

## **NOTE TO USERS**

**Copyrighted materials in this document have not been  
filmed at the request of the author.**

**Pages 439-555**

**This reproduction is the best copy available.**

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**



Aleksei Gan's Constructivism, 1917-1928

Kristin Romberg

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2010

UMI Number: 3447973

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 3447973

Copyright 2011 by ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This edition of the work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.



ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2010

Kristin Romberg  
All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

Aleksei Gan's Constructivism, 1917-1928

Kristin Romberg

“Aleksei Gan’s Constructivism” is the first monograph about the Russian constructivist Aleksei Gan (1887-1942) and an experiment in the formal analysis of a materialist practice. Best known as cofounder of the First Working Group of Constructivists and author of the group’s agitational and theoretical texts, Gan’s own oeuvre was comprised of amateur performances and mass-media objects (texts, books, journals, and films). This dissertation shows that the same qualities of ephemerality and dependency that make Gan’s work resistant to art-historical analysis were also what made it representative of constructivism’s ambitions for a materialist approach to art. In exploring these forms, Gan redefined the “work of art” as a labor process through which the material world, human beings, and normative (common or social) frameworks simultaneously produced one another. The result was an alternative modernism, what I call an aesthetics of embeddedness, whose objects were extensive and responsive structures designed to permeate and shape their environment. Through close readings, the dissertation redefines art-historical concepts such as style and medium in ways specific to Gan’s historical moment, also examining them as manifestations of tensions in the early Soviet imagination. Most crucially these involve the cult of labor, the politics of group formation, and the power of the mass media to mold the normative frameworks governing social reality.

Chapter 1 reevaluates the origins of Russian constructivism by examining Gan's early career in cultural and political enlightenment organizations, particularly his work in amateur theater and as a "constructor of mass action." Chapter 2 focuses on the crystallization of constructivism as a movement and aesthetic theory in 1921. Chapter 3 looks closely at Gan's book *Constructivism* (1922), developing an understanding of constructivism based on a typographic rather than sculptural model of material making. Chapters 4 and 5 examine Gan's journal projects in terms of architecture and cinema, defining a set of constructive paradigms that run throughout Gan's work. Finally, chapter 6 treats Gan's work as a filmmaker in relation to contemporary efforts to rationalize artistic labor.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations—ii

Acknowledgments—xi

Introduction and Biographical Notes—1

1. Critical Masses: Mass Action and the Origins of Russian Constructivism—9
2. Gan's Constructivism, 1921: The First Working Group of Constructivists—95
3. Gan's *Constructivism*, 1922: Russian Constructivism's Typographic Conditions—174
4. The Communist City, Part 1: Paper Architecture, from *Object* to *Contemporary Architecture*—223
5. The Communist City, Part 2: Montage and the Demonstration of Everyday Life—291
6. *Island of the Young Pioneers*, or How They Thought the Work Could Be Fun—358

Illustrations—439

Bibliography—556

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. Aleksei Gan, *Self-Portrait*, 1910s (RGALI)
- Figure 2. Photograph of Esfir' Shub, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Aleksei Gan, and Varvara Stepanova, 1920s
- Figure 3. Photograph of Dziga Vertov, Elizaveta Svilova, and Aleksei Gan, c. 1922-1924 (RGALI)
- Figure 4. Photograph of members of the Union of Contemporary Architects (OSA) at Aleksandr Vesnin's dacha, c. 1926-1929
- Figure 5. Photograph of Aleksei Gan (seated at top) with OSA members, c. 1926-1929
- Figure 6. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930 (RGAKFD)
- Figure 7. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930 (RGAKFD)
- Figure 8. Iliia Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, 1870-1873, oil on canvas
- Figure 9. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930 (RGAKFD)
- Figure 10. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930 (RGAKFD)
- Figure 11. History of constructivism, author's diagram
- Figure 12. Aleksandr Rodchenko, portrait of Aleksei Gan working on *Proletkino and Technology and Life*, 1924
- Figure 13. Photograph of Aleksei Gan and others on a film shoot, c. 1924
- Figure 14. Photograph of Aleksandr Rodchenko, Aleksei Gan, and others on a film shoot, c. 1924
- Figure 15. Aleksei Gan's history of constructivism, author's diagram
- Figure 16. Varvara Stepanova, caricature of Aleksandr Rodchenko as constructor, 1922, illustrated in *Zrelishcha 7* (October 1922)
- Figure 17. Varvara Stepanova, caricature of self as constructor, 1922, illustrated in *Zrelishcha 7* (October 1922)
- Figure 18. Varvara Stepanova, caricature of Aleksei Gan as constructor, 1922, illustrated in *Zrelishcha 7* (October 1922)
- Figure 19. *Anarchy 2* (18 September 1917)

- Figure 20. “*Tvorchestvo*” section of *Anarchy* 14 (8 March 1918)
- Figure 21. Aleksei Morozov’s house in 2006
- Figure 22. Gan’s plan for May Day, 1920, author’s diagram
- Figure 23. *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, directed by N. N. Evreinev, November 1920
- Figure 24. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Construction 126*, 1920, oil on canvas
- Figure 25. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Construction 127*, 1920, oil on canvas
- Figure 26. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Construction 128*, 1920, oil on canvas
- Figure 27. Obmokhu exhibition, 1921
- Figure 28. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Hanging Spatial Construction*, 1921, plywood and metallic paint
- Figure 29. Frank Stella, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II*, 1959, enamel on canvas
- Figure 30. Portrait of Aleksandr Rodchenko, c. 1922
- Figure 31. László Moholy-Nagy, *Light-Space Modulator (Light Prop)*, 1928-1930
- Figure 32. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas
- Figure 33. Alexander Rodchenko, *Black on Black*, 1918, oil on canvas
- Figure 34. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Triptych: Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue*, 1921, oil on canvas
- Figure 35. Aleksei Gan, cover of *Constructivism*, 1922
- Figure 36. Aleksei Gan, pages 16-17 of *Constructivism*, 1922
- Figure 37. Filippo Marinetti, page from *Les mots en liberté futurists*, 1919
- Figure 38. Partial page from N. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *The ABCs of Communism*, 1921 edition
- Figure 39. Aleksei Gan, partial page from *Constructivism*, 1922
- Figure 40. Aleksei Gan, quotation from the First Working Group of Constructivists, “We declare uncompromising war on art!” in *Constructivism*, 1922

- Figure 41. Aleksei Gan, passage from *The Communist Manifesto in Constructivism*, 1922
- Figure 42. Author's enumeration of the typefaces used in *Constructivism*
- Figure 43. Partial page from *Poligraficheskoe proizvodstvo* (Graphic Production) showing use of drop cap, 1928
- Figure 44. Partial page from N. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *The ABCs of Communism*, 1920 edition, showing use of ornament
- Figure 45. Newspaper page featuring combination of advertisements and standard text
- Figure 46. Aleksei Gan, page 51 of *Constructivism*, "Tectonics / Faktura / Construction," 1922
- Figure 47. Aleksei Gan, page 19 of *Constructivism*, 1922
- Figure 48. Aleksei Gan, partial view of page 56 of *Constructivism*, "Tectonics, Faktura, and Construction," 1922
- Figure 49. Aleksei Gan, partial view of page 61 of *Constructivism*, "Tectonics...Faktura," 1922
- Figure 50. Aleksei Gan, page 20 of *Constructivism*, 1922
- Figure 51. Hand typesetting: piece of moveable type, hand with partially assembled line, and typecase for sorting type
- Figure 52. Linotype operator at the keyboard
- Figure 53. Linotype machine, c. 1916
- Figure 54. Casting section of linotype machine
- Figure 55. Line of molds assembled to cast a slug (a line of type)
- Figure 56. Slug, face and side view
- Figure 57. Changing the magazine of molds, c. 1916
- Figure 58. Correcting lines
- Figure 59. Aleksandr Rodchenko, sketch for cover of *Constructivism*, 1922
- Figure 60. Cover and four pages of Olga Rozanova, *A Little Duck's Nest of Bad Words* (Utinoe gnezdyshko durnykh slov) by Aleksei Kruchenykh, 1913, letterpress, lithography, watercolor, and gouache

- Figure 61. *Lubok* featuring Baba Yaga, early 1700s
- Figure 62. Cover and page from Natalia Goncharova, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Mikhail Larionov, Nikolai Rogovin, and Vladimir Tatlin, *World Backwards* (Mirskonsta) by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh, 1912, lithography, collage, and rubber stamps
- Figure 63. Varvara Stepanova, *Gaust chaba*, 1919, watercolor and collage on newspaper
- Figure 64. El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, *Object 3*, 1922
- Figure 65. Ilya Ehrenburg, *And Still It Turns*, 1922
- Figure 66. Galina and Olga Chichigova, manuscript for “VKhUTEMAS News,” fall 1922
- Figure 67. Presentation of Gan’s constructivist typographic technique in A. Sokolov, *Spravochnaia knizhka naborshchika*, Kharkov, 1925
- Figure 68. Aleksei Gan, model for book kiosk for Vserokompom, c. 1924
- Figure 69. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova], cover for *Kino-Fot 1*, 1922
- Figure 70. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova], cover for *Kino-Fot 2*, photomontage by Stepanova, 1922
- Figure 71. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova], cover for *Kino-Fot 3*, illustration by Stepanova, 1922, and detail
- Figure 72. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova], cover for *Kino-Fot 4*, photomontage by Rodchenko, 1922
- Figure 73. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova], cover for *Kino-Fot 5*, illustration by Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1922, and detail
- Figure 74. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova], cover for *Kino-Fot 6*, 1923
- Figure 75. Aleksei Gan, V. Toporov, V. Mikhailov, I. Kosachevskii, and S. Kuznetsov, cover and first page of *SA*, 1926, no. 3
- Figure 76. All covers for *SA*, 1926-1930
- Figure 77. Aleksei Gan, folding workbench designed for Mossel’prom, 1922

- Figure 78. Portrait of Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova in front of *Kino-Fot* 2-4, c. 1922
- Figure 79. Aleksei Gan, first page of *Kino-Fot* 1, 1922, illustrated with drawing by Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1917
- Figure 80. Le Corbusier, cover of *L'Esprit nouveau* 5, 1920
- Figure 81. Comparison of logotype from cover of *Kino-Fot* and masthead, 1922
- Figure 82. Greek temple and automobile comparison, from Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 1923
- Figure 83. Aleksei Gan, page from *SA*, 1926, no. 2, and detail showing “an explanatory mockup,” the first page of *Kino-Fot* 1, and the cover of *Vremia*, 1924, no. 1
- Figure 84. Second Working Group of Constructivists, cover of *Vremia*, 1923, no. 1
- Figure 85. Scale comparison of logotype on cover and interior page of *Kino-Fot* 4, 1922
- Figure 86. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko], cover for *Proletkino* 4-5, 1924
- Figure 87. [Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko], cover for *Proletkino* 6-7, 1924
- Figure 88. Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover of *Technology and Life*, 1924, no.21, with detail of Rodchenko signature
- Figure 89. [Aleksei Gan], Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover of *Technology and Life*, 1924, no. 22
- Figure 90. Aleksei Gan and Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover of *Technology and Life*, 1925, no. 5
- Figure 91. Cover of *Proletkino* 2, 1924
- Figure 92. Cover of *Technology and Life*, 1924, no. 12
- Figure 93. Varvara Stepanova, cover of *SA*, 1929, no. 4
- Figure 94. Varvara Stepanova, cover of *Sovetskaia arkhitektura*, 1931, no. 1-2
- Figure 95. Aleksei Gan, design for a rural kiosk, c. 1924-1926
- Figure 96. Liubov' Popova, set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, 1922
- Figure 97. Varvara Stepanova, set for *The Death of Tarelkin*, 1923

- Figure 98. Author's illustration of rural kiosk as mass-produced multiple
- Figure 99. Gustav Klucis, agit-stand, 1922
- Figure 100. Aleksandr Rodchenko, project for a cinema-automobile for the All-Russian Agricultural Exhibition, 1923
- Figure 101. VKhUTEMAS student, project for an agit-automobile, 1920s
- Figure 102. Aleksei Gan, first page of *Kino-Fot 2*, 1922, illustrated with "Spatial Object" by Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1919
- Figure 103. Aleksei Gan, first page of *Kino-Fot 3*, 1922, illustrated with "Project for the Sovdep" by Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1920
- Figure 104. Aleksei Gan, first page of *Kino-Fot 4*, 1922, illustrated with "Project for a Kiosk" and "Spatial Object" by Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1920
- Figure 105. Aleksei Gan, first page of *Kino-Fot 5*, 1922, illustrated with "Kiosk" by Aleksandr Rodchenko
- Figure 106. Detail of first page of *Object 3*, 1922
- Figure 107. El Lissitzky, cover page of *ASNOVA News*, 1926
- Figure 108. Aleksei Gan, "Constructivism in the Furnishing of Everyday Life," in *SA*, 1926, no. 2
- Figure 109. Illustration of radiator installation in multiple rooms in *SA*, 1927, no. 1
- Figure 110. Aleksandr Rodchenko, photograph of saleswoman in Moscow, 1928
- Figure 111. Aleksandr Rodchenko, photograph of saleswoman in Moscow, 1928
- Figure 112. Aleksei Gan, rural kiosk in *SA*, 1926, no. 1, and detail
- Figure 113. Aleksei Gan, cover of *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!*, 1923
- Figure 114. Aleksei Gan, "Print Material for Criticism Assembled by the Constructivist Rodchenko," with montages by Aleksandr Rodchenko, in *Kino-Fot 1*, 1922
- Figure 115. Aleksei Gan, page from *Kino-Fot 1*, 1922
- Figure 116. Aleksei Gan, two-page spread from *Kino-Fot* about montage, illustrated with photomontages by Aleksandr Rodchenko entitled "Psychology" and "Detective," 1922

- Figure 117. “Toward the Coming Beautification of Moscow,” *SA*, 1926, no. 1
- Figure 118. Ivan Leonidov, “How not to Build,” from “Architectural Kunstkamera,” *SA*, 1928, no. 2
- Figure 119. Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover for *Lef* 2, 1923
- Figure 120. Aleksandr Vesnin, cover for *Arkhitektura*, 1923
- Figure 121. Arno Breker, *Readiness*, 1939
- Figure 122. Degenerate Art Exhibition, 1937
- Figure 123. Ivan Leonidov, page from “Architectural Kunstkamera,” *SA*, 1928, no. 2
- Figure 124. Aleksei Gan, poster for The First Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture, 1927
- Figure 125. Aleksei Gan, “*Spravka* about Kazimir Malevich,” *SA*, 1927, no. 3
- Figure 126. “Academic Zholtovskii Constructs Buildings that Correspond (?) to the Character of New Soviet Russia,” in *SA*, 1927, no. 2
- Figure 127. Aleksei Gan, page from *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!*, illustrated with still of Trotsky on a tribune taken from Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-Pravda* 13, 1923
- Figure 128. Isaak Zelenskii as he appeared in Rodchenko’s copy of *Ten Years in Uzbekistan*
- Figure 129. Vesnin Brothers’ second project for the Lenin Library as it appeared in *SA*, 1929, no. 3
- Figure 130. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Architecton*, as it appeared in *SA*, 1928, no. 3
- Figure 131. Ivan Leonidov, page from “Project for a Club of a New Social Type,” *SA*, 1929, no. 3, and details: (b) How NOT to display and build and (c) How NOT to build
- Figure 132. Nikolai Sokolov, page from “Experiment in Architectural Thinking,” in *SA*, 1929, no. 2, and details
- Figure 133. Nikolai Sokolov, “Think with Your Head Not Your Ruler,” detail from “Experiment in Architectural Thinking,” in *SA*, 1929, no. 2
- Figure 134. Varvara Stepanova, covers and selected pages from *SA*, 1930, no. 1-2, with photographs of Vladimir Mayakovsky in Mexico and New York,

photographs of nature by Aleksandr Rodchenko, and a project for a green city by M. Barshch and Moisei Ginzburg

- Figure 135. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, military preparedness
- Figure 136. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, American assembly line
- Figure 137. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, American grooming and leisure
- Figure 138. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, American grooming and leisure
- Figure 139. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, American grooming and leisure
- Figure 140. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, American grooming and leisure
- Figure 141. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, human traffic
- Figure 142. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, automobile traffic
- Figure 143. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, rapids in Karelia
- Figure 144. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, dam in Karelia
- Figure 145. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, streetcars in Moscow
- Figure 146. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, train transporting tractors
- Figure 147. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, worker at paper mill
- Figure 148. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, worker
- Figure 149. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, worker
- Figure 150. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, workers entering lecture by Em. Yaroslavsky
- Figure 151. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, tractor brigade
- Figure 152. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, worker couples
- Figure 153. Esfir' Shub, *Today*, 1930, worker couples
- Figure 154. Mikhail Nesterov, *Portrait of Vera Mukhina*, 1940, oil on canvas
- Figure 155. Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929, cigarette packager
- Figure 156. Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929
- Figure 157. John Heartfield, *Hurrah, The Butter is Finished!*, 1935, photomontage

- Figure 158. Cartoon appearing in *Kino-Gazeta* 1 (11 September 1923)
- Figure 159. Cover of *Zrelishcha* 54 (26 September 1923), advertising a cinema debate
- Figure 160. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, sequence in café
- Figure 161. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, sequence in market
- Figure 162. Montage of scenes from *Island of the Young Pioneers* published in *Proletkino* 4-5 (1924)
- Figure 163. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, swimming
- Figure 164. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, bathing
- Figure 165. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, marching in wheat field
- Figure 166. Still from *Island of the Young Pioneers* (detail of figure 162)
- Figure 167. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, synchronized marching
- Figure 168. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, synchronized walking down street
- Figure 169. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, synchronized approach of wall
- Figure 170. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, pioneer diving
- Figure 171. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924, professional diving
- Figure 172. G. Klinch, “‘Demonstration of Everyday Life’ by the ‘Kinok’ Method,” cartoon appearing in *Kino-Gazeta* 2 (18 September 1923)
- Figure 173. Camera obscura, as illustrated in Athanasius Kircher, *Ars Magna Lucis Et Umbra*, 1646
- Figure 174. Aleksei Gan, two-page spread from *Kino-Fot* about acting, 1923, featuring an article by Lev Kuleshov on “House of Hate” (1918) and illustrated with stills from Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-Pravda* (1922), and details
- Figure 175. “Kino-Pravda’s Nature,” stills from Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-Pravda* as illustrated in *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!*, 1923
- Figure 176. Frank Gilbreth, Motion efficiency study, c. 1914

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are numerous people and institutions without whose help this dissertation would not exist, and others who made the work much more fun. First, I am deeply indebted to Christina Kiaer, who has supported me and this project through the thickest and thinnest of situations. Her interest and careful readings made the text a better one, as well as a more enjoyable one to write. That I was able to complete it at all is in part her achievement. I thank Branden Joseph for his support in the past year, particularly for his insights on the first chapter. Devin Fore, another reader, has been a delightful interlocutor on numerous occasions over the past few years. I am especially grateful to him for providing me reason to become intimately acquainted with Sergei Tret'iakov's writing through a translation project in 2006. My thanks too to Alex Alberro and Molly Nesbit for agreeing to read the text and for their kind criticism during the defense.

I was fortunate to co-curate an exhibition with Ricky Anderson at Columbia's Wallach Gallery in the early stages of this project. My thinking in chapters 4 and 5 was formed in more than one way from the experience of our collaborative work, and I cannot thank him enough for being such a wonderful colleague then and since. With regard to that project, my thanks too to Stephen Garmey for allowing us generous access to his collection, and to Sally Weiner and Jeanette Silverthorne for facilitating the project.

Jonathan Flatley deserves special thanks for encouraging my interest in this material at a time when there was little reason to do so and for continuing to prove that brilliant scholarship can also be engaged and generous. I am similarly indebted to Stuart Liebman, whose suggestion that there might be something interesting about the journal *Kino-Fot* prompted the first iteration of my research on Gan in 2000. At Columbia, Anne

Higonnet and Benjamin Buchloh were both supportive as I was formulating the project, and I am grateful to them both.

There were many people who made the three years that I spent conducting research in Russia much more pleasurable and fulfilling than they otherwise might have been. Among the most steadfast were Dmitri Gutov, Aleksei Penzin, and Helen Petrovsky. I am grateful to all three for taking me under their respective wings. To the participants in the The Karl Marx School for the English Language, and especially Dima Gutov and David Riff, thank you for helping me to think through ideas of intellectual practice outside academic bounds, at least my usual ones. My thinking about amateur performance in the first chapter was especially influenced by that experience. I would also like to thank Molly Brunson, Brian Droitcour, Christine Evans, Ani Mukherji, Bill Quillen, Tom Roberts, and Susanne Winterling for keeping me relatively sane through three long dark winters.

I am indebted to Columbia University, the Harriman Institute, the American Council for Teachers of Russian, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts for supporting my research financially. Several of the curatorial staff at the National Gallery—Judith Brodie, Chris Vogel, Jeff Wilson, and especially Margaret Bauer—were generous in sharing their connoisseurship and technical expertise in print objects. For other acts of intellectual and administrative generosity, thank you to Oliver Botar, Molly Brunson, Masha Chlenova, Katerina Clark, Jorgen Cleeman, Ben Kiel, John MacKay, Sarah Sherman, Victoria Smolkin, Paul Thomas, Joyce Tsai, Anna Vallye, and Ben Zajjek. In this regard, I am also indebted to the late Catherine Cooke, who published an important article on Gan in 1999 and was working on Gan when she died in 2004, and to

Susan Reid, who facilitated my access to her archive at the University of Sheffield. While Cooke did not conduct archival research, her work with secondary sources was extensive and creative. I have credited her in my notes where appropriate.

For various other forms of support, my deepest thanks to Katrina Anderson, Daniel Lin, Bibi Obler, David Ries, and Wayne, Betty, Neil, and Christine Romberg. Particularly in the last year, your help and understanding has made all the difference.

## INTRODUCTION AND BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

This study of the Russian constructivist Aleksei Gan has had several aims and functions, from producing the most positivistic sort of historical reconstruction, to serving as an object through which to think through my own moment. The majority of what follows sits somewhere in between. It articulates the ways that Gan's constructivism contributed to the aesthetics of modernism, as well as the ways that it manifested tensions within the early Soviet imagination related to the cult of labor, the power of the mass media, and the politics of group formation.

Gan was involved in nearly all branches of constructivism, including mass performances and theater, the laboratory period, graphic design, cinema, and architecture. Hence, he has been present in one form or another in most histories of the movement, most often as cofounder of the First Working Group of Constructivists and author of the booklet *Constructivism* (Konstruktivizm, 1922). Excerpts from the book were translated early on as a constructivist manifesto of sorts,<sup>1</sup> and his other writings show up in

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts were translated into English in Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962): 284-287; Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Viking Press, 1974): 32-42; John Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934* (New York: Viking Press, 1976): 214-225; and Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas, 1900-1990* (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992): 318-320. A translation of the entire text by Igor Serebriakov appears in *Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1930: the G. Costakis Collection*, ed. Anna Kaphetse, vol. 2 (Athens: Ministry of Culture, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, European Cultural Center of Delphi, 1995): 682-695.

anthologies of primary source documents in several fields.<sup>2</sup> Despite Gan's ubiquity and clear centrality to the movement, he has remained a mysterious figure. This dissertation is the first to take him as a subject of study in his own right.<sup>3</sup> The absence of serious research on Gan is partially explained by substantial logistical barriers that I will enumerate below, but equally discouraging has been the awkward fit of his work within dominant understandings of the movement. The performative and ephemeral mass-media forms central to Gan's oeuvre seem marginal within interpretations that revolve around a sculptural model, privileging material *faktura* and objects such as Vladimir Tatlin's *Corner Counterrelief* and Aleksandr Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions. In addition, the militant tone of Gan's rhetoric and his unvarnished interest in liquidating art in favor of regular labor has made him unappealing to several generations of scholars—first, to those eager to argue for constructivism's status as an art,<sup>4</sup> and then again to those

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, Catherine Cooke, Vladimir Tolstoy, and Irina Bibikova, eds., *Street art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918-33* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990); Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (London: Routledge, 1988); *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, ed. Yuri Tsivian, trans. Julian Graffy (Gemonia, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Several partial treatments are worthy of mention: Catherine Cooke, "Sources of a Radical Mission in the Early Soviet Profession: Aleksei Gan and the Moscow Anarchists," in *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Neil Leach (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 13-37; Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm. Kontseptsiiia formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 2003); Aleksandr Lavrentiev, "Zagadki Alekseia Gana," *Da* 2-3 (1995): 3-11; and Jennifer Oille, "'Konstruktivizm' and 'Kinematografiya,'" *Artforum* 16: 9 (1978): 44-49.

<sup>4</sup> Camilla Gray uses Gan's *Constructivism* as an example of "various contemporary statements by the artists themselves," which "are for the most part incoherent, doctrinaire, an uncoordinated set of slogans." She uses quotes from *Constructivism* to make the point, suggesting that Gan's typographical layout was more important than the actual text. Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment*: 249.

interested in recuperating constructivism as a heroic example of a politically engaged art movement.<sup>5</sup> Here, I take the aberrance of Gan's formal and political choices as an opportunity to revise these narratives, arguing that it is precisely the ephemeral and historically embedded nature of Gan's objects, and the collapse of the distance between art and labor politics in his thinking, that made Gan's work representative of constructivism's ambitions to materialist practice.

A number of factors have contributed to make Gan a particularly challenging research topic. Prior to the Revolution, he likely worked in underground political organizations, which left few records for obvious reasons. I was able root out ample evidence of his work with the Union of Food Workers and the anarchist movement in 1917-1918, but during the Soviet period information on both topics was shaped by bias and censorship. My most important source for those years, the daily newspaper *Anarkhiia* (Anarchy), was inaccessible in Russian libraries until very recently.<sup>6</sup> Making matters worse, a fire in Gan's apartment and studio sometime before 1922 destroyed early work and correspondence.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there were few people interested in preserving whatever did survive after his death. His first wife, Olga, died early in 1920, and his only child,

---

<sup>5</sup> The best of such recent studies have refrained from outright criticism of Gan, but also include him only when absolutely necessary. See Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 66-73; and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT, 2005): 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> The New York Public Library also holds fragments of selected issues.

<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to date the fire. Based on Anna Konopleva's correlation of the event with Malevich's move from Vitebsk to St. Petersburg, it seems to have occurred in the summer of 1922. By her account, everything but two large armchairs was destroyed, and Gan and Shub relocated to a smaller two-room apartment in the same building, Starokoniushennyi pereulok #39. Anna Konopleva, "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 49 (2000): 217-218.

Katya, was raised from infancy by Olga's relatives in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Most of what we have in the way of personal correspondence comes from the archive of his partner during the twenties and early thirties, the filmmaker Esfir' Shub. If there was more material, Shub may have destroyed it after he disappeared in the mid thirties, assuming (correctly) that he had been arrested for political reasons.<sup>9</sup> Shub's daughter by a previous marriage, Anna Konopleva, provided us with another valuable document when she wrote down her reminiscences of Gan in 1986. It is limited by its source material, however, which is her mother's archive, her recollection of secondhand information passed on much later by her mother, and her own memories from a period over fifty years earlier, which she experienced from a distance since she lived primarily with her father.

This is all to explain that many obstacles have stood in the way of the somewhat meager claim that I *think* that Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan was born in the vicinity of Moscow in 1887.<sup>10</sup> This date is a revision of those that have been published before, 1893

---

<sup>8</sup> Konopleva says that Olga fell ill and died suddenly during the first years after the Civil War. Her account is the only place where I have seen any reference to their having a daughter or relatives in Ukraine. Konopleva, "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan": 217. A record in the PUR (Red-Army) archive lists him as having a wife (as well as a mother and father) in October of 1919. RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 11, l. 32. Varvara Stepanova refers to her death as the result of an unknown heart disease in an entry of 1 March 1920. Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994): 104.

<sup>9</sup> Shub's memoirs display a wariness about being associated with him. She talks about numerous other people, but never mentions Gan by name, eerily alluding to him only obliquely in an account of a evening at the Kafé Pittoresk as "a constructivist dressed in riding breeches and a military-style jacket" (this was Gan's signature attire) who claimed jokingly to speak "on behalf of the Union of Breadmakers" (Gan worked with the union in 1917). Esfir' Shub, *Krupnym planom* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1959): 52.

<sup>10</sup> In response to a question about his origin (*proiskhozhdenie*), Gan responded "citizen of Moscow." RGALI f. 675, op. 2, d. 139, l. 3. I do not know that he was born there, but his father also lived there. Gan's birth year is listed three times in PUR staff lists as 1887 (RGVA, f. 9, op. 1, d. 163, ll. 45, 53, 163). He filled out a form on 22 November 1926

and 1895. The difference is significant in that it makes him four to nine years older than constructivist colleagues such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Dziga Vertov, and Moisei Ginzburg, and only eight and two years younger than the two giants of the pre-war Russian avant-garde, Kazimir Malevich and Tatlin. Whereas the other constructivists would have been in their early to mid twenties in 1917, Gan would have been thirty, old enough to have had an adult identity and career prior to the war.

Konopleva's memoirs suggest that Gan was probably involved in a combination of theater and underground anarchist activities in the years before World War I.<sup>11</sup> A self-portrait preserved in Shub's archive, dated by the archivist to the 1910s, provides evidence of symbolist influence and an artistic acumen absent in his constructivist work (fig 1).<sup>12</sup> Further support for the theory that he may have studied art prior to World War I is found in his Red-Army records, where the somewhat vague "schools of painting" is listed under the category of education.<sup>13</sup> Like many leaders in the Revolution and its associated artistic formations, Gan came from the intelligentsia or lower gentry. The

---

listing his age as 38, which would mean he would have been born in 1887 or 1888 (RGALI f. 675, op. 2, d. 139, ll. 1-3). This was the date provided me by the FSB (KGB) in 2008. The one contradictory piece of evidence is a PUR staff list from 1920, which lists his age as 30, making his birth year 1889 or 1890. I have found no evidence to support the year that has been most consistently published and relayed to me by Russian scholars, 1893.

<sup>11</sup> Konopleva recalls Gan talking about living underground under a pseudonym in a provincial city prior to the Revolution. He sang the part of Lenskii in a local production of Chaikovsky's opera *Evgenyi Onegin* as part of a scheme to skip town. Konopleva, "Aleksandr Mikhailovich Gan": 219. I have found no evidence to corroborate this, but political agitators often found refuge in the theater, a place where it was easy to change one's name. This also occurred, in reverse, after the Revolution. See Serge Orlovsky, "Moscow Theaters, 1917-1941," in Martha Bradshaw, ed., *Soviet Theaters, 1917-41: A Collection of Articles* (New York: Research Program on the USSR, 1954): 8.

<sup>12</sup> It is dated by the archivist to the 1910s and catalogued as RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 315.

<sup>13</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 210, l. 6ob. [школы живописи]

same Red-Army records list his prerevolutionary status as *intelligent* and *dvorianin*.<sup>14</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this background would have meant certain privileges, but not necessarily wealth. The *dvorianstvo* usually served in lower level military and administrative posts, which gradually lost in relative wealth and power as Russia's economy became increasingly capitalist. Such a background would have encouraged his identification with Marxist and anarchist analyses of class issues. Members of the *dvorianstvo* also often served in the military, which is what Gan did during World War I.<sup>15</sup>

Snapshots of Gan with his colleagues during the twenties show a person radically transformed from the pre-war symbolist self-portrait (figs 2-5). Dandyish attire is replaced by an ascetic military uniform, and dreamy introspection has given way to a collaborative engagement with his peers. This transformation is also reflected in the understanding of constructivism that I will develop in the main body of the dissertation, which treats the most productive years of his career, 1917-1928. Chapter 1 reevaluates the origins of Russian constructivism by examining Gan's early career in cultural and political enlightenment organizations, particularly his work in amateur theater and as a "constructor of mass action." Chapter 2 focuses on the crystallization of constructivism as a movement and aesthetic theory in 1921. Chapter 3 looks closely at Gan's book *Constructivism* (1922), developing an understanding of constructivism based on a typographic rather than sculptural model of material making. Chapters 4 and 5 examine Gan's journal projects in terms of architecture and cinema, defining a set of constructive

---

<sup>14</sup> RGALI f. 675, op. 2, d. 139, ll. 1-3; and RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 210, l. 6ob.

<sup>15</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 210, l. 6ob.

paradigms that run throughout Gan's work. Finally, chapter 6 treats Gan's work as a filmmaker in relation to contemporary efforts to rationalize artistic labor.

The late twenties and thirties were bad years for Gan, as for many. In the fall of 1927, Gan entered the Donskaia Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital in an effort to recover from some combination of nervous exhaustion and alcoholism.<sup>16</sup> He remained under the care of Donskaia's doctors off and on from November 1927 through 1930.<sup>17</sup> He was able to continue working while there, and remained productive until the end of 1928. After that, records of Gan's activities dramatically drop off. We know that he was the keynote speaker at the First Congress of the Union of Contemporary Architects (OSA) in May of 1929,<sup>18</sup> and that he participated in a few lectures and discussions in Moscow from 1930 to 1933.<sup>19</sup> In the fall of 1931, Gan seems to have taken his first trip to the far-east town of

---

<sup>16</sup> Konopleva suggests that Gan's alcoholism stemmed from a combination of severe shell shock sustained during World War I and the trauma of losing his first wife. Konopleva, "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan": 217.

<sup>17</sup> Letters between Gan and Shub dated 21 November to 12 December 1927 are the best record of Gan's hospitalization. He seems to have lived there full time until early in 1928, after which he came home on Sundays, probably until the beginning of 1929. Shub reports calling the doctors to handle relapses, but these incidents are difficult to date. Donskaia was known for treating mild cases. Gan mentions receiving a series of injections (*ukoly* and *vduvaniia*), baths, and shock therapy (*elektrizatziia*). RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 105, ll. 21, 26-27; and Konopleva, "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan": 215.

<sup>18</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 489.

<sup>19</sup> His participation in a discussion at the Communist Academy in March of 1930 is mentioned in "Dooktiabr'skoe sodержanie ideologicheskikh otkrovenii 'Oktiabr'," *Za proletarskoe iskusstvo* 5 (May 1931): 8-9. His presence at discussions there in 1931 is cited in Ekaterina Degot, *Bor'ba za znamia. Sovetskoe iskusstvo mezhdru Trotskim i Stalinym. 1926-1936* (Moscow: Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008): 249-250. A talk at the Dom Pechati in the spring of 1931 is listed in *Brigada khudozhnikov* 4 (1931): 23. Gan appeared at a public lecture in April 1933 according to Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet*: 272.

Khabarovsk. It is not clear why he went or for how long.<sup>20</sup> It may have been a *komandirovka*, one of the work assignments involving travel, often journalistic, that others of his colleagues took during the same period.<sup>21</sup> In any case, he published an article in the local paper there on their new constructivist House of Soviets in October 1931.<sup>22</sup> Back in Moscow, the situation quickly deteriorated for him in 1933 and 1934, and he returned to Khabarovsk in March, possibly hoping to work as an architect.<sup>23</sup> Konopleva reports that the last Shub heard of Gan was a rumor that he had “died badly.”<sup>24</sup> And, indeed, Gan was arrested in October 1941 for participating in counterrevolutionary propaganda and agitation, tried and found guilty in August 1942, and executed 8 September 1942. He was rehabilitated in 1989.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> I have no record of him being in Moscow from spring 1932 until April 1933.

<sup>21</sup> See Leah Dickerman, “The Propagandizing of Things,” in Magdalena Dobrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998): 81-96; Maria Gough, “Radical Tourism: Sergei Tret’iakov at the Communist Lighthouse,” *October* 118 (fall 2006): 158-178; and Maria Gough, “Back in the USSR: John Heartfield, Gustav Klucis, and the Medium of Soviet Propaganda,” *New German Critique* 36, no. 2 (2009): 133-183.

<sup>22</sup> A. G-n, “Stroiashchiisia Khabarovsk. Na stroike doma kommuny,” *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* (7 October 1931).

<sup>23</sup> Shub records Gan’s alcoholism becoming particularly severe from January through March of 1933. She appears to have thrown him out shortly thereafter. Her archive also preserves a series of desperate notes pleading for money in March of 1934. The notes suggest that he had been promised work somewhere that required train travel. When Shub’s friend, the writer Aleksandr Fadeev, traveled to Khabarovsk in January 1935, he wrote her that he had not seen Gan, but was staying in the same hotel where Gan had stayed and had seen notes about an architect named Gan in a local paper. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 72; and RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 135, l. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Konopleva, “Alekssei Mikhailovich Gan”: 221. [плохо умер]

<sup>25</sup> This information was given to me by the FSB (KGB) in response to my request of May 2008. His files are not yet open.

## CHAPTER 1

**Critical Masses:  
Mass Action and the Origins of Russian Constructivism**

The will to consciousness is higher than the will to truth. I am shouting about the conscious construction of today's proletarian ethos [*dukha*].  
- Aleksei Gan, 1918<sup>1</sup>

There is no direct leap from capitalism to communism; there is the long, arduous, obstinate road through crude socialism, the crucible in which communism is born, matures, and ripens.  
- Aleksei Gan, 1920<sup>2</sup>

I would like to begin this discussion of the origins of Russian constructivism with an idea that lies at the origin of my own thinking about it. With regard to this project, I have long had an image comparison stuck in the back of my mind in generic form. The contrast on which it hinges—something like old backward peasant Russia versus new modern technological Russia—appears again and again in imagery of the period. It was probably lodged in my consciousness at some point by Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem of 1921, "Order No. 2 of the Army of the Arts," where he writes, "Comrades, give us a new form of art, an art that will pull the republic out of the mud."<sup>3</sup> The version that I have found to

---

<sup>1</sup> Aleksei Gan, "K poetam proletarskikh pesen," *Anarkhiia* 11 (5 March 1918): 2. [Воля к сознанию выше воли к вере, и я кричу о сознательном строительстве пролетарского духа нашего дня.]

<sup>2</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Massovoe deistvo," *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 12. He republished much of the text in Aleksei Gan, "Bor'ba za 'massovoe deistvo'," *O teatre* (Tver': Tverskoe izdatel'stvo, 1922): 73. [Нет прямого скачка от капитализма к коммунизму: есть долгий, тяжелый и упорный путь грубого социализма, в горниле которого рождается, зреет и созревает коммунизм.]

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Order No. 2 of the Army of the Arts" (1921), in Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005): 263.

begin here is extracted from a reportage film entitled *Today* (Segodnia), produced in 1930 by Esfir' Shub.<sup>4</sup> On one side is an image of a reindeer-drawn sled pulling a log through the snow (fig 6); on the other, a dirigible floats above the modern city, in this case New York (fig 7). Both images have to do with weight, with work, and with the conveyance of heavy things.

The reindeer variant is certainly not the *worst* of all situations. The metal sled skids on the snow seem smart, and I must admit that the image that I really wanted would have been of an absurdly wooden cart with its wheels sodden and rotting, sunk a foot deep in the slush and mud. Still, even here one feels the weight and the drag in the bent heads of the deer and the friction of the end of the log digging into the muddy snow. In the film version of the image, the deer jerk and stumble, the joints in the legs buckle a bit, making the effect of laborious hauling more marked. We could also be looking at Ilya Repin's iconic nineteenth-century realist painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870-73) (fig 8), where again the bent posture bespeaks the brute backbreaking hauling, the unmediated muscular force on which the cargo's conveyance relies.

In the image of the dirigible, the sense of weight and work is completely different. Strain, friction, and force no longer seem like relevant terms. Laboring muscle has been replaced by a simple membrane installed between two types of air with differing densities, precisely exploiting the gases' physical properties (fig 9). One elegant organizational action, the insertion of an edge in the right place, and this enormous object simply floats, naturally. When Shub cuts to a view of the interior (fig 10), we see none of the usual evidence of labor, certainly no trace of a bent and straining posture. The human

---

<sup>4</sup> *Today* was made from a mixture of original footage and found foreign newsreels. It was distributed in Germany as *Cannons or Tractors*.

figure inside maintains an easy upright stance in front of the wheel. His engagement with the world is not through the tug of his muscles, but rather with his brain and his eyes.

Shub's film of 1930, along with whatever sort of constructive purpose it hoped to serve at that point, is leaps and bounds away from the early moment in constructivism's prehistory that I will address in this chapter. This comparison is significant to me in part because it presents a preview of the project which constructivism became, and which I will treat in chapter 6, but also because it figures a fantasy that I believe hovered, in an undecided way, behind constructivism from the start. It is a fantasy about work, and more specifically, about organization. It is underwritten by the hope that real change can be effected not by working more and harder, but rather by liquidating the old forms and rearranging the givens to better advantage. There is obviously an enormous difference—not to mention a lot of work—between the muddy roads and log cabin in the first image and the complex structure of New York City. Yet Shub's film is titled *Today*, and she points out in the first intertitles that all of the footage was gathered in 1929-1930. This contrast is not meant to be read as past versus future, nor as existent versus fantastic, but rather as a contemporary choice between simultaneous possibilities.

Aleksei Gan is best known for founding the First Working Group of Constructivists in 1920-1921 and as the author of the book *Constructivism (Konstruktivizm)* of 1922. This chapter will focus on the period just prior to that, 1917-1920, when Gan was engaged in organizing amateur theater groups, other cultural and political enlightenment work, and the development of a practice called "mass action," which was intended to produce a new socialist form of mass theater. This pre-constructivist portion of Gan's career is

problematic for a number of reasons, probably the most important of which is that it produced few physical objects. This is not only a problem in the obvious sense (of there being little to look at), but also because the inherently immaterial, performative, and ephemeral practices central for Gan in those years seem largely irrelevant to the movement that would follow. They involved none of the experimentation with industrial materials, none of mud and gravity—in short, none of materiality—that we associate with constructivism. Yet, as I will argue in the following, the formal dynamics and patterns of thinking that emerged from this period of Gan’s work provide a way of understanding another crucial aspect of constructivism, one that has lurked as a formless assumption about its political engagement. By the end of this chapter, we will understand how these performative and political practices participated in the same fantasy about intransigence and buoyancy that I outlined above, constructing the foundation on which Gan’s later constructivist theory and objects would rely. In order to get there, we will have to reevaluate terms like labor, production, and object.

Most would agree that some idea about work, labor, and production was at the heart of constructivism. The movement is generally understood as pioneering the role of the modern designer, and the history of its development looks something like this (fig 11): it begins somewhere in the cubo-futurist assimilation of Western European painting’s analysis of representation. It then moves on to the breakthrough moment of the “0.10” exhibition of 1915, where Malevich first exhibited his *Black Square*—producing a painting not as representation, but as an object in itself—and where Tatlin first showed his selections of industrial materials. The “0.10” exhibition paved the way for artists to begin experimenting open-endedly with industrial materials—exploring their *faktura*, to

use the constructivist term—during the so-called laboratory period of constructivism.<sup>5</sup> Finally, constructivism emerged in its productivist variant, as an art of organizing those materials for utilitarian purposes; that is, in a general sense, with the purpose of pulling the Republic out of the mud. The limited success of this project is most convincingly exemplified by Varvara Stepanova's and Liubov' Popova's work in the textile industry and Karl Ioganson's work at a metal shop.<sup>6</sup>

Within this productivist interpretation of constructivism, Gan's work has always seemed like a bit of a compromise. The agitational texts that he published, the journals and booklets that he wrote, edited, and designed, and the newsreel films and kiosks that he produced also had a productivist element. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, Gan went into actual print shops, worked directly with typesetters or did the typesetting himself, and was concerned with designing a printed page that would balance an efficiency of means with an efficacy of visual impact. A portrait produced by Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1924 depicts him in this productive role (fig 12)—bent over his

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on *faktura* in the context of the Russian avant-garde, see Maria Gough, "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," *RES* 36 (autumn 1999): 32-60.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005); and Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Earlier pioneering works by Christina Lodder and Anatolii Mazaev also assume that entering mass production of objects was the primary goal of the constructivists, one at which that they eventually failed. Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); and A. I. Mazaev, *Kontseptsiia "proizvodstvennogo iskuštva" 20x godov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975). O. V. Akhmatova places more focus on social construction and agitation, but still traces constructivism's formal lineage in abstraction in the visual arts. See O. V. Akhmatova, *Russkii konstruktivizm (opyt sotsial'no-filosofskogo analiza)* (Moscow: Sputnik, 2001). Architectural history has also assumed the historical trajectory I have sketched above. For example, see Anatole Senkevitch, "Moisei Ginzburg and the Emergence of a Constructivist Theory of Architecture," introduction to *Style and Epoch*, by Moisei Ginzburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982): 27-28.

workbench, triangle in hand, he is working to design two objects for mass production, the journals *Proletarian Cinema* (Proletkino) and *Technology and Life* (Tekhnika i zhizn').<sup>7</sup> He also worked at all levels in the production of newsreel films at the film company Proletkino, activity again recorded photographically, albeit in snapshots rather than formal portrayals (figs 13 and 14). Despite all of this hands-on work, Gan has been categorized as constructivism's theorist, ideologue, or propagandist, and not a constructor in his own right. More about intellectual production of images and information than about material production of dishes and housing blocks, Gan's work seems provisional. It is still representational, like painting before suprematism, or still two-dimensional, like paper architecture. It seems at best like a way of promoting constructivism at a time when entry into real industrial production was not viable.<sup>8</sup>

Yet to the extent that constructivism had ambitions to be a *socialist* aesthetic involved in *mass* production, these issues of viability and promotion should not be beside the point. Although Gan had no issue with the standard narrative I have sketched out above—indeed, he was a party to its writing—it was only one half of his prehistory of constructivism, and not even the half that he emphasized.<sup>9</sup> Gan explicitly warned his colleagues about a narrow focus on the industrial production of objects, writing that they

---

<sup>7</sup> The portrait must have been taken late in 1924. The cover of *Proletkino* 6-7, which came out in late November or early December of 1924, and the cover of *Tekhnika i zhizn'* 22, which came out around the same time, are both visible.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Lodder makes this argument about Gan's print objects, most explicitly in Christina Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937* (London: Pindar, 2005): 368-391.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Aleksei Gan, "O sovremennykh khudozhestvennykh gruppirovkakh," *Teatral'naia Moskva* 35 (17-23 April 1922): 6-7; and Aleksei Gan, "Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche," *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*, 1927, no. 3: 104-107.

must think of their endeavor as being about more than “production in the sense of the mechanical multiplication of handicraft goods.” It also “*has to involve self-production.*”<sup>10</sup> The production of a socialist object world went hand in hand with the production of a socialist public to produce, inhabit, and want it.<sup>11</sup> This broader interpretation of constructivism was, in his eyes, the truly *materialist* aesthetic, a “genuine realism,” as he wrote.<sup>12</sup> He also insisted that, historically, this materialist tendency in constructivism had its origins not in the experiments with materials in the visual arts, but rather in debates within amateur proletarian theater about the practice with which he was involved prior to the founding of the First Working Group of Constructivists: mass action (fig 15).<sup>13</sup>

Mass action was a movement that emerged from the broader context of amateur proletarian theater between 1918 and 1920. It was intended to be an open-ended experimental and transitional practice in the development of a socialist and mass form of theater, although formally it fits more easily into the context of public festivals. The basic idea was to instigate semi-coordinated yet spontaneous movement of the general

---

<sup>10</sup> I am cheating here a little bit. Gan writes this in the context of the relationship between theater and cinema, but I think that the point extends to his thinking about constructivism and productivism as a whole. Aleksei Gan, “The Cinematograph and Cinema,” in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, trans. Richard Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 67. [Но она не может служить только средством воспроизводства в смысле механического размножения кустарных изделий в том или ином их виде. / Она является самопроизводством.]

<sup>11</sup> Christina Kiaer’s work has probably done the most to focus attention on the consumption side of constructivism. See *Imagine No Possessions*.

<sup>12</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Chto takoe konstruktivizm?” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1928, no. 3: 79.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* For another contemporary account of the movement stressing the importance of proletarian theater and mass action, see Viktor Pertsov *Reviziia levogo fronta v sovremennom russkom iskusstve* (Moscow: Vserossiskii Proletkul’t, 1925): 23.

population in public space, preferably in multiple locations on a national scale. Gan was involved in several ambitious attempts at orchestrating mass actions, none of which was truly successful. What is important, however, is that mass action was Gan's primary area of activity when he, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova co-founded the First Working Group of Constructivists late in 1920. The First Working Group's first group texts, which referred to Rodchenko and Stepanova as painters, reserved the term *constructor* for Gan, who was called "constructor of mass action."<sup>14</sup>

A series of caricatures produced by Stepanova in 1922 (figs 16-18) provides some hint of how the group imagined a constructor of mass action in relation to other sorts of constructors, as well as a nice counterpoint to Rodchenko's productivist portrait. Stepanova has labeled each of the three founders of the First Working Group with the title *constructor* (konstruktor), but only Rodchenko appears as the quintessential artist-constructor, holding a compass and ruler and dressed in his special constructivist coveralls (fig 16). Stepanova also comes close, demonstrating her work as a constructor in textiles by modeling a constructivist outfit of her own design (fig 17). The caricature of Gan displays a markedly different focus (fig 18). Dressed in street wear—boots, overcoat, jodhpurs, hat, and driving goggles—and with a copy of the journal that he published that year, *Kino-Fot* (Cinema-Photo), he is not outfitted for making, but for going out, moving around, and distributing information.

By the time Gan became this constructor, he had abandoned the ambitious and festival-like version of mass action that I will examine in this chapter in favor of

---

<sup>14</sup> Statement in *Ermitazh* 3 (30 May – 5 June 1922): 3; [Alekssei Gan], "Massovoe Deistvo'," *ErMitazh* 12 (1-7 August 1922): 3-4; [Alekssei Gan], "Konstruktivisty," *Ermitazh* 13 (8-13 August 1922): 3.

producing mass-media objects like the journal that he clutches in his right hand.<sup>15</sup> All the same, he continued to cite mass action throughout the twenties as foundational to constructivism's aesthetics and historical development. In this chapter, I will reconstruct a working history and formal analysis of sorts of this forgotten and failed practice, with the suspicion that this might be the best way of pinning down the part of Gan's constructivism that keeps it from collapsing into a mediocre version of productivism.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, I will argue that developing ways of working with and within the general consciousness and norms that made up social reality was as much a part of Gan's aesthetic project as probing and manipulating material *faktura* in the design of physical objects.<sup>17</sup> These norms of thinking and behavior had their own *faktura* of sorts, producing

---

<sup>15</sup> Gan's Second Working Group of Constructivists supposedly had a mass action section in 1924, suggesting that he had still not given up on the idea at that point. S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm. Kontseptsiiia formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 2003): 179. I have seen no evidence of Gan's actively pursuing any mass action projects after 1920, nor does he write about it after 1920 except as a precursor to constructivism. The Mass Action group led by Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi and Nikolai L'vov continued to be active throughout the twenties and seems to have been completely independent of Gan.

<sup>16</sup> Mass action has never been woven into the art historical narrative of constructivism's origins in any depth, although there are several sources of general information on it. Khan-Magomedov's account of Gan's involvement in it is quite good as far as it goes: Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 283-288. It has also been narrated and analyzed in James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 134-163; and Catherine Cooke, Vladimir Tolstoy, and Irina Bibikova, eds., *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918-33* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990): 121-126.

<sup>17</sup> When I use the terms "norms" or "normative reality" in the following, I mean no more than the set of things that attain the status of truth for no other reason than general agreement. No theoretical or historical background should be necessary. That said, my interest in this line of thinking stems from the importance of the idea of the norm in Soviet culture, from the charts of official norms that were used as production quotas and for planning purposes, to the normative aesthetics of socialist realism and documentary photography. For an enlightening all-purpose philosophical discussion, see Christine M.

their own deep ruts and their own psycho-behavioral friction. When Gan insisted that constructivism's philosophical base, its materialism, emerged from an ephemeral and immaterial practice like mass action, he directs our attention toward what may be an obvious point, but I think still one worth making: that a materialist practice is not only—nor even primarily—about physical materials. It is a way of working, relating, and thinking, which, like mass action, need not produce an object at all.

### **“ARTS” OUT OF *ANARCHY*: PROLETARIAN THEATER AND THE MOSCOW FEDERATION OF ANARCHIST GROUPS**

The history of Gan's career prior to constructivism is not well known, and thus it is necessary to at least provide a sketch of the general trajectory here. The period of Gan's involvement in amateur proletarian theater, cultural and political enlightenment organizations, and mass action was messy—he later characterized these years as the “tumultuous havoc” that preceded the clarity of constructivism<sup>18</sup>—but the very instability of the period, with its quickly shifting political landscape, also experientially shaped Gan's thinking in crucial ways. If I seem to go on in detail at times, it is not only with the purpose of committing a hard-won historical reconstruction to print, but also because the patterns in Gan's pre-constructivist experience and thinking carved the pathways through which constructivism's logic would later flow.

The story begins, as least as far as I have been able to document it, in August of 1917, when Gan appeared organizing an amateur theater group within the Moscow Union

---

Korsgaard et al., *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Gan, “Chto takoe konstruktivizm?": 79.

of Food Workers.<sup>19</sup> Theater had been seen as a tool of cultural and political enlightenment of the masses since the emancipation of the serfs in the 1860s, but amateur drama circles like Gan's, with worker participants, were rare before 1905 because of bans on workers organizing. They began to proliferate in the decade before the First World War in tandem with the development of trade unions;<sup>20</sup> which is to say, briefly legally and then underground.<sup>21</sup> There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that Gan was involved in something of that sort at that time.<sup>22</sup> The aspirations of these groups were mixed, indeed, often contradictory. Some, like Gan, saw them as a means of worker self-organization and consciousness raising; others saw them as a way to civilize the masses and democratize high culture; and still others saw them as a form of "rational recreation," a

---

<sup>19</sup> A. R., "Proletarskii teatr," *Vestnik zhizni* 2 (1918): 17-18; Rogdai, "'Proletarskii teatr' Pishchevnikov (k istorii samodeiatel'nykh stsenicheskikh kollektivov proletariata)," *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 13-14; Aleksei Gan, "K sotrudnikam Proletarskogo teatra," *Anarkhiia* 43 (21 April 1918): 4. At the time that Gan started his group, there was a unified cultural enlightenment commission for the separate unions of bakers, confectioners, and breadsellers. Eventually a series of organizational changes meant that Gan's union was called the Union of Food Workers (*Soiuz pishchevnikov*). For simplicity's sake, I use only the latter title, which is the name used in the Rogdai narration of the history of the group.

<sup>20</sup> See E. Anthony Swift, *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 181-204.

<sup>21</sup> Trade unions were legal for a brief fifteen-month period in 1906-1907, after which they continued to exist underground. For more on the trade-union movement in Russia, see Victoria E. Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> Gan recounted to Shub experiences of performing prior to the war in small provincial theaters in conjunction with underground political activity. See Anna Konopleva, "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 49 (2000): 219.

productivity-enhancing alternative to alcohol-based leisure activities.<sup>23</sup> Whatever their conscious goals, these groups helped bring about an important shift in Russian politics by establishing networks of organized workers, as well as individuals with experience organizing.<sup>24</sup> Gan's surfacing in the summer of 1917 was typical of a larger movement of these sorts of organizers coming up from underground between February, when trade unions were legalized again, and October.<sup>25</sup>

There is no evidence that Gan or the Food Workers group was affiliated with any particular political party prior to the October Revolution. Gan's designs for his theater group were likely broadly in line with those of the contemporaneous and better documented Proletarian Culture movement, known as Proletkul't, which officially coalesced in Petrograd immediately prior to the October Revolution in 1917.<sup>26</sup> Their most basic belief was that simple political seizure of power did not constitute a revolution; the more crucial benchmark was the development of authentically proletarian cultural forms and ways of thinking strong and rich enough to supplant existing bourgeois norms. Many

---

<sup>23</sup> Swift, *Popular Theater*: 181-204. For more on general trends in cultural enlightenment work in the decade leading up to the Revolution, see Mark Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2002): 21-61. Gan talks about one such prerevolutionary amateur theater organization in a makes clear that he was for consciousness raising rather than democratization of high culture in Aleksei Gan, "Togda, teper', i my," *Anarkhiia* 47 (26 April 1918): 4.

<sup>24</sup> See Swift, *Popular Theater*: 181-204.

<sup>25</sup> See Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkul't Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 21; and Diane Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981): 142-186.

<sup>26</sup> Proletkul't was an acronym for a network of "proletarian cultural enlightenment organizations" (*proletarskie kul'turno-prosvetitel'nye organizatsii*), established by Petrograd factory committees. Theater was one of its many modes of cultural enlightenment. Its history has been well researched and narrated, most recently in Mally, *Culture of the Future*.

members of Gan's Food Workers group participated in the October coup, as did a broad coalition of Bolsheviks, anarchists, left Socialist Revolutionaries (left SRs), and other random discontents. Gan described this experience as double-edged, both a blow that dissipated the group's creative momentum, and a victory that boosted morale and inspired further work.<sup>27</sup>

Over the winter, Gan worked to reconstitute the group as a broader movement that he began to call "Proletarian Theater." In early December, he made a general call to all "poets of proletarian song" to attend a meeting in the building of the Food Workers Union with the purpose of soliciting a new proletarian repertory. Although Gan later admitted with disappointment that "not a lot of poets came," the meeting did draw a total of thirty or forty people.<sup>28</sup> Gan gave a talk focused on the development of proletarian art as a new style and stressed that the first step was to produce new plays ideologically friendly to the working class.<sup>29</sup> The group's proposals for new plays included one inspired by the *lubok*, a Russian form of popular print. Gan's own intriguing proposal was based on a dramatized version of *pisanki*, the traditional Ukrainian craft of decorating eggs.<sup>30</sup> In late February of 1918, Gan made another appeal for his Proletarian Theater, this time at the much larger conference of proletarian cultural enlightenment

---

<sup>27</sup> Gan, "K sotrudnikam Proletarskogo teatra": 4.

<sup>28</sup> Izdatel'skaia gruppа sotrudnikov proletarskogo teatra, "Proletarskii teatr," *Anarkhiia* 14 (8 March 1918): 4. There is little information about the "Publishing Group of Coworkers of Proletarian Theater," who organized the meeting and published this article.

<sup>29</sup> His speech was later published in *Anarkhiia*: Gan, "K poetam proletarskikh pesen": 2.

<sup>30</sup> Izdatel'skaia gruppа sotrudnikov proletarskogo teatra, "Proletarskii teatr": 4.

organizations where the Moscow branch of Proletkul't was founded.<sup>31</sup> Although Proletkul't also included amateur theater in its stable of proletarian cultural activities, Gan chose not to join it, claiming that Proletkul't relied too heavily on central organization.<sup>32</sup> Not long after this meeting, Gan found a less centrally organized home for his Proletarian Theater under the auspices of the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> The First Moscow City Conference of Proletarian Cultural Enlightenment Organizations featured four papers on theater, one of them Gan's. See "Pervaia Moskovskaia obshchegorodskaia konferentsiia proletarskikh kul'turno-prosvetitel'nykh organizatsii," *Izvestiia khudozhestvenno-prosvetitel'nogo otdela Moskovskogo Soveta Rab., Sold. I Kr. Deputatov* 2 (1 April 1919): 25-28. See also, A. R., "Proletarskii teatr": 18.

<sup>32</sup> Autonomy and grass-roots organization were very clearly important to Gan. He specifically argued for working at the local level rather than sending representatives off to Proletkul't at the meeting of the Cultural Enlightenment Commission of the Union of Food Workers on 10 August 1918 (TsGAMO f. 201, op. 1, d. 738). He also expressed his belief in the value of local grass-roots organization over central power in an article about Proletkul't (Aleksei Gan, "Proletkul't," *Anarkhiia* 14 [8 March 1918]: 4). He maintained his antipathy toward the organization through at least the fall of 1920, as he demonstrates in his article "O pozitsiakh vnutrennego fronta RKT," *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 9.

It is difficult to precisely parse the ideological differences between Proletkul't and Gan's Proletarian Theater, and his criticisms of the rival organization may have been personally motivated. Proletkul't also emphasized grassroots organization and autonomy for their affiliated groups. Gan's group does seem to have allowed an unusual amount of freedom to its members—S. Mikhailov cites greater freedom as one of his reasons for leaving "Soviet efforts" in order to join Gan's group (S. Mikhailov, "Proletarskii teatr [vpechatleniia]" *Anarkhiia* 46 [25 April 1918]: 4). He also admitted members with various political convictions. For example, he refers to members who were maximalists, which was a particularly radical branch of anarchism (Gan, "K sotrudnikam Proletarskogo teatra": 4).

The oft made claim that Gan was a member of Proletkul't is almost definitely not true. It seems to be based on Gan's contributing an article to the *Al'manakh Proletkul'ta* in 1925.

<sup>33</sup> The Moscow Federation was founded in March 1917. The membership was primarily anarcho-communist. See Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967): 176-177. The only account of Gan's involvement with the

It is probable that Gan's links to anarchism went back to the pre-war period,<sup>34</sup> when many artists throughout Europe, including Russia, identified with anarchist ideas, if often only casually.<sup>35</sup> The first definite tie of Gan to anarchism comes in January of 1918, when he was listed as part of the staff of a new anarchist journal called *Revolutionary Creation* (Revoliutsionnoe tvorchestvo). The journal only put out the one issue; Gan's

---

Federation is Catherine Cooke's groundbreaking article, to which I am extremely indebted. Catherine Cooke, "Sources of a Radical Mission in the Early Soviet Profession: Aleksei Gan and the Moscow Anarchists," in *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Neil Leach (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 13-37.

<sup>34</sup> My best stab at uncovering some trace of Gan's activity prior to World War I remains extremely speculative. An account of anarchism written in 1926 describes a small anarchist reading group that formed in 1911 among students at the Moscow Commercial Institute. According to the account, the group included an Aleksei Khon. "Gan" is the common Russian spelling of the German name "Hahn." Phonetically, it could be just as accurately transliterated as "Khon," although it never is. Moscow and St. Petersburg telephone books from the late 1890s through the 1920s show no records for this alternate spelling. Considering the persecution that anarchists underwent from 1918 on, it seems possible that the author might have used "Khon" in order to protect Gan.

Gan would have been somewhat old, 24, for a student group in 1911, but the group's activities seem consonant with what we know of him. In addition to discussing the available material on anarchism—that which was published before such literature was banned in 1905—they held evening soirees where they distributed anarchist literature. In 1913, they became known as the Group of Anarcho-Communists, and in 1916 they made contact with members of the Russian anarchist old guard, such as Lev Chernyi, with whom Gan would work later, in 1918, on the newspaper of the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups. In 1916 they also began organizing within trade unions and made contacts in the army. See V. Khudolei, "Anarkhicheskie techeniia nakanune 1917 g.," in *Ocherki istorii anarkhicheskogo dvizheniia v Rossii*, ed. Aleksei Borovoi (Moscow: Golos truda, 1926): 314-315. I am indebted to Catherine Cooke's notes for pointing me to this source.

<sup>35</sup> See, among others, Patricia Leighton, *Re-ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Gunter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996). The role of anarchism after the Revolution in the Russian context has been discussed in Hubertus Gassner, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon Guggenheim Museum, 1992): 302-305.

articles on art and proletarian theater were to have come out in the second. It may have been the failure of this print venue that prompted Gan to join the Moscow Federation, which had its own daily newspaper called *Anarchy* (Anarkhiia) (fig 19).<sup>36</sup> Gan began publishing in *Anarchy* on Tuesday, 5 March, and had instituted his own small arts section, usually located on the back page, by the end of the week (fig 20).<sup>37</sup> Gan's arts section solicited announcements and articles from all proletarian clubs, theaters, and cultural enlightenment organizations. It also usually included a good amount of Gan's own reporting on current events and thinking about proletarian theater.

Beyond his work at the paper, Gan's involvement with the Federation included rehearsing in their space, lecturing on art and proletarian theater as part of their series of "free courses on anarchism,"<sup>38</sup> and participating in their practice of requisitioning the property of wealthy Muscovites.<sup>39</sup> The Federation's headquarters, where Gan's Proletarian Theater rehearsed,<sup>40</sup> utilized one such requisitioned space, the former

---

<sup>36</sup> *Anarkhiia* began publication in September 1917 as a "social and literary daily." In the two issues following the October coup, the paper reported its seizure of a print shop, the former "*Moskovskii listok*," for the purpose of publishing anarchist literature, and announced the founding of the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups. There was then immediately a three-month hiatus before it resumed publication in the beginning March 1918, when Gan's first articles began to appear in it.

<sup>37</sup> *Revoliutsionnoe tvorchestvo* was advertised in first issue of *Anarkhiia* in which Gan published, suggesting that he initially held out hope for its continuation. *Anarkhiia* 11 (5 March 1918): 4.

<sup>38</sup> The announcement for the series appeared several times, the first of which was in *Anarkhiia* 19 (16 March 1918): 1.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the anarchist requisitioning of property, see Whitney B. Keen, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Universe Books, 1983): 255-256.

<sup>40</sup> Meeting announcement in *Anarkhiia* 22 (20 March 1918): 4.

Merchant's Club at 6 Malaia Dmitrovka. Gan was also a key player in requisitioning another Moscow mansion, the house of Aleksei Morozov (fig 21).<sup>41</sup> During Gan's month-long tenure as the custodian of the Morozov house, he attempted to open the house's art and ceramics collection to the public as a sort of museum and to create space for artists' use.<sup>42</sup> This experience is the first point where we can establish his relationships to avant-garde visual artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Aleksei Morgunov, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova, and Vladimir Tatlin, all of whom also published articles in Gan's section in *Anarchy*.

Reading through the articles that these artists published in *Anarchy*, one begins to suspect that the appeal of anarchism mapped quite closely onto the appeal of no-strings studio and living space. They wanted complete freedom to create without the restrictions imposed by art's institutions or any sort of patron, whether bourgeois merchant or Bolshevik state, and anarchism's rejection of hierarchical power and its celebration of rebellion from dominant norms lent ideological grounding to these desires. These attitudes were in many ways a holdover from the futurist period prior to the First World War, when many of these same artists had joined with futurist poets in attempting to free themselves from the requirements of bourgeois life by flaunting social and artistic

---

<sup>41</sup> Aleksei Morozov was a member of the family of wealthy Moscow merchants and art collectors of which Ivan Morozov, an early patron of modern art, is the best known. Aleksei Morozov's house was located on Vvedenskii pereulok. Gan termed the group that took over the Morozov house on 15 March the "Commune Group." Catherine Cooke's article on Gan and anarchism, while limited in its source materials, narrates this episode fairly accurately. Cooke, "Sources of a radical mission": 13-37.

<sup>42</sup> The house eventually did become a ceramics museum on 14 December 1919. The announcement gives a brief history of A. V. Morozov's collection: "Muzei Russkogo farfora," *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* (December 1919): 13. Also see E. B. Sametskaia, "A. V. Morozov i sozdanie gosudarstvennogo muzeia keramiki," *Muzei* 6 (1986): 159-164.

conventions. They famously advocated “a slap in the face of public taste,”<sup>43</sup> wore bright yellow shirts embellished with a wooden spoon strung through the buttonhole, painted their faces with mathematical symbols and transrational poetry (*zaum*), and staged public lectures meant to challenge the public’s sense of decorum.<sup>44</sup> The underlying assumption and assertion behind these demonstrations was that conventions of behavior, dress, and artistic representation were just that (conventions); they were relative and arbitrary arrangements that had been repeated so widely and often as to seem natural and correct. The corollary was that there was nothing necessary or binding about the general rule, and they made this point by somewhat randomly excepting themselves from it.

This understanding of the relativity of conventions translated into futurist artistic practices in much the same way as in the work of their Western European counterparts (not only the Italian futurists, but also post-impressionists, cubists, etc.). In order to understand how Gan’s thinking grew out of these concerns, it will be helpful to situate the movement within relevant larger historical trends, even if only in the broadest of strokes. As Renato Poggioli has argued, one of the defining characteristics of the historical avant-garde was a skepticism about language, visual languages of representation included. He located the birth of the trend in the period of the

---

<sup>43</sup> I am referring to the famous futurist manifesto that advocated “throwing Pushkin from the ship of modernity.” It should be said that even in this futurist manifesto the complaint was that those conventional forms were incomprehensible to modern readers/viewers, “like hieroglyphics.” D. Burluk, Aleksandr Kruchenykh, V. Mayakovsky, and V. Khlebnikov, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” in *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, ed. and trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Washington, DC: New Academia, 2004): 51-52.

<sup>44</sup> See especially Jane Sharp, “The Russian Avant-Garde and Its Audience: Moscow 1913,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6:3 (September 1999). Also Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Washington, DC: New Academia, 2006): 38-39, 133, 136.

