stressed that "the worker must become a conscious and active participant in the creative process of the creation of the object," and the artist must be persuaded to "put all his creative powers into industry."[12]

Further debate was galvanized by Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, which was exhibited in Moscow in December 1920. This important event was accompanied by Tatlin's statement of intent, which challenged the avant-garde to expand their sphere of activities beyond the studio.[13] Subsequently, in March 1921, a group of artists called the Working Group of Constructivists was set up within Inkhuk (Institut khudozhvennoi kultury—The Institute of Artistic Culture) in Moscow.[14] The group consisted of seven members in all: the three founders Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Aleksei Gan, as well as Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, Konstantin Medunetskii and Karl Ioganson.[15] The seven defined and embraced a new synthesis between art and industry. As their program made clear, their intention was to relegate their purely artistic explorations to the role of "laboratory work," and to extend their experiments of manipulating three-dimensional forms in a purely abstract way into the real environment by participating in the industrial production of useful objects. They called the new type of activity that they envisaged "intellectual

production," proclaiming that their ideological foundation was "scientific communism, built on the theory of historical materialism" and that they intended to attain "the communistic expression of material structures" by organizing their material in accordance with the three principles of *tektonika* or tectonics (the social and politically appropriate use of industrial material), construction (the organization of this material for a given purpose), and *faktura* (the conscious handling and manipulation of it).[16]

Their formal concerns were epitomized by the works shown at the *Second Spring Exhibition of the Society of Young Artists* (Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov—Obmokhu), which opened in Moscow in May 1921.[17] The majority of works exhibited were constructed in space using materials like glass and metal as well as more traditional wood. The works by the Stenberg brothers comprised open-work, skeletal constructions, containing strong references to the materials, forms and articulations of existing engineering structures such as bridges and cranes. This is very evident in Vladimir Stenberg's *Construction for a Spatial Structure No. 6* of 1920-21, which is built up of small metallic elements, some of which seem like miniaturized versions of I and T beams. Alongside these, Rodchenko exhibited a series of hanging constructions, made from wood painted silver: an ellipse, a square, a circle, a triangle, and a hexagon. They shared a common method of construction. Concentric geometrical shapes were cut out from a single plane of plywood. These shapes were then arranged within each other and rotated from a two dimensional plane into a three dimensional form, suspended in space with wire. The emphasis on basic materials and simple, economical methods of construction were seen by certain theorists, for example Boris Arvatov, to parallel and therefore to be highly compatible with industrial processes.[18] He argued that an artist who had no knowledge of working with materials was "utterly meaningless in a factory."[19]

Quite rapidly, interest in Constructivist ideas began to extend beyond the confines of the initial group. By the end of 1921, Lyubov Popova and Aleksandr Vesnin had also adopted a Constructivist position, while artists like Anton Lavinskii and Gustav Klucis became aligned after coming into contact with Constructivist ideas at the Vkhutemas (Vysshie Gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie—the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops), which were set up at the end of 1920 to train "highly qualified master artists for indus-

try."[20] Of particular importance were the Basic Course and the Wood and Metal Working Faculty of the Vkhutemas, the latter directed by Rodchenko. Here, the new generation of artists was being trained to be "engineer-constructors" or "artist-constructors" who would fuse a complete grasp of artistic skills with a specialized knowledge of technology. At the same time, it was in these faculties that a design methodology was being developed by Rodchenko, Lavinskii and others. Yet within the Vkhutemas the Constructivists were always in a minority. As the avant-garde and pro-Constructivist magazine *Lef: Left Front of the Arts* (Levyi front iskusstv) reported in 1923, "The position of the Constructivists is extraordinarily complicated. On the one hand, they have to fight the purists [easel painters] to defend the productivist line. On the other, they have to put pressure on the applied artists in an attempt to revolutionize their artistic consciousnesses."[21]

Perhaps it is not surprising therefore to find that the practical implementation of Constructivist ideas seems to have been relatively slow. The circumstances outside the school were hardly propitious. Industry had been decimated following almost seven years of conflict, and those enterprises that had survived were not sufficiently progressive to accommodate the new type of designer. When Tatlin approached the New Lessner Factory in Petrograd, with the aim of becoming involved in designing products for mass manufacture, he was directed to the technical drawing department.[22] The government encouraged and promoted production art in general, but had far more traditional aesthetic attitudes than the Constructivists. Narkompros was reorganized in 1921, and most of the avant-garde employees, including all the Constructivists, lost their jobs. By 1922 Gan was complaining of the open and covert campaign being waged by the State and the Party against the avant-garde.[23] In this situation, there were several different strategies that the artists could adopt. Gan, for instance, devoted considerable energy to advertising and propagandizing Constructivist ideas through his brochure *Constructivism* of 1922 and through numerous articles. Others tended to publicize the Constructivist approach by working in areas where the idea of artists' participation had already been established, such as in the theatre (the Stenberg brothers), and in typographical and poster design (Rodchenko). As one artist complained in 1923, the two chief areas of practical activity for the dedicated Constructivist were designing advertising posters or constructing models.[24] For these reasons, in the first

years after 1921, Constructivist products tended to be experimental or exploratory in nature, rather than being fully utilitarian and practical in solutions to specific tasks.

Some of the earliest Constructivist designs were prototypes for temporary agitational stands or small, portable and sometimes collapsible kiosks. Among the former are Gustav Klucis' designs of 1922 for a series of "radio-orators," "radio-tribunes" and "cinema-photo stands" with three-dimensional and dynamic slogans. These were to be placed on the streets of Moscow during the celebrations of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern and the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution.[25] The stands were devised to perform specific agitational functions: displaying photographic material and posters, or giving a spatial and audio-visual presence to revolutionary slogans. Some performed only one function as a loudspeaker or "radio-orator" while others were conceived to execute several different tasks simultaneously, e.g. *Propaganda Stand, Screen and Loudspeaker Platform*. Using a language clearly derived from the kind of stands utilized by the Stenberg brothers for their sculptures at the Obmokhu exhibition of 1921, Klucis reduced the construction of his various propaganda items to their essential elements, clearly revealing the structure of each stand, and providing stability through a multiplicity of vertical, diagonal and horizontal supports. Although material scarcities may have encouraged this method of construction, in many of the stands the geometry of the straight lines and their interactions seem to have provided a design impetus in their own right. All the stands appear to have been made from wood, canvas and cables and were painted red, black and white. In conjunction with this, Klucis developed a kind of modular system, not far removed from the principle inspiring the modular wooden constructions of Rodchenko, which explored the variety of structural frameworks that could be devised using essentially similar elements. In *Screen-Tribune-Kiosk*, the openwork frame supports the tribune, the screen, and the book display unit at the bottom. The tribune sits on top of an open-work, box-like structure, which is strengthened by a central pillar and at the top, bottom and two sides by the crossed struts and on the remaining two sides by the larger vertical supports which hold the screen. The screen here surely also has a double function, acting not only as film screen, but also as a visual device to frame the speaker and perhaps even offer him a measure of protection during inclement weather conditions. The box device el-

evates the speaker, but also gives the tribune a sense of weightlessness. The central inner pillar is also utilized to support the book stand. In *Propaganda Stand, Screen and Loudspeaker Platform*, Klucis has incorporated a bookstand, loudspeaker, screen and an expanding structure at the bottom right, which might be for the display of posters. The compression of several functions into a small compact unit, along with economy of space, manufacture and materials and other features that Klucis devised became established components of Constructivist design.

