

Art of the Commune

Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917–20

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In October 1917 the Bolshevik Party overthrew the Provisional Government of Russia, established in February, and replaced it with a Council of People's Commissars committed to destroying capitalism and the bourgeoisie and to establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a prelude to the ultimate creation of a fully socialist society. The previously exiled radical political opposition had become the ruling establishment. Issues of modern art and society were suddenly no longer hypothetical and "utopian." They had to be confronted. Hence, amongst the organs of power in the new government was the Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narodnyi komissariat po prosvesheniuiu—Narkompros), responsible for education and culture, with a separate Department of Fine Arts (Otdel Izobrazitelnykh Iskusstv—IZO). The profound political and social changes posed real questions for artists and their associates. What was revolutionary art? What relationship should exist between art and the new state, between art and the Bolshevik party? Was avant-garde art inherently "bourgeois" in fact, or did it represent the emergence of an alternative and potentially "revolutionary" outlook? Could proletarian art itself be created only by authentic workers, or could it also be produced by artists who embraced a proletarian world view? Debates on these complex issues found expression in diverse journals published in the territory of the former Tsarist empire.

The two most important publications promoting the ideological position of the Communist party and the government were obviously the newspapers *Izvestiia* [News], published by the Supreme Soviet, and *Pravda* [Truth], issued by the Central Committee of the Party. Both publicized important government measures relating to artistic questions, such as the decrees nationalizing private art collections and Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda, and a handful of statements on art, particularly the importance of art for propaganda and agitation. Naturally, the amount of space devoted to artistic questions was severely limited, because the government's prime concern from 1918 to early 1921 was to consolidate the Revolution and successfully fight the Civil War. After the decree of November 9, 1917, banning the "counter-revolutionary press,"¹ only political publications that recognized the government were permitted. These included newspapers such as Maksim Gorkii's *Novaia zhizn* [New life], the anarchists' *Anarkhiia* [Anarchy], and the

Socialist Revolutionaries' *Znamia truda* [The banner of work], all of which concentrated on political and ideological questions. When aesthetic matters were broached, Gorkii emphasized the didactic role of art and promoted more traditional values, while artistic innovators such as Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich were published in *Anarkhiia*, suggesting that there were links between the avant-garde and the short-lived anarchist movement after the Revolution.

One political body whose chief role was cultural was Proletkult, or the independent proletarian cultural and educational organizations (Proletarskie kulturno-prosvetitelnye organizatsii), which were set up at the instigation of Aleksandr Bogdanov in November 1917 in Petrograd, and rapidly spread throughout Russia, attracting 400,000 members by 1920. Independent of the Party and the Government, Proletkult was specifically organized to create "socialist forms of thought, feeling and daily life,"² and a culture that would reflect the values and aspirations of the proletariat. It promoted working-class education and the emergence of a proletarian intelligentsia, arranging classes for adults, organizing schools, studios, clubs, and theaters, and publishing numerous journals such as *Gorn* [The furnace] (Moscow, 1918–22), *Proletarskaia kultura* [Proletarian culture] (Moscow, 1918–21), and *Griadushchee* [The future] (Petrograd, 1918–21). None of these magazines was profusely illustrated, although their covers often carried images produced by members of the Proletkult or works of art of an agitational nature, some of which possessed a slightly folk-art flavor. The journals tended to present a rudimentary and essentially unified concept of illustrative art, based on Bogdanov's Marxist theory, according to which the cultural struggle was as important as the political and economic fight for the achievement of socialism:

*Art organizes the living images of social experience not only in the sphere of cognition, but also in the sphere of emotions and aspirations. The consequence of this is that it is the most powerful weapon in the organization of the collective's forces in class society—of class power.*³

As Valerian Polianskii emphasized in *Griadushchee*: "In the days of October we defeated capitalist power and took it into our own hands; now we are going towards a new, more mighty and majestic victory—towards the victory over bourgeois

culture.”⁴ Most Proletkult theoreticians argued that the new culture could only be created by workers and that the new art would be realistic. Typically, Pavel Bezalko declared: “We proceed from the position that the workers themselves create proletarian culture, and not the intelligentsia who by chance, or not by chance, have arrived at the ideas of the proletariat.”⁵ Like the majority of Proletkult critics, Bezalko attacked the so-called “Futurists,” artists who had rejected academic realism and who had experimented with Cubism and abstraction. He condemned them for being essentially “bourgeois artists” who were unsuitable role models for the proletariat.⁶

Less doctrinaire were the journals published by the new local-government authorities, all firmly allied with the Bolsheviks. *Plamia* [The flame] (1918–20), conceived as a “generally accessible scientific, literary, and artistic illustrated journal,”⁷ was issued by the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Red Army Deputies from 1918 to 1920. Its official nature was emphasized by the fact that Anatolii Lunacharskii, the Commissar for Enlightenment, was its first editor and an active contributor during its initial year of publication. Directed at a popular working-class audience, *Plamia* was primarily didactic, and concentrated on disseminating information rather than on participating directly in the cultural debates of the time. It devoted far more space to recent political history, important socialist figures, general knowledge, and literature than to the visual arts. Nevertheless, there were several illustrated articles celebrating important individual artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Francisco Goya, Auguste Rodin, and Vincent van Gogh as well as more politically directed pieces on subjects such as Gustave Courbet’s activities during the 1871 Paris Commune and Oscar Wilde’s involvement with Socialism. In addition, there was a long series of articles written by Lev Pumpianskii dealing with art-historical problems—for example, the relationship between primitive painting and primitivism, the nature of agitational art, and how the working class had been depicted in the visual arts before the Revolution. Individual issues were often devoted to particular themes, such as the anniversary of the Revolution or May Day, when articles about the celebrations were accompanied by documentary photographs as well as reproductions of various items of agitational art including decorations, posters, and relevant