Enlightenment, but it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that it really began to bear fruit, as a dizzying sequence of unconventional compositions and painting styles emerged, challenging the naturalness of conventions of representation that had been laid down and reinforced for centuries.<sup>45</sup> Ironically, many of the inventors of these styles claimed that they themselves were engaged in developing a truer, more scientific, or more direct way of representing reality. For example, impressionism and divisionism claimed to more truthfully record light, futurism claimed to represent motion and energy, symbolists claimed access to invisible auras, and so on.<sup>46</sup> Suspicion was initially reserved for *academic* language, rather than the process of representation itself. By the teens and twenties, however, the pileup of “isms” began to undermine such claims for truth, and all languages of representation began to seem relative and arbitrary. This final shift in attitude has perhaps been most precisely located and theorized by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois as the “semiotic turn” within Picasso’s work of the early teens.<sup>47</sup> It also coincides with the moment that Peter Bürger interpreted as art becoming aware of itself as an institution.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

<sup>46</sup> T. J. Clark has recently developed this point in relation to Picasso in his series of lectures entitled “Picasso and Truth,” at the National Gallery of Art (2009).

<sup>47</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “In the Name of Picasso,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985): 23-40; and Yve-Alain Bois, “The Semiology of Cubism,” in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992): 169-208.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

The pre-war Russian futurist avant-garde sat on the margins of this Western European trend. Many of its artists made pilgrimages to Paris to study, or spent time with the avant-garde pictures of Moscow collectors like Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. But rather than delay their recognition of the relativity of style, their marginal position seems to have made the arbitrariness of stylistic idioms even more apparent. To a much greater extent than in the work of Western European artists, the early work of nearly all of the artists of the Russian avant-garde was marked by a period of rapidly shifting from copying the style of one Western European avant-garde after another—an “impressionist” picture would be followed by a “Cezannist” picture, then a “cubist” picture, and then the invention of some new style altogether. Some went on to eschew all claims on realism and assert that creative freedom relied on moving on to a realm of pure play within the medium, as in Benedict Lifshits’ understanding of the “autonomous word.”<sup>49</sup> Others struck another compromise, somehow simultaneously holding their claims for the realism, or truth value, of their painting systems together with a heightened sense of their relativity. The most striking example is Malevich’s effort to describe his fully abstract suprematism as a “new painterly realism.”<sup>50</sup> David Burliuk explained it more straightforwardly in 1912, stating that there was truth in the arts, but it had a life span of

---

<sup>49</sup> See Markov: 119-120.

<sup>50</sup> Malevich’s suprematism, while interpreted in retrospect as the beginning of art as an object in itself, was touted by Malevich at the time as “a new painterly realism,” a “nonobjective” way of representing the essence, rather than the surface, of things through the “zero of form.” He wrote numerous texts to this effect, the most pertinent of which is “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism,” in *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism*, ed. and trans. John Bowlit (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988): 116-135.

about twenty-five years; one needed to accept that concepts of beauty were relative and temporary.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the same disregard for the authority and fixity of conventions and norms lay at the heart of the ideas that Gan and his anarchist colleagues presented in *Anarchy*, but with a significant refocusing of the problem in a collectivist direction. The norms that governed social life and art definitely still seemed like conventions—that is, relative and shiftable—and Gan was nothing less than shrill in his condemnation of attempts to hold onto conventions of the past that had outlived their historical relevance.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, this relativity no longer seemed like the precondition for complete individual freedom. Instead, Gan’s thinking focused on the fact that a norm is defined by—even made out of—broad subscription and relevance. It might not be fixed by ties to *eternal* truths, but there was a *relative* truth at any particular moment, and one must work within it. Merely excepting oneself from its jurisdiction—slapping taste in the face—might be good work if you could get it, but it did nothing to make that relative truth less determinant, relevant, or real.

Gan specifically wrote condemning the futurists’ inability to factor in both sides of this equation, calling such artists daredevils (*smel’chaki*) and their so-called freedom narrow or illusory. He wrote that when these daredevils “declare the autonomy of their individual selves, they are deluding themselves, or to say it a better way, what they’ve got

---

<sup>51</sup> This is from Burliuk’s speech at one of the futurist lectures that took place at the Moscow Polytechnical Museum. Cited in Markov: 39.

<sup>52</sup> The text that Gan cowrote with Malevich and Aleksei Morgunov is a particularly clear statement of this sentiment: “Zadachi iskusstva i rol’ dushitel’ei iskusstva,” *Anarkhiia* 25 (23 March 1918): 4. Translated as “The Problems of Art and the Role of its Suppressors” in K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1968): 49.

is not freedom in the deepest sense of the word, but rather a leave-pass [in the military sense], or a ticket for a short-term vacation.”<sup>53</sup> The metaphor of the leave-pass is particularly clever considering the military origins of the term *avant-garde*. Rather than interpreting the *avant-garde* as culture’s front line of battle, he likened their artistic strategy to a temporary escape from the fray. He made this link again, mapping it onto recent events, when he wrote condemningly of artists who spoke about the complete “freedom of the eagle” and then “ran away in October.” Their commandment, according to Gan, was, “Be a hero on stage and a coward in life.”<sup>54</sup> This radical artistic freedom, with its heroic gestures, was only viable within the narrow confines of an artificial and cordoned-off aesthetic space.

In place of the narrow conception of artistic freedom represented by the *avant-garde* slap, Gan and his colleagues at *Anarchy* proposed the concept of *tvorchestvo*, or “creation.” In an art context, the word is often translated as “oeuvre” or “art,” but it also means “creative work” on a very fundamental level not specific to fine arts. Indeed, the connotations carried by the word *tvorchestvo* are significantly different from those of the word “art” (*iskusstvo*). *Iskusstvo* is associated with illusion; as in English, it is closely related to the words “artificial” (*iskusstvennyi*) and “artifice” (*iskusstvennost’*). In contrast, *tvorchestvo* is related to the verb *tvorit’*, meaning “to create” in the sense of “to make.” The verb’s adjectival form, *tvoritel’nyi*, is used to designate the instrumental case

---

<sup>53</sup> Izdatel’skaia gruppа sotrudnikov proletarskogo teatra, “Proletarskii teatr”: 4. [И если были смельчаки, заявлявшие об автономности своей личности, то это был самообман, ибо лучшее, что они имели, это не свободу в глубочайшем смысле этого слова, а увольнительную записку или билет в кратковременный отпуск.]

<sup>54</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Proletarskii teatr,” *Anarkhiia* 56 (11 May 1918): 4. [Будь героем на сцене и трусом в жизни.]

in Russian, pointing to a link to tools and to agency. Thus, while “art” held connotations of manipulating materials in order to create an artificial illusion or an image for the eye, *tvorchestvo* suggested digging into and altering reality itself. The first anarchist journal in which Gan was involved, *Revolutionary Creativity* (or *Revolutionary Tvorchestvo*), was to have been about *tvorchestvo* in this larger sense: a journal of “science, art, social life, and cooperation.”<sup>55</sup> The section of *Anarchy* that Gan edited, which I have been calling an “arts” section, was actually printed under the rubric *Tvorchestvo*, not *Iskusstvo*.

Investment in the idea of *tvorchestvo* was not specific to Gan; it was a widespread buzzword during these years. For example, the influential book on theater written by Proletkul't leader and theorist Platon Kerzhentsev in 1917 (published in 1918) was titled *Tvorcheskii teatr* (Creative Theater),<sup>56</sup> and the poets David Burluk, Nikolai Aseev, and Sergei Tret'iakov gathered around a journal called *Tvorchestvo* in Vladivostok in 1917.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the concept can be understood as one manifestation of that moment's reaction against the semiotic shift that I described earlier. It responded to a desire for a relevant, unmediated, and engaged relation to reality, that is, for the recovery of aesthetics in its original sense. As Susan Buck-Morss has argued in relation to Walter Benjamin's artwork essay, the word aesthetics had originally referred to a mode of cognition via

---

<sup>55</sup> Announcement in *Anarkhiia* 11 (5 March 1918): 4. [журн. науки, искусства, социальн. жизни и кооперации]

<sup>56</sup> Platon Kerzhentsev, *Tvorcheskii teatr. Puti sotsialisticheskogo teatra*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vserossiiskogo tsentral'nogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta sovetov RSKiK deputatov, 1919). For a discussion of the book, see G. V. Titova, *Tvorcheskii teatr i teatral'nyi konstruktivizm* (Saint Petersburg: Saint Petersburg Academy of Theatrical Arts, 1995): 35-76. In addition to his work on theater, Kerzhentsev published multiple books on the scientific organization of labor.

<sup>57</sup> Markov: 381.

sensory perception. It was a way of knowing the world through the body's sensory interfaces with it. In the modern period, however, an overload of unfamiliar stimuli—"shocks," to use Benjamin's term—made sensory perception of real life incompatible with cognition. In response, aesthetics underwent a full reversal in functionality and meaning, increasingly coming to describe a mode of blocking out the world, an *anaesthetics*, as Buck-Morss terms it. This loss of the aesthetic as a connection to the world turned human subjects into passive observers, people who did not understand their bodies—and the actions that their bodies performed—as related to the world that they perceived.<sup>58</sup> *Tvorchestvo* would reverse this trend yet again, supplanting *anaesthetic iskusstvo* with an active and organic relationship between body and outside world.

While *tvorchestvo* might supplant art, the redefined relationship that it posited clearly had broader relevance than art, and its advocates easily extended its application from the realm of art to that of politics, or human relations more generally. They described revolution, too, as a form of *tvorchestvo*, a "social *tvorchestvo*." An article titled "Revolution as *tvorchestvo*," published in *Anarchy*, serves well to demonstrate how they understood *tvorchestvo* as a single mechanism governing the political, the social, and the aesthetic. It reads,

Revolution, as *tvorchestvo*, is a deviation from the norm, from what is accepted, acknowledged, and everyday.

Every deviation can be interpreted in two ways—either as a mistake, something lower than the established level, or as a new form, a new law that is higher than the routine, serving as an example for the future...

Who is the creator [*tvorstom*] of revolution?

---

<sup>58</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," *October* 62 (fall 1992): 3-41.

—The people themselves. They create it directly [*neposredstvenno*]...in the same way that they create their laws and habits, their music and painting, their language.<sup>59</sup>

Here *tvorchestvo* was assumed to be a mechanism for the evolution of a number of socially defined categories, from the moral (laws and habits) to the aesthetic (music and painting). The mechanism was functionally similar to the formation of a style, in the sense of a period style, or of a language. It involved a deviation from the norm, followed by that deviation's acceptance or rejection by "the people themselves." Note here that the role of the masses was crucial; the idea relied on full participation. As Gan described it in a lecture he delivered the same spring, the masses participated "in *tvorchestvo* by affirming revolutionary everyday life."<sup>60</sup>

In itself, there was nothing particularly radical about proposing that the moral and aesthetic were analogous and governed by the same dynamic—for example, such a link was also the backbone of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the emphasis on the

---

<sup>59</sup> Br. Gordin, "Revoliutsiia, kak tvorchestvo," *Anarkhiia* 19 (16 March 1918): 1. [Революция, как творчество, есть уклонение от нормы, от принятого, от признанного, от обиходного. / Каждое уклонение можно трактовать двояко, как ошибку, как что-то стоящее ниже уровня установленного и как новую норму, новое правило, стоящее выше заведенного и заслуживающее быть примером для будущего и точкой исхода для нового уклада, творческим центром, откуда идут лучи во все стороны жизни и строя. / История цивилизации состоит из двух элементов: из подражания и творчества... / Кто является творцом революции? / - Сам народ. Он творит ее непосредственно. / Так творит народ все его вековая великая ценности. / Так он творит свои права, обычаи. Так он творит свою музыку, свою живопись. Так он творит свой язык.]

<sup>60</sup> The lecture is announced in *Anarkhiia* 69 (26 May 1918): 1. [Искусство и творчество. Большевики и искусство. Анархисты и творчество. Приобщение масс к искусству через пролеткульт. Участие масс в творчестве через утвержд. революцион. быта.]

<sup>61</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

role of the masses might be interpreted as no more than a further democratization of the concept of the avant-garde, which also depended on the rejection or acceptance of new stylistic deviations, at least among the elite who consumed art. Yet, the idea of *tvorchestvo* qualitatively differed from these aesthetic conceptions in the degree to which it strove to bind the processes of creation and reception together. As described above, the people's affirming role was not the reception half of a two-part process. They were not just the tastemakers, but also the *tvorets* (creator or author); "they create it directly." The processes of creation and reception were, at least ideally, combined into one motion.

The general zeitgeist behind this drive toward unity also motivated Mikhail Bakhtin's work of the same period. While a general discussion of his work is beyond the scope of my study, his resolution of this particular problem provides a more economic and eloquent way of understanding the impetus behind *tvorchestvo*. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, which was written sometime between 1919 and 1921 but not published during his lifetime, he worked to eliminate the contemplative distance that structured Kant's understanding of moral judgment. Kant had suggested that individuals should make judgments not according to their own interests, but "as if" the consequences of their action might affect any person at any time—a sort of "do unto others as you would have done unto you." Desiring a less abstract and universalizing understanding of the problem, one that did not deny local specificities, Bakhtin replaced Kant's "as if" with the idea of "no alibi in existence," a solution that is not so much a modification of Kant's as its precise opposite. Instead of intellectually taking oneself out of one's situation, Bakhtin proposed grappling with one's complete embeddedness in it, eliminating any gap between actions and their account. According to Bakhtin, we must

understand that judgment does not just reflect, but also simultaneously defines the fabric of reality.<sup>62</sup>

The purveyors of *tvorchestvo* also desired this sort of unity between reality and its apprehension. This is why they had to break out of the rarified realms of art with its anaesthetic aesthetics and work directly within the constraints of life. Interestingly, this movement was not just one way, and this is a crucial point to understand: if languages of representation were increasingly understood as relative and shifting, so were certain aspects of reality. The power of collective affirmation to transform normative truths was the sort of lesson that came out of experiences like the Revolution and the anarchists' requisitioning of property. If Gan had taken over the Morozov mansion himself, it would have been stealing, a deviant act. The affirmation of a larger group redefined it as a micro-revolution in the rightful ownership of the property. It all hinged on what seems like a simple question, but is actually quite difficult to answer rationally, or even to define: "*chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho*," to quote another Mayakovsky poem; that is, "what is good and what is bad."<sup>63</sup> However tough to reckon, this question is at the heart of the lateral understanding of authority that defines the anarchist position at its most basic.<sup>64</sup>

In concluding this section, I would like to return to my story and note that the Federation's response to the first May Day celebration, in 1918, manifested this

---

<sup>62</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> "Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho" was a children's poem written in 1925. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *What is Good and What is Bad* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979).

<sup>64</sup> For a good discussion of this question, see Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.

investment in the social constitution of power on both political and symbolic levels.<sup>65</sup> While initially interested in participating, they finally decided to call for a boycott of the Bolshevik-organized festival.<sup>66</sup> The Federation's position emphasized the hierarchical qualities of the Bolshevik plan: it represented a demonstration of power over, rather than of, the proletariat; it bore the character of a "government, compulsory celebration, organized by decree from above, by the command of a power that wants to change this holiday of the workers fighting for freedom into a day of exultation in honor of their temporary victory."<sup>67</sup> Their criticism focused particularly on the fact that that the festival was not participatory, but spectacular, all "style, glitter, and fireworks,"<sup>68</sup> an attempt to cloak empty promises behind "red drapery."<sup>69</sup>

As a strategy, the boycott is interesting within the argument that I have begun to develop. Functionally, it flips tautomerically back and forth between an avant-garde slap in the face of public taste, with its logic of individual exception, and an attempt at producing change through collective politics. It all depended on whether the masses

---

<sup>65</sup> Oddly, although Gan's "Publishing Group of Coworkers of Proletarian Theater" held a meeting on the subject of May Day in mid March (*Anarkhiia* 17 [14 March 1918]: 4), they did not weigh in on the issue in the paper.

<sup>66</sup> I do not know what Gan actually did on this day. It seems that Morgunov, Rodchenko, and Tatlin participated in the decorations for this festival despite the Federation's position. See minutes of a meeting of 14 April 1918 translated in Cooke, Tolstoy, and Bibikova, *Street Art of the Revolution*: 39.

<sup>67</sup> Sovet Moskovskoi Federatsii Anarkhistskikh Grupp, "K tovarishcham-anarkhistam i sochuvstvuiushchim," *Anarkhiia* 51 (1 May 1918): 1. [казенный, принудительный праздник, организуемым по приказанию свыше по повелению власти, которая хочет превратить этот праздник борьбы за освобождение трудящегося в день ликования в честь своей временной победы.]

<sup>68</sup> Br. Gordin, "Prazdnovanie pervogo maia," *Anarkhiia* 47 (26 April 1918): 1.

<sup>69</sup> Br. Gordin, "K pervomu maia," *Anarkhiia* 47 (26 April 1918): 1.

“affirmed” the deviation.<sup>70</sup> Gan began working with Bolshevik organizations not long after this event, but the anarchist emphasis on nonhierarchical peer-to-peer structures continued to underwrite his work as he went on, as did this tautomeric tension.

### **THE STRUGGLE FOR MASS ACTION: THE CONGRESS ON WORKER-PEASANT THEATER**

It is impossible to know exactly how or why Gan joined the ranks of the Bolsheviks late in 1918, but it is not hard to guess. In the period between April and September, the Bolsheviks tried to consolidate power by eliminating rival ideologies, and records of both the Federation and Gan’s theater group at first tell the story of increasing persecution and then, in July, begin to disappear. A citywide raid on anarchist groups of 12-13 April put many of the Federation’s members in jail, seized their requisitioned spaces, and shut down their newspaper for over a week.<sup>71</sup> The artists living at the Morozov house were

---

<sup>70</sup> According to von Geldern, May Day of 1918 was poorly attended, although possibly because of hunger and fatigue. He also notes that this was the last public festival covered by an independent press. Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 86-93.

<sup>71</sup> The Cheka raided twenty-six anarchist centers in Moscow, killing or wounding forty anarchists and imprisoning more than five hundred. One member of Gan’s theater group, a Comrade Lukashin, was arrested. The crackdown was justified in a series of speeches and newspaper articles, many by Trotsky, accusing the anarchists of “banditry” and of harboring criminals and White Guardists. Gan participated in an extensive exchange defending his custodianship of the Morozov house in *Anarkhiia*. For more see Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*; V. Serge, *One Year of the Russian Revolution*, trans. Peter Sedgewick (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972); and G. P. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work: Twenty Years of Terror in Russia (Data and Documents)* (Chicago: The Chicago Section of the Alexander Berkman Fund, 1940). For an account of the events from the point of view of Gan’s Proletarian Theater, see Mikhailov, “Proletarskii teatr (vpechatleniia)”: 4, or Gan, “K sotrudnikam Proletarskogo teatra”: 4.

arrested and the house reallocated to a Proletkul't group.<sup>72</sup> Gan's Proletarian Theater lost its rehearsal space.<sup>73</sup> During this raid Gan seems to have been on good enough terms to negotiate with the Bolsheviks without being arrested, and Bolshevik cultural workers made overtures to recruit him at that time.<sup>74</sup>

The Russian summer of 1918 was difficult and chaotic for everyone, and it is not surprising that records of Gan's activity are few and far between. We know that by 9 May Gan's *Tvorchestvo* section had moved its editorial offices to the same building that housed the Poet's Café (*Kafe poetov*) on Nastas'inskii pereulok,<sup>75</sup> and by the end of June he had found a new space for his Proletarian Theater in the former building of the Food Workers Union on the Arbat. He set up several meetings for Proletarian Theater for the beginning of July.<sup>76</sup> I do not know whether or not those meetings ever took place, however, since on 2 July *Anarchy* ceased publication for good.<sup>77</sup> The termination of the

---

<sup>72</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Muzei Morozova," *Anarkhiia* 45 (24 April 1918): 3; and Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Osobniaki," *Anarkhiia* 51 (1 May 1918): 4. When the house was made into a ceramics museum in December 1919, it was reported that the April raid did damage the ceramics collection. This report does not mention the Proletkul't occupation, but says that the Narkompros Board of Museum Affairs took the house under its protection in December 1918, and that it began to function as an unofficial museum in May 1919. See "Muzei Russkogo farfora": 13.

<sup>73</sup> The group also had to cancel one of their few public performances, which had been scheduled for 13 April. Gan, "K sotrudnikam Proletarskogo teatra": 4.

<sup>74</sup> Suggested in S. Mikhailov, "Proletarskii teatr (vpechatleniia)," *Anarkhiia* 43 and 46 (21 and 26 April 1918): 4.

<sup>75</sup> According to the address on the masthead, the entire paper began using the Nastas'inskii pereulok address on 26 May.

<sup>76</sup> A[leksei] G[an], "Proletarskii teatr," *Anarkhiia* 97 (29 June 1918): 4.

<sup>77</sup> According to a note in Kazimir Malevich's collected works, 3 July was another important day of anarchist persecution, although it does not specify how and I have not

paper coincided with the left SRs' attempt to overthrow the Bolsheviks on 6 July. The left SRs assassinated the German ambassador, took hostages, and commandeered the Central Post and Telegraph Office, which they used in an attempt to lead the country back into the war. When the Bolsheviks regained control, they executed twelve of the leaders, making it clear that their patience for oppositional parties had run out.

The next and last evidence of Gan's work in the Food Workers Union appears on 10 August.<sup>78</sup> He then disappeared for several months before reemerging in December in the records of the local Moscow district Red-Army organization (*Moskovskii okružnyi komissariat po voennym delam*), at first with the title of Director of the Cultural Enlightenment Department and then Director of the Agitation-Enlightenment Department.<sup>79</sup> His job involved coordinating the activities of existing cultural enlightenment organizations; sending traveling libraries, clubs, and theaters to the front; and re-functioning requisitioned property for recreational use by Red-Army soldiers and

---

read other accounts of it. This note also talks about two more issues of *Anarkhiia* that came out in the fall of 1919 (29 September and 23 October) published by the Association of Anarchist Organizations Underground, but I have not been able to locate these. Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochenenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 1, ed. A. S. Shatskikh and A. D. Sarabiiianov (Moscow: Gileia, 1995): 330.

<sup>78</sup> Gan attended a meeting of the Cultural Enlightenment Commission of the Union of Food Workers on 10 August, but was absent at the next meeting for which I have documentation, on 12 December 1918. TsGAMO f. 201, op. 1, d. 738, ll. 3-4.

<sup>79</sup> Gan was a signatory for orders [*prikazy*] dating from 6 December 1918 to 9 May 1919. They appear in *Izvestiia Narodnogo Komissariata po Voennym Delam* 174 (6 December 1919), 32 (15 February 1919), 45 (2 March 1919), 58 (21 March 1919), 76 (12 April 1919), and 93 (6 May 1919). His change in title may have represented a promotion. He started off signing orders underneath the Head of the Agitation-Enlightenment Department, then signed as the Acting Head of the Agitation-Enlightenment Department, and finally as the unqualified Head.

workers.<sup>80</sup> This is likely the point at which Gan officially joined the Communist Party, a membership that he maintained through 1924.<sup>81</sup>

Without naming Gan explicitly, a history of Russian anarchism written in 1930 by Emelian Yaroslavsky, the commissar under whom Gan worked in the Moscow district Red-Army organization,<sup>82</sup> suggests a plausible narrative for Gan's transition. He briefly mentions a group of anarcho-syndicalists concentrated within the Moscow Union of Food Workers who opted to abandon their "Bakuninist relation to power" and join Bolshevik efforts.<sup>83</sup> It seems likely that as the political position of the anarchists weakened, Gan began working with the new government, which was far more friendly to his aims than the tsarist government had been. Just such a strategy was articulated at the First All-Russian Conference of Anarcho-Syndicalists of August 1918. Rather than go underground, as some anarchists were doing, they would participate in Bolshevik cultural enlightenment organizations with the understanding that their revolution would come once proletarian consciousness had more fully developed.<sup>84</sup> In any case, by January 1919, Gan boasted of his ability to work across party lines, "with anarchists, maximalists, and

---

<sup>80</sup> These conclusions are based on the content of the orders that Gan signed (see note 79).

<sup>81</sup> On a questionnaire of 1926, Gan reports that he was a member of the Communist Party from 1918 until 1924, when he "dropped out for mechanical reasons" (*vybyl mekhanich.*) (RGALI f. 675, op. 2, d. 139, l. 3). It has been suggested to me that this indicated his dropping out not because of a change in conviction or some other significant reason, but rather for some logistical reason, for example, because the party needed his mailbox for other more active members.

<sup>82</sup> Yaroslavsky's was the first signature on most of the orders that Gan signed.

<sup>83</sup> Em. Yaroslavsky, *Anarkhizm v Rossii (kak istoriia razreshila spor mezhdue anarkhistami i kommunistami v russkoi revoliutsii)* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1939): 39.

<sup>84</sup> "1aya Vserossiiskaia konferentsiia Anarkho-Sindikalistov," *Vol'nyi golos truda* 4 (16 September 1918): 4.

Bolsheviks.”<sup>85</sup> He continued to associate and form independent groups with the artists with whom he had worked in the Federation of Anarchist Groups,<sup>86</sup> many of whom had themselves taken up positions in the Visual Arts Department (IZO) of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros).<sup>87</sup> In many ways, working openly within dominant organizations was more consistent with his ideas about digging into the real conditions of the contemporary situation than going underground would have been.

However Gan’s recruitment occurred, the decision seems to at least initially have been a good one. Gan’s first year in Bolshevik organizations—from May Day 1919 and May Day 1920—was arguably the pinnacle of his worldly success. He was quickly promoted to positions where he had real responsibilities, as well as real resources at his disposal. While serving in the Moscow-district Red-Army organization, he was asked to help with the Moscow component of the May Day celebration of 1919 by the newly formed national-level Red-Army cultural and political enlightenment organization, known as PUR Revvoensovet (*Politicheskoe upravlenie Revoliutsionnogo voennogo*

---

<sup>85</sup> Maximalism was a radical branch of anarchism. Varvara Stepanova records his statement in a diary entry. Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit’ bez chuda* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994): 66. [вот я, напремер, работаю с анархистами, с максималистами, и с большевиками, но они, ругаясь между собой...].

<sup>86</sup> Stepanova’s diaries record the frequent meetings during this period among Gan, Rodchenko, Malevich, Drevin, Udal’tsova, and others. Outside of their roles in Bolshevik organizations, they seem to have formed their own communal groups for the promotion and sale of their work, and may have lived together in a “work commune” [*trudovaia kommuna*] located at 29 Dolgorukovskaya ul. This was the location of at least one of their meetings in January 1919 (Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet*: 66), and the address is listed as Gan’s residence and “work commune” in a PUR staff list from June of 1919 (RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 163, l. 7ob). More research is needed to determine exactly what this work commune might have been.

<sup>87</sup> Malevich, Tatlin, Morgunov, and Rozanova all became part of the Moscow branch of IZO. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 49.

*soveta*, or Political Administration of the Revolutionary Military Council).<sup>88</sup> This May Day celebration was Gan's first experience in organizing a large public festival, and many of the ideas that went into it would find their way into the practice that Gan would develop as mass action later that year.<sup>89</sup> The plans for this festival also seemed to precisely respond to the spirit of the anarchist criticism of the previous year's May Day. It specifically emphasized mass participation over spectacle.<sup>90</sup> Gan's participation in this May Day celebration of 1919 also seems to have launched his career in PUR Revvoensovet.<sup>91</sup> He began official employment there in June as Head of the Art Department (*Nachal'nik khudozhestvennogo otdeleniia*), also sometimes called the Club

---

<sup>88</sup> The Revvoensovet was the national-level Red-Army organization, headed by Trotsky. The Political Administration, known as PUR, was a branch founded 18 April 1919, in order to oversee and execute political enlightenment and agitational work for the Red Army and Navy.

<sup>89</sup> There is little information about Gan's role in this event. If he took part in designing the festival, it was unacknowledged in published versions of the plan. My evidence of his involvement comes from a memo written in April in which the national-level May Day organizers ask that money be given to Comrade Gan, the Director of the Cultural Enlightenment Department of the Moscow District, to buy supplies for the festival. RGVA f. 9 op. 11, d. 125, l. 9. For more about this event, see Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 284.

<sup>90</sup> The futurist paintings that had been prevalent decorations in 1918 were particularly avoided according to a report in *Pravda* of 3 May 1919, translated in Cooke, Tolstoy, and Bibikova, *Street Art of the Revolution*: 85.

<sup>91</sup> Gan's changes in position within political enlightenment organizations correspond to changes in the organizations as a whole. According to an overview written in 1920 of the founding and development of political enlightenment work in the Red Army, a "new phase" of work began with the All-Russian Congress of Directors of Agitation and Recruitment Departments in November 1918 and lasted through June 1919, which is when Gan takes up his post at PUR Revvoensovet. It also suggests that the May Day celebration of 1919 marked a point when the field of political enlightenment work finally found its footing. RGVA f. 9, op. 11, d. 174, l. 7.

Department.<sup>92</sup> The bulk of his job was to organize and administer clubs where Red-Army soldiers and workers could associate while participating in activities related to political literacy, theater, music, visual arts, and physical culture.<sup>93</sup>

Beyond his club duties, one of Gan's first projects within PUR Revvoensovet was to produce the plan for another mass festival to celebrate a new holiday to be called the Day of Soviet Propaganda. Like the May Day celebration of 1919, it aimed to "attract" or "draw in" (*vovlech'*) participation on a national scale. There was almost no attention paid to decorations. The plan called instead for using local newspapers, distributing leaflets and gramophone recordings, and organizing theatrical and choral performances in towns across the country.<sup>94</sup> It was scheduled to take place on 17 August. The day was postponed several times, and then to the best of my knowledge canceled due to events related to the Civil War, but the archives preserve ample evidence of Gan's artistic plan, the money and other resources allocated to it, the flyers that were printed, and so on.<sup>95</sup>

I will return to the specifics of the plan for this event again later. For now it is enough to note that this was probably the project during which Gan began to conceptualize these festivals in terms of mass action,<sup>96</sup> that is, as an open-ended means of

---

<sup>92</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 1, l. 34.

<sup>93</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 11, d. 122.

<sup>94</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 12, d. 41.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* The day was promoted in the journal *Iskusstvo* 8 (5 September 1919), which was published by the Visual Arts Section of Narkompros (IZO).

<sup>96</sup> While the term is not used in Gan's plans for the Day of Soviet Propaganda, it was termed such at the Congress on Worker-Peasant Theater in November. In *Tvorcheskii teatr*, first published in 1918 and reissued with wider distribution in 1919, Kerzhentsev uses the phrase "mass action" once, spelling it in the conventional way—*massovoe*

developing a mass socialist theater by encouraging coordinated movement of the masses in public space. It is also likely the point when he started working with a subgroup of the Theatrical Department of Narkompros (TEO) called the Association of Worker-Peasant Theater.<sup>97</sup> This group would join him in promoting mass action at the Congress on Worker-Peasant Theater held later that year, in November.<sup>98</sup> Thus, even though the Day of Soviet Propaganda was cancelled, the activities surrounding its planning produced a certain amount of momentum for the idea of mass action, as well as a sense that the existing amateur theater movement might be harnessed in its support. Gan had every reason to think of mass action as a viable project, and one with growing prospects.

The Congress on Worker-Peasant Theater in November was a defining event for Gan. The idea was proposed in the beginning of 1919 as part of TEO's effort to make sense and good use of the grass-roots amateur theater movement that had burgeoned—more or less spontaneously and with a messy range of purposes—in the years

---

*deistvie*—rather than in the shortened terminological way used by Gan and others at the Congress, *massovoe deistvo*.

<sup>97</sup> The Association was created as a subgroup of TEO's Subsection of Worker-Peasant Theater on 22 February 1918 (GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 545, ll. 11-14). Planning for the Congress began at the same time, as did the publication of TEO's newspaper *Theater Bulletin*. Although Stepanova notes in somewhat ambivalent language in her diary something about Gan and the "Theater Section" in January of 1919, I have no evidence that Gan was involved in any of these things until the end of July, when he was forwarded a memo from TEO informing him of the Congress (RGVA f. 9, op. 11, d. 148, l. 4). He attended one of the Association's meetings on 22 August 1919, where he ran and lost an election to become the third member of the Association's governing council. He does not appear in the minutes of the other meetings from the end of July to mid September (GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 548), nor in *Theater Bulletin* at all until the Congress in November.

<sup>98</sup> At the Congress, the Association was credited with planning the Day of Soviet Propaganda, as well as another unsuccessful mass action for the Anniversary of the October Revolution. "Otkliki S"ezda: plan pervogo narodnogo deistva-prazdnestva," *Vestnik teatra* 46 (16-21 December 1919): 5.

immediately after the Revolution.<sup>99</sup> Gan's Proletarian Theater had been only one of many such efforts spread throughout the country. As part of the same initiative, TEO also created a Subsection of Worker-Peasant Theater to serve as an umbrella organization for all amateur theater efforts. They began publishing a weekly paper, *Theater Bulletin* (*Vestnik teatra*), and organized a two-week course to train instructor-organizers who would go into the provinces and prepare amateur theater workers to attend the Congress.<sup>100</sup> The event was initially supposed to take place in March, but was postponed several times because of transportation problems. It finally convened on 17 November.

As far as I know, Gan was not involved in initiating or planning the Congress, but at some point in the months between February and November, he and his new colleagues in the Association of Worker-Peasant Theater began to take on a dominant presence in the general discussion of the unified platform that the Congress would produce. They envisioned organizing the existing bevy of amateur theater groups spread throughout the country into a coordinated network for mass action. The plans for the Day of Soviet Propaganda were a good example of their ambition. However far-fetched this scheme might seem now, their views were broadly assumed to represent the worker-peasant

---

<sup>99</sup> The flourishing of amateur theater after the Revolution has been much noted and narrated. As Viktor Shklovskii wrote, "No one knows what to do with the drama circles. They are propagating like protozoa. Not the lack of fuel, nor food, nor the Entente—no, nothing can stop their growth." Viktor Shklovskii, *Khod konia* (Berlin: Gelikon, 1923). For more recent accounts, see Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater, 1905-1932*, ed. Dr. Lesley Milne, trans. Rosane Permar (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988): 41-44; and Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2000).

<sup>100</sup> The course was offered by the Subsection of Worker-Peasant Theater, within TEO. Those who enrolled in the course received military rations (announcement in *Vestnik teatra* 2 [8-9 February 1919]: 2). Instructors included Platon Kerzhentsev and V. V. Tikhonovich, as well as instructors on topics like the Soviet constitution and political and social questions ("Na novykh putiakh," *Vestnik teatra* 7 [18-19 February 1919]: 3).

theater movement's ideological center as the Congress convened in November.<sup>101</sup> They were so sure of their position that they saw the Congress less as a forum for debate than as an organizational meeting for relaying the plan to provincial participants. On the first day of the Congress, they quickly took the stage and began laying out their agenda.<sup>102</sup>

When the Association actually articulated the points that everyone had assumed comprised the general consensus, however, their vision turned out to in no way represent the true amateur theater norm. As it turned out, the majority of the Congress' participants thought of worker-peasant theater as a way of letting the masses in on the civilized pleasures of traditional theater while harnessing Bolshevik support. They had no interest or faith in this thing called mass action, which seemed like "a nonexistent fantasy," a "form of theater that [was] not catching on and that [would] not replace existing theater."<sup>103</sup> They wrote up their own set of resolutions that placed amateur theater on more traditional foundations. In an attempt to regain leverage, Gan organized the members of the Association and the representatives from the Red Army into a "communist faction,"<sup>104</sup> which he came to call "the Commfaction," and led this coalition

---

<sup>101</sup> This is stated straightforwardly in a TEO report in GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 45-47. The dominance of their views may have been related to the buzz surrounding the publication of Kerzhentsev's *Tvorcheskii teatr*. Originally published in a small edition in Petrograd in 1918, the book was reissued by the Central Committee (who also published *Izvestiia*) in 1919 in order to allow for broader distribution, particularly to the provinces.

<sup>102</sup> For a summary of the Congress, see von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 136-137.

<sup>103</sup> "Otkliki S"ezda: plan pervogo narodnogo deistva-prazdnestva": 5. [Массовое действие—фантастическая, еще неосуществленная форма театра, которая не привьется у нас и не заменит театра существующего.]

<sup>104</sup> Reports in the press at the time only vaguely suggest that Gan led the Commfaction, but an article looking back on the event in 1922, and probably written by Gan, explicitly names him ([Gan], "Massovoe deistvo": 3), as does Pertsov, *Reviziia*: 23.

in a walkout of the proceedings. After a series of negotiations, the Congress ended with the ratification of two sets of resolutions, one majority and one minority.<sup>105</sup> Gan would spend much of the next year campaigning to nudge the positions of his Commfaction into the majority.<sup>106</sup>

For my purposes, the interesting thing about the events of the Congress was that they revealed something which was, in one sense, already true, but which, in another sense, had been effectively irrelevant. Prior to the Congress, its organizers had been able to act with a complete lack of awareness of the actual normative point of view, to the extent that they were completely unprepared for the negative reception of their ideas. A few weeks after the fact, the author of *Creative Theater*, Platon Kerzhentsev, could only respond that “the results of the Congress on Worker-Peasant Theater were paradoxical to the point of strangeness.”<sup>107</sup> In retrospect, he admitted, the hyphenated designation “worker-peasant theater” had been an artificial attempt to unify groups like Gan’s Proletarian Theater with amateur theater groups which held more traditional views, and which were associated with provincial peasant efforts, whether or not they were actually based there. As he rather brilliantly expressed it, “the hyphen in the term ‘worker-

---

<sup>105</sup> N. L., “S”ezd po Raboche-Krest’ianskomu Teatru,” *Vestnik teatra* 44 (2-7 December 1919): 1. The dual set of resolutions were published in *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 11. Their basic gist was that the struggle for socialist theater was the same thing as the struggle for socialism, and that bourgeois theater must be replaced with a mass theater that could only be created by the working class itself. This mass theater would have proletarian traits such as collectivism and organized cooperation [*sotrudnichestva*].

<sup>106</sup> *Vestnik teatra* 9-11 Aug 1920. The Congress was followed by a series of “Sessions of the Soviet of Worker-Peasant Theater,” intended to help actualize the Congress’s resolutions. The first was 28-30 December, the second in March, and the third in August.

<sup>107</sup> P. M. Kerzhentsev, “Otkliki S”ezda,” *Vestnik teatra* 45 (9-14 December 1919): 4. [Итоги съезда по рабоче-крестьянскому театру парадоксальны до странности.] Kerzhentsev represented Proletkul’t at the Congress.

peasant' theater...was intended to portend synthesis, but...after the Congress, that little hyphen...changed into something quite long, dividing the two understandings more than before."<sup>108</sup> In its combination of the rhetorical and the real, Kerzhentsev's comment about the lengthened hyphen is extremely apt. Like the hyphen, the Congress was designed to unite, but in the end only called attention to an unbridgeable divide. The Congress discovered or revealed a norm that had existed all along, but the event also transformed the real contours of political possibility by eliciting a manifestation of that latent sentiment. The organization that had been the dominant force in amateur theater, the Association, came out as the far-left minority group, the Commfaction,<sup>109</sup> all because their ambitions for mass action were finally put to the test and not "affirmed."

In the case of the Congress, Gan lost. From that point on, he often would. What is important, however, is that Gan understood organizing the coalition at the Congress and the subsequent campaign as an integral part of his practice; so much so that when he wrote about the Congress later, he used the term "constructor of mass action" to describe his role.<sup>110</sup> Recapitulations of the events of the Congress pointed out that the "majority" and "minority" were really only the majority and minority *of the Congress*, which did not necessarily represent the population at large. Gan's "struggle for mass action," as Gan

---

<sup>108</sup> P. M. Kerzhentsev, "Bor'ba na s'ezde," *Vestnik teatra* 44 (2-7 December 1919): 5. [сам термин «рабоче-крестьянский театр»...хотел предвидеть синтез, но...после съезда, скорее можно сказать, что маленькое тире в слове «рабоче-крестьянский театр,» превратилось в очень длинное, разделяющее оба понятия больше, чем раньше.]

<sup>109</sup> A report on the activity of TEO's Subsection on Worker-Peasant Theater from 1 December 1919 to 1 March 1920. GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 45-47.

<sup>110</sup> Probably Gan, "Massovoe deistvo": 3.

described the next year's campaign, involved efforts to reach those broader contingents and win them to mass action's cause.

Gan had attended the Congress as the representative of the Art Department of PUR Revvoensovet,<sup>111</sup> but in the months that followed, he increasingly shifted his focus to pushing forward the agenda of the Congress's Commfaction within TEO organizations.<sup>112</sup> He continued to appear on PUR staff lists in 1920,<sup>113</sup> but he was no longer listed as Head of the Art Department.<sup>114</sup> He began to attend meetings of TEO's Subsection of Worker-Peasant Theater, often reporting on the Red Army's theatrical

---

<sup>111</sup> GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 178, l. 37.

<sup>112</sup> The Commfaction continued to act as a unit, beginning at the first session of the Soviet of Worker-Peasant Theater, held 28-30 December 1919, where the group again affirmed their commitment to mass action (GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 2).

<sup>113</sup> Gan may have migrated into TEO as an agent of PUR. One issue discussed at the Congress of Red Army Political Enlightenment Workers of December 1919 was the consolidation of the cultural enlightenment activities of PUR and Narkompros (RGVA f. 9, op. 11, d. 13, l. 116). The PUR archive preserves several pages of notes from 1920 "On the Unification of PUR's and NKP's Artistic Work" that appear to be in Gan's handwriting (RGVA f. 9, op. 11, d. 168, ll. 23-24), and the artistic work of PUR was in fact officially transferred to Narkompros on 22 October 1920 ("Ob"edineniia khudozhestvennoi raboty PURa s Narkomprosom," *Vestnik teatra* 71 [22 October 1920]: 14-15). Sheila Fitzpatrick discusses this union in more general terms in Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970): 243-245.

<sup>114</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 210, l. 6ob.

activities, but increasingly functioning in a more general way.<sup>115</sup> His name also starts to show up in TEO's newspaper, *Theater Bulletin*.<sup>116</sup>

By far the most important venue for Gan's struggle for mass action was the newly formed TEO Section of Mass Performances and Spectacles. The Section had been approved in October 1919, before the Congress met, in order to address the question of mass theater that was being raised by the Association within TEO's Subsection of Worker-Peasant Theater.<sup>117</sup> This victory may have been one more reason why the advocates of mass action were so confident at the start of the Congress. The new Section began to get organized in mid December, at which point a representative from Proletkul't, V. S. Smyshliaev, was chosen as the director. Other participants were P. S. Kogan, M. V. Libakov, N. I. L'vov (another veteran of PUR Revvoensovet), and Gan, who entered as the representative from the Association of Worker-Peasant Theater.<sup>118</sup> When the Section began to meet in January, their first order of business was to begin

---

<sup>115</sup> GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3; GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 587; GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 14; GARF 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 8; GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 5.

<sup>116</sup> Gan's first appearance in *Vestnik teatra* was in November. He did not publish there under his own name until the end of August 1920.

<sup>117</sup> "Sektsiia massovykh predstavlenii i zrelishch," *Vestnik teatra* 47 (23-29 December 1919): 6.

<sup>118</sup> Gan is sometimes listed in secondary literature as the head of the Section, but this was not true during the most important period of the Section's activity. He was initially listed in the lowly position of an "instructor" (GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 44). He describes the first six months of the existence of the Section of Mass Performances and Spectacles as characterized by a "leap-frogging" for power between himself and Smyshliaev ("III-ia sessiia Vserossiskogo Soveta Raboche-Krest'ianskogo teatra (9-11 August 1920)," *Vestnik teatra* 66 (9-11 August 1920): 6-9). He was officially asked to assume leadership toward the end of July (GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 12ob and GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 587, l. 3).

planning a mass action for Moscow's May Day celebration of 1920. This event will serve as the central example of the form in this chapter.

I might as well cut to the chase and admit that the mass action for May Day of 1920 also never happened. On April 20, the mass actionists' plans were scrapped due to "a whole set of objective conditions," among which were funding problems,<sup>119</sup> the resignation of Smyshliaev and Kogan,<sup>120</sup> and probably also the death of Gan's first wife.<sup>121</sup> Instead, May Day of 1920 became the date of the very first national *subbotnik*,<sup>122</sup> a Soviet institution in which one volunteers to work collectively on civic projects, usually cleaning or yard work in communal spaces, on a day when one is not required to work at one's normal job (*subbota* means Saturday).<sup>123</sup> All the same, the debates surrounding this mass action's planning stuck in Gan's head like a broken record. Even after the decision to call it off, he insisted that the Section publish all of their materials on the May Day

---

<sup>119</sup> Evidently, they failed to provide the necessary supporting materials in their funding proposal and did not receive materials or work space. GARF f. 638, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 44-45.

<sup>120</sup> GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 44.

<sup>121</sup> Gan's first wife, about whom little is known, died in late February 1920. Stepanova records in her diary entry of 1 March 1920 that "Gan's wife died...stupidly and unexpectedly—from some unknown heart disease...He tries to appear strong and unconcerned with private property, but it's clear that he is upset." Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet*: 104. [У Гана умерла жена...глупо и невероятно—от какой-то непонятной болезни сердца... / Он крепится и хочет показать себя не собственником, но, видно, удручен.]

<sup>122</sup> GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 15; synopsis of paper given by Aleksei Gan as part of "III-ia sessiia Vserossiiskogo Soveta Raboche-Krest'ianskogo Teatra (August 1920)": 13; translated in Cooke, Tolstoy, and Bibikova, *Street Art of the Revolution*: 126. The first *subbotnik* had taken place a year earlier on a local scale. Cooke, Tolstoy, and Bibikova, *Street Art of the Revolution*: 122.

<sup>123</sup> For more on the *subbotnik*, see von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 151-56.

mass action in *Theater Bulletin*,<sup>124</sup> and Gan returned to the story of producing the plan again and again as a sort of primal scene in the formation of constructivism.

### **MAY DAY, 1920: A FORMAL ANALYSIS**

Performing a formal analysis of something which never occurred, and which would have self-consciously refused to coalesce into an image anyway, is a tricky matter, although certainly not one without precedent.<sup>125</sup> Gan and his fellow mass actionists used the term “script” (*stsenarii*) to describe their plan for May Day, and I will treat its analysis as one would in any performance-based practice. Insofar as I am interested in mass action as a precursor to constructivism, I will also pay close attention to Gan’s positions and investments in the debates that went into the plan’s formation, as well as the way that he narrated the event and its controversies later.

Texts published by the Section as they began to get organized in December and January reflected general agreement on two basic criteria defining a mass action as a new

---

<sup>124</sup> GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 15.

<sup>125</sup> There are many examples of artworks in the twentieth century for which it is difficult to precisely locate a definitive “object” to analyze. Certain performance and conceptual works in which the work must be completed by others are obvious parallels (e.g., Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, Sol Lewitt’s wall drawings, or Dan Graham’s poem schemas). The fact that May Day 1920 never occurred is another problem entirely, which I believe simply requires categorizing Gan’s plan as a failed work. In this sense, it holds the status of a preliminary sketch for a work that was never executed—for example, Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International or many other architectural projects. Its analysis is similar to that of script whose performance was never documented, for example, most of the dada performances at the Cabaret Voltaire, or any musical scores or theatrical scripts from a period before documentation was possible.

theatrical form: 1) it should take place outdoors in unbounded everyday spaces,<sup>126</sup> and 2) the action should not be strictly choreographed and directed, but rather emerge spontaneously from “an organic demand, lying deeply in the consciousness of the masses.”<sup>127</sup> Ideally, this massish quality would be expressed in the event itself, but they also urged their readers to participate in formulating the basic contours of the mass action in advance by attending a series of meetings and debates and by following the reports of such events in the press.<sup>128</sup> Like many earlier and contemporaneous movements for mass theater in Western Europe and the United States, the mass actionists proposed these conditions as explicit rejections of the norms of bourgeois theater, whose closed dark

---

<sup>126</sup> One article reads, “This May Day celebration will take place in all of Russia, all the squares, streets, and country fields will be transformed into a single great stage.” “Otkliki S”ezd: plan pervogo narodnogo deistva-prazdnestva”: 5. [Место действия этого Первомайского праздника—вся Россия; все площади улицы, поляны в деревнях—превращаются в единую великую сцену.] The Section’s call for participation also makes this a clear specification: “Vozzvanie Sektsii massovykh predstavlenii i zrelishch TEO Narkompros,” *Vestnik teatra* 50 (29 January-4 February 1920): 2.

<sup>127</sup> And further: “Mass theater is not an invented form, but an organic demand, lying deeply in the consciousness of the masses...Only the oppression of the ruling castes kept this demand from manifesting itself...The question of consciousness in mass theater can be decided only by the masses themselves in the process of collective creation and the comradely cooperation [сотрудничестве] of individuals and collectives.” “Vozzvanie Sektsii massovykh predstavlenii i zrelishch TEO Narkompros”: 2. [Форма массового театра не придуманная форма, а органическая потребность, лежащая глубоко в сознании масс...Только благодаря гнету правящих каст, эта потребность не могла проявиться в тех грандиозных формах, которые возможны в условиях освобожденной рабочим классом жизни. / Вопрос о создании массового театра может быть разрешен только самими массами в процессе коллективного творчества и товарищеском сотрудничестве лиц и коллективов.]

<sup>128</sup> “Vozzvanie Sektsii massovykh predstavlenii i zrelishch TEO”: 2.

spaces and tightly controlled spectacles they considered to be specific to capitalist theater rather than inherent to theater itself.<sup>129</sup>

In a sense, rejection of these capitalist forms was an effort to recuperate the more “natural” forms of Russian folk festivals, which had been held on Maslenitsa (Fat Tuesday) and Easter and which involved people randomly strolling through the city. In the late nineteenth century, these events had been commercialized as *narodnyi gulianiia* (people’s strolls) by private individuals or charity organizations, who would organize the event in a fenced-off area and charge an admission fee.<sup>130</sup> The Section’s choice of these two baseline criteria also reflects a tension that existed within all efforts to develop proletarian culture during this period. While everyone agreed that proletarian culture should emerge organically out of proletarian class experience, it was not a simple matter to coax actual proletarians—of which there were few in Russia anyway—into producing new proletarian cultural forms. Experience showed that when told to make art and left to their own devices, the masses tended to produce things that looked very much like

---

<sup>129</sup> Von Geldern presents a good summary of the potential influences on Russian ideas about mass theater and festivals, from Rousseau to Wagner to Percy MacKaye. See von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 23-28. The relationship of mass action to the public festivals of the French Revolution is a topic that I am conspicuously not addressing, in a large part because I have not found the comparison particularly productive and Gan himself rejected them wholesale as a possible influence. The French festivals were well known to Gan and other theater people through the work of Roman Rolland and Kropotkin’s *History of the French Revolution*, and quotations from Rolland, as well as from figures of the French Revolution such as Didier and Rousseau appeared frequently in the press. Gan’s rejection of the French Revolution examples may have been related to the fact that, as von Geldern has noted, they had been a model proposed by the Provisional Government in 1917. In that case, the Summer Garden in Petrograd was to be transformed into a Potemkin Paris with actors playing the roles of famous bohemians of that era. The director and designer were Evreinev and Annenkov, who would later produce a mass action called *The Storming of the Winter Palace*. See von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 23.

<sup>130</sup> See Swift, *Popular Theater*: 138-141.

bourgeois art. In this sense, the criterion of unbounded space was actually a sort of restriction. It would prevent the masses from “organically emerging” in the form of a traditional theatrical production, in part by reaching back to a familiar and pre-bourgeois folk form in a very general way.

Having agreed on these minimal criteria, the members of the Section began to argue over the more specific form that the May Day event should take. The way that Gan tells it, the crux of the disagreement had to do with thematic content. The Section’s director, Smyshliaev, proposed structuring the day’s festivities around a well-known folk tale or myth. The frontrunner was the myth of Prometheus, which had the advantage of being a favorite of Marx,<sup>131</sup> and which was seen as being relatable to the idea of spring, the return of the sun, as well as rich with associations developed over time in world literature.<sup>132</sup> Another member of the Section, Vladimir Mass, proposed that they might look to the mass festivals of the French Revolution as models.<sup>133</sup> Gan staked out his own position by categorically rejecting both proposals, insisting that they remember that the reason that they were celebrating May Day at all was that it was a holiday organic to proletarian culture—it had significance for the labor movement in recent history, even memory.<sup>134</sup> Gan warned that May Day had been co-opted in the past.<sup>135</sup> They should be

---

<sup>131</sup> Synopsis of paper given by Aleksei Gan as part of “III-ia sessiia Vserossiiskogo Soveta Raboche-Krest’ianskogo Teatra (9-11 August 1920)”: 6-9.

<sup>132</sup> “Plan prazdnestva 1go maia,” *Vestnik teatra* 51 (5-8 February 1920): 5-6.

<sup>133</sup> “Pervoe Maia (K otchetu sektsii),” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 14.

<sup>134</sup> May Day had long been celebrated as the return of the spring, but in the second half of the nineteenth century it began to be celebrated as an International Workers Day, sometimes to commemorate the successful fight for the eight-hour workday.

careful to preserve the proletarian essence of the holiday and not try to squeeze it into forms created by different cultures and classes.<sup>136</sup> Even the festivals of the French Revolution had far too much religious and pagan symbolism.<sup>137</sup> “The formal aspect of the May Day action,” he concluded, “must be solved and not borrowed.”<sup>138</sup>

The Section eventually succumbed to Gan’s persuasion and chose to act on his alternative solution, which structured the day’s events around the history of the three Internationals. While this history might also be said to have its mythic components, it was in some sense of and by the working class, as well as historically related to May Day.

---

<sup>135</sup> He cited the British, German, and Swiss moving the holiday to the first Sunday in May in 1891 so as not to disrupt the workweek, and the previous year’s May Day in Weimar Germany when the nationalistic German army and Freikorps had used it as the occasion to take communist Munich. “Pervoe Maia (K otchetu sektsii)”: 14.

<sup>136</sup> Oddly, Gan had nothing to say about the use of the myth of Prometheus in particular, even though its message of delayed progress through a daily penance of toil and suffering has complex resonances with Gan’s thinking and inclinations in relation to the Soviet cult of labor. As Marshall Berman has pointed out, one of the most important twentieth-century criticisms of Marx is directed at his celebration of labor and production above other equally important aspects of life. This was symbolized in his love for Prometheus. As Marcuse explained, “Prometheus is the culture-hero of toil, productivity, and progress through repression..., who creates culture at the price of perpetual pain. He symbolizes productiveness, the unceasing effort to master life...Prometheus is the archetypal hero of the performance-principle.” For Marcuse, relief from Prometheus is to be found in figures like Orpheus, Narcissus, and Dionysus, or in more modern terms, by people like Baudelaire and Rilke. “They stand for a very different reality...Theirs is the image of joy and fulfillment, the voice that does not command but sings, the deed which is peace and ends the labor of conquest.” See Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982): 126.

<sup>137</sup> “Plan prazdnestva 1go maia”: 5-6; and “Pervoe Maia (K otchetu sektsii)”: 14.

<sup>138</sup> Gan, “Chto takoe konstruktivizm?”: 79. [Формальную сторону первомайского действия нужно решить, а не заимствовать.]

Gan introduced a working version of a script,<sup>139</sup> which the Section collaboratively developed into the script that was published several times in advance of and after the day.<sup>140</sup> I am summarizing the basic phases below and have loosely mapped them in figure 22. I should note that while, for clarity's sake, I have not quoted verbatim, I have also left little of substance out.

- 1) Decorative Plan: The city would attempt to “present the communist city of the future.” All of the main squares would be renamed for an art or science and decorated accordingly. There would be Geography Square, which would contain a huge globe, Astronomy Square, Political Economy Square, etc. In addition, there would red flags and vitrines containing topical satires.
- 2) In the morning, a siren or whistle would issue from the Sparrow Hills, an elevated area slightly south of Moscow's center. All of the city's factory whistles would answer (fig 22a).
- 3) On this audio signal, groups of cavalries, motorcycles, and cars were to be dispatched from Moscow's seventeen gates. They would summon the masses into the streets and lead them toward various neighborhood squares (fig 22b).
- 4) There, they would celebrate the First International (fig 22c).
- 5) Everyone would then move toward the city center, converging on Red Square, where they would celebrate the Second International (fig 22d).

---

<sup>139</sup> Gan only published this script later. Aleksei Gan, “Opytnyi plan dlia massogo stsenariia,” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 14.

<sup>140</sup> The published versions of the script were more or less the same: “Plan pervomaiskogo prazdnestva,” *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* 2 (January-February 1920): 25-26; or “Plan prazdnestva 1-go maia”: 5-6; translated in Cooke, Tolstoy, and Bibikova, *Street Art of the Revolution*: 124-126.

- 6) Finally, the entire mass was to move toward the “Field of the International,” located on Khodynka Field, an open space on the city outskirts. There, an aerodrome and a wireless telegraph station would be installed, the Third International would “appear” and “a socialist structure unfold” (fig 22e).

Before beginning my analysis, I should clarify a couple of key points that were lost in the conversion of Gan’s script into the collectively authored script. First, although the decoration of the city as a communist city of the future might seem elaborate—akin to the creation of a Potemkin city—the decorative plan was intended to be very minimal in comparison to past efforts. Gan’s claim was that that “no artificial decorations other than red flags” would be used.<sup>141</sup> While admittedly difficult to reconcile with the specified giant globe for Geography Square, the intention behind the claim should still be noted. Second, although the Section’s charge was to produce a plan for Moscow’s celebration only, Gan’s script also included provisions for simultaneous performances in multiple urban and provincial locations. It used general locations—“neighborhoods,” “squares,” “streets,” “field”—rather than locations specific to Moscow. It also included a variation for the spatial conditions of a country village or agricultural commune.<sup>142</sup>

I do not want to downplay the enormous outlay of energy and resources that would have been required to realize this plan. Still, what may be most notable about the script was how minimal it was. Even the elements that were specified were not particularly original. Gan was likely inspired, or at least encouraged, in his choice of theme by Anatolii Lunacharsky’s preference that a mass festival should allow the masses

---

<sup>141</sup> Gan, “Opytnyi plan dlia massogo stsenariia”: 15. [*Некаких искусственных украшений кроме красных флагов.*]

<sup>142</sup> Gan, “Opytnyi plan dlia massogo stsenariia”: 15.

to “repeat the experiences of the October Revolution.”<sup>143</sup> Processions and red flags were standard issue in celebrations of May Day in various countries,<sup>144</sup> and a plan written for the May Day celebration of 1919 also began with factory whistles, people responding from various districts in the city, and a procession to Red Square. The 1919 plan ended quite differently, with everyone boarding a river boat or train,<sup>145</sup> but the idea of sending people out to Khodynka Field was also a borrowed tradition. Khodynka had been used for public festivals from the time of Catherine the Great to the coronation of Nicolas II in 1896.<sup>146</sup> James von Geldern points out that Gan’s plan also closely resembled one used in Voronezh for the 7 November celebration in 1918.<sup>147</sup> It is likely that the similarities in these plans are also rooted in preferences expressed by Lunacharsky.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> Lunacharsky was commenting on the celebration for the first anniversary of the October Revolution in *Izvestiia* of 25 September 1918. It is translated in Cooke, Tolstoy, and Bibikova, *Street Art of the Revolution*: 55.

<sup>144</sup> Kerzhentsev talks about traditional celebrations of May Day as a worker’s holiday in England, France, Germany, and Finland as characterized by red flags, posters, processions, meetings, and singing. Kerzhentsev, *Tvorcheskii teatr*: 69.

<sup>145</sup> Cited in Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 284.

<sup>146</sup> After several hundred people were trampled to death at Nicolas II’s coronation, its use was discontinued. See Swift, *Popular Theater*: 17.

<sup>147</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 248.

<sup>148</sup> He laid out a similar structure as a generic ideal for a mass festival in the issue of *Theater Bulletin* that came out the week of May Day 1920, that is, after the Section’s mass action plan had already been called off in favor of the *subbotnik*. See *Vestnik teatra* 62 (27 April-2 May 1920): 13. We might guess that the article was his gesture of sympathy toward the Section—remember that when their event was cancelled, Gan had insisted that they publish their materials anyway—and most of the more generic ideas that Lunacharsky expresses in this article can also be found in Gan’s writings from the *Anarchy* period. My sense is that they were simply widespread ideas. In any case, my argument in no way hinges on this plan being an original invention of Gan’s, but on it

The script shows almost nothing of an individual authorial or directorial vision or hand. Kerzhentsev had characterized May Day in his *Creative Theater* as an underdeveloped holiday, still waiting for its symbolism, emblems, and forms to develop.<sup>149</sup> The Section's script did not devise much in the way of specific elaborations on the underdeveloped forms that they had inherited. It would have produced an event with greater formal organization than the carnival-like wandering that had taken place during an old-fashioned Maslenitsa festival, but when compared to a theatrical script, this script gives very little precise direction. The history of the three Internationals serves as a theme, but it is not the subject matter or content of the work except in the most abstract way. The action is not tied to portraying or reenacting specific events. It is significant that when the storming of the Winter Palace was reenacted to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution later that year on the giant square in front of the actual Winter Palace in Petrograd (fig 23), Gan found the event a complete betrayal his aims.<sup>150</sup>

---

being extremely important to him. If he was one of a number of people advocating the same thing, this only strengthens my argument.

<sup>149</sup> Kerzhentsev, *Tvorcheskii teatr*: 69.

<sup>150</sup> *The Storming of the Winter Palace* was orchestrated by N. N. Evreinov and is described in Cooke, Tolstoy, and Bibikova, *Street Art of the Revolution*: 122, 137-138. Gan responded to it at a debate of 20 December 1920: "In Petrograd, they solved [the problem of mass action] in the following way: they mobilized an army of labor, who performed a play. But the problem is that no one unwillingly goes to set up a demonstration for no good reason. The masses always consciously participate in an action, but you can end up with the sort of thing that existed in the time of Catherine and the period of court festivals, when each participant in the procession was ordered to execute a defined task. The masses must consciously participate in mass action and when it is necessary for them to show their strength, then they should come out on the street and begin a revolution, since they know that they have a spectator—the bourgeois who sits at the window trembling in fear." RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 15a, l. 17. [В Петрограде он разрешался следующим образом: мобилизовалась армия труда, которая разыгрывала пьесу, но дело в том, что никому неохота итти устраивать демонстрации поневоле. Масса всегда сознательно участвует в действии, а то

In contrast to the specific direction that comes with a reenactment or a traditional script, the direction provided by Gan's script might be characterized as a set of signals or prompts. The whistles, motorcycles, and prearranged meeting points provide some amount of spatial and temporal coordination, but they do not prescribe specific actions or affects. They rather serve as stimuli to which to react in whatever manner one does. May Day itself had often functioned in the past as a similar sort of coordination device. It was traditionally a holiday, and therefore a marked day, breaking and punctuating the daily routine. It was also a day when demonstrations had often occurred.<sup>151</sup> There was usually speculation in advance in the press—and presumably in private as well—about what might occur.<sup>152</sup> Obviously somebody premeditated and initiated these demonstrations, but mass participation in them was more or less spontaneous and unmediated. Common knowledge and widespread expectation that *something*, as yet undefined, might occur on May Day made it a sort of rallying point that facilitated unchoreographed and unplanned participation.

The relationship between the script and the mass participants was obviously an important problem for the mass actionists. They often conceptualized its structure by

---

может получиться то, что было в екатерининскую эпоху во время дворцовых празднеств, когда каждому участнику процессии было предписано исполнять определенное задание. Масса должна сознательно участвовать в массовом действии и, когда ей было нужно проявить свои силы, то она выступала и шла в начала революции по улицам, так как она знала, что у нее есть зритель – буржуа, который сидел в окне и трясся от страха.] He expressed a similar sentiment in his article “V Podotdele teorii i opyta,” *Vestnik teatra* 76-77 (14 December 1920): 22.

<sup>151</sup> Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 88.

<sup>152</sup> For example, a memoir/history of the Kushner print shop recalls this sort of anticipation about May Day. Mikhail Fischelev, *Fabrika knigi krasnyi proletarii. Istoriia tipografii byvsh. “T-va I. N. Kushnerev I Ko.”* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo legkoi promyshlennosti, 1932): 119.

using a language of boundaries or frames that at least initially suggests familiar discourses of artistic autonomy and avant-garde breaks with it. A description of the festival produced for May Day 1919, which had many similarities to the 1920 plan, is particularly interesting in this regard.<sup>153</sup> After describing the various details of their plan for the city's decoration, it goes on to assert:

Whatever the colors used for the outer frame [*rama*] of the festival, it will lose all its inner meaning without the unmediated participation of the broad popular masses. Thus, TEO considers the primary task in organizing this festival to be drawing the effective essence of the broad popular masses into it, not as indifferent and apathetic spectators who are attracted to a May Day festival, but as a live crowd, animated by the same feelings that fill the organizers of the celebration. This crowd reacts vigorously to everything that the festival's program presents to it; it becomes both participant and spectator.<sup>154</sup>

Here, again, there is an emphasis on attracting or “drawing in” “unmediated” participation. The preparatory work of the organizers—the decorations set up in advance—were not the focal point of the festival, as they had been in the pompous and spectacular May Day celebration of 1918. They were designed instead to be an “outer frame.” The real stuff of the festival was the “effective essence of the masses,” which must be drawn inside the festival frame in order to become the work's “inner meaning.”

---

<sup>153</sup> This 1919 plan was written by someone named Vinogradov and cited in Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 284. He quotes from *Vestnik teatra* 19.

<sup>154</sup> “Proekt prazdnovaniia 1 Maia,” *Vestnik teatra* 22 (29 April-1 May 1919): 3. [Какими бы яркими красками ни была убрана внешняя рама праздника—он потеряет весь свой внутренний смысл без непосредственного участия в нем широких народных масс. Поэтому ТЕО видит основной задачей устройства этого праздника вовлечение в его действительную сущность широких народных масс не равнодушных и не безучастных зрителей привлекаемых на праздник 1го мая, а живую толпу, одушевленную теми же чувствами, которыми полны и организаторы торжеств. Эта толпа живо реагирует на все то, что предлагают ей программы праздников; она сама становится и участницей и зрительницей.]

This language was repeated in texts describing the mass action for 1920; the masses are always “the inner content,”<sup>155</sup> “the core of the festival,”<sup>156</sup> and so on. The rhetoric sets up a structure of inside and outside, and then goes on to talk about blurring the lines between art and audience by drawing the audience inside. The masses become both participant and spectator, both audience and actor. In short, it appears to be exactly what we expect from this period: a breakdown of the barrier between art and life.<sup>157</sup> There is no doubt that this passage participates in a contemporary discourse surrounding breaking down the barrier between audience and performer. “The chasm-like divide of the footlights,” which separated the creativity of a few from the inactivity of the many, was a common way of representing the problems with bourgeois theater.<sup>158</sup> Yet something about this conclusion is unsatisfactory. To interpret their use of the frame analogy in this way seems to assert exactly the same sort of boundary whose prohibition was the Section’s primary criteria for the form: mass action was to take place in everyday

---

<sup>155</sup> “Otkliki S”ezd: plan pervogo narodnogo deistva-prazdnestva”: 5. [С своей стороны пролетарские коллективы вносят в празднество—внутреннее содержание, т.е. свой революционный пафос, то опьянение, оргиазм, без которого не может создаться массовое театральное действие.]

<sup>156</sup> “Plan prazdnestva 1go maia”: 5-6.

<sup>157</sup> The art-into-life idea has often been articulated in terms of the elimination of the boundary between audience and actor, perhaps most recently by Gerald Raunig in his chapter on Soviet theater. There he writes that the “goal was the complete elimination of the stage, tearing down the boundary between viewer and actor, between theater and everyday life, between reality in life and reality in art.” Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007): 154.

<sup>158</sup> Kerzhentsev, *Tvorcheskii teatr*: 14. Pertsov’s history emphasizes that this was a widely felt sentiment. Pertsov, *Reviziia*: 23.

unbounded spaces. Even if one emphasizes transgression of that boundary, why would they set up their own organizational activities as the offending frame in the first place?

