

Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art (Aesthetic Consumption and Production)*

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Tret'iakov published the following essay in the Proletkul't journal Gorn [The Forge] during a period of close collaboration with the mass organization's Moscow group, where he held leading positions in both its theatrical and literary divisions. The text explores a variant of Lef production art that has been reconjugated using the theories of one of Proletkul't's founders, the scientist, author, and cultural theoretician Aleksandr Bogdanov. Even though Bogdanov had been forced from the political stage by the early 1920s and consequently could not be mentioned by name in Tret'iakov's "Art in the Revolution," the 1923 essay is nevertheless Bogdanovite through and through.¹ This influence is firstly discernable in the essay's terminology, where Tret'iakov calls for the replacement of representationalist and reflectionist methods of artist production by ones based on organization. The latter was a concept of an unmistakably Bogdanovite impress: after relentless persecution by his political rival Lenin which made him a persona non grata in the Party and Proletkul't, Bogdanov redirected his energies in the late 1910s and early '20s toward developing "tectology," a "universal organizational science" that probed common isomorphic patterns that cut across all levels of psychic, social, and material phenomena (and that has recently been heralded as a progenitor of both modern cybernetics and systems theory). The final volume of Tektologiia appeared just one year before "Art in the Revolution." One can thus surmise that the "science" which Tret'iakov mentions at the end of the essay was Bogdanov's tectology, the monistic metascience that researched the analogical structures which coordinated all strata of experience.

Tectology and Proletkul't provided Tret'iakov with a general theory of labor that was more comprehensive and versatile than models of production that apotheosized physical manufacture exclusively. Bogdanov's theories accommodated all varieties of creation and construction within the master concept of organizational production. In Bogdanov's words, "creation of all kinds (technological, socioeconomic, everyday, scientific, artistic) represents a variety of different forms of labor, and similarly consists of organizing (or disorganizing)

* "Iskusstvo v revoliutsii i revoliutsiia v iskusstve (esteticheskoe potreblenie i proizvodstvo)," *Gorn*, no. 8 (1923), pp. 111–18.

1. On the Futurist "construction of life" [*zhiznestroenie*] as a Bogdanovite art of organization, see I. Vainshtein's "Iskusstvo i organizatsionnaia teoriia," *Vestnik kommunisticheskoi akademii*, no. 11 (1925), p. 204–22.

human activity. . . . There is not and cannot be any strict division between creation and basic labor."²

The redefinition of labor as an organizational process which encompasses both cognitive and physical acts challenged conventional conceptions about the class of producers. The proletarian was no longer necessarily defined as the urban working-class male, but included people involved in all modes of productive activity, whether constructing language, sewing a dress, walking down the street, or making art. Of paramount importance was that the individual assume an operative, inventive relationship to these acts of labor. What Bogdanov's "universal organizational science" proposed, and what Tret'iakov adapted in this essay for the purposes of Lef's art of production, was a new approach to the "proletarianization of the intellectual," a notion that was ubiquitous—and often profoundly misconstrued—in the 1920s. While most would interpret this phrase in a limited fashion, understanding it to mean stripping artists and writers of their intellectual culture and retraining them in the less donnish environment of the factory or the collective farm, Tret'iakov defined proletarianization far more inclusively: for him, it meant unleashing, not disavowing, the creative and organizational capacities of the conceptual producer. His resulting vision for a monistic culture of production encompassed everything from literacy to electrification, from romantic love to eugenics, from poetry to technical standardization.

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A close look at Russian art right now, at developments in the activities of art-workers in Russia and abroad, reveals a surprising degree of cohesiveness among the forces of painters and writers on the right.

Even a cursory glance through the Russian émigré journals reveals that underneath the rabid hatred expressed toward the makers of the new Soviet Russia (the "red thugs," as they call the workers of the revolution) there is a chorus of sighs about the great writers and artists, about good books and cozy apartments, about an intelligentsia that is the salt of the earth. These bastards roll out all of the "greats"—Tolstoy and Pushkin, Vrubel and Roerich—to serve as heavy artillery in the defense of "past greatness" (which is to say: "the good old days").

This expatriate clique moans and groans about the Russian ballet and the Art Theater, which console the foreign philistines. The pages of their journals are filled with interminable discussions of "the enchanting folktale" and the "dream world" into which theater, pictures, and poetry spirit away the souls of readers and spectators weary of everyday life. They shore up "eternal beauties" and other unshakable "truths" with references to the flowering of religious movements in Russia. Ever more persistently they create visions of this gingerbread Russia, a Russia of romantic Gypsy restaurant music, of golden cupolas, of pies, of troikas, philistine feather beds, and physical well-being.

2. Aleksandr Bogdanov, "Puti proletarskogo tvorchestva," *O proletarskoi kul'ture 1904–1924* (Moscow: Kniga, 1924), p. 192.