FIG. 1 K. Dydyshko, *Revolution*, *Plamia* [Flame], no. 56 (June 1919): 7.

paintings. As befitted a journal edited by the head of Narkompros, a relatively large amount of space was assigned to the discussion and illustration of specific government artistic measures such as Lenin’s Plan for Monumental Propaganda. Between September 1918 and September 1919, *Plamia* published photographs of more than twenty monuments, several featured on the covers; for example, Grizelli’s monument to François Babeuf in Petrograd and Viktor Sinaiskii’s project for a Monument to the Great Russian Revolution. The journal also illustrated new designs for postage stamps and an official stamp for Sovnarkom, the Soviet of People’s Commissars, or the Supreme Soviet. In addition, the covers reproduced photographs of prominent socialists, both past and present. Lenin, for instance, graced the cover of the first issue. Otherwise, *Plamia* was illustrated by contemporary artists such as Ivan Puni and Natan Altman, or featured an item of propaganda such as a poster or monument (fig. 1). Overall, the journal presented an artistic image that was not particularly partisan. Reflecting Lunacharskii’s own tolerant attitudes, it was sympathetic to avant-garde experimentation as well as to more traditional formal approaches. At the same time, it clearly insisted, in accordance with Party directives, that “the proletariat must be equipped with a general humanist culture.”⁸

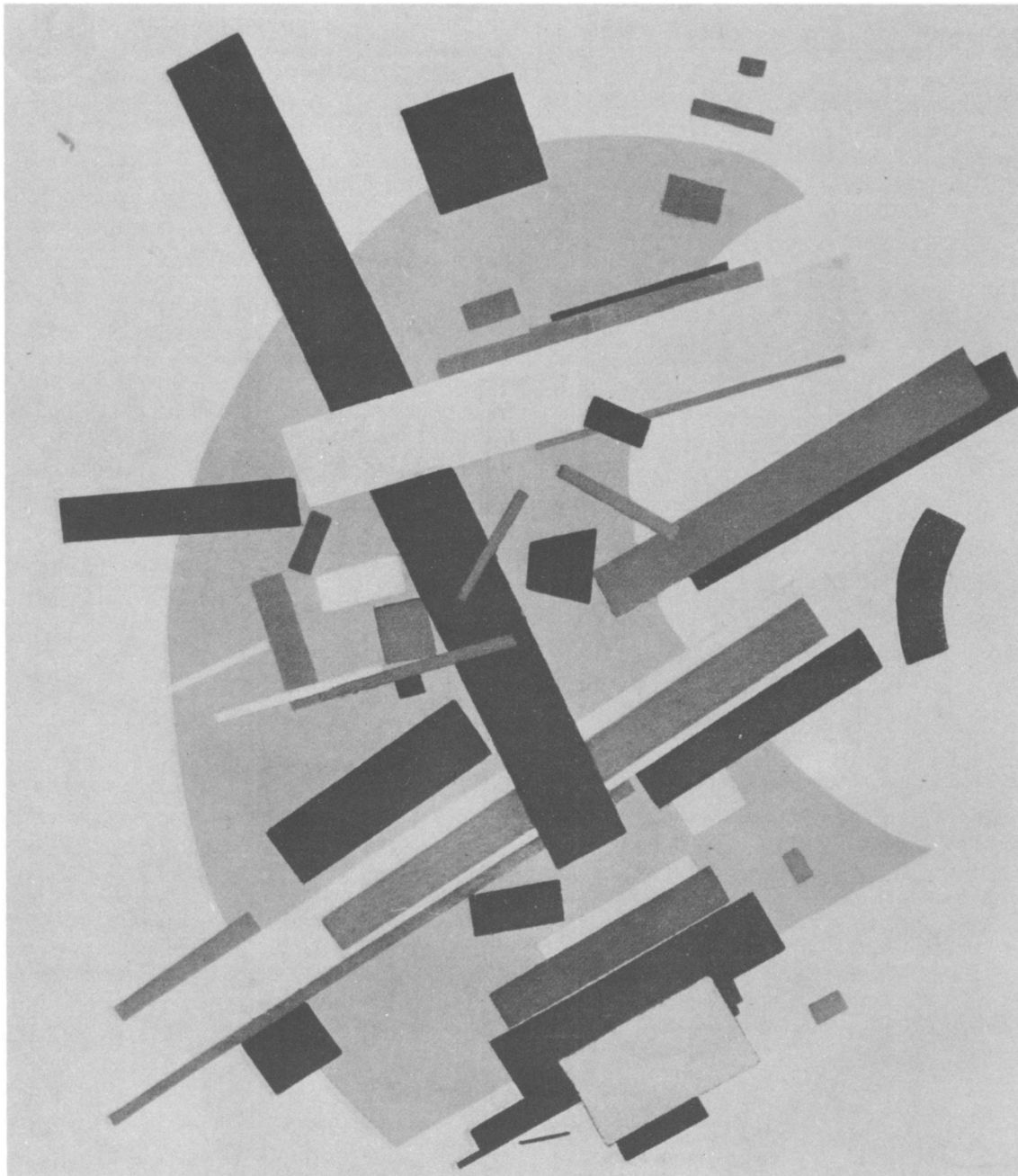


FIG. 2 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Painting*, 1916, reproduced in *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* [Fine art], no. 1 (1919): 29.