We do have something to gain by pursuing this frame metaphor—particularly because it becomes relevant again in chapters 4 and 5—but only if we consider that it might perform multiple and different operations. On the one hand, the mass-actionists’ organizational devices *do* set the mass action apart from everyday life in a temporal sense; for that day, the routine structures of everyday experience are called off and the city is temporarily experienced as a “socialist city of the future.”<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, this frame does not demarcate a spatial boundary between actor and audience, or artwork and viewer, in the way that a proscenium arch or a picture frame does. Here, comparison to the Storming of the Winter Palace is again helpful. Whereas the Petrograd event took place on one large and stage-like square against the backdrop of the Palace, Gan’s mass action was to occur on a set of sites scattered throughout the city. It would have been physically impossible to view the entire thing as a spectator, since in the first half one would have to be in several places at once and in the second half one would have to move along with the crowd, thereby effectively becoming a participant. Hence, while the Storming of the Winter Palace might be understood in terms of the same frame that structures discussions of artistic autonomy, Gan’s May Day mass action cannot. Its frame does not run perpendicular to a privileged vector of vision, it does not separate spectator from spectacle, nor does it define the plane of an image. It does not define the borders of

---

<sup>159</sup> Mazaev has discussed the role of the festival in the construction of Soviet life in his *Prazdnik kak sotsial’no-khudozhestvennoe iavlenie. Opyt istoriko-teoreticheskogo issledovaniia* (Moscow: Nauka: 1978). He emphasizes Bakhtin’s theory and the importance of the festival as a means of removing the participant from the constraints of everyday life.

an object to be viewed, but it does mark off a unit of experience that differs from the participants' everyday life.

This experiential space apart is achieved in some measure simply by virtue of it being a festival day, but the effect is made stronger by Gan's choice to thematically structure the plan around a discontinuous series of historical events. The day's activities progress from celebration of the First International to Second and then Third, all within a city meant to represent a still further step, the socialist city of the future. Catapulting oneself through this schematic and temporally collapsed version of the history of the class's coming to consciousness pulls one out of the routine structures of the everyday, perhaps allowing one to see the upheaval and chaos of the contemporary moment as part of a meaningful pattern and progression. Gan had used the same strategy in an even more obvious way in his plan for the Day of Soviet Propaganda, in which the thematic content for lectures, films, and choral pieces were consistently organized on the model of "then" and "now," or "what we have achieved in two years." There was "the wind instrument orchestra, its present and future," "soldier's songs in the tsar's army and the choir of Red-Army soldiers," and "who did cinema serve in the past, and who does it serve now."<sup>160</sup> The structure is employed almost to the point of parody. As in the May Day script, the structure of these themes makes a point about change and progress being possible at the same time that it creates a space in which the participants are enough removed from the routine to be able to "see" it. The distance involved in this "seeing" was not the sort that exists between an audience and an image or spectacle, however; it was a deeper sort of

---

<sup>160</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 12, d. 41, l. 5.

experiential understanding that comes with experiencing one's normal surroundings and peers in a different way.

This distinction between spectacle and participative experience had well developed roots within the type of amateur proletarian theater in which Gan had been engaged. The differences between amateur proletarian theater and the period's avant-garde theater experiments are seldom noted, but it is worth pointing out that the productions often associated with constructivism and produced by people like Vsevolod Meierkhold, Sergei Eisenstein, and Sergei Tret'iakov, with stage sets by Stepanova, Popova, and El Lissitzky, were professional productions. They aspired to utilize highly trained biomechanical actors to produce precise effects in an audience. In contrast, amateur proletarian theater groups were organized within trade unions or workers clubs and composed of amateur participants. Their aim was to facilitate certain sorts of interaction and cooperation amongst the participants and to provide an opportunity for workers to cultivate their own ideas and talents. Amateur groups often rehearsed the same scripts that were performed in professional theaters. For example, Gan's Proletarian Theater worked with Leonid Andreev's play *Savva* (1906).<sup>161</sup> The rehearsals may or may not have culminated in a public performance, however, and, even if they did, their value lay in the production of an experience for the participants rather than one for an audience.

---

<sup>161</sup> Izdatel'skaia gruppa sotrudnikov proletarskogo teatra, "Proletarskii teatr": 4. Andreev's *Savva* was one of two prerevolutionary Russian plays that Kerzhentsev recommended as good options for proletarian theater groups (the other one was Maxim Gorky's *Enemies*). Kerzhentsev, *Tvorcheskii teatr*: 54. Much like the history of the three Internationals used in the May Day celebration, the content of *Savva* was taken from the revolutionary life of Russia. Andreev (1871-1919) was known by his contemporaries as "the most modern of modern writers," because of his chaotic expressionistic style and incorporation of contemporary characters and events. The publication of his first stories in 1901 provoked much controversy over the nature of literature. *Savva* was published in 1906 and banned in Russia.

One participant in Gan's Food Workers group (possibly Gan) wrote approvingly that their rehearsals often turned into group discussions of art and politics,<sup>162</sup> implying that such discussions were closer to the group's goal than perfecting their performance of the play. On the few occasions when Gan's group performed publicly, Gan would begin the performance with a lecture on the purposes of proletarian theater. In the presence of an audience, the performance was presented as more of a specimen than a spectacle; it required Gan's lecture as a mediation or frame in order to become an object for consumption from the outside.<sup>163</sup>

Thus, although amateur proletarian theater sometimes posed as a lesser version of professional theater, there was a fundamental difference between the two in the way that performance was conceived, and many of Gan's writings from this period make more sense once one realizes that the degree and character of this difference is marked in Russian by a striking lexical variance. In Russian, the words used for professional theater all revolve around the verb *igrat'*, or "to play." This is also used in English, as in to

---

<sup>162</sup> Rogdai, "'Proletarskii teatr' Pishchevnikov": 13-14. It has been suggested that Rogdai might have been a pseudonym used by Gan (note in Kazimir Malevich, *Chernyi kvadrat* [Saint Petersburg: Azbuka, 2001]: 501). Whoever Rogdai was, he was obviously involved with many of the same things that Gan was—e.g., the breadmakers, theater, futurist poets, and constructivist artists—and the language he uses is similar in style to Gan's. On the other hand, it is unclear why Gan would use a pseudonym in the cases in which it appears, primarily in articles about the breadmakers and in a poster for a dispute about the "5 x 5 = 25" exhibition to be held 25 September 1921. In the latter, Rogdai is billed along with Aksenov and Kruchenykh, suggesting that he may have been a poet. The poster is reproduced in Alexander Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*, ed. John Bowlt (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988): 57.

<sup>163</sup> According to Gan, after the October Revolution, the group performed the play *Savva* in factories and provincial locations. Before each performance, he would explain the importance of Proletarian theater. Aleksei Gan, "'Proletarskii teatr' Pishchevnikov (k istorii samodeiatel'nykh stsenicheskikh kollektivov proletariata)," *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 13-14.

perform “a play,” “to play a role,” or “playacting,” but in Russian, there is no linguistic connection between what a stage actor does and the verb “to act” in the sense of performing an action in life, which would be *deistvovat*’. In contrast, amateur theater of the sort that Gan organized was described by an entirely different term, *samodeiatel’nost*’ or *samodeiatel’nyi* theater, which does, incidentally, contain the root for action. The word is usually translated in the theater context as “amateur performance,” but it can be literally translated as “self-activity” and it is used in other contexts to express ideas like personal initiative, spontaneous action, or even being self-employed.<sup>164</sup> While performance in professional theater was characterized by altering one’s self to play a role for the benefit of a spectator, performance in amateur theater suggested nearly the opposite, an act of spontaneous self-expression performed for the sake of the actor’s own development. It is self-activity in the sense of praxis.

In Gan’s writing about theater, he put to heavy use the linguistic coincidence of “playacting” and “play” in an effort to reverse the hierarchy implied by the designations amateur and professional. For him, professional theater was the trivial and escapist pastime, while amateur theater was the more serious and productive activity.<sup>165</sup> However counterintuitive initially, this alignment draws on the same distinction between art and *tvorchestvo* that I articulated earlier: art was for “daredevils” and “cowards,” for people

---

<sup>164</sup> For more see Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*: 23-24. Von Geldern suggests that *samodeiatel’nost*’ may have been the Russian equivalent of California theater figure Percy MacKaye’s term *self-governance*. Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*: 28.

<sup>165</sup> One description of the earliest days of his Food Workers theater group talks about there being some participants who wanted to “play” [*igrat*’], and others who wanted to “work,” which meant an unstructured discussion of current problems in art and politics in an effort to actively develop a viewpoint and a culture of their own. Rogdai, “‘Proletarskii teatr’ Pishchevnikov”: 13-14.

who wanted to “play at being a hero on the stage” and run away in life; whereas *tvorchestvo* was creative work within the restrictions of real-life conditions. In his further development of the distinction, Gan went so far as to suggest that amateur theater be explicitly understood as a form of labor, writing that the difference between professional theater and amateur proletarian theater amounted to a choice between “play [*igra*] and free triumphant labor [*svobodnyi torzhestvuiushii trud*].”<sup>166</sup> Here, Gan has added a second intentional ambiguity to his conflation of play and playacting by using the word *labor* to mean both the process of working and the demographic group of the proletariat. The idea is that when labor (the demographic) triumphed it would participate in labor (the process) freely, not in a coerced way, but in a voluntary and self-initiated way, that is, *samodeiatel’no*.

By suggesting that we think about amateur proletarian theater and mass action in the context of labor, Gan also points to resonances of the word *samodeiatel’nyi* in Marx’s analyses of different forms of work. In *The Grundrisse*, Marx had made an important distinction between hand tools and factory machines, explaining that workers who used hand tools wielded the tools, making them into an extension of their bodies and animating it with their skill and strength. Conversely, Marx pointed out, in an automatic system of machinery like a factory assembly line, workers were appendages of the

---

<sup>166</sup> Gan proposes this choice in an article defending mass action that was first published in August of 1920 and then again, with substantial additions and revisions, in a volume of collected essays on theater in 1922. See Aleksei Gan, “Nasha bor’ba,” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 1-2; and Gan, “Bor’ba za ‘massovoe deistvo’”: 68-69. He writes, “*Play or free triumphant labor? / That is the sharpest point which divides us, the coworkers of ‘Proletarian Theater,’ from the advocates and actors of professional theater.*” [*Игра или свободный торжествующий труд? / Вот самая резкая черта, которая разделяет нас, сотрудников «Пролетарского театра» от сторонников и деятелей театра профессионального.*]

machine, and the machine harbored the skill and strength.<sup>167</sup> This difference had consequences for the workers relationships to nature and others: whereas hand tools allowed workers to be independent, their own proprietors—that is, *samodeiatel'nyi*—machinery made them dependent on a larger system.<sup>168</sup> And whereas *samodeiatel'nyi* work was a means of developing individual knowledge and skill, the knowledge and skill produced by factory work was a collective mode that Marx called “the general intellect.” This collective know-how was contained by the machine, which literally embodied it in its physical structure, at the same that it fixed the working relationships among its human appendages.<sup>169</sup>

Gan never referred to this particular segment of *The Grundrisse*, but he did follow the statement about play and labor that I quoted above by launching into a discussion of Marx that focused on the same complex of interdependent relationships associated with factory labor. He discussed them in terms of the characteristics of an exchange society, but this was really just a way of talking about the same issue in slightly more general terms. His argument assumed the difference between independent and dependent labor that I described above. He went on from that assumption to make an interesting suggestion: that the way in which one thought about the relationships inherent in these forms of labor also mattered. If one understood the interdependent relationships of factory labor in the individualistic terms fostered by the capitalist system of private property, emphasis fell on the system of objects: the ownership and exchange of

---

<sup>167</sup> Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973): 692-693.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*: 702.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*: 706.

machines of production and its products. Yet one could just as easily swap focus and emphasize the interdependent relationships among people that lay behind those exchangeable objects. This way, going to work was no longer each separate individual's means to an abstract reward, but rather participation in a cooperative production process to meet collective needs.

This second mindset was more congruous with the scale and terms inherent to mass production than the object-oriented variant. It also made particular sense within a system like socialism in which labor was the collective proprietor of the machine.<sup>170</sup> Still, Gan understood that making the switch was hardly so rational and automatic in everyday practice. It involved undoing habits of thought deeply engrained through many years of repetition. For this reason, Gan objected to the art world's fixation on the value of objects, as well as to the infatuation in the social sciences with Marx's analysis of the commodity fetish.<sup>171</sup> For him, both simply reproduced an object-focused habit of thinking, when what was needed was "other forms...of mental functionality [*dukhovnoi*

---

<sup>170</sup> Gan, "Bor'ba za 'massovoe deistvo'": 69. Gan does not provide the reference, but the extended quotation that he uses to make this argument is from Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Kratkii kurs ekonomicheskoi nauki* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1920): 105.

<sup>171</sup> Gan, "Bor'ba za 'massovoe deistvo'": 69-70. With regard to the latter, Gan writes that narrow focus on commodity fetishism had created its own mythology by detaching this aspect of Marx's thinking his larger economic analysis. This seems to have been a common idea at this time. The same point was made in 1924 by Isaak Illich Rubin, who quotes precisely the same passage from Bogdanov that Gan does in its support, suggesting that they both took the argument from a common source. See Isaak Illich Rubin, *Ocherki po teorii stoimosti Marksa* (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924).

*deiatel'nosti*],” ones that structured thinking in terms of the relationships among subjects.<sup>172</sup>

One such effort within contemporaneous proletarian culture circles was the practice of framing arguments in terms of the difference between the individual subject “I” and the collective subject “we.” Evgenii Zamiatin’s dystopian novel *We* of 1921 is only the best known, and also negative, comment on the larger cult surrounding the collective pronoun. The cult of “we” went back to the futurist moment, when the most famous Russian futurist manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” declared that, “We stand fast on the rock of the word ‘We’ amidst a sea of catcalls and derision.”<sup>173</sup> Although their strategy was one of exception from the sea of normality, their exception was conceived as a collective one, and thereby provides a relative new stability. In the years immediately following the Revolution, the idea of “we” expanded and reoriented in exactly the same ways that I described for similar futurist ideas above. The poet Velimir Khlebnikov wrote that “the government of the Terrestrial Globe / Has come into existence: / It is We”;<sup>174</sup> Mayakovsky wrote, “Proletkul’tists do not speak about the ‘I’ / Or about the self. / ‘I’ / For the Proletkul’tist / is utterly indecent.”<sup>175</sup> The immensely influential proletarian culture ideologue Aleksandr Bogdanov also promulgated this idea

---

<sup>172</sup> Gan, “Bor’ba za ‘massovoe deistvo’”: 71. [иных форм...духовных деятельности]

<sup>173</sup> Burliuk, et al., “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste”: 51-52.

<sup>174</sup> Velimir Klebnikov, “Manifesto of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Globe” (1917), in Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*: 264-269.

<sup>175</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, “The Fifth International” (1922), cited in Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*: 102.

of a collective, rather than individualistic voice.<sup>176</sup> Discussions of we-ness occurred in the amateur theater and proletarian culture circles in which Gan operated,<sup>177</sup> and he explicitly linked himself to the movement by authoring a play titled *We* in 1920.<sup>178</sup>

This cultish use of the collective pronoun has been interpreted as evidence of an interest in the collective, which it undoubtedly was.<sup>179</sup> In the context of this discussion about *samodeiatel'nyi* theater, however, it seems equally important that it was a way of framing issues in terms of subjects instead of objects. It was not just a statement of kinship, but also a *self-defined* relationship of kinship, one presumably produced by sharing the same predicate, or the same action. Amateur theater can be understood as another way of doing the same thing. It was a means of restructuring thought in terms of collectives rather than individuals. As arts go, theater was more of a factory machine than a hand tool. It involved the coordination of a number of individuals, whose roles in the collective production of the spectacle were coordinated and determined by a script. At the

---

<sup>176</sup> Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*: 105.

<sup>177</sup> For example, Gan chaired a session at the Congress on Worker-Peasant Theater in which there was a major discussion of merging individualistic “I”s into a “we.” The overall character of the discussion is best exemplified by a comment by Comrade Pel’she, who stated, “My ‘I’ will be closely merged with other ‘I’ s, and won’t be an ‘I,’ but rather a ‘We.’ I will not be a zero, but I will also not be an individualist.” GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 178, l. 89. [мое “я” будет тесно слито с другими “я”, и не будет “я”, а будет “мы.” Я не буду нуль, но и не буду индивидуалистом.]

<sup>178</sup> Stepanova records in diary entries of 14 and 25 November 1920 that Gan asked Rodchenko to design the production, but that she didn’t trust Gan to succeed in actually staging the play. Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet*: 147-148. She was right—the play was never produced—but Rodchenko did design seventeen costumes for the production, some of which been published as figure 181 in German Karginov, *Rodchenko*, trans. Elisabeth Hoch (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979): 194; and in Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, ed. Vieri Quilici (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986): 208-209, 211.

<sup>179</sup> See Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*: 102-118.

same time, it was a way of thinking in terms of subjects rather than objects. As opposed to professional theater, amateur proletarian theater shifted focus away from the production of the object—the realization of the script as a spectacle—and toward the production of a set of relationships among the producers.

Thus, one significant corollary to thinking about amateur proletarian theater as labor was that the object of that labor was also its collective subject. In participating in amateur theater, workers worked to produce themselves. In this sense, it can be understood as a virtuosic labor, although not in the way that Paolo Virno meant it. In his analysis of Post-Fordist affective labor, Virno had also been interested in forms of work that were performative, immaterial, and ephemeral. Like Gan, he wanted a way to think about labor that did not produce an object separate from itself. He was, however, still interested in wage labor, and therefore his concept hinged on the presence of an audience, since production and consumption must occur simultaneously by separate parties.<sup>180</sup> In order to understand Gan's thinking about amateur theater and mass action, we need to decouple performance and audience, thereby making it possible to think about the performative aspect of any labor as productive in the sense that it produces the greater virtuosity of the performer. Here, to be clear, I take performance to be the execution of an action based on a model or a script. Regardless of whether a performed action creates a consumable product, each time the activity is performed the performer becomes better at it. The activity also becomes more and more incorporated into the performer; it becomes increasingly natural, less a performed action and more an aspect of the performer's being,

---

<sup>180</sup> Paolo Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004): 49-56.

a faculty. In this sense, any act—but particularly the repeated act implied by performing a script or model—is a means of gradually producing a new self.<sup>181</sup>

I would suggest that Gan thought about *samodeiatel'nyi* theater as labor in something like this audience-decoupled virtuosic sense. Amateur performance was the activity by which the proletarian participants worked to develop a new normal and natural arrangement of their minds and bodies in relation to each other. It produced a collective virtuosity. In this view, the relevant divide to be broken down in amateur proletarian theater was not the boundary between actor and audience, or artwork and viewer, but that between artist and object. The participants were both the shapers and the shaped, both subject and object, they were collectively co-producing themselves. To return to an earlier quote, the project was one of *self-production*.

As a model for understanding this procedure, the common understanding of virtuosity has particular advantages with respect to the problem, discussed earlier, of how to develop an authentically proletarian culture rather than simply schooling proletarians in bourgeois culture. The laborious and repetitive exercises of a musician, dancer, athlete, or calligrapher, may very well develop strength, endurance, higher jumps, more intricate patterns, etc., but when we say that they develop virtuosity, we refer to a facility and naturalness, a quality of spontaneous and unlabored grace. The idea is not bigger, better, further, more original, but an asymptotic approach to a new normal, a new natural and authentic self. In Marx's analysis, this mode of developing virtuosity had been limited to individual and self-directed work with hand tools, in which one worked independently and directly with nature. The gamble of *samodeiatel'nyi* theater was that a collective and

---

<sup>181</sup> My thinking here owes much to the participants of the Karl Marx School for the English Language in 2005-2006, and particularly to Dmitri Gutov and David Riff.

social form of virtuosity could be developed by practicing an activity that was coordinated and collectively self-directed. Because collectiveness was seen to be an inherent property of proletarian culture, there was also a sense that such an activity would only bring the participants closer to their authentic selves.<sup>182</sup>

The production of this collective form of virtuosity, of a harmonious “we,” was the real object, or aim, of amateur theater. Prior to mass action, it had occurred *despite* the fact that they were performing traditional scripts, which, after all, had to be considered dangerous models for repetitive emulation. For this reason, Gan had always emphasized the necessity of creating a new proletarian repertory, but in the meantime he made do with existing scripts like Andreev’s *Savva*. Gan defended the use of *Savva*, saying that they would “prove that the play could be performed without all the baggage,”<sup>183</sup> but he also acknowledged that its use was provisional. Such performances were “studio work, good for defining the correlations among its creative forces and no more.”<sup>184</sup> He would use the script as a formal device, hoping to relay as little of its content as possible, while still producing the set of interactions that were themselves the true aim of the project.

Gan’s plan for the May Day mass action can be understood as a further step toward purifying this project. It was a script designed specifically for the purpose of producing reaction and interaction, without having much in the way of content itself.

---

<sup>182</sup> See Robert Williams, “Collective Immortality: The Syndicalist Origins of Proletarian Culture, 1905-1910,” *Slavic Review* 39, no. 3 (1980): 389-400.

<sup>183</sup> Gan, “Proletarskii teatr”: 4. [Игряя “Савву,” ...мы доказываем, что их пьесу можно разыграть без установленного багажа.]

<sup>184</sup> Gan, “Togda, teper’, i my”: 4. [Это его студийная работа, в которой он определяет соотношение творческих сил, и только.]

Later in the twenties when he defined mass action, Gan wrote that “the essence of this performative<sup>185</sup> activity of the masses does not lie in *playacting*, but in the serious positioning of the class in *action*, understood as a dynamic medium [*aktivnoe sredstvo*] of an enormous collective reacting to the current political moment *emotionally*.”<sup>186</sup> The passage is cryptic to say the least, but I take it to mean that mass action positions the masses not in the sense of detailed theatrical blocking, but rather positions them *in an active stance*. It provokes them into expressing an emotional gut response, externalizing in action what had previously lay latent and unexpressed. In this way, a mass action script was specifically designed to elicit a predicate, presumably a common one, thus also producing the sought-after collective subject, the “we.”<sup>187</sup> It functioned like a measuring tool to plumb existing norms, at the same time that it worked to undam the latent potential of those norms, as occurred in the transformation at the Congress.

This brings up the second way that the mass actionists’ organizing techniques can be thought about as a frame. Earlier, I characterized the script as a set of signals or

---

<sup>185</sup> In citing this passage, von Geldern translates this word, *deistvennoi*, as “performative,” which is unorthodox. I have chosen to preserve his word here, because none of the usual variants—e.g., “effective,” “efficient,” or “active”—render a meaningful translation, but it does lend the passage the inauthentic flavor of a more recent text.

<sup>186</sup> Gan, “Chto takoe konstruktivizm?": 79. [Сущность этой действенной активности масс заключалась не в *игре*, а в серьезной установке класса на *действие* как на активное средство огромного коллектива, реагирующего на текущий политический момент--эмоционально.]

<sup>187</sup> In this sense, it did have something in common with the “theater of attractions” theorized by Sergei Tretiakov and Sergei Eisenstein, although, as Raunig points out, Tretiakov’s and Eisenstein’s attraction was carefully calculated for a particular audience in a way that assumes a more skewed balance of agency or authority than Gan’s mass action script does. See Raunig, *Art and Revolution*: 158-159. See also Devin Fore’s introduction to Sergei Tret’iakov, “The Theater of Attractions,” trans. Kristin Romberg, *October* 118 (fall 2006): 19-26.

prompts. These might be conceptualized as a frame not in the sense of a bounding device, but rather in the sense of an armature, or framework. It was a network for distributing identical agitational stimuli. The framework structure was even better exemplified in the Day of Soviet Propaganda, in which a standardized set of agitational devices—fliers, films, and gramophone recordings—were to be distributed to an unspecified number of locations. Theaters would all perform the same plays and readings, and local choirs would perform the same arrangements.<sup>188</sup> “Agitator-organizers” from various trade unions, Proletkul’t, the Communist Union of Youth, etc., were to be sent out from the regional centers into the countryside in an effort to fully incorporate “every corner” of the Republic.<sup>189</sup> The importance of network technologies like electricity, radio, and telephones, in this period has been noted by many,<sup>190</sup> and in Gan’s work they are particularly central. A framework model for thinking about Gan’s May Day plan as a tool for inducing mass action, rather than as a traditional script, is both apt and specific to Gan’s historical and personal imagination.

I would like to close this section with another illustrative analogy, one that Gan himself used to explain mass action. In an article of September 1920, Gan defended mass action against those who claimed that it was unrealistic—all words and no facts—by likening it to a trial that had taken place recently in Tver’. *This*, according to Gan, was an

---

<sup>188</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 12, d. 41, l. 3.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> For example, see Maria Gough, “Switched on: Notes on Radio, Automata, and the Bright Red Star,” *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917-1937: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996): 39-55.

example of mass action, an existing *fact* of theater during the transition period.<sup>191</sup>

Although it is not entirely clear from the article, the trial was most likely one of the theatricalized court cases, or agit-trials (*agitsud*), that were a common form of mass pageant at this time.<sup>192</sup> These mock trials seem to uncannily foreshadow the show trials of the late twenties, but they are also still commonly used as a consciousness-raising activity by activists and mainstream nonprofit groups today. In any case, my point here is that Gan saw a formal similarity between mass action and this trial. The latter was an event that explicitly elicited a common predicate, a judgment, from a jury of peers—e.g., “we find the defendant not guilty”—and that predicate had power not only to affect the reality of the life of the person on trial, but also to set a precedent—a new norm—for future cases.

### STYLE IS CLASS

If there is another illustration for me which, like the comparison of the cart and dirigible, has hovered behind my understanding of Gan’s constructivism, it is the stories of the anarchist requisitioning of property that occurred in 1918. I do not have a detailed firsthand description of Gan’s experience in this, nor Aleksei Morozov’s, but there is an account of the anarchist requisitioning of Ivan Morozov’s house that I would like to quote at length. The account is obviously from a point of view radically opposed to Gan’s, which in some ways makes it all the more affecting:

---

<sup>191</sup> Alekso [Gan], “Obzor faktov,” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 3-4; and Gan, “Bor’ba za ‘massovoe deistvo’”: 75-76.

<sup>192</sup> See Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000): 51-80.

Some of the more violent members of the Moscow branch [of anarchists], a band of deserters, malcontents, drunkards, and drug addicts, had appropriated the Merchants' Club as their sanctum without interference from the authorities, and their principal activity was occupying the mansions of the city's wealthiest citizens. Ivan Morozov's home, one of the most imposing in Moscow, was a natural target. One night they burst into the darkened premises and took over, spreading into every room like nomads in a tent, sleeping amidst the Cézannes and Gaughins, drinking and gambling in the marble salon surrounded by the infatuated nymphs.

Morozov, once so proud and sure of his role, was confronted by a ragged, threatening mob which despised his skills and mocked his accomplishments. That evening he sought refuge with friends for himself and his family. He had not been injured, but he had been dispossessed, severed finally and irrevocably from the private world of privilege and certainty which had shaped his values. Shchukin dated his friend's physical and psychological decline from that moment.<sup>193</sup>

Part of what makes this account powerful for me is the way that it describes an experience of one reality crumbling and of being suddenly left behind in the ongoing march of history. In this sudden reversal of fortunes, the normative support for Morozov's worldview dissolves, as does Morozov's sense of self. What makes this account important to understanding mass action, and by extension constructivism, is that one can imagine there being a single moment—the moment of “dispossession”—when Morozov suddenly realizes that he no longer owns his property and the anarchists realize that they do. In that moment, the reality of the situation instantly transforms, all because of a simultaneous collective acknowledgement that *their minds have changed*.

The fantasy behind the dirigible is that its ability to float is already there. The possibility exists already in nature, and all it takes is the insertion of that edge, that one organizing action, to transform potential into a physical reality. I would propose that the

---

<sup>193</sup> Keen, *All the Empty Palaces*: 255. Keen does not note a source for this story. Ivan Shchukin was an important collector of French avant-garde painting.

idea behind mass action was similar.<sup>194</sup> Whether one calls it common sense or general intellect or whatever else, the idea is that there is a script that everyone knows and performs to some extent in each one of his or her actions. Those actions, in turn, bump up against and make small deviations in entrenched cerebral ruts. This is happening all the time. As Gan wrote, “we are already living with and in mass action. We must take up the task of organizing it.” One only has to liquidate the routine simultaneously and coordinate the bump with the cerebral rut for subjective deviation to be transformed into a new normative reality. Without this organization, Gan continued, “‘mass action’ will be as ineffective as the mass chaos in which people lived up through [the era of] the capitalist system.”<sup>195</sup>

I intend the relationship between the organization of physical matter and consciousness to be in part one of analogy—it was a preference in thinking that structured the psychic solution to any number of problems. I also mean to suggest that Gan’s socialist aesthetics relied on the material and the intellectual being interrelated,

---

<sup>194</sup> As a defense against the potential charge that my dirigible illustration is a nonexistent fantasy that is not catching on, I would like to point out that thinking in thermodynamic terms had influential adherents during the period, as did the conflation of physical and social processes. In her overview of the influence of the ideas of Aleksandr Bogdanov and the Latvian scientist Wilhelm Ostwald on the artists of the Russian avant-garde, Charlotte Douglas describes both scientists as believing in a science that would apply the same energetic principles and methods to all spheres, from physics to psychology and sociology. See Charlotte Douglas, “Energetic Abstraction: Ostwald, Bogdanov, and Russian Post-Revolutionary Art,” *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 76-94.

<sup>195</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Massovoe deistvo. Sostiazanie i bor’ba,” *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 3. [Массовое действо. / Живя уже с ним и в нем—мы ставим перед собой задачу: об его организации. / ...до тех пор «Массовое действо» будет бездейственным и ничем не станет отличаться от массового хаоса, в котором жили люди включительно до капиталистического строя.]

which is only to say, as Gan often did, that his aesthetics were materialist and thus founded on the idea that material conditions and consciousness are continually producing each other. By 1922, he had coined the term “intellectual-material production” to describe the simultaneous co-production of the material world and consciousness in his activities.<sup>196</sup> Yet, in addition to these two modes of relating the physical and the intellectual, I also mean to suggest that an integral component of Gan’s aesthetic project was social. His material-intellectual production was subject to the broader contextual constraints of gravity and mud, but it was also entangled in a no less constraining web of socially constituted norms. Gan’s conscious effort to make his projects work within both of these sets of constraints—“testing the truth of his thinking in practice,” as it were—is what made Gan’s a socialist aesthetics, a materialist practice, and a mode appropriate to proletarian culture. In this sense, this chapter is simply a long way of saying what Walter Benjamin expressed much too tersely: “Communism responds by politicizing art.”<sup>197</sup>

This analysis of Gan’s pre-constructivist activities has been an effort to demonstrate that this project of politicizing art involved more formal complexity than the

---

<sup>196</sup> He began by using the term “intellectual production” in the summer of 1920 and introduced “intellectual-material production” in 1922. For examples of the first, see A. G., “Chetyre serii (k izdaniiu Khudozhestvenno-Agitatsionnoi literatury),” *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn’* 4/5 (May-October 1920): 19-20; and Gan, “‘Massovoe deistvo.’ Sostiazanie I bor’ba”: 2-3. He uses the second in Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver’: Tverskoe izdatel’stvo, 1922): 15; Aleksei Gan, “Kommunisticheskii gorod (V planovykh razrabotkakh konstruktivistov),” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 40 (16-31 May 1922): 5-6; Aleksei Gan, “K nashei konferentsii,” *Ermitazh* 15 (22-28 August 1922): 3; and Gan, “Bor’ba za massovoe deistvo”: 49-80. Also see Zhemchuzhnyi’s review of Gan’s *Constructivism*, in which he associates the phrase heavily with Gan: Vit. Zhemchuzhnyi, “Aleksei Gan: ‘Konstruktivizm,’” *Zrelishcha* 9 (24-30 October 1922): 8.

<sup>197</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 242.

phrase initially suggests. A comment made by Trotsky in the early twenties attempted to do the same. Responding to the Kuznitsa poets' slogan, "style is class," Trotsky commented that such a slogan should not be taken literally. A proletarian style is not simply the style of work that happened to be produced by a proletarian subject. The processes by which a class comes to a style are much more complex. Yes, he wrote, "'style is class,' but not just in art, . . . above all in politics. Politics is the only field in which the proletariat has really created its own style."<sup>198</sup> He goes on to talk about how that style—that political style—developed through economic strikes, through the struggle for the right to organize, through the utopian socialist schools, participation in bourgeois revolutions, and finally through the October Revolution. If the proletariat had a style to call its own, these were the experiences that shaped it and the forms in which it had expressed itself.

Historically, there was obviously a political dimension to Gan's activity in amateur theater and mass action. He organized his Food Workers group within a trade union as a consciousness raising activity. The group participated in the October coup, and then in the anarchist Federation, before Gan finally joined the Communist Party and began working on mass festivals. But in addition to these events and affiliations, Gan's activity in theater and mass action also had a political dimension that I would like to describe as formal. From the Revolution, to the requisitioning of the Morozov mansion, to the walkout at the Congress on Worker-Peasant Theater, many crucial events in his story involved the dynamics of collective politics. They involved transformations in political reality that hinged on shifting a critical mass, or simply actualizing an existing

---

<sup>198</sup> Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*: 170. I have altered the translation slightly.

one. Experimenting in the ways that public opinion and mass movement function might be said to be Gan's primary concern during this period, as well as the task around which mass action's formal functionality was designed. Trotsky's list of the events that had shaped proletarian style cannot help but remind us of the structure of Gan's May Day mass action, with its progression through the events of the three Internationals. Although I described this element as thematic, it can also be seen as a formal device that helped to place the contemporary moment's seeming chaos within a meaningful pattern of events. The structure of repetition allowed for identification and development of the salient characteristics of the political style that Trotsky suggested best characterized proletarian style as a whole. Indeed, an article hyping the May Day mass action of 1920 in the press asserted that the theme was appropriate because the Internationals were themselves the first examples of the mass action form.<sup>199</sup>

Much of my argument in this chapter has depended on explicating revaluations of terms: art and *tvorchestvo*, professional and *samodeiatel'nyi* theater, productive and virtuosic, work and play. Each of these terminological inversions functioned to displace the centrality of the object in order to focus attention onto what could no longer be called the audience or the viewer, but perhaps the mass participant-producer-consumer-object (constituent?) of culture. I will argue that this focus continued to inform Gan's production even after he began to construct material objects. In the same article in which Gan talked about labor and play, first published in September 1920, Gan continued the trend toward rhetorical inversion at the same time that he reinserted the object back into the mix. Pulling the classic materialist move of turning idealism on its head, he asked his reader to

---

<sup>199</sup> "Plan prazdnestva 1go maia": 5.

understand that art objects cannot be taken as things that have value in and of themselves, but rather as “elements that cement the relations of people in a larger process of social [obshchestvennogo] production.” They are “a means of organization.”<sup>200</sup>

Having finally arrived at the end to which my argument aspired, I should point out how far it has strayed from my initial fantasy. By suggesting that mass action was formally structured by Gan’s experiences with collective politics such as strikes, walk-outs, and requisitioning property, I have defined organization somewhat simply, as the creation of a majority. When I initially proposed that a fantasy about organization lay behind constructivism, however, I meant to suggest something more like a Fourierist conception of a harmonious coordination of difference. This is something more complex than majority, but also something else. As Bogdanov noted, also in 1920, “majority and the state of being organized are not only not the same thing, but usually turn out to be opposing sides.”<sup>201</sup> I have allowed myself to repeatedly conflate them largely because I believe that Gan did too.

## PERSPECTIVE

Ironically, or perhaps predictably and understandably, it was precisely the area that Gan claimed as his specialty—public opinion—that presented him the biggest challenge. As he continued his campaign for mass action in the summer of 1920, Gan gradually began to retool his strategies in response to his experiences, increasingly focusing on gradual

---

<sup>200</sup> Gan, “Nasha bor’ba”: 1-2. [...как элементы цементирующие отношения людей в процессе общественного производства...]

<sup>201</sup> Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Filosofia zhivogo opyta: populiarnye ocherki* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1920): 222.

persuasion and the multiplication of his viewpoint through the mediation of mass-media devices. In July and August, he and the Commfaction set a strategy for promoting mass action within both the general public and governing organizations like TEO.<sup>202</sup> They requested their own print organ in order to distribute educational texts, both ideological and practical, to regional branches of worker-peasant theater. When the request was denied, the group decided to produce the texts on a typewriter and distribute them manually.<sup>203</sup> Gan also began working with TEO's centrist organ, *Theater Bulletin*.<sup>204</sup> He ran for the position of editor, losing to V. V. Tikhonovich, three to five,<sup>205</sup> but then took advantage of Tikhonovich's vacation in mid August to publish an issue almost entirely composed of articles in which he told his side of every possible story.<sup>206</sup> The next two issues of *Theater Bulletin* contain an important set of debates between Gan and Tikhonovich, in which Tikhonovich emphasized that Gan's positions were not

---

<sup>202</sup> Gan, "Bor'ba za 'massovoe deistvo'": 65; and GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95.

<sup>203</sup> Report of Gan's speech published in "III-ia sessiia Vserossiskogo Soveta Raboche-Krest'ianskogo teatra (9-11 August 1920)": 10; and Gan, "Bor'ba za 'massovoe deistvo'": 65.

<sup>204</sup> GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 24 and GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 587, l. 10.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> Gan was made deputy editor while Tikhonovich was away (GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 27). The issue of *Vestnik teatra* was published on 24 August 1920. Gan's name is conspicuously listed as editor in this issue, but I may be overstating the case when I suggest that he hijacked the paper. Tikhonovich was back from his leave by 23 August, and the first article in Gan's issue was by Tikhonovich. My best guess is that Gan prepared the issue in Tikhonovich's absence and that it was too late to prepare another before the publication date. The other possibility is that the editors of *Theater Bulletin* wanted Gan to hang himself by producing a public statement that they could then publicly contest.

representative of the organization as a whole.<sup>207</sup> He framed Gan's position against continuity with past culture as extreme, akin to burning books, and accused Gan of being out on his own limb, "a chief without an army."<sup>208</sup>

Tikhonovich's assessment has to be taken with a grain of political salt, as does the assertion in secondary scholarship that Gan was dismissed from his post at TEO late in 1920 because of his extreme leftist positions.<sup>209</sup> The second half of 1920 did see a major reorganization of TEO,<sup>210</sup> as well as a very public negative appraisal of the "ultrarevolutionary" positions of Proletkul't.<sup>211</sup> Gan was not a member of Proletkul't, however; and although he usually represented a far-left position in the polemical debates of those months and was marginalized by the *Theater Bulletin* editors, I have not seen evidence of his dismissal from TEO. In fact, he was the first speaker at the first meeting, on 3 December, of the newly reorganized TEO Subsection of Theory and Experience/Experiment (*Opyta*).<sup>212</sup> Within TEO's new structure of eleven subsections, this was the central coordinating subsection, and the published statements of its aims

---

<sup>207</sup> *Vestnik teatra* 67 and 68 (7 September and 21-26 September 1920). Two of the articles were discussed explicitly as paired responses in an editorial meeting of 30 August 1920 (GARF 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 29).

<sup>208</sup> V. V. Tikhonovich, "Golaia zemlia. T. Gan vmesto RKP," *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 2-3.

<sup>209</sup> Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant Garde*: 214-215; Owen Smith, Gan biography in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990): 263.

<sup>210</sup> The plan for reorganization had been in process for months. The Section of Worker-Peasant Theater was asked for their input at a meeting in late July at which Gan was in attendance. GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 21 and GARF f. 2306, op. 24, d. 587, l. 5.

<sup>211</sup> Titova, *Tvorcheskii teatr i teatral'nyi konstruktivizm*: 24.

<sup>212</sup> "Novaia struktura TEO," *Vestnik teatra* 76-77 (14 December 1920): 20-22. Also see "Podotdel' teorii i opyta," *Vestnik teatra* 78-79 (4 January 1921): 22.

continue to sound very much like Gan's doing until at least 8 February 1921. For whatever reason, he seems to have stopped working within TEO around that time.<sup>213</sup> A significant part of the polemics and reorganization in the fall of 1920 had to do with the imminent end of the Civil War and the decline of the worker-peasant theater movement more generally.<sup>214</sup> The press repeatedly refers to the fact that the best theater talents were being attracted to professional theaters because of better rations and wages,<sup>215</sup> and one might guess that the revolutionary fervor that drove the initial flowering of the movement was wearing thin after three years.

This is not to say that Gan's understanding of his situation was not changing. An unpublished report on the Commfaction, probably written by Gan in August or September of 1920, reveals a new awareness of his position as an embattled one. He states rather contritely that the group "had been compelled to settle accounts with themselves,"<sup>216</sup> and then went on to draw up two lists detailing the forces lined up against them, categorizing them militaristically into two fronts. The "inner front" had to do with forces within the theater establishment, and the "outer front" had to do with everyone else.<sup>217</sup> He wrote:

---

<sup>213</sup> The last time that Gan is mentioned in TEO's *Theater Bulletin* is 8 February 1921. An ambiguous letter to Meierkhold of 11 February 1921 suggests that Gan was still involved in organizing circuses at that date (RGALI f. 998 op. 1, d. 1333, l. 1), but I have seen no evidence of his work in TEO beyond mid February.

<sup>214</sup> Mally, *Culture of the Future*: 194.

<sup>215</sup> V. V. Tikhonovich, *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 1.

<sup>216</sup> GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95. [Мы заставили с собой считаться.]

<sup>217</sup> Gan repeats this lingo several times in published and unpublished documents during the summer of 1920. For example, he uses it in his keynote speech at the Third Session of

Before us is THE INNER FRONT.  
 Its strengths: Existing professional theaters [*prof.-teatry*]  
 High level of theatrical culture  
 Existence of entire network of schools and studios  
 Reptilian servility of the petty bourgeois set  
 State Apparatus TEO's universal support of the use of all these  
 weapons by the army that is against us.

#### THE OUTER FRONT

Its strengths: Indifference of the Party and the Soviet press  
 Folksy [*narodnicheskie*] tendencies of the people who are involved  
 in worker-peasant theater  
 Ignorance and illiteracy.<sup>218</sup>

The moments of hyperbole in what would seem to be a hum-drum list reveal a growing consciousness of the chasm between his reality and his ambitions. His experience at the Congress on Worker-Peasant Theater and the failure of the May Day mass action of 1920 had forced him to come up against the fact that there was no one script and no common “we,” at least not yet. The fact that Gan maintained faith that these things were achievable and desirable is one of the deep and unresolvable issues with Gan's project.

---

the National Soviet of Worker-Peasant Theater, one of the Sessions planned as a follow-up to the Congress. It took place 9-11 August and was reported later in the issue of *Theater Bulletin* that Gan edited: *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 6-9. He also defends it in Gan, “O pozitsiakh vnutrennego fronta RKT”: 9. The fact that the “inner front/outer front” terminology was Gan's invention is made clear in article by V. V. Tikhonovich, in which he mercilessly ridicules Gan for it: V. V. Tikhonovich, “Golaia zemlia”: 2-3.

<sup>218</sup> The last line is written in by hand. GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 94. Although Gan's name is not attached to the document, I assume that he was the author based on the fact that part of the text appears verbatim in an article published under his name (Gan, “Massovoe deistvo. Sostiazanie I bor'ba”: 2-3), and because the handwritten corrections on the typed text closely matches Gan's handwriting. [Перед нами - ВНЕШНИЙ ФРОНТ. / Его силы: Существующие проф.-театры. / Высокая театральная культура / существование целой сети школ и студий / Присмыкание мелко-буржуазной своры / Всемерная поддержка всех этих родов оружия противной нам армии со стороны Государственного Аппарате ТЕО. / Внутренний фронт / Его силы: индифертизм партии и советской прессы. / Народнические тенденции в среде деятелей по рабоче-крестьянскому театру. / Невежество и безграмотность]

Gan's report goes on to list the Commfaction's positions, achievements, and failures, along with specific strategies for the future. He talks about the need to revive the Section of Mass Performances and Spectacles, but he also works out specific strategies to garner support for such activities in more gradual ways by infiltrating organizations on both "fronts." The Commfaction planned to conduct courses to train communist agitators to go to provincial locations and build the worker-peasant theater network there.<sup>219</sup> In Moscow, they had apparently already made inroads in "penetrating" Sverdlov University, which was one of the first schools for training party cadres, and in developing friendly relations with the "Commission of Workers in the Artistic Sector."<sup>220</sup> They also succeeded in setting up an office within IZO called the Subsection of Artistic Agitation, of which Gan served as director.<sup>221</sup>

In addition to this effort to distribute actual Commfaction representatives in other organizations, the report also focused on the production of printed literature to serve as vehicles for spreading their ideas. The rejection of their request for their own newspaper and the subsequent antagonism of the editors of *Theater Bulletin* had been setbacks, but they had access to a couple of smaller papers: *Wall-News* (Stengaz)—which may have been a wall newspaper rather than a print paper—and *Art Life* (Khudozhestvennaia

---

<sup>219</sup> Gan admits that this project was necessitated by the fact that the provincial participants of the Congress had not left their addresses. GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95.

<sup>220</sup> The Commission of Workers in the Artistic Sector (*Komitet Rabotnikov v Khudozhestvennom Sektore*) probably refers to the Artistic Section of Narkompros.

<sup>221</sup> GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108. I will discuss this position further in chapter 2. That Gan considered this office to be a branch of worker-peasant theater within IZO is suggested by the Commfaction report when it lists "The Sector of Worker-Peasant Theater IZO (the Subsection of Artistic-Agitation)," suggesting that they were the same thing. GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95.

zhizn’).<sup>222</sup> They were also producing a series of brochures, an “agitational literature about art,” which would educate the masses to understand art of the past, present, and future from a materialist perspective.

I have not seen any of these brochures—it is not entirely clear that they were ever produced<sup>223</sup>—but Gan’s proposal for the project was printed in *Art Life* and gives a fairly detailed account of their themes.<sup>224</sup> The proposed topics explained materialist aesthetics and the history of recent trends in art, critically evaluated the “mysticism and metaphysics” of idealist aesthetics, explicated how recent trends in painting became gradually more materialist despite themselves, and so on. They seem designed to provide the general public with a crash course in everything that Gan knew, and thereby to prepare the ground for the reception of the art forms that Gan deemed relevant. Thus, the brochures might be called agitational, but they were also designed to “position” the

---

<sup>222</sup> Gan states as one of their achievements that they had “won printing capability” (Мы получили возможность печати.) and then specifically lists *Stengaz* and *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn’*. GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95. Aleksandr Lavrentiev has suggested that the stengaz was not a wall newspaper, but a low-distribution printed paper called *Stengaz* (Aleksandr Lavrentiev, “Zagadki Alekseia Gana,” *Da* 2-3 [1995]: 3). Without any further evidence that there was a print version, it seems more likely to me that it was a wall newspaper, a form in which Gan was particularly interested.

<sup>223</sup> The Commission report states that they had created 57 brochures without specifying their subject matter (GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95). They could plausibly have been part of the project for agitational literature about art, which was to have 67 brochures.

<sup>224</sup> A. G., “Chetyre serii (k izdaniiu Khudozhestvenno-Agitatsionnoi literatury)”: 19-20. I assume that the “A. G.” who signs this article is Aleksei Gan based on the facts that the article includes mention of many of the same themes that appear in Gan’s *Constructivism* and lays out a plan for art agitation during a time when Gan headed the Subsection of Art Agitation. We also know that Gan had some involvement in editing or producing the paper in which it appeared (GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, l. 205; GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95).

masses to see things Gan's way. In short, Gan probably realized that before attempting to organize another material-intellectual revolutionary leap, he needed to change the script.

Around this same time—four months after the May Day failure and three before the founding of the First Working Group of Constructivists—Gan reflected on a more gradualist approach, and a more directed one, in terms that should now be quite familiar:

Proletarian theater...is direct and unmediated *samodeiatel'nosti*. It has no trumped-up repertory or techniques of expression. It finds both of these in practice, in action.

Our transitional period emerged and progresses according to a plan [or schema, *planu*]. One must know this general plan in order to grasp revolutionary reality. Observing reality after having assimilated this plan, the *samodeiatel'yi* collective of proletarian theater grasps it in action and laboriously engraves it on the thick layer of everyday life [*byt'*] that it touches...Looking ahead, obstinacy [*uporstvo*] gradually falls away. The schema begins to carry less charge, and movement that felt like a struggle crosses over into the movement of jubilation.<sup>225</sup>

Change might not come like a lightning bolt, but it might come through a reiterative campaign. Each time around the grooves of the future would be a little deeper, tracing their contours would be a bit easier, the motion a bit more natural, until finally the future would feel buoyant and effortless—jubilant.

The idea of a “schema” or “plan” seems like a new component, as well as a somewhat ominous one. He also obviously found this a sticky point, stumbling on it in a speech later that year, on 20 December. There he stated that “communism provides us

---

<sup>225</sup> I have altered the paragraph breaks. Gan, “Massovoe deistvo. Sostiazanie I bor'ba”: 3. [Пролетарский театр—театр переходного периода и безусловной и прямой самодеятельности. / У него нет вдохновенно-сфабрикованного репертуара, нет техники выражения. / И первое и второе он приобретает в практике, в действии. / Наше переходное время возникло и движется по плану. / Чтобы интерпретировать революционную действительность необходимо знать этот общий план. / Усвоив его и наблюдая за действительностью—самодеятельный коллектив Пролетарского театра—поймет в действии, с каким трудом врезается он в толщу тронутого быта.../ Впереди же его постепенное падение упорства. / План укладывается с меньшим напряжением и движение борьбы переходит в движение ликования.]

with this harmonious [*stroinyi*] plan, which we must realize in life, and which could be realized through coercion entirely. It [communism] doesn't like this coercion, but all the same, that's what's happening now."<sup>226</sup> There is a contradiction here already between spontaneous self-organization and the implementation of a readymade plan. Gan continues in the same speech by trying to define the problem as a temporary one stemming from class differences. For example,

When you ask the *intelligent* what communism is, he narrates an entire picture for you, paints you complete oil-on-canvas seascapes; but if you ask us, the proletarians, what communism is, we answer...that it's the Cheka [*Chrezvychainaia Komissiia*], that it's labor cards, and so on and so forth.<sup>227</sup>

One group only saw a grand and ideologically organized plan, the other only saw the way the plan impacted their everyday life. These differing perspectives made the organization of mass action more complicated.

He continued by suggesting that understanding these differing perspectives and locating the specific places—even physical places—where they are formed was the role of mass action. The transcript reads,

We must now make sense of and consider these perspectives toward which we are moving. We must consider where the actual organization of life takes place, what

---

<sup>226</sup> This statement follows his criticism of Evreinov's *Storming of the Winter Palace*, which is where the theme of coercion comes from. As noted earlier, Gan criticized it for the authoritarian direction given the mass participants. RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 15a, l. 17. [Коммунизм же дает нам стройный план, который мы должны проводить в жизнь и который может целиком проводиться рядом принуждений. Он не терпит этого принуждения, но все-таки в данный момент он такой.]

<sup>227</sup> Labor cards were somewhat like internal passports. They were required government documents that recorded your work history and specified in which cities one had permission to work. RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 15a, l. 17. [Когда интеллигента спросить, что такое коммунизм, то он расскажет вам целую картину, он нарисует вам целые масляные моря, а если вы спросите нас, пролетариев, что такое коммунизм, то мы ответим вам, мы говорим, что это Чрезвычайная Комиссия, что это карточек трудовые и т.д. и т.д.]

within it must be concretized. That is the task of mass action. Now conditions are terrible. But in three years much has already changed. We already have begun to live like the intelligentsia used to live before the revolution. We have already crossed from abasement to joy, and the intelligentsia has gone the other way, from joy to abasement.<sup>228</sup>

Through these inversions of experience, the difference in perspective deriving from varying class backgrounds was narrowing. It would narrow further, Gan went on to suggest, now that the *intelligent* can “walk around proudly,” having “to pull his own groceries and other things around on a sled.”<sup>229</sup> Their job, as cultural workers and organizers of mass action, was to figure out how to work with these differing perspectives and close the gap between them. After all, these sorts of changes were possible. They had already to some extent happened, and perhaps especially for Gan. As Gan wrapped up his speech, the transcript records a few comments shouted out from three anonymous audience members which are both funny and poignant: The first shouts, “And who’s going to pull the sleds?” The next answers him, “The defeated class of the bourgeoisie.” The last is directed at Gan, “And you, you’re riding around in automobiles!”<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.* [Но мы должны теперь осмысливать, рассматривать те перспективы, к которым мы идем. Мы должны рассмотреть, где действительная организация жизни, что внутри чего должно цементироваться. Вот основная задача массового действия. Теперь условия ужасны. Но за 3 года революции многое уже изменилось. Мы начинаем жить, как раньше до революции жила интеллигенция. Мы перешли уже от унижения к радости, а интеллигенция наоборот перешла от радости к унижению.]

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* [он теперь будет гордо шагать, когда ему придется возить на салазках самому продукты и всякое другое.]

<sup>230</sup> RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 15a, l. 18. [Голос из публики: «А кто это салазках возит». Другой голос: «Разбитый класс буржуазии.» Голос третий: «А вы на автомобилях»]

## CHAPTER 2

**Gan's Constructivism, 1921:  
The First Working Group of Constructivists**

Hegel and Kant were the last who, to put it bluntly, were able to write major aesthetics without understanding anything about art.  
- Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970<sup>1</sup>

I'm sick of Gan. He doesn't know anything about art.  
- Aleksandr Rodchenko, January 1919<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will focus on the crystalization of constructivism as a movement and an aesthetic theory in the winter and spring of 1920-1921. This will involve examining Gan's role in the formation of the First Working Group of Constructivists and rehashing the triad of formal constructivist "disciplines"—construction (*konstruktsiia*), *faktura*, and tectonics (*tektonika*)—that have become the standard fare in studies of the movement with particular attention to Gan's point of view. For me to talk about Gan's constructivism as an aesthetics at all is to invite controversy. From the beginning, and certainly since, Gan has been known as a most militant *protivnik iskusstva*, an adversary of art as a general category. He was caricatured as such by his contemporaries in texts of the period, and by all accounts, he played the part well, shooting down art's interests

---

<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 334.

<sup>2</sup> Rodchenko's comment was reported by Stepanova in her diary. Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994): 66. [Ган мне опротивел, в искусстве он ничего не понимает.]

whenever possible.<sup>3</sup> There were good reasons why his artist colleagues often found themselves “sick of Gan.” This reputation has followed him in art-historical portrayals, particularly those basing their knowledge on the abbreviated excerpts of Gan’s most famous text, the book *Constructivism* (1922), that were translated into English early on.<sup>4</sup> It is telling that the most often cited line from that book is the one with which it opens: “We declare uncompromising war on art!”<sup>5</sup> This reputation is not completely undeserved, and I can empathize with the impulse to distance the movement from the more abrasive moments of Gan’s rhetoric in an effort to recuperate the formal elegance of the achievements of artists like Karl Ioganson, Liubov’ Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova.<sup>6</sup> Yet this dismissal has also had its price, not only denying Gan credit

---

<sup>3</sup> Viktor Pertsov’s history of the Left Front of the Arts of 1925 summarized a general impression expressed broadly in the press when it characterized Gan’s position as unnuanced in its opposition to art. Viktor Pertsov, *Reviziia levogo fronta v sovremennom russkom iskusstve* (Moscow: Vserossiskii Proletkul’t, 1925): 56-58.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpts were translated in Camilla Gray’s *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962): 284-287; and in John Bowlt’s anthology, *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1988): 214-225. More recently a problematic but nonetheless full translation of the text was published in *Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1930: The G. Costakis Collection*, Anna Kaphetse, ed. (Athens: Ministry of Culture, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, and European Cultural Center of Delphi, 1995): 682-695.

<sup>5</sup> Gan reproduces variations on this quote from the “Program of the First Working Group of Constructivists” three times within the text. Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver’: Tverskoe izdatel’stvo, 1922): 3, 21, 70. [Конструктивизм объявляет непримиримую войну искусству!]

<sup>6</sup> The tendency to distance the movement from Gan and his book appears to have originated with John Bowlt’s anthology, *Russian Art of the Avant Garde*: 214-225. Bowlt’s evaluation—that Gan “was disdained by many contemporary constructivists”—is a reasonable statement, but it has been too readily reduced and taken as the final word on the matter. For example, the recent textbook *Art Since 1900*, which otherwise does an excellent job of discussing Russian constructivism, is utterly disdainful of Gan, without, apparently, knowing much about him. See Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism*,

for the central role that he played in the movement, but also robbing constructivism of its most important contributions to modernism.

My first assumption in what follows is that there is obviously something too simplistic about a literal interpretation of Gan's rejection of art. Even in the mid twenties, when Gan's reputation as anti-art ideologue was at its most one-dimensional, it was clear that his claims in some ways contradicted his intentions. As one commentator pointed out in 1923, when Gan says that "the constructivists rebelled against aesthetics from the first day of their existence,"...he probably means bourgeois aesthetics and its art...It is completely clear that the constructivists rebel against aesthetics in the name of a new aesthetic."<sup>7</sup> I will take this qualification as a given when I use the words *art* and *aesthetic* here. However prosaic Gan's objects may have been, neither he nor his constructivist colleagues simply gave up artistic practices in toto to pick up a hammer and sickle. They programatically developed a system of specific criteria for thinking about and producing particular sorts of objects. In doing so, they produced some of the most intelligent artworks of the twentieth century. In order to fully appreciate them as such, however,

---

*Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004): 177. Recent, more focused studies of constructivism by Maria Gough and Christina Kiaer both kindly refrain from outright Gan-bashing, and Gough even devotes some time to a serious discussion of his book. But neither study is interested in Gan, rather including him when it is absolutely necessary. Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 66-73; and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005): 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> The author quotes an article published by Gan in an earlier issue of the same paper. N. G. Smirnov, "Konstruktivizm kak epokha v iskusstve," *Zrelishcha* 62 (13-17 November 1923): 4. «конструктивизм с первого дня своего существования восстали против эстетики.»... Цитированный автор, говоря такими словами об искусстве и об эстетике, вероятно представляет себе—буржуазную эстетику и такое же искусство...Совершенно ясно, что против эстетики конструктивисты восстают во имя новой эстетики.]

these works must be understood in more dimensions than the two or three in which we are accustomed to evaluating art, and this is where Gan's thinking becomes crucial.

Gan's version of constructivism is interesting because it represents an aesthetic structured around an understanding of medium that is both material and historical. It simultaneously reaches inward, to resolve the problems internal to the object, and outward, understanding the object's properties as conditional and dependent on ever-shifting economic, social, political, and technological conditions. Explicitly modeled on a Marxist notion of practice, Gan's theory assumes an immanent bond among the material object, its maker, and the surrounding circumstances, so that the act of production does not result in a single product, an object, but rather aims at the simultaneous co-production of all three of those terms. I should admit from the outset that this idea has inherent problems. Nevertheless, the stakes of the project are undeniably high. Developing in parallel inverse to the aesthetics of autonomy then coalescing in Western European art,<sup>8</sup> Gan's constructivism can be said to constitute an embryonic modernist aesthetic of its own, one that I will call an aesthetics of embeddedness.

### **IDEOLOGICAL PROGRAMMING: THE INKHUK SECTION OF ART AGITATION**

Gan's has long been an underdeveloped storyline in the founding of the First Working Group of Constructivists, in part because it did not fully coincide with those of the group's artist members. Here I will attempt to flesh out, to the extent possible, the

---

<sup>8</sup> Here, I am referring to medium specificity, in the sense generally associated with Clement Greenberg, and avant-gardism, as theorized by Peter Bürger.

character of his role within the organizations in which the group formed, the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) and the Visual Arts Section of Narkompros (IZO). Gan joined INKhUK on 5 May 1920, right after the cancellation of his May Day mass action and around the same time that everyone else did.<sup>9</sup> The Institute was intended to serve as something of a think tank for developing a scientific approach to art,<sup>10</sup> and the discussions that took place within its “working groups” have long been key episodes in histories of the Soviet avant-garde.<sup>11</sup> The relevant pre-constructivist discussion groups were, first, Vasiliï Kandinsky’s Section for Monumental Art, and then later in 1920, Rodchenko and Stepanova’s Working Group of Objective Analysis. Although Gan was acquainted with the artists who participated in these groups, he did not initially participate himself. He instead joined INKhUK as part of a commission charged with

---

<sup>9</sup> INKhUK was founded at the same time. S. O. Khan-Magomedov, “INKhUK: vznikovlenie, formirovanie i pervyi period raboty. 1920,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 2 (1981): 339. Although sources are inconsistent with regard to when Gan joined INKhUK, I have no reason to doubt Khan-Magomedov’s early claim that Gan joined on 5 May 1920 on Rodchenko’s recommendation. Khan-Magomedov cites convincing archival evidence, although I have not myself confirmed it and he does not repeat it in his later books. Later works by Aleksandr Lavrentiev and Elena Sidorina place it in the spring and fall of 1921, respectively (Aleksandr Lavrentiev, “Zagadki Alekseia Gana,” *Da* 2-3 [1995]: 3; and Elena Sidorina, *Russkii konstruktivizm: istoki, idei, praktiki* [Moscow: n.p., 1995]: 48). The only primary evidence that I have seen on this question is a “List of Members of INKhUK,” probably from the beginning of 1923, where he is listed as “of the constructivists” (RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 317, l. 73).

<sup>10</sup> The Institute’s charter of 22 May 1920 describes it as a “scientific institution for the theoretical and practical working-out of the problems of art.” It was set up in autonomous and self-formed “working groups” such as the Working Group of Objective Analysis and the Working Group of Constructivists. OR GTG f. 148, op. 1, d. 84. [учреждение научное для теоретической и практической разработки проблем искусства]

<sup>11</sup> See especially Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1983): 83-89; and S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm. Kontseptsiiia formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 2003): 94-109; and Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 32-56.

working out its ideological program.<sup>12</sup> Thus, from the beginning, his role was very different than that of the other founding members of the First Working Group. He was not engaged in hashing out the problems internal to art, but rather in thinking about how art might fit into larger societal programs, values, and demands.

It is unclear what exactly Gan did, if anything, as part of that INKhUK commission, but a general impression of his work can be derived by looking at another position within IZO which Gan held at roughly the same time and about which I can at least offer fragmented clues.<sup>13</sup> According to a document entitled “Instructions for Visitors to IZO,” questions about artistic enlightenment were to be directed to Comrade Gan, Director of the Subsection of Art Agitation (*Zaveduiushchii Podotdela Khudozhestvenno-agitatsionnogo*), in rooms 142 and 143 on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. There were special hours for inquiring about exhibitions and stocking museums (*popolnenie muzeev*), and one could stop by the office to pick up literature any day from noon to 2 pm.<sup>14</sup> Another part of the job seems to have been organizing IZO’s presence in the press. Formal letters attest to his efforts to place stories and announcements of IZO’s activities with press organs such as *Izvestiya* and the state news agency (ROSTA).<sup>15</sup> He also had an

---

<sup>12</sup> Khan-Magomedov, “INKhUK: vzniknovenie, formirovanie i pervyi period raboty. 1920”: 339.

<sup>13</sup> Records of Gan’s holding this position appear from July-September 1920. GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, ll. 36, 77, 182, 189.

<sup>14</sup> GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, l. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Letters to this effect—addressed to editors of *Izvestiia*, Rosta, and *Ekonomiia zhizni*, on IZO letterhead and signed by Gan—are preserved in GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, ll. 44, 58, 59. The file also contains a clipping from *Izvestiia* which prints the same information about IZO that is also preserved in manuscript form in the same file (GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, ll. 38-39).

editorial or production function in more specialized internal news organs directed towards artists: the local wall newspaper (*stengazeta*) and the Narkompros Artistic Section's print newsletter *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* (Art Life).<sup>16</sup>

Gan's project for an agitational literature about art, which I mentioned toward the end of chapter 1, was likely related to this job. Gan proposed the project in an article in *Art Life* during the same period.<sup>17</sup> While I have no conclusive evidence that any of the brochures were produced, it seems possible that they may have been among the "literature" on offer in the IZO office.<sup>18</sup> The list of proposed titles for the project, which was to be comprised of sixty-seven brochures in four series, included many of the same themes that appear later in *Constructivism*, and the published proposal is helpful as an unusually straightforward surrogate explanation of the way in which Gan imagined both his own job and *Constructivism's*. As Gan explained,

---

<sup>16</sup> *Art Life* was the "bulletin of Narkompros's Artistic Section," which included representatives from IZO, TEO, etc. Gan listed *Stengaz* and *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* as publications over which he had some control in a report probably written in August or September (GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95), and Stepanova mentioned Gan's control of a "stengaz" in a diary entry of November (Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhnet*: 147). Aleksandr Lavrentiev has suggested that the stengaz was not a wall newspaper, but a low-distribution printed paper called *Stengaz* (Lavrentiev, "Zagadki Alekseia Gana": 3). I have not seen a paper copy.

<sup>17</sup> A. G., "Chetyre serii (k izdaniiu Khudozhestvenno-Agitatsionnoi literatury)," *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* 4/5 (May-October 1920): 19-20. I assume that the "A. G." who signed this article is Aleksei Gan. The article includes mention of many of the same themes that appear in his *Constructivism*, and it lays out a plan for art agitation publications during a time when Gan heads the Subsection of Art Agitation. We also know from a note in the Narkompros archive of autumn 1920 that Gan had some involvement in editing or producing the paper in which it appeared. GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, l. 205.

<sup>18</sup> A report of the Commfaction mentions a series of fifty-seven brochures as an existing accomplishment of the Commfaction. GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95.

Three years of persistent work by the IZO Department has made a deep impression and opened up a clear and precise path into the future. The ideological essence of the visual arts is now defined by a shift toward production and is chiefly concerned with destroying the dualistic principle on which intellectual production has been based until now. Initiative groups and advocates of communist work in the visual arts are realizing these intentions; we are rebuilding our studios and schools. The organ of artistic propaganda has the tremendous task of explaining the current shift to the working masses, of introducing and attracting them to this new construction. We need an entire stream of agitational literature about art.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the project was meant to close a gap between the new art and the public's ability to appreciate it by disseminating a basic level of a specific sort of cultural and political literacy. Some of the proposed titles used a historical materialist lens to interpret the art of the past, including the most recent modernist movements like cubism, suprematism, and futurism. The series also contained titles describing art's sociological and political functions within different political systems; for example, there were plans for brochures on "Socialism and Art," "Anarchism and Art," "Bourgeois Art," and so on.<sup>20</sup>

The final series of brochures in the plan moved beyond this task of interpreting the past in order to begin developing a new socialist aesthetic for the future. According to Gan, there had been a period when the Marxist response to art was merely defensive and

---

<sup>19</sup> А. Г., "Четыре серии": 19-20. [Три года упорной работы, которая проделана Отделом ИЗО, оставила глубокий след и открыла ясный и точный путь в будущее. Идеологическая сущность изобразительных искусств определена сдвигом в сторону производственную и озабочена, главным образом, уничтожением того дуалистического начала, из которого исходило интеллектуальное производство до наших дней. Перестраиваются наши мастерские и школы; инициативные группы, сторонники коммунистических задач в изобразительном искусстве реализуют намеченное. Перед органом художественной пропаганды встает грандиозная задача разъяснить трудящимся массам настоящий сдвиг, ввести и вовлечь их в это новое строительство. Необходим целый поток агитационной литературы по искусству.]

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

settled for critically unmasking art as a manifestation of the ideology of the dominant class. At the present time, however,

this polemical mode [*storona*] has already passed...Now it is possible to develop a socialist aesthetic beyond the confines of arguments about historical materialism, to add an independent, rather than subordinate, significance to art at the same time that historical materialism's premises are maintained.<sup>21</sup>

Note that at this early, rather earnest moment, Gan clearly stated his aim of developing a new aesthetics, even used the word *estetika*. Moreover, this aesthetic would not be confined to a supporting role, the mere mobilization of a stable category called art in service to the economic and political. Instead, it would to be an integral component of the evolving socialist society, with its own dynamic and power. As initial attempts to flesh out this new aesthetic's contours, the plan proposed titles like "Science, Technology, and Art," "*Faktura*," and "Tectonic Style,"<sup>22</sup> all topics that later figure prominently in *Constructivism*.

Even in the fragmented sketch that I have been able to provide here, one can see how Gan's role within IZO had points of intersection with the strategies that he was developing to promote the Commfaction's agenda during the same period. Recall from chapter 1 that after the failure of the May Day mass action of 1920, Gan began to change his approach in accordance with the realization that the masses did not necessarily possess a latent unified will. He began to redirect his agitational energy away from singular dramatic and grandiose efforts like mass action and toward gradual and targeted

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 20. [Эта полемическая сторона уже прошла...и теперь открывается возможность развивать социалистическую эстетику за пределами споров об историческом материализме, сохраняя его предпосылки и придавая искусству самостоятельное, а не подчиненное значение.]

