

through the use of the worked material.

*The Material.* The material as substance or matter. Its investigation and industrial application, properties and significance. Furthermore, time, space, volume, plane, colour, line and light are also material for the Constructivists, without which they cannot construct material structures.

### The Immediate Tasks Of The Group

- 1 In the ideological sphere:
  - To prove theoretically and practically the incompatibility of aesthetic activity with the functions of intellectual and material production.
  - The real participation of intellectual and material production as an equal element in the creation of communist culture.
- 2 In the practical sphere:
  - To publish a statement.
  - To publish a weekly paper, VIP [*Vestnik Intellektual'nogo Proizvodstva; The Herald of Intellectual Production*].
  - To print brochures and leaflets on questions relating to the activities of the group.
  - To construct designs.
  - To organize exhibitions.
  - To establish links with all the Production Boards and Centres of that unified Soviet machine which in fact practically shapes and produces the emergent forms of the communist way of life.
- 3 In the agitational sphere:
  - i The Group declares uncompromising war on art.
  - ii It asserts that the artistic culture of the past is unacceptable for the communistic forms of Constructivist structures.

## 7 Alexei Gan (1889–1942) from *Constructivism*

The author was a designer as well as an artist and theorist active in Inkhuk and the First Working Group of Constructivists. Gan's book is the most extensive exposition of the principles of Constructivism, but is marked by an extremity of formulation which caused disagreement even within the group. The book itself embodied Constructivist typographical and design principles. The brief extract reproduced here discusses the key triad of Constructivist concepts: 'tectonics', 'faktura' and 'construction'. 'Faktura' essentially concerns the properties of materials and the processes of their working; 'construction' ways of combining and organizing them; and 'tectonics' the vague, but from a constructivist perspective none the less essential, area of these principles' relation to the theory of Communism. Originally published as *Konstruktivizm*, Tver, 1922. The present translation is taken from Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment*, London, 1962.

*Tectonic* emerges and forms itself based on the one hand on the characteristics of Communism, and on the other on the expedient use of industrial materials.

The word tectonic is taken from geology where it is used to define eruption from the earth's centre.

Tectonic is a synonym for the organic, for the explosion from an inner being.

The tectonic as a discipline should lead the Constructivist in practice to a synthesis of the new content and the new form. He must be a Marxist educated man who has once and for all outlived art and really advanced on industrial material. The tectonic is his guiding star, the brain of experimental and practical activity.

*Factura* is the whole process of the working of material. The working of material as a whole and not the working of one side.

Here the material is understood in its raw state. The expedient use of material means its selection and working over, but the character of this working over [of the material] in its integrity is *factura*: the organic condition of the worked over material or the new condition of its organism.

The material is the body, the matter. The transformation of this raw material into one form or another continues to remind us of its primary form and conveys to us the next possibility in its transformation.

In so far as we transform and work over [materials], we are engaged in *factura*. Proceeding from this, the second discipline one can formulate thus: *Factura* is to consciously select material and use it expediently without halting the movement of the construction or limiting its tectonic.

*Construction.* Construction must be understood as the co-ordinating function of Constructivism.

If the tectonic unites the ideological and formal, and as a result gives a unity of conception, and the *factura* is the condition of the material, then the construction discovers the actual process of putting together.

Thus we have the third discipline, the discipline of the formation of conception through the use of worked material.

All hail to the Communist expression of material building! [ . . . ]

The end has come to pure and applied [art]. A time of social expediency has begun. An object of only utilitarian significance will be introduced in a form acceptable to all.

Nothing by chance, uncalculated, nothing from blind taste and aesthetic arbitrariness. Everything must be technically and functionally directed.

Once and for all the idea of a final solution and eternal truths must be invalidated.

The roots of art were always in material-formal substances, in production . . .

From the speculative activity of art to socially directed artistic work . . .

The technical system of society, the ordering of its wealth, creates the ordering of human relationships. . . .

In the field of cultural organization, the only valid criterion is that which is indissolubly connected with the general tasks of the revolution . . . Art is dead! There is no room for it in the human work apparatus. Work, technique and organization!

Let us tear ourselves away from our speculative activity [art] and find the way to real work, applying our knowledge and skills to real, live and expedient

work. Intellectual-material production sets up working mutual relations and a production basis with science and technique, replacing art which by its very nature cannot be disentangled from religion and philosophy and is not capable of pulling itself out of the closed circle of abstract, speculative activity . . .

*Tectonic, factura, construction.* Retaining the lasting material and formal basis of art such as colour, line, surface, volume and movement, artistic work materialistically directed will become, in conditions of expedient activity and intellectual-material production, capable of opening new means of artistic *expression*.

Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat. The master of colour and line, the builder of space-volume forms and the organizer of mass productions must all become constructors in the general work of the arming and moving of the many-millioned human masses. . . .

