

We affirm in these arts a new element the kinetic rhythms as the basic forms of our perception of real time.

These are the five fundamental principles of our work and our constructive technique.

Today we proclaim our words to you people. In the squares and on the streets we are placing our work convinced that art must not remain a sanctuary for the idle, a consolation for the weary, and a justification for the lazy. Art should attend us everywhere that life flows and acts . . . at the bench, at the table, at work, at rest, at play; on working days and holidays . . . at home and on the road . . . in order that the flame to live should not extinguish in mankind.

We do not look for justification, neither in the past nor in the future.

Nobody can tell us what the future is and what utensils does one eat it with.

Not to lie about the future is impossible and one can lie about it at will.

We assert that the shouts about the future are for us the same as the tears about the past: a renovated day-dream of the romantics.

A monkish delirium of the heavenly kingdom of the old attired in contemporary clothes.

He who is busy today with the morrow is busy doing nothing.

And he who tomorrow will bring us nothing of what he has done today is of no use for the future.

Today is the deed.

We will account for it tomorrow.

The past we are leaving behind as carrion.

The future we leave to the fortune-tellers.

We take the present day.

ALEKSEI GAN

Constructivism [Extracts], 1922

Born 1893; died 1942. 1918–20: attached to TEO Narkompros [Teatralnyi otdel Narkomprosa—Theater Section of Narkompros] as head of the Section of Mass Presentations and Spectacles; end of 1920: dismissed from Narkompros by Anatolii Luna-



Aleksei Gan, mid-1920s. Riding a motorcycle, wearing cyclist's goggles, was Gan's favorite pastime.

charsky 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; 1926–30: member of OSA [Obedinenie sovremennykh arkhitektorov—Association of Contemporary Architects] and artistic director of its journal, *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* [SA—Contemporary Architecture; bibl. R84]; 1928: member of October group; during 1920s: wrote articles on art and architecture; rumored to have been executed.

The translation is of extracts from Gan's book *Konstruktivizm* (Tver, October–December 1922 [according to KL, advertised as appearing in May in bibl. R59, no. 5, p. 26]). The first extract, "Revolutionary Marxist Thought," is from pp. 13–19; the second, "From Speculative Activity," is from pp. 48–49; and the third, "Tectonics, Texture, Construction," is from pp. 55–56. [Part of the text has been translated into English in bibl. 45, pp. 284–87.] 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 published in bibl. 216, p. 153. It is logical to assume that the book's appearance was stimulated by 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 [bibl. R454]. Moreover, the First Working Group of Constructivists, of which Gan



Cover of Aleksei Gan's *Konstruktivizm* [Constructivism] (Tver, 1922). Designed by Gan.

Идея провозглашения этих «художественных ценностей» возникает и усиливается в процессе своего исторического бытия. Она, как гласит — на русском языке — предельно парадоксально и провокационно, использует средства формальной эстетики, в которой в эстетических формах, героически, провозглашается задача, обещающая обеспечить человечеству от всяких сверхъестественных сил высвобождение на его свободу.

Жизнь — НЕИЗМЕНИТ
— ВОТ КТО МОЖЕТ СТАТЬ ЭСТЕТИЧЕСКИМ
И ДАТЬ ДВА ПАРАДИГМАТИЧЕСКИХ
ИЗОБРАЗИТЕЛЬНЫХ ФОРМ
ИНТЕЛЛЕКТУАЛЬНО МАТЕРИАЛЬНОЙ
КУЛЬТУРЫ КОМУ-ТО
НИЗМЯ.

Продвигая и пролетаризируя искусство абсолютно не учитывая искусство.

Характер и формы, в которых искусство выражалось и то «социально-значимое», которое оно несло, но с какой стороны не задавали ему.