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

modes of persuasion that involved infiltrating organizations and distributing information in pamphlets and newspapers. This shift in strategy corresponded to a shift in his self-conception as a “constructor of mass action.” As he wrote in August of 1920,

It is necessary, above all, to cultivate one’s inner communist, not only the fervid and active advocate of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but also the communist who *would purify himself of all hope of supernatural powers and instead objectively assimilate the plan and forms of future social production.* Only after he examines himself can he approach the...production of new forms.<sup>23</sup>

Gan’s call for self-examination and suppression of the ego is consistent with the loss of personal integrity, in the most literal sense, that was inherent in his new agitational strategy, which involved framing information in different ways in dependence on the perspective of one or another audience. As he continues on in the same text,

In the struggle for these forms of production of the intellectual component of communism, we have *two* fronts: the inner and the outer. The struggle must be conducted on both simultaneously. We must enlighten (educate) our party comrades, who are for the most part in this way no different than the intelligentsia—that is, atavistically oriented—and then also agitate the proletariat, in the broadest sense of the word, which has already been partially contaminated with the harmful decadent spirit of the intelligentsia.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Massovoe deistvo. Sostiazanie i bor’ba,” *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 2-3. [Необходимо, прежде всего в себе воспитать коммуниста, т.е. не только горячего и активного сторонника диктатуры пролетариата, но коммуниста, который бы предметно усвоил себе план и формы будущего общественного производства и очистил себя от всяких надежд на сверх-естественные силы. Только после того как он проверит себя—ему следует ступить в...производство новых форм.]

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*. [В борьбе за эти формы интеллектуального производства коммунизма у нас два фронта: внешний и внутренний. Борьбу необходимо вести одновременно. Просвещать (образовывать) наших партийных товарищей, в большинстве своем ничем не отличающихся в данной области от интеллигенции в целом, которая атавистически настроена—и агитировать в самом широком смысле этого слова пролетариат, частью уже зараженный тлетворным духом разложившейся интеллигенции.]

In limiting the number of fronts to two, Gan was oversimplifying. Still, his acknowledgement of multiple sites of engagement, dependent on audience, had significant implications for his role. He transformed from a director orchestrating the action of a unified mass into more of an ideological switchboard, considering the existing perspectives of his different audiences and structuring his pitch accordingly.

I bring the Commfaction strategy in at this point in order to suggest that Gan's work within IZO was structured by a similar inner front/outer front strategy, one in which the artists may have constituted the inner front. There is evidence suggesting that Gan considered his position in IZO to be an extension of his Commfaction work. At one point, he referred to "The Sector of Worker-Peasant Theater IZO (the Subsection of Art Agitation)," as if they were two names for the same thing, and he cited the Commfaction's infiltration of IZO as one of their successes.<sup>25</sup> Thus, at the same time that Gan acted to promote IZO's artists in the larger world, he may also have been promoting the Commfaction's positions within IZO's artists. This is, in a sense, what it meant to be a constructor of mass action. As Boris Arvatov would write in 1922, "agitational art is *the art of social influence*."<sup>26</sup>

It is difficult to precisely define the character, origin, and extent of the influence that Gan exerted on this inner front, but comments recorded by Stepanova in her diary suggest that Gan's opinion carried some weight. In an entry of January of 1919, she expressed jealousy of Gan's devotion to Malevich's work, showing that she cared about

---

<sup>25</sup> GARF f. 628, op. 1, d. 4, l. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Boris Arvatov, "Da zdravstvuet raskol! K levoi konferentsii," *Zrelishcha* 2 (5-10 September 1922): 7-8. [АГИТАЦИОННОЕ ИСКУССТВО ЭТО *искусство социального воздействия*.]

Gan's preferences and approval.<sup>27</sup> Another example comes in November of 1920, when she reported Chagall's response to Gan's critical feedback on one of their exhibitions—Gan apparently found it to be too arty. Chagall responded that “it is understandable when Gan scolds those like me; but if he scolds Rodchenko, whose work is entirely scientific and strictly founded, then it means that he absolutely repudiates art, and it is not worthwhile to pay any attention.”<sup>28</sup> Although in literal terms Chagall was dismissing Gan's view, the comment also assumes that they were concerned about it.

For younger artists like Stepanova and Rodchenko, the mere fact of Gan's age (he was four years older than Rodchenko and seven older than Stepanova), experience leading political and military organizations, and connections to more established artists like Tatlin and Malevich may have lent him an aura of authority. In regard to the last, his involvement in Malevich's retrospective in the winter of 1919-1920 probably earned him credibility as someone who could get things done within the current political climate.<sup>29</sup> His influence on the artists may also have stemmed from a certain amount of real power over practical matters like supplies and rationing. He seemed to know a lot of people in branches of the government outside of Narkompros,<sup>30</sup> and we know that he had at least an

---

<sup>27</sup> See Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet*: 63-71.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: 146. [Если Ган ругает таких, как я (Шагал), то жто понятно; но если он ругает Родченко, где все научно и строго обоснованно, то это значит, что он совсем отрицает искусство, и на него не стоит обращать внимания совершенно.]

<sup>29</sup> The extent of Gan's role in this exhibition is not entirely clear. He seems to have written the wall text and may have done more. See A. A. Sidorov, “Khudozhestvennye vystavki,” *Tvorchestvo* 2-4 (February-April 1920): 34.

<sup>30</sup> Galina and Olga Chichigova recount that they first met Gan when they were students of Rodchenko. When they needed to talk to a government official about one of their projects, Rodchenko directed them to Gan, who brought them to meet the person in

administrative role in obtaining postponements of military service for IZO artists.<sup>31</sup> This was a relevant issue for Rodchenko, who applied for and received a postponement in October of 1920, although there is no evidence that Gan was involved.<sup>32</sup> The picture I am piecing together here must be understood as highly speculative and fragmentary, but I would like to allow it to color my interpretation as I proceed on to the story of the formation of the First Working Group of Constructivists.

### THE FIRST WORKING GROUP OF CONSTRUCTIVISTS

In the summer of 1922, Gan published two statements that unequivocally proclaimed that the First Working Group of Constructivists was founded on 13 December 1920 by Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova.<sup>33</sup> The specificity of the date seems targeted to stake a claim, one that no one has been able to definitively corroborate or disprove. The first documented use of the word *constructivism* comes from the transcript of an unofficial organizational meeting attended by Gan, Rodchenko, and

---

question. See the selections from Galina and Olga Chichagova's reminiscences published in *DA!* 2-3 (1995): 47.

<sup>31</sup> GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, ll. 51, 56, 61, 77.

<sup>32</sup> GARF f. 2306, op. 23, d. 108, l. 255. Rodchenko's deferral may have been related to the establishment of VKhUTEMAS around the same time. As Christina Lodder has noted, artists attending educational institutions were exempted from military service. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 112.

<sup>33</sup> Nearly the same statement clarifying the founding of the Group was published in *Ermitazh* 3 (30 May-5 June 1922): 3; and *Ermitazh* 13 (8-13 August, 1922): 3. The former version is reproduced in Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 115.

Stepanova on 23 February 1921.<sup>34</sup> Because Gan did not publish anything during the period between October 1920 and April 1922,<sup>35</sup> it difficult to precisely trace the development of the group outside of the surviving transcripts from the group's meetings.<sup>36</sup> Most probably, the idea for constructivism emerged out of discussions among Gan, Rodchenko, and Stepanova that occurred late in 1920 but did not coalesce into a group and a system until the organization of official meetings at INKhUK. Gan suggested something like this more nuanced narrative on the first two pages of *Constructivism*. There, he did not mention the 13 December founding date at all, instead letting readers make their own inferences from his statement that constructivism arose out of mass action and his dating the quotation "We declare uncompromising war on art!" to 1920.<sup>37</sup>

However Gan chose to tell the story later, when one looks back on the bits and pieces of historical evidence, it seems clear that it was primarily Gan who uncompromisingly declared war on art in 1920. In the fall of that year, he persistently spoke in military terms about the fight on various fronts to eliminate bourgeois theatrical

---

<sup>34</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 116. I have not seen this transcript and Khan-Magomedov does not reproduce it, nor does he specify his source. In an earlier publication, he concluded that the term *constructivist* first appears at the first INKhUK meeting on 18 March. S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyy konstruktivizm* (Moscow: Arkhitektura, 1994): 92-113. Christina Lodder makes the same conclusion. See Christina Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian art: 1914-1937* (London: Pindar, 2005): 501.

<sup>35</sup> His absence from the press for this year and a half may have been related to the problems he had with the editors of *Vestnik teatra* (Theater Bulletin) in the fall of 1920. It also could have been related to paper shortages. See Diane P Koenker, *Republic of Labor: Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005): 110-111.

<sup>36</sup> The transcripts of the INKhUK meetings have been published in Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyy konstruktivizm*: 92-113.

<sup>37</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 3. [Мы объявляем непримиримую войну искусству!]

forms. Rodchenko and Stepanova's experience during the same period was, by contrast, dominated by the discussions of art within Kandinsky's Section for Monumental Art. Although the project of Kandinsky's group was to formulate a new socialist art, their basic procedures assumed the preservation of art to a greater extent than Gan's did. Their meetings were spent analyzing existing artworks in an attempt to isolate universal laws of the relationship of visual forms to human perception and emotion. These laws were to be used in formulating future socialist works of monumental art with a democratic and universal human spirit.<sup>38</sup> Rodchenko and Stepanova eventually tired of this approach, rejecting it in late November in order to organize the more "formalist and materialist" artists at INKhUK into another group, the Working Group of Objective Analysis.<sup>39</sup> Yet, as Chagall's comment, cited earlier, suggests, the artists still identified strongly as artists and had trouble relating to Gan's more extreme anti-art stance as late as early November.

The concerns of Rodchenko and Stepanova's Working Group of Objective Analysis were, just as they claimed, more formalist and materialist than Kandinsky's had been, and their breaking off to form the new group was one sign of an important change afoot in the two artists' attitudes toward art in the final month of 1920. The meetings of the group have been well-narrated and analyzed elsewhere, in the greatest detail by Selim

---

<sup>38</sup> Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 29-32.

<sup>39</sup> The meetings of the Working Group of Objective Analysis began on 23 November and continued on until April of the next year. They initially included Bubnova, Popova, Rodchenko, Sinezubov, and Stepanova, although it would later expand. According to Stepanova, the creation of this group caused Kandinsky, as well as Briusov, to stop coming in to work. Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet*: 148. Also see Khan-Magomedov, "INKhUK: vzniknovenie, formirovanie i pervyi period raboty. 1920": 345.

O. Khan-Magomedov, but also in a helpfully problematized way by Maria Gough.<sup>40</sup> As Gough describes it, the group's project in their initial set of meetings—the ones in November and December of 1920—was to analytically hone in on the specificities of painting as a medium. They aimed to define the “painterliness” (*zhivopisnost'*) of painting, in the same way that the Russian literary formalists attempted to isolate the “literariness” of literature from biographical and psychological factors.<sup>41</sup> They decided that painting's essential elements were “form, color, and material (*faktura*),” whereas figurative representation (*izobrazitel'nost'*) and emotion should be considered supplementary. They went on to discuss how form might possibly be motivated if not by these supplementary factors, and came up with three options: composition, construction, and rhythm.<sup>42</sup> Isolating the difference between the former two would become the subject of the famous “composition-construction debates” that the group conducted beginning on New Year's Day of 1921.

For my purposes, it is important to note that in turning away from Kandinsky's approach the Working Group of Objective Analysis also turned away from the analysis of an artwork in relation to anything outside of itself. Their stated goal at the beginning of their project was “the theoretical analysis of the basic elements of a work of art,” and “not the psychology of...creation, nor the psychology of aesthetic perception, nor the

---

<sup>40</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i ranniy konstruktivizm*: 37-72; and Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 32-56. Also see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 83-89; and Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 94-109.

<sup>41</sup> Christina Lodder also describes Rodchenko's interests in exactly this way in Christina Lodder, “The Transition to Constructivism,” in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992): 270.

<sup>42</sup> Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 32-38.

historical, cultural, sociological, or other problems of art.”<sup>43</sup> The statement was obviously a reaction to Kandinsky’s emphasis on art’s effect on the psychology and perception of the viewer, but it also explicitly excludes all of the contextual factors that I will argue were paramount for Gan and that would become one of the most crucial topics for discussion in the First Working Group of Constructivists.

During the same time that the Working Group of Objective Analysis was engaged in this analysis of the formal qualities of painting, Gan was involved in a series of debates on theater with precisely the opposite orientation. Gan became a member of the artistic board of Meierkhold’s theater at the end of November and was immediately charged with organizing a series of debates to take place every Monday.<sup>44</sup> They were the type of “dispute” (*disput*) that was a common form of quasi-entertainment in Moscow in the teens and the twenties.<sup>45</sup> There was an official speaker, an official opponent, and invited discussants; posters were often printed and tickets often sold, although I am not sure that they were in this case. Gan’s Monday debates revolved around the future of the new theatrical forms that had emerged after the October Revolution—for example, mass action—and this question quickly turned into a discussion of the relationship between politics and art. As the period of war communism ended, some felt that theater could return to normal, whereas others considered the new theatrical forms that had emerged

---

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*: 32.

<sup>44</sup> RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 3, l. 1. In addition to Gan and Meierkhold, the participants included Anatoly Lunacharsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Kamernyi Theater director Aleksandr Tairov, Platon Kerzhentsev, V. Smyshliaev, and V. Tikhonovich.

<sup>45</sup> For more on the dispute as entertainment and avant-garde art form in the futurist period, see Jane Sharp, “The Russian Avant-Garde and its Audience: Moscow 1913,” *Modernism/ Modernity* 6:3 (September 1999).

after the Revolution as the first step in a continuing process of developing new socialist cultural forms. The latter group was portrayed by the former as opportunists, pandering to Bolshevik political views in order to seem more relevant and worthy of state funding.

At the debate of 20 December, Gan responded to such accusations by asserting that the new modes of art were a necessary part of a new communist culture. The transcript reads,

People are saying that there is no need to mix up politics and art or to talk about a revolution in art on the basis of communism; that this is cheap politics (*politikanstvo*) and that we artistic people are apolitical. But time has shown that communism is not cheap politics, but rather a whole culture composed of many parts. The Civil War is over, and new fronts have opened up. The labor front has replaced the military front. After the labor front is the front of intellectual labor.<sup>46</sup>

For Gan, communism was not just a matter of winning political power, but rather of constructing a new culture. This new culture would not be realized by “the same old intelligentsia with their musical orchestra,” who “throw a red badge in their buttonhole and call it revolution.”<sup>47</sup> The demand for new cultural forms was painful for the cultural producers of the past, who identified with and loved the old forms, but that was precisely because the new forms represented more than just a new style of art. They were part of a comprehensive transition to an entirely new way of life.

---

<sup>46</sup> RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 15a, l. 16. [Тут говорили, что не нужно путать политику и искусство, что говорить об революции искусства, на основе коммунизма. Это политиканство, мы – мол люди искусства аполитичны. Но время показало, что коммунизм не политиканство, а целая культура, которая состоит из многих частей. Утихла наша гражданская война, выступают новые фронты. За фронтом военным встал фронт труда. За трудовым фронтом идет фронт интеллектуального производства]

<sup>47</sup> RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 15a, l. 16. [В чем же заключается эта революция в искусстве и почему к ней не может подойти та самая интеллигенция с оркестрами музыки. Она задевала красные значки в петлицы и думала, что в этом революция.]

I bring these theater debates into the discussion in part to provide some sense of Gan's whereabouts and activities during the time that his friends were participating in the better known INKhUK discussions, but also to suggest that they may have had some influence on those within the Group of Objective Analysis. At least within certain artistic circles, Gan's series of debates were events not to be missed. I have seen them referred to in quotation marks as "the Mondays."<sup>48</sup> One of these Mondays is also the only event that I have been able to correlate with the alleged founding date for the First Working Group, Monday, 13 December. On that Monday, the scheduled debate, which was to be about "the theatrical front," was postponed because of another event.<sup>49</sup> It is completely speculative but also plausible that Gan, Rodchenko, and Stepanova held their own informal discussion about a new art based on constructive principles when the time slot unexpectedly freed up. It also seems possible that December's public debate on the relationship between art and politics planted seeds of a shift within the artists' thinking.

In the new year, Stepanova, Rodchenko, and the rest of the Group of Objective Analysis began meeting again for the series of discussions that have become known as the composition-construction debates.<sup>50</sup> Again, both Khan-Magomedov and Gough have provided great blow-by-blow accounts, to which I will refer rather than reproduce in full

---

<sup>48</sup> For example, in the account of A. V. Fevral'skogo in RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 14, l. 38.

<sup>49</sup> RGALI f. 963, op. 1, d. 14, l. 38.

<sup>50</sup> The debates ran from 1 January through 22 April 1921. Twenty-five artists and theoreticians participated (Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 32). Among them, at various times, were Natan Al'tman, Aleksei Babichev, Varvara Bubnova, Aleksandr Drevin, Karl Ioganson, Ivan Kliun, Boris Korolev, Vladimir Krinskii, Nikolai Ladovskii, Konstantin Medunetskii, Liubov' Popova, Rodchenko, Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, Stepanova, Nikolai Tarabukin, and Nadezhda Udal'tsova. Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*: 37-72.

here. For my purposes, these debates are most interesting as a process through which the artists—in particular, Rodchenko—began to open their understanding of objects back up to all of the external factors that they had rejected in abandoning Kandinsky's program for monumental art. Coming from the background that Gan did, he assumed that the new socialist cultural forms would be inextricably embedded in larger social, political, and economic conditions. What is fascinating about the parallel development of artists like Rodchenko and Stepanova is that they made this transition without straying from the formal purity of the analysis that had begun as an exercise in defining the specificity of painting as a medium. The transformation took place “in the zero of form,” so to speak.<sup>51</sup>

The composition-construction debates began by picking up the distinction at which the group had arrived in the discussion of painting in December. They agreed to define the difference between the composition and construction as that between a picture arranged according to the artist's taste and one organized to satisfy a goal or purpose. As Gough points out, this definition of construction already represented a huge shift from those of 1920. Medium was no longer the issue, at least not in the same way; they were no longer talking about the specific properties of painting. Instead, the distinction hinged on the motivating force behind the formal choices in the work, whether it be a painting, sculpture, or something else. Accordingly, the group began to open their discussion to three-dimensional work, and expanded to include the three sculptors, or spatial constructors, who would become part of the First Working Group of Constructivists: Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetskii, and Georgii Stenberg. Eventually, these three new

---

<sup>51</sup> Kazimir Malevich wrote this in another context. Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism,” in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*: 116.

participants joined Rodchenko and Stepanova in completely rejecting the topic with which they had begun—painting—and arguing against the rest of the group that construction was not possible in a two-dimensional work at all.<sup>52</sup>

Gough has done some valuable analytical work to delineate the various interpretations that the participants offered for defining the difference between composition and construction. Her analysis revolves around the question of what motivates the arrangement of elements within a work if it is not the artist's taste. The most important theories for her are 1) Rodchenko's "utilitarian thesis," which suggested that motivation could come from organizing the work in accordance with a particular purpose; 2) Rodchenko's "nascent theory of deductive structure," by which the arrangement of the elements within the work were determined by the shape of its support, in the mode of Frank Stella's paintings from the 1960s; and 3) Ioganson's "common-denominator strategy," which posited that the creation of multiple works based on the same set of principles would produce a visual grammar within the series that itself provided each work with an underlying structure. Within this array of sophisticated choices, Gough nearly fully dismisses the "dimensionality thesis" with which they had started—that is, that compositions are two-dimensional and constructions, three.<sup>53</sup>

The dimensionality thesis was indeed the least inventive of the group's proposals. It also ceased to be a definitive distinction for the constructivists, much of whose work

---

<sup>52</sup> I am summarizing Gough's account here. Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 39-41.

<sup>53</sup> Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 41-56. I have left out one of Gough's variants—Stepanova's "Organic-Unity Thesis"—because it is not important to my argument. Gough also eventually discards it irrelevant to the difference between construction and composition.

eventually turned out to be, at least technically, two-dimensional. Still, this thesis was extremely important if judged according to its role in the artists' transition to constructivism. When Rodchenko, Stepanova, Ioganson, and Stenberg broke off from the Working Group of Objective Analysis to form another INKhUK working group, the First Working Group of Constructivists, they described the project as a move to thinking about spatial (that is, three-dimensional) construction. The group's function was, as they put it, "the special working out of problems of spatial-constructive production."<sup>54</sup> In one sense, this emphasis on the spatial seems merely like the next step in their exploration of the specificity of various arts: they started by isolating the painterliness of painting and now they would tackle the sculpturliness of sculpture. Yet, this shift to three-dimensionality also contained a latent insight that motivated another, loosely correlative but qualitatively different shift, one crucial to the emergence of constructivism. Even in the most controlled and cloistered of situations, a three-dimensional object engages with factors external to it—such as light, space, and gravity—to a much greater extent than a two-dimensional one does. Thus, in a sense, the shift to three-dimensionality added more to the discussion than just one more dimension. It represented a shift toward understanding objects as formally dependent on their context.

I will eventually develop this point again from another point of view when I discuss the three constructivist disciplines, but I would like to pause now to think about it as a formal evolution in Rodchenko's work by contrasting Rodchenko's linearist paintings of 1920 (figs 24-26) with the hanging spatial constructions that he exhibited at

---

<sup>54</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i ranniy konstruktivizm*: 92. [для специальной разработки проблем пространственно-конструктивного производства.]

the Obmokhu exhibition in spring of 1921 (figs 27-28).<sup>55</sup> This may feel a little like rehashing of old territory, but bear with me as it will become important later on. The comparison of the linearist paintings and the hanging constructions is convenient because the two bodies of work have so many similarities: neither is figurative, both are planes articulated solely by lines produced with rulers and compasses, and both thereby keep the most arbitrary elements of the artist's hand and taste at arm's length. The difference between them lies in the fact that the concentric circles of the hanging spatial construction divide the wooden plane into separate moving pieces, allowing it to fan out into a third dimension and create a spatial form.

For Gough, the hanging spatial constructions are the prime example of Rodchenko's "nascent theory of deductive structure." They are like Stella's paintings, she argues, in that the lines inscribed on their constituent plane repeat the shape of the plane's outer boundary (fig 29). Thus, they are not organized by taste, as in a composition, but by the shape of the support.<sup>56</sup> Without denying the validity of this claim, I would also argue that the hanging spatial constructions make another aesthetic argument, one directly related to the construction's third dimension. For clearly Rodchenko's placement of lines in the hanging constructions are motivated by a good deal more than they are in Stella's paintings. Rodchenko is severely limited in his placement of the lines, not because of a fairly arbitrary decision to conform to the shape of the support, but because the lines have

---

<sup>55</sup> Obmokhu was the acronym for the Society of Young Artists (*Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov*). It was composed of artists who were younger and less established than Rodchenko, but he, Ioganson, Medunetskii, and the Stenbergs exhibited at their third exhibition, which opened on 22 May 1921. For more, see Lodder, "The Transition to Constructivism": 267-268, 278-279 note 6.

<sup>56</sup> Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 47-50.

to be arranged in order to allow the plane to fan out. The arrangements in Rodchenko's series of paintings are very simple, but they still would not have been possible in the spatial construction.

Such limitations on composition were one inherent tradeoff of the move from two to three dimensions. Another was the loss of total control over the appearance of the object. The hanging spatial constructions are often celebrated for their kinetic production of an infinite number of visual impressions. Suspended from a single string and painted with metallic paint, they rotate and catch the ambient light, making their appearance contingent upon outside factors such as time, light, the position of the viewer, and the air currents in the room. The appearance of the paintings, in contrast, is dependent on little outside of the pictures themselves. Indeed, next to the hanging constructions, they almost take on mystical quality, as if Rodchenko had, for want of any other source of motivation, resorted to something like sacred geometry. The physical demands introduced by the third dimension thus solves the problem of how to motivate form at a time when individual taste was taboo.

Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions were, of course, just as useless as his series of paintings, but it is not difficult to see how the exercise in three-dimensional construction can be extrapolated to converge with his utilitarian thesis. If the interaction with time, space, viewer, and air currents helped give motivation and definition to the spatial construction, then the constraints imposed by the demand that an object fulfill a particular utilitarian purpose could be even more specific and challenging. Such limitations on compositional freedom were exactly what Rodchenko and Stepanova had gone looking for when they founded the Group of Objective Analysis and set off on their

quest to isolate the specificity of painting. They ended up finding those limitations not by narrowly defining the boundaries of the medium—that is, not by isolating the object from all outside factors—but rather by expanding the object’s relational contingency. Art’s instrumentalization was also its way out of a tedious endgame. This is how the formal concerns of the Working Group of Objective Analysis came to coincide with Gan’s call for new socially utilitarian art forms.

Considering the extent to which Gan personally identified with constructivism later, as well as the fact that he seems to have designed and authored their program, it has always been surprising that he did not attend the first meeting of INKhUK’s First Working Group. According to Khan-Magomedov, Gan was one of the co-conceivers of the group. On 23 February, he, Rodchenko, and Stepanova met unofficially—that is, outside of INKhUK—to discuss which other artists would be appropriate members.<sup>57</sup> At the first official meeting within INKhUK on 18 March, however, the situation appeared to have been turned around: the attending members—Rodchenko, Stepanova, Ioganson, and Georgii Stenberg—discussed and voted on whether to admit Gan, Medunetskii, and Stenberg’s brother Vladimir, and there was a special item on the agenda devoted to deciding whether to “draw Gan into the group’s work” (*privlechenii tov. Gana k rabote gruppy*).<sup>58</sup>

While Gan was a close colleague of Rodchenko and Stepanova’s, he had not participated in their discussions thus far, and his membership may have required special discussion simply because it was a slight change in company. Yet the facts that Gan gave

---

<sup>57</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 116.

<sup>58</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*: 92.

the formal papers at most of the meetings, penned the group's texts, and was charged with representing the group at the general meeting of INKhUK suggest that he was asked into the group to perform the ideological and public relations function at which he had become a professional. There is evidence of other speakers being hired to give lectures at INKhUK; for example, El Lissitzky was hired to deliver a series of lectures that fall.<sup>59</sup> And the First Working Group proposed inviting specialists in mathematics and engineering technologies at the same meeting at which the discussion of Gan's membership took place. Trained in the Political Administration of Revvoensovet (PUR) and just having written, or at least proposed, a series of brochures analyzing art from a historical materialist perspective, Gan may have seemed like a good candidate to help the group's artists develop their ideological position.

The events of the Tenth Party Congress, which convened on 8 March, ten days before the group's first meeting, help to make sense of the group's desire to put a finer point on their ideological orientation. The Congress is best known as the event at which the New Economic Policy (NEP) was accepted, but it was also notable for its reaction to the Workers' Opposition movement, which had gained strength over the winter of 1920-1921, culminating in the Kronstadt rebellion only a week before the Congress convened. On the last day of the Congress, resolutions titled "On Unity" and "On the Anarchist and Syndicalist Deviation" were passed to address deviations in the party line caused by the

---

<sup>59</sup> Gough reproduces the contract. Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 129.

entry of “elements that have not yet fully assimilated the communist worldview.”<sup>60</sup> I should point out that this was not a “white” opposition, as during the Civil War, but a left opposition, and many who worked within Narkompros were perceived to be sympathetic to it. Gan and Rodchenko could easily have been counted among those anarcho-syndicalist elements, having been involved in the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups back in 1918.<sup>61</sup>

Also on the agenda at the Congress was a proposal by Narkompros’s director, Anatole Lunacharsky, that Narkompros be placed under the direct control of the Party. This would have transformed the organization’s educational branches and arts sections, such as IZO, INKhUK, and TEO, into a more elaborate version of PUR, the Red-Army cultural and political enlightenment branch for which Gan worked until the end of 1922.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, PUR was the organizational precedent that Lunacharsky cited in his proposal.<sup>63</sup> While the idea is clearly disconcerting—in essence, it defined education and art as identical to agitprop—it also has to be understood within the context of the larger debate about Narkompros’s purposes, or lack thereof. Long considered by many to be a

---

<sup>60</sup> P. N. Fedoseev and K. U. Chernenko, eds., *Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo soiuz a rezoliutsiakh i resheniakh s’ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TSK*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 1 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury: 1954): 527-534.

<sup>61</sup> Gan was affiliated with the anarchist movement in 1918 before he joined the Bolsheviks. See chapter 1.

<sup>62</sup> See my discussion of Gan’s involvement in PUR in chapter 1.

<sup>63</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970): 245.

disorganized charity for artists and intellectuals,<sup>64</sup> it came under more serious scrutiny in the second half of 1920. Lunacharsky's proposal at the Tenth Party Congress may have been a last-ditch effort to preserve the organization and the jobs it provided by recycling it as a tool of the Party.

There are bits and pieces of evidence to suggest that Gan was involved in the project to restructure Narkompros and PUR. The consolidation of the cultural enlightenment activities of the two organizations was discussed at a PUR meeting at the end of 1919,<sup>65</sup> and the archive preserves several pages of notes titled "On the Unification of PUR's and Narkompros's Artistic Work" rendered in handwriting similar to Gan's.<sup>66</sup> The artistic work of PUR was officially transferred to Narkompros on 22 October 1920,<sup>67</sup> and the first mandate for Narkompros's reorganization came out not long after, in early November. It resulted in the restructuring of TEO that immediately preceded Gan's debates on theater in December. Gan seems to have played some role in this process, since he was asked to report on his ideas for a restructuring of TEO in July.<sup>68</sup> Also potentially significant is the date of the next mandate for Narkompros's reorganization. It

---

<sup>64</sup> See Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*.

<sup>65</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 11, d. 13, l. 116.

<sup>66</sup> RGVA f. 9, op. 11, d. 168, l. 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> "Ob"edineniia khudozhestvennoi raboty PURa s Narkomprosom," *Vestnik teatra* 71 (22 October 1920): 14-15. Sheila Fitzpatrick discusses the union in *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*: 243-245.

<sup>68</sup> GARF 628, op. 1, d. 3, l. 21; GARF f. 2306, op 24, d. 587, l. 5.

came out on 21 February 1921,<sup>69</sup> only two days before Gan, Rodchenko, and Stepanova held their first unofficial organizational meeting for the First Working Group.

As it turned out, Lunacharsky's idea was not well received by his colleagues, who suggested revisiting the question once the organization was more adequately "penetrated with the communist spirit."<sup>70</sup> Still, the future First Working Group may have felt that developing their communist spirit would keep them on history's side. This is not to say that they were coerced into their new project, at least not any more than in any situation where relevance to contemporary trends is a factor. A comment made by Stepanova at one of the First Working Group's meetings hints that this kind of artistic competition was also a motivating factor. She urged her colleagues, "we must hurry up and declare our worldview," because, "they say that Mayakovsky's manifesto, where he talks about the negation of art and so on, has already come out, and that it is close to what we have been saying for awhile."<sup>71</sup> Thus, they seem to have thought that the addition of ideology was an important aesthetic innovation, and they wanted to beat Mayakovsky to the punch. This is, again, not to say that their political sympathies were false, but that they understood folding politics into their artistic practice as something more than politically correct. It was also an aesthetic innovation, and potentially the next big thing.

---

<sup>69</sup> Pamela Jill Kachurin, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Retreat of the Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1998): 146.

<sup>70</sup> These are Krupskaja's words. They refer specifically to Glavopolitprosvet, which was one of the new organizations that took over Narkompros responsibilities. Cited in Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*: 245.

<sup>71</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*: 103. [Говорят, что уже появился манифест Вл. Маяковского, в котором он говорит об отрицании искусства и проч., что близко нам, о чем мы давно уже заявляем.]

Whatever their reasons, once the decision was made to invite Gan into the group, his role does seem to have been explicitly defined as providing the theoretical framework. Beginning with the second meeting, on 28 March, Gan presented a series of papers in which he laid out a set of concepts and terms to structure the group's discussions. The dates and topics were as follows:

|          |                                                                                                                                |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 28 March | The Constructivist Group's Program and Plan for Work<br>( <i>O programme i plane rabot gruppy konstruktivistov</i> )           |
| 4 April  | The Constructivist Group's Organizational Plan<br>( <i>Ob organizatsionnom plane Gruppy konstruktivistov</i> )                 |
| 11 April | The Plan for Work of the Section of Print and Agitation<br>( <i>O plane rabot otdel Pechati i agitatsii</i> )                  |
| 27 April | Tectonics ( <i>O tektonike</i> ); and<br>The Objectives of the Wall Newspaper ( <i>Zadachi stennoi gazety</i> ). <sup>72</sup> |

His first lecture contained all of the major topics that would be discussed during the meetings. After this lecture, the group voted to accept his proposal for the program and working plan, and he was charged with formulating a shorter formal program statement, with "an agitational character," for approval at the general meeting of INKhUK on 1 April.<sup>73</sup> Employing an exercise typical of political enlightenment work, Gan proposed that each of the members of the group participate in the process of writing the program by coming up with their own pair of slogans, "one with a negative character and one with an affirmative character,"<sup>74</sup> something along the lines of "Down with *x*! Long live *y*!"

Thus Gan's role in the First Working Group of Constructivists was much like his job as Director of Art Agitation within IZO. He was to present the group's project to a

---

<sup>72</sup> Gan did not attend the last of these meetings. S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina* (Moscow: Galart, 1995): 77.

<sup>73</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i ranniy konstruktivizm*: 93-94.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*: 94. [Один лозунг, построенный на отрицании, а другой—на утверждении.]

larger audience, but also to help shape the artists' interests and practice by helping them to integrate form with ideology. In his first lecture to the group, he used a lot of "we's": "until now, each of us has, more often than not, approached spatial-constructive work by performing haphazard operations on the material," and "we must cross over into real experiments within life itself."<sup>75</sup> But it is also likely that the First Working Group was just one job among many for Gan at this point. He did not attend all of the meetings, and when they were over he stopped participating in INKhUK debates. In the fall of 1921 the members of the First Working Group got involved with a new set of speakers.<sup>76</sup> The fact that Gan took constructivism as his primary identity from 1922 on was the result of a number of factors that I will explore in the next chapter. One of them may have been Rodchenko and Stepanova's own cultural enlightenment work of "drawing Comrade Gan into the group."

## WHAT IS CONSTRUCTIVISM? PART 1: A SHORT COURSE

If the artists in the First Working Group came to understand objects and medium in a new way through the set of formal arguments discussed above, Gan came to similar conclusions via Marxist theory. As Gan envisioned it, the discussions of the First Working Group would productively integrate these two branches of thinking into a unified practice. It would provide solid ideological ground for what had been abstract

---

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*: 98. [До сих пор каждый из нас, подходя к пространственно-конструктивным работам, производил чаще всего случайные оперирования над материалом...Надо нам перейти к реальному эксперименту в самой жизни.]

<sup>76</sup> These included El Lissitzky and the Hungarian art historian Alfred Kemény. Cited in Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 129; and Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 163.

material experiments, and vice versa. “In the group,” as he put it, “the ideological part must go hand in hand with the formal part...Everything must be founded on both ideology and form,” so that “our work is not isolated in theory and plans ‘outside life’.”<sup>77</sup> In the following explication of the Marxist foundation of Gan’s constructivist aesthetics, I will utilize both the transcripts of the First Working Group’s meetings and the text of *Constructivism*. Large parts of *Constructivism* are drawn verbatim from the papers that Gan delivered at the meetings of 1921, and the discussions that occurred at those meetings are particularly helpful in elaborating on the terms construction, *faktura*, and tectonics. The political and sociological foundations of his thinking, which is what I will address first, are much more clearly articulated in the later text.

In its overarching aims, the logic behind Gan’s constructivism had much in common with the concept of *tvorchestvo*, whose significance I discussed in relation to Gan’s anarchist period in chapter 1. The word means “creative work” in a broad sense not confined to art. Like *tvorchestvo*, constructivism was an alternative to art (*iskusstvo*), and like *tvorchestvo*, constructivism was designed to bridge the distance between life and art that structured bourgeois aesthetics with a practice that was fully embedded within the messy constraints of reality. Both were conceived as bringing human subjects into an active relationship with their surroundings—whether that be the physical world or their fellows—rather than depicting the surrounding world from a distanced and subjective point of view.

---

<sup>77</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*: 98-99. [Я считаю, что в Группе идеологическая часть должна идти рука об руку с формальной стороной...все должно быть нами обосновано, как формально, так и идеологически. / Мне мыслится, что наша работа не замкнется в теорию и проектирование «вне жизни.»]

Constructivism was both a refinement of the *tvorchestvo* idea and its rearticulation in Marxist terms. Those terms were largely filtered in Gan's work through the thinking of Russian Marxists such as Aleksandr Bogdanov and Nikolai Bukharin, whose "short courses" dominated the reading lists for political enlightenment workers. The short course was a book designed to present complex theories of economics and political philosophy in a layperson's terms, often in question and answer format. Bukharin's *The ABCs of Communism* (*Azbuka kommunizma*, 1919) is probably the best-known example of the genre.<sup>78</sup> Gan articulated the foundations of the First Working Group's project that I will explicate in this section with an argument taken directly from Bogdanov's *The Science of Social Consciousness: A Short Course on an Ideological Science in Questions and Answers* (*Nauka ob obshchestvennom soznanii: kratkii kurs ideologicheskoi nauki v voprosakh i otvietakh*, 1914). If what follows feels simplistic at times, remember that Gan's texts drew from and aimed at this short-course rhetorical style. Indeed, he quoted Bogdanov's book extensively in the text of *Constructivism*.

The argument that Gan made via Bogdanov in *Constructivism* is an example of the evolutionary anthropological arguments that appear frequently in Marxist literature of the period. It begins with the so-called primitive era and sketches out a brief history of the development of art through the ages before eventually concluding that communism (and constructivism) would be the inevitable end of the line of development. Art is understood both formally and sociologically as a series of stages in the development of modes for creating cohesion within society. In primitive society, for example,

---

<sup>78</sup> Bukharin coauthored the book with Evgenii Preobrazhensky in 1919 as an "elementary textbook of communist knowledge." It became the most widely read political work in Soviet Russia and reprinted numerous times.

representations displayed a high level of consistency by virtue of the fact that everyone was engaged in cooperative labor processes and had roughly the same experiences. These consistencies defined the first primitive worldview. As societies became more complex, however, those who created representations were increasingly different people than those who executed ideas in reality. “The connection between idea and action was severed,” and “a large increase in the number of words” rushed in to fill the space that opened up in between.<sup>79</sup> This gap also precipitated an important reversal of hierarchy, whereby rather than test the truth of an idea in reality, worldview itself became the master against which the truth of new ideas and representations was measured. Strangely, these representations were seen to represent a truth *higher* than reality, whereas the actual functioning of reality was deemed arbitrary and unsystematic, “an endless succession of apparent accidents.”<sup>80</sup> On the one hand, the text elaborated, even when false, these worldviews performed a social function by creating community. They functioned “to systematize feelings” and “as a means of cementing human society” by providing a common system of beliefs and codes of behavior.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, the gap on which the process of representation was founded was easily exploited to construct and preserve positions of privilege. The protection of vested interests meant that all manner of irrational modes of organizing things and people were solidified and preserved. As Gan explained, in “gluing

---

<sup>79</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivism*: 27. [Техника и экономика труда потребовали большого увеличения количества слов, связь идеи с действием была разорвана самой жизнью: мысль организатора осуществлялась действием исполнителя.]

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*: 25. Here, Gan quotes Engels. I have used the translation in Friedrich Engels, *Feuerbach: The Roots of the Socialist Philosophy*, trans. Austin Lewis (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1903): 96.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*: 25-26. [оно пыталось систематизировать чувства... / ...эстетика...являлась одним из средств цементирувавших людское общество.]

together...general moods and feelings, art also fixed the everyday material life [*byt*] of the society in place and hampered the historical development of the social environment.”<sup>82</sup>

As examples, Gan pointed to city infrastructure and patriarchal social structures.<sup>83</sup>

Gan continued, again via Bogdanov, by explaining that a fundamental change took place with bourgeois culture in the capitalist era. The rise of rational scientific thinking created a crisis in the functioning of false worldviews as the untruth of their content became increasingly obvious. Scrutinized rationally, their “‘eternal’ and ‘imperishable’ truths” began “to break down and dissolve.”<sup>84</sup> Art responded by shedding the premise that it represented anything real, becoming instead a “pure art” of “abstract fetishism” (*otvlechennyi fetishizm*).<sup>85</sup> This did not necessarily mean that it was abstract in the sense of nonfigurative. As the text explains,

Abstract fetishism does not lie in ideas or forms being abstract, but in an abstract point of view on them, for example, when one considers a scientific truth or a work of art to have meaning in itself, outside of what results from each of its relations to the society whose life it enters; that is, when their real meaning—their social function—is “abstracted” [*otvlechen*] from them.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*: 25. [Склеивая таким образом общественные настроения и чувства—искусство, одновременно, приклеивало быт общества к месту, тормозило историческое развитие общественной среды, создавая значительные барьеры в периоды революций.]

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*: 27, 60.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*: 25. [«Вечные» и «нетленные» истины...начинают тлеть, разлагаться...]

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*: 28, 29.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*: 29. [Отвлеченный фетишизм заключается не в том, что мысли или образы отвлечены, а в отвлеченной точке зрения на них, напр., когда научная истина или произведение искусства рассматриваются, как нечто имеющее значение всецело само по себе, безо всякого отношения к обществу, в жизнь которого они входят, т.е. как если бы от них был «отвлечен» их действительный смысл—их общественная функция.]

An art of abstract fetishism is a representation or a model that has been constructed in isolation, abstracted from its larger context in the sense of drawn away (*otvlechennye*). In other words, it was a way of saying autonomous art.

The quote from Bogdanov's text continues by explaining that this autonomous mode of art still offered a means of social connection, but in a new way that was empty of positive content. For example,

A cathedral, or a statue of the divinity was understood as something that unified the faithful, with each other, with the divinity itself, or with the idealized presentation of past generations, that is, as a kind of social connection. But if the same statue of the divinity were to enter exchange society after many centuries—for example, if it were found in an excavation—then people would see it as an image executed with a greater or lesser degree of beauty and only that. In actual fact it continues to connect people, who see it with a common mood that gives them a certain common understanding of how life can be powerful and harmonious. It cultivates a unified way of feeling and thinking. In short, some sort of social connection remains, only in a new form.<sup>87</sup>

Art developed a new mode of social connection not by creating a common representation of the world, but rather a “common mood,” a “unified way of feeling,” a common sense. This new category of experience, a feeling of commonality with no specific referent, was given the name “the aesthetic.”

It was this historically specific meaning of the word *aesthetic* that Gan rejected when he declared war on art. He made this specific qualification when he wrote,

---

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*: 29. Gan quotes from Bogdanov, *Nauka ob obshchestvennom soznanii*: 167. [...храм, статуя божества понимались как нечто объединяющее верных между собою и с самим божеством, идеализированным представителем прошлых поколений, т.е. как некоторая общественная связь. Но пусть та же статуя божества, после ряда веков, досталась меновому обществу, напр., найдена при раскопах; тогда в ней увидят более или менее совершенный образ красоты, но и только. Между тем на деле она и тут продолжает связывать людей, которые видят ее в общем настроении, давая им некоторое, общее для них знание о том, какова может быть сильная и гармоничная жизнь, воспитывая их чувство и мысль к единению, -- словом, остается, лишь в новом виде, некоторой общественной связью.]

“aesthetics, as a science of beauty, . . . does not exist for constructivists.”<sup>88</sup> Although Gan’s tendency to rhetorical hyperbole gave his rejection particular force, it is worth noting that reaction against this particular detached form of aesthetics was a larger trend unifying many of the artistic formations of that moment, including realist painting. Indeed, Bogdanov’s theory was usually marshaled in support of realism, which was understood as closing the gap by producing a more accurate rendering of reality. Gan’s employing the same argument was, in a sense, an attempt to bring nonobjective work under the realist umbrella. In the minds of realist painters and their advocates, constructivism’s nonobjective and formally inventive works were “formalist,” that is, out of touch with reality and involved only with the problems internal to art. In this sense, the linguistic cards were stacked in their favor. Their most effective jabs relied on the ease with which the opposition between realism and formalism could be conflated with that between figuration and abstraction.

In response to this dominant structure, Gan did what he often did and attempted to redefine the terms of the debate by means of hyphens. He proposed that “we must teach ourselves to build so that the resulting dynamic is not abstracted-illusionistic, done for visual impression, but rather a real [*podlinnoi*] dynamic of concrete movement.”<sup>89</sup> Here he executes two significant realignments. The first is the joining together of two words that were antonyms in the minds of the realist painters—abstract and illusionistic—into

---

<sup>88</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Konstruktivizm. Otvet Lefu,” *Zrelishcha* 55 (29 September-7 October 1923): 12-13. [Для конструикувистов эстетика, как наука о прекрасном, . . . не существует.]

<sup>89</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 60. [Необходимо научить себя так строить, чтобы динамика продукта производства была бы не отвлеченно-иллюзорной динамикой для зрительного впечатления, а подлинной динамикой конкретного движения.]

the hyphenated adjective *abstracted-illusionistic* (*otvlechenno-illiuzornoi*). The second is his association of the words *dynamic* and *movement*—which would seem to be linked to ideas of immateriality, the image, and instability—with words that imply stasis and integrity like *real* and *concrete*. The opposition abstract versus realist, usually mapped onto distance from versus closeness to life, was replaced with another way of parsing the issue: a distinction between an image abstracted from reality and meant to manipulate the eye—the abstracted-illusionistic image—and a concrete object with a real life moving around in the real world.

This distinction is the same insight that I attributed to Rodchenko in his move from two-dimensional geometric paintings to the hanging spatial constructions.<sup>90</sup> His paintings were static images, abstract but also abstracted. A hanging spatial construction was capable of producing an abstracted-illusionistic image too, but only if beheld for a single instant, as when a photographic image captured one particular arrangement of its ever-changing interaction with the light, space, and viewer's eye. One comes to know and understand the hanging spatial construction not through any one such image of it, but by active relationship to it, by walking around it, by watching it spin, by folding it up and reinstalling it in another space, and so on; that is, via what Benjamin Buchloh described

---

<sup>90</sup> The word *otvlechennyi* was generally associated with abstraction. Rodchenko used it positively to describe his own work in 1919: "Objects died yesterday. We live in abstracted [*otvlechennom*] spiritual creation. We are the creators of nonobjectivity. Color as such. Tone as such." Cited in Tat'iana Goriacheva, "Suprematizm i konstruktivizm. K istorii vsaimootnoshenii," *Iskusstvoznanie* 2 (2003): 411. [Предметы умерли вчера. Мы живем в отвлеченном духовном творчестве. Мы создатели безпредметности. Цвета как такова. Тона как такова.]

as its “phenomenological feedback loop.”<sup>91</sup> The constructions are perfect examples of abstract objects that are also concrete objects with a real dynamic. The interactive and hands-on quality of these works is particularly well illustrated in a portrait of Rodchenko in which they appear in the background, collapsed flat and stacked unceremoniously, without pedestals or frames (fig 30).

As a final way of grounding constructivism ideologically, Gan employed a large percentage of the text of Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” to frame constructivism in terms of Marx’s notion of practice.<sup>92</sup> Rather than continue to force the plane of figurative realism closer and closer to the plane of life, constructivists would entwine themselves and their objects with reality. Practical activity would replace the distanced relationship inherent to representation. Their thinking, like Marx’s materialist thinking, would “not stop on this side of the phenomenon,”<sup>93</sup> but weave in and around it, becoming a part of it.

---

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* 30 (fall 1984): 82-119.

<sup>92</sup> Marx originally wrote the “Theses” as notes in 1845. They were not published until Engels included an edited version as an appendix to his *Ludwig Feuerbach* of 1888. I do not know whether Gan would have had access to the original text, which was first published, simultaneously in German and in Russian, by the Moscow-based Institute of Marxism-Leninism in 1924. The quotations in Gan’s text differ from the standard Russian translation, suggesting that he may have translated it himself from the German. For an English translation, see Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” trans. W. Lough, in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969): 13-15.

<sup>93</sup> Gan is referring to the part of “Theses on Feuerbach” that is generally translated into English as “Man must prove the truth—i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice.” The word “this-sidedness” creates some confusion, initially making it appear as if Gan’s paraphrase contradicts Marx’s sense, but this ambiguity is the shortcoming of the English translation. The German word *Diesseitigkeit* means “this-sidedness” in the sense of “this-worldliness,” that is, something like earthliness. In the Russian translation of 1924, it is translated as *posiustoronnost’*, also literally “this-sidedness.” Gan’s phrasing clarifies the sense, and in a way that resonates with constructivist practice. Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 34. [и не останавливается по сую сторону явлений.]

In this way, they would “prove the truth of their thinking in practice.” This will all become more concrete, just as Gan hoped, when I present the discussions of the First Working Group in the next section. But let’s note now that a Marxist understanding of practice, in which the material world and consciousness simultaneously produce each other, is exactly what Gan meant when he called constructivism “intellectual-material production,” a phrase in which another strategically placed hyphen bridges the gap between reality (the material) and subjective understanding (the intellectual).

Intellectual-material production, like all previous stages in art’s development, was a means of providing cohesion in society by unifying people’s thinking. This time, however, the unity of thought would not issue from a collective clinging to some agreed upon congealed image, but rather from a process in which consciousness and material reality were so interrelated as to be the same thing. Such art objects were not ends in themselves, but a means of keeping consciousness in line. They were “elements that cement[ed] the relations among people in a larger process of social [*obshchestvennogo*] production.”<sup>94</sup> Everyone would understand the world in the same way not because they had agreed to, but because it was true.

## **WHAT IS CONSTRUCTIVISM? PART 2: CONSTRUCTION, *FAKTURA*, AND TECTONICS**

Gan spent the first fifty of *Constructivism*’s seventy pages developing variations on the argument above before moving on to describe the formal disciplines that were to

---

<sup>94</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Nasha bor’ba,” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 1-2. [...как элементы цементирующие отношения людей в процессе общественного производства...]

structure the actual practice of constructivism. The three terms describing them—construction, *faktura*, and tectonics—had been the more important topic of discussion in the meetings of the First Working Group, and reviewing the group’s effort to define them remains the best way of understanding the specificities of Gan’s constructivism from an aesthetic standpoint. Transcripts of the meetings confirm that Gan was the origin of the set of concepts. He featured them in his first paper, and he was obviously the most invested in them during the discussions, pushing for their acceptance even when the other members of the group expressed bemusement and skepticism. Indeed, the most instructive moments in the transcripts are those when the group had the most trouble assimilating Gan’s ideas.

The group easily agreed on the importance and definition of the first of these terms, construction, in part because the word already unambiguously connoted the rational modes of making with which they wanted to associate—the Russian word *konstruktor* means engineer.<sup>95</sup> The word had also already received lengthy treatment within the composition-construction debates. As Rodchenko stated in one of the First Working Group’s discussions, construction had “already been well chewed over,” and was “now used without difficulty.”<sup>96</sup> In *Constructivism*, Gan found it sufficient to say that construction was “the assembling function of constructivism.”<sup>97</sup> By way of elaboration,

---

<sup>95</sup> This set of associations were already well in place by the late nineteenth century, and “constructiveness” was used in the artistic context in the teens to describe the rational aspects of art. Thus even before the composition-construction debates, Rodchenko had played with exhibiting some of his paintings as “constructions” and some as “compositions.” See Lodder, “The Transition to Constructivism”: 271-272.

<sup>96</sup> Cited by Gough in *The Artist as Producer*: 71.

<sup>97</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 62. [собирательную функцию конструктивизма]

we might also go back to the previous section and posit that construction was the process of putting an object together as Gan advocates, so that it had a concrete dynamic ability to move around within life. It can be contrasted with a composition, which was an arrangement producing a single visual effect.

The term *faktura* generated more controversy. Like construction, it already had a meaning, but one from which the group wanted to distance themselves. Within traditional art and aesthetics, *faktura* had described the surface texture of a work, the brushstroke and the weight of the paint.<sup>98</sup> Its examination was one method of identifying the work of a particular artist, and therefore it was bound up with ideas about individual style and the artist's hand. Gan explained that, as a constructivist discipline, he defined *faktura* in a way that significantly departed from this traditional meaning. It would no longer describe the painted surface of an object, nor the traces of the artist's touch preserved there, but rather a process of working a material in its entirety. The example that he provided to illustrate his point was cast iron. As he explained,

Cast iron runs, that is, transforms into a fiery liquid mass, then is poured into a mold, goes through a glazing section or is simply chopped off, and arrives at lathe workstations in the mechanical department, after which one can say that the cast iron has become a thing. *This whole process is faktura, that is, the working of the material in total and not just a working of one of its surfaces.*<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> For a history of the evolution of the term's meaning, see Maria Gough's "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," *RES* 36 (autumn 1999): 32-60.

<sup>99</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 62. [Чугун плавится, т.е. претворяется в огненную жидкую массу, затем вливается в оформленную опоку, проходит наждачное отделение или просто обрубается, поступает в механическое отделение на токарные станки после чего можно сказать, что чугун становится вещью. *Весь этот процесс и есть фактура т.е. обработка материала в целом, а не обработка только одной его поверхности.*]

In selecting his example, Gan made surface texture irrelevant by describing a material whose surface was lost and reconstituted in its changes of form and phase, from solid to liquid and back again. One could perform a number of very different operations on it: pouring, molding, cutting, or turning it on a lathe. These possibilities were all related to the cast iron's *faktura*, its specific physical properties as a metal.

One of the important byproducts of this concept of *faktura* was a new relationship between the maker and the material. In the old definition of *faktura*, the material served the artist, faithfully recording every movement of his brush. The constructivist understanding of the term shifted the balance of power between the two so that the form of an object was determined by a combination of the maker's intentions and material's possibilities and limitations. The process of making became more of a partnership.<sup>100</sup> In his description of the cast iron, Gan's use of a string of reflexive verbs is interesting in this respect. In translating these actions into English, I used a combination of two types of expressions—passive constructions in which an anonymous maker is implied (e.g., the iron is poured into a mold) and active constructions in which the iron is the subject of the sentence (the iron runs). This grammatical ambiguity is symptomatic of the distribution of agency between subject and object. By working a material in this manner, through and through, the maker makes demands on the material, but the material also makes demands on the maker.

The use of industrial materials rather than fine arts materials is often cited as proof of constructivism's desire to produce utilitarian objects, or simply as a vague nod to

---

<sup>100</sup> Christina Kiaer develops this point, albeit with different foci and nuances, in her idea of the "comradely object." See Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*.

modernity, but it can also be understood in terms of this decentering of agency. The materials most prized in the fine arts had been things like gold and paint, which were extremely malleable and could be transformed with minimal resistance into whatever ideal concept the artist had in mind. The best constructivist materials were instead ones that pushed back a little. They did not indulge impractical fantasies, but rather molded the constructivist's understanding of the world by selectively resisting or complying with his intentions, speculations, and expectations. In this sense, Gan's concept of *faktura* conformed to the chicken-and-egg dynamic expressed by Marx when he wrote that "the educator himself must be educated," words Gan also quoted in the text of *Constructivism*.<sup>101</sup> Attention to material *faktura* was important, according to Gan, as "a reminder of fact, of the factual essence of one or another given property of a body, of matter."<sup>102</sup> It "reminds us of the fact of the material itself, which cannot be ignored in experimenting, which must be taken into account."<sup>103</sup> In other words, *faktura* tied *disegno* down to earth.

For Gan, this subject-object relationship was itself the most important product of *faktura*. I have been describing *faktura* in terms of the properties of the material largely because the structures of language make it difficult to do otherwise, but note that when Gan defined *faktura* using the example of cast iron, he talked about it as the *process*: "this whole process is *faktura*, that is, the working the material in total." This focus on

---

<sup>101</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 33; or Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach": 13-15.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*: 62. [фактура значит напоминание о самом факте, фактически сущность той или иной данности тела, материи.]

<sup>103</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i ranniy konstruktivizm*: 101-102. [о факте самого материала, с которым нельзя не считаться]

process becomes clearer if we attempt to digest one of the more awkward moments of his constructivist program, where he talked about the relationship between humans and materials in terms less palatable than the ones I have used above. He wrote,

Communism...organizes humanity in conditions of full freedom, when a person has no other enemy left but nature. He will fight nature with inventiveness and the tools of production that he himself creates so that he will not be captive to or limited by the primitive "natural" world and its primitive materials. Rather, the natural world will be subordinate to man, who will increase and transform it according to his will.

Wood, granite, ore, and the rest of our "inheritance" [*darstvennost'*] from nature will be forced out by METALS, GLASS, IRON and the other products of communist industry, from which we constructivists will build a new world of forms and constructions that will make geological, raw material go the way of the cave-norms of the primitive savage.<sup>104</sup>

This passage, with its talk of subordinating nature, is not often quoted in histories of constructivism, which tend to separate the movement from the brutal exploitation of the natural environment that actually occurred during the Soviet period. The rhetoric can to some extent be written off as the residue of a historical context in which nature was a more threatening force. A similar attitude appears in the writing of other Russian communists like Bogdanov and Bukharin.<sup>105</sup> Yet Gan's expression of preference for

---

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*: 100. [Коммунизм...организует челевечество в условиях полной свободы, когда у человека не останется ни одного врага кроме природы. Он будет бороться с природой изобретаельством, орудиями производства, которые он сам создаст, чтобы первобытну «природный» мир с его первобытными материалами не пленял, не ограничивал человека, а наоборот находился бы в подчинении у человека, который будет его множить и претворять по своей воле. / Дерево, гранит, руда и проч. «дарственность» природы будут оттеснены МЕТАЛЛАМИ, СТЕКЛОМ, БЕТОНОМ и другими продуктами коммунистической индустрии, из которой мы, конструктивисты, построим новый мир таких форм и сооружений, перед которыми поблекнет и геологический, сырой материал с пещерными нормами первообыного дикаря.]

<sup>105</sup> For example, see Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Kratkii kurs ekonomicheskoi nauki* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1920): 105; and Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (New York: International, 1925): 121. Marx's discussion of

processed, over raw, materials still seems quirky and gratuitous, as does the importance he attached to the qualification that the new world built by communism and constructivism must be entirely the product of human labor.

Rodchenko also initially balked at these specifications, reminding Gan that the processed products of civilization—the dainty floral painted teacups and Victorian scalloped trim—were the ones they were trying to get away from. They were interested in working with the material itself, the *raw* material. The fact that Rodchenko could not see the distinction that Gan made so emphatically, in capital letters, between ore and iron, or granite and glass, may be indicative of a larger difference in their orientation. It is perhaps best understood by revisiting the assumption that constructivism hinged on the idea of the utilitarian. The constructivist object supposedly differed from the art object in that it was useful. As Christina Kiaer has pointed out, the idea of *tselesobraznost*’ was an important concept running through constructivist rhetoric. Usually translated as “expediency” or “purposiveness,” it literally means “formed in relation to a goal.” The demand that an object have *tselesobraznost*’ meant that all design decisions would be motivated by the object’s purpose.<sup>106</sup> I relied on something like this explanation earlier when I discussed the hanging spatial constructions and suggested that Rodchenko was happy to cede some control of the design process to material and utilitarian demands

---

machines and nature in *The Grundrisse* is probably the referent for these discussions. There, he writes about machines, locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, etc. as “natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature,” but also interestingly, as organs “of human participation in nature.” They are a manifestation of humanity’s transformation of the physical environment in accordance with its needs, and thus represent a physical manifestation of social knowledge and relations. See chapter 14 of Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973).

<sup>106</sup> See Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*: 8. As Kiaer points out, there was a broad range of interpretations of what constituted a legitimate purpose, or *tsele*’.

because it provided him a rationale for design decisions. As we will see again later, Rodchenko was prone to employing this explanation as the solution to most of the conceptual problems that came up in the discussions of *faktura* and tectonics.

Gan also liked the idea of utility insofar as it involved a relationship of interaction rather than contemplation, but the qualification was less definitive for him. If one were to find an object readymade in nature that served one's purpose, it would not have the same value for Gan as an object that was the product of human labor. For him, the importance of human labor was not the production of a thing, but the production of a relationship in which material and consciousness were interwoven. In this sense, a raw material was similar to an autonomous human subject, or to an abstracted-illusionistic image. None of these things were possible in the world of constructivism, which was structured around relationship, interdependence, and actions in which there was always a simultaneous equal and opposite reaction. Thus, the value Gan attributed to processed materials stemmed from the *process*. Constant working and reworking of the material world would mold human consciousness so as to harmonize with it, but only to precisely the same extent that the material world would be molded to suit human consciousness. Although it is more appealing to think of this dynamic as humans listening to nature, it is just as accurate to describe it as nature's complete transformation into a human product.

Thus far, I have discussed *faktura* in terms of the relationship between material and maker, but Gan's *faktura* also triangulated to include the relationship of each of those two terms to their larger circumstances. On the one hand, *faktura* relied on a material

having fixed and inherent properties, “unconditional” properties.<sup>107</sup> It was important that the material push back, that it be a fact. On the other hand, the specific ways in which a material’s unconditional properties manifested themselves depended on circumstances external to it. In the example of the cast iron, the most obvious variable in this category was temperature. The metal changed from a flowing liquid to a solid in dependence on heat. Similarly, the possibilities of the metal were dependent on the maker’s skill level and access to technology or tools. This is the sense in which *tselesoobraznost*’ was an important concept. The material’s properties depend on how and with what the maker acts upon them, which is in turn dependent on current economic, political, and social limitations and demands, and society’s specific knowledge base and technological abilities. The whole process of making was embedded within this complex set of interrelations.

In a sense, Gan was simply pointing out the web of relational contingency that has always surrounded every production process, artistic or otherwise. Yet Gan’s acknowledgement and embrace of this fact represents a significant departure from both previous and other contemporary understandings of art and the creative process. Whereas other art-making practices—and sciences, for that matter—tended to isolate these factors as annoying issues *external* to their project, things to be minimized and solved before the process of creation or experimentation could proceed, Gan considered all of these factors to be integral to the process and the object, even part of the material medium.

In order to understand Gan’s thinking in this regard, it is easiest to begin at the most physical level. In his initial proposal of 28 March, he suggested that the group think about

---

<sup>107</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i ranniy konstruktivizm*: 99. [безусловном]

the light and space surrounding an object as part of the material to be worked. As he wrote,

We must approach light and space as we do the material. The spatialists' mistake was that they only solved the solid material and missed the space and the significance of light...No one has, for example, shown concretely in objects what sort of space an object is calculated to occupy and what light will radiate from it.<sup>108</sup>

At the next meeting, he further schematized the idea when he presented his draft of the program statement. Under the heading of things “the group considers to be material elements,” Gan listed 1) “the material in general,” 2) light, 3) space, 4) volume, 5) surface, and 6) color. He dubbed all but the first “intellectual materials” and made a special point of insisting that “the constructivists treat intellectual materials in the same way as solid materials.”<sup>109</sup>

It is easy to see how this line of thought might have motivated Rodchenko's development of the hanging spatial constructions.<sup>110</sup> His transformation of a plane of plywood into a three-dimensional sculptural form can be understood as the addition of the “materials” of space and volume (or volumetric space). The form's painted reflective

---

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*: 100. [К свету и пространству мы должны подходить, как к материалу. Ошибка пространственников была в том, что они разрешали только твердый материал и пропускали пространство и значение света...Но никто, например, не указывал, конкретно в вещах, на какое пространство вещь рассчитана, какой свет будет излучать она.]

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*: 95-96. [Материальными элементами группа считает: / 1. Материал вообще. / Изучение его происхождения, индустриальное претворение или продуктика. Его свойство, его значение. / Интеллектуальными материалами: / 2. Свет / 3. Пространство / 4. Объем / 5. Плоскость / 6. Цвет / К интеллектуальным материалам конструктивисты относятся в равной степени, как к материалам твердых тел.]

<sup>110</sup> Although most of Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions are dated 1920-1921, the later date is more likely. I have not seen documentation of them prior to their exhibition at the Obmokhu exhibition of May 1921, and Gan affixed a date of 1921 to one of them when he published a photograph in *Kino-Fot* 4 (1922).

surfaces and free rotation are in a sense a means of working with surface and light. It is also easy to glimpse a larger zeitgeist in Gan's enumeration of intellectual materials. Not only did it participate in that moment's desire to systematize "elements and principles of design," but also in the widespread interest in exploring space, light, and movement. This interest may be best typified in the twenties by Lázló Moholy-Nagy's oeuvre, particularly his experiments in photography and his *Light-Space Modulator*, or *Light Prop*, of 1928-1930 (fig 31). The artistic ground had been well prepared for such interests across the board by a string of avant-garde painting practices claiming to represent light and movement rather than physical matter,<sup>111</sup> as well as by the greater accessibility of photographic media, but there were also direct linkages between the Russian constructivists and Moholy. Although he did not draw up the first plans for the *Light Prop* until late in 1928, the first sketches for it were done in 1922, during a period of collaboration with Alfréd Kemény.<sup>112</sup> In 1921, Kemény had traveled to Moscow, where we know that he participated in discussions at INKhUK and saw Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions at the Obmokhu exhibition.<sup>113</sup>

One could interpret these vectors of influence in any number of ways. More important than the uniqueness or priority of Russian constructivism's interest in working with space and light, however, are the nuanced differences in the way in which these interests translated and manifested themselves. Comparison between Rodchenko's

---

<sup>111</sup> For example, impressionism, divisionism, futurism, and rayonism.

<sup>112</sup> Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985): 26.

<sup>113</sup> For more on Moholy's relationship to constructivism, see Oliver Botar, *Természet és technika: Az újraértelmezett Moholy-Nagy, 1916-1923* (Budapest: Vince Kiadó, 2007): 192-202.

hanging spatial constructions and Moholy's *Light Prop* is particularly productive in this regard. Both structures hinged on the interaction of moving volumetric arrangements of planar metallic surfaces with light and space. I have already discussed the way that Rodchenko's constructions created a relationship between themselves and the viewer that was modulated by the viewer's movement, ambient light sources, and air currents in the room. The *Light Prop* functioned in a slightly different way, projecting moving patterns onto the surrounding space by reflecting, blocking, or letting light beams pass through variously perforated and rotating vertical planes of metal. Thus, unlike Rodchenko's construction, the *Light Prop* deflected visual interest from the central object (itself) and scattered it everywhere else. It modulated space and light, producing a different experience of the surrounding environment for the viewer, whose relationship to the source of the spectacle was indirect. The machine need not even have been visible.

The impression of modesty suggested by the *Light Prop*'s behind-the-scenes approach is countervailed by the high degree of control over the surroundings that it required. While Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions became more interesting the more they responded to chance atmospheric factors, the *Light Prop* functioned best when the room was completely dark and a spotlight trained directly on it. Indeed, it was designed for use in the highly controlled environment of a theater. It did not interact with light and space as external, contingent factors, but made them a constituent part of its system. Similarly, the rotation of the *Light Prop*'s surfaces was not affected by air currents, but controlled by an internal motor. Any application of an external force strong enough to affect its movement would no doubt break the mechanism. So, although both Rodchenko's and Moholy's constructions were designed to utilize or relate to space and

light, the character of the relationship in the two cases differed markedly. The hanging spatial constructions responded to their surroundings, while the *Light Prop* dominated its environment without being affected by it.

Oddly enough, Moholy's construction was more utilitarian than Rodchenko's. Moholy initially designed the *Light Prop* as a device for creating light effects in theater, and he received money from the German electrical supplier AEG (*Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft*) to construct it.<sup>114</sup> Yet despite its moving pieces and light effects, the *Light Prop* conforms to the aesthetic structure of an abstracted-illusionistic image. It is a technologically enhanced way of creating a spectacle. One cannot know it through interaction in the same way that one can with Rodchenko's construction. Object and viewer remain quite separate. The viewer's thinking remained "on this side of the phenomenon," as Gan quoted Marx.<sup>115</sup> Rodchenko's non-utilitarian construction, in contrast, attains the status of a concrete-dynamic object through its dependence. It has an embedded, rather than an autonomous, relationship with its surroundings.

The distinction that I am developing here is admittedly a fragile one when considered in abstract physical terms like space and light. It will open up to become a much more robust difference as I move from this discussion of *faktura* into a consideration of Gan's "third principle and first discipline," tectonics.<sup>116</sup> Tectonics has always been the least well understood of the three terms in secondary scholarship, as well

---

<sup>114</sup> Terence A. Senter, "Moholy-Nagy: The Transitional Years," in *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From Bauhaus to the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 85.

<sup>115</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivism*: 34; Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach": 13-15. See my note above on the translation.

<sup>116</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivism*: 55. [третий принцип и первую дисциплину]

as the one deemed least relevant to art history. Most define it as something like constructivism's "ideological component," or the way in which its formal techniques were applied to contemporary political tasks, and leave it at that.<sup>117</sup> These definitions are more or less correct. Yet they enable a bracketing of tectonics as the application of constructivism, and therefore separate from its formal innovations, whereas Gan clearly thought about it as an integral part of the system. For Gan, tectonics described a dependence on larger context not as an incidental external fact, but as a formal property of the object. It was his way of extending the material medium beyond "the material in general" and "intellectual materials" like space and light, in order to include historically contingent variables like the economic and political system, social and psychological norms, and technological know-how.