This phenomenon would not be worth mentioning if it existed only within émigré circles. Let the dead there bury their own dead.

But no: the united front of émigré art has its tenacious wing in Russia. Under the cover of NEP,³ these scum continue to crawl out of every hole in Russia, although with more stealth and caution here. They have decided that it is time for the revolution to die (as if the revolution were like a draft that could be cut off by closing a window); that it is once again time to call upon the “best and the brightest” of Russian (read: bourgeois-intelligentsia) culture; and that there has been enough talk about the individual’s connection to the titanic efforts of the production collective. Man—how proud that sounds simply by itself.⁴ And in everyday life, man is subject to the power of objects and a habitual environment. In a word: long live the philistine and domestic comfort, long live our immortal past, glory to God in the highest (He delivers), peace on earth and goodwill to men—but “don’t bother me about anything beyond my own backyard.”

The guiding light of this reactionary wing is St. Petersburg, that impoverished “specialist in the traditions” of great “Russian art.”

And it would probably not even be worth writing yet again about these groups, if only they didn’t display such great stamina in our current state of exhaustion, and if only one didn’t sense that they are the expression of certain surviving attitudes.

On the other hand, one also detects a certain disorder and discord in the camp of those revolutionary scouts who connect issues of revolution to those of art.

When you come across satisfied statements by the leaders of the revolutionary press who say that we finally have a “Soviet everyday life”; when the mystic Andrei Belyi is the source of inspiration for proletarian poets; when a swelling wave of belles lettres appears; when novels and narratives are written that “represent” revolutionary episodes and sensations, it then becomes evident just how little the revolutionary system for reevaluating all sectors of life has been applied to art. Do not forget that we have entered a period when we must take the thoughts and feelings that constitute the real “accomplishment of the revolution” and crystallize them into consciousness. At present the most crucial front is that of the ideological organization of the individual. And this campaign requires the same intense “struggle for consciousness” that is being waged “for existence” [*za bytie*] within politics and economics. We do not side with those fatalists, those “simplifiers” of Marxism, who claim that consciousness will emerge “spontaneously” once the forms of production have been changed. No, we consider all knowledge that illuminates

3. NEP was the acronym for “New Economic Policy.” In order to rebuild the Russian economy after the devastation of the civil war, Lenin replaced the policy of War Communism in 1921 with the New Economic Policy, which reestablished limited forms of private ownership within a partially capitalist economy. By 1928, when the NEP was dissolved and the Soviet economy was renationalized in the first Five-Year Plan, industrial and agricultural output had been restored to their pre-World War I levels.

4. Mocking reference to a line in Maksim Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* (1902), which became a rallying cry for psychological realism in art.

revolutionary problems and all sensation that strengthens revolutionary activity to be factors that may indeed be secondary, but are still active. These factors are restructuring the individual and accelerating our progress on the path toward the construction of the "world commune of producers."

If this is indeed the case, then several fundamental questions must first be carefully considered within the camp of those constructors of art who do not regard the revolution as a random episode or as something fallen "out of the blue."

Objectively, the revolution is a historical process that changes class hierarchies and involves a dramatic acceleration in the rate of change within socioeconomic forms. Subjectively, it means the awareness of new tasks and of the devices for their realization by an individual organized by the interests of the collective.

Isn't art one productive process among other modes of production? What kind of relationship does art have to life? What is art's role in the latter?

Do works of art have an absolute value, or are they subordinate to the principle of relativity that is at the core of Marxist dialectics? What occasions the production of aesthetic products (works of art), and what conditions the consumption of these products by the collective?

From the perspective of communism, in which direction should this production and consumption develop? Are the tasks of the revolution in the realm of art resolved by *representation* and *reflection*, or is art faced with *organizational* and *constructive* tasks that have not been fulfilled by the forms that have existed up to our time? What kind of changes to the principles of "form and content" does the revolution dictate?

To what extent is the art of our revolution simultaneously a revolutionary art, i.e., an art that revises its own methods and devices every time it fulfills a new task?

These are some of the questions that demand the utmost attention of those who believe that all kinds of human activity (including art) should be subordinated to the fundamental task of organization.

Although we are hardly asking these questions for the first time, it must be said that the constructors of the new life somehow overlooked them. These questions did not become central points in the battles between the old and the new aesthetic ideologies. They were only partially considered. Rarely were they ever worked through thoroughly. Most often people simply brushed them aside, and preferred instead to proceed blindly, orienting themselves not so much by the "future to be created" as by the same old "culture of yesterday." The result was something on the order of a scholastic dispute among pedants: since the bible (the old culture) was the same for revolutionaries and reactionaries alike, the dispute concerned only which direction the handle of this bible should be pointing on the apparatus of criticism.