The equivalent of *Plamia* in Moscow was *Tvorchestvo* [Creation], “a journal of literature, art, science and life,”⁹ published by the Moscow Soviet of Workers and Red Army Deputies from 1919 to 1922. Directed at a similar audience, and with similar aims, its coverage of the visual arts was again less extensive than its treatment of literature. Its sympathies seemed to be with the view expressed by one critic who asked: “And isn’t it a rewarding task to depict in images and paintings all the moments of that struggle from February to October and from October to today?”¹⁰ The literary commentator Friche, a member of the editorial board and an active proponent of realism, wrote several articles on the history of art that discussed such issues as the depiction of the proletariat or the countryside in art; these were accom-

panied by a catholic selection of illustrations of works by such artists as Pieter Bruegel, Van Gogh, Edouard Manet, Jules Bastien-Lepage, Jean-François Millet, Anders Zorn, Käthe Kollwitz, and George Grosz. Another frequent contributor was the art historian Aleksei Sidorov, who was consistently critical of the avant-garde in his reviews of the latest artistic theories, exhibitions, and publications. He was clearly far more comfortable writing about the artistic treasures of Moscow and recent acquisitions of the Tretyakov Gallery. In one article, he surveyed the art of the previous two years, including the Civil War posters, the statues produced for Lenin’s Plan of Monumental Propaganda, and the street decorations for the revolutionary festivals. He emphasized that the Red Army soldiers liked the posters of Aleksandr Apsit and

Dmitrii Moor, and that the Futurists' decorations were less successful than those of more moderate artists such as the Cézannist Iliia Mashkov. Indeed, the journal celebrated artists such as Rodin alongside writers such as Gorkii and contemporary artists such as Leonid Pasternak, Sergei Gerasimov, and Mstislav Dobuzhinskii. The selection demonstrated a tolerance for some degree of experimentation, but also a clear preference for a more representational style. During 1920, there was more coverage of the Proletkult, with the publication of articles by Aleksandr Bogdanov and other Proletkult spokesmen, accompanied by increasingly overt criticism of the radical position of IZO.¹¹

Narkompros itself published a large number of journals covering educational and artistic issues. *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn* [Artistic life], which first appeared in December 1919, was "the organ of the Artistic Section of Narkompros,"¹² and covered most of its departments, including those dealing with Museums, Preservation of Monuments, Architecture, Fine Arts (IZO), Theater (TEO), and Music (MUZO). Although it was edited by a board which included the progressive art critic Abram Efros and the radical theoretician Osip Brik, the journal's coverage of the theory and practice of the fine arts was fairly limited. Wassily Kandinsky wrote on projects to create a new type of museum, a Museum of the Culture of Painting, to enshrine the avant-garde's aspiration to establish an objective basis for art, and on the organization of an international "house of arts" as part of the general fostering of international contacts. Lunacharskii and Efros also wrote about international contacts, German Expressionism, and exhibitions in Germany.¹³

Far more focused on problems concerning the contemporary visual arts in Russia and directed at a more professional audience were the three journals produced by IZO during this period: *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* [Fine art] (Petrograd, one issue, 1919), *Iskusstvo* [Art] (Moscow, eight issues, January–September 1919), and *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the commune] (Petrograd, nineteen issues, December 1918–April 1919). Of the three, *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* was the most substantial and luxurious publication, printed on high-quality paper and lavishly illustrated, the cover being printed in color (pl. 2, p. 10). Although its one and only issue appeared in 1919, the editorial was written in May 1918, over six months before *Iskusstvo kommuny* even started production. Conceived only a few months after IZO itself had been set up, and just after Vladimir Maiakovskii had complained that the arts were continuing as if nothing had happened, the journal reflected a theoretical basis that was, in the words of one critic, "distinguished by its astonishing simplicity."¹⁴ The editors proceeded from the premise that "undoubtedly socialist society will have its own way of life, its own science, and its own art; and, of course, this science and art will differ not only in their aims but also in their methods and techniques from everything that has been done in these areas before."¹⁵ This completely new "art of the future" was "the art



FIG. 3 Sergei Chekhonin, design for an official stamp, reproduced in *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo*, no. 1 (1919): 63.

of the working class," or "proletarian art," but it was also paradoxically "classless art." Moreover, the editors insisted that "this art should be as free from the past and hate the past as much as the working class hates it."¹⁶ Such a position allowed the rejection of past art to be seen as politically progressive and established a strong link (in theory at least) between "the art of the future" and the aesthetic developed by the most progressive Russian artists in the prerevolutionary period, who similarly rejected academic art.

Not surprisingly, the editors of *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* emphasized that the future art should be professional, and therefore should have assimilated artistic culture as defined by recent theory based on the achievements of Cubism, Futurism, and abstract art. The journal intended "to show, although in the most general outlines," current artistic developments, because "only in what is surrounding us now can we find the path to the future."¹⁷ Kandinsky examined the relationship between artists and the stage; Malevich ruminated on the problem of a museum for contemporary art and the relationship between contemporary poetry and art; Osip Brik and Nikolai Punin argued for the collective quality of proletarian art. The bulk of the journal, however, was devoted to a report written by David Shterenberg, head of IZO, in April 1919. The report covered the history, activities, and resolutions of various bodies within IZO; this was followed by specific declarations concerning museums and art education. Suprematist paintings by Malevich (fig. 2) and Olga Rozanova and abstract counter-reliefs by Tatlin, Petr Miturich, and Lev Bruni were reproduced alongside works that responded far more directly to contemporary requirements: designs for official stamps (fig. 3), currency, and new insignia by Altman, Sergei Chekhonin, and Puni; projects