Our Constructivism has declared unconditional war on art, for the means and qualities of art are not able to systematize the feelings of a revolutionary environment. [ . . . ]

## 8 El Lissitzky (1890–1947) and Ilya Ehrenberg (1891–1967) Statement by the Editors of *Veshch*

Lissitzky and the writer Ehrenberg collaborated in 1922 to produce a short-lived trilingual journal under the name *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*, intended to relate developments in post-revolutionary Soviet art and design to similar movements in the West. Typically the cover of the third issue drew together Malevich's *Black Square* and a locomotive in a dramatic montage. The journal occupied a mid-point between Suprematism and utilitarian Constructivism. The statement reproduced here was delivered by Lissitzky to a congress of 'progressive artists' in Dusseldorf in 1922 and was instrumental in the organisation of an 'International Fraction of Constructivists' at that Congress. The *Veshch* statement was published in *De Stijl*, V, no. 4, Amsterdam, 1922. The present translation, by Nicholas Bullock, is taken from Bann, op. cit.

- 1 I come here as representative of the magazine *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*, which stands for a new way of thinking and unites the leaders of the new art in nearly all countries.
- 2 Our thinking is characterized by the attempt to turn away from the old subjective, mystical conception of the world and to create an attitude of universality – clarity – reality.
- 3 That this way of thinking is truly international may be seen from the fact that during a seven-year-period of complete isolation from the outside world, we were attacking the same problems in Russia as our friends here in the West, but without any knowledge of the others. In Russia we have fought a hard but fruitful struggle to realize the new art on a broad social and political front.
- 4 In doing so we have learned that progress in art is possible only in a society that has already completely changed its social structure.

- 5 By progress we mean here the freeing of art from its role as ornament and decoration, from the need to satisfy the emotions of the few. Progress means proving and explaining that everybody has the right to create. We have nothing to do with those who minister to art like priests in a cloister.
- 6 The new art is founded not on a subjective, but on an objective basis. This, like science, can be described with precision and is by nature constructive. It unites not only pure art, but all those who stand at the frontier of the new culture. The artist is companion to the scholar, the engineer, and the worker.
- 7 As yet the new art is not always understood; it is not only society that misunderstands it, but more dangerously, it is misunderstood by those who call themselves progressive artists.
- 8 To combat this situation we must join ranks so that we really can fight back. It is essentially this fight that unites us. If our aim were only to defend the material interests of a group of people called artists, we would not need another union, because there are already international unions for painters, decorators, and varnishers, and professionally we belong to these.
- 9 WE REGARD THE FOUNDING OF AN INTERNATIONAL OF PROGRESSIVE ARTISTS AS THE BANDING TOGETHER OF FIGHTERS FOR THE NEW CULTURE. Once again art will return to its former role. Once again we shall find a collective way of relating the work of the artist to the universal.

## 9 *LEF*: 'Whom is *LEF* Alerting?'

Vladimir Mayakovsky, the leading revolutionary poet, organized the group 'Left Front of the Arts' around the journal *LEF* in 1923. During the years of the civil war, 'leftist' art had been hegemonic. In the changed conditions of the New Economic Policy more technically conservative trends in art and literature re-emerged, claiming to serve the Revolution under the banners of 'realism' and 'popularity'. Mayakovsky's aim was to regroup the Left and re-establish its claims to be the true art of the Revolution. This manifesto-editorial appeared in the first issue of *LEF*, pp. 10–11, Moscow, 1923. The present translation, by Richard Sherwood, is taken from *Form*, no. 10, Brighton, October 1969 (reprinted in *Screen*, vol. 12, no. 4, London, Winter 1971–2).

This is addressed to us. *Comrades in Lef!*

We know that we, the 'left' master-craftsmen, are the best workers in today's art. Up to the Revolution we piled up highly correct draft-plans, clever theorems and cunning formulae, for the forms of the new art.

One thing is clear: the slippery, globular belly of the bourgeoisie was a bad site for building.

During the Revolution we amassed a great many truths, we studied life, we received the task of building a very real structure for the centuries ahead.

A world shaken by the booming of war and revolution is difficult soil for grandiose constructions.

We temporarily filed away our formulae, while helping to consolidate the days of revolution.

# Art in Theory

1900–1990

*An Anthology of Changing Ideas*

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Edited by Charles Harrison  
and Paul Wood

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First published 1992  
First published in USA 1993  
Reprinted 1993 (three times), 1994, 1995, 1996 (twice),  
1997, 1998, 1999 (twice)

Blackwell Publishers Ltd  
108 Cowley Road  
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Blackwell Publishers Inc  
350 Main Street  
Malden, Massachusetts 02148, USA

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*  
Art in theory, 1900–1990 / edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood.  
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0–631–16575–4 (p/b: acid-free paper)  
I. Art, Modern – 20th century – Philosophy.  
I. Harrison, Charles, 1942. II. Wood, Paul, 1949–  
N6490.A7167 1992 92–6007  
709'.04—dc20 CIP

Typeset in 10 on 12pt Ehrhardt  
by Pure Tech Corporation, Pondicherry, India  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper

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