A natural extension of the stand was the kiosk. Amongst the earliest was Gan's folding street sales stand (skladnoi stanok) of c. 1922-23 for Mosselprom (Moskovskii trest po pererabotke selskokhazaistvennoi produktsii—Moscow Association of Enterprises Processing Agricultural and Industrial Products). This was a small folding structure, apparently made from wood, which could be carried to its destination and then quickly erected in the street or any open public space. After use, it could easily be re-folded and carried away. It contained a tray (on collapsible legs) with a removable glass lid for displaying small items of merchandise such as stationery supplies or cigarettes. Gan also designed a larger structure for the sale of books and journals in c. 1923. This was not a portable piece as such, although it could be moved. It consisted of two cuboid structures of different sizes, which opened out to form a large area of shelving for displaying books and magazines. This prototype clearly went into production at some point and, with certain modifications, was manufactured from wood for use inside public buildings, like the entrance halls of Moscow University and of the stations on the Moscow Metro, where some examples are still in use. When shut, the prominent lettering advertised the role of the kiosk and with the colored panels provided elements of decoration.

Working along similar lines, in 1924 Lavinskii produced a more permanent structure for Gosizdat (the State Publishing House). This design was to be erected on the streets, and at least one kiosk was built on Revolution Square in Moscow. The essential structure elaborated the basic cube and consisted essentially of a truncated, four-sided pyramid, with the corners cut away, which had been inverted over a cuboid base. All four sides were used for display. The windows and service hatch were covered by flaps, which could then hang down when the kiosk was open in a way that repeated the shape of the top. This arrangement meant that items could be left on display indefinitely in the windows. The ex-

citing articulation of the roof angles necessitated an effective drainage system. The design was attractive, compact, economic to manufacture, and easy to use. With its innovative design and practicality, this kiosk represented an enormous advance over the almost classically inspired model that Lavinskii had produced for the All Union Agricultural Exhibition of 1923.

A similarly adventurous approach to geometry characterized Gan's design for a rural kiosk of c. 1924. Primarily intended for the sale of books, it was also conceived to serve as a focal point for the social activities of the village. In an attempt to convey, in the structure of the kiosk, the important ideological role that it was to play in the life of the community, Gan turned his design into a piece of permanent propaganda and made it literally look like a flag ship. The nautical imagery was utilized in the prow-like arrangement of the facade and the rigging, with structures echoing the crows nest, and the funnels being attached to the top of the building. Although these features make the *Rural Kiosk* visually arresting and architecturally exciting, their maritime emphasis seems somewhat inappropriate for the rural settings of the vast land-locked areas of Russia. In other respects, the design displays an admirable pragmatism. The steep inclines of the walls and roofs, for instance, were justified on climatic grounds: it was intended to channel the snow and rain in such a way as to keep the entrance clear. Despite this, the whole design has a decidedly more rhetorical feel than Gan's more temporary structures such as the folding sales stand and his book kiosk, and, of course, there is no evidence whatsoever that it was ever actually built.

Whatever their success, such items were only limited realizations of Constructivist ideas. One area of creative endeavor in which it seemed possible to realize a synthesis of "the new way of life" with a total visual environment was the theatre: "In the theatre, Constructivism . . . united constructive furnishings (the decor, the props and the costumes)—designed to show, if not the objects themselves, at least their models—with constructive gestures, movements and pantomime (the biomechanics of Vsevolod Meierkhold)—the actors organized according to rhythms."[26] If the actor was transformed into a kind of robot, the stage was transmuted into a machine. The first Constructivist stage set was Popova's design for Meierkhold's production of Crommelynck's farce *The Magnificent Cuckold*, which opened on 15 April 1922. The mill

of the action became a multi-leveled, skeletal apparatus of platforms, revolving doors, ladders, scaffolding and wheels, which rotated at differing speeds at particularly intense moments during the play. The traditional costumes were replaced by overalls or production clothing (*prozodezhda*), working clothes, the form of which was determined by the function to be performed. In this instance, they were designed to facilitate the actors' movements on the stage. Popova stressed that in her design overall she had been concerned "to translate the task from the aesthetic plane onto the Productivist plane."[27] A similar approach determined Vesnin's set for the Kamerny Theatre's production of Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday* of 1923, which was enacted on a far more complex construction, incorporating elements derived from engineering and industrial structures as well as more specific urban elements of scaffolding, stairs, and a lift.[28] Stepanova's set for Meierkhold's production of Sukhovo-Kobylin's *The Death of Tarelkin*, which opened in November 1922, was less architectural. She devised a series of separate apparatuses, each built using thin planks of wood of standard thickness, painted white. Although their functions tended to be playful within the theatrical context, the principles inspiring their production could be applied more widely and directed to the design of objects of greater utility in everyday life, such as chairs and tables. Nevertheless, there were severe limitations on the extent to which the theatre could function as an experimental laboratory for design in the wider environment. Perhaps recognizing this fact, for *The Earth in Turmoil* in 1923, Popova devised a set based on a gantry crane and simply employed a plethora of props, which all consisted of objects that had in fact been mass produced.

During this early period, the only area in which the Constructivists established a working relationship with any specific industrial enterprise for the design of everyday objects for mass manufacture was in the field of textile design.[29] Popova and Stepanova accepted the invitation issued in 1923 by the First State Textile Print Factory for artists to work there. Once employed, they began to wage a battle "against naturalistic design in favor of the geometricization of form,"[30] producing numerous designs based on the manipulation of one or more geometric forms and usually one or two colors. Undoubtedly, the venture was a success because the artist had an established role within the industry. It was an area of "applied art", which was far more bound up with traditional ideas of ornament and embellishment than with re-organizing the material

environment in a fundamental way. Even so, Popova and Stepanova effected some changes in the patterns of the fabrics produced, and asserted the importance of such elements within the wider environment. In writing about this new area of Constructivist activity, Brik explained the opinion, which Popova and Stepanova undoubtedly shared, that "a cotton print is as much a product of artistic culture as a painting."[31]

Given the constraints and frustrations, it is not surprising that the Constructivist movement began to fragment. It is difficult to date this precisely, but it had certainly occurred by mid 1922, when Gan published his book *Constructivism*, in which he referred quite explicitly to The First Working Group of Constructivists.[32] It seems probable that he was distancing himself, Rodchenko and Stepanova from the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii who had exhibited as the Constructivists in January 1922.[33] By adding the epithet "First," Gan was asserting the priority of himself, Rodchenko and Stepanova in developing the term and the concept. In an article of 1922 he explicitly stated that they were the founders of the group, thus by implication relegating other users of the Constructivist label, such as the Stenbergs and Medunetskii, to a secondary status.[34] The rift between the two factions is confirmed by the fact that in 1924 the catalogue for the *First Discussional Exhibition of Active Revolutionary Art Groups* listed the Constructivists as the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii and placed them in a group, which was distinct from Gan and his entourage.[35] But by this time, the cohesion of the movement had fractured even further. Gan, Rodchenko and Stepanova no longer presented a united front. The First Group of Constructivists was now listed under Gan's leadership alone and its membership was given as comprising Grigorii Miller, Aleksandra Mirolyubova, L. Sanina, N[ikolai?] G. Smirnov, Galina and Ol'ga Chichagova.[36] By 1925 Viktor Shestakov was included.[37] This faction asserted quite categorically its independence from "all other groups calling themselves Constructivists" such as "the Constructivists from the Kamerny theatre" (presumably the Stenbergs, Medunetskii and Vesnin), "the Constructivists of Meierkhold's theatre" (Popova and Stepanova), and "the Constructivists of *LEF*" (Rodchenko, Stepanova, Lavinskii, Popova, and Vesnin).[38]