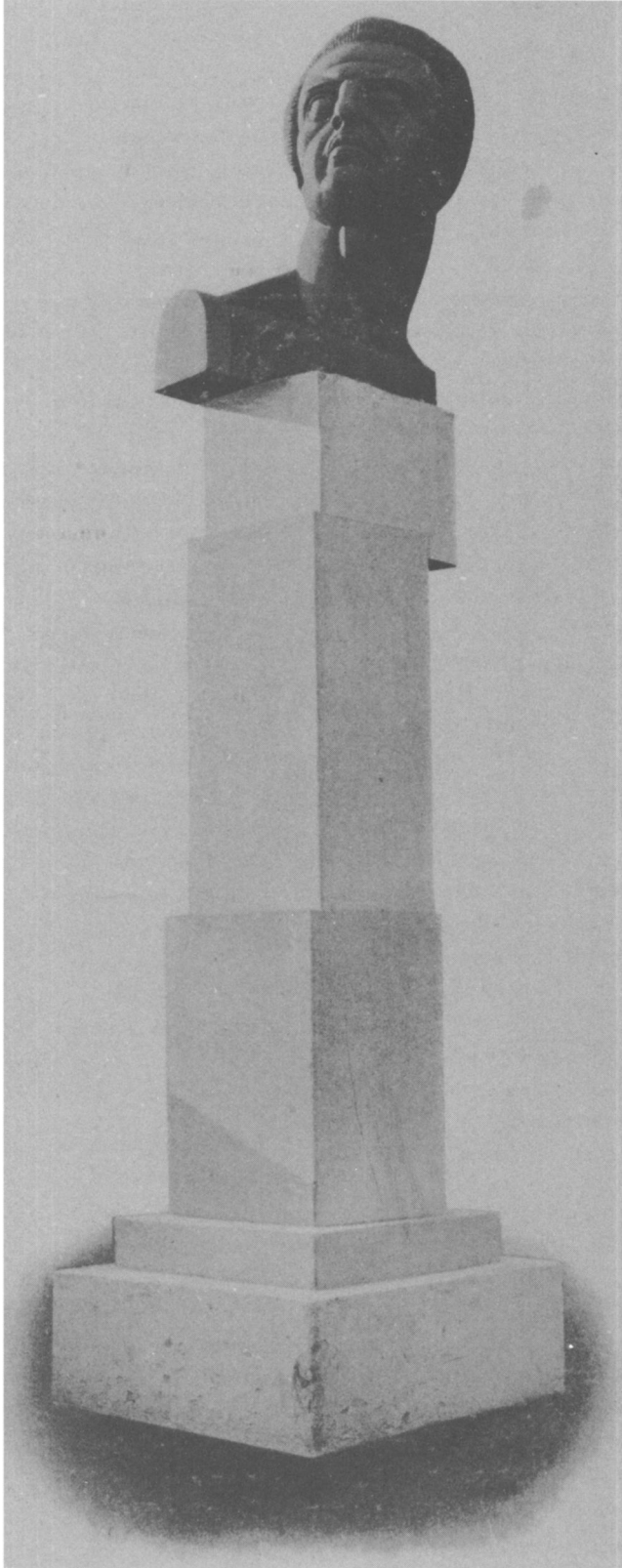


FIG. 4 Viktor Sinaiskii, *Monument to Lasalle*, Petrograd, 1918, reproduced in *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*, no. 1 (1919): 77.

for statues created for the Plan of Monumental Propaganda (*fig. 4*);¹⁸ and drawings by workers produced in the local art schools (*fig. 5*).

Iskusstvo, subtitled "The Bulletin of the Department of Fine Arts of the Commissariat for Enlightenment," declared its aim to be that of "Informing the broad mass of the population about the activities of the Department of Fine Arts" and "about artistic life as a whole and in all its manifestations."¹⁹ It entreated its readers to participate by sending articles and photographs of their work. The publication appeared sporadically: after the first four issues in January and February, only four more were published between March and September 1919. The first four numbers carried Kandinsky's design for the title (*fig. 6*), and the columns of text were interspersed with his vignettes. Subsequent issues, however, were smaller and less visually exciting, employing a plain, businesslike typography and a more cramped layout. Once again, an important element of the journal was a chronicle section that supplied details about publications, exhibitions, competitions, significant events, and important institutions, such as the Museum of the Culture of Painting and the State Free Art Studios. *Iskusstvo* provided a forum for the discussion of aesthetic issues for a fairly wide section of the avant-garde. Its initial emphasis on formal innovations and the theoretical ramifications of such explorations made it closer to prewar art journals such as *Soiuz molodezhi* [The union of youth]. Indeed, its publication of Kandinsky's "Small Articles on Large Questions," "Concerning the Point," and "Concerning the Line" extended the attempts of the prerevolutionary period to define and systematize the fundamental elements of painting. In a similar spirit of theoretical investigation, the literary critic Viktor Shklovskii examined the nature of space in Suprematist painting. The journal also contained articles on Cubism and Futurism as well as *zaum*, or "transrational," poems by the late Olga Rozanova and stirring contemporary revolutionary verses by Maiakovskii. On occasion, the journal did have a polemical aspect, which was demonstrated by Brik's attack on those who espoused the more traditional artistic values



FIG. 5 Drawing produced by a district art school, reproduced in *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo*, no. 1 (1919): 59.

associated with realism, Shterenberg's defense of IZO's policy, and Nadezhda Udaltsova's justification of the Futurist aesthetic. It is clear, however, that such articles were conceived as responses to specific incidents and were not primarily concerned with exploring the implications of politics for art. Such problems were not central to *Iskusstvo*.