And so the question concerns how to fortify our positions and how to define and activate the fight against those who are resurrecting the old aesthetics of taste.

How were the questions about art and its relationship to life resolved during the tense period of the revolution by those who were the actual conductors of the revolutionary energy?

There are slogans: *Art for all! Art into the masses! Art into the streets!*

These slogans seem rather vague once you take into account that there are two aspects of art: the fixing of private experiences and sensations in a material (creation), and the effect of the created forms upon human psyches (perception).

Under the conditions of bourgeois society, these two aspects were distributed between two distinct groups. The group of those perceiving—a passive audience who devoted the greater portion of their lives to labor that was undesirable and pointless—strove to fill its leisure time with an activity that afforded some joy and interest, and that raised their spirits with a minimal expenditure of energy. People were searching for some place to which they could escape from the monotony and insipidness of the everyday. And painters, poets, musicians, and actors came to their rescue. Under the brand names of edification, perfection, and transcendent spiritual insights, a fictional life was offered that was different from people's own lives and which they accepted dolefully but unflinchingly. People were transported into different epochs, into other settings, into fantasies. Art was a conjuring trick with an almost hypnotic quality. It was a narcotic that created in the human mind a different life that was parallel to actual life. This other life may have been spectral, but it was all the more attractive for this very reason.

The artist became a wizard and illusionist, a seer and prophet whose gifts were bestowed from above. His skill in processing material was termed "genius"—a word inflected with a certain sense of the miraculous. In opposition to this art, a realism and naturalism emerged, whose task was to *reflect* life as it is. But this second current developed into photographism, into the scientific illustration of everyday life and of the history of society's activity. Because realism and naturalism took only what was already there, they dragged along behind life, often systematizing it, but hardly ever organizing it in the direction of the *desired* forms.

We must underscore the importance of the artistic movement that developed methods for the deliberate and purposive utilization of artistic material (word, color, sound, solid materials). It developed these methods in its laboratories by focusing all of the artist's attention on the material presented to him and on the means for treating and arranging it (composition). The main axis of this movement connected together those leftist groups who aimed at producing the active and skilled human psyche.

The psychology of the working person was already emerging on the eve of the revolution. Its characteristics: an ever-joyous straining to overcome chaotic and inert phenomena and the tireless development of new methods of organization.

Artistic labor integrated art into the ranks of ordinary processes of organized production that utilized linguistic, chromatic, plastic, and musical material in the most expedient manner. In most cases, however, this work was not considered revolutionary. The revolutionary quality of creation typically just meant the use of a revolutionary subject or image in the work. Which is why in the poetic and artistic creation of our epoch the revolution remains just an "event" that people write *about*, that people *describe*. This phenomenon is called revolutionary thematics.

Only the subject matter is changed. All the rest has been left in the old art that is either cut off from life or drags along behind it. The people who had just been using measured, regular metrical lines of verse to praise the starry night, the aroma of flowers, or their melancholy and longing now begin to praise the revolution: torch—scorch, brave—grave.

Just like in a panopticon, people are once again forced to look at the revolution through the tiny window of verse. And at the same time, an entirely new, bold, and economical language is developing alongside art, quite independently of it: *ar-es-ef-es-ar* [RSFSR], *sovdep* [Soviet deputy], *cheka* [special police for combating counterrevolutionary activity], *sorabis* [Soviet worker of art]. From his tribune, the orator hurls precise descriptions, compact words, witticisms, and slogans among the people. Is how someone extols the revolution really so important? Indeed, the revolution has fundamentally changed the way in which he views, feels, and names all of the objects that surround him. Even in the time of the revolution, art retained its cult-like, ornamental function, and remained unaffected by the materialist dialectic that assigns a secondary role to all objects and phenomena by giving them a practical purpose. The poet found himself in the role of a priest entering into the same old church to conduct the same old liturgy, only now celebrating Marx instead of Christ.

It is true that some people proposed the principle of agitational art, i.e., the utilization of works of art for the practical goals of persuasion, instruction, and recollection. But here too they forgot two things: (1) Why should the “command” of the agitational poem and poster be more compelling than a resolution, an order, a draft, or a diagram? and (2) Isn’t the agitational force of a poem diminished if it’s composed using the same forms previously intended to *divert* the person from the present, practical moment?

Indeed, the poem continued to be a poem, the poster continued to be a picture, i.e., isolated aesthetic organisms. And the entire domain of living human



Margaret Bourke-White.
1930. The banner behind
the audience reads “Art
for the Workers.”

speech remained untouched, continuing to stagnate in dreariness and inexpressiveness. We learned from verses that the revolution is great, red, and worldwide; that it is a blast, an explosion, sacred, etc. But hardly anyone showed us what kinds of words could be used to name all of the objects that surround the person who is illuminated by the revolution: the stones, the sun, one's own body, the grasses, the metals, love, instruments. And indeed, giving a new face to one's relations to the entire world is a precondition for revolutionary creation.