Clearly the largest grouping outside of Gan and his entourage were the Constructivists associated with *LEF*.[39] The magazine had been founded in 1923 and among its other activities it promoted the work of the Constructivists, using the weapons of "example, agitation and pro-

paganda."[40] The magazine published Constructivist projects and numerous articles about them. Boris Arvatov was perhaps the first theorist to distinguish between Productivists and Constructivists. For him, the Productivists were primarily theoreticians, whereas the Constructivists were artists, who were actually attempting to implement a practical link with industry.[41]

The validity of Productivist theory and the effectiveness of Constructivist practice were brought into question and subjected to close and critical scrutiny on 16 January 1925 at LEF's first conference. The presidium of the meeting included practicing Constructivists like Lavinskii, Gan, Rodchenko, and Shestakov, as well as writers and critics like Mayakovskii, Brik and Chuzhak.[42] Over 150 attended. At this and at a further meeting in July that year, it was agreed that there was a crisis and certain fundamental issues were raised.[43]

Some of the severest criticisms were voiced by Nikolai Chuzhak, who considered it essential to eradicate the remaining influence of the vulgar simplifications and excesses of the early Productivist theoreticians (1918-1920), particularly their intransigent opposition to art itself. Although he did not name these Productivists he was presumably referring to Gan and his fellow contributors to *LEF*, Brik and Arvatov.[44] Chuzhak was equally negative about the practice of the Constructivists and asserted that "Rodchenko's group is worried about 'style' and textiles, which Brik idolizes. The Constructivists comprising Gan and company have made 'production' a fetish, almost an aim in itself."[45] The remedy for this, as Chuzhak saw it, was for the Constructivists to engage in more concrete, practical activity, and undertake projects that were tied into the real, rather than the hypothetical needs of society.[46]

Pertsov was equally brutal and frank in his assessment of the problems confronting the Constructivists, and identified some of the weaknesses in the theoretical principles of the Productivists. He argued that the notions of "the artist as the organizer of production" and the "rejection of fine art" were fallacious concepts, based on a total misunderstanding of communist ideas.[47] He also criticized the Constructivists' current output, which he considered amounted to little more than a new kind of "applied art." He suggested that the greatest contribution that the artist could make to industry lay precisely in his "technical ignorance and the fact that he is not tied down to earth by so called 'technical possibilities,' and that he can easily imagine a general technical idea, industrial form,

project and combination."[48] Pertsov suggested a new slogan: "Artist! Remember—your Constructive idea can fertilize industry."[49]

To some extent the crisis was due not so much to internal disagreements, the inadequacy of Productivist theory or the shortcomings of Constructivist practice, as to external pressures.[50] The market forces, which Chuzhak had mentioned, were powerful influences, acting against the production of Constructivist designs by industrial enterprises. Evidence suggests that manufacturers were far from eager to embrace the Constructivists' rather austere and perhaps unduly utilitarian products. Even in the textile industry, which had initially welcomed geometric patterns, there seems to have been a change of heart. By July 1925 Stepanova had reported that fabric designs were being accepted for mass production only if they contained naturalistic imagery: "Drawings reminiscent of the town and industry, for example straight lines, and circles are not being made now, they are accepting only drawings recalling the countryside: streams and flowers."[51] The social and political situation was also not advantageous. Gan highlighted the fundamental problem of taste under the conditions of the New Economic Policy, explaining that those responsible for selecting merchandise to be sold in the shops were reluctant to invest in Constructivist designs. He also emphasized the increasing role that negative criticism, supported by official dislike of the avant-garde, was playing in closing doors against the Constructivist designer.

Gan claimed that these critics tended to support the traditional categories of artistic activity and the aesthetic position of realism. Gradually, as official policies hardened and began to have an impact, and social and political values came to be more firmly linked to academic values in painting, Constructivists became more vulnerable. Pletnev observed: "It is no accident that right-wing art has driven LEF into a corner . . . LEF has lost its socialist orientation, and where can you go without a foundation."[52]

It is against this background of neglect by the market and attack by the critics that one of the most important manifestations of Constructivist design during the 1920s must be viewed—the Workers' Club, which was designed by Rodchenko and made for the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925. It perhaps underlines the gulf between Constructivist aspiration and reality that the only completely Constructivist environment ever made

was produced for an international exhibition, not in communist Russia but in capitalist France. For an occasion that was regarded as a publicity promotion exercise, the government was able to direct valuable resources towards the realization of Constructivist principles. Although Constructivism was neglected at home and derided by officialdom, the government nevertheless realized the enormous propaganda value of such artistic innovation abroad. As one Soviet reviewer pointed out, "our section at the Paris Exhibition constituted an undoubted cultural victory for the USSR."[53]

The ideological significance of the workers' clubs was immense. They were regarded as crucibles for creating the new society, centers for the diffusion of culture, and even places where the new proletarian culture would be created by the people themselves.[54] The cultural programs that were undertaken by the clubs ranged from basic literacy to more advanced courses in artistic and literary creativity. The clubs were also intended to combat the old way of life and to eradicate habits associated with the former social and political system. The club had a social role in replacing the old social center of the church in the life of the community, a political role in inculcating the new social and political values of collective life and communism, and a cultural role in educating the workers, helping them to acquire and appreciate existing "bourgeois" culture and helping them to liberate their own creative potential so that they could develop their own culture.

The ideological importance of the Workers' Club is indicated in Rodchenko's design by the prominence given to Lenin. Rodchenko includes a Lenin Corner. This practice had become common after the leader's death in 1924 and represented an adaptation to socialist purposes of the traditional Red Corner where the icons had hung in pre-revolutionary Russian Orthodox homes.[55] In Paris, this consisted of a large poster-sized picture of Lenin, complemented by the famous poster by Adolf Strakhov, issued shortly after the great Bolshevik died in 1924 to celebrate his revolutionary vision. At the top of one wall, Lenin's name is spelt out in large letters. It is interesting to note that this skeletal lettering is built up from standard squares and triangular divisions, and therefore acts as a programmatic statement of Rodchenko's method of standardization and economy, which he had employed in the Club's overall design. Indeed, all of the designs for items within the Club consisted of strictly rectilinear combinations of Euclidean geometric forms.

The furniture was painted in four colors, white, red, grey and black, either alone or in combination, to reinforce the ideological significance of the forms themselves. These colors, particularly red and black, had come to symbolize the Revolution during the Civil War.