Продвигая рационализацию и культивируя самостоятельность, как класс в ином, жестких условиях борьбы. Его идеология формулировалась четко и ясно. Он подталкивал нем своего класса не играть, не эксплуатировать средства абстракции, не «обезличивать» индивидуальность, а реализовать средства революционной борьбы, предельной пропаганды, агитации, фактами.

Искусство не украшать, а больше качества революционного класса пролетариата, а скорее различие отдельных предельных его членов. В целом же оно было чуждо и не нужно классу, у которого был сам и только свое культурное наследство.

Page from *Konstruktivizm*. Designed by Gan.

was a member, had been founded in 1920 (see p. 241ff). 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.

In keeping with its tenets, the book's textual organization and imagery are highly "industrial": the elaborate typographical layout designed by Gan and the book's cover (designed allegedly by Gan but suggested probably by Rodchenko [cf. the definitive cover with the project by Rodchenko illustrated in bibl. R76, no. 1, 1923, p. 106]) were intended, of course, to support the basic ideas of the text itself. Such terms as *tektonika* [tectonics], *faktura* [texture], and *konstruktsiya* [construction] were vogue words during the later avant-garde period, especially just after the Revolution, and implied rather more than their direct English translations. The concepts of texture and construction had been widely discussed as early as 1912–14, stimulating David Burliuk and Vladimir Markov, for example, to devote separate essays to the question of texture [see bibl. R269, R233]; and the concept of construction was, of course, fundamental to Markov's "The Principles of the New Art" (see pp. 23ff.). The term "texture" was also used by futurist poets, and Aleksei Kruchenykh published a booklet entitled *Faktura slova* [Texture of the Word] in 1923 [see bibl. 133, p. 341, for details]. The term "tectonics" was, however, favored particularly by the constructivists and, as the so-called "Productivist" manifesto explained, "is derived from the structure of communism and the effective exploitation of industrial matter"

[bibl. 216, p. 153]. But nonconstructivists also used the term; to Aleksandr Shevchenko, for example, a tectonic composition meant the "continual displacement and modification of tangible forms of objects until the attainment of total equilibrium on the picture's surface" [bibl. R16, p. 119]. To confuse matters further, Gan's own explanation of tectonics, texture, and construction was not at all clear: "Tectonics is synonymous with the organicness of thrust from the intrinsic substance. . . . Texture is the organic state of the processed material. . . . Construction should be understood as the collective function of constructivism . . ." (*Konstruktivizm*, pp. 61-62). Nevertheless, despite Gan's rhetoric and obscurity, the value of his book lies in the fact that it crystallized, as it were, certain potential ideas in evidence since at least 1920 and presented them as what can be regarded as the first attempt to formulate the constructivist ideology. The inconsistencies and pretentiousness of Gan's style of writing leave much to be desired.

From "Revolutionary Marxist Thought in Words and Podagrism in Practice"

Year in year out, like a soap bubble, Narkompros fills out and bursts after overloading its heart with the spirits of all ages and peoples, with all systems and with all the "sinful" and "sinless" *values* (!) of the living and the dead.



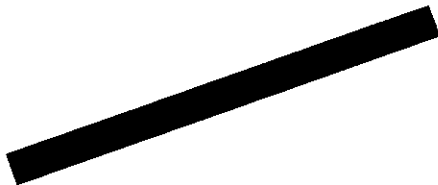
And under the auspices of the quasi Marxists work the black thousands of votaries of art, and in our revolutionary age the "spiritual" culture of the past still stands firmly on the stilts of reactionary idealism.



Artistic culture—as one of the formal exponents of the "spiritual"—does not break with the values of Utopian and fanciful visions, and its fabricators do not reject the priestly functions of formalized hysterics.



The Communists of Narkompros in charge of art affairs are hardly distinguishable from the non-Communists outside Narkompros. They are just as fascinated by the beautiful as the latter are captivated by the divine.