The issue of precisely how the avant-garde should accommodate the new ideology was, however, fundamental to *Iskusstvo kommuny*, which was deliberately controversial and polemical, devoted essentially to stimulating the debate about the art of the future and the relationship between progressive artistic practice and the new socialist state. The first issue declared:

Our paper is for everyone interested in the creation of the future art of the commune.

*Our columns are [dedicated] to every new word in the field of artistic creation, work and construction.*²⁰

This remained the magazine's basic priority, although *Iskusstvo kommuny* also acted as an information bulletin, publishing IZO's decrees and the latest news about its various sections (architecture, the decorative arts, publishing, etc.) and about its competitions, exhibitions, meetings, and artistic education. Like *Iskusstvo*, it frequently had to defend IZO's policies, such as its purchase of Futurist paintings, against criticism from the Party and the Council of People's Commissars. In all, only nineteen issues appeared, but the journal played an extremely influential role in the crystalliza-

tion of avant-garde attitudes and ideas. It was so successful that after three issues Lunacharskii had to warn the journal about its "destructive tendencies with regard to the past and its inclination when speaking as a specific school, to speak on behalf of the government."²¹ He stressed that Narkompros had to be impartial in its treatment of different artistic trends, although he acknowledged that the Futurists had been the first to come to the help of the Revolution, were close to it, had proved to be good organizers, and had a lot to offer.²² In August 1919, after the journal's demise, another contemporary observed:

*Of all the periodicals published since the proletarian revolution and dedicated to artistic and cultural questions, Iskusstvo kommuny more than any other was characterized by an ideological unity, as alien to eclecticism . . . as to any bureaucratic emphasis. . . . It was written with experience and thoughtfulness so that its polemic—the true sign of the sharpness and urgency of the questions posed—possessed a really lively character, and not an impartial or academic one. The essential slogans and principles of Iskusstvo kommuny fell into two categories: firstly, the relationship between art and the revolution; secondly, the relationship between different artistic trends. In the first, the representatives of progressive young art clearly and definitely stood on the side of the progressive, young . . . class of the proletariat. . . . In the second, the artist-revolutionaries put forward the conditions of the new creativity and discarded the old.*²³

In the second issue of December 1918, Brik raised the question of the nature and source of proletarian art. He declared: "The art of the future will be proletarian art. Art will be proletarian or it will not exist at all."²⁴ He rejected the definitions of proletarian art as either art produced specifically for the proletariat or art made by proletarians, criticizing Proletkult for thinking that it was sufficient to teach art to any worker for him to produce proletarian art. Instead, Brik argued that proletarian art was art made by "the artist-proletarian" who "unites a creative gift with a proletarian consciousness into a single whole."²⁵ He elaborated:



FIG. 6 *Iskusstvo* [Art], nos. 1–4 (1919): 1. Masthead and vignettes by Wassily Kandinsky.

The artist-proletarian is distinguished from the bourgeois artist not by the fact that he creates for a new client, or by the fact that he comes from a different social class, but by his attitude towards himself and his art.

The bourgeois artist considered creation his personal affair, the artist-proletarian knows that his talent belongs to the collective.

The bourgeois artist creates in order to reveal his “I,” the artist-proletarian creates in order to carry out socially important work.²⁶

Further, Brik asserted that the true “artist-proletarian” should not attempt to satisfy the tastes of the crowd, but on the contrary, should fight such tastes, always trying to “create something new, because herein lies his social significance.”²⁷ In other words, he should be committed to continuous innovation. Brik ended triumphantly: “These are the general principles of proletarian creative work. Whoever acknowledges them is a proletarian, an artist-proletarian, and the builder of the art of the future.”²⁸ In this way, Brik attacked the idea dear to the Party and indeed to most of Proletkult, i.e., that the new art should be realist and comprehensible to the masses.

Fundamental to all the new theories promoted in *Iskusstvo kommyny* was a profound commitment to the most advanced aesthetics. This commitment was indicated by the innovative typography of its heading on the first page (fig. 7) and was evident in IZO’s declaration on “artistic culture,” which appeared in the issue of February 16, 1919. This manifesto emphasized that “the culture of artistic invention” constituted “one of the positive achievements of contemporary artistic creativity during the past decade” and that it was rooted in “the explorations of the young artistic schools and could be revealed only by them.”²⁹ Its definition of the essential artistic elements—material, color, space, time, form, and technique—provided an objective foundation for art, which, it was asserted, was the basis for all further innovation.

In accordance with this position, Punin, Shterenberg, and Brik published articles in *Iskusstvo kommyny* in which they sought to reconcile the formal explorations of the artistic avant-garde (the self-styled Futurists) with the revolutionary ideology of the Bolsheviks and to promote the Futurists themselves as the creators of the new art, thus, explicitly or implicitly, criticizing Proletkult and, indeed, even the preferences of the Party itself. Punin, for instance, at one point discarded class criteria, arguing that “an artist cannot be proletarian or nonproletarian; the only quality by which an artist can be defined is the presence or absence of talent.”³⁰ He asserted: “The artistic culture of communism will be created by those who . . . possess creativity, for creativity is the basis and content of art.”³¹ This view excluded the realists as “not revolutionary”³² and meant that the work of most Proletkult artists found little favor. Punin continually argued that Futurism was the most powerful artistic school and the one most able to contribute new artistic ideas to the creation of a new socialist culture:

The problem of proletarian art is not within the power of Proletkult, the Wanderers,³³ and least of all the individualists of The World of Art.³⁴ . . . Only the young, affiliated with the so-called “Futurist” movement, know, and know very well, what they want, and have presented the whole extent of the problem of proletarian art, and naturally, no-one else can solve it. We have not usurped power, we are the diviners of the future. “Futurism” is not one among many artistic trends, but the single living trend. . . . “Futurism” is not a state art, but the only correct path for the development of universal human art.³⁵

Similarly, Shterenberg accused Proletkult of putting “new wine into old, holey wine skins”³⁶ and argued that the Futurists rather than Proletkult could help the proletariat create their new culture because Futurism was committed to “the search for new paths.”³⁷ He emphasized the Futurists’ solidarity with “workers in Proletkult,”³⁸ but attacked Proletkult’s monopoly on proletarian culture as unproductive and, by implication, harmful. Significantly, while promoting the role of the avant-garde in the creation of the new art, Shteren-

berg's criticism of Proletkult's influence dovetailed with the government's reservations about Proletkult's demand for cultural autonomy and suspicions of the organization's power base. Likewise, Brik, who had been involved with Proletkult in 1917, criticized it in 1919 for embracing "the long outworn forms of *petit-bourgeois* romanticism with its cheap heroism and vulgar nationalism."³⁹ He acknowledged that "Proletkult had posed the question of an independent proletarian culture" when "the cultural and educational organs of Soviet Power" had ignored it, but he, nevertheless, attacked Tsyperovich and other Proletkult critics who stressed "the art of the past" and believed that "the new socialist art of the proletariat will only develop through the school of studying the best works of the greatest artists."⁴⁰ Brik argued that the individualistic nature of this heritage was in direct opposition to the new collective nature of proletarian art. He claimed that the very ideas of universal human culture, sacred art, and eternal beauty all belonged to "the arsenal of bourgeois lies and deceits,"⁴¹ like the concept of eternal truth, which the Party rejected. In this way, Brik utilized Party doctrine to support Futurism and to attack the traditional aesthetics espoused by the Party and by Proletkult.

Other contributors to *Iskusstvo kommuny*, such as Natan Altman, argued that the new art would be Futurist, because Futurism was built "on collective foundations"⁴²—by which Altman meant that no component of a Futurist painting existed independently of the whole. The identification of Futurism with the collective and with Communism was also made explicit in the organization of Kom-Fut, or the Communist-Futurist Collective. Set up by Brik and Kushner in January 1919 and announced in the February 2, 1919, issue of *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Kom-Fut called on the Party to renounce its own nonrevolutionary cultural policies and embrace the ideas of Kom-Fut, which were also the ideas of IZO.

In fact, *Iskusstvo kommuny* was highly critical of the Party's attitudes towards art and of its cultural policy in general. Brik, for instance, accused Lenin of compromising with the bourgeoisie in the cultural sphere in a way that the great leader would never do in politics.⁴³ The journal was also critical of Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda, instituted on April 12, 1918, and implemented by IZO. The plan provided for the removal of "monuments erected in honor of the Tsars and their servants which have no historical or artistic value" and their replacement with "monuments to commemorate the great days of the Russian socialist revolution"⁴⁴ with the first such monuments to be erected within eighteen days. *Iskusstvo kommuny* criticized the concept of erecting statues to individuals on the grounds that it contradicted the collective ethos of socialism and also because it seemed to follow the Tsarist practice of celebrating its achievements and its supporters with commemorative statues.⁴⁵ Moreover, the critics deemed the artistic quality of the monuments produced to be "below all norms," considered the realistic style "outmoded," and concluded that "figura-



FIG. 7 *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the commune], no. 1 (1918): 1. Masthead by unknown designer.

tive statues do not, in the end, interest anyone."⁴⁶ Punin asserted that a new type of monument was needed, such as Tatlin's project for a Monument to the Revolution (eventually exhibited in November 1920 as the Model for a Monument to the Third International), which was not a useless, static statue, but a dynamic building with a specific function. Punin also criticized the festivities organized to celebrate the first anniversary of the October Revolution for being the same as those festivals organized by the Tsars; and he insisted that artists should not provide decorations for such occasions because the very idea of decoration was "alien and dead."⁴⁷ Instead, he argued, artists should be destroying the old art and monuments because destruction was the only effective weapon against the bourgeoisie. He was also outraged by the amount of cloth being wasted to make flags and panels for the celebrations, when "we are all without trousers and skirts."⁴⁸ His most damning indictment was that it was all unnecessary: "History will not forgive this. In our time there is nothing that is not necessary."⁴⁹

Iskusstvo kommuny's promotion of Futurism as socialist art, its criticisms of existing government policy, and its

exhortations to the Party to adopt the policies advocated by the journal all suggest that the journal's aim was ultimately directed at gaining cultural dominance, as Lunacharskii had warned. Certainly statements in *Iskusstvo kommuny* suggest that an artistic dictatorship might be no less valid than the political dictatorship of the proletariat. Punin stressed: "We want to see our October realized, we want to establish a dictatorship of the minority, for only the minority constitutes a creative force, capable of walking in step with the working class."⁵⁰