As Gan readily admitted, many aspects of constructivism's first two disciplines, *faktura* and construction, did not depend on socialism and could be explored within autonomous art objects. Interest in industrial materials had begun to emerge in prerevolutionary avant-garde artistic experiments such as Tatlin's non-utilitarian constructions of the early teens, as well as in the work of Western European constructivists like Moholy.<sup>118</sup> Yet for Gan, without tectonics, these works were missing a crucial dimension. Forced to remain within the confines of art, "without connection to

---

<sup>117</sup> For example, Christina Lodder, "Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s," in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-32* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990): 102. She relays the appropriate passages from Gan's *Constructivism* in her longer study, but the term does not receive a full discussion. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 94, 99.

<sup>118</sup> In the meetings of 1921, Western European constructivism was not an issue, but Gan devotes his concluding remarks in *Constructivism* to addressing the phenomenon. See Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 69-70.

the social reorganization of the whole social organism,” they remained “arbitrary operations on the material,” an “absurdity” (*nelepost'iu*), neither here nor there.<sup>119</sup> Russian constructivism’s aesthetic difference from—and for Gan, advantage over—Western art lay in the fact that the communist restructuring of institutions and relationships allowed the work of the artist to become directly related to practical contemporary tasks. This allowed them to make objects that were socially meaningful. Such an aesthetic opportunity was not available to artists working within traditional art institutions. As a result, they experienced their interest in all of the formal and material issues I discussed above as something like “a bug bite” (*komarnym ukusom*), an itch impossible to scratch.<sup>120</sup>

For these reasons, tectonics was far and away the most important of the three constructivist disciplines for Gan. He tried to get across its essential role by articulating it in terms comprehensible to those who had more readily identified with the Working Group of Objective Analysis’s project of isolating the qualities specific to painting: “Constructivism without tectonics,” he wrote, “is like painting without color.”<sup>121</sup> That is, tectonics may not be everything, but it was important, as well as inherent. One could certainly make a painting without color—both Malevich and Rodchenko had demonstrated that point in their white on white, black, and black and white paintings (figs 32, 33, and 24-26). Such works did not take full advantage of the medium’s potential, however, and much of its pleasure, richness, and value were lost in the ascetic

---

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*: 59, 55. [без связи с социальным переустройством всего общественного организма... случайное оперирование над материалом.]

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*: 55.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*: 61. [Конструктивизм без тектоники тоже, что живопись без цвета.]

experiment. In other cases, the absence of color could render a painting meaningless, as Rodchenko demonstrated later in 1921 with his series of three monochromes (fig 34). We can also read the statement as advice to the historian: studying constructivism's objects without considering tectonics is a little like analyzing a painting in a black and white picture. It might still hold some interest, but you will be missing a lot. In a way, the concept offers another way of accessing plenitude in an art that has been understood as a rational and scientific denial of that form of aesthetic experience.

Like Gan's Marxist interpretation of the evolution of art and society, the term *tectonics* probably derives from Bogdanov, whose pet project was the development of a universal organizational science that he called tectology.<sup>122</sup> Gan never explicitly acknowledged this relationship, but etymological coincidence is unlikely given the rarity of the words' shared root,<sup>123</sup> and even without the linguistic link, it is impossible to ignore the similarity—indeed, near identity—between Gan's tectonics and Bogdanov's universal science. Bogdanov believed that the realm of practical experience—of labor and social interaction—was the place with the most potential for providing a unifying system of organization for things, people, and thought.<sup>124</sup> Activity and interaction produced a common language and set of assumptions, which themselves served as the storehouse for the unifying dynamic.<sup>125</sup> According to Bogdanov, this societal unity had

---

<sup>122</sup> He published three volumes on the topic between 1912 and 1922.

<sup>123</sup> *Tekt-* should not be confused with the more common root *tekh-*, used in words like technique and technology.

<sup>124</sup> See Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Essays in Tektology, the General Science of Organization*, trans. George Gorelik (Seaside, Cal.: Intersystems Publications, 1984): 18.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

been interrupted by the modern trend to divide science into multiple *sciences*, each with its own insular language and set of principles. Tectology was an attempt to reunite these separate spheres by opening them to one another. The resulting coextension, in which practitioners in one field would have to communicate with those from others, would create a unified language and set of principles, an Esperanto of sciences.<sup>126</sup>

Even in this brief sketch, one can see the similarities between Bogdanov's new science and Gan's understanding of constructivism's objects as opening the sphere of art into direct relationship with life. They also both emphasized the social constitution of normative systems as the reason why it was important that humans, objects, and branches of knowledge not remain discrete. Oddly, even though Gan quoted extensively from Bogdanov in *Constructivism* in 1922, he did not mention him in the discussions of the First Working Group, nor did any of the other members note any connection. Political circumstances go a long way toward explaining this silence. Bogdanov had been Lenin's primary rival for control of the Russian Communist Party following the 1905 revolution. Lenin wrote *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* in 1909 as an attempt to philosophically undermine Bogdanov's power. After the October Revolution, Bogdanov and many in his camp were offered posts in Lenin's government. Lunacharsky and Trotsky both accepted, but Bogdanov refused, preferring to work in the independent organization Proletkul't. His ideas continued to be extremely influential in the cultural sphere, however, to the point where their power became a subject of concern within the Politburo in the summer of 1920. By December, a second edition of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* was issued and Proletkul't brought under state supervision. Bogdanov continued to work,

---

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*: 21.

lecture, and publish, but his name carried a certain stigma.<sup>127</sup> It is unclear how exactly this set of events related to the reorganization of Narkompros that I discussed above, but the temporal coincidence suggests that there was one. Gan and the group may have thought it better to make a linguistic link without being entirely explicit.

For my purposes, it is just as well that Gan did not fix the term's definition as a subset of tectology, since the other ways in which he and the group attempted to explain it lead on some valuable detours. The first begins with the way that Gan defined tectonics in his first program statement. There, Gan claimed that the term derived from geology, where it had been used since at least the 1890s to describe the inner structure of the earth's core and resulting surface features, such as mountain ranges.<sup>128</sup> As he explained,

Tectonics, or tectonic style, is organically smelted and formed on the one hand from the properties of communism itself, and on the other, from the purposive use of industrial material. The word tectonic is taken from geology, where it is used as a definition of an eruption from the center of the earth.<sup>129</sup>

The geologic analogy is notable, and strange, in the way that it articulated a primarily

<sup>127</sup> See John Biggart, "The Rehabilitation of Bogdanov," in *Bogdanov and His Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky), 1873-1928*, ed. John Biggart, G. D. Gloveli, and Avraham Yassour (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 1998): 6-14.

<sup>128</sup> Both the geologic definition and a definition related to craft appear in the Russian *Encyclopedic Dictionary* of 1890, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* claims that the geologic definition first appeared in English in the 1890s. It does not appear at all in Vladimir Dal's dictionary, originally compiled in the 1860s. See *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (1890), reprint (Yaroslavl: Terra, 1993): 774-775; See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 6 October 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50248119>>.

<sup>129</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 61. [Тектоника или тектонический стиль органически выплавляется и формируется с одной стороны из свойств самого коммунизма, с другой—от целесообразного использования индустриального материала. Слово тектонический взято из геологии, где оно употребляется, как определение извержений, исходящих из сердцевины земли.]

social process in the very least social of terms. In a move similar to his consideration of “intellectual materials” like space and light as physical materials, Gan translated Bogdanov’s slow shift of socially constituted universal norms into an analogy about the earth’s drifting tectonic plates. The translation was also an operation, functioning to naturalize the social, making it seem more objective and determined, like a physical fact. His use of the word “smelted” (*vyplavliaetsia*), usually used to describe a process of extracting metal from its ore, further defined the discipline in terms of physical materials.

For these reasons, Gan’s analogy has been seen as a reifying and deterministic way of thinking about the social, or even an essentializing interpretation of Marx’s model of base and superstructure.<sup>130</sup> To some extent, this reading simply fails to fully grasp the analogy. The movement of tectonic plates was a model for something already defined as socially constituted, and the words “smelted” and “eruption” implied fluidity and transformation, rather than solidity. At the same time, the element of determinism was, I believe, intentional. It was an effective way of describing the real sense of inexorability experienced by any one individual within a system in which privilege had been removed and all subject positions were equally defined by interdependence. This may be what Gan meant when he said that tectonics stemmed from the “properties of communism.” In addition, the conflation of the social and the material was a repeated theme in Gan’s thinking, and one that went in both directions. This description of the social in material terms complements his concept of *faktura*, which worked in the opposite way to define the material world as historical and socially contingent. Finally, note that Gan did not describe tectonics as the geologic plates themselves, but as the eruption that allowed

---

<sup>130</sup> This is Gough’s conclusion. Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 72-73.

formless and fluid subterranean magma to find a surface manifestation. Tectonics was less a concrete thing than a connector or conduit, the space between things.

The members of the First Working Group also found the nuances in Gan's geological explanation difficult to grasp. Gan wrote up an additional list of thirty-nine theses on the topic, apparently hoping to get the point across, but when they were discussed by the other members in his absence, everyone seemed to think, as Ioganson stated, "that the part about geology could be shortened."<sup>131</sup> Medunetskii in particular simply wanted to scrap the entire idea. For him, an eruption from the center of the earth suggested spontaneity and disorder, when constructivism was supposed to be about rationality, order, and organization. Others felt that it was important to keep it and attempted to come up with alternative explanations. Rodchenko's first pass was, as usual, to think about tectonics in terms of the utilitarian. He suggested that tectonics was a means of supplying "a goal for constructive construction..., something common and higher." For him, it was important that they "start not from the work, but from the goal," and in this regard "utility [could] be analyzed as an interesting question."<sup>132</sup>

Ironically, the combination of Medunetskii's assumption that nature was irrational and Rodchenko's assumption that something common was also something higher nearly precisely defines the problem that Gan would identify later in *Constructivism* as the

---

<sup>131</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*: 103. Medunetskii and Rodchenko also express the same sentiment. [мне кажется, что место о геологии следует сократить]

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*: 110. [Цель конструктивного построения должна быть кем-то поставлена, должно быть нечто общее и высшее. Надо начинать не с работы, а с целей. Мы ставим себе задачи в целом. Вопрос же об утилитарности можно разобрать как вопрос интересный.]

foundation of idealistic bourgeois thinking. As I relayed in the previous section, he located the problem with such thinking in the gap between worldview and reality, as well as in people's preference for the former. The truth of worldview was considered a *higher* truth, while reality was experienced as a "series of apparent accidents." This problematic seemed to be an especial source of befuddlement in the discussions of 1921. As Rodchenko eventually expressed it, "without experience—that is, without construction and *faktura*—[tectonics] cannot exist." Yet, at the same time, "tectonics is the common ideological basis underlying every assignment." Tectonics contained a difficult tension: it was simultaneously the foundation for practical work *and* a product of practical work. So, "how does the artist formally approach the work?," Rodchenko asked, "from the bottom up or the top down?"<sup>133</sup>

Stepanova smartly sidestepped this issue by proposing they think about tectonics as a development in understandings of style. Gan had referred to it as "tectonic style" in his initial presentation, the concept was familiar, and it was defined by the same bottom up/top down tension. As she pointed out, one cannot just create a style and apply it; it had to happen organically.<sup>134</sup> Like *faktura*, style already had a long history whose most recent chapter in avant-garde art focused on an individual vision and hand. This had not always been the case, however, and Stepanova suggested looking back at the way in which style worked in earlier periods, back to art before the Renaissance, when style had less to say about an individual, and more to say about the overall culture during a particular time

---

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*: 107. [Без опыта она существовать не может, т.е. без конструкции и фактуры. / Общее идеологическое основание при каждом задании—тектоника, но как формально подойдет художник к работе? Снизу вверх или сверху вниз.]

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*: 111.

period.<sup>135</sup> In this sense, she went back to the concept of period style originally proposed by Winckelmann, who had noted that works of a single period often deviated in the same way from the forms of Greek art, which he considered to be an unstylized and natural norm.<sup>136</sup> Stepanova would not have privileged Greek art in this way, but one can easily replace that term with some idea about a hypothetical objective and ahistorical representation unmediated by human preferences or norms. Like style, tectonics could be understood as the historical aspect of a representation, the way that it manifested a common deviation from nature or a common sense.

Stepanova's introduction of the idea of style also points to other, non-geological uses of the word *tectonic*. At the point when the geologic meaning entered Russian in the 1890s, there was another dictionary entry for the word that defined it as the art of endowing utilitarian objects with a beautiful form, or the artistic aspect of carpentry, metal-working, ceramics, and other craft production.<sup>137</sup> This definition likely stemmed from the development of the term in German art history. As Harry Francis Mallgrave has explained, the words *Tektonik* or *tektonisch* were used in the nineteenth century to talk about the structural arrangement of an artwork, usually in a literal sense, as in architecture, but sometimes also in two-dimensional ornament and representation. For example, in *Greek Tectonics* (1844-1852), Carl Bötticher wrote about tectonics as a system in which load and support were continually in conflict. A structure's stability was the result of a careful balancing of opposing forces. In this, Mallgrave explains, he drew

---

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*: 103.

<sup>136</sup> See *Winckelmann. Writings on Art*, ed. David Irwin (New York: Phaidon Press, 1972): 4-5, 53-54.

<sup>137</sup> *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*: 774-775.

on ideas advanced by Schopenhauer; first, that arts could be characterized (and ranked) in terms of their relative idealism or materiality, music being the least bound by material necessity and architecture the most; and second, that architecture should be understood in terms of a contest of wills. An architectural structure represented humankind's effort to keep gravity from having its way. Bötticher extended the idea to architecture's non-structural decorative elements, which he claimed expressed the structural dynamics of their bearers symbolically.<sup>138</sup>

This last idea of Bötticher's in turn influenced Gottfried Semper's better known theory of ornament's relation to material structure, which was also the more likely source of the Russian definition. In his mammoth *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or Practical Aesthetics: A Handbook for Technicians, Artists, and Friends of the Arts* (1860),<sup>139</sup> Semper transposed Bötticher's argument about the symbolic connection of ornament and structure into a historical one, suggesting that all ornamental forms stemmed from the properties of the materials out of which they were originally made, even if they were no longer rendered in those materials now. The creation of a new form was "an act of becoming" that involved a negotiation between an object's purpose and its

---

<sup>138</sup> See Harry Francis Mallgrave, Introduction to Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics: A Handbook for Technicians, Artists, and Friends of the Arts*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004): 39-40. See also Carl Bötticher, *Die Tektonik der Hellenen*, 3 vols. (Potsdam: Ferdinand Reigl, 1844-1852), and Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, vol. 2 (New York: Dover, 1966): 182-192.

<sup>139</sup> Semper reportedly came across *Greek Tectonics* while in exile in London in the library of the British Museum, where he shared a reading room with Marx. See Mallgrave, introduction to Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*: 9.

material.<sup>140</sup> These two categories—purpose and material—might be rearticulated in Schopenhauer’s terms as the will of the maker and the will of the natural world, or also as something like the relation of maker and material described by Gan’s definition of *faktura*. Semper continued, however, by moving beyond this act of becoming to talk about how the resulting form was translated into other materials and for other purposes completely unrelated to the ones that motivated it. This process, he wrote, “is quite a different one and is entirely a matter for the *history of style*.”<sup>141</sup> Style was what happened *after* the form had been detached from the originating interaction of human purpose and material properties. It began when form started to evolve on a purely cultural (non-material) plane.

Like Gan, Semper considered form to be the “result of *all* the factors involved in its creation.” By tracing each ornamental form back to a distant point of origin, he attempted to prove that ornament was never the product of an applied artists’ whimsy, but of a complex rational process, a “function composed of many variables.” Thus “nothing is arbitrary; everything is conditioned by circumstances and relations.”<sup>142</sup> This last statement in particular is reminiscent of Rodchenko’s credo, also cited by Gan in *Constructivism*, which went, “Nothing accidental, nothing unaccounted for, nothing from blind taste and aesthetic arbitrariness [proizvola]. Everything must be interpreted

---

<sup>140</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004): 106-107.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*: 107.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*: 71-72.

technically and functionally.”<sup>143</sup> Yet there is an important difference in the fact that the constructivist slogan reached forward to define a contemporary practice, while Semper’s reached backwards as an explanation. Semper might have explained the existence of the current battery of forms in material terms, but he also located that material point of origin—their moment of becoming—in temporally distant and less complex cultures, indeed, in the same “primitive society” that Bogdanov talked about in his *Science of Social Consciousness*. When addressing contemporary architecture, he railed against the overly functional, “invisible” architecture of iron scaffolding and glass, such as Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace, preferring to “clothe” or “dress” such structures with traditional ornament.<sup>144</sup>

Semper did not use the word *tectonics* to describe his overall theory, but to refer to the third of four categories of material structure: textiles (pliable and resistant to tearing), ceramics (moldable, and then hardened), tectonics (stick-shaped and structural, framework-like), and stereotomy (dense stacked blocks, like masonry construction).<sup>145</sup> In the twentieth century, however, the term evolved out of Semper’s third category of material into more symbolic abstract usages, becoming something like a synonym for the word *structural*. One prominent example is Heinrich Wölfflin’s discussion of “tectonic” and “a-tectonic style” (*tektonisch, atektonisch*) in his *Principles of Art History* (1915). He used the contrast as one of a number of ways to analyze the compositions of pictures. The

---

<sup>143</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivism*: 65. [Ничего случайного, безучетного ничего от слепого вкуса и эстетического произвола. Все должно быть осмыслено технически и функционально.]

<sup>144</sup> Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*: 71.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*: 109.

terms marked a distinction for him between a closed form (*geschlossene Form*), whose tectonic structure, or formal balance, “made of the picture a self-contained entity, pointing everywhere back to itself”; and an open form (*offene Form*), whose a-tectonic composition “everywhere points out beyond itself and purposely looks limitless.”<sup>146</sup>

Wölfflin cited monumental and other rigidly symmetrical work like the Parthenon or Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* as the most obvious example of tectonic style, although he also allowed that it could be present in freer compositions as long as balance was maintained. The greater the degree of symmetry, the greater the sense of wholeness, since with both halves present it seemed like nothing was missing.<sup>147</sup> In contrast, a-tectonic style was found in work like the baroque, where “everything is done to avoid the impression that this composition was invented just for this surface.” In such a-tectonic works, “the general tendency is to produce a picture no longer as a self-existing piece of the world, but as a passing show, which the spectator may enjoy only for a moment.”<sup>148</sup> The question boiled down to “whether...the total picture as a visible form, looks *intentional* or not.” The tectonic form feels intentional, as if “beauty is revealed law,” whereas the a-tectonic composition seems adventitious; its beauty derives from “the

---

<sup>146</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1950): 124.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*: 125. This theory relates directly to Semper’s lengthy discussion of symmetry, in which radially and spherically symmetric forms are seen to be “completely self-contained forms indifferent to the external world” because they are self-generating and whole (e.g., mineral crystals or snowflakes). Other forms are seen as dependent, formed by external forces, or as incomplete because they are broken parts or cross-sections of a whole. See Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*: 83-90.

<sup>148</sup> Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*: 126.

breath of life that brings flux and movement.”<sup>149</sup>

Even in the case of the open, a-tectonic form, Wölfflin assumed the artwork to be an autonomous whole. An a-tectonic composition may *seem* to limitlessly point to the world outside of itself, he wrote; but “of course, secret limits continue to exist, and make it possible for the picture to be self-contained in the aesthetic sense.”<sup>150</sup> Similarly, the tectonic form’s apparent intentionality was of the Kantian sort, a purposiveness without purpose. In conceiving of composition as independent of all of those “complex functions,” “variables,” “circumstances and relations” that Semper proposed generated form, Wölfflin did not so much contradict Semper’s concept of tectonic structure as develop it in a particular direction. He left all reference to form’s origin in material necessity behind in order to focus on the subsequent evolution of style. In this way, he maintained one aspect of the nineteenth-century meaning of the word *tectonic*: tectonic is used to imply structure in composition. It can still be understood as an abstract conflict between two wills, something like the will to stability versus the will to movement.

Wölfflin’s development of tectonic style was one way to evolve Semper’s line of thinking, but it was not the only way. Gan’s tectonics can also be understood as growing out of Semper-era usage, but in a way precisely the inverse of Wölfflin’s. If Wölfflin considered tectonic style a way for a picture to compositionally announce its self-sufficiency and completeness through visual balance, Gan used it instead to model the balance of forces that affected the production of an object. Gan’s tectonic drew on the aspect of Semper’s theory that Wölfflin had ignored, the complex function of variables

---

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*: 126, 131.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*: 124.

that went into a form's moment of becoming. Form was a compromise that resulted from a contest of wills. It was the balance of all relevant pressures, some of which were material, some social, some economic, and some political.

In this regard, Gan's interpretation can be seen as part of a contemporaneous trend in various sciences to incorporate the methods and models of structural linguistics.<sup>151</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, linguistics was seen to have hit on an important methodological discovery when it began studying the importance of communication and normative expectations within a single period rather than historically tracing the origins of words. These two aspects of the development of language were distinguished with the terms synchronic and diachronic.<sup>152</sup> Synchronic norms evolved collectively through time, gradually producing diachronic change, but the "origin" of the norm or language was as much the synchronic network of acts of communication as its diachronic historical predecessors. In its jettison of historical genealogy, structural linguistic analysis often focused on formal technique, and thus its analyses could tend towards an ahistorical formalism. As a structural model, however, it assumed historical embeddedness and thus emphasized the constraints on individual agency that stem from an interdependent position.

It is unclear whether Gan and the First Working Group would have known about Wölfflin's usage of the term when they were discussing their own in 1921. *Principles of*

---

<sup>151</sup> See Anna Guillemin, "The Style of Linguistics: Aby Warburg, Karl Vossler, and Hermann Osthoff," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69: 4 (October 2008): 605-626.

<sup>152</sup> See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983): 89-98.

*Art History* was not translated into Russian until 1922, but it was clearly on constructivist radar at that point. The productivist theoretician Nikolai Tarabukin reviewed it in September.<sup>153</sup> Wölfflin's earlier work was widely known in Russia before the First World War,<sup>154</sup> and a Wölfflinian school of art criticism developed in Moscow in 1921.<sup>155</sup> Gan sparred with one of its prominent adherents, the critic Aleksei Sidorov, in the spring of 1922 on the topic of approaches to art criticism.<sup>156</sup> In that year, Sidorov also used the term *tectonic* to describe book layout in a way that developed its architectural origins in the Wölfflinian direction. He suggested that, from a distance, text should merge into a uniform block, as if it were an architectural form constructed on the foundation of the white page.<sup>157</sup> Thus, it seems possible that Gan's attention to tectonics was another of his efforts to redefine the terms of the debate.

Although Gan evolved the meaning of tectonics differently than Wölfflin had, both of them moved the concept in the direction of defining a work's tectonic viability as contingent on its social reception, rather than its literal struggle to stand up under the pressure of gravity. In applying the tectonic to the analysis of a vertical plane of pictorial composition, Wölfflin linked those two factors—social reception and physical stability—

---

<sup>153</sup> Nikolai Tarabukin, review of G. V. Vel'flin, *Istolkovanie iskusstva, Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 7 (September-October 1922): 341.

<sup>154</sup> See Anatole Senkevitch, "Moisei Ginzburg and the Emergence of a Constructivist Theory of Architecture," introduction to *Style and Epoch* by Moisei Ginzburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982): 23.

<sup>155</sup> B. B. Mikhailov, "O nekotorykh metodologicheskikh poiskakh sovetskogo iskusstvovedeniia," *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 75 (1976): 285.

<sup>156</sup> See my discussion in chapter 5.

<sup>157</sup> A. A. Sidorov, *Iskusstvo knigi* (Moscow: Dom Pechati, 1922). See Osip Brik's review, "Usluzhivyi estet," *Lef* 1 (March 1923): 92-103.

through something like transference. In simple terms, tectonic style lent a sense of balance and order because of its visual similarity to a stable monumental structure like the Parthenon, even though in real terms its balance had no physical relevance. Gan's tectonic, in contrast, swapped this vertical image for a horizontal plane of functional interrelation. Tectonic style resulted from a real balance among a number of forces, most of which were lateral and social rather than god-given and universal.

This contrast between vertical and horizontal orientations is admittedly abstract, yet it is also appealingly consistent with Gan's geologic analogy. Indeed, it seems particularly significant in light of this discussion that he chose the confusing geologic definition over the vertical analogy of built form, even though his understanding of tectonics could theoretically be derived from Bötticher's Schopenhauerian understanding of architectural structure, and even though architectural structure would seem to have more in common with the constructivist project. He made this distinction in his own first use of the word *tectonic*, which was in relation to mass action in 1920. There, he stated that traditional theater with its "frozen stiff architecture" could not accommodate the "volcanic action" of a mass performance.<sup>158</sup> Mass action could, because it had a different sort of "organizational tectonic," one of a "practical art."<sup>159</sup> The cancellation of his May Day mass action script was "the first tectonic tragedy of socialist theater."<sup>160</sup> In this description, Gan specifically contrasts an architectural understanding of tectonic as a

---

<sup>158</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Opytnyi plan dlia massogo stsenariia "Pervoe Maia," *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 14. [застывшей архитектурой...вулканического действия]

<sup>159</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Massovoe deistvo," *Vestnik teatra* 67 (7 September 1920): 13. [организованной тектоникой действенного искусства]

<sup>160</sup> "Pervoe Maia (K otchetu sektsii)," *Vestnik teatra* (7 September 1920): 14. [первая тектоническая трагедия социалистического театра]

rigid vertical structure with a social understanding in which the tectonic was a laterally extensive organizational network. In this regard, it is interesting that, at least in English, the first recorded use of the adverbial form, *tectonically*, was in 1925 and in the realm of geology.<sup>161</sup> Evidently, it had become desirable to describe things not only as *being* structural, but also *behaving* structurally.

While the rest of the First Working Group had difficulty connecting to the geotectonic analogy, they also seemed to pick up the same distinction between lateral and vertical forces in their own more architectural attempt to conceptualize tectonic style. They proposed that tectonic style might be understood in opposition to monumental style, a contrast particularly meaningful for those who had participated in Kandinsky's Section for Monumental Art in 1920. As Stepanova ruminated:

There was construction in stone architecture, but this is not the construction that we're talking about. Instead of a monumental approach, we have a tectonic approach. Instead of a monumental style, an eternal artwork, we set down tectonically expedient constructivity with a precise and definite goal, and not only as a work of art.<sup>162</sup>

Stepanova's reference to stone architecture brings up structures like the Parthenon, whose classical expression of holding up the roof had also been the most obvious referent in Bötticher's *Greek Tectonics*. Gravity and physical viability were also constructivist

---

<sup>161</sup> John Joly's *The Surface-History of the Earth* (1925) described an "intrusive mass of igneous rock" as "generally *associated tectonically* with a mountain range" (my emphasis). See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 6 October 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50248119>>.

<sup>162</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i ranniy konstruktivizm*: 109. [И в каменной архитектуре была конструкция, но это не та конструкция, о которой мы говорим. У нас вместо монументального подхода есть подход тектонический. Мы ставим взамен монументального стиля—вечного художественного произведения—тектонически целесообразную конструктивность с точной и определенной целью, а не только как художественное произведение.]

concerns, but still, “this [was] not the construction [they were] talking about” with tectonics. The forces with which their constructions would need to reckon were not just the physical laws sent down from above, the ones expressed monumentally and eternally in constructions like the Parthenon. They were also lateral pressures from their fellow humans. Tectonic style meant discarding Kandinsky’s assumption of a universal and ahistorical human perceptive apparatus in favor of a concept of style as something that shifted in relation to society’s changing needs.

Later, in *Constructivism*, Gan finally found an example to more effectively communicate what he meant by tectonics in Bukharin’s *Theory of Historical Materialism* (Teoriia istoricheskogo materializma). Bukharin’s example allows him to let go of the overarching conception implied by geotectonic plates in order to focus on the character of a tectonically embedded object. He used an object from the world of machines rather than an art object, but, as we will see, this only makes the example more compelling. Gan quotes,

Outside of human society, any machine loses its meaning as a machine. It is transformed into a simple piece of external nature, a combination of steel or wooden parts, no more.

Imagine a sunken ocean liner. That living leviathan with its mighty engine shaking the entire monstrous steel body of the floating house, with one thousand gadgets of all kinds, beginning with the cleaning rag and ending with the radio station.

When it lies like a dead weight on the ocean floor, all of its complicated construction loses social meaning. The ship ceases to be a ship, for it has lost its social being. It leapt out of society, has ceased to be a constituent part of it, ceased to serve its *social* function, and has been transformed from a *social* thing into a plain thing, like any bit of external nature that is not in immediate contact with human society.

*Technology is not just [a collection of] pieces of external nature; it represents an extended organ of society. It is social technology.*<sup>163</sup>

---

<sup>163</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 47. This passage appears in Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical*

While it does not immediately disturb our sense of an art object's value to say that it may have no inherent function, Bukharin's example makes the point that *no* object has an inherent functional value, or even meaning, when pulled out of relation with its social context. Something as simple as a cleaning rag is transformed through use from a piece of organic matter decaying on the ocean's floor to a machine with very specific properties that allow it to absorb, scrub, etc. By the same measure, a complex product of human labor like a radio station, when taken out of use, becomes no different than a pile of metal, a "piece of external nature."

With a scale and structure more like architecture than like a tool, the ocean liner also makes an interesting choice as an example of a machine. "Using" it involves getting inside of it, rather than picking it up and wielding it. As I explained in chapter 1, Marx had analyzed a similar distinction, between hand tools and factory machines, as the origin of a much larger set of differences in the structure of human relationships with nature, knowledge, and one another. The worker who used a hand tool made it into an appendage

---

*Materialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1925): 133. There are discrepancies between Gan's quotation and the English translation. I have translated directly from *Constructivism*. [Любая машина вне человеческого общества теряет свое значение, как машина: она превращается просто в кусок внешней природы, комбинацию частей стали или дерева—больше ничего. / Представим себе, что затонул океанский пароход, эта живая громадина, с мощным двигателем, сотрясающим все чудовищное стальное тело пловучего дома, с тысячью всевозможных приспособлений, начиная от кухонных тряпок и кончая радиостанцией. / Когда он лежит мертвым грузом на дне морском, вся его сложная конструкция теряет общественное значение. Пароход перестает быть пароходом, ибо он потерял уже свое общественное бытие, он выскочил из общества, перестал быть его составной частью, перестал нести свою общественную службу, из общественной вещи превратился просто в вещь, как любая часть внешней природы, не соприкасающаяся непосредственно с человеческим обществом. / Техника—это не просто куски внешней природы; это—удлиненные органы общества, *это общественная техника*.]

of her body, animating it with her skill and strength, whereas an automatic system of machinery like a factory assembly line made humans into the appendages, harboring the skill and strength itself.<sup>164</sup> The reversal of roles had several important consequences for human experience and social organization. First, whereas the hand tool allowed the worker to be independent, her own proprietor, machinery made her dependent on a larger system.<sup>165</sup> Second, whereas the hand tool built the individual worker's understanding of nature through labor, in a machine society understanding and mastery of nature occurred via a system and as part of a social body. Finally, the machine, rather than the individual, became the storehouse for collective knowledge. It literally embodied this knowledge, as well as materializing and reifying in its construction the organizational structure of its human appendages.<sup>166</sup>

An ocean liner shares many traits with the automated factory machine that Marx described. One can also see clear similarities between Marx's conclusions and Gan's ambitions for constructivism in the emphases on dependent relationships and a mediated relationship to nature, as well as in the desire to think about the social in material terms. As Marx pointed out, under capitalism this change had brought oppression. In the struggle between man and nature, the human beings may make and have power over the machines, but in the struggle of one class against another, those machines also became a tool that facilitated the exploitation of the many by the few.<sup>167</sup> In using Bukharin's ocean

---

<sup>164</sup> Marx, *The Grundrisse*: 692-693.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*: 702.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*: 706.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*: 705-706.

liner rather than a factory as an example, Gan does not so much contradict this analysis as shift the emphasis to a more optimistic and human-centric reading. Like the factory, the ocean liner structures human interaction and makes people dependent on each other. The passengers are all literally in the same boat. Yet this machine does not use its appended humans as tools in a factory production process. Instead, it serves them, carrying them, housing them, transporting them, and keeping them together, presumably in a good way. The example also focuses attention on the machine's dependence on humans rather than the opposite. The bottom line is that the machine is meaningless and powerless outside of its relationship to people. These relationships defined its specific structure, as well as its overall character in a moral sense.

Tectonics was the constructivist method for keeping society's material manifestations, its machines, in sync with the consciousness and needs of the entire collective rather than those of an individual maker. By striking the perfect balance of all of the pressures active at a particular place and time, the tectonically stylish object would circulate socially in an effortless and frictionless way. In this regard, there is perhaps one more chicken-and-egg point to be made. While one could say that the object functioned better and better the better it was designed for the medium in which it would circulate, the object's ability to circulate was also enhanced the more uniform and frictionless the medium. The form of the object and the form of the socium were one system, varying in dependence on each other. Tectonics was the connection keeping this process of

codependent coordinated coproduction going. In short, Gan concludes, “tectonics is a synonym for organization.”<sup>168</sup>

In my earlier comparison of Rodchenko to Moholy-Nagy, and then again in my discussion of tectonic style, I attempted to draw out some basic differences between Gan’s constructivism and the aesthetic structures emerging in Western modernism. In both cases, the comparison boiled down to a difference between an object assumed to be independent and autonomous, and one understood to be relationally contingent and embedded. Before closing, I would like to briefly examine the issue in another way. Constructivism’s use of nontraditional materials and interest in “life,” or something like probing social norms, has always made it seem to fit the aesthetic structure of the avant-garde. Peter Bürger cited it as one of the examples of the historical avant-garde in his classic formulation of the problem.<sup>169</sup> Yet something about Gan’s urge to structure, rationalize, and tidy, as well as his extraordinary efforts to redefine immaterial, historically contingent, and normatively determined factors as aspects of the material medium, suggests that his notion of constructivism may also have something in common with the logic of modernist medium specificity in the sense most saliently articulated by Clement Greenberg.

For Greenberg, one of the defining characteristics of modernism was that each art self-critically defined its own “area of competence” by gradually purifying itself of everything that was not inherent to it. In “Modernist Painting,” he explained that if

---

<sup>168</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivism*: 61. [Тектоника синоним органичности]

<sup>169</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): 109.

naturalistic or realistic painting foregrounded resemblance while treating “the limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment—...as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly,” modernist painting reversed these values, eliminating any relationship to an outside referent and concentrating on those same material limitations as positive factors.<sup>170</sup> Greenberg’s insistence on isolating the artwork from the outside world clearly contradicts the spirit and formal properties of Gan’s constructivism, but there are several key similarities when it comes to their understanding of medium. As for Gan, Greenberg rejected illusionism in favor of an art in which form was motivated by the properties of the material medium, and, like Gan, he saw the physical limitations imposed by the medium as positive and interesting. Indeed, Gough pointed to this parallelism when she analyzed Rodchenko’s hanging spatial constructions in terms of Stella’s paintings, and my critical comment on that argument was not that its general logic was invalid, but that Rodchenko’s spatial constructions were actually much *more* strictly determined by medium-related limitations than Stella’s paintings, which really could have done quite a bit more with oil paint on a two-dimensional surface.

Greenberg also talked about modernist painting as a project of defining painting by testing its “norms.” The definition of painting was “revised and re-revised” through a series of experiments in different enclosing shapes, finishes and paint textures, values and contrasts, and so on.<sup>171</sup> The success of these variations, and thus also the definition of

---

<sup>170</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 86.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*: 87, 89.

painting, depended on whether the object was still “experienced as a picture,” rather than collapsing into an arbitrary everyday object.<sup>172</sup> While this would seem to make the painting’s definition dependent on the larger societal definitions of what art is, Greenberg makes a point of insisting that a work of art be defined because of what it is, rather than by its context. For example, he would not have accepted the argument underlying Marcel Duchamp’s urinal or Piero Manzoni’s signing of a nude model, in which ordinary everyday objects were redefined as art merely by placing them within an exhibition context and claiming authorship.

Of course, the category of object that Greenberg defined as a modernist painting’s failure, the everyday object, was precisely the same category that Gan wanted to understand as a medium. As we will see in the chapter 3, there are moments in analyzing Gan’s objects when one begins to suspect that one is doing an elaborate formal analysis of an everyday thing. Still, Gan’s understanding of the constructivist object has at least as much in common with Greenberg’s way of thinking than with Duchamp’s. Bürger cited dada as the most radical form of the historical avant-garde’s project of the “sublation of art into life,”<sup>173</sup> yet in truth dada’s transgressive strategies relied on there being a boundary between art and life to cross. Indeed, Bürger makes the historical avant-garde’s appropriation of the independence of the autonomous artwork an important aspect of his theory. The avant-garde did not aim to integrate art into the means-end rationality of their life context, but rather to create a disruption by introducing an object or action that did

---

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*: 89-90.

<sup>173</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: 22, 51-52.

not conform to the same logic.<sup>174</sup> In this sense, Bürger's avant-garde was aesthetically akin to Russian futurism. Its value lay in the shock of crossing boundaries, pushing buttons, and putting things where they do not belong, all of which assume that there is a normal way of categorizing objects into separate realms. Gan's understanding of the properties of objects as contextually modulated assumed instead that these barriers no longer existed. Constructivist objects would conform to the logic of their contextual situation.

Although Gan subscribed to the same criticism of the institution of art that Bürger laid out as the foundation for dada, constructivism's response to it was as aesthetically different from Bürger's avant-garde as it was from realist painting, and from Greenberg's modernist painting for that matter. Still, on this one point, he had something in common with Greenberg: for Gan, deviation from the normal was not a rhetorical point in itself, but more like Greenberg's exhortation to revise and re-revise until one reaches a new and better version of normal. In both cases, the strategy was to nudge at the boundaries from the inside, rather than cross them and look at them from the outside. Gan was not interested in defining the limits of pure painting in the same way that Greenberg was; for him, again, there was no such thing. Yet Gan *was* interested in testing, defining, and hewing to the norms of the medium as he defined it, that is, as dependent and embedded.

Gan's way of complicating the idea of medium to extend beyond the arrangement of materials within a physical object also suggests Rosalind Krauss' development of the idea of medium as a recursive structure. In *Voyage on the North Sea*, she began by working through her own assumption that the word *medium* referred simply to the

---

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*: 49-50.

physical support, admitting that this reified understanding of the term was not the only possible one, but rather specific to a particular brand of modernism, one most often associated with Greenberg. In place of it, she suggested that medium was not just a physical given, but the set of rules that generated a particular structure or form. For example, the set of processes by which a flat plane was arranged into a portrait or a history painting was structured by more than obedience to the physical facts of canvas, oil, and pigment, but also to conventions of representation and genre. For Krauss, this rediscovery helped her to understand artworks associated with institutional critique, site specificity, and installation. The success of these works has to do with their ability to specify their own set of rules, thereby defining their own medium.<sup>175</sup>

Yet Krauss's complication of the notion of medium is a step in the wrong direction in terms of capturing Gan's aspiration. Which is to say, it is one more step in the same direction that has defined the divergence I have been drawing out from the start. In defining its own set of structures, Krauss' medium does not embed the object within the structures of life, but creates its own insular game. The gesture of admitting "intellectual materials" into an autonomous work pushes the boundaries of art in the way that Duchamp did when he gave up art for chess. There may be numerous interesting points about that gesture, but it is not identical to giving up art for life. Gan was precisely not interested in making up the rules for his own game, that is, in *play*. Constructivism's objects tested their own limits and norms as objects in the same stroke in which they tested the limits and norms of life.

---

<sup>175</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

## CHAPTER 3

**Gan's *Constructivism*, 1922:  
Russian Constructivism's Typographic Conditions**

The printer's object is that his author's work shall be read, and not for the day only; and for this purpose both author and printer must submit wholeheartedly to the customs of their public. If a given author has few readers, and expects fewer, he may experiment as capriciously as he will; and only then. Those who wish their books to be read tomorrow as well as today will respect tradition. This applies with peculiar force to letters and type.

- Stanley Morison, *The Typographic Book*, 1963<sup>1</sup>

Only in work, in practice, can the...innovators of intellectual-material production prove the truth of the matter.

- Aleksei Gan, *Constructivism*, 1922<sup>2</sup>

For many years, Gan's reputation rested on his book *Constructivism* of 1922 (Konstruktivizm, fig 35). An unusually self-contained and "fine" object within an oeuvre dominated by ephemera, it was the one of Gan's works most likely to appear in a museum or rare book collection, and the unambiguous simplicity of its cover, which centers the text "Aleksei Gan / Constructivism" on an otherwise uninterrupted white ground, staked him a secure claim on the movement at a time when thorough research was difficult to conduct. Within the aestheticized version of constructivism purveyed by

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Morison, *The Typographic Book, 1450-1935* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1963): 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver': Tverskoe izdatel'stvo, 1922): 33. [Только в работе, в практике...новаторы интеллектуального-материального производства могут доказать практическую истину своего дела.]

émigrés,<sup>3</sup> the book's unconventional typographic layouts could be compared to Filippo Marinetti's *Les mots en liberté futurists* (compare figs 36 and 37), and its bombastic rhetoric to "The Futurist Manifesto."

Yet *Constructivism* always occupied that position awkwardly, and it hasn't done Gan many favors lately. In comparison to the books that came out of dada, Italian futurism, and Russian futurism, *Constructivism's* layouts seem clumsy and staid. Its quality does not merit treatment as an autonomous art object, not even a confrontational avant-garde artist's book, and the text itself, while his fullest and most straightforward explanation of his aesthetic system, does not hold up as a "work" in the sense of a formal scholarly text of universal relevance, let alone as a work of literature. Indeed, the book is more of a normal book than anything else. Created entirely with standard typesetting techniques, it was later cited in Soviet typography manuals as a foundational example of the constructivist approach to that job.<sup>4</sup> Gan himself asked that it be considered an "agitational book" (*agitatsionnaia kniga*),<sup>5</sup> something along the lines of *The ABCs of Communism* (*Azbuka kommunizma*, 1919). But even here the book falls short. Its print

---

<sup>3</sup> As Benjamin Buchloh has shown, émigrés such as Naum Gabo disseminated an aestheticized version of Russian constructivism as an apolitical geometric abstraction. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990): 85-110.

<sup>4</sup> For example, M. Dmitriev, *Tekhnika knigi: prakticheskoe posobie po naborno-knizhnomu delu dlia tipografskikh rabochikh I rabotnikov izdatel'stv* (Khar'kov: Proletarii, 1925); and A. Sokolov, *Spravochnaia knizhka naborshchika* (Khar'kov: Kar'kovskaia shkola pechatnogo del im. A. Baginskogo, 1925).

<sup>5</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 1.

run was an insignificant two thousand, and it received very little attention when it came out. I have only been able to locate one review.<sup>6</sup>

In short, *Constructivism* has suffered from an identity crisis. Neither good art nor good agitation, it is difficult to find the proper terms for evaluation. This betwixt and betweenness has produced appraisals such as John Bowlt's, who introduced his translation of excerpts from the text with the caveat that "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."<sup>7</sup> And indeed, the book, like Gan himself, has been overrated, as well as underrated, in terms that do not apply. Here, I will look at *Constructivism* in Gan's terms as I defined them in chapter 2 in order to argue that the book was his attempt to employ the system that he and the First Working Group developed in 1921, but within the new political conditions in which he found himself in 1922.

*Constructivism* was very probably the first constructivist object that Gan produced,<sup>8</sup> and for all its faults, it provides us a conveniently simple specimen of a

---

<sup>6</sup> Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi, "Aleksei Gan: 'Konstruktivizm'," *Zrelishcha* 9 (24-30 October 1922): 8.

<sup>7</sup> John Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988): 214-225.

<sup>8</sup> I do not know precisely when *Constructivism* came out, although it was most likely in the summer of 1922. The text mentions Ilya Ehrenburg's *And Yet the World Goes Round* and seems to respond to the journal *Veshch' / Objet / Gegenstand*, which dates it sometime after April 1922. It would also clearly have had to come out before the review of the book in *Zrelishcha* at the end of October (Zhemchuzhnyi, "Aleksei Gan: 'Konstruktivizm'": 8). The catalogue to the First Exhibition of the Unions of Active Revolutionary Art (1924) claimed that the book was designed in 1921 and published in 1922 (see Aleksandr Lavrentiev, *Laboratoriia konstruktivizma* [Moscow: Grant, 2000]: 206). It is possible that Gan might have begun the book in 1921 and added the references

constructivist object in two regards. First, it suggests a model of material making based on typographic printing. This is important because so many assumptions about constructivism emerge from a sculptural model that privileges objects such as Vladimir Tatlin's *Corner Counterrelief* and the laboratory constructions of Aleksandr Rodchenko and Karl Ioganson.<sup>9</sup> By taking Gan's book as paradigmatic, constructivism's mediological conditions become typographic ones. Second, *Constructivism* presents a fascinating example of the complexities inherent to Gan's concept of tectonics, that is, the way an object functions within the larger set of conditions in which it was produced and circulated. It is only by probing the circumstances surrounding the book's creation that it is possible to understand its form. The difficulty with which the book has been received helps to demonstrate one of the byproducts of Gan's aesthetics of embeddedness: pulled from their larger context, constructivist objects lose more than the usual layer of historically embedded meaning. They also lose their aesthetic foundation.

---

to *And Yet the World Goes Round* later. The text talks about Ehrenburg's having left Moscow "two or three months ago," which suggests that Gan began the book in May or June of 1921, since Ehrenburg left Moscow in March of 1921 (Roland Nächtigaller and Hubertus Gassner, "3x1=1: Vesc Objet Gegenstand," in *Veshch'/Objet / Gegenstand* [Baden, Switzerland: Verlag Lars Müller, 1994]: 23). It seems just as likely to me, however, that Gan backdated its design, something he did frequently when writing about constructivism's history.

<sup>9</sup> The most prominent examples of studies based on the model of sculpture are Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1983). Christina Kiaer complicates the sculptural model by focusing largely on graphic works, although her analysis often pulls those works into sculpture's orbit by focusing on their participation in a rhetoric of embodiment and materiality. They, too, are "things in our hands," as Rodchenko wrote. Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

## WHAT IS *CONSTRUCTIVISM*? PART 1: AGITATION FOR COOPERATION

On the first page of *Constructivism*, Gan specifically asked his reader to consider the book an agitational book, but what exactly was it agitating for? In this section, I will develop one answer to this question by examining *Constructivism* as a typographic book, arguing that typographic production was the labor process, or the process of material making, that structured Gan's thinking. Situating his book within the norms of agitational literature, industrial printing, and avant-garde artist's books, I will show that Gan's constructivism was an approach to labor on material, social, political, and economic levels and that *Constructivism* was the demonstration and explication meant to prove the efficacy of the approach.

In terms of overall form and textual genre, the category of agitational literature is the most helpful way to begin characterizing the book. It would make sense for Gan to attempt a constructivist version of such a book considering what we know of him thus far. Although he may have had a vaguely art-related education prior to World War I,<sup>10</sup> he was primarily an agitman thereafter, and as I pointed out in chapter 2, the book quoted other agit-literature such as Aleksandr Bogdanov's short course on the science of social consciousness and Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky's *The ABCs of Communism*. Indeed, the way that Gan outlined *Constructivism*'s agitational imperative in the first section of the text is very much like the preface of *The ABCs*. He explained that his aim was to redress what he saw as a lapse in Marxist thinking when it came to art.

---

<sup>10</sup> One of Gan's records in the archive of the Political Administration of the Revvoensovet lists under the category of educational background the ambiguous "shkoly zhivopisi," or "schools of painting." RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 120, l. 6ob.

At the same time that his party comrades were fighting hard against the vestiges of capitalism in economic life, he wrote, they “accept art offhand, without analysis, without criticism, and without reevaluation.” Maybe they “curse a little, call something bourgeois, call another thing philistine,” but they lack the proper education to take their analysis further.<sup>11</sup> The whole resulting complex of problems boils down to this one fact:

We are not literate in Marxism.

The lack of a minimal Marxist education is noticeable even among politically steadfast party comrades.

Moreover, our supposedly qualified communists sometimes treat questions that they know little about in a simple-minded and disdainful way.

All of this is harmfully reflected in our practice, in our thinking, in our approach to various multifaceted phenomena of life, and in the solution of a whole series of questions that arise in connection with building communism and communist everyday life.

As soon as we approach art, we cease to be Marxists.<sup>12</sup>

If constructivism was Gan’s personal application of Marxist concepts to the problem of aesthetics, then the book was his effort to provide the necessary education for others to do the same. Note that although he emphasizes the deficiency in Marxist education in this passage, the educational project goes in two directions: the problem is not just that the comrades do not understand Marx; they are also simpleminded about art. Constructivism

---

<sup>11</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 12. [Без анализа, без критики, без переоценки мы с плеча принимаем искусство... Правда, сперва немного поругаемся, что-то назовем буржуазным, что-то мещанским]

<sup>12</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 12. [Нам не достает марксистской грамоты. / Недостаток минимального марксистского образования заметно сказывается даже в среде политически устойчивых партийных товарищей. / Кроме того наши, так сказать, квалифицированные коммунисты иногда крайне легкомысленно и пренебрежительно относятся к вопросам им мало известным. / Все это губительно отражается на нашей практике, на нашем мышлении, подходе к многогранным и разнообразным явлениям жизни, на разрешении целого ряда вопросов встающих в связи со строительством коммунизма и коммунистического быта. / Как только мы подходим к искусству—мы перестаем быть марксистами.]

would close both knowledge lacunas. A socialist aesthetics for dummies, it was a way of “filling the existing gap,” as Bukharin and Preobrazhensky wrote of their own project.<sup>13</sup>

Gan takes another cue from Bukharin and Preobrazhensky in his formatting of the book. The authors of *The ABCs* had gone out of their way to explain in their short preface that they had used two sizes of type, a larger one for fundamental points and a smaller one for detailed explanations and examples.<sup>14</sup> Looking at a page from the 1921 edition (fig 38), you can see what they mean. It creates a subtle division between types of information, similar to the indentation and single-spacing of extended quotations. In *Constructivism*, Gan went many steps further, using more fonts, placing text on diagonals, and so on, but he also conspicuously preserved *The ABCs*’ practice, using large type for his major points, medium type for the body of his argument, and extremely small type for supporting information, often extended quotations from Bogdanov and Bukharin himself. Indeed, on many of the less visually striking pages, his use of type closely approximates *The ABCs* (for example, fig 39). He uses two of the same typefaces—one serif and one sans-serif—in two different sizes.

Even though Gan sometimes put quotations in smaller type, clarification of authorship does not seem to have been the primary purpose of using different fonts to differentiate between sections of text. Indeed, in reading through the book, it is easy to lose track of who is speaking and the authorial voice often seems deliberately obfuscated. The first three pages are obviously meant to be read as quotations (for example, fig 40),

---

<sup>13</sup> N. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *Azbuka kommunizma: Populiarnoe ob’iasnenie programmy Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii* (n.p.: 1921): 5. [Существующий пробел мы и решили восполнить.]

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

but since they are attributed to “The First Working Group of Constructivists,” Gan is, in a sense, quoting himself. The main body of the text is similarly confusing, beginning with an extended passage from *The Communist Manifesto* in larger than average type. The passage runs onto the next page, so that it is easy to assume that Gan is speaking until one reaches the end and sees the attribution (fig 41).<sup>15</sup> As I explained in chapter 2, substantial sections of “Gan’s” argument come in the form of quotations from, and sometimes synopses of, Bogdanov’s and Bukharin’s works. It is often difficult to know where one voice ends and another begins.<sup>16</sup> This choice to present his ideas in the words of others can be understood as a constructivist technique parallel to Rodchenko’s use of compasses and rulers in his paintings. It minimized his subjective voice by using the tools of “scientific communism,” in this case works of social science and economics.

If *Constructivism* was an agitational book in genre, it was a typographical book in its material medium. In the introduction to his classic text on the subject, Stanley Morison defined a typographic book is a series of prints, or “typographs,” that have been impressed on paper with types, or mechanically produced letters, composed in a frame and inked on a press. The resulting prints were often bound together in a particular order to form a book. Morison’s thinking was, in 1963, imbued with a Greenbergian zeitgeist. He broke the medium down to its essential components: typographic books “consist of three elementary essentials: paper, type, and ink.” He also made a point to exclude

---

<sup>15</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Gan several identifiable extended quotations from A. A. Bogdanov, *Nauka ob obshchestvennom soznanii: kratkii kurs ideologicheskoi nauki v voprosakh i otvietakh* (1913), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Moscow and Petrograd: Kniga, 1923) and Nikolai Bukharin, *Historical Materialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1925).

anything exterior: “a book is a book whether it is bound or not, and the present volume is not concerned with leather-work,” he insisted.<sup>17</sup> In the following analysis of Gan’s *Constructivism*, we will see that it was as pure an example of Morison’s basic definition of a typographic book as exists. At the same time, Gan’s book was as much of its moment as Morison’s was of his. It was a typographic book, but it was also a constructivist book, with all of qualities of relational embeddedness that I hope, at this point, the word already suggests. As we will see, the book’s typographical status had just as much social and political significance as its agitational genre.

There has never been any doubt that Gan composed the interior layouts of *Constructivism* himself, although the extent of his prior experience in typesetting has been difficult to establish. He claimed to have participated in the material production of print publications prior to 1922. We cannot know for sure, but these probably included *Anarkhiia* (Anarchy) and *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn’* (Art Life), both of which were formally akin to standard newspapers.<sup>18</sup> He also had a reputation in the world of graphic design as working directly in the print shop, rather than sending a design to be executed by a professional printer.<sup>19</sup> As Nikolai Chuzhak commented, “Comrade Gan...is well

---

<sup>17</sup> Morison, *The Typographic Book*: 1.

<sup>18</sup> Gan claims to have worked in the material production of “a set of different publications” prior to *Constructivism* in Aleksei Gan, “Konstruktivizm v nabore i verste,” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2: inside back cover. One of his entries in the First Discussional Exhibition of the Unions of Active Revolutionary Art in 1924 was an unspecified newspaper of 1918. See S. O. Khan- Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm. Kontseptsiiia formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 2003): 414. A report in *Anarchy* implies that he was responsible for getting the paper out. S. Mikhailov, “Proletarskii teatr,” *Anarkhiia* 43 (21 April 1918): 4.

<sup>19</sup> El Lissitzky, “Kniga s tochke zreniia zretiel’nogo vospriiatiia—visual’naia kniga,” *Iskusstvo knigi* 3 (1962): 167. The article was first published in German in 1927.

known for his aversion to anything crafty.” He “made it his rule...to wedge himself into the possibilities of print production...He tries to use typographic means.”<sup>20</sup> Here, I would like to add to this evidence two more speculative arguments for Gan’s prior typographic experience based on analysis of *Constructivism*. The first is that Gan’s compositions take normal typographic techniques of that period as their foundation. The second is that the interests, insights, and specific illustrations that mark Gan’s thinking about constructivism as an aesthetic theory make particular sense in terms of the medium of typography at the historical moment in which would have Gan experienced it.

In order to appreciate *Constructivism* as a typographic book, it is necessary to actually sit down and count the fonts. With the exception of the cover, *Constructivism*’s layouts were entirely composed of four typefaces,<sup>21</sup> whose different sizes and weights add up to a total of ten sets of type (fig 42):

1. One standard jobbing (that is, easily legible and common) serif typeface in four sizes, one of which also appears in a boldface (1.3-1.4B),<sup>22</sup>
2. One display face (that is, more ornate and less commonly used face), with a boldface (2 and 2B),<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, ll. 4ob-5. [Тов. Ган взял себе за правило...вклиниться по возможности в полиграфическое производство. Он действительно избегает до известной степени всякого ремесленничества, он старается пользоваться средствами той типографии.]

<sup>21</sup> The word *typeface* refers to the shape of the letters (which is the face of the piece of type whose contact with the paper produces the letter). The word *font* was initially a more specific term referring to the combination of a particular face and size, and thus a specific casting.

<sup>22</sup> Typeface 1 is similar to a face labeled “Aldine” in a Lehmann foundry sample book of 1862 (see A. G. Shitsgal, *Russkii tipografskii shrift* [Moscow: Kniga, 1974]: 123). It is also very similar to several of the “ordinary” (*obyknovennyi*) faces advertised in the Lehmann catalog of 1914. See *Aksionernoe obshchestvo O. I. Leman* (St. Petersburg and Moscow: 1914).

3. One sans-serif face in two sizes (3.1-3.2), and
4. One Roman face.<sup>24</sup>

Half of these were only used in one or two instances, and most pages each employed only two or three. All other variations in the appearance of the text were achieved by varying the kerning (the spacing between letters), the use of all caps, the placement of the lines of type within the frame, and the insertion of linear bars of various weights, which were also standard typographic elements (for example, figs 36 and 40).

In the world of typographic books, this palette was neither especially spare nor elaborate. We know that Tver' Publishing, where he produced the book, owned other, more ornate display fonts, which he clearly chose not to use.<sup>25</sup> He also chose not to add an italic, instead using bold or expanding the kerning when he wanted to show emphasis, as in point *a* of figure 36. The omission of an italic, which often looks like cursive script, was consonant with the constructivist aversion to any trace of the hand, but it was also a common substitution in Russian print during that period, since it saved the typesetter from having to own an entirely separate set of characters in each size and face. Indeed, it

<sup>23</sup> What I am calling the regular version of this typeface (2) may in fact be a narrow, or condensed, version, and the bold version (2B) may be the regular. Opportunities for comparison are limited by the fact that the bold is only used to set four words. They are versions of a display face manufactured as "Renaissance" by Osip Lehmann's foundry in St. Petersburg, c. 1874. A digital version is designed by Paratype as "Lehmann." See <http://www.paratype.com/pt/pdfs/fonts/Lehmann.pdf>. I am grateful to Ricky Anderson for identifying it.

<sup>24</sup> Typeface 3 is similar to a sans-serif face advertised by H. Berthold's St. Petersburg foundry, c. 1900. See illustration in Richard Anderson and Kristin Romberg, eds., *Architecture in Print: Design and Debate in the Soviet Union, 1919-1935* (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Gallery, Columbia University in the City of New York, 2005): 62. A similar face was also advertised in Osip Lehmann's catalog of 1914. See *Aksionernoe obshchestvo O. I. Leman*.

<sup>25</sup> *O teatre*, another book published at the same time by Tver' Publishing utilized a display font on its title page, as well as employing italics (*kursiv*) throughout.

was a normal enough practice that I did not feel it necessary to mention that in many of the places where I have used italics in my translations, the original text appeared either in bold or with expanded kerning.

If Gan's means and basic techniques were more or less standard, the logic of his construction diverged from normal usage in important ways. Appreciating these modifications, will require understanding a few things about the way the typographic medium was used at that moment in both standard printing jobs and in avant-garde projects. In professionally printed books and journals at this time, there was a fairly strict separation between those parts of the page that were to be experienced textually and those to be experienced visually. The main body of text in a book or journal was generally set in uniform blocks composed of easily legible workhorse faces, in much the same way that I am using Times New Roman here. Gan's typeface 1 is an example of this sort of face. They were functional and flexible because they were, in a sense, invisible. Like the "invisible" architecture of iron and glass against which Semper argued,<sup>26</sup> they seemed artless and unstylized, a transparent way of structuring an object in order to provide easy and unmediated access to content. In actual fact, it took a very sophisticated design to accomplish this, but the point is the same: the value of these typefaces lay in the fact that they were *not* eye-catching as visual forms and therefore facilitated a frictionless and uninterrupted flow in the reading experience.

When a printer wanted to add visual interest to a page, he did not choose a more distinctive typeface for the body of the text, but rather inserted an ornate drop cap or some non-alphabetical embellishment at a place where the reader would welcome a break

---

<sup>26</sup> See my discussion of Semper in chapter 2.

in concentration, such as the beginning or end of a chapter (for example, figs 43-44). The introduction of a visually interesting letter, non-signifying form, or even a mere change in scale within the same typeface, effected a change in perceptual modes; it interrupted the smooth flow of text-as-information, causing the reader to momentarily switch over into perceiving text as form. This contrast was perhaps starkest in print forms that involved advertisements, such as newspapers. There, the typeface used to set news stories flowed in and filled lines and columns like a liquid, producing blocks of what Gan called “overall grey text.”<sup>27</sup> The text of the advertisements and headlines was by contrast set in larger type and novel display faces, which were centered or otherwise specially placed (for example, fig 45). They were designed to read as separate figural forms—black on white—rather than a homogenous grey filling.

In *Constructivism*, Gan also used a combination of standard and display faces, justified blocks of overall grey text and more visually striking layouts. Yet he did not strictly maintain the integrity of those categories in the same way, instead opening up the world of the display font to the main body of the text, which in turn ranged from more flowing and uniform to more figural modes. Different typefaces were still assigned specific purposes. For the most part, the main body of the text was set in the most standard and easily legible face (1.3), while background information was presented in the smallest face (1.4). The slogans that serve as headings to each section were also consistently set in the display face (2), as in figure 46, where he has centered the heading “Tectonics / *Faktura* / Construction” on the page that precedes the section introducing the

---

<sup>27</sup> [Aleksei Gan], “Konstruktivizm v poligrafii,” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1928, no. 3: 80.

three constructivist disciplines. Because of their distinctive font and layout, one could quickly flip through the book and get all of the main points by simply reading these headings.

At the same time that these different fonts offered cues to the relative import and function of different sections of text, Gan also varied the typeface within the main body of the text in a way that did not produce a stark break in the argument, but rather lent it another layer of information that may be best described as tone. For example, the use of the larger display face on page 19 (fig 47a) created emphasis by slowing the reading process, whereas the small bold sans-serif font on page 65 (fig 39) produced an entirely different emphatic effect more akin to a stern tone. Without ever fully interrupting the reading experience, Gan varied the flow of the text by visual means in a way that enhanced rather than distracted from its sense. It acquired some of the presence, or aura, of an oratorical presentation through the simple assembly of mass-produced and standard elements.

Gan also used visual cues to create conceptual links between elements in different sections. For example, when the words “Tectonics / *Faktura* / and Construction” reappear four pages after the above-mentioned heading, they are part of the main body of the text, serving as the beginning of the sentence “Tectonics, *faktura*, and construction are the disciplines with the help of which we can exit the dead end of aesthetic professionalism” (fig 48). Because they appear in the same display face and with the original staircase alignment repeated in the black bars to the right of each word, one immediately recognizes them as important. In the second context, the staircase also takes on added significance, symbolically representing a stairway out of the “aesthetic dead end.” The

repetition of the triad of terms binds the three words as a visual and conceptual unit, the parts of one system that Gan considered them to be. When they come up again in the next section as separate section headings they are not together in the staircase pattern, but they are set in the same display font (fig 49). One understands that they go together as a triad despite the intervening paragraphs of text.

The closest Gan came to using an ornamental element was the linear bars. Like the display face, the bars were sometimes used conventionally to designate a break in the argument (fig 36, right). But they were also sometimes integrated into the text in a way that enhanced its meaning. One conventional example comes on page 19, where they are used to underline portions of text in order to emphatically set it apart from that surrounding it (fig 47, top). At other times, such as on page 3, the underlining is extended to the entire passage, no longer differentiating one word from another, but creating an overall urgent tone (fig 40). Still less conventional, on page 20 (fig 50), the bars are arranged into a bounded box, which cordons off those qualities that belong “on the other side of October,” such as “primitive authoritarian and individualistic culture,” from those that belong on “our side,” “the first culture of organized labor and intellect.”<sup>28</sup> The combination of the box and the slightly smaller plainer font makes the text it contains seem antiquated, distant, and separated from the contemporary moment. In contrast, the text that follows it, which is in the display font, seems to advance toward the viewer unconstrained.

---

<sup>28</sup> Christina Lodder has suggested that the box evokes the format of a funeral card. While this seems overly literal to me, it does look like a certain type of funeral card and Gan did use death imagery in describing the art of the past. Christina Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian art: 1914-1937* (London: Pindar, 2005): 399.

I could go on with similar examples, but the point is that Gan used the visual form of the type in a way that enhanced its sense rather than signaling a complete change in perceptual mode. He demonstrated that it was possible to create a more visually expressive typographic object by simply restructuring standard typographic elements and techniques so that the visual and textual were not so strictly separated. If we delve a little deeper into the material medium of typographic production as it was practiced in 1922, however, it becomes clear that the divide between the visual and textual was driven less by such concern for expressive efficiency in the consumption of the text, than by its efficiencies from the point of view of production. Setting the bulk of the text in a uniform way required fewer decisions. It reduced the time, skill, and artistic acumen required of the typesetter, also eventually making it possible to further automate the typesetting process through the use of new technologies such as the linotype machine.

The linotype machine merits discussion here as the dominant printing technology during the period in which Gan was working. Invented in the mid 1880s in the United States and first introduced in Moscow in 1903,<sup>29</sup> it was the technology that most shaped changes in typographic layout and the working experience of typesetters in Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century. It replaced the use of loose movable type by allowing the typesetter to compose and cast a full line of type as a single piece on the spot. Rather than compose a body of text by pulling prefabricated type by hand from

---

<sup>29</sup> The first machine to be used in Russia was purchased in 1903 by the N. Kushnerev print shop, which would become the Krasnyi Proletarii shop in 1922. Two of Moscow's other large shops purchased machines soon thereafter. See Diane P Koenker, *Republic of Labor: Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005): 31. For more on the invention of the linotype machine, see Michael Twyman, *Printing, 1770-1970: An Illustrated History of Its Development and Uses in England* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970): 62.

drawers (fig 51), the typesetter used a keyboard to control the machine's assembly of a line of molds, which was then sent into the casting section of the machine and filled with molten metal (figs 52-55). When the job was over, the resulting lines of type, called slugs (fig 56), were simply melted down and used to cast the next job, eliminating the time-consuming task of breaking down and resorting type.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the system involved a huge savings in labor, but only if one produced standardized layouts of uniform lines of type in the same face. It was possible to change the typeface by swapping the magazine of molds in the machine, in a way similar to changing the typeface in an electric typewriter (fig 57).<sup>31</sup> But the labor cost of doing so was much greater than in hand composition, where one only had to reach for another drawer of type. One could vary the kerning without changing the magazine, which explains the popularity of substituting expanded kerning for italics.

It is impossible to say for certain whether *Constructivism* was composed on a linotype machine, but considering Gan's historical understanding of material *faktura*, it seems significant that all of its layouts could have been.<sup>32</sup> It would have required changing magazines, or having several active machines or a machine with multiple magazines, but there are no free-floating characters or curved lines. The places where he has positioned a straight line of type on an angle are particularly suggestive of the

---

<sup>30</sup> See Michael Twyman, *Printing, 1770-1970*: 60-63; and Warren Chappell and Robert Bringhurst, *A Short History of the Printed Word*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Point Roberts, WA and Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 1999): 212-215.

<sup>31</sup> There were also machines with multiple magazines, but I have been unable to ascertain whether they were used in Moscow.

<sup>32</sup> It is clear that the book was printed with letterpress (raised type) rather than offset (indented type), but a linotype machine could have been used to set the type in either case.

linotype process (fig 36, left), since it would have been easier to securely position the line as a single linotype slug than as an aggregate of movable type. The book's large number of typos also suggests linotype.<sup>33</sup> With moveable type, a corrector could simply pull out and replace the one incorrect letter, but mistakes were notoriously difficult to correct with linotype because it required going back to the machine, interrupting whatever job was then being set, and recasting the entire line (fig 58).

The images and metaphors that Gan used to conceptualize constructivism in the text of the book also seem more natural and grounded if we assume that typesetting, and particularly typesetting by means of a linotype machine, was his primary experience of material making. Recall that for him tectonics was “smelted and formed,” like “an eruption from the center of the earth.” And in his explanation of *faktura*, his choice of material was cast iron, which “transforms into a fiery liquid mass, then is poured into a mold, goes through a glazing section..., after which one can say that the cast iron has become a thing.”<sup>34</sup> Both of these ways of explaining constructivism hinged on phase changes, on metals and minerals turning from a hard solid to a flowing liquid in dependence on temperature. In this sense, they find resonance in the industrial metalworking processes that were often privileged in the revolutionary imagination: a contemporaneous group of proletarian poets called themselves The Forge (*Kuznitsa*), and artists with labor sympathies such as the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier, whose work

---

<sup>33</sup> The large number of typos in *Constructivism* was noted by M. Dmitriev in *Tekhnika knigi*: 45-46.

<sup>34</sup> See my discussion in chapter 2 and Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 61-62.