Seduced by priestliness, **the transmitters and popularizers** reverently serve the past, while **promising the future by word of mouth**. This impels them toward the most reactionary, *déclassé* maniacal artists: of painting, sculpture, and architecture. On the one hand, they are Communists ready to fall in open battle with capitalism at the slightest attempt at restoration; on the other hand, like conservatives, they fall voluntarily, without striking a blow, and liturgically revere the art of those very cultures **that they regard so severely when mentioning the theory of historical materialism**.

Our responsible, very authoritative *leaders* are unfortunately dealing confusedly and unscrupulously with the art not only of yesterday, but also of today; and they are creating conditions in which there can be no possibility of putting the problems of intellectual-material production on the rails of practical activity in a collective and organized fashion.

And no wonder; they are of one flesh with those same putrid aesthetics against which the materialist innovators of leftist art rebelled.

That is why a campaign is being waged both in the open and in secret against the "nonideists" and the "nonobjectivists." And the more thematic the latter, the more graphically reality supports them, the less stringently the priests of the old art carry on the struggle with them.

Now officially they are everything; they set the tone and, like clever actors, paint themselves up to resemble Marx.

It is only the proletariat with its sound Marxist materialism that does not follow them, but for all that, the vast masses do: the intellectuals, agnostics, spiritualists, mystics, empiriocritics, eclectics, and other pedagogics and paralytics.

That is who is now the defender

of artistic values

in the name of Communism.

The priest-producers of these "artistic values" understand this situation and take it into account. It is they who are weaving the threads of falsehood and deception. Like the rotten heritage of the past, they continue to **parasitize and ventriloquize**, using the resources of that same proletariat that, writhing in agony, heroically, implements the slogans, **the promises of mankind's liberation from every supernatural force encroaching on his freedom.**

The priest-hireling

**—that is who might become an aesthetic
depicter and produce a lot of palliative forms**

**of the intellectual-material
culture of Communism.**

The proletariat and the proletarianized peasantry take absolutely no part in art.

The character and forms in which art was expressed and the "social" meaning that it possessed affected them in no way whatsoever.

The proletariat developed and cultivated itself independently as a class within the concrete conditions of the struggle. Its ideology was formulated precisely and clearly. It tightened the lower ranks of its class not by play-acting, not by the artificial means of abstraction, not by abstruse fetishism, but by the concrete means of revolutionary action, by thematic propaganda and factual agitation.

Art did not consolidate the fighting qualities of the proletarian revolutionary class; rather it decomposed the individual members of its vanguard. **On the whole it was alien and useless to a class that had its own and only its own cultural perspective.**



The more vividly the artistic-reactionary wave of restoration manifests itself—the more distinctly will the sound, authentic elements of the proletariat dissociate themselves from this sphere of activity.



During the whole time of the proletarian revolution, neither the department in charge of art affairs, nor organizations, nor groups have justified their promises in practice.

From the broadcast of revolutionary calls to the future, they turned off into the reactionary bosom of the past and built their practice on the theory of "spiritual" continuity.

But practice showed that "spiritual" continuity is hostile to the tasks of a proletarian revolution by which we advance toward Communism.

THE COUNTERREVOLUTIONISM OF THE BOURGEOIS VOTARIES OF ART WHO HAVE WANDERED CASUALLY FROM ART TO REVOLUTION HAS CREATED AN INCREDIBLE CONFUSION IN ITS VAIN ATTEMPTS TO "REVOLUTIONIZE" THE FLABBY SPIRIT OF THE PAST BY AESTHETICS.

BUT THE SENTIMENTAL DEVOTION TO THE REVOLUTION OF THE IDEOLOGISTS OF THE PETIT-BOURGEOIS TENDENCY HAS PRODUCED A SHARP CRACK IN THE ATTEMPTS TO DECAPITATE THE MATERIALISM OF REVOLUTIONARY REALITY BY THE OLD FORMS OF ART.

But the victory of materialism in the field of artistic labor is also on the eve of its triumph.

The proletarian revolution is not a word of flagellation but a real whip, which expels parasitism from man's practical reality in whatever guise it hides its repulsive being.