Iskusstvo kommuny not only harnessed existing progressive art to the new aims but also laid the bases for the development of a new theory of art, "production art," founded on the industrial nature of the proletariat and suggesting that art should become fused with industry. The idea that art should be more public and become a more integral part of everyday life was implicit in the journal's very first issue, when Maiakovskii published his poem "Order to the Army of Art," declaring that "the streets are our brushes, the squares are our palettes."⁵¹ In the same issue, Punin's statement in the debate "Temple or Factory" of November 1918 was quoted with approval: "A new era in art will begin. . . . It is not a matter of decoration but of creating new artistic objects. Art for the proletariat is not a sacred temple for lazy contemplation, but work, a factory which produces artistic objects for all."⁵² A worker wrote that "the proletariat needs an art that was born in the noise of the factories, the mills, and the streets, which in essence must be the powerful art of struggle."⁵³ Accordingly, Brik exhorted artists to abandon the "idealistic vapors" of bourgeois art and instead make "material objects," because "art is like any other means of production."⁵⁴ Boris Kushner, too, argued that essentially "art is simply work: ability, skill, and craftsmanship. . . . To a socialist consciousness, a work of art is no more than an object or a thing."⁵⁵ Stripped of its metaphysical attributes, art became work, and the artist became merely a skilled worker, "a technician," or "a constructor."⁵⁶ If art was like any other means of industrial production, then the existing division between art and industry was not an "established law" but the result of "bourgeois structures."⁵⁷ Hence, under socialism, art and industry could be reunited, as an editorial made clear: "Art strives towards conscious creation; production towards the mechanical. . . . Production and art merge into one whole; creation and work—towards conscious work."⁵⁸ Such declarations were impassioned statements and did not amount to a fully formulated or coherent theory. Incomplete, defective, and unresolved, these assertions never suggested precisely how art was to become involved in

industry, as Nikolai Chuzhak pointed out with hindsight in 1923:

. . . by instinct and in disunity, in a fantastically eclectic milieu . . . all the most important words used later were employed in *Iskusstvo kommuny* . . . but half were issued by accident. . . . Not only the practice of the paper, but also the whole practice of Futurism at this time, was almost entirely based on the "agitational poster."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the implications of such pronouncements were clear, and they generated further discussion in the journal.

One of the most reasoned attacks came from within the ranks of the avant-garde itself. In early 1919, Ivan Puni expressed his opposition to the "utilitarian aesthetic" that he had detected emerging, asserting that this was highly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century radical theories of Dmitrii Pisarev and the present attitude of Proletkult that art should represent the workers and thus be socially relevant. He argued that art could not be useful in "the creation of life" and "the production of new objects,"⁶⁰ because it was completely opposed to the concept of utility. Puni maintained that the artist's attempts to cooperate with the machine would merely produce an "applied art," because "the construction of an object is *completely* dependent on its *function*, the artist may add only superfluous elements to this."⁶¹ Indeed, he asserted that the introduction of extraneous aesthetic elements was responsible for the ugliness of everyday items. In contrast, he argued that there was an urgent need for people "able to think in terms of utility constructively" and that "for the proletariat to have really beautiful things . . . it is essential for the principle of utility to be assimilated more fully into *all* industries."⁶²

By 1921–22, however, such reservations were less powerful, and the ideas first explored in theoretical terms in *Iskusstvo kommuny* had been further elaborated and had found their ultimate fulfillment in the work of the self-styled Constructivists. These artists rejected the autonomy of art in favor of concrete design projects that would contribute, they hoped, to the creation of a wholly new visual environment appropriate to the new Communist society.⁶³ Conversely, the Party's eventual imposition of socialist realism was also foreshadowed in a more populist and illustrative concept of workers' art that found early expression in the publications under review. The open and exciting debates of the immediate postrevolutionary years would become the dogmatic and rigid positions of the late twenties and thirties. In this respect, artistic culture truly did reflect the wider political framework. —

Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

1. Reprinted as “Decree on the Press, issued by the Council of People’s Commissars,” in Yuri Akharkin, ed., *First Decrees of Soviet Power* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), 29–30.
2. “Ot redaktsii” [From the editor], *Proletarskaia kultura* [Proletarian culture], no. 3 (1918): 36. For a discussion of Proletkult, see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
3. Aleksandr Bogdanov, “Proletariat i iskusstvo” [Proletariat and art], in “Pervaia Vserossiiskaia konferentsiia Prosvetitelnykh organizatsii” [The First All-Russian Conference of Educational Organizations], *Proletarskaia kultura*, no. 5 (1919): 32.
4. Valerian Polianskii, “Zlobodnevnye voprosy” [Topical questions], *Griadushchee* [Future], no. 2 (1918): 2.
5. Pavel Bezalko, “Futurizm i proletarskaia kultura” [Futurism and proletarian culture], *Griadushchee*, no. 10 (1918): 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 2.
7. K. D. Muratova, *Periodiki po literature i iskusstvu za gody revoliutsii, 1917–1932* [Periodicals on literature and art during the revolutionary years, 1917–1932] (Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1933), 195, entry no. 1225.
8. Anatolii Lunacharskii, “Proletariat i sovetskaia kulturnaia rabota” [Proletariat and Soviet cultural work], *Proletarskaia kultura*, nos. 7–8 (April 1919): 2.
9. Muratova, *Periodiki*, 248, entry no. 1594.
10. N. Angarskii, “Starye pisateli i novyi byt” [Old writers and the new life], *Tvorchestvo* [Creation], nos. 8–9 (1919): 22.
11. See A[leksandr] Bogdanov, “Proletarskaia kultura” [Proletarian culture], *Tvorchestvo*, nos. 7–10 (1920): 30–32; “Vystavka Moskovskogo Proletkulta” [Exhibition of the Moscow Proletkult], *Tvorchestvo*, nos. 7–10 (1920): 46; and V. Kupavin, “Proletarskaia kultura: v novykh usloviakh (O proletkultakh)” [Proletarian culture: Under the new conditions (about the Proletkults)], *Tvorchestvo*, nos. 11–12 (1920).
12. “Ot redaktsii” [From the editor], *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn* [Artistic life], no. 1 (December 1919): 1.
13. See Abram Efros, “My i Zapad” [The West and Us], *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn*, no. 2 (January–February 1920): 1; P.E., “Novaya zhivopis i ee mesto v istorii iskusstva” [The new painting and its place in the history of art], *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn*, no. 3 (1920): 20–22; A[natolii] Lunacharskii, “Peredovoi otryad kulturny na Zapade” [The advanced vanguard of culture in the West], *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn*, no. 4 (May–October 1920): 1–3; idem, “Kalinin,” *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn*, no. 2 (1920): 39; and idem, “Pavel Bezalko,” *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn*, no. 3 (March–April 1920): 38.
14. N. Lerner, “Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo,” *Kniga i revoliutsiia* [Book and revolution], no. 1 (1921): 77.
15. “Ot redaktsii” [From the editor], *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo* [Fine art], no. 1 (1919): 5.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. The following models of monuments erected in Petrograd were reproduced in *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo*: Grizelli, *Babeuf* (1919), 73; Grizelli, *Perovska* (1918), 78; Aleksandr Matveev, *Karl Marx* (1918), 3; Viktor Sinaiskii, *Heine* (1918), 75; Viktor Sinaiskii, *Lassalle* (1918), 77; K. Zalit, *Garibaldi* (1919), 71; Teodors Zalkalns, *Chernyshevskii* (1918), 79.
19. “Ot redaktsii” [From the editor], *Iskusstvo* [Art], no. 1 (January 5, 1919): 1.
20. “Ot redaktsii” [From the editor], *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the commune], no. 1 (December 7, 1918): 1.
21. A[natolii] Lunacharskii, “Lozhka protivoiadiia” [A spoonful of antidote], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 4 (December 29, 1918): 1.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Ia. Lers, “O knigakh” [About books], *Iskusstvo*, no. 7 (August 2, 1919): 6.
24. O[sip] M. Brik, “Khudozhnik-proletarii” [Artist-proletarian], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 2 (December 15, 1918): 1.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. “Polozhenie Otdela Izobrazitelnykh Iskusstv i Khudozhestvennoi Promyshlennosti po voprosu o Khudozhestvennoi kulture” [The position of the Department of Fine Arts and Artistic Production concerning the question of “artistic culture”], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 11 (February 16, 1919): 4.
30. N[ikolai] Punin, “Proletarskoe iskusstvo” [Proletarian art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 19 (April 13, 1919): 2.
31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*
33. The Wanderers were members of the Society for Traveling Exhibitions (Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhstvennykh vystavok), which was established in 1870 to assert its independence from the Academy and to promote a realist art that would reflect specifically Russian conditions.
34. The World of Art (Mir iskusstva) was a St. Petersburg–based group of artists at the turn of the century who promoted the dissemination of Western art in Russia and had affinities with the Aesthetic Movement and the Viennese Secession.
35. N[ikolai] Punin, “Futurizm—gosudarstvennoe iskusstvo” [Futurism—A state art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 4 (December 29, 1918): 2.
36. D[avid] P. Shterenberg, “Kritikam iz Proletkulta” [To the critics from Proletkult], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 10 (February 9, 1919): 3.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. O[sip] M. Brik, “Dovolno soglashatelstva” [Enough of compromising], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 6 (January 12, 1919): 1.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. N[atan] Altman, “Futurizm i proletarskoe iskusstvo” [Futurism and proletarian art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 2 (December 15, 1918): 2.
43. Brik, “Dovolno soglashatelstva,” 1.
44. See “Decree on Monuments of the Republic, Issued by the Council of People’s Commissars,” in Akharkin, ed., *First Decrees of Soviet Power*, 120.
45. N[ikolai] Punin, “O pamiatnikakh” [About monuments], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 14 (March 9, 1919): 2.
46. *Ibid.*
47. N[ikolai] P[unin], “K itogam Oktyabrskikh torzhestv” [On the results of the October festivities], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 1 (December 7, 1918): 2.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. N[ikolai] Punin, “Proletarskoe iskusstvo” [Proletarian art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 19 (April 13, 1919): 1.
51. V[ladimir] Maiakovskii, “Prikaz po armii iskusstva” [Order to the army of art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 1 (December 7, 1918): 1.
52. M. L-in, “Mitng ob iskusstve” [Meeting about art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 1 (December 7, 1918): 3.
53. Rabochii [Worker] Mushtakov, “Oktyabr v iskusstve” [October in art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 2 (15 December 1918), 2.
54. O[sip] Brik, “Drenazh iskusstvu” [A drain for art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 1 (December 7, 1918): 1.
55. Boris Kushner, “Bozhestvennoe proizvedenie” [Divine work], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 9 (February 2, 1919): 1.
56. V[ladimir] Dmitriev, “Pervyi itog” [First result], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 15 (March 16, 1919): 2.
57. “Primechanie redaktsii” [Editorial comment], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 7 (January 19, 1919): 2.
58. See “Primechanie red[aktsii]” [Editorial comment], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 8 (January 26, 1919): 2.
59. N[ikolai] Chuzhak, “Pod znakom zhiznestroeniia, opyt osoznaniia iskusstva dnia” [Under the slogan of life-building: An attempt to understand the art of today], *LEF* [The left front of the arts], no. 1 (March 1923): 24.
60. Khu[dozhnik] [artist] Ivan Puni, “Tvorchestvo zhizni” [Creation of life], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 5 (January 5, 1919): 1.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*
63. See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

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