Rodchenko's approach entailed devising furniture for "simplicity of use, standardization, and the necessity of being able to expand or contract the numbers of its parts."[56] This was achieved by making some items collapsible, so that they could be removed and stored when not in use. Into this category come the folding tribune, screen, display board and bench. Moreover, dynamism was an intrinsic element of the conception, from the revolving hexagonal display components of the show case, lit from below, to the chess table with its rotating chess board, and pieces of furniture like the tribune complex, which were compact in storage, but folded out for use.[57]

The pragmatism of Rodchenko's approach was also underlined by the fact that he used wood. It was undoubtedly the most economic material at that time in Russia. It was cheap and plentiful, whereas steel was expensive, difficult to process, and in very short supply. Moreover, Russian industry already possessed considerable expertise in the mass production of wooden furniture. The choice of wood was therefore a highly sensible decision, based on the state of the Russian economy and the nature of the country's natural resources. Yet the choice of wood hardly seems compatible with the Constructivist commitment to technology, which was stressed in the program of the Working Group of Constructivists, and which Rodchenko underlined further in the original model, which bore the slogan "technology improves life: the newest inventions." He was also at pains to reduce the impact that the nature of wood as a material would have on the look of his designs. He painted the wood so that the texture of its surface was completely smooth and free from any characteristics that would give it a rural or organic resonance. Perhaps the ultimate irony was that for reasons of convenience, the furniture was actually made in Paris.

The components of Rodchenko's design were intended to cater to every aspect of club life, and so included chairs, reading tables, cabinets for exhibiting books and journals, storage space for current literature, display windows for posters, maps and newspapers and a Lenin corner.[58] The most prominent element was the reading table. In place of the traditional flat surface, the top consisted of a flat central piece abutted

by two sloping sides. The sloping sides supported books and journals easily for reading, while allowing the top to be used for temporarily storing books not in current use. This arrangement is more economic in the space it occupies than a flat reading table would be. At the base, two triangular wedges ran along the length of the table, providing support for the readers' feet, structurally strengthening the upright supports at either end, but also playing a formal role in reiterating the slope of the reading section of the table.

This rethinking of basic items pervaded the whole scheme. It is also clearly seen in the chairs. These comprised three uprights (two thinner rods at the front and a wider plank behind) which are attached together at three levels: at the top by the open semi-circular form, at the seat level by the flat semicircular plane of wood and at the bottom with three standardized wooden elements. Throughout the design, the forms of the structural units are derived from the three basic geometrical forms: the circle, rectangle and triangle, in the manner of Rodchenko's earlier hanging constructions and unit constructions, but these forms are combined in a new way to provide a sturdy easily constructed chair.

Amongst the most ingenious devices was the apparatus that compressed into a box for storage, but, when required, could be folded out to incorporate a film screen, a tribune for political and educational speakers, a bench and a display board. This answered the need for strict economy in materials, and mode of production, but it was also space saving. Rodchenko employed telescopically extending parts and ball and socket jointing to achieve this transformation.[59] Once again the design relates to the earlier phase of "laboratory work." The principle of construction, incorporating the collapsible strut, has affinities with the kinds of folding and rigid constructions made by Ioganson and displayed at the Obmokhu exhibition of May 1921. Some of these changed their spatial parameters when the string was pulled, returning to the original configuration when the string was pulled again. Rodchenko's design can also be seen as a development from the principle of the skeletal structural framework, which had been utilized by Gustav Klucis in his designs for a *Screen-Tribune-Kiosk* and for a *Propaganda Stand, Screen and Loudspeaker Platform* of 1922. There are particular similarities between Rodchenko's and Klucis' book display units. Both artists exploited telescoping devices and the same set of bold colors. Rodchenko was also harnessing elements from Stepanova's theatrical devices of 1923, which

had been constructed from rods. In devising the various elements for the Workers' Club, therefore, Rodchenko was working within an established language of design.

Rodchenko's Workers' Club as a prototype, worked out in every detail according to utilitarian and aesthetic demands, stands as one of the great achievements of Constructivism. It is a design that combines an authentic functionalism with a powerful programmatic statement about the kind of art and environment that Constructivism might create in the new Communist world. It demonstrates precisely how the Constructivists applied the principles of tectonics, *faktura* and construction to the solution of a specific design task. In devising the Workers' Club, Rodchenko took into account the ideological requirements of Communism, and the industrial processes involved in manufacturing the various items. He also chose his material in line with those two factors and in response to the given function of each piece of furniture. For the Constructivists, tectonics embraced both the physical and ideological function of the object. They believed that geometry and standardization embodied the impersonality and rationality of the collective and were vital ingredients in their technological vision of the Communist future. Hence, construction entailed reducing each object to its essential geometric components and discarding all extraneous details, while *faktura* resulted in the wood being treated in a way that minimizes its associations with nature and maximizes its affinities with the machine. Along with Tatlin's Tower, the Workers' Club represents one of the canonical creations of the Constructivist aesthetic. Sadly, it remained an isolated realization of Constructivist potential.

Whatever the actual quality of their designs, in their statements, the Constructivists tended to assert the exclusive importance of the "utilitarian" at the expense of the symbolic and ideological purpose of form and design. Their stridency should be seen as a particular response to a specific situation. In order to combat the "old aestheticism," the Constructivists adopted a crusading and somewhat intransigent tone, demanding "an end to art". In trying to formulate a new relationship between art and reality, they had to clear the path of previous approaches, which included the whole range of applied art from the World of Art's theatrical designs onwards. In asserting their close link with industry, the Constructivists were expressing the need for artists to take contemporary technology and its practical manifestations in industry into

account in their work. Ultimately, the Constructivists were idealists, wedded to a belief in the possibility of fusing the aesthetic, the political, the social, the technological and the industrial into a new unity.

Laudable as such aspirations were, the undeniable fact was that they were operating in a very un-ideal environment. They had given their allegiance to the Revolution, which had compromised with capitalism in 1921 with the New Economic Policy. The result was that they were working in a mixed economy for a society that did not yet exist. They embraced industry, but this was at lower ebb than it had been in 1913. While they were committed to abstract formal values and a new language for the new society, the government increasingly supported academic painting and realism.