The present moment within the framework of objective conditions obliges us to declare that the current position of social development is advancing with the omen that the artistic culture of the past is unacceptable.

The fact that all so-called art is permeated with the most reactionary idealism is the product of extreme individualism; this individualism shoves it in the direction of new, unnecessary amusements with experiments in refining subjective beauty.

Art

is indissolubly linked:

with theology,

metaphysics,

and mysticism.

It emerged during the epoch of primeval cultures, when technique existed in "the embryonic state of tools," and forms of economy floundered in utter primitiveness.

It passed through the forge of the guild craftsmen of the Middle Ages.

It was artificially reheated by the hypocrisy of bourgeois culture and, finally, crashed against the mechanical world of our age.

Death to art!

It arose naturally

developed naturally

and disappeared naturally.

MARXISTS MUST WORK IN ORDER TO ELUCIDATE ITS DEATH SCIENTIFICALLY AND TO FORMULATE NEW PHENOMENA OF ARTISTIC LABOR WITHIN THE NEW HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT OF OUR TIME.

In the specific situation of our day, a gravitation toward the technical acme and social interpretation can be observed in the work of the masters of revolutionary art.

Constructivism is advancing—the slender child of an industrial culture.

For a long time capitalism has let it rot underground.

It has been liberated by—the Proletarian Revolution.

A new chronology begins

with October 25, 1917.

From “From Speculative Activity of Art to Socially Meaningful Artistic Labor”

. . . When we talk about social technology, this should imply not just one kind of tool, and not a number of different tools, but a system of these tools, their sum total in the whole of society.

It is essential to picture that in this society, lathes and motors, instruments and apparatuses, simple and complex tools are scattered in various places, but in a definite order.

In some places they stand like huge sockets (e.g., in centers of large-scale industry), in other places other tools are scattered about. But at any given moment, if people are linked by the bond of labor, if we have a society, then all the tools of labor will also be interlocked: all, so to say, “technologies” of individual branches of production will form something whole, a united social technology, and not just in our minds, but objectively and concretely.

The technological system of society, the structure of its tools, creates the structure of human relationships, as well.

The economic structure of society is created from the aggregate of its productional relationships.

The sociopolitical structure of society is determined directly by its economic structure.

But in times of revolution peculiar contradictions arise.

We live in the world’s first proletarian republic. The rule of the workers is realizing its objectives and is fighting not only for the retention of this rule, but also for absolute supremacy, for the assertion of new, historically necessary forms of social reality.

In the territory of labor and intellect, there is no room for speculative activity.

In the sphere of cultural construction, only that has concrete value which is indissolubly linked with the general tasks of revolutionary actuality.

Bourgeois encirclement can compel us to carry out a whole series of strategic retreats in the field of economic norms and relationships, but in no way must it distort the process of our intellectual work.

The proletarian revolution has bestirred human thought and has struck home at the holy relics and idols of bourgeois spirituality. *Not only the ecclesiastical priests have caught it in the neck, the priests of aesthetics have had it too.*

Art is finished! It has no place in the human labor apparatus.

Labor, technology, organization!

THE REVALUATION OF THE FUNCTIONS OF HUMAN ACTIVITY, THE LINKING OF EVERY EFFORT WITH THE GENERAL RANGE OF SOCIAL OBJECTIVES—


that is the ideology of our time.



And the more distinctly the motive forces of social reality confront our consciousness, the more saliently its sociopolitical forms take shape—the more the masters of artistic labor are confronted with the task of:

Breaking with their speculative activity (of art) and of finding the paths to concrete action by employing their knowledge and skill for the sake of true living and purposeful labor.

Intellectual-material production establishes labor interrelations and a productional link with science and technology by arising in the place of art—art, which by its very nature cannot break with religion and philosophy and which is powerless to leap from the exclusive circle of abstract, speculative activity.