Gan knew, often depicted miners and blacksmiths.<sup>35</sup> Gan participated in this larger imagination by describing constructivism in metallurgical terms.

All of this is important because, although it is unlikely that Gan had ever worked in a foundry or forge, similar material processes could just as easily have entered his consciousness through work in industrial typesetting. The production of moveable type involved a casting process that manipulated the properties of different metals in a way that finds resonance in Gan's conceptualization of *faktura*, as well as in his specific explication of the concept by way of cast iron.<sup>36</sup> Prior to the invention of the linotype machine, this process had occurred at an industrial foundry. Indeed, the English words *font* and *foundry* come from the same French root, *fondre*, or to melt. The linotype machine brought this casting process into the print shop, making it an ever-present and continuous part of the typesetter's work. With moveable type, he had spent his time assembling and resorting pieces. With linotype, he became part foundry worker. His day was spent presiding over the liquidation and reconstitution of form in molten metal.

The process by which experience with a particular material process comes to structure a way of thinking—from informing the choice of an illustrative example to underwriting a larger worldview—is a phenomenon as common as it is complex. Earlier,

---

<sup>35</sup> Gan talks about Meunier in Aleksei Gan, "Pevets rabochego udar," *Anarkhiia* 69 (26 May 1918): 4. Forges and foundries are common images in *Anarkhiia* more generally.

<sup>36</sup> Traditionally, the shape of a typeface was punched out of a sheet of a malleable metal like copper. This thin flat mold was placed at the bottom of a cubic rectangular mold and filled with a molten alloy of tin, lead, and a small amount of antimony. The last of these had the peculiar property of expanding as it cooled, which helped achieve sharp edges by forcing the metal tightly into mold as the metal solidified. The resulting piece of type can then be hardened by heating and quenching (tempering) or by exposure to a cyanide solution. That is to say, it involved exploiting the properties of various metals.

when I described standard typographic design in terms of form and flow, it was probably on some level because the logic had resonance for me in the material process I was about to explain. Whether the logic structuring the paradigm resides in the material, the process, the mind, or some combination of the three, the structure is clearly real, if only in the sense that it has real consequences. In this way, the linotype process was important because it engendered a shift in the way that the relationship between form and matter was perceived in typographic production. Movable type had effected a similar shift from the handwritten manuscript. It made it possible to break down a specific layout of text and reliably transpose it into another font or arrangement. The fact that it was still considered the same text relied on the assumption that the value of written language lay in its sense rather than its visual form. At the same time, movable type still made form and matter seem inherently bound to each other. One could take apart and reassemble the characters, but each modular unit was an indivisible block that one picked up, used, and put back where it belonged.

With the linotype process, this connection between the character's form and a specific material manifestation was severed. The relationship between matter (that is, the metal) and form (the shape of the character) was in constant flux. In this way, form became more of what Gan called an "intellectual material." It could be materialized and then liquidated without ever ceasing to exist. Thus, while it had always been true that a written text existed as information, separate from its expression in a specific visual form, the linotype process made the logic of the text-as-information more consistent with the experiential logic of the medium. The reverse is equally true: the linotype machine would

never have been invented had people not valued text as a system of relaying encoded information rather than as a specific visual form.<sup>37</sup>

The only place where *Constructivism* departs from the use of standard typesetting methods is the cover (fig 35), but even there the internal logic of printing as a medium is a point of interest in an abstract sense. The cover design consists of two textual elements, Gan's name and the title of the book, both printed with hand-carved wooden blocks designed by Rodchenko. The book's title, *Konstruktivizm*, is defined as the negative space in the black block print, whereas the red lettering rendering Gan's name reverses the relationship, printing the text as the positive. A sketch in the Rodchenko family archive featuring precisely the same red lettering used for Gan's name and a close variant of the lettering used for the title (fig 59) provides both evidence of Rodchenko's involvement and an interesting illustration of the technique that Rodchenko must have used to compose the lettering in many of his graphic works.<sup>38</sup> Because the letters are

---

<sup>37</sup> I mean to suggest an argument similar to Geoffrey Batchen's for photography, that the desire for a particular technology produces the technology, rather than the reverse. Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997): 24-53.

<sup>38</sup> Khan-Magomedov attributed the cover to Rodchenko on the basis of this sketch. Christina Lodder has countered his claim because formal comparison to Rodchenko's other graphic compositions from this time reveals that he nearly always used the entire surface of the cover, as in the sketch, while the lettering on the actual cover is centered within a significant expanse of white page. The sketch could very well have been Rodchenko's analysis of Gan's work, although the lettering has also recently been linked to Rodchenko by Vladimir Krichevskii, who states that a bibliographic description of the book in "one of the publications of the same Tver' Publishers" reads "Color cover by the constructor Rodchenko." Krichevskii unfortunately does not cite the specific source, and his book does contain other mistakes of fact, but it would be more consistent with what I know of Gan's work if Rodchenko had produced it. Gan rarely created forms from scratch, preferring to use preexisting type or photographs. The most likely scenario may be the collaborative one, in which Rodchenko designed and produced the blocks, perhaps

hand-drawn and produced as a single block, they do not conform to the prefabricated and modular logic of moveable type. Yet, they have something in common with linotype. Their forms are the most direct route between each character's ideal schema and the regular matrix of their graph paper ground. Thus, like linotype, they represent a specific instantiation of an immaterial idea. In addition, the design takes the positive-negative logic inherent to both casting and printing processes as its theme. The word *konstruktivizm* and Gan's name are related to the grid in inverse ways: the former traces its lines, while the latter fills its squares.<sup>39</sup>

If the peculiarities of linotype's material production of form were relevant to Gan's aesthetics, so was the way that linotype reconfigured the labor process. For one, linotype redrew the lines between the material, the maker, the tool, and the product in a way that made it more necessary to understand medium as a larger system. The paper and ink that compose the final product were only a small part of the material that is worked. Much of the important material work occurred in assembling what would normally be defined as the tool. In a later article on constructivism in typographic production, Gan actually added a fourth discipline of "tools of production" to tectonics, *faktura*, and

---

in consultation with Gan, and Gan placed them on the page during the printing process. See S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987): 131; Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian art*: 398; and Vladimir Krichevskii, *Oblozhka: graficheskoe litso ephokhi revoliutionnogo natiska* (Moscow: Samolet, 2002): 68.

<sup>39</sup> The lettering for the word *konstruktivizm* is obviously more elongated in the sketch, which also differs from the final version in that there are serifs on the "T"s; but they seem similar enough for a sketch, especially considering that the final version would have been carved by hand and bears the idiosyncrasies of that process in other ways, e.g., the diagonal bars in the two examples of the letter "И" are not at the same height.

construction in order to accommodate this fact.<sup>40</sup> Second, the economies of scale necessary to make the purchase of a linotype machine viable meant that this larger system involved a larger system of interconnected makers. Typographic production was, in the terms I discussed in chapter 2, more of an ocean liner than a hand tool. Its practitioners were necessarily dependent on each other and the owner of the shop. In this respect, Gan's interests in collective action also make particular sense coming out of the culture of Moscow typesetters, who were one of the earliest labor groups to organize in Russia, as well as one of the most politicized. They serve as the paradigmatic example in studies of the labor movement in Russia.<sup>41</sup> Their first successful strike occurred in 1903,<sup>42</sup> the same year that Kushnerev's print shop purchased Moscow's first linotype machine.

It is unclear whether or precisely how the purchase of the linotype machine related to the printers' strike. As a threat to the human typesetters' livelihood, it may have precipitated the strike, or it could have been purchased as a response to the strike, whose participants were unable or unwilling to work any more efficiently by hand. For my purposes what matters is that 1) a collective politics developed in tandem with the introduction of efficiencies in technology and labor practices, 2) that collective politics was one of resistance, and 3) whatever the typesetters' complaints, their gains as a result

---

<sup>40</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Konstruktivizm v tipografskom proizvodstve," *Al'manakh proletkul'ta* (Moscow: Vserossiskii Proletkul't, 1925): 116-119.

<sup>41</sup> See Diane P Koenker, *Republic of Labor: Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Mark Steinberg, *Moral Communities: The Culture of Class Relations in the Russian Printing Industry, 1867-1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Koenker, *Republic of Labor*: 19.

of the strike—a ten-hour workday and higher wages<sup>43</sup>—were structured by the same quantitative values of time and money that encouraged the linotype machine’s invention. Their demands had little to do with more qualitative issues such as the linotype machine’s elimination of variety, creativity, and pleasure from their daily activity and the resulting product, probably because most of those aspects of the job had already fallen by the wayside long ago.

In an article of 1925, Gan lamented this entrenched resistance on the part of typesetters to accept or contribute to innovations in their working process. He noted, “whoever has had to work in a print shop knows how workers always resist when the question of changing the typesetting and layout system comes up. The old semi-artisanal traditions are still jealously guarded by everyone without exception.”<sup>44</sup> He traced the origin of this resistance back to the workers’ experiences before the Revolution:

Under the conditions of the capitalist system of production, typographic labor...existed as a narrow printing business, aiming for the highest profits, and nothing more...New methods of work were very rarely introduced...not so much because of an absence of material means as because of the proprietor’s ignorance, the producers’ lack of legal rights, and the undemanding indifference of the customers.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*: 19.

<sup>44</sup> Gan, “Konstruktivizm v tipografskom proizvodstve”: 116. [Кому приходилось работать в типографии, тот знает, как упираются рабочие в каждом отдельном случае, когда ставится вопрос об изменении системы набора и верстки. / Старые, полукустарные традиции до сих пор ревниво охраняются всеми без исключения.]

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*. [Типографский труд в условиях капиталистической системы производства...в целях наивольшей прибыли,...существовало, как предприятие узко полиграфическое и только...применение новых методов труда вводились у нас крайне редко...Все это вызывалось не столько отсутствием материальных средств, сколько невежеством предпринимателей, бесправием производящих и нетребовательностью заказчиков, которые к формам печати относились безразлично]

Resistance to innovation was born of a social and economic system in which the interests of penny-pinching owners, oppressed workers, and indifferent customers could only be negotiated through the abstraction of numbers. Improvements to the quality of the product or the quality of the experience of producing it were not a part of the equation. This mindset had unfortunately been preserved, Gan lamented, in the present conditions: “woe to him who tries to *transform* typographic work with observations about how the producer is separated from the material, how he does not participate in the growth of its *faktura* and does not know how to use it.”<sup>46</sup>

The qualitative side of the problem was, however, taken up in explorations of the book form within the realm of art, where job security and satisfaction were much more inflexibly tied to quality, as well as to the valuation of the visual. During the same years when the Moscow typesetters were developing their resistant collective politics, Russian futurist artists and poets were collaborating on book projects whose discussion will provide the second half of the background necessary to understand *Constructivism's* aesthetic position.<sup>47</sup> Like Gan's book, Russian futurist books sometimes used typographic methods, but it was always in combination with watercolor, collage elements, and non-typographic printing processes such as lithography. They were designed, almost without exception, to draw attention to the fact that they were handmade. Indeed, as Gerald

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* [беда тому, кто рискнет *трансформировать* типографский труд теми или иными замечаниями, указав, что производители оторваны от материала, не участвуют в фактурном его росте и не умеют им пользоваться.]

<sup>47</sup> See *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934*, ed. Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002).

Janecek has argued, their makers often seemed intent on “dismantling the legacy of Gutenberg” rather than exploiting it.<sup>48</sup>

One good example is Olga Rozanova’s version of Aleksei Kruchenykh’s *A Little Duck’s Nest of Bad Words* (*Utinoe gnezdyskhko durnykh slov*, 1913, fig 60), which employs a combination of letterpress, lithography, watercolor, and gouache. The clumsily executed characters and slightly off-kilter slant of the lines of text emphasize the nonmodular singularity of the lithographic manuscript. This awkwardness may have been a deliberate stylization intended to refer to the traditional Russian popular prints called *lubki* (for example, fig 61). First produced in the seventeenth century as woodblock prints, they were often hand-colored in a primitive assembly line process that resulted in non-localized patches of color similar to those in *Duck’s Nest*. Because *lubki* were produced for a largely illiterate audience, the image was far more important than the text, which was simply treated as part of the image and carved by hand into the same plate, rather than set in movable type. In this sense, Rozanova’s book refers to a primitive mode of mass production, which—like the linotype process—resulted in medium-specific simplifications of form, but which also chose the opposite technical path, valuing the visual at the expense of the textual.

At the same time that Rozanova’s book brings to mind the primitive style of the *lubok*, the character of the printed mark is less that of a carved mark, impacted by material resistance, and more akin to the free flow of a calligraphic brushstroke. This quality lends the images a sense of unmediated spontaneity, which is only enhanced by

---

<sup>48</sup> Gerald Janecek, “Kruchenykh contra Gutenberg,” in *The Russian Avant-Garde Book*: 41.

Rozanova's loose application of watercolor and gouache on top of the print. Note that she achieves this impression in spite of the several intervening layers of mediation inherent in the printing process, and that this success is largely due to the fact that she has reproduced the text by an analog process. Each mediating step—from hand-drawn original to lithographic plate, then to paper, and ultimately to a viewer's retina—is only one more direct one-to-one transfer. It thereby preserves form as an irreducible specific object. This strategy parallels Kruchenykh's *zaum* (or "beyond sense") poetry, which used invented words that were similarly irreducible because they could not be converted into the common denominator of sense. Rozanova makes the contrast between her lithographic manuscript and typographic methods more explicit by using prefabricated movable type on *Duck's Nest's* cover. While the irregularities in her lithographs stemmed from her ability to freely distribute marks over the entire two-dimensional surface of the paper, the idiosyncrasy represented by the two random insertions of italic letters on the cover draws attention to the discrete modular units used in its composition.

Rozanova's insistence on inserting craft and analog processes into the book form counters the very processes of standardization and exchangeability of which book printing had been an early pioneer. Benedict Anderson, among others, has pointed out that the printed book was "in a rather special sense...the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity."<sup>49</sup> In this respect, the gesture contains at least a vague political statement. The low level of the materials and craftsmanship employed also suggests that the statement was less about the aesthetic value of a beautiful object than

---

<sup>49</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991): 34.

the political leverage of an irreducible object. This strategy is characteristic of futurist books more generally. The point is made particularly well by those examples that used rubber stamps to render text such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's *World Backwards* (Mirskonsta, 1912, fig 62, top right page).<sup>50</sup> As Marjorie Perloff has argued, even though the stamped lettering is prefabricated, the nonstandard spacing "sets the words free" from the grid or framework that usually defines typeset text. The words are also freed from their role as signifiers, she adds, because visual impression takes precedent over sense.<sup>51</sup> Even more than in Rozanova's manuscript, the image's value in this page from *World Backwards* stems not from its inherent beauty but from its inherent power to resist systematization. In short, the goal of the futurist book was to create an object that could not be melted down and incorporated into the informational logic in which the linotype machine participated.

The desire to resist textual assimilation was both economically *and* politically significant within the Russian context, where there were tight government controls on the publication and distribution of information both before and after the Revolution. Before I return to *Constructivism*, I would like to look at one early post-revolutionary book project, Varvara Stepanova's *Gaust chaba* of 1919 (fig 63), as a transition between the

---

<sup>50</sup> Several varying versions of the book were collectively produced by Natalia Goncharova, Kruchenykh, Mikhail Larionov, Nikolai Rogovin, and Vladimir Tatlin. The page utilizing rubber stamps is attributed to Kruchenykh.

<sup>51</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 139-140.

futurist book and Gan's constructivist one.<sup>52</sup> Stepanova produced several unique copies of *Gaust chaba* by pasting scraps of paper and painting *zaum* poetry in watercolor onto old copies of the official Communist Party newspaper *Izvestiia*. The material quality of these books is even lower than that of the other two futurist books we have seen, although the poverty of means feels less like a rebellious gesture than a poignant reminder of the extreme material shortages of 1919. The work also displays differences between handwritten and typographic text much more emphatically and less playfully than in my earlier examples. There is a more rigid distinction between the mechanically printed newsprint, which is entirely a found object, and the hand-painted lettering. Stepanova's watercolor text and the newspaper's relentless grid of lines and columns represent extreme limit cases in their respective categories.

The perpendicular superimposition of the two types of text suggests that the relationship between them is one of contrast or opposition without specifying a stable hierarchy. In a visual reading of the work, the larger, more colorful lettering clearly dominates, pushing the uniform black and white ground of the newsprint into the background. Yet from the textual point of view, Stepanova's words are *zaum* nonsense, as illegible as the abstract collaged shapes that block out the newspaper's text. If one wants to read the work textually, the newspaper's text is the easier point of entry. Thus, on one level, the work simply illustrates the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the two modes. Yet those two modes likely also had political significance for Stepanova. One aspect of the work that has not, to my knowledge, been noted elsewhere is that the issues

---

<sup>52</sup> *The Russian Avant-Garde Book* classifies *Gaust chaba* as a constructivist book, but it is at least as much a futurist work, both temporally and in its interests. The *zaum* text and its general logic of resistance are futurist modes.

of *Izvestiia* that Stepanova used all come from 5-9 July 1918.<sup>53</sup> These dates can hardly be accidental, since they define a key moment in the history of the left opposition, as well as within Stepanova's own life. On 4 July 1918, the left SRs attempted to overthrow the Bolsheviks by calling for a vote of no confidence. In the ensuing days, they assassinated the German ambassador and attempted to hijack radio and telegraph services in an effort to gain control. By July 8, the leaders had been arrested and some executed.<sup>54</sup> The truth about these events has been notoriously difficult to piece together because of the many layers of spin applied in the press.<sup>55</sup> While it is difficult to piece together in the fragments that are visible in Stepanova's book, I believe the text of the newspapers she uses to be related to those events.

This series of events can also be tied to Stepanova through the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Group's newspaper *Anarchy*. Recall from chapter 1 that Gan and Rodchenko had both published there, and that it was one of the few news sources not controlled by the Bolsheviks. It was shut down the same week in July.<sup>56</sup> Except for his

---

<sup>53</sup> This is true of the versions in MoMA's collection and the one partially reproduced in Aleksandr Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*, ed. John Bowlit (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988): 18.

<sup>54</sup> See Lutz Häfner, "The Assassination of Count Mirbach and the 'July Uprising' of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow, 1918," *Russian Review* 50: 3 (summer 1991): 324-344.

<sup>55</sup> Until Häfner's recent research, interpretations of the incident were based on Bolshevik press and histories, in which the left SRs were depicted as either impractical idealists or "white" reactionaries threatening the Revolution. Some also suggested that the entire incident was manufactured by the Bolsheviks to discredit the opposition. Häfner "The Assassination of Count Mirbach": 331-332.

<sup>56</sup> The last issue came out on 2 July, that is, before the Left SR's took action. I can only speculate as to the precise relationship. Between November 1917 and July 1918, the

brief takeover of *Vestnik teatra* (Theater Bulletin) in August 1920, Gan was not able to publish regularly again until 1922, and the anarchist movement was all but written out of Soviet history.<sup>57</sup> Against this background, *Gaust chaba* becomes an elegiac battle painting, commemorating the valiant, yet ultimately ill-fated, resistance of an oppositional movement against a dominant power. She maps that political struggle onto the formal difference between irreducible visual form and textual information produced on a mass scale. Her superimposition of the futurist elements on top of the newspaper also suggests a substructure-superstructure model, in which seemingly conflicting positions symbiotically feed one another in much the same way that Gan posited that the typesetter's resistance to new technologies and the dominance of capital were correlative phenomena.

Gan's choice to produce *Constructivism* with purely typographic means must be understood against this background. For him, the typographic medium was like Marx's machine, or Bukharin's ocean liner. Whether it was good or bad depended on how it was used.<sup>58</sup> As someone who had both published newspapers and produced singular experiences in amateur theater, Gan could appreciate the respective powers and tradeoffs inherent in both of the modes that Stepanova portrays on a formal level. It had something

---

Bolsheviks shut down over four hundred papers deemed oppositional. Andrew Wachtel and Ilya Vinitsky, *Russian Literature* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2009): 209.

<sup>57</sup> One last lone attempt to accurately record anarchist history was Aleksei Borovoi's volume of collected essays in 1926. *Mikhailu Bakunimu. 1876-1926. Ocherki istorii anarkhicheskogo dvizheniia v Rossii* (Moscow: Golos truda, 1926). Emelian Yaroslavsky's *History of Russian Anarchism*, which was translated into English and widely distributed, was a complete revision that largely vilified the movement. Emelian Yaroslavsky, *History of Anarchism in Russia* (New York: International Publishers, 1937).

<sup>58</sup> See my discussion in chapter 2.

to do with what Walter Benjamin described as the reduction of aura inherent in the mechanically reproduced image.<sup>59</sup> Gan suggested later, in 1928, that outside of the oppositional politics of oppression and resistance, the text and image did not need to work in opposition at all. Indeed, the same movement toward efficiency that made mass printing technologies increasing favor text over image also increasingly created consumers who “looked at” books rather than reading them. The greater the volume of printed materials available, the less time people had to pour over each one.<sup>60</sup> Thus, if understood in terms of a larger organism, in which both production and consumption were taken into account, the most efficient and practical text was also one that utilized visual elements to enhance the text’s meaning and make it easier to digest.

*Constructivism* was Gan’s attempt to rework the relationship between the visual and textual as a cooperative set of compromises that met both demands simultaneously by developing a mass-producible affective power into a typeset text.

As someone who had been part of the crushed anarchist movement and then joined the Bolsheviks, Gan could also understand the problems with the political strategy of resistant opposition that Stepanova expressed through its analogy to form in *Gaust chaba*. In *Constructivism* he formally proposed an alternative political position, one of collaboration. Gan’s assembly of the book’s text accepted the futurist valuation of the visual while rejecting its strategy of obstructive resistance. It also worked within the possibilities and limitations of the linotype process without fully submitting to its regime

---

<sup>59</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 217-243.

<sup>60</sup> [Gan], “Konstruktivizm v poligrafii”: 80.

of uniformity. The result was necessarily a compromise, neither the richest of visual works, nor the most economic way of reproducing text. In this sense, the book demonstrates constructivism's core logic as I explained it in chapter 2: it represented the tectonic balance of a number of relevant factors within the medium of typography. This strategy of compromise, it should be noted, also contained an element of resistance. He did not fully comply with the existing demands of fine art, nor of industrial production. Yet whereas futurist resistance had leaned in one direction, and thus also towards opposition, isolation, and negation, the constructivist stance was structured instead by cooperation, compromise, and perhaps also complicity. Stepanova's *Gaust chaba* was a melancholy demonstration of the standoff, and standstill, produced by a reactive politics of oppression and resistance. *Constructivism* was positive agitation for a politics of collaboration.

## **WHAT IS *CONSTRUCTIVISM*? PART 2: CONSTRUCTIVISM IN ONE BOOK**

My answer to the question of what Gan was agitating for opens up an even more puzzling one: if the book was a short course in the politics of collaboration and compromise, why does Gan write in such a militant tone? The most famous line from the book identifies constructivism not with compromise, but just the opposite: "Constructivism declares uncompromising war on art!"<sup>61</sup> In the second half of this chapter, I will look at how the book's uncompromisingness was in itself also a compromise by examining the conditions surrounding its production in the summer of 1922. Between the time that he and the First

---

<sup>61</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 21. [Конструктивизм объявляет непримиримую войну искусству!]

Working Group formulated their aesthetic program and the time when Gan produced *Constructivism* much had changed in the Moscow art world, largely as a result of the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the opening up of borders to Western Europe. I will argue here that *Constructivism* is a strange artifact of Gan's effort to satisfy too many competing demands.

Let me start by introducing several further pieces of evidence that contradict the book's claim to agitational literature. First, it had a low print run, only two thousand copies. This would have been easy to explain had Gan produced it in 1921 when severe paper shortages made printing resources scarce, but in the summer of 1922 Gan was otherwise quite successful in accessing print media. He published articles frequently in several journals and even founded his own journal, *Kino-Fot* (Cinema-Photo), which had a print run of eight thousand. Also strange for an agitational book, which was ostensibly designed to get the word out to the broad masses, is the fact that it received so little attention in the press. As I stated earlier, I have only seen one contemporary review. Finally, for a book that no one seemed to be reading in Moscow, *Constructivism's* two thousand copies had reasonable success making their way into library and museum collections worldwide, where they have held up extremely well when compared to other paper objects produced in the Soviet Union during that era.<sup>62</sup>

Of course, this set of contradictions may simply point to a design failure. Gan either miscalculated or lacked proper resources to create a truly effective tool for rousting

---

<sup>62</sup> For example, the newspaper *Anarchy*, produced only four years earlier, is now only accessible on microfilm, the last shreds of the originals too brittle for preservation. Leaflets and other agitational literature were often printed on newsprint, making Gan's choice to use a smoother and more durable paper for his agitational book significant.

and educating the masses on the aesthetic front. One also sort of suspects that the problem stems from Gan's own delusions and contradictory desires to be really famous for his anti-individualist proletarian aesthetic. Gan's calls to "cultivate one's inner communist" and "purify oneself of all hope of supernatural powers" seem like proposals of a man wrestling with his ego.<sup>63</sup> His name on the cover is the largest and the only color element in the book, and the book did in fact function to secure him a place in the history of Russian constructivism. These suspicions probably contain at least a grain of truth, but I would also like to consider a third option: that something about the complex function of tectonic pressures that determined *Constructivism's* form made it seem like a good idea to design a compact statement about constructivism in a rather arty limited edition.

There were several relevant changes that occurred between 1921 and the publication of *Constructivism* in 1922. Most were in one way or another consequences of the NEP's partial resuscitation of a market economy. The most important was that government control on printing resources was relaxed. After the Revolution, print shops had been nationalized and haphazardly allocated to various government agencies.<sup>64</sup> The nonexistence of private print shops was the reason why Gan and the Commfaction had to officially apply for permission to print their own newspaper in the summer of 1920. With the introduction of NEP, some print shops were re-privatized, including Tver' Publishing,

---

<sup>63</sup> I am referring to my presentation in chapter 2. They are from Aleksei Gan, "Massovoe deistvo. Sostiazanie I bor'ba," *Vestnik teatra* 66 (24 August 1920): 2-3.

<sup>64</sup> Koenker, *Republic of Labor*: 28-29.

where Gan produced *Constructivism*.<sup>65</sup> Gan's unconventional layouts would have required that he work at a shop sympathetic to him. Most print shops were not open to experimenting with typographic *faktura*, as Gan pointed out in the article of 1925 that I quoted above. The Tver' publisher's newly privatized status may have given it license to indulge such projects. Another virtue may have been its distance from public or state scrutiny. Around the same time that Gan produced *Constructivism*, Tver' also printed a volume of collected essays called *On Theater* (O teatre), to which Gan contributed an essay on mass action.<sup>66</sup> Gan's article was an aggregation of those that had gotten him into trouble when he initially published them in *Theater Bulletin* in August of 1920. The absence of prying eyes in Tver' would also help explain Gan's featuring Lenin's political enemy Bogdanov in *Constructivism* when he does not even mention the name once in any of his other writings.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to allowing for a greater diversity of publications, the privatization of presses and the end of paper shortages also created a more active public exchange in the press. This has resulted in a more extensive record of the events and debates occurring

---

<sup>65</sup> Tver' was referred to as a "former" one of these official provincial publishers, a *byvshchii Gubizdat*, in the review of other publication produced there in *Teatral'naia Moskva* 50 (25-30 July 1922): 12.

<sup>66</sup> *On Theater*, which seems to have come out in July, had more of a reception in the press than Gan's *Constructivism* did. It was reviewed in *Teatral'naia Moskva* 50 (25-30 July 1922): 12; *Avangard* 1 (August 1922): 24; and *Avangard* 3 (September 1922): 81. The first review in *Avangard* mentions several of the articles, but not Gan's, whereas the second spends a good bit of time denigrating Gan's article, specifically for being "unconstructivist" in its verbal economy. This suggests to me that Gan had become more prominent, particularly as a constructivist, in August, which contributes to the idea that *Constructivism* came out in the summer.

<sup>67</sup> As I explained in chapter 2, Bogdanov had long been a political rival of Lenin's, and he came into particular disfavor at the end of 1920.

within the art world. Thus we know that by the spring of 1922, constructivism had become an important topic of discussion. Gan gave at least two public lectures on it in March, one in response to a lecture on the same topic by the productivist theoretician Osip Brik.<sup>68</sup> When Gan finally first published an official statement describing the formation and work of the First Working Group of Constructivists at the end of May, over a year after the group's formation, he was able to conclude it with the observation that "constructivism has become the fashion."<sup>69</sup>

This new interest in constructivism could be taken as evidence that Gan's evolving PR campaign had finally succeeded, that he had finally created the social conditions in which constructivism could circulate easily, except that much of the buzz in the spring of 1922 had to do with a version of constructivism significantly different from Gan's. Another consequence of NEP was that it opened the Soviet cultural sphere to the West after many years of isolation. One of the more important things to break through, in April of 1922, was El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg's Berlin-based trilingual journal *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* (Object, fig 64).<sup>70</sup> Lissitzky, who had developed his *proun* paintings as a student of Malevich in Vitebsk, had briefly participated in INKhUK in the fall of 1921, advocating for the continuation of easel painting. When his position was

---

<sup>68</sup> The first was called "On Constructivism" and mentioned in "Doklady i disputy ob iskusstve," *Vestnik iskusstv* 3-4 (March 1922): 28. The second was "The Constructivist Plan for the Communist City" and noted in *Vestnik iskusstv* 3-4 (March 1922): 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Ermitazh* 3 (30 May-5 June 1922): 3. [конструктивизм стал модой]

<sup>70</sup> Lissitzky and Ehrenburg intended the first issue of *Veshch'* to come out in February, but it was delayed until April, at which point they published it as a double issue covering March and April. See the commentary to the reprint, *Veshch'/Objet/Gegenstand*, ed. Nächtigaller and Gassner.

definitively rejected in December,<sup>71</sup> he went to Berlin, where he immediately began collaborating with the Russian émigré poet Ehrenburg on the journal. Proclaiming that “the blockade on Russia [was] ending,” the journal linked constructivist trends in Russia to trends emerging internationally.<sup>72</sup> Soviet examples were folded in with phenomena like De Stijl and Le Corbusier’s *L’Esprit nouveau* as expressions of an international cultural trend. Ehrenburg simultaneously produced a book, *And Yet the World Goes Round* (*A vse taki ona vertitsia*, fig 65), with much of the same content as the journal.<sup>73</sup> Like Gan’s book, it was primarily typographic and used somewhat unconventional layouts (fig 65b), although it was less of a pure typographic book in that it contained a large number of photographic reproductions of artworks and technological objects from around the Western world (fig 65c).

The perception promulgated by *Object* that constructivism was a legitimate trend in Western Europe may have prompted the rush in Moscow to claim the term. The Soviet government had sent Lissitzky to Berlin to plan a show of Russian art for the fall of 1922, with the goal of improving the reputation of Soviet culture abroad.<sup>74</sup> As Manfredo Tafuri

---

<sup>71</sup> Lissitzky left INKhUK at a meeting of 24 November 1921 at which the other members decided to ban easel painting. Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Gan were not present at the meeting, which was composed primarily of architects. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 177.

<sup>72</sup> El Lissitzsky and Ilya Ehrenburg, “Blokada Rossii konchaetsiia,” *Veshch’* 1-2 (March-April 1922): 1.

<sup>73</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *A vse taki ona vertit’sia* (Berlin and Moscow: Gelikon, 1922). I do not know when in 1922 the book came out, although Gan was definitely aware of it by the end of August. He talks about it at the end of *Constructivism*.

<sup>74</sup> Narkompros began organizing The First Russian Exhibition in spring of 1921. It involved a complicated set of negotiations through official diplomatic channels, but by late November, it seemed like a show would take place. It finally opened on 15 October

has argued, constructivism was a good candidate for the exhibition because it presented an “image of an ideology of organization” that effectively countered the image then represented, particularly in Berlin, by Russian émigrés, who were known for their combination of decadence and boorishness.<sup>75</sup> For any Soviet artist, participating in this show would have been an enormous opportunity. The exhibition by the Stenberg brothers and Konstantin Medunetskii in January 1922, which was titled “The Constructivists,” may have been the earliest attempt to stake a claim on the newly valuable artistic territory.<sup>76</sup> The appearance of the journal *Object* later in the spring created a positive run on it. Indeed, the journal may have been produced as a recruitment tool. There were only two issues—a double issue for March and April and another for May—and although it claimed to be trilingual, most of the text was only in Russian, suggesting that it was designed to present the idea of international relevance and circulation to a Russian audience without actually circulating much beyond Russian-speaking quarters. In any case, by May of 1922, when selection of works began in earnest,<sup>77</sup> constructivism suddenly became, as Gan noted, extremely fashionable.

---

1922 at the Van Diemen Gallery. See Peter Nesbit, “Some Facts on the Organizational History of the van Diemen Exhibition,” *The First Russian Show: A Commemoration of the van Diemen Exhibition, Berlin, 1922* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983): 67-72. See also Myroslava M. Mudrak and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, “Environment of Propaganda: Russians and Soviet Expositions and Pavilions in the West,” in *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1910-1930* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992): 68. For excerpts from the catalogue to the show, see *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Viking Press, 1974): 70-76.

<sup>75</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, “USSR – Berlin, 1922: From Populism to ‘Constructivist International’,” in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*, ed. Joan Ockman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985): 149-151.

<sup>76</sup> See Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 170-171.

<sup>77</sup> Nesbit, “Some Facts on the Organizational History”: 67-72.

Lissitzky and Ehrenburg's effort to internationalize the movement prompted its more politicized adherents to entrench and more firmly articulate the foundational role played by Soviet socialist conditions. One example was a review of *Object* published in September 1922 by the productivist theoretician Boris Arvatov.<sup>78</sup> As he saw it, *Object* did not attest to the unity of international trends, but rather to the aesthetic impoverishment of the constructivist idea outside of the specific conditions in which it arose in Russia. The journal was proof that

International art has unquestionably come up against a dead end..., its further evolution stopped by the absence of new organizational problems and the conversion of the pursuit of non-figurative creative products into an end-in-itself...

The proletarian revolution was necessary for "pure nonobjectivity" to cross over into constructivism, that is, into laboratory experimentation with materials in relation to production tasks. Russian art found itself a way out in the convergence of artistic labor with industrial labor...

In the West, nothing like this happened. There, leftist art continued to flop around in the backwater of do-it-yourselfishness and individualism. True, under the influence of the great triumphs in technology, the Western nonobjectivists technified themselves [*otekhnizirovalis*']. They absorbed the technological in a purely ideological way, came to draft rather than draw, to use geometric and technical forms, but only within the limits of the same stationary aesthetic picture.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Arvatov was the other prominent figure of constructivism and productivism to have served in PUR Revvoensovet along with Gan. He worked there as a bibliographer in the Library Department during the summer of 1919, the same period that Gan directed the Art/Club Department (RGVA f. 9, op. 1, d. 138, ll. 49ob-50). Their writings often display a similar knowledge base and mindset, and he contributed to Gan's other print project of this period, the journal *Kino-Fot*.

<sup>79</sup> Boris Arvatov, review of *Veshch', Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 7 (September–October 1922): 341–342. [Международное искусство, несомненно уперлось в тупик...перейдя к беспредметным композициям, остановилась перед невозможностью дальнейшей эволюции в виду отсутствия новых организационных задач, в виду превращения продуктов творчества в окончательную, никакой «изобразительностью» не прикрытую...самоцель. / Понадобилась пролетарская революция для того, чтобы «беспредметничество просто» перешло в конструктивизм, т.е. в лабораторную обработку материалов с производственными задачами. Русское искусство нашло

In making constructivism into an international art movement, Lissitzky and Ehrenburg had stripped away everything that made it aesthetically interesting and socially meaningful, that is, its embeddedness in the organizational problems of everyday life and industrial production. Arvatov concluded that *Object* was sad in its opportunism: “the opportunism of *Object* is...the opportunism of those who want the new, but don’t feel the new ground under their feet and thus continue their cowardly support of the old.”<sup>80</sup>

Gan’s personal response to the cooptation of his movement certainly contained an element of personal pride. He accused Lissitzky of taking a copy of the constructivist program and photographs of their work with him when he left Moscow in 1921,<sup>81</sup> which was clearly true, since the photographs appear in *Object*. There was nothing scandalous about this fact in itself; publicizing Soviet work was part of the reason for Lissitzky’s trip. The problem was that Lissitzky had taken control of the interpretation of those photographs, presenting constructivism as an art movement represented by individual artists. Part of the problem for Gan was also undoubtedly the fact that Lissitzky had

---

себе выход в слиянии индустриального труда с трудом художественным... / На Западе ничего подобного, конечно, не произошло. Там левое искусство продолжает барахтаться в болоте самодельщины и индивидуализма. Правда, под влиянием могучих успехов техники, западные беспредметники отехнизировались, т.е. впитали в себя технику чисто идеологически, стали чертить, а не рисовать, употреблять геометрические и технические формы, но все это в пределах все той же эстетической станковой картинки...]

<sup>80</sup> Boris Arvatov, review of *Veshch’*, *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* 7 (September–October 1922): 341-342. [Оппортьюнизм «Вещь»--это оппортьюнизм социальных условий, находящихся в состоянии боржения и сдвига, но не преодоленных революцией,-- это оппортьюнизм тех, кто хочет нового, но, не чувствуя под собой новой почвы, продолжает трусливо держаться за старое.]

<sup>81</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 70. He makes the claim again in 1926 in Aleksei Gan, “Nasha spravka,” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2: inside front cover.

chosen Rodchenko as the representative of Russian constructivism. *Object* did not even mention Gan, probably partially for the same reason that Gan is not better known within art history: his contribution was more organizational and textual than visual. He simply did not produce a lot of objects. Ironically, in the international art world, irreducible visual form offered less resistance to reproduction and reinterpretation than text did.

Gan's awakening to the international scene also provides a possible explanation for his inclusion of Bogdanov in the text. As I explained in chapter 2, Gan's term *tectonics* was obviously related to Bogdanov's "universal organizational science" of tectology, and his hesitance to mention him by name in his work is easily explained by the political enmity between Bogdanov and Lenin. Even in *Constructivism*, the way that Gan introduced the section quoting Bogdanov suggests a hedging of bets. He used scare quotes, writing that he included it for the sake of "fans (*liubiteli*) of 'scientifically historical excursuses'."<sup>82</sup> In Gan's world, the word *liubiteli* was derogatory, holding connotations of dilettantism.<sup>83</sup> In 1922, there was probably no serious danger in being associated with Bogdanov, but it also would have undermined constructivism's appeals for state support.<sup>84</sup> The situation was different with regard to the international sphere,

---

<sup>82</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 26.

<sup>83</sup> Amateur theater, for example, was referred to as both *liubitel'nyi teatr* and *samodeiatel'nyi teatr*, and Gan clearly preferred the connotations of active labor carried by *samodeiatel'nyi*.

<sup>84</sup> Later in the thirties all things Bogdanovite would be defined as counterrevolutionary activity, but in the twenties Lenin's disapproval only added a tint to Bogdanov's influence. He continued to teach at the Socialist Academy (after 1923, the Communist Academy), and his books were published and republished until his death in 1928, some going into tenth and eleventh editions and being translated into several languages. See John Biggart, "The Rehabilitation of Bogdanov," *Bogdanov and His Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky)*, 1873-

however. As Oliver Botar has argued, the Hungarian art historian Alfréd Kemény picked up Bogdanovian lingo and ideas during the months he spent at INKhUK in the second half of 1921.<sup>85</sup> Bogdanov gave a lecture entitled “The Social-Organizational Significance of Art” at the Russian Academy of Sciences in October. It was attended by INKhUK members, and its subject matter was very similar to what Gan included in *Constructivism* about art’s organizational role within society. Botar claims that Kemény was already using Bogdanov’s language before he returned to Berlin in December,<sup>86</sup> and the third volume of Bogdanov’s *Tectology* was published in Berlin in 1922.<sup>87</sup> Thus, what was a liability in Moscow might have seemed to Gan like his best way of accessing the Berlin audience. Better yet, unlike the photographs of Rodchenko’s work, there was no way to reinterpret his text as just another work of art. He made sure of that by declaring constructivism’s uncompromising war on art three times.

In fall of 1922, Galina and Olga Chichigova, who were then students at the state art school VKhUTEMAS, commented on the relationship between the appearance of *Object* and Gan’s creation of *Constructivism* in verse initially intended as part of a

---

1928, ed. John Biggart, G. D. Gloveli, and Avraham Yassour (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 1998): 14, 25.

<sup>85</sup> See Oliver Botar, *Természet és technika: Az újraértelmezett Moholy-Nagy, 1916 1923* (Budapest: Vince Kiadó, 2007): 192-202. For an account of Kemény’s speech at INKhUK, see Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 163.

<sup>86</sup> Botar has argued that Kemény and Moholy used the term *Konstruktivität*, or constructivity, in their joint text of 1923, “Dynamic-Constructive Energy System,” as a replacement for Bogdanov’s term tectology. See Botar, *Természet és technika*: 192-202.

<sup>87</sup> Bogdanov’s first volume on tectology was published in 1913 and the second in 1917. The third was published by the Berlin-based Russian-language publisher Gzhebin in 1922 and received only partial distribution in Russia.

VKhUTEMAS newsletter relaying the summer's gossip. It was omitted from the final publication, but still exists in manuscript form (fig 66). They wrote,

There is a fog over Moscow, and over the fog an airplane  
distributes the journal *OBJECT*.  
The summer is rainy. It pours and pours.  
*Object* fell on Starokoniushennyi [the street where Gan lived]  
and was caught by **ALEKSEI GAN**,  
the big fish of constructivism,  
the kinok,  
the chieftain of all leftists,  
but not a Levitan, not even a Cézanne.<sup>88</sup>

Gan had become the big fish of Russian constructivism by cultivating his more modest inner communist and collaborating with others to develop a new socialist aesthetic based on dependence and interrelation rather than autonomous objects and subjects. Yet the incongruity of those terms with the international art system meant that there was no way for his version of constructivism to even register there. It had no individuals, no Levitans and no Cézannes. It also had no discrete objects. Which had been fine, until *Object* forced him to define his own version of constructivism as separate from theirs. The Chichagovas, who were also book designers, express this well by rendering Gan's name in giant all-capital letters reminiscent of the lettering on the cover of *Constructivism*. **ALEKSEI GAN** as big proper name was the product of the *Object* invasion.

---

<sup>88</sup> The kinoks were the group of filmmakers led by Dziga Vertov. Isaac Levitan (1860-1900) was a Russian landscape painter. Lavrentiev reproduces the manuscript in *DA!* 3-4 (1995): 42. [Над Москвой туман, над туманом аэроплан. / Расбрасывают журнал ВЕЩЬ. / Лето дождливое, дождик хлещет, хлещет. / Вещь упала в Староконюшенный. Поймал ВЕЩЬ АЛЕКСЕЙ ГАН / Кит конструиизма / Кинок / ВсеMLEвым атаман / Хотя не Левитан, и даже не Сезанн.]

The shrill and unnuanced quality of Gan's anti-art rhetoric in *Constructivism* and other articles of this period must be seen as a response to this situation. Later, in 1925, Gan admitted as much:

[The constructivists] tossed out a lot of slogans, just like the other workers of Lef. Mostly, they declared their protest against art, and they did this because what pops into every person's head when they hear that word is a particular complex of certain types of humanist activity, humanist work: theater, music, literature, that is, poetry and a whole series of other aesthetic representations with the values that are called art.<sup>89</sup>

It was important to Gan that constructivism not be considered *that* kind of art, a humanist art. "The constructivists understand art much more broadly," he continued, using another analogy from the world of metal: "It is the art of mining, of metallurgical production."<sup>90</sup> His lectures on constructivism in March were an initial attempt at correcting public opinion. His most important points there were that constructivism had arisen independently of Western influence and was contingent on communist ideology.<sup>91</sup> He also emphasized that the final object of constructivism was a new communist city, not a set of objects for an international exhibition.<sup>92</sup> He formalized these statements in

---

<sup>89</sup> RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 37. [Они выбросили ряд лозунгов, как выбрасывали другие работники ЛЕФа. Прежде всего они объявили протест против искусства, и они это сделали потому что каждый человек, когда он произносит это слово - в его голову ассоциируется определенный комплекс некоторых видов человеческой деятельности, человеческой работы: театр, музыка, литература, т.е. стихи и целый ряд других эстетических изображений в области тех ценностей, которые назывались искусством]

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* [Конструктивисты гораздо шире понимали искусство - это искусство, горного дела, металлургической промышленности.]

<sup>91</sup> "Disputy i lekstii. Tezisy konstruktivizma (Dom prosveshcheniia I iskusstva)," *Teatral'naia Moskva* 32 (March 1922): 18-19.

<sup>92</sup> He gave a lecture on the topic in March and published an article on the same theme in May. The article begins by talking about the resurgence of old aesthetic values. Aleksei

published articles at the end of May, when the fervor surrounding selection of objects for the Berlin exhibition was at its peak.<sup>93</sup> Over the summer, he produced *Constructivism*.

In the final two pages of the book, in the section entitled “Constructivism in the West,” Gan explicitly addressed Lissitzky and Ehrenburg.<sup>94</sup> He admitted that there were parallels between constructivist trends in Western Europe and the constructivism that emerged in Russia in the years following the October Revolution. Both arose spontaneously as responses to the general conditions of modernity, laid bare by the First World War. Still, Gan insisted with some impatience, “clearly all constructivisms are not the same.”<sup>95</sup> The problem with Lissitzky and Ehrenburg’s understanding of constructivism was that they united international trends on a formal basis, treating all objects as bourgeois works regardless of their situation and function. They are “unable to disengage from art” and “simply call the new art constructivism.”<sup>96</sup> When Gan reiterated his most famous line for the third and last time in the book, he added a qualifying pronoun that neatly separates us from them on exactly this point: “*Our* constructivism

---

Gan, “Kommunisticheskii gorod (V planovykh razrabotkakh konstruktivistov),” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 40 (16-21 May 1922): 5-6.

<sup>93</sup> Gan, “Kommunisticheskii gorod”: 5-6, and *Ermitazh* 3 (30 May-5 June 1922): 3.

<sup>94</sup> He referred specifically to Ehrenburg’s *And Yet the World Goes Round* but implied that he was also responding to *Object*. Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 69-70.

<sup>95</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 70. [естественно, что и конструктивизм не одинаков.]

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*: 69. [не могут оторваться от искусство. / Они просто новое искусство называют конструктивизм.]

declared uncompromising war on art!”<sup>97</sup> In contrast, Western European and American constructivisms “mate with art.”<sup>98</sup>

The great paradox of the book is that Gan seemed to feel that he too needed to mate with art a bit in order to even be visible to the audience for whom this discussion mattered. In a context in which his lectures and newspaper articles were having no effect, he did what any contextually responsive constructivist would do, and produced a constructivist agitational *objet* to be reckoned with. It would be a demonstration of ephemeral agit-prop, but on nice paper. It would provide an individual author, in large red letters, for the aesthetic he had gone through pains to make appear an organic phenomenon, worked out by committee. The pressures of the situation also required that he write a polemical book about an aesthetic structured around compromise. And then there is the problem of the intended audience. The best way to explain his inclusion of Bogdanov, as well as his printing the book at the out-of-the-way Tver’ shop, is that he never wanted it to be received by a contemporary Russian audience. Yet the very point of the book, that constructivism was an aesthetic specific to the Soviet context, required him to print the text entirely in Russian in order to avoid conflation with the internationalist look and ideology of *Object*.

All of these contradictions made *Constructivism* a failure in its own moment, which may also make it proof of the failure of constructivism as an aesthetic. In trying to balance all the demands placed on it, it was unable to satisfy any of them. The only thing

---

<sup>97</sup> My emphasis. *Ibid.*: 70. [Наш конструктивизм объявил непримиримую войну искусству.]

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* [братают с искусством.]

it succeeded in doing was winning Gan a reputation for being vain, unnuanced, and the enemy of everything artistic. Through the rest of the twenties, Gan would continue to be constructivism's most consistent advocate, also producing his own constructivist objects in print and film. He lost the momentum of the First Working Group, however. By 1923 all of the original members had moved on. Gan began meetings of a Second Working Group with a more junior set of members on 11 December 1923.<sup>99</sup>

On the other hand, the book's failure also stemmed from Gan's unwillingness to compromise. *Constructivism* had no means of circulating in its own time because it clung too closely to Gan's ideal version of constructivism, complete with its Russian language and Bogdanovite foundations. This interpretation makes of the book a different kind of compromise, one similar to the strategy of "socialism in one country" that Stalin would propose two years later. If Gan could not have a constructivist world, he would at least have constructivism in one book. As a compact and durable exemplar of that ideal, the book would preserve some trace of what constructivism really was and the conditions in which it developed. When it surfaced, it would provide documentation to counter the history being written by Lissitzky and Ehrenburg. In this sense, Gan wrote this book for me, and he was correct that it was only in working with the text, in unraveling and

---

<sup>99</sup> The new members were Viktor Shestakov, Galina and Olga Chichagova, N. Smirnov, Grigorii Miller, Aleksandra Miroljubova, and L. Sanina. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 179.

deciphering its techniques and referents—that is, in practice—that it, and I, was able to prove the truth of the matter.<sup>100</sup>

One does not need to resort to such a self-reflexive historical argument in order to find evidence of *Constructivism*'s delayed impact, however. Only a few years later, in 1925, it surfaced in Kharkov, Ukraine, in two typesetting handbooks, where it served as the prime example of a new approach. The author of the first noted that the constructivist approach, developed by A. Gan in his *Constructivism*, was able to achieve a number of formats that most typesetters would have said were impossible, or simply not done.<sup>101</sup> The second was significantly more enthusiastic, presenting its description of Gan's book in a constructivist layout of its own (fig 67), and repeating Gan's main points against the conflation of Russian and international constructivism: that its final goal was to construct a new socialist city, and that it was not art. The author somewhat playfully contradicted Gan on the second point, stating that “constructivism negates the elements of art, but from our point of view constructivism is still art! True, it is not the art of old classical forms...Constructivism is a new art that replaces the old.”<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 33. [Только в работе, в практике...новаторы интеллектуального-материального производства могут доказать практическую истину своего дела.]

<sup>101</sup> Dmitriev, *Tekhnika knigi*: 45-46.

<sup>102</sup> Sokolov, *Spravochnaia knizhka naborshchika*: 167-172. [Конструктивизм отрицает в себе элементы искусства. С нашей точки зрения—конструктивизм все же искусство! Правда, это не искусство старых классических форм...Конструктивизм—это искусство новое, идущее на смену старому.]

## CHAPTER 4

**The Communist City, Part 1:  
Paper Architecture, from *Object* to *Contemporary Architecture***

What is *art* [*tvorchestvo*]? Art is the broadening of life.

A person goes home in the evening tired. With the end of the day comes the end of a portion of life...He is saddened to part with the millions of experiences, feelings, and senses that agitate and weave together with what we call life. So he gets a book—a story or a novel—and, like sleep draws darkness over the spirit, again begins to love, hate, fear, laugh. Again...the ocean roars, mountains rise, and life flows on, resplendent with joy, grief, happiness, and terror.

And this is art. It extends life.

A person lives in his corner of a small town in the provinces. He sees only his own forest, his own fields, all the same people. It has been like this for generations. And then an inventor appeared, pulled vapor into iron, placed a car on an iron rail, and the person who had never left his own town is transported across a huge space, sees north and south, sees other people, other fields, the sea, unknown forests. During that interval of time, an infinitely greater number of impressions pass through the human self.

And this is art. It tremendously expands a person's life.

- Editorial statement of the journal *Tvorchestvo*, 1919<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I have altered the paragraph breaks. [A. Serafimovich, V. Friche, and N. Meshcheriakov], "Tvorchestvo," *Tvorchestvo* 1 (May 1918): 1. [Что такое *творчество*? / Творчество, это—уширение жизни. / Вот человек усталый вечером приходит домой. Кончился день, кончилась жизнь, отмеренная этим днем... / Но человеку жаль разставаться с миллионом переживаний, чувств, ощущений, которые, волнуясь, сплетаются в то, что мы называем жизнью. И он перед тем, как сон темно задернет душу, берет книгу—рассказ, повесть, или роман—и снова любит, ненавидит, борется, смеется; снова...шумит море, стоят горы; снова, сверкая радостью, горем, счастьем, ужасом, течет жизнь / И это творчество; оно продлило жизнь. / Человек живет в своем углу, в деревне, в губернии. Видит только свои леса, свои поля, все тех же людей. Так поколениями. И вот явился изобретатель, взял в железо пар, пустил машину по железным полосам, и человек, дальше своей губернии нигде не бывавший, перебрасывается на громадные пространства, видит юг и север, видит чужих людей, иные поля, поре, невиданные леса. В тот же промежуток времени через человеческую душу пробегает неизмеримо большее количество впечатлений. / И это— творчество; оно огромно расширило жизнь человека.]

To the child it is self-evident that what delights him in his favorite village is found only there, there alone and nowhere else. He is mistaken; but his mistake creates the model of experience, of a concept that will end up as the concept of the thing in itself, not as a poor projection of things... Only in the face of absolute, indissoluble individuation can we hope that this, exactly this has existed and is going to exist; fulfilling this hope alone would fulfill the concept of the concept. But the concept clings to the promised happiness, while the world that denies us our happiness is the world of the reigning universal, the world stubbornly opposed by Proust's reconstruction of experience.

Happiness, the only part of metaphysical experience that is more than impotent longing, gives us the inside of objects as something removed from the objects.

- Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1966<sup>2</sup>

In the next three chapters, I will examine Gan's work during the productivist period of constructivism, 1922-1928, when Gan was most active in the fields of cinema, print, and architecture. Chapter 6 will focus on his production of films, and this one and the next, on his production of magazines, or journals. The third of these fields, architecture, holds a special place in Gan's oeuvre insofar as it was both the one to which he nominally contributed the least, and the one to which his theory and practice most aspired. The closest he came to constructing an architectural structure was a model for a book kiosk (fig 68). Nevertheless, from his attempt to transform the existing city into a socialist city of the future for May Day of 1920, to his work with the Union of Contemporary Architects (OSA) from 1926 to 1930, he was clear about his work's final end. As he articulated it in 1922 in *Constructivism*, "the communist city is the constant goal."<sup>3</sup>

Reading on in this passage from *Constructivism*, it becomes apparent that Gan's

---

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973): 373-374.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver': Tverskoe izdatel'stvo: 1922): 62.  
[Коммунистический город—вот их неколебимая цель.]

sense was literal, at least in part. The communist city would replace the bourgeois capitalist city's "small, clumsy buildings," "architectural eclecticism," and "signs of private property...at every step," with the "communist expression of material structures."<sup>4</sup> That is, it would be a place, with a particular arrangement of things. Yet, as I mean to suggest with my epigraphs, the communist city might also be understood as a state of mind, and Gan seems to have seen it in this way too. The passage goes on to posit that one component of the city-building task was "to compel workers...to see the ugliness [of the capitalist city] as simply and naturally as they see their own messy apartment."<sup>5</sup> Living in the communist city meant comprehending one's environment as extending beyond the private dwelling and its nuclear family, beyond one's own village, and even beyond the modern city. Something like the global village of the 1960s, the communist city was feeling and behaving as if one were living with people, everywhere and in general.

This enlarged definition of the communist city makes it possible to include Gan's work with mass-media forms, such as his journals and films, under the rubric of constructivist architecture. And, indeed, such a grouping is convenient, since the three fields are so multiply intertwined in Gan's work that it is difficult to fully extricate one from the others. Although my focus in this chapter will be on Gan's journal projects, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 63. [Мелкие и неуклюжие здания его] [его эклектизме архитектурных форм] [Признак частной собственности...на каждом шагу] [коммунистическом выражении материальных сооружений]

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* [необходимо так сделать, что бы организовать человеческое сознание и заставить революционно-действующие группы и трудящиеся массы видеть это безобразие так же просто и естественно, как они видят это в своей квартире, которую те или иные условия привели к беспорядку.]

two most important examples will be a journal about cinema, *Kino-Fot* (Cinema-Photo, figs 69-74), and the architectural journal usually referred to as *SA* (*Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*, or Contemporary Architecture, figs 75-76). Thus, my discussion will require touching on political and formal debates in both fields. The more intriguing connections, however, will be on the level of form and function, and my larger assumption is that Gan's journals, films, and architectural structures were all constructivist objects designed on similar principles and for similar ends. As in my discussion of *Constructivism* in the previous chapter, the technical specificities of typographic production continue to be important in the journals, but my focus here will turn, in this chapter, to the ways in which the construction of the journals related to architecture, and then, in the next, to their relation to cinema.

The purpose of looking at the journals vis-à-vis these other disciplines is, first, to articulate a set of constructive logics that run throughout Gan's work. Because so little of Gan's work is material and extant, the journals represent the best opportunity to closely analyze his development of constructivist objects in actual practice. I will look at them as explorations of style, seriality, reproduction, distribution, and montage. Secondly, considering the journals in terms of cinema and architecture enables us to envision them as something more than isolated achievements in graphic composition, or mechanically reproduced versions of something like painting. As one third of an interrelated triad of approaches to constructing the communist city, they become a new sort of object with an entirely different set of dimensions. They help us to define an object appropriate for a mass subject in the same way that Adorno proposed that the "thing in itself" belonged to an individuated subject with a local model of experience.

## INTO PRINT! GAN'S PRODUCTIVISM

Gan's work in print corresponded to the heyday of productivism, when, as the story goes, the constructivists at the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) rallied around Osip Brik's cry "Into Production!" by definitively rejecting pure art altogether in favor of mass producing utilitarian objects for everyday life. Within the usual way of defining the scope of this project, print has always occupied the lightweight end of the spectrum, with architecture anchoring the other extreme. Architecture was art's closest kin to engineering, and thus productivism's highest form, whereas print's handheld and flat, ink-on-paper objects were only a small step away from drawing and painting. This hierarchy, prominent in the thinking of productivist theoreticians such as Brik, was taken up as a structuring paradigm in pioneering studies such as Christina Lodder's *Russian Constructivism*. She opens her chapter on print, which is tellingly placed at the end of the study and entitled "Confinement," by writing,

[Having] failed in its primary objective of totally transforming the environment...the constructivist artist lowered his sights to more practical problems such as the small-scale, well-defined design task, and in particular to typographical, poster, and exhibition design, which fitted more neatly into traditional artistic categories.<sup>6</sup>

Here, constructivism's print objects are the practicable and limited version of the project to which the productivists resorted after their more substantial efforts had failed. In a more recent treatment, Lodder adds a slightly different twist to the secondary status of the print objects, suggesting that they were a way of "promoting constructivism" during a

---

<sup>6</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale, 1983): 181.

time when, again, real work in production was not possible.<sup>7</sup>

One byproduct of focusing on Gan's journals, and perhaps of structuring a study of constructivism around Gan more generally, is the necessity of rethinking this narrative, as objects and processes long relegated to the outermost margins—namely, those related to print—become the central and definitive ones. In the following, I will accept two pieces of supporting evidence from Lodder's evaluation: indeed, print was one of the easier mass-production processes for an artist to enter, and work in print was used to build broad support for other production projects. At the same time, I will show that in Gan's thinking these facts do not lead to the conclusion that print production was a lesser form. For him, the relationship between something like architecture and something like print—or between something like material construction and something like ideological construction—was not hierarchical, but complementary and interwoven. Similarly, for Gan, print was never a last resort, but more like a good place to start, serving as an instrument for the social organization—or the construction of mass action—that we have already seen was his medium of choice.

Although Gan's thinking in this respect may disrupt art-historical interpretations of productivism, it was perfectly congruent with relevant ideas from the realm of revolutionary practice out of which Gan emerged. In an article of 1902, "Where to Begin?," Lenin had pointed to the parallelism between the development of the periodical press and social and political organization, writing,

The starting point of our activities, the first step toward creating the desired organization...should be the founding of an All-Russian political newspaper...It

---

<sup>7</sup> Christina Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937* (London: Pindar, 2005): 368-391.

may be said without exaggeration that the frequency and regularity with which a newspaper is printed (and distributed) can serve as a precise criterion of how well this cardinal and most essential sector of our militant activities is built up...As long as we fail to combine our efforts to influence the people and the government by means of the printed word, it will be utopian to think of combining other means...for exerting influence. Our movement suffers in the first place...from its state of fragmentation, from the almost complete immersion...in local work, which narrows [our] outlook.<sup>8</sup>

Lenin's emphases on aspects of a periodical print organ such as regular distribution, the broadening of outlook, and national scale will be critical in the argument to come. For now, however, it is enough to point out that for Lenin, as for Gan, a print organ was what they needed to produce *before* anything else—it was “where to begin,” not where failed things meet their end. It was the best measure of the strength of a movement's organization.

As I go on to develop ways of reading Gan's journals formally, it will be crucial to keep this organizational function in mind. By the end of the twenties, Gan's reputation as a producer rested on his work as a graphic designer,<sup>9</sup> but his early work in print suggests that his interest and experience in the field were rooted in other concerns. We have already seen the important role that the newspaper *Anarkhiia* (Anarchy) played in Gan's organization of his amateur proletarian theater group in 1918. He edited and wrote for the

---

<sup>8</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Where to Begin?” in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961): 13-24.

<sup>9</sup> By 1924, Gan promoted himself an innovator in graphic design, exhibiting samples of his work as a progression of achievements in typographic production at the First Discussional Exhibition of the Unions of Active Revolutionary Art in May. By 1927-1928, articles reviewing the decade in graphic design usually pointed to him as key figure. See Sophie Koppers, “Proizvodstvennaia grafika na vystavke,” *Poligraficheskoe proizvodstvo*, 1927, no. 10: 14; and “Oformlenie knigi,” *Poligraficheskoe proizvodstvo*, 1928, no. 8: 24.

paper, and probably also had a hand in its material production.<sup>10</sup> Gan claimed to have worked in the production of “a set of different publications” prior to *Constructivism*.<sup>11</sup> It is nearly impossible to corroborate or elaborate, but likely candidates include, along with *Anarchy*, the short-lived magazine project *Zhizn' pekaria* (Baker's Life),<sup>12</sup> *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* (Art Life), and *Vestnik teatra* (Theater Bulletin).<sup>13</sup> These papers were formatted in a relatively standard way, making it difficult to know quite what Gan meant when he asserted later that he began “to transform textual typesetting,” “activate typographical material,” and “plan the printed surface” in them.<sup>14</sup> Yet this very lack of graphic innovation makes an important point in itself: that from the beginning

---

<sup>10</sup> His first entry in the Discussional Exhibition was an unspecified newspaper of 1918, and one report in *Anarchy* implies that he was responsible for getting the paper out. See S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm. Kontseptsiiia formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Stroizdat, 2003): 414; and S. Mikhailov, “Proletarskii teatr,” *Anarkhiia* 43 (21 April 1918): 4.

<sup>11</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Konstruktivizm v nabore i verste,” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2: inside back cover. Further references will be to this page.

<sup>12</sup> An article announcing the founding of *Zhizn' pekaria*, an organ of the Baker's Union, appeared in *Anarchy* on 29 June 1918. I have not been able to locate a copy of it, and it seems likely that the project was a casualty of the Bolshevik shutdown of the independent press in July. My speculation that Gan may have been involved in the magazine is based on his association with the Baker's Union (of the various groups that united to make up the Union of Food Workers, Gan was closest to the bakers), and the fact that the author of the article introducing the magazine was Rogdai, who was either a very close colleague of Gan's or his pseudonym. In addition, the article's description of the magazine emphasized that it would be the first union publication to focus on worker self-organization and the everyday life of the workers, both central concerns for Gan. Rogdai, “*Zhizn' pekaria*,” *Anarkhiia* 97 (29 June 1918): 4.

<sup>13</sup> In a statement of 1926, he wrote that he worked on publications in 1918 and then in 1921-1922. The latter must be a mistake, since we know that he did have a production function in *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'* and *Vestnik teatra* in 1920 and published nothing in 1921.

<sup>14</sup> Gan, “Konstruktivizm v nabore i verste.”

Gan's interest in print was not focused on the composition of a graphic image, but on the periodical as a material medium whose properties and possibilities were determined by the combined demands of the means of production, the presentation of information, and the object's circulation.

Understanding Gan's work in print in this way—as a larger complex of production and distribution functions—helps make sense of some of the quirkier moments in Gan's early career. For example, when he organized his Proletarian Theater movement immediately after the October Revolution, he did so on behalf of a mysterious entity named the “Publisher's Group of the Coworkers of Proletarian Theater” (*Izdatel'skaia gruppа sotrudnikov proletarskogo teatra*). Nothing is known about this organization—for all I know, Gan was its sole member<sup>15</sup>—but the combination of publishing and theater in the name attests to the adjacency of print and performance in Gan's thinking. Also interesting in this respect was the discussion that took place at the group's first meeting, in December 1917. As the attendees brainstormed ideas for a new proletarian theater repertory, one attendee suggested that they consider including traditional woodblock prints (*lubki*) in the performance. Gan added that they might think about using dyed Easter eggs (*pisanki*), film, gramophone recordings, and photography.<sup>16</sup> With the exception of the eggs, all of these media were, like print, ways of mechanically reproducing images or sound for wide distribution. They also all related technically to print in their various uses of positive-negative printing processes. This last point also

---

<sup>15</sup> The group authored several articles in *Anarchy* in 1918.

<sup>16</sup> *Izdatel'skaia gruppа sotrudnikov proletarskogo teatra*, “Proletarskii teatra,” *Anarkhiia* 14 (8 March 1918): 4.

encompasses the seeming outlier, the eggs, whose intricate multi-colored designs were traditionally produced as batik is, by applying lines of wax with a stylus between successive dyings.<sup>17</sup> The fact that these media were proposed alongside film and recorded music as possible elements of a theatrical performance points to Gan's desire to understand print within a spectrum of technologies that facilitate simultaneous collective experience. In this light, the phrase "activating typographical material" might be interpreted as referring not to the graphic punch of the page layout, but to the animation of the print object through public presentation, whether on stage or through distribution and circulation.

By Gan's own account, 1922 was the year when constructivism self-consciously entered graphic production,<sup>18</sup> and his publications of that year—the book *Constructivism* and the magazine *Kino-Fot*—were his first print works to announce themselves as such. This shift in his self-presentation, from an agitator using print to a producer making print, was no doubt a response to the implementation of the New Economic Policy and the related rise of productivism, which put pressure on everyone to emphasize their role in production and to compete in a semi-open market. In order to put this shift in context, note that the winter of 1921-1922 was the period in which the productivist theoreticians Osip Brik, Boris Kushner, and Boris Arvatov began attending meetings at INKhUK, and when, at the famous meeting of 24 November 1921, the INKhUK group made the

---

<sup>17</sup> There are several traditional techniques for decorating eggs in Slavic cultures, each with its own name. *Pisanka*—whose name is related to the verb *to write*, or *pisat'*—specifically refers to those produced with this batik-like dying process.

<sup>18</sup> Gan, "Konstruktivizm v nabore i verste."

decision to categorically reject easel painting and “hoist their productivist flag.”<sup>19</sup> Within this context, the INKhUK discussions that had revolved around questions such as the painterliness of painting and the differences between composition and construction were replaced by queries into possible practical contributions to the national economy that an artist might make.<sup>20</sup> The resulting discourse was shaped in some measure by a pervasive fear about being marginalized as an ineffectual relic of that realm of speculative and abstract activity once known as art. The best example may be their response to the common suggestion that their only hope for a productive existence given their lack of engineering training was to teach the artier classes at schools of applied arts.<sup>21</sup> Many of them already taught at the State Art and Technical School (VKhUTEMAS), but they were concerned about being confined there. This is why they went to such great lengths to define their work as approaching industrial production as closely as possible. The productivist slogan “Into production!” implied “out of the academy.”

A few of them actually did find their way into the factory in one way or another. As has been narrated elsewhere, the more successful efforts were those of Varvara Stepanova and Liubov’ Popova, who began designing fabric for the First State Cotton Printing Factory in the fall of 1923, and Karl Ioganson, who worked in a metalworking

---

<sup>19</sup> This expression comes from a retrospective account of 1923. “Institut khudozhestvennoi kul’tury,” *Russkoe iskusstvo*, 1923, nos. 2-3: 88. Cited in Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 102. Both Gough and Khan-Magomedov read the rejection of easel painting in this way, as motivated by the perception that they needed to shift to a productivist mode. See also Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 177.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the beginnings of productivism, see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 112; Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 101-106; and Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 177.