Moreover, during the New Economic Policy, the taste of the new entrepreneurial class with money was for more ornate, traditionally conceived furniture, and the austere designs of the Constructivists seemed to exert little charm. Likewise, the Constructivists had no success with the working class or its leaders, who were equally dismissive of strict utility, and dreamt of more luxurious artifacts. It was perhaps as a response to obvious consumer demand that later Constructivist designs display a more conventional approach towards the articulation of furniture. Rodchenko's sets for the play *Inga* epitomize this development, indicating a subtle change in both his stylistic language and in his approach to the whole problem of interior design. The play concerned the new communist woman and the environment in which she lived. Just as 1925 had allowed him to demonstrate how Constructivism could create the ideal Workers' Club, so *Inga* gave Rodchenko the opportunity to demonstrate another hypothetical new interior, as well as the enormous potential of rationally designed items, some of which could fold away. Yet in place of his innovative, geometric and skeletal designs of 1925, Rodchenko modified his basic elements to more curvilinear planes, demonstrating their adaptability and potential universality using one set of easily constructed elements and creating items that could easily be modified to represent the internal furnishings of a club, an apartment, a bedroom and an office. In a published statement he expressed his disillusionment with items of furniture that performed a dual function. He had obviously come to realize that "It is not possible for a table transformed into a bed to perform its straightforward duties."[60]

Ultimately, however, the solutions are less formally exciting than his earlier work. The wardrobe, for instance, is compact, and possesses some ingenious storage features, but these are arranged within a structure, which, although devoid of ornamentation, and entirely geometric, represents a simplification of existing wardrobe types, rather than embodying any new structural concepts. It is not reduced to an essential skeletal structure, and the method of construction is not revealed on the exterior. The integral, material plane has replaced the wooden rod. The same can be said of the 1929 showcase, which, in contrast to the display units of 1925, comprises four segments of circles arranged around a central square and built up of wooden planes. Rodchenko's designs possess some innovative qualities, but these are clothed in more traditional outward forms. A critic unsympathetic to Constructivism could perhaps justifiably deride them as "old wine in new bottles",[61] but for those engaged in the arduous task of trying to develop and promote new furniture design, Rodchenko's solutions were viewed in a more positive light. They were "constructed in an interesting fashion" and their use on the stage had "great educational significance." The sympathetic critic hoped that these prototypes might eventually go into mass production.[62]

My account of their design endeavors might suggest that the late 1920s were years of unremitting gloom for the Constructivists. This is not so. They did achieve some notable successes, particularly in the field of photomontage. Even in 1925, Pertsov had regarded this as an isolated area of positive achievement.[63] Yet not all critics found such developments desirable. Chuzhak, for one, could not see its potential and regarded it less as a desirable end in itself than as an interim, rather transitory development.[64] Such an analysis of its potential may have been responsible for the Constructivists' initial decision to become involved in such areas. But typographical, poster and exhibition design also had the important advantages at the time of representing small-scale, well-defined design tasks which fitted into traditional artistic categories. Moreover, the Party's stated aesthetic preferences were for realism, and government bodies, such as the Trades Unions and the Red Army, actively patronized artists who supplied realistic paintings. The photograph provided a way of using images without resorting to conventional realism. At the same time, the photograph was the product of a mechanical process: it could be mechanically reproduced and it thus complemented the Constructivists' commitment to technology. The

ability of photomontage to present a concrete image, which linked the everyday life of the viewer with the political and social precepts of the Communist Party, made it a valuable propaganda weapon. Klucis' photomontages employed the diagonal and asymmetrical compositional principles that he had developed in his earlier paintings and constructions. Posters such as *We Will Repay the Coal Debt to the Country* (1930) create an impact through the unusual viewpoint of the figures and the rhythm created by the ascending parallels of their diagonally advancing legs, which endow them with the coherence, power and dynamism of a collective machine. The simplicity, monumentality and documentary nature of such images makes them most persuasive. A similar approach is displayed in Lissitzky's work for his exhibition layouts such as *Pressa* (Cologne 1928) which rely on the impression created by combining integral images within a monumental format. The use of the medium, however, exerted its own pressure, and the illustrative image eventually came to dominate the formal principles with which it was manipulated, a process encouraged by the more stringent demands of the Party in the early 1930s.

Yet while conditions were fostering this pragmatism, certain Constructivists like Tatlin and Petr Miturich were revealing a heightened idealism as they concentrated on developing an alternative technology. These artists sought to return to an intensive investigation of nature and to the fundamental principles of growth and movement in organic form. Their studies led both of them to evolve new forms of transport. Miturich developed the concept of "wave-like motion" based on the principle that the curved line conserves more energy than the straight line. He demonstrated this with an apparatus, which consisted of two three-meter paths; one of these possessed three level stretches, with inclined planes between them (like three large, descending steps); and the other comprised three downward, curved swoops. Setting off two metal balls simultaneously, the ball on the curved path completed the course, while the other was only two-thirds of the way along its trajectory.[65] Convinced that wave-like motion was therefore faster, Miturich used this principle as the basis for the design of a series of vehicles, the *Volnoviks* and the *Letun* or flying machine. Working separately, though in a similar direction, Tatlin developed a flying machine, the *Letatlin* or Air Bicycle. He rejected the solutions of contemporary aviation and science, and is reported to have said: "The engineers make hard forms.

They are evil. With angles. They are easily broken. The world is soft and round."[66] His studies of baby birds, like wild cranes, their physical structure and its adaptation to the problem of flight provided the basis for the mechanics and the form of the *Letatlin*. Like Leonardo and his design for a flying machine, Tatlin and Miturich studied nature in order to re-create it. They both used nature to give man wings and emancipate man from the restrictions of nature, to liberate him from gravity. From the reconstruction of man's physical environment, Tatlin and Miturich had attempted to move beyond this to the reconstruction of man's physical capabilities. From designing a liberating environment, they designed objects to liberate human beings from the laws of gravity. This is perhaps the ultimate idealism, and it epitomizes the visionary impulse which runs through the entire Constructivist episode in Russian art.

Endnotes

1 A version of this article was first published in the catalogue of Andrews and Kalinovska, 99-116.
2 Kushner, "Kommunisty-futuristy," 3.
3 Shterenberg, "Pora ponyat'," 5.
4 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 56.
5 Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniya," 27.
6 Mayakovskii, "Prikaz po armii iskusstva," 1.
7 Brik, "Drenazh iskusstvu," 1.
8 Osip Brik, "Primechanie redaktsii," 2 and Nikolai Punin cited by Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniya," 27.
9 Although it was published in 1921, the editor's introduction is dated November 1920. See *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*, 4. The Art and Production Sub-section of Izo was set up in August 1918. (See *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*, 36).
10 "Ot redaktsii," *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*, 3.
11 Shterenberg, "Pora ponyat'," 5-6.
12 Brik, "V poryadke dnya," 6-7.
13 Tatlin, et al, "Nasha predstoy-i rabota," 11.
14 See "Programma uchebnoi podgruppy konstruktivistov Inkhuka." For details concerning Inkhuk, see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 78 ff. and Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*. The name of the group has been given variously as The Working Group of Constructivists and The First Working Group of Constructivists. Archival material gives the name of "The Working Group of Constructivists," but the first public pronouncement about the group to appear in the press in August 1922 in the Moscow magazine *Ermitazh* (no. 13, 3-4) used both names. The introduction entitled "Konstruktivisty" gave the group its full title declaring that "On 13 December 1920 the First Working Group of Con-

structivists was formed." It cited Rodchenko, Stepanova and Gan as the founders and stated, "Directing their attention to the future culture of communism and proceeding from present specific conditions, they worked out a program and production plan and started to enlist collaborators." This introduction was followed by "The First Program of the Working Group of Constructivists." The presence of both names in this publication, suggests that they were used concurrently and inter-changeably. It may well be that the shorter form was a short-hand version of the fuller name and that both names were used in this way from the very beginning.