From “Tectonics, Texture, Construction”

A productive series of successful and unsuccessful experiments, discoveries, and defeats followed in the wake of the leftist artists. By the second decade

of the twentieth century, their innovational efforts were already known. Among these, precise analysis can establish vague, but nevertheless persistent tendencies toward the principles of industrial production: texture as a form of supply, as a form of pictorial display for visual perception, and the search for constructional laws as a form of surface resolution. Leftist painting revolved around these two principles of industrial production and persistently repulsed the old traditions of art. The suprematists, abstractionists, and "nonideaists" came nearer and nearer to the pure mastery of the artistic labor of intellectual-material production, but they did not manage to sever the umbilical cord that still held and joined them to the traditional art of the Old Believers.¹

Constructivism has played the role of midwife.

Apart from the material-formal principles of industrial production, i.e., of texture and of constructional laws, constructivism has given us a third principle and the first discipline, namely, tectonics.

We have already mentioned that the leftist artists, developing within the conditions of bourgeois culture, refused to serve the tastes and needs of the bourgeoisie. In this respect they were the first revolutionary nucleus in the sphere of cultural establishments and canons and violated their own sluggish well-being. Even then they had begun to approach the problems of production in the field of artistic labor. But those new social conditions had not yet arisen that would have allowed for their social interpretation and thematic expression in the products of their craft.

The Proletarian Revolution did this.

Over the four years of its triumphant advance the ideological and intellectual representatives of leftist art have been assimilating the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat. Their formal achievements have been joined by a new ally—the materialism of the working class. Laboratory work on texture and constructions—within the narrow framework of painting, sculpture, and senseless architecture unconnected with the reconstruction of the whole of the social organism—has, for them, the true specialists in artistic production, become insignificant and absurd.

AND WHILE THE PHILISTINES AND AESTHETES, TOGETHER WITH A CHOIR OF LIKE-MINDED INTELLECTUALS, DREAMED THAT THEY WOULD "HARMONICALLY DEAFEN" THE WHOLE WORLD WITH THEIR MUSICAL ART AND TUNE ITS MERCANTILE SOUL TO THE SOVIET PITCH,

WOULD REVEAL WITH THEIR SYMBOLIC-REALISTIC PICTURES OF ILLITERATE AND IGNORANT RUSSIA THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL REVOLUTION, AND

WOULD IMMEDIATELY DRAMATIZE COMMUNISM IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL THEATERS THROUGHOUT THE LAND—

The positive nucleus of the bearers of leftist art began to line up along the front of the revolution itself.

From laboratory work the constructivists have passed to practical activity.

Tectonics [REDACTED]

Texture [REDACTED]

and Construction [REDACTED]

—these are the disciplines through whose help we can emerge from the dead end of traditional art's aestheticizing professionalism onto the path of purposeful realization of the new tasks of artistic activity in the field of the emergent Communist culture.

WITHOUT ART, BY MEANS OF INTELLECTUAL-MATERIAL PRODUCTION, THE CONSTRUCTIVIST JOINS THE PROLETARIAN ORDER FOR THE STRUGGLE WITH THE PAST, FOR THE CONQUEST OF THE FUTURE.

BORIS ARVATOV
The Proletariat
and Leftist Art, 1922

Born Kiev, 1896; died Moscow, 1940. Ca. 1908: attended high school in Riga; 1911: member of the Union of Social Democratic Youth; ca. 1915: attended Petrograd University, studying physics and mathematics; early 1920s: member of Proletkult; member of Inkhuk and the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences; closely associated with *Lef* [Levyi front iskusstv—Left Front of the Arts], with the constructivists and formalists; author of books and many articles on modern art and literature.

The text of this piece, "Proletariat i levoe iskusstvo," is from *Vestnik iskusstv* [Art Herald] (Moscow), no. 1, January 1922, pp. 10–11 [bibl. R59]; no. 2, pp. 3–5,

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