<sup>21</sup> See Gough’s account. Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 101-106.

factory from 1923 to 1926.<sup>22</sup> More commonly, however, their production work took place in a range of more traditional arenas for artistic labor, such as theater and cinema sets and costumes and graphic design.<sup>23</sup> Rodchenko, in particular, had a prolific career in print, designing book and magazine covers, posters, and product packaging.<sup>24</sup> The productivist attitude toward this work in applied art fields, and particularly in print, was qualified in much the same way that pedagogical work was. Indeed, in his text of 1923, “Into Production!,” Brik talks about Rodchenko’s work in print as his “being patient,” “waiting,” “doing what he can” until the day when the world would be ready for “the iron constructiveness of [his] constructions.”<sup>25</sup> As Christina Kiaer has pointed out, Brik’s language draws a line between Rodchenko’s active (and masculine) iron construction work and his passive (and feminine) work in print, which Brik equates with “waiting” rather than producing.<sup>26</sup>

Gan was not in exactly the same situation as his artist colleagues during this early period of transition. Although he no longer appeared in PUR’s records after 1920, he seems to have been employed by the organization through the end of 1922 and likely still

---

<sup>22</sup> See Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005): 89-140; and Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 106-119, 151-190.

<sup>23</sup> For example, the Stenbergs, Medunestskii, Popova, and Vesnin all worked on theatrical sets, Rodchenko produced film intertitles for Vertov’s newsreel films and designed film sets Lev Kuleshov’s *Journalist*.

<sup>24</sup> See Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*: 143-197.

<sup>25</sup> Osip Brik, “Into Production!” (1923), in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann, trans. Richard Sherwood (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974): 85.

<sup>26</sup> See Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*: 144-145.

drew a steady paycheck there.<sup>27</sup> With the exception of the meetings of the First Working Group of Constructivists, Gan had never been a regular at INKhUK discussions, and he does not seem to have attended the meetings in the winter of 1921-1922. Still, he was well aware of these shifting pressures. When he became active again at INKhUK meetings, in the spring, he defended constructivism in relation to productivist demands.<sup>28</sup> He also began to more prominently feature his capacity as a producer, designing one of his few three-dimensional objects, a folding sales stand for Mossel'prom (fig 77),<sup>29</sup> and calling attention to his work in print with the production of *Constructivism* and *Kino-Fot*. These two print projects seem to have provided the point of entry into the field of industrial print production for Rodchenko and Stepanova, who designed elements for the covers and produced photomontages and illustrations for the interiors of the magazine.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Gan later claimed to have worked for PUR from 1918 to 1922 inclusive. RGALI f. 675, op. 2, d. 139, l. 3.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to attending INKhUK meetings in the spring of 1922, Gan became more interested in promulgating his understanding of constructivism in print. Along with *Constructivism*, he started a monograph on Rodchenko that was to be published by INKhUK in March (RGALI, f. 941, op. 1, d. 11, l. 23). It never came out, but notes outlining the content have been preserved and published in Aleksandr Lavrentiev, "Zagadki Alekseia Gana," *Da* 2-3 (1995): 4. He also gave public lectures entitled "On Constructivism" and "The Constructivist Plans for the Communist City" (*Kommunisticheskii gorod po planam konstruktivistov*) in March and April, respectively, and published statements defining the First Working Group of Constructivists in May and August. *Vestnik iskusstv* 3-4 (c. March 1922): 28; *Vestnik iskusstv* 5 (c. April 1922): 40; *Ermitazh* 3 (30 May-5 June 1922): 3; and *Ermitazh* 13 (8-13 August 1922): 3.

<sup>29</sup> Gan promoted the stand as a design for Mossel'prom, but I have seen no direct evidence that the department store was interested in acquiring the work. Gan dated it to 1922 in *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2. The first mention of it in the press that I have seen is in 1924, in *Zrelishcha* 77 (11-16 March 1924): 10.

<sup>30</sup> Both Rodchenko and Stepanova had previously worked on handmade "books" and exhibition catalogues—for example, Stepanova's *Gaust chaba* (1919) and the hand-drawn covers for the catalogue for the exhibition "5 x 5 = 25" (1921)—but their

Although Gan clearly felt and responded to this shift to a productivist mindset, he negotiated the terrain a little differently than the artists did. The best way to understand how is to take a short detour into his pedagogical work. As I have already noted, print and teaching occupied very similar spaces within productivism's terms. Both were prone to being defined as lesser and supplementary activities, work for those who were not qualified for the real work of entering factories. Like his artist colleagues, Gan expressed wariness about limiting the constructivist's production function to teaching at technical schools. As he explained at one meeting in the spring of 1922, this would amount to casting the artist as an "intermediary" (*posrednik*) with a "purely speculative role."<sup>31</sup> This comment deserves special attention because it brings up so many of the same issues that we saw in chapter 2, where it was the mediation of representation, the "overabundance of words," that made the artist's activity particularly prone to the speculative pitfalls associated with subjective taste and vested interests. Utilizing the same common-law logic that underwrites the expression "those who can't do teach," Gan's response categorizes teaching as one more version of that category of abstract and impractical activity that does not test its truth in practice. Constructivism's purpose as an aesthetic system was to make such speculative activity structurally impossible.

Perhaps for this reason, Gan was never officially employed as a teacher, at VKhUTEMAS or anywhere else. Nonetheless, he did serve a crucial informal pedagogical function for many graphic arts students during the twenties, largely because the director of the graphics department at VKhUTEMAS, Vladimir Favorskii, was a

---

contributions to *Constructivism* and *Kino-Fot* are, to the best of my knowledge, their first venture into mass-produced print objects.

<sup>31</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 197. [посредник...роль чисто спекулятивно]

stalwart holdout in the spread of the productivist imperative. He actively discouraged students from learning anything about the technical aspects of printing and typographical layout in an effort to hold open some space for traditional craft. His tutelage inspired an anachronistic revival of the woodcut in the twenties.<sup>32</sup> Since print was one of the only fields in which entry into production was an immediately viable venture, this was particularly disappointing to the productivist-minded, and graphic arts students came to Gan at several points during the twenties looking to fill the lacunae in the VKhUTEMAS curriculum.

The way that Gan taught these students involved a restructuring of the pedagogical function in the same nonhierarchical and practice-based ways that we have seen in his other work. The first case was in 1922, when he took over the “educational subgroup” (*uchebnaia podgruppya*) that the First Working Group of Constructivists had organized a year previously.<sup>33</sup> Educational subgroups were a category of organization within INKhUK, something like a student version of the “working group” of which the Working Group of Objective Analysis and the First Working Group of Constructivists were examples. Composed of ten people, they were meant to bring together likeminded practitioners, whether students or professionals. Like Gan’s work in amateur proletarian theater, the educational subgroup dissolved, or at least made less hierarchical, divisions

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*: 458.

<sup>33</sup> Members included A. Akhtyrko, A. Borisov, N. Smirnov, L. Sanina, G. Miller, G. and O. Chichagova, and V. Shestakov, most of whom had been Rodchenko’s students at VKhUTEMAS. Upon the founding of the subgroup, Gan wrote a program statement for it, but was otherwise largely uninvolved until the spring of 1922, at which point he replaced Rodchenko as the senior member of the group. S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo disaina* (Moscow: Galart, 1995): 360-361.

between teacher and student, student and professional, and training and working. It was intended to function as a collective of coworkers in which the ten members worked together on practical projects, all presumably continuing to develop their skills in the process. Indeed, there was little difference between the subgroup structure and Gan's work on the magazine *Kino-Fot* with his accomplished peers, Rodchenko and Stepanova.

Gan had further opportunity to develop this practice-based pedagogical approach in 1927 when several VKhUTEMAS graphic arts students asked to apprentice as his assistants. He worked with them and other apprenticing students at two Moscow print shops on the layout and typesetting for the magazines for which he was then responsible, *SA* and *Proizvodstvennyi zhurnal* (Production Journal). The students learned design skills in the process of working with Gan to produce the magazines and were usually credited alongside him in the design credits.<sup>34</sup> Gan redefined teaching as a component of the production process—or, alternatively, redefined the production process as a mode of interrelational self-production, thereby obviating the academy's cloistered abstraction from life. Knowledge and skills were demonstrated through work, making it structurally impossible for the teacher to become an intermediary for speculative ideas. Every lesson was tested in practice.

Gan's reconfiguration of academic teaching into a productive and self-productive materialist practice provides a good model on which to understand Gan's thinking about his work in print in relation to architecture. Certainly his journals were also susceptible to

---

<sup>34</sup> As an aside, Gan's pedagogical venture seems to have had a positive influence on the students. In an interview with Khan-Magomedov, G. Gladysheva recounted how much of her practical education stemmed from the experience. Another went on in 1930 to found his own collective working group, The First Brigade for the Mass Book (*Pervaia brigada po massovoi knige*). See Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 461.

the charge of being intermediaries, open to speculative spin, but rather than reject them, Gan employed a similar redefinitional workaround. The economic and political reality of the moment may have made it impossible to construct the communist city anywhere other than on paper. But this only made it more important not to allow work on paper to collapse into speculative, abstracted, utopian activity—paper architecture in the negative sense. This required Gan to redefine the paper on which that architecture was constructed as an active and productive structure extending into and organizing reality, rather than secondary and reflective conveyors of knowledge.

Gan spoke to this problem in an article of May 1922, in which he defended a recent report in which constructivist ideas for the communist city had been publicized, most likely his recent lecture at the House of Art and Enlightenment (*Dom prosveshcheniia i iskusstva*), entitled “The Constructivist Plans for the Communist City” (*Kommunisticheskii gorod po planam konstruktivistov*).<sup>35</sup> It appears that the report may have been criticized for being all talk. Gan responded,

Objective conditions at the present time compel us to give lectures and publish propaganda in print...

The constructivists are posing the question of the communist city while *working within the boundaries of current conditions...*

With words and writing [*slovom i pis'mom*], [we] strive to attract the broad masses to the issue, transporting these questions out of the sphere [*sfery*] of the group's subjective efforts and into the province [*oblast'*] of objective possibilities...

We do not plan to communicate our fantasies and dreams about the communist city. We just want to share the works currently being produced by the Working Group of Constructivists...

Not only will the communist city exist in the future, but one can already trace its rudimentary contours today.

Only speculators and NEPmen don't see it. The constructivists see it and

---

<sup>35</sup> Mentioned in *Vestnik iskusstv* 5 (c. April 1922): 40.

understand it, and it compels them to develop design plans.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly there is an element of concession in Gan's statement—"objective conditions compel" them to work on paper. Yet, unlike Brik, who defined Rodchenko's interim activity in print as merely waiting, Gan is keen to argue that their work in print was also an active and materialist approach. They were working with what was at hand in the contemporary tectonic moment, "within the boundaries of current conditions." If the only materials available were words and writing, then they would get started with those.<sup>37</sup>

Gan's use of the phrase "with words and writing" (*slovom i pis'mom*) is interesting in its play on the expression "in words and deed" (*na slovakh i dele*). The manipulation of this expression was a common rhetorical stunt in writings of the period. Indeed, it was one of Gan's favorites. He structured the punch lines for innumerable arguments so as to enjoin the mass actionists, the constructivists, and so on, to confront whatever task was at hand "not just in words, but in deed." The phrase mobilized a time-tested and sturdy armature of general wisdom: words are cheap, practice what you preach, and so forth.

---

<sup>36</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Kommunisticheskiĭ gorod (v planovykh razrabotkakh konstruktivistov)," *Teatral'naiia Moskva* 40 (16-31 May 1922): 5-6. [Объективные условия заставляют нас в данный момент выступать с докладами и печатно с пропагандой... / Конструктивисты, работая в пределах данных условий и учитывая опыт минувших пяти лет ставят вопрос о коммунистическом городе. / ...Словом и письмом конструктивисты стараются вынести эти вопросы из сферы субъективных усилий группы в область объективных возможностей, чтобы привлечь широкие массы к этому делу. / ...Мы не собираемся сообщать свои фантазии и грезы о коммунистическом городе. Мы хотим только поделиться теми работами, которые производятся в данный момент в самой рабочей группе конструктивистов. / ...Коммунистической город не только будет, его зачаточные контуры намечаются уже и теперь. / Только спекулянты и нэпманы этого не видят. / Конструктивисты же видят и понимают и это заставляют их разрабатывать плановые системы.]

<sup>37</sup> For more on the status of words and writing among productivists, see Devin Fore, "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography," *October* 118 (fall 2006): 95-131.

Thus, Gan was making a significant point by replacing the “deeds” half of the expression with “writing,” a loose synonym for “words.” He also changed the structure of the expression to the instrumental rather than the prepositional—they were working *with* words and writing, not *in* them—enacting a shift from a more confined sense of working within a defined sphere to a tool-based sense of working in an unbounded field. This contrast is reinforced by his interpretation of their print materials about architecture not as a way of communicating isolated personal “dreams and fantasies,” but just the opposite: they were a vehicle for “transporting questions out” (*vynesti*) of their own group’s isolated and subjective “sphere” (*sferu*) to be tested in the more expansive “province [*oblast*’] of objective possibilities.”

The part of this passage that is hardest to swallow, as well as most important, is the claim that their designs were both plans for the future *and* documentation of the contours of a communist city that was already visibly emerging—“only NEPmen don’t see it.” His idea seems to be that together they could summon the communist city into existence merely by looking at it from the right point of view. We have seen this logic before from Gan. Thinking back to his plan for May Day of 1920, he had insisted that the city would be temporarily transformed into a socialist city of the future not by decorating the city’s facades, but by everyone *behaving* differently within it. And around the same time, Stepanova reported with some confusion in her diary that “Gan considers agitation to be as important as creating a work.”<sup>38</sup> The assumption on which all of this thinking rested was that the existence of the communist city depended on a critical mass of people

---

<sup>38</sup> Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit’ bez chuda* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994): 108. [Ган считает, что агитация так же важна, как и создание произведений.]

having the same vision for it, and this was the rationale behind the broad circulation of the constructivist plans. In this respect, Gan's use of the word *province* to describe the realm into which they would shuttle their ideas was particularly evocative. Their plans were contingent on collective affirmation, not just within their small group, nor within the rarified tastes that governed inside Moscow's city limits, but also in the huge geographical expanse of the provinces, where many an avant-garde agit-train had been stopped cold by peasant bemusement. When isolated in a subjective sphere, works on paper were speculative fantasies. But *activated* typographic material, an idea able to circulate in the provinces—wasn't that as good as real?

At the time that Gan wrote this article, he had not had access to a print organ for a year and a half. Thus, regaining the capacity to activate his words and writing in print may not have felt like a compromise at all, but rather a significant broadening of possibilities. The partial restoration of a market economy under NEP allowed for the revival of a more diverse press. There was paper again and the governmental restrictions on the use of print shops loosened, allowing individuals and nongovernmental organizations to publish on their own initiative. Gan's reconfiguration of categories within this context makes interesting use of the masculine/feminine alignments suggested by Kiaer. On the one hand, these conditions made it less possible to immediately construct the communist city in the "iron constructivist" sense of erecting scaffolding, since the power to organize collective structures through compulsion, or state monopoly on resources, was lost. At the same time, it opened up mass-media structures as a means for promulgating alternatives around which a voluntary collective vision could grow. If this was "waiting," that waiting was a period of gestation from which a more organic

version of the communist city would be born.

Gan began taking advantage of these new conditions and their particular possibilities in April of 1922, when he started sending his ideas out on the rails of the new weekly arts papers *Teatral'naia Moskva* (Theatrical Moscow) and *Ermitazh* (Hermitage). By the end of August, he had founded his own vehicle, a journal called *Kino-Fot* devoted to photography and cinema, and joined the editorial board of the new theatrical review, *Zrelishcha* (Shows).<sup>39</sup> As a final point before I move on to talk about the development of a constructivist graphic style in these journals, I would like to keep in mind that Gan's work as a typesetter and graphic designer may have been motivated by his desire for access to the press, rather than the other way around. Gan began designing for the journal *Proletkino* (Prolet-Cinema) in August 1924, right after losing access to *Zrelishcha*, which folded for financial reasons in June.<sup>40</sup> As his relationship to *Proletkino* became rocky in October, he began doing design work for the Transportation Union's journal *Tekhnika i zhizn'* (Technology and Life). These two journals were not constructivist organs and he was not part of the editorial staff, but he managed to publish an article or two in them while doing the typesetting and design.<sup>41</sup> His work with them

---

<sup>39</sup> He was listed as such in the first few issues and attended the last meeting of the editorial board.

<sup>40</sup> At the last editorial meeting, on 11 June 1924, they discussed the reasons for the closing. They owed the printer money, in part because of bad business decisions exacerbated by currency inflation and revaluation. RGALI f. 2581, op. 1, d. 61.

<sup>41</sup> Gan also worked with *Proletkino* producing films, and the first issue that he designed contained several items on his film *Island of the Young Pioneers*, including Aleksei Gan, "Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta," *Proletkino* 4-5 (1924): 18. He continued to be affiliated with *Proletkino* until 1928, but his power there seems to have declined at the end of 1924, after the negative reception of his film *Island of the Young Pioneers* (Ostrov

also corresponded to the decline of his official connections to Communist Party organizations—he stopped working for PUR at the end of 1922 and lost his party membership in 1924.<sup>42</sup> After *Technology and Life* decided to go in a different direction in the summer of 1925,<sup>43</sup> he did not have any venue for publishing until he began designing *SA* in 1926, and much of the work that he published in the first issues can be traced back to 1924, as if he had kept it ready and waiting.<sup>44</sup> It is a speculative argument, but still one to keep it in mind, that Gan’s honing his graphic design skills may have been his way of accessing what was for him the means of production of the communist city, buying with his labor what he had lost in political clout.

## TECTONIC STYLE AND THE FLEXIBLE UNIVERSAL

In the previous section I suggested that one way in which Gan’s print projects related to constructivist architecture was by ideologically preparing the ground for it. In the next two sections, I will look at that ways in which Gan’s journals were not just propaganda

---

iunyxh pionerov). Gan published one article, on cinema, in *Tekhnika i zhizn'*. Aleksei Gan, “Kino,” *Tekhnika i zhizn'* 4 (1925): 16.

<sup>42</sup> It is not clear whether he quit or was expelled. On a questionnaire of 1926, he wrote that he “dropped out for mechanical reasons” (*vybyl mekhanich.*), which suggests that no particular event or offense precipitated the action, but that it was merely bureaucratic. RGALI f. 675, op. 2, d. 139, l. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Gan may have been fired for missing deadlines. In a letter to Shub later that summer, he wrote about experiencing a crisis in his work in which he was unable to finish projects. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 105, ll. 10-11.

<sup>44</sup> For example, the two-page presentation of constructivist furniture entitled “Constructivism in the Furnishing of Everyday Life,” published in the first issue of *SA*, can be traced back to work and discussions of 1924. See *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2: inside front cover; and “Konstruktivisty,” *Zrelishcha* 68 (28 December 1923-6 January 1924): 17.

*for* constructivist architecture but also in themselves examples of it, or at least explorations of its formal problems. In this sense, Gan's first journal project—the six numbers of *Kino-Fot* that he published between August 1922 and January 1923—was just as relevant to constructivist architecture as his last, *SA*. The project can also be considered the most direct continuation of the First Working Group of Constructivists, since Rodchenko and Stepanova worked with Gan on *Kino-Fot*'s production. It represented their first opportunity to realize their constructivist system within practical conditions. In this section, I will focus on the graphic composition of *Kino-Fot* and subsequent constructivist journals as a function of the group's effort to develop one of the most important concepts that came out of their discussions of 1921: the notion of tectonic style.

The concept of style may initially seem foreign to constructivism because of its association with Morellian methods of connoisseurship and the unconsciously imparted characteristics of one or another artist's subjective vision and hand.<sup>45</sup> If constructivism's forms included, as Rodchenko put it, “nothing accidental, nothing unaccounted for, nothing from blind taste and aesthetic arbitrariness,”<sup>46</sup> surely there was no place in them for whatever residue of subconscious inclination is thought to constitute the aberrations of style. This has not completely discouraged efforts to attribute constructivist graphic

---

<sup>45</sup> For more on the Morellian method in the context of the late nineteenth century, see Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes,” in Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeonk, eds., *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Pierce* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988): 81-118.

<sup>46</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivizm*: 65. [Ничего случайного, безучетного ничего от слепого вкуса и эстетического произвола. Все должно быть осмыслено технически и функционально.]

compositions to specific authors on the basis of stylistic analysis, however.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the question of who designed *Kino-Fot*—particularly its covers—has been the subject of such examination. On the one hand, *Kino-Fot* was particularly important within Gan’s oeuvre precisely because, of all the periodicals to which he contributed over the years, it was the most fully his project. His name alone was listed on the back cover as the “editor-publisher,” he wrote the editorial statement on the first page of each issue, and when the address of the editorial office was listed in the fifth number, it was Starokoniushennyi pereulok #39, the building where he shared an apartment with the filmmaker Esfir’ Shub. On the other hand, some have assumed that the cover designs—arguably the most important aspect of the journal from the point of view of art history—must have been designed by Rodchenko.

This latter conclusion is based in part on the appearance of Rodchenko’s name, presumably as a signature of sorts, on the covers of numbers four and five (figs 72a-73a), as well as on a series of photographic portraits in which he and Stepanova pose in front of the covers for numbers three through five (fig 78).<sup>48</sup> Yet, the primary reason for assuming a Rodchenko attribution is stylistic. Based on Gan’s typographic work in *Constructivism*,

---

<sup>47</sup> Christina Lodder has performed a particularly impressive example in attempting to attribute the cover of *Constructivism* to Gan. See Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art*: 398.

<sup>48</sup> Although he does not specify, I assume that these were the reasons that Khan-Magomedov concluded that “we now know that the covers of *Kino-Fot*, which was founded by Gan, were by Rodchenko’s hand,” in S. O. Khan-Magomedov and Vieri Quilici, *Alexandre Rodchenko. L’Oeuvre complet* (Paris: Philippe Sers, 1986): 130-131. The fourth number is attributed to Rodchenko again in Magdalena Dobrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998): 177. Victor Margolin assumes Rodchenko designed the entire run in Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): 102.

the interior layouts seem like Gan's work, but the covers *look like* Rodchenko's.<sup>49</sup> They seem to manifest what has come to be recognized, both today and within the period, as Rodchenko's "signature graphic style."<sup>50</sup> The stylistic component of the argument for a Rodchenko attribution is particularly important because the hard evidence is so far from conclusive. The photograph and the signatures do not necessarily link him to anything more than the illustrations. After all, Stepanova's name appears on the cover of the third number (fig 71a) in the same way that Rodchenko's does on the fourth, but everyone assumes that this refers only to the cover illustrations and not to the overall design.<sup>51</sup> In the fifth number, the words "Montage by Aleksandr Rodchenko" scratched into the bottom left corner of the plate for the illustration more insistently urge us to consider Rodchenko the author (fig 73a). But, again, it is not clear if his "montage" was the entire cover or the arrangement of the image of Edison on the divided ground. When magnified, halftone dots can be discerned within the lines of the attributing lettering, suggesting that it was part of the illustration—and reproduced photographically with it—rather than scratched onto the plate at the end. This does not rule out the possibility that Rodchenko also designed the cover, but it does undermine the support for it.

---

<sup>49</sup> For example, Margolin compares *Kino-Fot* and *Lef*, the latter of which was designed by Rodchenko, as the work of the same author. Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*: 103-107.

<sup>50</sup> Nikolai Chuzhak commented on Rodchenko's signature style in a meeting of 1925. RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 4ob. I quote from Leah Dickerman, "Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1997): 3.

<sup>51</sup> The illustration on the fourth number initially appears to be a different situation: it looks like a still image from Mayakovsky's film *Not For Money Born* (1918), in which case only the cover design would be left to credit to Rodchenko. Although the print quality makes it impossible to be certain, further inspection at least strongly suggests that the illustration was a photomontage.

Within the range of possible conclusions that could be deduced from the hard facts, Khan-Magomedov's conciliatory suggestion that Gan may have designed the first number and that Rodchenko preserved this basic design in the later covers is one sensible variant.<sup>52</sup> This interpretation has the advantage of also explaining some specificities that *can* be designated stylistic: the slightly stronger designs in numbers four through six make sense as the hair of difference introduced by Rodchenko's better eye for composition, and the play on positive and negative in number five evokes Rodchenko's graphic sensibility. He often employed inversion to motivate graphic difference; for example, in the lettering he designed for the cover of Gan's *Constructivism* (fig 35), he printed Gan's name as a positive image, in red ink on the white ground, while defining the lettering for the title negatively, as the uninked spaces left in a black block.

I would like to curtail this particular line of connoisseurly sleuthing, however, in order to explore another one more consonant with the constructivist project: what if we were to analyze the stylistic differences in the cover designs not as the residue of two different actors, each with his own telltale traits and subconscious predilections, but rather as the deliberate result of a systematic and collective exploration of the possibilities of a constructivist style? This would allow us to think of the cover designs—and of constructivist style more generally—as the rational functionalist project that we expect it to be. It also allows us to understand style as a collaborative endeavor, an authorship theory that fits well with my earlier discussion of Gan's practice-based pedagogy, in which coproducers with various skills work and learn together in one

---

<sup>52</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 414. This represents a revision of his previous crediting of the covers to Rodchenko in Khan-Magomedov and Quilici, *Alexandre Rodchenko*: 130-131.

motion. Gan was the only one of the three with experience in industrial printing, but Rodchenko and Stepanova were much more skilled with anything drawn by hand. Thus, it seems likely that Rodchenko produced the hand-drawn logotype that appears at the upper left corner of each cover, just as he produced the lettering for the cover of Gan's *Constructivism*. We know that he and Stepanova produced many of the illustrations. The three may have worked together to come up with the arrangement of the overall design.

The collaboration theory not only fits the constructivist ethos, but also corresponds nicely to the logic of the periodical form. As much as *Kino-Fot* was Gan's project, part of what made it a good example of a constructivist object—and of Gan's oeuvre in particular—was the collaborative nature of its authorship. On the level of content, it served, as most magazines do, as a structure for presenting texts and images by multiple contributors. Shub later suggested that the magazine was a gathering point for a group of filmmakers then emerging that included Dziga Vertov and his kinok group, Gan, and herself,<sup>53</sup> suggesting that multiple authorship may have extended to editorial functions as well. My argument here will be that *Kino-Fot*'s graphic style is also best understood as a product of collaborative dialogue. It was a place where the group worked out the repercussions of the constructivist system that they had developed in the discussions of the First Working Group in 1921.

Now that the question of who drew the logotype has become inconsequential, we are free to wonder why the cover's logotype would have been hand-drawn at all. One might guess that the constructivist predilection for efficiency and systematicity would

---

<sup>53</sup> Esfir' Shub, "O sebe" (1929), *Zhizn' moia—kinematograf* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972): 244.

have instead led to a fully typographic solution. In other respects, the journal's design worked to economically employ existing materials and printing infrastructure. The interiors are set in common and economic jobbing typefaces, with the occasional use of display faces,<sup>54</sup> and all of the images and typographical embellishment conform to the two- or three-column formats of each page. In fact, in some cases, they used an alley-less column, a technique associated with American measures for efficiency in which a line, rather than a space, is used to separate columns (for example, fig 79). Similarly, the page size, format, and page number make efficient use of a standard sheet.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the cover's overall structure employs modular blocks that can be swapped in and out and reused, such as the numbers and the heavy bars. Had the group wanted an ornate or handcrafted look for the logotype—something along the lines of the quirkily hand-drawn number used by Le Corbusier's *L'esprit nouveau* (fig 80)—using a unique block or plate would have been the only possibility. But the letters of *Kino-Fot*'s title are more than distinct and uniform enough to have been produced with movable type, so much so that some have assumed that they were.<sup>56</sup>

Upon comparing the cover's logotype to the effort to approximate it on the masthead using movable type (fig 81), one intuitively understands why the decision was made. The masthead's version does not quite line up and its spacing is off, making it

---

<sup>54</sup> Jobbing faces are common, easily legible, workhorse fonts such as Times New Roman, whereas display faces are more ornate and used for titles and advertisements.

<sup>55</sup> All issues have sixteen black-and-white pages and the number of color pages can be divided evenly into the print run, which was 4000 for the first issue and 8000 for issues two through six.

<sup>56</sup> Lavrentiev assumes that the title block was composed of poster type. Lavrentiev, "Zagadki Alekseia Gana": 3.

appear awkward and disjointed. Ironically, they do not seem to have been able to find a prefabricated “K” or “№” as brutally sans-serif as the cover’s hand-drawn variant.

Indeed, the contrast between the cohesive gestalt of the cover’s logotype and the aggregative composition that comprises the interior version is striking enough to be cited as further evidence of two different authors. Again, I would like to forestall that conclusion in order to explore the ways that this stylistic difference can be attributed to systematic variations. This will require a significant detour from *Kino-Fot*’s pages into discussions surrounding style then current in design discourses in Europe, as well as in the First Working Group’s discussions.

We already saw in chapter 2 that style was one concept through which the First Working Group of Constructivists proposed understanding Gan’s first and favorite constructivist discipline, tectonics, in their discussions of 1921. He himself initially referred to tectonics as “tectonic style,” and when the group became flummoxed several weeks later by the word’s geological origins, Stepanova insightfully suggested they bring back its companion term and think about it as something like a period style, in which nuances of form united works of one or another historical era. In shifting the emphasis in her understanding of style from an individualistic differentiating concept to a unifying one, Stepanova was participating in a broader movement whose manifestations included organizations like the Werkbund and the Bauhaus, as well as individuals like Le Corbusier. Although political orientations, emphases, and intentions may have varied significantly among them, they were all interested in developing a unifying and coherent modern style that might replace the eclectic overabundance of styles then being applied haphazardly to mass-produced commodities and buildings. Whether their issue with

fashion's fluctuations was based on inefficiency, alienation, or some combination of the two, the development of a coherent modern style was understood as a means of interceding by offering forms that were solid and motivated, the expression of a coherent culture, its practical needs, and technological possibilities.<sup>57</sup>

One common way of pursuing this goal was to develop a limited repertoire of standardized forms. Instead of offering the same objects in a variety of decorative options, these standardized forms were to be ideal types, the perfect form for a given object's function. The process of their design came to be known as typification. The idea was perhaps most memorably expressed in Le Corbusier's two-page spread in *Towards a New Architecture*, where he equated the modern industrial design of the automobile to the evolution of the forms of Greek temples (fig 82). He reminded his reader that the architectural perfection of the Parthenon sprung not from a single inspired moment of stylistic invention—that is, not from novelty and originality—but from centuries of anonymous refinements to what amounted to a standardized set of temple elements: columns, capitals, and so on. As he wrote, “It is necessary to press on towards the development of *standards* in order to face the problem of *perfection*.” Establishing “a standard involves...extracting...a recognized type conformable to its functions.” In this process, he concludes, “we have the birth of style.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> For a good summary of the relevant concepts, see Francesco Passanti, “The Vernacular, Modernism, and Le Corbusier,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56 (December 1997): 442-443; and Frederic Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory & Mass Culture before the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>58</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications: 1986): 133-138.

Gan's notion of constructivism also relied on the idea that forms should be the expression of a whole and cohesive culture. This was the thinking that underwrote the assumption, presented in the previous section, that the constructivist plans for the communist city depended on a common vision. We also know that he was engaged on some level in the discourse surrounding typification, or at least he was by 1926, when he published a small demonstration of constructivist graphic design in the journal *SA* (fig 83). There, he illustrated the first page of *Kino-Fot* alongside what he calls "an explanatory mockup" of a page layout and the cover for another journal that he designed in 1923 called *Vremia* (Time). I have already cited the first part of the text that accompanies the illustration—this is where he stated that constructivism entered typographical production in 1922 and claimed that, prior to that point, he had experimented in "activating typographic material" and "planning the printed surface." The text went on to state that the next stage of work must be "typification [*tipizatsiiu*], both in the individual parts and in the printed object as a whole."<sup>59</sup>

In itself, there is nothing about Gan's distinction between "individual parts" and the "object as a whole" that could not be applied to Le Corbusier's illustration of typification. Gan may even have been parroting Le Corbusier, who writes that perfect standards must be achieved "*in every minute point*, in the run of the whole thing and in all the details."<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, we will see that the constructivist idea of tectonic style made much more of

---

<sup>59</sup> Gan, "Konstruktivizm v nabore i verste." [Следующим этапом работы следует считать уже типизацию как отдельных частей, так и всей печатной вещи в целом. Внизу помещены три работы Алексея Гана: макет для объяснения, титульный лист и обложка, сделанная набором без шрифта.]

<sup>60</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*: 134-135.

the differences between the part and whole than Le Corbusier did. Its exploitation of those differences was directly related to its greater emphasis on the historicity of style. For if Le Corbusier clearly assumed, as most all modernists then did, that style should reflect its era and constantly evolve, his argument also conflates that kind of evolutionary change with another: that involved in the perfection of the type. One must “press on towards the establishment of standards.” The Parthenon and the modern automobile were each a perfected “product of selection,” by which we must assume he meant an evolutionary process with a duration and an end point. Thus, at least in some measure, when Le Corbusier talks about the evolution of form, he was not talking about form keeping pace with an ever-changing modernity, but rather about form’s gradual and asymptotic approach of a modern ideal.

Le Corbusier may not have explicitly advocated stasis as a characteristic of the new modern ideal, but it was the position he assumed, perhaps as a result of his concern to distance his approach from the inconstancy of fashion. Conscious or not, the bias is clearly present in the structure of the temple-auto presentation, where the stark contrast between the classical and the modern has the effect of calling attention to the historicity of style on the level of large defined epochs, but also of reifying each side of the comparison. I might add that this tacit assumption was nothing unique to Le Corbusier, but also the basis for Kandinsky’s Section for Monumental Art in 1920. As we have already seen, his proposal was to develop a new universal style corresponding to new socialist subjects, who may not be fully evolved as yet but would, as he understood it, gradually evolve toward a stable new norm of modern socialist subjectivity.

When the constructivists hit on the concept of tectonic style, they accepted one part

of this project: the idea that there should be a new style based on an ideal balance of all the relevant technical and cultural forces of modernity. At the same time, they raised the stakes on the project's claim to modernity one step further by requiring that this ideal balance be understood as a constantly moving target. There were good reasons why people like Kandinsky and Le Corbusier did not even consider such a radical level of contemporaneity. Such a move may have been the logical extension of the assumption that form should be historical, but it also raised some serious practical issues. Particularly within the constructivist system, where form was to emerge from the experience of working a material's *faktura*, simultaneous demands for absolute contemporaneity and an experiential knowledge of the material, which would presumably require duration, created a tension in which one might sensibly conclude that one or the other term had to give.

That is precisely what one of the Stenbergs concluded in 1921 during the meetings of the First Working Group. Particularly when it came to large-scale building projects, he pointed out, there was a contradiction between *faktura* and tectonics. As he articulated it,

By treating an object tectonically, we risk building a construction in brick, even though it demands iron, just because the moment dictates it. Now they are using the old [materials] for everything, but we are producing projects for the new. I worry that we will get stuck in projects because the contemporary tectonic bids us to work with what we have at hand.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> The transcript, at least as Khan-Magomedov presents it, does not specify which Stenberg was speaking. S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm* (Moscow: Arkhitektura, 1994): 108. [Мы должны рассматривать не материал, ибо может быть, не будет кирпича, а железо и стекло. Беря вещи тектонически, мы рискуем строить из кирпича, из того, что диктует момент, тогда как конструкция будет требовать железа. Теперь для всего пользуются старым, мы же даем проекты нового. Боюсь, что мы так и останемся при проектах, ибо современная тектоника велит делать из того, что есть под руками, вставлять стекло по-старому, тогда как у нас есть проекты новых способов.]

As Stenberg saw it, you could not develop form out of practical work with available materials *and* keep current with the historical moment. The combination of tectonics and *faktura* would not embed them in the evolution of the contemporary moment, but rather cause them to get mired in it, unable to move forward.

Stenberg's fear about getting stuck in the logic of what would soon be past was a valid concern, but his desire to jettison work with available materials also amounted to a rejection of constructivism as Gan defined it. For Gan, both absolute contemporaneity and experience working materials were inherent to the definition of their project. Resolving the tension between them was constructivism's *raison d'être*. As Gan explained, "communism is in essence dynamic," which means that "if immortality was what was demanded of earlier structures, to place something on the earth's surface that would serve all future generations now and forever..., the constructivist [now] faces other practical demands." The problem was that "even as communism demands *today's* building today, tomorrow it will demand the next form." The trick was "to produce this second form in a way that does not displace yesterday's, but supplements it."<sup>62</sup> They needed to develop a way of responding to communism's continually refreshed slate of requirements without constantly demolishing and rebuilding from scratch.

---

<sup>62</sup> Gan, *Konstruktivism*: 59-60. I have borrowed elements of Gough's translation. See Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 71. [Коммунизм по существу своему динамичен... / Если в прежних сооружениях требовалось что-то увековечить, что то так поставить на земной поверхности, чтобы это раз и всегда служило всем грядущим поколениям..., то в задачу конструктивиста входят иные, практические соображения. / ...Это значит, что если коммунизм сегодня требует здания *на сегодня*,...завтра он снова потребует очередной формы и следующую форму надо дать, так, чтобы вчерашнее не отметалось, а дополнялось и дополняло очередное требование.]

In the First Working Group's discussion of possible resolutions to this seeming contradiction, Rodchenko came up with an approach that I will argue turned out to be crucial to constructivist style. He began by redefining the issue as one of universalism. When they had defected from Kandinsky's Section for Monumental Art in 1920, they had definitively rejected one kind of universalism—the idea of an eternally valid, universal form of human perception. Still, Rodchenko insisted, “if we accept that tectonics is inconstancy,” then “we must create *some sort* of universalism.”<sup>63</sup> Otherwise, “we... will not be able to join contemporary life, for we will have to immediately rebuild everything.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps, he proposed, there was another mode of universalism that would help them out of the contradiction. In order to explain what he meant, he offered two examples. The first was a multi-purpose table. It could be turned one way and used as a typewriter table, sideways to serve as a sewing table, and inverted for some other purpose. The second example was a meeting hall (*dom dlia kongressov*) with movable walls.

According to Rodchenko's analysis, the first of these objects, the typing table, was flexible and adaptable in one sense—it served several purposes—but it was also rigid in that the design for each of its orientations was very specific and fixed. The table would have to be remade when typewriters or sewing machines changed their specifications. The meeting hall, in contrast, embodied a universal mode of flexibility. Not designed to

---

<sup>63</sup> My emphasis. Transcribed in Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*: 108. [Если принять, что тектоника—изменчивость, то придется делать какой-то универсализм.]

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* [Мы... не сможем влиться в современную жизнь, ибо тогда придется все сразу перестроить.]

perfectly serve any one purpose, it could be transformed by its users into multiple arrangements with different sized spaces. Thus, its universality lay not in a perfected ideal type, but in its infinite adaptability to ever-changing specifications. Rodchenko went on to characterize the logic governing the second example by likening it to a modular shelving unit—then termed an American cabinet (*amerikanskii shkaf*)—“which waits for another shelf to be placed on it, and then another as it is needed, until finally you get a whole armoire.”<sup>65</sup> This modular mode of design was one solution to the problem as Gan had posed it: it allowed the new to “supplement, rather than displace.” It also relied on there being a formal and functional gap between the prefabricated modules, or parts, and the whole. Because the parts were standardized rather than designed for a specific purpose, the whole could remain in constant flux, enabling its users to produce the right form for the moment on the fly. The design task changed from the production of form to the production of a structure with interactive and dependent formal potential.<sup>66</sup>

At this point, we can finally return to *Kino-Fot* and constructivist graphic style. For even though Rodchenko articulated the modular logic of the flexible universal with examples from the realm of architecture and furniture, his model might as easily have

---

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* [например, столы для пишущих машинок, которые, положенные на бок, будут служить столами для кройки, а перевернутые—еще чем-нибудь. Работая так, мы подойдем совсем к другим вопросам и не сможем влиться в современную жизнь, ибо тогда придется все сразу перестроить. Нам могут предложить сделать дом для конгрессов, придется тогда делать его универсально, чтобы раздвинуть его стены, соединить его с другим или получать 2 дома. Такой дом можно уподобить полке американского шкафа, которая дожидается, чтобы на нее поставили другую, на другую, когда нужно будет,—и третью, и тогда получается целый шкаф.]

<sup>66</sup> The problem of standardization was parsed similarly in the German Werkbund, where suggestions ranged from creating standardized parameters for the production process, to standardizing parts, to reduce the number of forms on offer via the creation of ideal types. See Schwartz, *The Werkbund*:121-128.

been the typographic printing process that I discussed in the previous chapter. Like the hall with movable walls, the printer's set of prefabricated forms is also a productive structure for a nearly infinite number of arrangements and purposes, and further, one whose constitution and liquidation of form operated on a temporal scale that approached the smooth and continuous evolution through which they imagined tectonic style to progress. The flexible structure that they sought was particularly well exemplified by periodical press like the daily newspaper, a form in which a stable structure of columns and pages allowed for the form to respond quickly to the demands of the day's shifting content. The fact that Gan saw graphic layout templates in this way, as reusable structures, is supported by his illustration of the "explanatory mockup" on the far-left of his demonstration of constructivist page layout (fig 83b), where he has blocked out text blocks and reusable graphic elements.

Movable type was one scale on which the constructive logic of a modular universal had been widely employed for several centuries, as well as one that Gan had already extensively investigated. It was not the only possible scale, however, and the exploration of the range within which the scale of this modularity might fluctuate is one way of thinking about the development of constructivist graphic style. On one extreme, it was possible to standardize components to such a degree that they functioned as something like a primitive version of digital pixilation. Gan experimented with this—what he called "typography without type"—by arranging standardized squares in the form of letters and other design elements. He claimed to have produced several posters in this mode,<sup>67</sup> as

---

<sup>67</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 414. Several posters produced in this way are preserved in the collection of the Russian State Library.

well as using the technique to compose the title lettering for *Time* (fig 84), the other journal that he included in the typification demonstration. In the case of *Time*, the level of standardization is slightly diminished by the use of a combination of square and curved elements. Nevertheless, in maintaining the small divisions between each block, the lettering calls attention to its modular makeup.

The lettering used for *Kino-Fot*'s logotype explores a different segment of the modularity spectrum. It also seems to be blocked out on a grid, but rather than being assembled of modular components as in *Time*, it was probably hand-drawn in the same way that Rodchenko's sketch for *Constructivism*'s cover illustrates (fig 59). What may be most surprising about the comparison between the two is the extent to which the difference in technique actually does result in a different stylistic effect. In emphasizing the temporary assembly of parts, *Time*'s lettering calls attention to the typographic grid and its moveable pieces in a way reminiscent of the cover of the futurist book *A Little Duck's Nest of Bad Words* (fig 60). One feels that the pieces can be swapped in and out to create innumerable variations. In *Kino-Fot*, the grid that forms the characters functions in nearly the opposite way, binding the letters together and fixing their relation to each other on a unified system of intervals. The sense of wholeness and consistency which emerges, and which contrasted so sharply with the typographic rendering used for the masthead, is the trace of a common grid of origin.

Some hint that these different effects were intentional and not merely the accidental result of different technical means can be gathered from the fact that they correspond thematically to the subject matters of their respective publications. *Time* was the journal

of an organization dedicated to efficiency in labor called the Time League,<sup>68</sup> and its moving parts suggest assembly-line processes and unit measurements native to the field of scientific labor studies. *Kino-Fot*'s grid, in contrast, evokes proto-photographic techniques for reproducing, transferring, and magnifying images, a paradigm pushed further by the reproduction of the cover logo in a reduced size in the interior (fig 85). It is difficult to say whether they actually photographically reduced the lettering, or simply produced a new version by mathematically contracting the base grid.<sup>69</sup> Either way, the change in scale thematically suggests the continuous spectrum of optical magnification's mathematics rather than the discrete modular integers of *Time*'s assembly process.

*Kino-Fot*'s logotype did not in itself aggressively thematize modularity as *Time*'s did, but the journal's existence as an ongoing serial opened up other possibilities for broader exploration of the logic. Although its covers still used prefabricated type for elements like the price at the top right, illustration credits, and headlines, its modules also extend beyond the standard type case to include elements with greater and lesser levels of specificity and interchangeability. The title lettering remains precisely the same throughout the run, while the numbers and illustrations change in and out from issue to issue. Along with the linear bars in various weights used to complete the composition, the numbers possess a level of abstraction that would allow them to be used for other publications, whereas the illustrations, basically one-offs, represent the other far extreme

---

<sup>68</sup> The Time League (*Liga vremeni*) was founded by Platon Kerzhentsev, the Proletkul't theater theorist who wrote *Tvorcheskii teatr*. He turned into an ardent advocate for the scientific organization of labor in the 1920s. The editorial board of the journal included Vladimir Mayakovsky, Aleksei Gastev, and Leon Trotsky.

<sup>69</sup> All examples of the appearance of the logotype are precisely the same when brought to the same scale, at least as detectable by the eye when superimposed on one another.

of specificity.

In the context of the serial, the logotype block hits the specificity spectrum in a particular sweet spot. Produced as a single block, it cannot be broken down for use in other projects. Yet it is also universal in another way: it can be used on each of the numbers in a way that the numbers and illustrations cannot be. The character of its specificity precisely corresponds to the scope and scale of the magazine. Indeed, this is what makes the lettering a logotype. It visually unites the various issues, with their multiple copies, as one project with a single identity, and its usefulness for this purpose comes by virtue of its uselessness for any purpose outside the boundaries of the project. The fact that it manages to create this unique identity for the magazine despite the bare-bones sans-serif composition is a testament to the exacting analytical bent and functional aim of this exploration of style.

The constructivist graphic style developed in *Kino-Fot* stemmed less from an artist's work with materials than from a set of constructive principles. Were we to attribute the covers to Rodchenko at this point, it would not be because he drew the logotype, although he probably did, but because he was responsible for the "American-cabinet" system of thinking about modular design. Further, Rodchenko's idea about modular design emerged in dialogue with the First Working Group about an idea that had originated with Gan, and that had been most helpfully elaborated into a concept about style by Stepanova. This process of discussion can be considered the co-working of an ideational or discursive *faktura*. Its product was a transpersonal style with more in common with the corporate stamp of a brand than with the distinctive mark of an individual artist's hand.

Evidence of the self-consciousness and sophistication with which Gan, Rodchenko, and Stepanova seem to have understood style as a product that could be objectively and rationally designed and produced is found in a manuscript in the Rodchenko-Stepanova family archive. Probably written sometime in 1922 or early in 1923, the text is copy for an advertisement for their constructivist services and humorously enumerates their constructivist wares as the following: “derision, art’s discrediting, parody, caricatures, projects for sports-, *spets*-, and agit-clothing, projects for labels, book jackets, stickers, new means of advertising, patented images, and advertisements in light, space, and volume.”<sup>70</sup> There is an element of Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia in the list’s mixture of concrete things such as clothing and book jackets with more abstract and affective products like discrediting and derision, and I think we can safely assume that the text was a joke, perhaps composed as comic relief during an exasperating discussion of their possible contributions to the national economy. In light of their earnest discussions of 1921 about the formal possibilities of working with light and space as materials,<sup>71</sup> their last product of “light, spatial, and volumetric advertisements” reads as a humorously self-deprecating assessment of their current occupation in comparison to the ambitions to Marxist materialist practice with which they had started.

Yet the idea of producing and distributing immaterial and affective effects—

---

<sup>70</sup> “Spets-clothing” was clothing designed for specialists, or workers with particular clothing needs. Lavrientiev titles this document “Konstruktivisty. Proekt reklamnogo ob”iavlennia.” Aleksandr Lavrentiev, *Laboratoriia konstruktivizma* (Moscow: Grant, 2000): 67. [издательства, дискредитирование искусства, пародии, шаржи, проекты спорт-, спец- и агит-одежды, проекты этикеток, оберток, наклеек, новые способы рекламы, патентованные изображения, световая, пространственная и объемная [реклама].]

<sup>71</sup> See Khan-Magomedov, *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*: 95-96, 100.

”things” like derision and art’s discrediting, as well as like style—was only funny because it also contained a little truth. In relation to my discussion of *Kino-Fot*’s logotype, the category of “patented images” (*patentovannye izobrazheniia*) is particularly apropos. It has been suggested that this rubric was intended to refer to their photomontage work—that is, to their use of pre-existing, presumably “patented” images in creating new unique compositions<sup>72</sup>—but it is equally possible that they meant the creation of the sort of branded visual identity of which *Kino-Fot*’s logotype is one example. What is interesting about the latter interpretation is that it gets the logic of the mass-produced object exactly right by assuming that a design is a product with an existence, reality, and power greater than, and independent of, its material instantiation.

In the mid twenties, this constructivist graphic style became enough of a thing that all three members of the group were able to employ it on other magazine projects, and here the impersonal nature of the style becomes particularly important. Although Gan later claimed the design for the cover for the journal of the Time League, *Time*, the design was attributed to the “First Working Group of Constructivists” in the journal itself. At this point, in the winter of 1923-1924, the First Working Group did not include Rodchenko and Stepanova, who had begun working on the journal *Lef*, and in so doing fallen out with Gan, in the spring of 1923.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the First Working Group who designed *Time* was most likely a second First Working Group, which Gan brought together out of

---

<sup>72</sup> Lavrentiev, *Laboratoriia konstruktivizma*: 67.

<sup>73</sup> I will narrate this development in greater detail in chapter 5.

members of the INKhUK educational subgroup in December of that year.<sup>74</sup>

Another example of the transferability of the style came in the summer and fall of 1924, when Rodchenko and Gan came together again to design two issues of *Proletkino* (figs 86-87), as well as eight months of the “popular political, economic, and technical magazine,” *Technology and Life* (figs 88-90). Covers for these last two publications are visible in Rodchenko’s portrait of Gan of 1924 (fig 12), suggesting that Gan alone designed them, and in the case of *Proletkino* there are no explicit credits to dispute the conclusion. In *Technology and Life*, however, Rodchenko’s signature on the covers of the first four constructivist numbers (see fig 88b)—including the one visible in the portrait of Gan (fig 89)—make clear that Rodchenko at least produced the basic template.<sup>75</sup> In 1925, more detailed design credits spell out that Gan and Rodchenko worked together on the project in much the same way that I proposed that they did on *Kino-Fot*: Rodchenko created the lettering for the covers and any photomontage illustrations, Gan laid out the interiors, and they took turns or worked together to produce the variations on the original cover design that began with the first number of 1925. Stepanova joined in the

---

<sup>74</sup> The first issue of *Time*, published in October, attributed the design to a “Second Working Group of Constructivists.” The byline for the cover was revised to read “First Working Group of Constructivists” in the second (December) issue, presumably after the group had officially organized on 11 December and settled on maintaining nominal continuity with the original group. Further supporting the theory that this design was a collaborative project of the second First Working Group is the fact that the Time League’s seal (*shtamp*) was designed by Viktor Shestakov, a member of the educational subgroup and the second First Working Group. Other members included Galina and Olga Chichagova, N. Smirnov, Grigorii Miller, Aleksandra Miroliubova, and L. Sanina.

<sup>75</sup> Rodchenko’s name appears at the lower right, above the “va” of Moskva, as part of the same block that renders all of the lettering. In the case of number twenty-two, the one in the Rodchenko photograph of Gan, the signature is difficult to make out because the plates were misaligned so that the dark blue block surrounding the photo overlaps and all but obliterates Rodchenko’s name.

collaboration five numbers later, making a cameo appearance as the “*konstruktivistka*,” or constructress, on the cover (fig 90). Although Stepanova was not involved in the design of *Technology and Life*, this portrait is not so different from Rodchenko’s portrait of Gan with *Proletkino* and *Technology and Life*, or the portrait of Rodchenko and Stepanova in front of *Kino-Fot*. None of them document a claim of solo authorship, but rather an association and participation.

The increased specificity about who did what over the course of the run of *Technology and Life* suggests that it was important to them on some level to distinguish among their individual contributions. Yet it is hard to ignore the way that the design retains a consistent identity from number to number, regardless of which of them composed it. The style may not have belonged to any one individual, nor to any one object for that matter, but it was a distinctive and recognizable thing in a delocalized transpersonal way. The existence of a stylistic unity among *Kino-Fot*, *Time*, *Proletkino*, and *Technology and Life* becomes particularly clear when they are compared to previous, non-constructivist issues of the latter two journals (figs 91-92). There is evidence to suggest that both *Proletkino* and *Technology and Life* turned to constructivist style as part of campaigns to popularize and modernize their image. In the case of *Proletkino*, archival evidence documents the decision, and *Technology and Life* had been implementing similar reforms for about a year already.<sup>76</sup> Thus, not only was constructivist style a

---

<sup>76</sup> In a meeting of April 1924, the Society of Builders of Proletarian Cinema, an organization closely tied to *Proletkino*, recommended that they reorganize the journal for greater *populiarnost*. GARF f. 8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 172. *Tekhnika i zhizn'* had originally been a trade journal called *Krasnyi transportnik* (Red Transport Worker) published by the transportation union. They changed the name, added more content of general interest, and began upping its print run in the beginning of 1924. Some of the most shamelessly

discernable thing, it was a thing perceived to have a specific function, one of making an organization appear modern and attractive to a broad audience.

Gan's design for the constructivist architecture journal *SA* was the most refined version of this graphic style.<sup>77</sup> During the period that Gan designed it, from 1926 through 1928, *SA*'s cover and interior designs look like cleaned up and more measured versions of *Kino-Fot* (compare figs 69, 75, and 79). The modular logic of *Kino-Fot* and its logotype are taken in a slightly different direction by virtue of the fact that the "S," "A," and number were composed of separate blocks, which Gan arranged and rearranged in a number of variations in the first two years (compare the first two rows of fig 76). If *Time*'s form of modularity suggested units of measurement and *Kino-Fot*'s photographic processes, *SA*'s might be construed as evoking building blocks, finally bringing idea of tectonic style back around to the building construction paradigm with which it began. This series of variations can also be understood as a further exploration of the limits of a branded identity. The design constantly shifts with Gan's slight rearrangements, but the journal remains stably recognizable. In surveying the entire run, the only idiosyncratic examples are those that Gan did not design—the first issue of 1928 and then those after

---

gimmicky content—including illustrations for a telephone on Mars—was introduced right before rolling out the new constructivist graphic design in the fall of 1924. Oddly, *Proletkino*'s print run actually went down significantly with the constructivist redesign. The print run of *Tekhnika i zhizn'* tripled in 1924, going from 5000 to 15,000. During the period when Gan and Rodchenko were designing it, it went up again, topping out at 40,000.

<sup>77</sup> I will discuss the history of *SA*'s founding in chapter 5. Also see Vieri Quilici, "The Magazine *SA*: A Constructivist Creation," *Rassegna* 38: 2 (1989): 10-25.

the third issue of 1929.<sup>78</sup>

In the abstract, some combination of shiftiness and stability—of the flexible and the universal—was the foundation of tectonic style. Yet in developing the combination to meet NEP's demand for a branded identity, they may have inverted the initial purpose of the combination of terms. Their initial discussion of tectonic style focused on a style that continually shifted to keep pace with an ever-changing contemporary zeitgeist. Instead they ended up focusing on the creation of a static and recognizable identity. I betrayed this mistake above by suggesting that *SA* was a *refinement* of the style pioneered by *Kino-Fot*. It was an evolution, not in the sense of a radically contemporary continual reinvention, but in a way more in line with Le Corbusier's perfection of an ideal type. Or in the mode of the sort of periodization in which an "early," "mature," and "late" style correspond to the different stages of development, and then exhaustion, of the formal possibilities of a particular idea.

Gan produced very little after his last number of *SA*, at the end of 1928. Some of the reasons for the decline of his career were personal, but his personal failings corresponded to the end of an era in a way that may not be entirely coincidental. Gan may simply have been unable to connect to the zeitgeist of the First Five-Year Plan. If Gan was unable to adjust, we can at least argue that tectonic style did so without him. When Stepanova took over the design of *SA* in 1929, she immediately changed its style to

---

<sup>78</sup> The first three issues of 1929 were designed by E. Nekrasov, but he maintains Gan's design.

reflect the new mood (fig 93).<sup>79</sup> Her redesign can be interpreted as constructivist style's robustly adapting in the way that they had initially proposed tectonic style should. The final issues of the journal in 1930 were designed by Solomon Telingater in yet another blunt sans-serif style. Yet the perspicacity of Stepanova's tectonic intuition was borne out in the fact that she was the one who went on to design of *SA*'s successor, *Sovetskaia arkhitektura* (Soviet Architecture, fig 94) in 1931.

### **FROM OBJECT TO CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE: THE CONSTRUCTIVIST JOURNAL'S EXTENSIVE STRUCTURE**

In this section, I look at dimensions of Gan's journals that I call their extensive structure. Less visually oriented, but nonetheless formal, these dimensions include all of the ways in which the journal made itself accessible, or opened onto the world. Because Gan's journals were not isolated art objects or laboratory experiments but viable serial publications, their texts and images had to make their way onto paper, and then also through various distribution channels to several thousand readers at regular temporal and spatial intervals. This extended design task involved taking into account the material economies of the existing production apparatus, factors such as standard fonts, paper, and press sizes. Considerations like these were also modulated by external economies through various sites of dependency, such as advertising income, distribution outlets, and the interest of subscribers. Their open negotiation of all of these factors transformed the journals from static works on paper to active circulating objects, making the print run,

---

<sup>79</sup> The typeface for her new "SA" were taken from Gan's poster design for OSA's First Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture in 1927 (fig 63).

price, frequency and methods of distribution all dimensions as relevant as the planar measurements and number of pages. The extensive structure made Gan's journals constructivist objects rather than autonomous works of art, as well as radically extending the collaborative nature of their authorship to encompass just about everyone, from the managers of theaters and newsstands to advertisers, subscribers, and readers.

Because the journal's extensive structure cannot be "read" in the same way as a graphic image, it will be helpful to think about it here in conjunction with another set of objects: the distribution kiosks that Gan designed during the same period. I have already briefly noted the folding sales stand that he designed for Mossel'prom in 1922 (fig 77), as well as the book kiosk he designed for VseRoKomPom, the commission for aiding veterans, in 1922-1923 (fig 68).<sup>80</sup> The third entry in this class is a slightly more substantial a structure, a design for a rural kiosk (c. 1924, fig 95).<sup>81</sup> All three were intended as distribution points for print materials, stationery products, and, in the case of the Mossel'prom stand, cigarettes. The rural kiosk was also to be outfitted with a radio

---

<sup>80</sup> VseRoKomPom stands for *Vserossiiskii komitet pomoshchi bol'nym I ranenym krasnoarmejsam i invalidam voiny*, or The All-Russian Commission for the Aid of Wounded Red-Army Soldiers and War Invalids. My dating is based on the facts that the name for the organization came into being in January 1922 and that a picture of Gan's model for the design was, to the best of my knowledge, first published in February 1924; as well as Konopleva's suggestion that the fire in Gan and Shub's apartment, which most likely took place in the summer of 1922, started in Gan's "newspaper kiosk." Konopleva, "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan": 218.

<sup>81</sup> To the best of my knowledge, the earliest evidence of the rural kiosk design is its publication in *SA* in 1926. For unspecified reasons, Lodder dates it to 1924 in Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art*: 310. A date of 1924-1925 makes some sense based on the lettering directly above the door, partially obscured by the GIZ (Gosizdat) emblem, which may read *Tekhnika i zhizn'* (Technology and Life). This was the new name given to the magazine *Krasnyi transportnik* (Red Transport Worker) in January 1924 and, as we have seen, Gan was involved in the production of the magazine from November 1924 until June 1925.

receiver and movie screen. As Gan's most three-dimensional objects, the kiosk designs were his most architectural works in the traditional sense. Analysis of their close relationship to his print projects, both as potential distribution points for them and as objects with formal and functional parallels, will allow us to better conceptualize the extra-visual dimensions of the constructivist object.

As temporary semi-architectural structures, the kiosks have often been paired with constructivist stage sets—for example, Popova's set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922, fig 96) or Stepanova's for *The Death of Tarelkin* (1923, fig 97)—and treated as laboratory experiments in the problems of constructivist architecture.<sup>82</sup> Christina Lodder has perhaps given the pairing the most thought, proposing that the two groups were united by their role as experimental “microenvironments.” They represented a controlled environment, or a “limited design task,” through which the constructivists could transition from the non-utilitarian constructions to more substantial architectural commissions.<sup>83</sup> The kiosks provide a particularly convenient way for her to make the link because they were each illustrated in a key constructivist architectural publication, the book kiosk in Moisei Ginzburg's *Style and Epoch* in 1924, and the other two in *SA* in 1926.

Lodder's argument, while it has merit, avoids an obvious difference that is fundamental to my argument here: the stage sets were confined within a dark theater

---

<sup>82</sup> For example, see Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 317-355; and Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 163-180.

<sup>83</sup> Lodder has made variations on the argument in a number of places. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 145-180; Christina Lodder, “Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s,” in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990): 99-116; and Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art*: 341-367.

whereas the kiosks were mobile and mass-produced distribution points to be located throughout the city or countryside. The contrast is not as stark as it might be due to the fact that the stage designs were not diorama-like backdrops, but free-standing structures with functional moving parts. Thus, they were fully three-dimensional with some potential for an existence in the round. Still, the fact that the kiosks were to be placed outside in public space and used by ordinary people adds several layers of complexity to their three-dimensionality. And they can be said to acquire another spatial dimension altogether through their mass production and distribution. Although it may not be readily apparent when comparing them to the stage sets one-to-one and side-by-side, the kiosks differ markedly from the sets when one envisions them scattered at spatial intervals, casting an infinitely extendable net throughout the city or countryside (fig 98). To refunction an earlier quote, together they were a means of carrying their contents out of the “sphere of...subjective efforts and into the province of objective possibilities.”<sup>84</sup>

In this respect, Gan’s kiosks fit more readily into another category whose best known examples are probably Gustav Klucis’s agit-stands of 1922 (for example, fig 99). These semi-permanent, mass-producible, and often mobile mass-media distribution devices had their roots in the Civil War period, when disseminating Bolshevik propaganda via agit-trains, traveling theaters, and printed newspapers and leaflets was considered crucial in the fight for a Soviet republic. One design competition for

---

<sup>84</sup> Gan’s attitude toward constructivist theater sets was ambivalent. He published an interview with Stepanova about her set for *The Death of Tarelkin* that cast the project in a positive light at the end of 1922 (Aleksei Gan, “Beseda s V. F. Stepanovoi,” *Zrelishcha* 16 (December 1922): 10-12), but he was also critical of Meierkhol’d in July, suggesting that cuts to his funding were a good thing because it would encourage him to get out of theater and onto the streets (Aleksei Gan, “Otkrytoe pis’mo V. E. Meierkholdu,” *Ermitazh* 8 (4-10 July 1922): 11).

newspaper kiosks in 1919 reportedly had sixty entries.<sup>85</sup> Artists continued to produce variations on the theme throughout the twenties, some which might be more productively compared to the stage sets because they were mobile theaters.<sup>86</sup> For example, Rodchenko produced a schematic design for a “cinema-automobile” in 1923 (fig 100). Another, produced by an anonymous student at VKhUTEMAS, folded out into a cinema and stage (fig 101). Still, even the mobile theaters should be separated from the stationery stage sets on the same grounds that Gan’s kiosks should—that is, their mobility, multiplicity, and location outdoors.

Rodchenko’s agit-automobile finds better precedent in his own pre-constructivist agitational architectural designs, such as his project for a “Sovdep” building and the kiosks that he produced as part of the group Zhivskul’ptarkh in 1919-1920.<sup>87</sup> Significantly, Gan published images of these three projects, as well as two of Rodchenko’s laboratory constructions and a formally related drawing, alongside his own editorial statement on the first page of all but one of the numbers of *Kino-Fot* (figs 79, 102-105). In doing so, Gan proposed a formal continuity among cinema, the abstract laboratory constructions, and the Civil War-era agitational structures, also grounding my argument for thinking about Gan’s journals as structurally parallel to the kiosks by

---

<sup>85</sup> The competition was sponsored by the Subsection of Artistic Labor at IZO Narkompros. See *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn’* 1 (December 1919): 24.

<sup>86</sup> For a wide range of examples, see Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 316-355.

<sup>87</sup> The Sovdep building was a more substantial structure and may have been a design for an actual unique building in Moscow. Sources differ as to its purpose, and I have been unable to verify their accuracy. Khan-Magomedov writes that it was a generic house of soviets (S. O. Khan-Magomedov, “Zhivskul’ptarkh,” *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo* 5 (1978): 33), whereas it is labeled as a project specifically for the Moscow House of Soviet Deputies in Dobrowski, et al., *Aleksandr Rodchenko*: 159.

rendering the difference between two- and three-dimensions an irrelevant distinction. His choice of projects from Rodchenko's work with Zhivskul'ptarkh makes reference to a similar idea—Zhivskul'ptarkh's full name was the Commission on Working out Questions of Painterly-Sculptural-Architectural Synthesis.<sup>88</sup>

And, indeed, if we ignore the dimensional difference, Gan's kiosks begin to seem more akin to his journal projects than to the stage sets, or to unique examples of architecture. Intended for mass production and distribution, they were not architectural structures so much as an infrastructure for distributing things like cigarettes, books, and stationary, much in the same way that *Kino-Fot*'s pages and text blocks did for essays, images, and information. Particularly in the case of the book kiosk (fig 68), the actual structure bears some visual and functional resemblance to Gan's journal designs. Not only does it fold open and closed like a book, but it also displays a combination of blocky headline-like signage and swappable content. As with *Kino-Fot*'s design, where the logotype and masthead remain constant while the number and content are swapped in and out from number to number, the specific goods lining the book kiosk's shelves would come and go while the signs for *knigi*, *bumaga*, and *veshchi*—or books, paper, and things—would remain unchanged. Gan showed that he thought about the design of his journals in this way—as a template or framework to be filled—in the demonstration of graphic design that I presented earlier (fig 83), where he placed an empty template next to a full page.

Another way in which the kiosks relate more readily to Gan's journal projects than

---

<sup>88</sup> For more on Zhivskul'ptarkh, see S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Zhivskul'ptarkh, 1919-1920: pervaiia tvorcheskaia organizatsiia sovetskogo arkhitekturnogo avangarda* (Moscow: Arkhitektura, 1993).

to the stage sets was that they were designed to function in an uncontrolled environment. Just as *Kino-Fot*'s form was tempered by pragmatic concerns like the size of the standard sheet and advertising revenue, the kiosks took their shape through negotiation with an outdoor setting. The rural kiosk was particularly attentive to these aspects of design. As the text accompanying its illustration in *SA* pointed out, its triangular footprint was intended to adjust to a preexisting country town, in which forks in the road were more common than right-angled street corners, and the angles of the roof were designed to accommodate the drainage issues of a snowy climate in a way that Le Corbusier's modernist flat roof infamously did not.<sup>89</sup> Another weather-related innovation was the glassed-in enclosure, which provided protection without impeding the projection of content outward toward the street. This decoupling of shelter and privacy seems particularly innovative when one compares it to earlier designs for news distribution devices such as Klucis's agit-stands, which left winter temperatures completely unaddressed, most likely because the demand that the structure not be a confining interior was considered paramount. By mixing and matching the forms and functions of a delimiting closed structure with those of a connecting or network structure, Gan satisfied seemingly contradictory functional and environmental requirements, creating a shelter whose content was also accessible from the street.

The journals' response to environmental factors is less accessible to visual analysis, but it can still be traced from issue to issue and from journal to journal. For example, in *Kino-Fot* he altered the number of pages printed in color, presumably in an attempt to balance the increase of income stemming from selling more expensive color ads with the

---

<sup>89</sup> Andrei Novikov, "Derevenskii kiosk," *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 1: 35.

expense of printing more color pages.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, announcements detailing where to buy the magazine or how to subscribe, purchase ads, and submit articles were introduced and elaborated as the run progressed.<sup>91</sup> One can argue that these aspects of the journal are givens, that these things are simply what journals do. Yet the different ways in which they were negotiated had significance, a fact that comes into greater relief when one compares Gan's to other avant-garde journals of the period. Perhaps the most convenient in this respect is the one with which we are already familiar from the last chapter: El Lissitzky's and Ilya Ehrenburg's *Veshch'* (*Object*). The kiosks still have several things to tell us about the structure of Gan's journals, and I will return to them. At this point it will be helpful to take a detour into a comparison between *Kino-Fot* and *Object*. Gan's decision to publish *Kino-Fot* was likely in some measure inspired by the appearance of *Object*, and *Kino-Fot* contains oblique reference to it by republishing some items of its

---

<sup>90</sup> With the exception of the first number, all of the covers are printed in two colors. Since each cover represents four pages, a print run that was a multiple of four was desirable. *Kino-Fot* was printed in editions of four and eight thousand. Beginning with the third issue, color accents were added to the back and inside front covers, which only meant that Gan was taking fuller advantage of having to print that sheet separately. In the fifth and six numbers, color is used for several more of the advertising pages. Between the first and third issue, the number of advertising pages grew from three to six, perhaps motivating Gan in number 4 to add four more pages of ads (a quarter signature). In number 5, Gan printed those four extra pages in color, presumably allowing him to sell more color ads, which he had by that point priced higher. In the last issue, number 6, there is a full sixteen-page signature printed in color if one includes the cover, which was printed on the same paper. Many of the color ads are full-page and luxuriously spare in their design, suggesting that he was trying to fill a full signature that he did not quite need.