Alternatively, the affixing of "First" to their title may have been a later development, possibly of 1922. In the introduction Gan mentions that "Constructivism has become fashionable". The "First" may, therefore, simply have been adopted to distinguish his group from any other groups or artists using the name. It may have been prompted, for example, by the exhibition of the Stenberg Brothers and Medunetskii at the Cafe Poetov which took place in January 1922 and for which the catalogue used the title *Konstruktivisty*. Although the Stenbergs were members of the group at the time of their exhibition, there may have been subsequent fundamental disagreements, as yet not documented. The tensions between Medunetskii and Stepanova were clearly manifest in the debate that followed Stepanova's paper "On Constructivism" on 22 December 1921, when Medunetskii said "Stepanova should keep drawing tadpoles" (See "Transcript of the Discussion of Comrade Stepanova's paper 'On Constructivism'." December 22, 1921 in Andrews and Kalinovska 1990, 74). This may have resulted in a split even before the January 1922 exhibition and the *Ermitazh* publication of August 1922.

Certainly, the longer title is encountered in subsequent publications. For instance, "Konstruktivisty" in *LEF*, no. 1, 1923, 251-2. This article announced preparations for the group's exhibition, and listed the items by Rodchenko that comprised "socially interpreted artistic work." Gan's book *Constructivism* dated 1922 also refers to "The First Working Group of Constructivists." It is clear that at this time Gan, Rodchenko and Stepanova are still united, as we know from the *Ermitazh* publication. When Gan eventually split with Rodchenko and Stepanova (probably sometime in 1923) Gan took the name with him and gave it to his own group.

15 Documentation published by Khan-Magomedov 1986 makes the development of the group much clearer. According to "The Report No. 1. The Assembly for the Organization of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk" held on 18 March 1921, Gan was president of the group. In the following meeting (28 March 1921) Gan was asked to write a publicity statement for the group.

16 "Programma uchebnoi pod-gruppy."

17 This exhibition used to be known as the Third Obmokhu exhibition.

18 Arvatov, "Proletariat i levoe iskusstvo," 10.

19 Ibid. Of course, Arvatov has his own axe to grind here, and it should be pointed out that "the works are unstable, caught mid-way between different categories, rather than markers on an unproblematic track towards 'art in production'" (Fer, "Metaphor and Modernity," 14).

20 *Izvestiya VTsIK*, 25 December 1920.

21 "Razval Vkhutemasa," 28.

22 Nevertheless, Arvatov and Tatlin were reported to have set up a "production laboratory" at the New Lessner Factory in Petrograd ("Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 2/3, 1923, 88).

23 Gan, *Konstruktivism*, 15.

24 Neznamov, "Proz-raboty A. Lavinskogo," 77.
25 One was erected outside the hotel on Tverskoi Boulevard in Moscow in which the delegates were staying (Oginskaya 1981, 26). Fourteen of these designs were exhibited in Riga in 1970. See *Katalog vystavki proizvedenii Gustava Klutsisa* . One was made in 1925 for the exhibition accompanying the Fifth Congress of the Comintern (Ibid., no. 26, 44). Apparently, Klutsis was active in organizing this exhibition (Eght, "Khudozhnik G. Klutsis," 8).
26 Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniya," 32.
27 Popova, "Vstuplenie k diskussii Inkhuka o 'Velikodushnom rogonostse'."
28 Vesnin's project was cramped by the proscenium arch. In its full glory it clearly alludes to mines, factory chimneys, as well as industrial and urban complexes.
29 This, of course, excludes the type of poster and typographical work being undertaken by Rodchenko, Lavinskii and Gan for State enterprises and for publishers.
30 Varvara Stepanova, "O polozhenii i zadachakh khudozhnika-konstruktivista v sittsenabivnoi promyshlennosti v svyazi s rabotami na sittsenabivnoi fabrike" in Minutes of Inkhuk's meeting on 5 January 1924. For details concerning the date when Stepanova and Popova entered the factory see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 291-92, n. 6.
31 Brik, "Ot kartiny k sittsu," 34.
32 Gan, *Konstruktivism*, 5.
33 *Konstruktivisty. K. K. Medunetskii, V. A. Stenberg, G. A. Stenberg*.
34 "Front khudozhestvennogo truda. Materialy k Vserossiiskii konferentsii levykh v iskusstve. Konstruktivisty. Pervaya programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov", *Ermitazh*, (Moscow), no. 13, 1922, 3-4.
35 "1-ya diskussionnaya vystavka ob'edinenii aktivnogo revolutsionnogo iskusstva 1924g." in Matsa 1933, 314.
36 Ibid. The catalogue contained information relating to the activities of the group and a statement of its theoretical position which, of course, closely echoed the precepts of Gan's *Konstrnktivizm*. The members of the group seem to have mainly been students from the Vkhutemas. The group was apparently organized into different sections, dealing respectively with furniture and equipment needed in everyday life (Gan, Miller and Sanina), children's books (the Chichagova sisters and Smirnov), special clothing (Mirolyubova, Sanina and Miller), and typographical production (Gan and Miller). Their exhibits at the show included designs for typographical layouts, items of everyday use including furniture and equipment, industrial clothing (production clothing), specialized clothing, and children's books (ibid., 316-17).
37 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 56. Writing in 1925, Pertsov clearly differentiated between the group led by Gan and the other Constructivists. He called Gan's group "The First Working Group of Constructivists" and listed its members.
38 "1ya diskussionnaya vystavka" in Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, 314.
39 Ultimately, the antagonism between these two major groupings became such that in an article of 1928 Gan rewrote the history of Constructivism completely, and pre-dated the split between the "Constructivists" and the artists whom he now referred to as "the productivists of LEF" to 1920! See Gan, "Chto takoe konstruktivism?" 79-81.
40 *LEF*, No. 2, 1923, 9.
41 Arvatov, "Oveshchestvelennaya utopiya," 61.
42 "Pervoe soveshchnie rabotnikov *Lefa*" in Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 135.
43 The discussions and conclusions of the January and July meetings were published in Pertsov 1925.

44 Arvatov was unable to attend the conference because he was ill. Brik participated and so did Gan.
45 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 136.
46 Ibid., 137.
47 Ibid., 79.
48 Ibid., 76.
49 Ibid.
50 The disagreements between different members were far more wide-reaching and numerous than the specific elements of the debate that I have chosen to highlight here.
51 Ibid., 143.
52 Ibid., 145.
53 Tugendkhol'd, "SSSR na parizhskoi vystavke," 932.
54 See Kopp, *Constructivist Architecture in the USSR*, 112.
55 In this way the Bolsheviks had learnt from the practice of the Christian church, which had itself taken over rituals and locations from from paganism, adapted them, and thus supplanted the previous religion effectively.
56 Varst, "Rabochii klyub," 36.
57 Lavrentiev, "Experimental Furniture Design in the 1920s," 151-2.
58 "Rodchenko v Parizhe."
59 Lavrentiev, "Experimental Furniture Design in the 1920s," 151.
60 A. Rodchenko "Diskussii o novoi odezhde i mebeli—zadacha oformleniya" in Glebov, *Inga*, 12.
61 Berezark, "Veshch' na stene," 10.
62 Lukhmanov, "Bez slov," 4.
63 Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 79.
64 Nikolai Chuzhak, "Ot illyuzii k materii (po povody 'Revizii Lefa')" in Pertsov, *Za novoe iskusstvo*, 113-4.
65 Although the apparatus seems to be very convincing, it is based on unscientific principles. In his unpublished note "The Miturich idea of *volnovoe dvizhenie* (wavelike motion)," George Gerstein explained that "The principle in no way depends on wave-like motion, although it does involve a descent and possibly much later a rise of the moving object . . . the usual explanation of such things is in terms of potential and kinetic energy. The tracks start at the same height, therefore both balls have the same amount of initial potential energy and no kinetic energy. Total energy, i.e., the sum of potential and kinetic energy of each ball, is always constant. The lower a ball gets on its trajectory, the less potential energy and hence the more kinetic energy (and hence velocity) it will have." Miturich's apparatus works because the curved path goes lower than the straight path, and the ball that travels along it will go faster than along the straight path.
66 Begicheva, "Vospominaniya o Tatline," 18.