And now—about the other side of the process of artistic production: the collective consumption of works of art.

You would think that the caste of specialists who, in “transports of inspiration,” carried down from heaven the sacred flame of expressive words and images, of chromatic and acoustic combinations—you would think that this caste would come to an end with the revolution. Everyone can and should speak and move expressively, paint all objects in expressive colors, and introduce into every object that they produce the same maximal degree of precision, clarity, and expediency that until now was possessed only by the specialists who devoted themselves to this matter—the seekers of forms, the workers of art. Recall that in childhood every person draws, dances, invents precise words, sings. So why does he then grow up to be extremely inexpressive? And only occasionally go to admire the artist's “creation”? Doesn't this originate within those conditions of capitalist labor which make work processes into a curse and within which people are always longing for moments of free time? Is it normal to be converted from a skilled producer into a spectator-consumer? And to thereby lose your active creative instinct?

Art for all! This slogan should have meant the highest degree of skill and adaptiveness in all one's practical activities—whether one is speaking, sanding wood or sharpening, convincing an audience, commanding an army, walking on the street, or sewing a dress. Joy in transforming raw material into some socially useful form, combined with skill and the intensive pursuit of the most expedient form: this is what this “art for all” should have become. Every person should be an artist, the absolute master of whatever he is doing at the present moment.

But instead of this, instead of an understanding of the socialist labor process as one that is both joyous and necessary, people are given the same old art that develops parallel to life. “Art for all” turns out to be the *mere democratization* of old art. The objects of artistic creation are made as accessible as possible to everyone: concert halls, theaters, and picture galleries are filled with the laboring masses. Instead of recognizing verse as a preliminary attempt to organize living human language, and as an attempt that demands active participation; instead of approaching theater as the first initiative toward a rhythmically coordinated construction of life, etc., people are once again “absorbed in contemplation,” and are “experiencing life secondhand.”

This democratization of art conversely took the art works that had once transported the previous masters of life into the “world of art,” and transformed them into the plush divans for life's new masters, the proletarians. The bourgeois environment and hated conditions of labor only further entrenched the habitual

desire to spend leisure time in a state of artistic contemplation, enthralled by the charms of verse, melody, and dance.

Are there really responsible, leading minds in the sphere of "revolutionary" art who say, for example, that theater is a "means to fill up the leisure time of a proletariat weary from the work day"? We must remember that it was the curse of forced labor that actually generated this need in its day. It was this curse that primed people to assimilate the haze of a "bourgeois culture" that instilled passivity and contemplation: art was the best way to escape from their drawn-out daily routine into other worlds. Take America, where they have the "Young Men's Christian Association," a colossal organization supported by the funds of capitalists, founded to fill up the leisure time of the laboring classes with partially religious, partially aesthetic-contemplative pursuits, and to thereby imbue them with the inert psychology of petty-bourgeois contentment. Is this what we're striving for?

The democratization of art as currently practiced does perhaps have one positive quality: it provides an educational service by familiarizing the masses with the aesthetic expressions of preceding generations. *The true "art for all" should never consist of turning all people into spectators, rather the opposite: it consists of mastering what was previously the particular property of the specialists of art—mastering all of the qualities and abilities necessary to build and organize raw material. That comes first. Second is the involvement of the masses in the processes of "creation," which until now only individuals have used to conduct their "liturgies."*

Our practical life in its movement, in its ascents and declines, discoveries and catastrophes, joys and misfortunes; our life that, by collectivizing production and consumption, is forcing separate individuals to come together within the granite block of the collective; our life in its totality—this is the only important and essential subject around which word, sound, color, material, and human activity should be organized.

*In connection with the revolution and the perspectives that it enables, we must introduce and investigate the question of art as aesthetic production and consumption—the question of the interrelations between art and life. At every moment, all manifestations of practical life must be colored by art. Everyone must become an artist-constructor of this life. Perhaps lyrical verses—the fireworks of poetic illumination and reincarnation—will disappear from our world. But they will survive as exemplary models for the reconstruction of language. Art's center of gravity will be situated in life itself, in the lines and forms of its objects, in everyday language, in the sounds of plants, factories, ports, streets, tractors, and worker's assemblies. To each according to his needs: such is the precept of the revolution. The attention of constructors of our life must be focused not upon *perfect works* of art, but upon the *perfect individual*, full of organizational skill and the will to overcome the obstacles that lie along the path to the total mastery of life.*

A science with this goal is currently emerging, and it is saturating all of the production processes of the social revolution with the highest degree of perfection, productivity, and joy.