4. Russian Art of the Avant-Garde[1]

(Translated Texts)

John E. Bowlt

The Paths of Proletarian Creation, 1920 — ALEKSANDR BOGDANOV

Aleksandr Bogdanov: Pseudonym of Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Malinovsky. Born Grodno Province, 1873; died Moscow, 1928. 1896: joined the Social-Democratic Party; 1899: graduated from the medical faculty of Kharkov University; 1903: joined the Bolsheviks; 1905: took an active part in the in the first Revolution; 1907: arrested and exiled to Western Europe; 1909: with Anatolii Lunacharsky organized the Bolshevik training school on Capri; 1914-1918: internationalist; 1917 on: played a major role in the organization and propagation of Proletkult; member of the Central committee of the All-Russian Proletkult and coeditor of *Proletarskaya kultura* [Proletarian Culture]; maintained close contact with Proletkult in Germany, where several of his pamphlets were published; 1929: became less active in politics and returned to medicine; 1926: appointed director of the Institute of Blood Transfusion, Moscow; 1928: died there while conducting an experiment on himself.

The text of this piece, "Puti proletarskogo tvorchestva," is from *Proletarskaya kul'tura* [Proletarian Culture] (Moscow), no. 15/16, 1920. This text demonstrates Bogdanov's ability to argue in terms both of art and of science and testifies to Proletkult's fundamental aspiration to conceive art as an industrial, organized process. The text also reveals Bogdanov's specific professional interest in neurology and psychology. He wrote several similar essays.

* * *

1. *Creation*, whether technological, socioeconomic, political, domestic, scientific, or artistic, represents a kind of labor and, like labor, is composed of organizational (or disorganizational) human endeavors. It is

exactly the same as labor, the product of which is not the repetition of a ready-made stereotype, but is something "new." There is not and cannot be a strict delineation between creation and ordinary labor; not only are there all the points of interchange, but often it is even impossible to say with certainty which of the two designations is the more applicable.

Human labor has always relied on collective experience and has made collective use of perfected means of production; in this sense human labor has always been collective; this was so even in those cases where its aims and outer, immediate form were narrowly individual (i.e., when such labor was done by one person and as an end in itself). This, then is creation.

Creation is the highest, most complex form of labor. Hence its methods derive from the methods of labor.

The old world was aware neither of this social nature germane to labor and creation, nor of their methodological connection. If dressed, up creation in mystical fetishism.

2. All methods of labor, including creation, remain within the same framework. Its first stage is the combined effort and its second the selection of results—the removal of the unsuitable and the preservation of suitable. In "physical" labor, material objects are combined; in "spiritual" labor, images are combined. But as the latest developments in psychophysiology show us, the nature of the efforts that combine and select are the same—neuromuscular.

Creation combines materials in a new way, not according to a stereotype, and this leads to a more complicated, more intensive selection. The combination and selection of images take place far more easily and quickly than those of material objects. Hence creation takes place very often in the form of "spiritual" labor—but by no means exclusively. Almost all "fortuitous" and "unnoticeable" discoveries have been made through a selection of material combinations, and not through a preliminary combination and selection of images.

3. The methods of proletarian creation are founded on the methods of proletarian labor, i.e., the type of work that is characteristic for the workers in modern heavy industry.

The characteristics of this type are: (1) the unification of elements in "physical" and "spiritual" labor; (2) the transparent, unconcealed, and unmasked collectivism of its actual form. The former depends on the scientific character of modern technology, in particular on the transfer-

ence of mechanical effort to the machine: the worker is turning increasingly into a "master" of iron slaves, while his own labor is changing more and more into "spiritual" endeavor—concentration, calculation, control, and initiative; accordingly, the role of muscular tension is decreasing.

The second characteristic depends on the concentration of working force in mass collaboration and on the association between specialized types of labor within mechanical production, an association that is transferring more and more direct physical, specialist's work to machines. The objective and subjective uniformity of labor is increasing and is overcoming the divisions between workers; thanks to this uniformity the practical compatibility of labor is becoming the basis for comradely, i.e., consciously collective, relationships between them. These relationships and what they entail—mutual understanding, mutual sympathy, and an aspiration to work together—are extending beyond the confines of the factory, of the professions, and of production to the working class on a national and, subsequently, a universal scale. For the first time the collectivism of man's struggle with nature is being thought of as a conscious process.

4. In this way, methods of proletarian labor are developing toward monism and collectivism. Naturally, this tendency contains the methods of proletarian creation.

5. These aspects have already managed to express themselves clearly in the methods peculiar to those areas in which the proletariat has been most creative—in the economic and political struggle and in scientific thought. In the first two areas, this was expressed in the complete unity of structure in the organizations that the proletariat created—party, professional, and cooperative organizations: one type, one principle—comradeship, i.e., conscious collectivism; this was expressed also in the development of their programs, which in all these organizations tended toward one ideal, namely, a socialist one. In science and philosophy Marxism emerged as the embodiment of monism of method and of a consciously collectivist tendency. Subsequent development on the basis of these same methods must work out a universal organizational science, uniting monistically the whole of man's organizational experience in his social labor and struggle.

6. The proletariat's domestic creation, inasmuch as it derives from the framework of the economic and political struggle, has progressed intensely and, moreover, in the same direction. This is proved by the

development of the proletarian family from the authoritarian structure of the peasant or bourgeois family to comradely relationships and the universally established form of courtesy—"comrade." Insofar as this creation will advance consciously, it is quite obvious that its methods will be assimilated on the same principles; this will be creation by a harmonically cohesive, consciously collective way of life.

7. With regard to artistic creation, the old culture is characterized by its indeterminate and unconscious methods ("inspiration," etc.) and by the alienation of these methods from those of labor activity and other creative areas. Although the proletarian is taking only his first steps in this field, his general, distinctive tendencies can be traced clearly. Monism is expressed in his aspiration to fuse art and working life, to make art a weapon for the active and aesthetic transformation of his entire life. Collectivism, initially an elemental process and then an increasingly conscious one, is making its mark on the content of works of art and even on the artistic form through which life is perceived. Collectivism illuminates the depiction not only of human life, but also of the life of nature: nature as a field of collective labor, its interconnections and harmonies as the embryos and prototypes of organized collectivism.

8. The technical methods of the old art have developed in isolation from the methods of other spheres of life; the techniques of proletarian art must seek consciously to utilize the materials of all those methods. For example, photography, stereography, cinematography, spectral colors, phonography, etc., must find their own places as mediums within the system of artistic techniques. From the principle of methodological monism it follows that there can be no methods of practical work or science that cannot find a direct or indirect application in art, and vice versa.

9. Conscious collectivism transforms the whole meaning of the artist's work and gives it new stimuli. The old artist sees the revelation of his individuality in his work; the new artist will understand and feel that within his work and through his work he is creating a grand totality—collectivism.

For the old artist, originality is the expression of the independent value of his "I," the means of his own exaltation; for the new artist, originality denotes a profound and broad comprehension of the collective experience and is the expression of his own active participation in the creation and development of the collective's life. The old artist can

aspire half-consciously toward truth in life—or deviate from it; the new artist must realize that truth, objectivity support the collective in its labor and struggle. The old artist need or need not value artistic clarity; for the new artist, this means nothing less than collective accessibility, and this contains the vital meaning of the artist's endeavor.

10. The conscious realization of collectivism will deepen the mutual understanding of people and their emotional bonds; this will enable spontaneous collectivism in creation to develop on an incomparably broader scale than hitherto, i.e., the direct collaboration of many people, even of the masses.

11. In the art of the past, as in science, there are many concealed collectivist elements. By disclosing them, the proletarian critics provide the opportunity for creatively assimilating the best works of the old culture in a new light, thereby adding immensely to their value.

12. The basic difference between the old and the new creation is that now, for the first time, creation understands itself and its role in life.

Declaration: Comrades, Organizers of Life, 1923 — LEF

The journal *Lef* (Levyi front iskusstv—Left Front of the Arts) existed from 1923 until 1925 and then resumed as *Novyi lef* (Novyi levyi front iskusstv—New Left Front of the Arts) in 1927 and continued as such until the end of 1928. Among the founders of *Lef* were Boris Arvatov, Osip Brik, Nikolai Chuzhak, Boris Kushner, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Sergei Tretyakov. Its editorial office was in Moscow. In 1929 the group changed its name to Ref [Revolyutsionnyi front—Revolutionary Front]. In 1930 the group disintegrated with Mayakovsky's entry into RAPP [Rossiiskaya assotsiatsiya proletarskikh pisatelei—Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Writers] and with the general change in the political and cultural atmosphere. LEF was especially active during its early years and had affiliates throughout the country including Yugolef [Yuzhnyi LEF—South LEF] in the Ukraine. As a revolutionary platform, *Lef* was particularly close to the constructivists and formalists; *Novyi lef* devoted much space to aspects of photography and cinematography, Aleksandr Rodchenko playing a leading part.

The text of this piece "Tovarischi, formovschiki zhizni!" appeared in *Lef* in 1923 in Russian, German, and English. This translation is based on the English version, pp. 7-8. This was the fourth declaration by *Lef*, the first three appearing in the first number of the journal: "Za chto boretsia LEF?" ("What Is LEF Getting Its Teeth into?"] and "Kogo predosteregaet LEF?" ["Whom Is LEF Warning?"]. However, they were concerned chiefly with literature and with history and had only limited relevance to the visual arts.

* * *

Today, the *First of May*, the workers of the world will demonstrate in their millions with song and festivity.

Five years of attainments, even increasing.

Five years of slogans renewed and realized daily.

Five years of victory.

And—

Five years of monotonous designs for celebrations.

Five years of languishing art.

So-called Stage Managers!

How much longer will you and other rats continue to gnaw at this theatrical sham?

Organize according to real life!

Plan the victorious procession of the Revolution!

So-called Poets!

When will you throw away your sickly lyrics?

Will you ever understand that to sing praises of a tempest according to newspaper information is not to sing praises about a tempest?

Give us a new Marseillaise and let the Internationale thunder the march of the victorious Revolution!

So-called Artists!

Stop making patches of color on moth-eaten canvases.

Stop decorating the easy life of the bourgeoisie.

Exercise your artistic strength to engirdle cities until you are able to take part in the whole of global construction!

Give the world new colors and outlines!

We know that the "priests of art" have neither strength nor desire to meet these tasks: they keep to the aesthetic confines of their studios.

On this day of demonstration, the First of May, when proletarians are gathered on a united front, we summon you, organizers of the world:

Break down the barriers of "beauty for beauty's sake"; break down the barriers of those nice little artistic schools!

Add your strength to the united energy of the collective!

We know that the aesthetics of the old artists, whom we have branded "rightists," revive monasticism and await the holy spirit of inspiration, but they will not respond to our call.

We summon the "leftists" the revolutionary *futurists*, who have given the streets and squares their art; the *productivists*, who have squared accounts with inspiration by relying on the inspiration of factory dynamos; the *constructivists*, who have substituted the processing of material for the mysticism of creation.

Leftists of the world!

We know few of your names, or the names of your schools, but this we do know—wherever revolution is beginning, there you are advancing.

We summon you to establish a single front of leftist art—the "Red Art International."

Comrades!

Split leftist art from rightist everywhere!

With leftist art prepare the European Revolution; in the U.S.S.R. strengthen it.

Keep in contact with your staff in Moscow (Journal LEF, 8 Nikitsky Boulevard, Moscow).

Not by accident did we choose the First of May as the day of our call.

Only in conjunction with the Workers' Revolution can we see the dawn of future art.

We, who have worked for five years in a land of revolution, know:

That only October has given us new, tremendous ideas that demand new artistic organization.

That the October Revolution, which liberated art from bourgeois enslavement, has given real freedom to art.

Down with the boundaries of countries and of studios!
Down with the monks of rightist art!
Long live the single front of the leftists!
Long live the art of the Proletarian Revolution!

Constructivism [Extracts], 1922 — ALEKSEI GAN

Born 1893; died 1942. 1918-20: attached to TEO Narkompros [Teatralnyi otdel Nar-komprosa—Theater Section of Narkompros] as head of the Section of Mass Presentations and Spectacles; end of 1920: dismissed from Narkompros by Anatolii Lunacharsky because of his extreme ideological position; close association with Inkhuk; cofounder of the First Working Group of Constructivists; early 1920s: turned to designing architectural and typographical projects, movie posters, bookplates; 1922-23 editor of the journal *Kino-fot* [Cine-Photo]; 1926-30: member of OSA [Obedinenie sovremennykh arkhitektorov—Association of Contemporary Architects] and artistic director of its journal, *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture); 1928: member of October group; during 1920s: wrote articles on art and architecture; died in a prison camp.

The translation is of extracts from Gan's book *Konstruktivizm* (Tver, October-December 1922). The book acted as a declaration of the industrial constructivists and marked the rapid transition from a purist conception of a constructive art to an applied, mechanical one; further, it has striking affinities with the enigmatic "Productivist" manifesto. It is logical to assume that the book's appearance was stimulated be the many debates on construction and production that occurred in Inkhuk during 1921 and in which Boris Arvatov, Osip Brik, El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Nikolai Tarabukin, et al., took an active part, and also by the publication of the influential collection of articles *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve* [Art in Production] in the same year. Moreover, the First Working Group of Constructivists, of which Gan was a member, had been founded in 1920 (see p. 24iff). However, the book, like Gan himself, was disdained by many contemporary constructivists, and the significance of the book within the context of Russian constructivism has, perhaps, been overrated by modern observers.