<sup>91</sup> For example, the second number advertises that it was being distributed in all cinemas in Rostov-na-don. This expands in the fourth issue to include locations in Petrograd, Smolensk, Rostov na Don, Kozlov, Orel, Samara, Saratov, Nizhnyi Novgorod, Kharkov, Kiev, and Odessa. In numbers three and four, he finally thinks to list an address for submissions of content and advertisements. In issue five, the advertisement pricing schema has been revised to reflect variations in color and placement.

content.<sup>92</sup> This overlap in material initially makes the two journals appear to be close competitors in the same category. It is analysis of their extensive structures that reveals that they define entirely different types of objects.

The difference between the two projects is most obviously and significantly manifested in their imagined audiences. The opening statement of *Object* proclaimed its intention to serve as a means of “exchange of practical knowledge, realizations, and ‘objects’ between young Russian and Western European artists.”<sup>93</sup> Its attempt to be trilingual, while only half-heartedly implemented,<sup>94</sup> should be taken as evidence of this pursuit, as should its list of subscription rates in the currencies of nearly a dozen countries. What *Object* gained in geographical scope, however, it forfeited in the depth of its engagement. Among its objects of exchange were avant-garde art projects from various locales and in a range of media, as well as items of “practical knowledge” such as Paul Recht’s article, “Glyptocinematography,” which discussed the optical distortion engendered by projecting an image on a flat screen.<sup>95</sup> While these sundry contributions were placed next to each other, they did not speak to each other. Vetted for quality but not brought into conversation with one another, they remained discrete objects pulled

---

<sup>92</sup> *Kino-fot* 1 reproduces Ludwig Hilberseimer’s article “Dynamic Painting (Non-Objective Cinema)” from *Veshch*’ 3, along with a drawing by Viking Eggeling from *Veshch*’ 1-2. The illustration is labeled incorrectly, as by “Richard Eggerling,” in both *Veshch*’ 1-2 and in *Kino-fot* 1. A collage by Rodchenko reproduced in *Kino-fot* 1 incorporates an advertisement from *Veshch*’ 1-2.

<sup>93</sup> El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, “Blokada Rossii konchaetsia,” *Veshch*’ 1–2 (March–April 1922): 1.

<sup>94</sup> Approximately three quarters of the text appears only in Russian. See Kestutis Paul Zygas, text on *Veshch*’, *Oppositions* 5 (summer 1976): 115–16.

<sup>95</sup> Recht’s article was originally published in *L’Esprit nouveau* 11-12 (November 1921) and republished in *Veshch*’ 1-2 (March-April 1922): 28.

from whatever relationship they might have had to their native contexts.

*Kino-Fot* limited its geographic mobility by employing only Russian text and content specific to Soviet cinema, but it also dug into those conditions in a deeper way. When *Kino-Fot* published content from abroad, it was pulled into a local discussion. For example, after introducing information about Charlie Chaplin, Gan solicited responses from three locals: the producer Nikolai Foregger, the filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, and Rodchenko and Stepanova.<sup>96</sup> Another interesting choice was to combine information for film consumers, such as movie reviews and show times, with contributions relevant to film producers—articles on technical, economic, and artistic problems. Normally these two types of information would have been separated into two venues targeted at different audiences—an industry journal for the professionals and a weekly entertainment review for the public. Bringing production and consumption together in one place and to the same readers created a vertical integration of sorts within the field of Soviet cinema. In comparison, *Object* was a horizontal cross-section at a level that assumed an elite audience unified by class, not by field or locale. These differences in content had repercussions for the temporal interval of distribution. *Object* issued only two numbers, and those at an unspecified interval. *Kino-Fot*, with its more topical content, was conceptualized as a weekly.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Rodchenko wrote the text and Stepanova did the illustrations for their contribution. See *Kino-Fot* 3 (19-25 September 1922).

<sup>97</sup> It failed to realize the ambition, but still managed biweekly publication from late August until mid October, after which the last two issues trickled out one per month. The print shop where it was produced also shifted from a Mospoligraf shop to VKhUTEMAS between October and December, suggesting that the break reflects a problem with the printer.

The ways that the two journals reached out to their respective audiences reflected substantial differences between Gan's and Lissitzky's conception of the constructivist object.<sup>98</sup> If Gan's object was constantly negotiating with its surroundings and fully embedded in everyday life, Lissitzky's position had always been that a self-contained easel painting could contribute more on its own terms. It is telling that during the same period when Gan and his anarchist colleagues were advocating collective art forms (or *tvorchestvo*) as the "affirmation of revolutionary everyday life" by the masses,<sup>99</sup> Lissitzky was developing the abstract paintings that he called *prouns*, or "projects for the Affirmation of the New Art."<sup>100</sup> As T. J. Clark has argued, Lissitzky saw these self-contained compositions as capable of political impact through their ability to shape the psyche of the viewer. It was by *forgoing* participation as a constituent part of mass production that they were able to model the rational self-consistency, or "internal logicity," to which communism's centrally planned economy aspired, making the idea accessible to human consciousness.<sup>101</sup> When the productivists rejected that kind of easel painting late in 1921 in favor of dissolving the boundaries between art and mass production, Lissitzky left INKhUK and moved to Berlin. His first project there was to publish *Object*.

---

<sup>98</sup> For example, in "Oformlenie knigi": 24.

<sup>99</sup> *Anarkhiia* 69 (26 May 1918): 1. See my discussion in chapter 1.

<sup>100</sup> He developed the *proun* while working with Malevich's group UNOVIS, which is an acronym for "Affirmation of the New Art" (*Utverzhdienia novogo iskusstva*). I am treating Lissitzky's *proun* works as paintings since they read as flat compositions, but many were mixed media works combining wood, metal, paper, and paint.

<sup>101</sup> Clark quotes from the language of the Ninth Party Congress. T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999): 225-297.

*Object* was a journal, not a painting, but the understanding of the art object that it promulgated was the same. Indeed, the illustration on its first page is as neat a map of Lissitzky's aesthetic theory as one could hope for (fig 106). There, he has placed two art objects—Malevich's suprematist paintings *Black Square* and *Black Circle*—in the same column as the label “suprematist object” (*suprematicheskaiia Object*). Next to them is a picture of a locomotive labeled “technological object” (*tekhnicheskaiia Object*). The text on the left reads, “Representing a machine is the same as painting a nude / Humans are not the rational creators of their own bodies / The machine is a lesson in clarity and economy.”<sup>102</sup> The text ridicules a superficial machine aesthetic, proposing that art should realize the same level of rationality, but by its own means. This interpretation is reinforced by Lissitzky's graphically defining the relationship between the two categories of objects with a dashed line broken in the center by two parallel lines of equal length. It seems fitting to read the set of symbols in the context of Lissitzky's background in drafting and engineering, where they would denote an electrical circuit interrupted by a capacitor.<sup>103</sup> When used in conjunction with a battery, a capacitor separates and stores charge—positive on one side and negative on the other—so that it can be released to produce a quick jolt of energy later. In Lissitzky's illustration, these same parallel lines simultaneously form an equation whose right-hand term is the word “economy” (*ekonomiia*). The schema suggests that art's contribution in that respect would not come through its integration into industrial production, but by maintaining art and industry as

---

<sup>102</sup> *Veshch'* 3 (May 1922): 1. [Изображать машину—все равно что писать ню / Человек не является разумным творцом своего тела / Машина—урок ясности и экономии]

<sup>103</sup> Lissitzky studied architecture and engineering in Darmstadt prior to World War I.

separate spheres. The strength of their respective charges depended on their strict separation into equal and opposite domains.<sup>104</sup>

For all of the diagrammatic austerity of its articulation, Lissitzky's strategy displays an aesthetic sophistication, as well as a certain savvy within the politics of the moment. The New Economic Policy had been implemented because the Soviet Union urgently needed to import Western technology and goods in order to get industries like cinema and print back on their feet, and the export of art objects was an important source of revenue in that endeavor.<sup>105</sup> Despite *Object's* confident opening statement that "The Blockade on Russia Has Ended!", the pathways of exchange were still fairly fragile, making it prudent to minimize friction by keeping art arty, technology techy, and politics out of the picture entirely. In a sense, Lissitzky was also calling for a flexible form of universality, for modular parts that could be combined for different purposes to meet different needs. The motivation for such a construction strategy was precisely the inverse of the one I discussed earlier, however. Rather than a way to keep pace with a constantly shifting common vision, Lissitzky sought a way of accommodating simultaneous and divergent values and outlooks. And if an embedded extensive structure was important to Gan as a way to begin by constructing a common vision for the communist city, Lissitzky had another strategy for waiting. Keeping one's vision contained was a way of buying time during which potential energy, or Western technology, could be stored, as in a battery, for

---

<sup>104</sup> Electrical circuits were used to explain aesthetic ideas elsewhere during this period, for example, V. Pertsov, *Reviziia levogo fronta v sovremennom russkom iskusstve* (Moscow: Vserossiskii Proletkul't, 1925): 22, 74; and Karl Ioganson's drawing, discussed in Gough, *The Artist as Producer*.

<sup>105</sup> See *Treasures into Tractors: the Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938*, ed. Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood, 2009).

later use.

Comparison with *Object* is one way to bring out the formal specificities of the constructivist object's extensive structure. Another is to look at how it underwent refinement between *Kino-Fot* and *SA*. The major differences were that *SA*'s circulation was lower (*Kino-Fot*'s was eight thousand, while *SA*'s grew from fifteen hundred to four thousand) and its frequency of publication a consistent six numbers a year rather than the promised, but not delivered, weekly or bi-weekly issue of *Kino-Fot*. Although these numbers suggest a reduced ambition, they also point to a practical fine-tuning of the form. *Kino-Fot*'s print run may have been larger, but there is no evidence that every copy was read. In the first years of NEP, a *khozraschet*, or self-financing regime, was nominally operative, but much of the press was still heavily subsidized by the state, whose specifications sometimes produced an incentive to inflate print run.<sup>106</sup> Between 1923 and 1926, the development of techniques for eliminating such irrational waste became an obsession, spawning an industry all its own. The Time League, with its journal *Time*, was one organization devoted to shaving minutes and kopeks off every production task. These measures were also applied to the printing industry, where multi-year efficiency studies were conducted at the same print shops where *Time* and *SA* were reproduced.<sup>107</sup> Thus, when *SA* claimed in the final two issues of 1926 to have distributed its entire print run in over seventy cities in the Soviet Union and abroad, it was boasting about a design achievement that dovetailed with an entire body of labor science and

---

<sup>106</sup> Matthew Edward Leno, "Stalinist Mass Journalism and the Transformation of Soviet Newspapers, 1926–32" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1997): 71–73.

<sup>107</sup> Studies done between 1923 and 1928 at the *Krasnyi proletarii* and *Iaia obraztsovaia* print shops and others are preserved in RGALI f. 1440, op. 1, dd. 347-349.

policy.<sup>108</sup>

Like the snow-repelling roof of the rural kiosk, the attention that *SA* paid to these pragmatic issues made it a more stable structure. It lasted for five years and twenty-seven numbers, as compared to five months and six numbers for *Kino-Fot*, or two numbers for *Object*. This is particularly impressive when one compares it to its closest competitor, *Izvestiia ASNOVA* (ASNOVA News, fig 107), published by the rationalist architect Nikolai Ladovskii and designed by El Lissitzky shortly after his return from Berlin in 1925. The first and only issue came out at roughly the same time as the first issue of *SA*. Placed side by side, the two architectural publications clearly differ in a number of ways, from the approaches to building that they advocated to the style of their graphic design. Yet the long and consistent run made possible by *SA*'s extensive structure is the most fundamental difference (compare figs 76 and 107). It transformed *SA* into another kind of object entirely, a permanent institution rather than an isolated statement. Its solid extensive structure is what enabled *SA* to shelter a sustained debate.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will return to my analysis of Gan's journals via his kiosks. We left off in that discussion with the observation that the rural kiosk's hybridization of an open network structure and a closed bounding structure represented a thoughtful response to the local climate. I will now continue by elaborating on how this open-closed hybrid was also a structure fundamental to Gan's larger oeuvre by examining a two-page spread that Gan composed for *SA* in 1926, where he collected a number of constructivist designs under the heading "Constructivism in the Furnishing [*armature*] of

---

<sup>108</sup> *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 4, inside back cover; and *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, nos. 5–6: 112.

Everyday Life” (fig 108). Most were furnishings for a living space or workspace—there was a folding bed, a bookshelf, and two desks. Rather than use the word *furniture* (*mebel*’), however, Gan used the word *armatura*, which means something more like “furnishings” in the sense of “fixtures” or “fittings.” It is generally used for things like plumbing and wiring that run from room to room, often also between separate family apartments within the same building, in the way illustrated in a subsequent issue of *SA* (fig 109). Thus, even though the objects are all free-standing, they have been framed in terms of an infrastructure or network.

Gan added the dimension of enclosure to the discussion by including among these furnishings two outliers: his Mossel’prom sales stand of 1922 (fig 108a) and a protective work suit designed by Grigorii Miller (fig 108b), a former member of the INKhUK educational subgroup. These two objects expand the category under consideration by expanding and contracting the unit of enclosure: the work suit acts like a second skin, contracting the scale of the interior to the level of the individual, while Gan’s sales stand conversely extends out beyond any larger enclosure. Designed for selling cigarettes and paper supplies on the street, it leaves the seller free to interact in the open air, while protecting the water-sensitive products in a glass-topped vitrine.

Gan justified his inclusion of the sales stand in this collection of objects by writing that “the street, just like the apartment, must be furnished for the worker.”<sup>109</sup> But the Mossel’prom stand was really more of a furnishing for a workplace than for an apartment. Gan referred to it as a “folding workbench with a tray” (*skladnoi stanok s*

---

<sup>109</sup> *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2: 1. [Улица так же как и квартира требует рабочей обстановки.]

*lotkom*), and period photographs of other similar devices—in this case taken by Rodchenko—show how he intended it to be used (figs 110-111). In Moscow, many goods were (and still are) sold by street vendors, who lay out their wares on blankets, in baskets, or on folding tables. The street represents the workplace for this sizable contingent of the service sector. By using the word *workbench*, Gan not only places the Mossel'prom stand within the realm of work rather than private life, it also implies that the job of sales—or distribution—was productive labor.

This realignment is key with regard to understanding the constructivist journal's extensive structure as a component of the object. If Rodchenko's portrait of Gan showed one aspect of the production of his journals and the kind of workbench on which it happened (fig 12), Gan's workbenches for the street were the places where the work of fabricating their extensive structures took place. They were two halves that came together to produce the full object. This proposal, I might add, resonates nicely with the caricature of Gan produced by Stepanova that I paired with Rodchenko's portrait in chapter 1 (fig 18). There, the text reads "Aleksei Gan, constructor," but all reference to material making has been swept away. Gan is instead depicted in street clothes with the third number of *Kino-Fot* clutched in his right hand. Having worked out the design problems internal to the object, he is now out engaged in its distribution, a constructor of its extensive structure.

Gan further developed the productive possibilities of this sort of distribution workbench in his design for the rural kiosk. The description in *SA* stated that the rural kiosk would be a distribution point for the books, magazines, and radio and film programs produced in the city center, but also that it would serve as a gathering point for

meeting and interacting with neighbors, a little like a club. It was to be “a central place for mass forms of worker-peasant sociality.”<sup>110</sup> This gathering function was both facilitated and formally expressed by the enclosure that I described earlier. Here again it represented a significant departure from contemporary ways of imagining the mass distribution of information, such as Klucis’s agit-stands, which tended to valorize the constant unconfined movement of their viewers. Although the user of Gan’s rural kiosk could experience its content in that way, in motion from the road outside, there were also reasons to go inside and spend time there. There seems to be at least one seat and table, on the right (fig 95a), and writing paper and implements were to be sold, implying that one might write the news as well as reading it. Although the text did not specify that it contained a wall newspaper, the walls visible in the illustration suggest that it might have, as does Gan’s long-standing infatuation with the form.<sup>111</sup> A wall newspaper was basically a bulletin board where everyone was welcome to post, arrange, and rearrange the content. Here, the word *soobshcheniia*, or “communications” or “information,” visible through the windows on the right (fig 95b), might indicate such a space. Gan, among others, held up this form as an interactive and collective way to publish, or publicly present, the news.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> Novikov, “Derevenskii kiosk”: 35. [киоск должен стать центральным местом для массовых форм рабоче-крестьянской общественности.]

<sup>111</sup> One of Gan’s talks at the meetings of the First Working Group of Constructivists was titled “The Wall Newspaper,” and according to Lavrentiev, he produced a two-page brochure on the topic. Aleksandr Lavrentiev, “Zagadka Alekseia Gana,” *DA!* 2-3 (1995): 9.

<sup>112</sup> For more on the wall newspaper, see Catriona Kelly, “‘A Laboratory for the Manufacture of Proletarian Writers’: The *Stengazeta* (Wall Newspaper), *Kul’turnost’* and the Language of Politics in the Early Soviet Period,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 54 no. 4 (2002): 573-602.

However clunky, the desire behind it was for a news outlet in which the consumers were also the authors and producers. Gan called it “a form of mass work on the word.”<sup>113</sup>

This last suggestion represents another way in which Gan’s workbenches for the street combined the tasks of production and distribution. In this way, it also leads us back to Lenin’s ideas about the importance of the newspaper in developing a revolutionary organization. Picking up where we left off in the same passage from “Where to Begin?,” Lenin goes on to elaborate on the newspaper’s organizational function—and conveniently for my purposes, he even uses an architectural metaphor—by suggesting that the *production* of a newspaper is just as much an organizing force as its consumption. He writes,

A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organizer. In this last respect it may be likened to the scaffolding round a building under construction, which marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organized labor. With the aid of the newspaper, and through it, a permanent organization will naturally take shape...The mere technical task of regularly supplying the newspaper with copy and of promoting regular distribution will necessitate a network of local agents..., who will maintain constant contact with one another, know the general state of affairs, [and] get accustomed to performing regularly their detailed functions in the All-Russian work.<sup>114</sup>

Here, Lenin notes that, while the ostensible purpose of the newspaper was to reach the broad masses, its primary benefit was often the creation of organizational cohesion among the members of the movement, its producers. In this way it is similar to the process of dialogue that took place in the First Working Group, and that was productive

---

<sup>113</sup> Lavrentiev, “Zagadka Alekseia Gana”: 9. [Стенная газета как форма массовой работы над словом.]

<sup>114</sup> Lenin, “Where to Begin?”: 13-24.

of a constructivist style. What was important about forms like the wall newspaper or the rural kiosk was that they incorporated the broad masses into the production side of the project, or into the dialogue. Continuing Lenin's metaphor, it brought them into the scaffolding that defined the contours of the larger construction project, presumably socialism.

As a delimiting structure, the rural kiosk's enclosure functioned in a similar way. It may have removed and partially separated people from the street, but only to connect them to contemporary life in other ways. It marked off a space in which the passerby might have a conversation with a local neighbor, or, in technologically mediated ways, connect to the rest of the country and the world. In this sense, entering the kiosk contrasted with the experience of entering the detached and passive space of a theater just as much as it did with Klucis's ideal of uninterrupted motion. In enclosing those who entered, the kiosk also opened them to other categories of activity, inter-actions and exchanges. As my first epigraph put it, "it tremendously expanded a person's life."

The fact that Gan's kiosks were *sales* stands is another way in which they were sites of exchange, which, however ideologically counterintuitive, adds an important nuance to their participatory function. Having some choice, however limited, about which magazine to pick up, sit down, and read, or about how to arrange items on the wall newspaper, is a more active participatory experience than Klucis's agit-stands, which function more like feeding tubes for information. Insofar as constant circulation without pause is, in relative terms, just another form of inertia, the negotiation and exchange fostered by Gan's seemingly confining enclosure were also arguably more productive. The enclosure may have stilled physical movement, but it also facilitated movement in

the sense of social change. Gan's journals can be understood similarly. They created a bounded space that pulled both content and readers out of their everyday context in order to connect them to other things. The enclosing structure was used not to isolate, but precisely the opposite, to corral things together into relation.

As a final point, I should note that although I have been arguing that the kiosks combined characteristics of architecture and journals, they also performed some functions that neither the press nor architecture then could. Like the wall newspaper, they combined the immediate presence and interactive potential of live experience with the extended reach of the mass media. They admittedly did this in an awkward way. The rural kiosk aggregates but does not integrate the broadcast medium of the radio receiver, the moving image of the cinema screen, the topical print media viewable through glass, and a space for interpersonal interaction. Properly merged, this combination of functions might describe something like the internet. In 1926, they were presented as something of a technological wish list, providing us with indications, rather than full realizations, of the kind of interactive mass-media apparatus that Gan desired. In this sense, it is fitting that Gan never attempted to construct the rural kiosk in three-dimensions, producing only the graphic illustration that appeared in *SA* (fig 112). This illustration was in itself a polished realization within its graphic medium. Unlike the photographs of plans and built structures that also appeared in the journal, the shadowy grey tones in the illustration of the rural kiosk were composed using hatching not halftones (fig 112b). It was an object designed explicitly for mass reproduction in print.

The kiosks, as workbenches for the street, should have been structures for the distribution of the journals, but as it turned out, the journals served as the distribution

device for an idea represented by the kiosks.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, while the rural kiosk modeled the combination of functions that Gan imagined could and should exist in one mass-media apparatus, his journals were the closest viable approximation within the economic, political, and technological conditions of that moment. Yet, the rural kiosk was not a utopian fantasy. Like his suggestion that the construction of the communist city required cultivating a common vision for it, and like Lenin's idea that the newspaper was the "scaffolding round a building under construction," figuring the rural kiosk within *SA*'s pages was Gan's way to begin by making desire part of the infrastructure. Its reality increased in direct proportion to the solidity of the extensive structure of the paper on which it was printed.

---

<sup>115</sup> In this sense, it relates to what Margolin has called the rhetorical function of constructivist structures like Rodchenko's workers club. Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia*: 81-121.

## CHAPTER 5

**The Communist City, Part 2:  
The Demonstration of Everyday Life**

I do not invent things or love composing spontaneous theories. I am a materialist, good at employing the dialectical method of thinking. I know how to really perceive actuality and analytically grasp the facts... The consistency and harmony of the materialist outlook create what might be called a unity of thought, or a single system of thought, through which it is easy to grasp all manner of phenomena from the outside. These phenomena appear to be... unconnected to each other. But this is not true. They are all connected, all reciprocally coupled with one another. You just have to know how to methodologically approach them so that the methodology doesn't transgress...

It is easy to say that *Battleship Potemkin* is a bad movie, but one must prove that it is true. Whatever I glimpsed in it is enough to honestly, sincerely, and openly declare it on a subjective level. But once I want to open the eyes of others,... I must mobilize all my powers and abilities in order to prove it.

- Aleksei Gan, letter to Esfir' Shub, December 1927<sup>1</sup>

Nothing made is completely objective, purely practical, or merely present.

- Donald Judd, 1965<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Shub of 6 December 1927. The paragraph break is mine. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 105, l. 29. [Я ничего не выдумываю и не люблю на ходу сочинить теорий. Я материалист, пользуюсь не плохо диалектическим методом мышления, умею реально воспринимать действительность и аналитически разбираться в фактах... Последовательность и стройность материалистического миропонимания – создает так сказать единство мысли или единую систему мышления пользуюсь которой легко разбирается в целом ряде явлений с внешней стороны кажущиеся оторванным и не связанным между собой. Но это неверно. Они все связаны, все взаимно сцеплены друг и другом. Важно только суметь методологически подойти к этому чтобы сама методология не грешила... Мало сказать, что “Броненосец потемкин” плохая картина; нужно доказать, что это так. Мне субъективно достаточно того что я в ней увидел чтобы честно, искренно и открыто заявить это. Но раз я хочу открыть на глаза других,... я должен мобилизовать все свои силы, все свое умения чтобы это доказать.]

<sup>2</sup> Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* 8 (New York: Arts Digest, 1965): 94.

This second chapter on Gan's journals will be devoted to their use of montage. In art history, the word has been primarily associated with photomontage, whose cut and pasted images on a bounded two-dimensional surface make a nice segue between cubism's deconstruction of conventions of figurative representation and surrealism's reconstruction of them on other terms. Within the concerns of that narrative, the appeal of photomontage at this moment seems to stem from its potential to reintroduce iconicity into the pictorial surface. It offered an approach to figurative representation that both reflected the fragmentary experience of modern life and escaped the status of subjective illusion by virtue of being composed of indexically and mechanically produced records of reality.<sup>3</sup> My argument also assumes montage's widespread appeal during these years, and in that sense it is important that applications of its possibilities cropped up in a broad range of artistic practices.<sup>4</sup> Yet in examining Gan's use of montage in his journals, it will be

---

<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Benjamin Buchloh's positioning of Soviet photomontage as the midpoint in a progression from "*faktura* to factography" still defines a dominant paradigm. Benjamin Buchloh, "From *Faktura* to Factography," *October* 30 (fall 1984): 82-119. For more recent and focused readings of Soviet photomontage as a mode of picture-making, see Stephen C. Hutchings, "Photographic Eye as Poetic I: Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* Project (1923)," *History of Photography* 24: 4 (winter 2000): 300-307; and Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005): 146-158. Recent treatments in the context of Weimar Germany have focused on the ways that montage can be considered a reflective mode of figurative representation. See Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photographs of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Brigid Doherty, "See: 'We Are All Neurothenics'! or, the Trauma of Dada Montage," *Critical Inquiry* 24: 1 (autumn 1997): 82-132.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the examples of artistic photomontage already cited, montage was used to create synthetic images, and montage-like effects were emulated in painting. On the former, see Maria Gough, "Back in the USSR: John Heartfield, Gustav Klucis, and the Medium of Soviet Propaganda," *New German Critique* 36, no. 2 (2009): 133-183. On the

important to extend the concept to consider its applications outside of the reconfiguration of the static picture plane. The most obvious place to start is cinema. Indeed, I have already billed this chapter as a demonstration of how Gan's journals were like his films. Also worth noting is the use of the Russian word *montazh* in the realm building construction, where it refers to the assembly or installation of prefabricated modular components like plumbing or roof tiles. Thus, montage was a method of construction that united Gan's work in cinema with Rodchenko's discussion of the modular American cabinet, as well as with the journals. The word can be defined in a way applicable to all of these arenas as the assembly of preexisting parts to create new forms or meanings through relation.

The appeal of montage within a project like Gan's had technological and ideological components. Both are aptly expressed on the cover of his booklet on cinema of 1923, *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* (*Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*, fig 113). There he reproduced a strip of film depicting the lower two third of a man's face, mouth wide open, as if shouting the slogan-like title that appears below. On the technological level, the image demonstrates the relationship between the formal potential of montage and then-dominant technologies of mass media and mass production. The movie camera took in the raw material of continuous live experience and churned out discrete units or frames. In doing so, it transformed the formal properties of representation from something like theater or painting into something more like roof tiles and radiators. If the latter could be mass-produced and assembled in multiple configurations to fulfill different functions, so could these small blocks of reality.

---

latter, see Christina Kiaer, "Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s," *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (2005): 323-345.

Breaking up the frames in this particular stretch of footage, moreover, also breaks up the unity of the human subject photographically recorded there, and with it, the localized point of view that would otherwise stand behind the statement that he shouts. This points to the ideological source of Gan's fascination with montage: it seemed to offer an objective way of thinking about and perceiving the world. It was a transsubjective form of expression.

On one level, Gan's faith in the possibility of this objective subject position relied on technological structures for reproduction and distribution such as those that I discussed in chapter 4. As Gan wrote in the text of his booklet, the demonstration of everyday life, or the screening of everyday life—in Russian, the word *demonstratsiia* is also used for a film screening—was made possible by “the reproduction of one real moment, of one piece of actual life,” the transformation of unique live experience “into thousands of thousands of pieces.” This division and multiplication allowed experience to be passed around, so to speak. It could “zip off to different places with the speed of an airplane, be dispersed throughout the countryside, the villages, and the cities,” broadening perspectives in all of those places “where young life also pulsates, but in the still grim conditions of unblinking stagnation.”<sup>5</sup> Connecting human subjects to their world in this way was a new aesthetics, as well as a new politics, for when “the most

---

<sup>5</sup> Aleksei Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!* (Moscow: Press V. N. Pozniakova, 1923): 1. [...воспроизводства одного реального момента, кусочка действенного быта, в тысячу-тысяйь кусков, которые вы с аэропланной скоростью были переброшены в другие места и рассеяны по всем деревням, селам и городам, где также бьется молодая жизнь, но в еще более суровых условиях недремляющей косности.]

minute, fleeting, barely graspable morsels of human behavior” are joined through montage,

you cannot help but discover the dynamic content sharply hitting you in the eye... When you approach the whole tempestuous process [of human life] in a real way [*real'no*]*—*that is, when you take the objective material form of the life of human society as it is, without rending it or subjectively ruminating on it with extrasensory perceptions*—*whether you like it or not, you will arrive at a concrete human character, at an actually working collective, at a form of social organization constructed by [the collective] and called government.<sup>6</sup>

Here, viewing life “as it is,” “in a real way,” “without extrasensory rumination,” results spontaneously*—*“whether you like it or not”*—*in an objective subject, what Gan calls “a concrete human character.” And, for him, this character is nothing less than a new form of *samodeiatel'nyi* government. It was the communist city, if you will.

Yet presenting the facts of life as they are and in a real way was hardly a straightforward procedure. While Gan’s montage may have “had nothing to do with fiction,” Jennifer Oille has noted, it had “everything to do with fabrication.”<sup>7</sup> Gan had enormous faith in his own abilities as an objective fabricator: “you just have to know how to methodologically approach [the facts] so that the methodology doesn’t transgress.” In this chapter, I will examine three of the montage methodologies that Gan developed, looking at them as ideological technologies. If print and cinema were the physical

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 11-12. [...нельзя не раскрыть резко бьющей в глаза функциональной содержательности, ... живая человеческая жизнь, рассыпаясь на мельчайшие мимолетные чуть уловимые крошки людских поведений... И когда ко всему этому бурному процессу подходишь реально т.е. берешь эту предметно-материальную форму жизни людского общества, так как она есть, без надрывов, без субъективной жвачки сверхчувственных восприятий*—*невольно останавливаешься на конкретной человеческой личности, на фактически работающем коллективе на конструируемой им форме общественной организации называемой государством.]

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Oille, “‘Konstruktivizm’ and ‘Kinematografiya’,” *Artforum* 16: 9 (1978): 44.

technologies that enabled the construction of a common point of view, montage was the communist city's less techno-rational b-side.

### ***KINO-FOT AND CRITICAL MONTAGE***

The journal *Kino-Fot* is a particularly good place to begin examining Gan's early development of montage. It coincides historically with montage's entry into Gan's thinking and the technique was both an overt topic of discussion on its pages and the technique through which they were composed. Although Gan had expressed interest in cinema as early as 1917,<sup>8</sup> cinema became a topic of broader interest and discussion in the spring of 1922, after Lenin's proclamation that cinema was the most important of the arts.<sup>9</sup> Gan's partner Esfir' Shub began working as a reeditor for films, recutting prerevolutionary and foreign films for Soviet audiences,<sup>10</sup> and Gan developed a close relationship with filmmaker Dziga Vertov. Within this atmosphere, Gan's enthusiasm for cinematic montage in the singular quickly turned into a discussion of a plurality of

---

<sup>8</sup> Gan proposed introducing cinema projections, along with prints, Easter eggs, and gramophone recordings, into amateur theatrical performances, at the meeting of his proletarian theater group in December 1917. Izdatel'skaia gruppa sotrudnikov proletarskogo teatra, "Proletarskii teatra," *Anarkhiia* 14 (8 March 1918): 4.

<sup>9</sup> See Vladimir Lenin, "Directive on Cinema Affairs" (17 January 1922), in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, trans. Richard Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 56.

<sup>10</sup> Shub began her work in film in 1921, after working from 1918 as the secretary at TEO Narkompros and the Artistic Council of the Moscow Circus. She moved from an administrative position to the job as a film reeditor in 1922. See Esfir' Shub, "O sebe" (1929), *Zhizn' moia—kinematograf* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972): 244; and RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 74, l. 1.

techniques. *Kino-Fot* was the place where he hashed out the differences, talking about them, but also exploring them practically by using them himself.

As I have already stated, even though Gan's journals involved the arrangement of disparate materials on a two-dimensional surface, they had little in common with art-historical interpretations of photomontage as a stage in the evolution of painting. Nonetheless, it will be helpful as I get started to look at Gan's journals in relation to one art-historical model that, even though it emerged in relation to work of the 1960s, would seem to be particularly relevant. In *Other Criteria*, Leo Steinberg proposed thinking about the work of artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in terms of what he called a flatbed picture plane. According to Steinberg, the new conceptualization was necessary because these artists were no longer treating the pictorial surface as an analog for visual experience, like a window, but rather as a space for collecting things and performing operations. This new picture plane was more like a tabletop or a bulletin board, or—rather appropriately for my purposes—the flatbed printing press from which he took the term. Steinberg understood this new way of conceiving of the pictorial surface to be part of a shift from modernism to postmodernism, because it represented a move from nature to culture and toward letting the world back into the work.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in addition to drawing on the typographic conditions crucial to Gan's practice, these same postmodern qualities can also be applied Gan's use of montage, which collects the world's diverse cultural products on one surface.

---

<sup>11</sup> Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972): 82-91.

Of course, Steinberg was correct to insist on his concept's historical specificity, but where exactly does the gap between the historical periods begin to open up? One obvious crack lies in the fact that the parallel between flatbed press and the picture plane is a good deal more literal in Gan's case. The "pictorial surface" of his journals were not *like* a flatbed printing press, but rather the direct result of one. They were the real-life model to which Steinberg made analogy. Similarly, the greater embeddedness in real life of Gan's work is apparent in the fact that he took up the constructive logic of the flatbed press at a time when it was still an active and relevant technology, whereas Steinberg's artists began to use the model at precisely the moment when it was becoming obsolete.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we must start by accepting that the object of this analysis will be the form of the journal itself, and not an art-world transposition of its formal procedures. But Steinberg's analogy will prove useful in this endeavor too. In defining a montage-like assembly operation as an inherent property of the flatbed press and the newspapers that it produced, it retroactively enables us to think about Gan's investigation of montage as an investigation of the journal's inherent properties as a medium. After making allowances for Gan's understanding of an embedded medium,<sup>13</sup> his exploration of the journal as a form is not so far from a Greenbergian effort to stretch and analyze the potential and specificities of a medium like painting.

The argument for reading Gan's use of montage in his journals in terms of a parallel aesthetics, rather than as everyday life, draws some support from Gan's own

---

<sup>12</sup> Early experiments in phototypesetting began in the 1940s, becoming the dominant replacement for various hot-metal typesetting processes, such as linotype, by the early 1970s.

<sup>13</sup> See my discussion of *faktura* and tectonics in chapter 2.

positioning of montage in that way. In an article in the first number of *Kino-Fot* entitled “Printed Material Assembled [*smontirovannyi*] for Criticism by the Constructivist Rodchenko” (fig 114), Gan explicitly took up the topic of montage in print media by comparing it to its use by Western European artists.<sup>14</sup> Illustrated by three examples, the article’s text celebrated the use of montage on much the same terms that I articulated at the outset: montage was exciting as a modern and mechanically produced replacement for traditional media like pen, pencil, and paint. He also went on to propose that the constructivist use of the technique differed in key ways from cubist and dadaist efforts. According to Gan, Rodchenko was the first to use the technique to make a critical statement, rather than as an abstract aesthetic experiment.

Gan’s argument initially seems simplistic, not to mention chauvinistic considering the critical intelligence of both cubist collage and dada photomontage. Still, it rests on some valid differences that bear elaboration. For one, Rodchenko’s montages were both made from mass-produced sources *and* designed to be mass-produced in one. The way that they are rendered in stark black and white without a visible edge to their ground conforms less to the conventions of photographic reproductions of independently existing artworks than to those of illustrations produced specifically for print. Note that Gan’s illustration for the rural kiosk also lacked these edges (fig 95). Moreover, as the accompanying article states, Rodchenko’s montages were designed for a function specific to a topical periodical: they were intended to replace satirical political cartoons and

---

<sup>14</sup> The article is not signed by Gan, but was almost certainly written by him. [Aleksei Gan], “Pechatnyi material dlia kritiki smontirovannyi konstruktivistom Rodchenko,” *Kino-Fot* 1 (25–31 August 1922): 13.

caricatures produced for newspapers.<sup>15</sup> Like many political cartoons, Rodchenko's critical statements have not aged well—the émigré group *Smena vekh* (Exchange of Monuments), the Kamernyi Theater, and an angel-whore conception of femininity seem to be the main targets, but we no longer have access to whatever wit might have held them together at the time.<sup>16</sup> The parallel to caricature is still interesting on a purely formal level, insofar as it lends a function to the effect of denaturalization or estrangement that comes with taking things out of their context and cutting them up. With regard to dada, montage's estrangement effect has been interpreted as having aesthetic functions that run the gamut, from the destruction of the artwork's aura to the creation of a contemplative distance.<sup>17</sup> Gan instead assigned it the same function performed in a cartoon by the comic exaggeration of the peculiarities of a situation or physical features.

Rodchenko's critical operation of taking texts, advertisements, and illustrations out of their context and presenting them in another way had something in common with cubist collage. Rodchenko's cuts and reconfigurations emphasized the constructedness of the original newspaper's presentation in a way similar to cubism's denaturalization of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Rodchenko further emphasized this point in a text of 1923, where he cited *Kino-Fot 1* as a place where he had demonstrated "a new method of illustration... by means of the assembly [*montirovki*] of typographic and photographic material." Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Konstruktivisty," *LEF* 1 (March 1923): 252.

<sup>16</sup> *Smena vekh* was a group of well-educated specialists who had emigrated. They returned to the Soviet Union after the implementation of NEP with the hope that the situation would evolve into a full-fledged capitalist system. The Soviet government allowed them back because their technical expertise would help rebuild the economy.

<sup>17</sup> In the first case, by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 237. In the second, by Benjamin Buchloh in "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 43. I am indebted to Branden Joseph for this insight. See Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003): 124.

conventions of illusionistic painting, and both practices dwelled on the relativity of representation. Gan was correct to insist that the two practices performed this operation in different spheres, however. By working both from and for the pages of the mass press Rodchenko's montages participated in producing the same reality on which they drew without any change in register. Even when one takes into account the details of the topical content that Picasso inserted into his pictures, his operations and queries remain abstract and epistemological. Indeed, this is one reason why the intelligence of their critique remains accessible a century later.

Also important, and notable considering the article appeared in a journal dedicated to film and photography, is that the montages that Gan and Rodchenko chose for this demonstration have little to do with photography, nor with its indexical access to reality. All of the elements are either text or illustrations clipped from mass-produced print media. As if to emphasize the point, the one clipping that is most like a straight photograph, the woman in peasant dress in the lower central example, retains a border with a printed caption.<sup>18</sup> By using clippings from the press, these montages pull from a reality of sorts, but one whose objective power stems from its broad distribution and collective affirmation rather than its photomechanical transcription of nature. If their purchase on reality is related to photography, it is not by way of photography's indexicality, but rather its reproducibility.

---

<sup>18</sup> The younger woman in this example may have been at least partially Rodchenko's own drawing. In the original montage, there seems to be a partially erased shoe below the one that is there now, suggesting that her leg was initially longer. I have not had an opportunity to examine the original, but it is reproduced in Magdalena Dobrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998): 177.

This focus on reproducibility is important because it opens montage up to other technologies of mass reproduction, such as roof tiles, but also typographic printing. One example of this sort of montage appeared in the same issue of *Kino-Fot* in a section where Gan presented excerpts from foreign cinema publications. They are joined by very minimal editorial segments, which act something like the intertitles in silent film (fig 115). As in Rodchenko's print montages, the excerpting and re-presentation of the quotes denaturalizes and recontextualizes them, but no value is placed on the reproduction of the visual form of the original source. The texts have been reset, producing a montage of textual information. Even the most visual elements—the large punctuation marks and symbols that sit alongside the text—are produced typographically.

Gan used a combination of a montage of images and a montage of texts to assemble the journal as a whole. Before I go on to demonstrate how, I would like to point to another difference between Gan's use of montage and Steinberg's flatbed picture plane. When Steinberg's concept is employed to discuss artworks of the 1960s, one common point is that these works resemble a newspaper because they display an assortment of things that do not relate to each other. As John Cage wrote of Rauschenberg's work early on, "There is no more subject in a *combine* than there is in a page from a newspaper. Each thing that is there is a subject. It is a situation involving multiplicity. (It is no reflection on the weather that such-and-such a government sent a note to one another.)"<sup>19</sup> That these pictures allow disparate objects, categories, and discourses to coexist is what made the flatbed picture plane postmodern. When Gan placed multiple contemporary

---

<sup>19</sup> John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," in *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961): 101-102.

discourses side by side on the pages of his journals, he did so with more modernist aim. He assumed that they would not coexist, but rather that making them simultaneously present would function to critically unmask the local biases of each. The result would be the singular and common point of view of a “concrete human character,” or an objective subject. For all intents and purposes, this view would be the truth.

In addition to separating Gan’s montage from Steinberg’s postwar examples, this difference also productively differentiates between Gan’s journals and the ideal newspaper to which Steinberg and Cage refer. This becomes a more significant point when one considers the role of the newspaper in a study like Benedict Anderson’s, in which the rise of daily newspapers and bourgeois nations occur in tandem. For Anderson, the particular form of community represented by the nation was based not on personal relationships, as in aristocratic society, but on a sense of calendrical coincidence much like the arbitrary juxtapositions that Cage describes. The bourgeois subject did not know the other members of the nation personally, but he could imagine “their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity...as a solid community moving steadily down...history.”<sup>20</sup> The simultaneous anonymous character of the bourgeois subject also parallels the particular form of objectivity that the newspaper presented through its seemingly judgment-free presentation of unrelated stories. The objectivity that Gan intended to foster through his use of montage was another sort, and produced by the opposite means. He brought disparate points of view together assuming they would be

---

<sup>20</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991): 26. For an interesting discussion of similar issues, see Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

forced to get to know each other and hash out their differences.

One of the best examples of Gan's use of this mode of montage on a larger editorial scale is found in *Kino-Fot 3*, where he published an article by Lev Kuleshov on the subject of montage illustrated by two photomontages by Rodchenko (figs 116a and b). Kuleshov was considered a leading expert on cinematic montage at that time, having conducted extensive experiments into its relational construction of meaning. Of these experiments, the best known resulted in the so-called Kuleshov effect, in which three copies of the same shot of the actor Ivan Mozzhukin were spliced together with three different objects in order to show that the viewer would interpret Mozzhukin's expression differently depending on its companion. In another experiment, he focused on the limits of human powers of intellection to infer a continuous live experience from a discontinuous sequence of shots by cutting together shots of parts of different women's bodies in a way that presented a convincing illusion that it was all one woman.<sup>21</sup> Kuleshov's findings were foundational to the development of Soviet cinematic montage, but others, notably Dziga Vertov and his kinok group, redirected his insights for different ends. While Kuleshov and Vertov both took advantage of montage's potential to join images originating from vastly disparate spatial and temporal coordinates, their approaches to assembling them were directly opposed. Kuleshov used montage to construct a fictive version of normal visual experience, whereas Vertov exploited montage's potential to free perception from the normal limitations of time and space, putting together footage with disjunctive transitions in order to present a reality as it had

---

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Christina Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937* (London: Pindar, 2005): 381.

never been seen before.<sup>22</sup>

In their anthology of Soviet film documents, Richard Taylor and Ian Christie cited the coexistence of Kuleshov's and Vertov's opposing positions in the same journal as evidence of Gan's nonpartisanship or naïve inconsistency as an editor, concluding that, either way, *Kino-Fot* was an unusually open forum for debate.<sup>23</sup> Their latter conclusion may well be true, but this does not mean that Gan's presentation of the conflicting viewpoints was uncalculated or uncritical;<sup>24</sup> it was just that its criticality was staged for the reader through excerpt and juxtaposition rather than articulated synthetically and subjectively. Kuleshov's text was, in fact, an excerpt, taken from a longer book project on montage. The text addressed the common concern that cinematic montage was inherently tied to American commercial filmmakers and their melodramas and detective films, and thus to unhealthy and unsocialist themes. Kuleshov, whose first film had been a detective film, pointed out in the article that the technique could also be used to create films with socialist content.<sup>25</sup> By way of example, he went through the steps necessary to construct a (healthy socialist) scene of a couple viewing electrical girders on a walk through the countryside. The beauty of montage, he explained, was that this scene could be

---

<sup>22</sup> Dziga Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution" (1923), in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*: 54.

<sup>24</sup> *Kino-Fot*'s partisan character was not lost on contemporary critics, one of whom later characterized it as the first Soviet magazine to cover cinema from a specific editorial perspective. See Rokt., "Pechat' o kino," *Zrelichcha* 54 (26 September 1923): 14.

<sup>25</sup> At that time, the words *American*, *detective*, and *psychological melodrama* were automatically associated with the words *escapist*, *unhealthy*, and *unsocialist*. For example, see Boris Arvatov, "Agit-kino," *Kino-fot* 2 (8-15 September 1922): 2.

constructed by skillfully splicing together separate footage, even if the actors, electrical girders, and countryside had never been together in one place.

On its own, Kuleshov's text has the objective and authoritative tone of a user's manual. Its focus on replacing American with Soviet content makes the purpose of montage appear to be a given. This effect would only have been strengthened within the context of Kuleshov's book, where the text would have fit organically into a self-consistent set of findings. By taking this excerpt and recontextualizing it in a journal where Vertov's alternate use of montage was prominent, Gan revealed Kuleshov's assumptions to be at least particular, and perhaps a bit partisan. Gan further pushed this point by placing an example of a competing understanding of montage, in the form of the two Rodchenko photomontages, on the same page with the text. Their captions, "Psychology" (*Psikhologiya*) and "Detective" (*Detektiv*), refer to the commercial film genres that Kuleshov proposed could be replaced with socialist content, and their source material seems to come primarily from advertisements for these films. But rather than use the smooth, illusionistic montage techniques advocated on the same page by Kuleshov, Rodchenko presented a highly disjointed composition on each theme. Differences in scale, the combination of text and image, and the visibility of the white ground all disrupt the illusion of a window-like picture plane and, with it, the effect of heightened presentness that usually pervades these genres of film.

One can read Rodchenko's montages as explicitly stating a critical position on these genres. In "Psychology," the multiplicity of embracing couples can be read as deflating the once-in-a-lifetime sense of desperation that structures the mood of romantic

melodramas,<sup>26</sup> while text fragments reading “her deed,” “persuaded,” “sacred lie,” and “belated joy” seem to expose the seedy underside of romantic love,<sup>27</sup> or perhaps to reposition the genre’s sentiments in terms of formulaic and sensational tabloid journalism. Advertisements for hair pomade, face powder, and a clean new modern bathroom also make visible links between romantic and commercial desire, and their paradoxical suppression of the body. Many of the same points can be applied to “Detective.” The titles for two different films appear, *Seraia ten’* (Grey Shadow) and *Krasnoe kol’ tso* (Red Ring), and further allusion to serial repetition comes in his inclusion of the same “3” that is used on the cover of that number of the journal. The solid block anchoring the center of the composition is an image of factory machinery, perhaps calling attention to the parasitic relationship to productive labor represented by the endless activity of cops chasing robbers, and the wasteful use of the perfectly good automobile, airplane, and dirigible that circle around it.

Yet, the provisional nature of this reading comes through when one considers the many positive things that Gan wrote about American detective films and, to a lesser extent, melodramas, during this period. Indeed, in the same issue of *Kino-Fot* he extolled the detective genre’s departure from the psychological interiority of naturalistic theatrical acting, replacing it with the externally expressed, action-based stunts and gestures best

---

<sup>26</sup> Lodder has read the images as portraying the same couple, or perhaps a love triangle, and argued that the montage has an easily legible narrative (Lodder, “Promoting Constructivism”: 296). It is difficult to make out, but to me they appear to be different people, and while the gist of the narrative is easy to deduce by means of reference to the formulaic genre, I find it difficult to make out one clear narrative.

<sup>27</sup> This is Lodder’s reading. See Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art*: 296.

exemplified by Charlie Chaplin.<sup>28</sup> Even though these physical stunts were being performed by actors, their significance was also real—Chaplin really was falling, opening his eyes wide, tipping his bowler hat, etc. The audience received these movements on a gut physical level, without “psychologizing,” or projecting into the actor, as had been the key to interpretation of the shot of Ivan Mozzhukin. Unlike the civilized passive audiences in a theater, Gan pointed out, these lowbrow genres produced a rowdier crowd who responded physically to the show.<sup>29</sup> In this light, Rodchenko’s montages might be read as opening up the question of the ideological character of different montage techniques, rather than subject matter. In the end, there is no one prescriptive reading, but several possibilities contingent on the point of view brought to it.<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, it is important that Rodchenko’s formal operation on the source material in both montages does not involve defacement (such as Duchamp’s mustache on the *Mona Lisa*) or the reassembly of fragments to make a single point (as in John Heartfield’s montages). His method consists only of opening up the boundaries of each of his printed sources to each other, requiring that fragments of different films and

---

<sup>28</sup> See Aleksei Gan, “My voiuem,” *Kino-Fot* 3 (19–25 September 1922): 8; and Aleksei Gan, “Pervoe,” *Kino-Fot* 3 (19–25 September 1922): 1. Vertov also talks about Gan’s admiration for American detective films in a meeting of 1925. RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 35. The support for his interest in melodrama is less strong, but he was probably the author of a theatrical review in April in which the play is lauded for its use of acting techniques drawn from American melodrama films. A[leksei] G[an], “Ditia,” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 35 (17–23 April 1922): 19.

<sup>29</sup> A[leksei] G[an], “Chto sleduet delat’,” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 44 (13–18 June 1922): 8. See also Lev Kuleshov, “Americanism,” in *The Film Factory*: 72–73.

<sup>30</sup> My reading here revises that of my earlier essay, “From *Veshch’* to *SA*: Journal as Object,” in *Architecture in Print: Design and Debate in the Soviet Union, 1919–1935*, ed. Richard Anderson and Kristin Romberg (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Gallery, 2005): 15–24.

advertisements coexist within the same frame. Gan repeats the same operation within the frame of the journal's page by juxtaposing Kuleshov's text about illusionistic montage with Rodchenko's demonstration of disjunctive montage. The autonomy of Kuleshov's text is punctured by Rodchenko's counterexample in a way that does not alter or falsify Kuleshov's text but does change its tone. The instructions no longer have the authority and impartiality of the advice of an expert, but rather appear to be one among several competing understandings of montage.

This way of composing the content in *Kino-Fot* contrasts sharply with something like Steinberg's or Anderson's ideal newspaper, as well as with the composition of a journal like Lissitzky's and Ehrenburg's *Object*. In all of those cases, the selection and positioning of the contributions of various authors and artists was primarily a matter of vetting and collection. They were then conveyed as autonomous units to the reader. Gan designed *Kino-Fot* to function instead like the rural kiosk. The enclosing device of the page does not isolate the works, but rather encourages the viewer to see them in light of one another. In this way, his presentation also rests on a certain notion of objectivity. It is important that this mode of objectivity was not technologically determined, but a choice on Gan's part. He would have been well aware that facts could say a variety of things for themselves depending on how they were organized. He had himself been the victim of misrepresentation in the press,<sup>31</sup> and he was living with a woman whose nine-to-five job was recutting foreign or prerevolutionary films so that they would signify appropriately

---

<sup>31</sup> Most notably, when the anarchist movement was vilified in 1918. See my discussion in chapters 1 and 3.

for Soviet audiences.<sup>32</sup> My point here is much the same as what Gan himself claimed in his article on Rodchenko's print montages: the medium that Gan terms "montage for critique" had both technological and ideological components. It relied on technologies of reproduction and distribution, but also on Gan's belief that people would see the truth and that the truth would set them free.

### **THE LEFT FRONT, SA, AND THE POLITICS OF DERISION**

The examples of montage discussed thus far contain a seed of an enlightenment notion of coming to consciousness through the unmasking of local bias and convention. They can be understood as critical in the sense that they attempted to bring the truth to light through juxtaposition. As the twenties progressed, however, the critical nature of the montage in Gan's journals took a turn toward the more overtly persuasive and polemical, so that procedures of excerpting and juxtaposition were being used to unmask untruth in defamatory and explicitly partisan ways that simultaneously produced untruth. If Gan's hope for the demonstration of everyday life was that it would cultivate a unified transsubjective point of view, this polemical mode of montage—what I will call derisive montage—was the result of competition to define and dominate it. It reflected the polarized politics that developed among artistic groups in the mid twenties. A large portion of this section will be devoted to looking at the organizational dynamics at work

---

<sup>32</sup> As I understand it, Shub's job may have entailed as little as splicing in new Russian-language intertitles, or much more creative reconstruction to give the film a more socialist content. One of the first films on which she worked was the American detective film *Seraia ten'*, whose title appears in Rodchenko's montage. See Esfir' Shub, *Krupnym planom* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1959): 67.

in the formation of those groups. This is not a set of work or behaviors to be celebrated, but it is foundational to understanding the period, as well as necessary background for the third mode of montage that I will present, the “productivist mode” that Gan introduced in 1927.

Before backtracking to look at the politics that led to the use of this sort of derisive montage, it will be helpful to get an idea of what “this sort” is. As Richard Anderson has shown in his article on early Soviet architectural groups, one particularly good example appeared in the first issue of *SA* (fig 117), where they reproduced a clipping from *Izvestiia* announcing and illustrating the winning design from the competition for the Central Telegraph Building, an eclectically styled structure with an ornate cornice by Ivan Rerberg.<sup>33</sup> The viewer’s interpretation of this fragment of *Izvestiia* is modulated in the journal’s re-presentation much more prescriptively than in the examples from *Kino-Fot*. It is not only excerpted and recontextualized, but also defaced. The article is circled, which, while harmless enough, functions to mark the announcement as notable in some way, no longer part of the background of objective information relayed by the newspaper. The impression of abnormality is strengthened by the question mark penciled in on top of the building. It is then transformed into a wholeheartedly mocking tone by the exclamation point on the right and the caption below, which prints “On the coming beautification of Moscow” in an ornamental display face that appears

---

<sup>33</sup> Richard Anderson, “The Journal States its Aims: Partisanship and the Party Line in the Soviet Architectural Press,” in *Architecture in Print: Design and Debate in the Soviet Union, 1919-1935*, ed. Richard Anderson and Kristin Romberg (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Gallery, 2005): 25-36.

particularly ridiculous within the context of *SA*'s modernist design. The tone approaches snide.

This derisive form of montage reached its apogee, as Anderson points out, in the second number of 1928 in a multi-page presentation composed by Ivan Leonidov called "The Architectural *Kunstkamera*."<sup>34</sup> On its first page (fig 118), we again see an image of Rerberg's Telegraph Building, reproduced above the heading "How not to build" (*Kak ne nado stroit*). An *x* crudely drawn over the image emphasizes the heading's negation, while an even more crudely fashioned arrow personalizes the attack by pointing to a placard with the architect's name. While this derisive mode of montage is similar to that explored above in the sense that it critically recontextualizes seemingly objective news presentations, it also represents a marked departure from *Kino-Fot*'s open-ended juxtapositions. Particularly in the case of Leonidov's "*Kunstkamera*," there is something violent and a little unhinged about the unruled pencil marking as it becomes jagged in the top right, and the imprecisely cut edges and clipped point of the black paper arrow. These idiosyncrasies depart from the transpersonal grid-based constructivist graphic style discussed earlier by reinserting a sense of an individual subjectivity, with a particular will, point of view, and hand. That individual subject seems frustrated by the fact that no one else sees what he sees. All he can do is crudely gesture and point.

This difference in voice reflected an evolution in the politics of group formation among Moscow's artistic groups between 1922 and 1928, and here my argument will take a turn toward historical narrative in an effort to understand the political dynamics

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Leonidov was a young architect associated with OSA. He also worked on the design of *SA* in the winter of 1927-1928. For more, see Andrei Gozak, *Ivan Leonidov* (Moscow: Zhiraf, 2002).

involved. In general terms, I will argue that the productivist shift that I described in chapter 4, in which it became necessary for artists to argue for their relevance in a context of decreased or more qualified state funding and capitalist competition, led to the entrenchment of positions and the perception that ideological dominance was a key component of survival. In order to fulfill the offensive and defensive demands of such a situation, groups that had previously associated in a relatively fluid way banded together and hardened into embattled *kruzhoks*, or tightly knit and clannishly loyal circles based less on common beliefs than, as Gan put it, who comes to drink tea with you.<sup>35</sup> If Gan sought objective subjects, these groups behaved instead as collective subjects.

Gan's own behavior and experience provide a good example of the reactive processes by which this political atmosphere took shape. We have already seen the beginnings of it in chapter 3, where the threat posed by international constructivism, largely in the form of Ehrenburg and Lissitzky's *Object*, caused Gan to more explicitly define his understanding of constructivism and to operate polemically in defense of it in the press. That same summer, in July and August 1922, he and a fellow mass-actionist Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi spearheaded an effort to organize a stronger "left front of the arts" by calling a conference of all groups claiming to be leftist. The purpose seemed to be to purify the ranks by developing precise criteria for qualification and then cutting the wheat from the chafe.<sup>36</sup> Considering Lenin's idea about the power of the newspaper to

---

<sup>35</sup> RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 20ob.

<sup>36</sup> Gan and Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi had organized a "mass action initiative group" by July and began planning the conference for September. The conference would include UNOVIS, various constructivist groups, the Moscow Proletkul't, INKhUK, VKhUTEMAS, Obmokhu, the Cinema Technical School, and several other groups. See

strengthen organization among its producers as much as its consumers, it makes sense that this organizational initiative corresponded to Gan's founding of *Kino-Fot* and subsequent close association with Rodchenko, Stepanova, Shub, and Vertov.

To the best of my knowledge, Gan's leftist conference never convened,<sup>37</sup> and an open letter to Gan asking him to stop airing the art world's dirty laundry in public (or, in the words of the letter, "in the presence of NEPmen") suggests that there may have been substantial resistance to his vetting process.<sup>38</sup> By December, Gan had become alienated from the whole idea, writing about the "left front" exclusively in quotation marks. The "left front," he wrote, had become "a mythology," a group of extreme individualists who were fighting amongst themselves for the wrong things. He saw their militant stance as the result of an embattled position, rather than true revolutionary verve and resolve. His analysis was that, "in waging war on one school or another,...they had in fact...suffered long periods of dire need. This convinced them that they were really fighting, that they were revolutionaries, that they were 'left,' that they were at the front, and that his front was called the 'left front'." In reality, however, this self-styled left front was only fighting for the sake of an "endless series of formal experiments" and had nothing to do

---

"K ob"edineniiu levykh gruppirovok," *Ermitazh* 10 (18-24 July 1922): 3; V. Zhemchuzhnyi, "Konferentsiia 'levykh'," *Ermitazh* 12 (1-7 August 1922): 3; Vit. Zhemchuzhnyi, "Konferentsiia 'levykh.' Mysli po povodu," *Ermitazh* 14 (15-20 August 1922): 3; and Aleksei Gan, "K nashei konferentsii," *Ermitazh* 15 (22-28 Aug 1922). 3.

<sup>37</sup> An article by Gan of late August, which suggests that there were problems with participation, is the last reference to it in the press that I have seen. Gan, "K nashei konferentsii": 3.

<sup>38</sup> "Druz'iam I vragam," *Teatral'naiia Moskva* 53 (25-30 August 1922): 8-9.

with the real left project—his left project—of consciously developing a new art for a new way of life.<sup>39</sup>

In this article, Gan suggested that the left front's group identity stemmed from an artificial origin: they mistook their own misfortune as a unified and principled cause. At the same time, Gan's dismissive tone betrays that he too was undergoing a similar reactive response, one perhaps provoked by the fact that the group of INKhUK productivists that would become known as Lef—or the Left Front of the Arts—were themselves just getting organized without him. Gan wrote the article in mid December, and Lef began petitioning for their own journal a month later, in mid January, just as *Kino-Fot*'s final issue came out.<sup>40</sup> What is important about this story is the dynamic of definition through reaction, or negation. The threat posed by *Object* caused Gan to plan a conference whose purpose was, in a sense, to territorialize constructivism by defining edges that excluded international art. The future members of Lef reacted by forming their own organization. In the end, Gan ended up excluded from the Left Front of the Arts whose formation he had helped to initiate and whose basic ideology he really should have been able to share. Indeed, the principles expressed by Lef and Gan are often so similar that many have assumed that he was a member.<sup>41</sup> In actual fact the animosity was so high

---

<sup>39</sup> Aleksei Gan, "'The Left Front' and Cinema," in *The Film Factory*: 75-77.

<sup>40</sup> Halina Stephan, "*Lef*" and the Left Front of the Arts (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1981): 24.

<sup>41</sup> Gan was also often associated with the group in texts of the period (for example, in Viktor Pertsov's history, *Reviziia levogo fronta v sovremennom russkom iskusstve* [Moscow: Vserossiskii Proletkul't, 1925]: 55), but he was not a part of it in the same way that Rodchenko and Stepanova were. More evidence of his antagonism toward Lef can be found in Aleksei Gan, "Konstruktivizm. Otvet lefu," *Zrelishcha* 55 (29 September-7 October 1923): 12-13.

that when Rodchenko and Stepanova joined Lef, it meant the demise of their working relationship with Gan for over a year. Significantly, Rodchenko pioneered the use of the negating, hand-penciled *x* on the cover of the second issue of *Lef* (fig 119).

The movement for constructivism in architecture that led to the founding of OSA, SA, and, with them, the examples of derisive montage with which I began, provides a further demonstration of how the politics of group formation related to the production of a dominant point of view. With regard to built form, architectural constructivism's beginnings are generally traced to the Vesnin brothers' project for the Palace of Labor of 1922-1923, but the political form of the movement, which is what I am interested in here, began with the INKhUK constructivists' pedagogical work at VKhUTEMAS. Beginning in 1920, all VKhUTEMAS students took the "basic course" that was developed and taught by Liubov' Popova, Anton Lavinskii, Rodchenko, and Aleksandr Vesnin (the youngest of the Vesnin brothers),<sup>42</sup> before breaking off into separate subfields.<sup>43</sup> As the instructors' constructivist and then productivist ideas crystallized during the school years 1920-1921 and 1921-1922, they passed on these ideas to their students, so that the students entering VKhUTEMAS's architecture studios in the fall of 1922 were the first to have been formed in the constructivist mold. This mold clashed substantially with the

---

<sup>42</sup> All three Vesnin brothers—Leonid, Viktor, and Aleksandr—had been trained architects, but Aleksandr chose to practice as more of an artist than an architect immediately following the October Revolution. He directed a painting studio with Liubov' Popova at VKhUTEMAS and participated in INKhUK discussions. His return to architecture late in 1922 can be considered part of the general effort by INKhUK constructivists to enter production. See S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Aleksandr Vesnin i Konstruktivizm. Zhivopis', teatr, arkhitektura, risunok, knizhnaia grafika, oformlenie prazdnikov* (Moscow: Arkhitektura, 2007): 18.

<sup>43</sup> For more on the basic course, see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*: 123-129.

outlook of the dominant modernist studio at VKhUTEMAS at that time, led by Nikolai Ladovskii.<sup>44</sup> Although Ladovskii was also interested in new modern forms and new materials, his approach to the creation of form, which he called rationalism, emphasized the psychological effects of form rather than the purposive use of materials.<sup>45</sup> Constructivist-minded students entering his studio immediately took up an oppositional offensive position, criticizing his approach as a “metaphysical” and “hopeless dead end.” It was, they claimed, “tragic for students to study his nonsense.”<sup>46</sup>

The complaints of these students were the tip of an iceberg that quickly solidified as the school year progressed. It was likely as a reaction to the encroaching dominance of the constructivist position that Ladovskii founded the Association of New Architects (ASNOVA) in the summer of 1923. Only a few months previously, in March, the INKhUK productivists had created a high-profile rallying point when the first issue of *Lef* came out. With covers designed by Rodchenko and content edited by Brik and the epically charismatic Mayakovsky, the journal was immensely popular among students. At a public debate about the magazine in July of 1923, a crowd of six hundred students reportedly waited to get into a small hall at the Moscow conservatory, and the magazine’s

---

<sup>44</sup> At that time, studios in the architecture department at VKhUTEMAS included Ivan Zholtovsky’s, Konstanin Melnikov’s, and Ladovskii’s.

<sup>45</sup> Ladovskii began developing his approach as early as 1919-1920, when similar ideas were being explored by future constructivists like Rodchenko. Ladovskii held to his approach throughout the twenties, eventually establishing a “psychological-analytical laboratory” at VKhUTEMAS in November 1926 in order to explore the “laws of perception and the ways in which they act.” *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 7. For more on this laboratory, see S. O. Khan-Magomedov, “Psikhotekhnicheskaia laboratoriiia VKhUTEINA,” *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika* 1 (1978): 16-22.

<sup>46</sup> Vkhutemaska, “Levaia metafizika,” *Lef* 4 (August-December 1924): 219. [метафизика... безнадежном тупике... страшно за студентов, занимающихся этой ерундой.]

opponents accused it of being too “sexy” for proletarian culture.<sup>47</sup> In a more strictly architectural arena, Moisei Ginzburg—the architect and architectural historian who would later join Vesnin in founding OSA and SA<sup>48</sup>—became active in advocating for a constructivist position in architecture in May, delivering a lecture in which he outlined the theses of his book *Style and Epoch*.<sup>49</sup> He also made his own effort to organize architects within the Moscow Architectural Society (MAO) that summer, editing two issues of the Society’s short-lived journal *Arkhitktura* (Architecture, 1923, fig 120), whose cover was designed by Vesnin.<sup>50</sup>

When the semester began in the fall, enough constructivist sentiment had amassed in the architecture department at VKhUTEMAS to spark a small revolt.<sup>51</sup> By February, a group of students began meeting within INKhUK and using *Lef* as a platform for their

---

<sup>47</sup> S., “LEF i marksizm,” *Lef* no. 4 (August-December 1923): 213-216.

<sup>48</sup> The son of an architect, Ginzburg had studied art and architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the Accademia di Belli Arti in Milan before training in architectural engineering in Riga during World War I. He moved to Moscow in 1921, thus missing the immediate post-Revolution period.

<sup>49</sup> The book is generally treated as the major text of Russian architectural constructivism. According to his preface to *Style and Epoch*, Ginzburg’s lecture took place on 18 May 1923. The claim seems targeted to prove that his ideas were not derivative of those Le Corbusier presented in *Vers une architecture*, published in 1923, although Le Corbusier’s book was compiled from articles that had appeared since 1920 in *L’esprit nouveau*, some copies of which were available in Moscow in 1922, when a review of the magazine was published. See Anatole Senkevitch, “Moisei Ginzburg and the Emergence of a Constructivist Theory of Architecture,” introduction to *Style and Epoch* by Moisei Ginzburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982): 26.

<sup>50</sup> Vesnin considered graphic design as seriously as he did architecture in 1923, also designing covers for the journal *Professional’noe dvizhenie* (Professional Movement) and for Ginzburg’s book, *Style and Epoch*.

<sup>51</sup> S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm. Kontseptsiiia formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 2003): 468.

complaints.<sup>52</sup> Familiar with the Vesnins' constructivist project for the Palace of Labor of the previous winter, these students saw their former instructor from the basic course as an alternative and lobbied for a new architecture curriculum at VKhUTEMAS taught by Vesnin.<sup>53</sup> While this particular campaign was not successful, it led to Vesnin opening a studio in the fall of 1924 at the institution where Ginzburg taught architectural history, the Moscow Institute of Civil Engineering (MIGI), which for obscure administrative reasons, was transferred by the end of the year to the institution where his brothers taught, the Moscow Higher Technical School (*Moskovskoe vysshoe tekhnicheskoe uchilishche*, MVTU). When OSA formed at the end of 1925, students from all three of the Vesnin brothers' studios were its strongest young members.<sup>54</sup> Considering the INKhUK constructivists' initial aversion to teaching, it is ironic that their production of this broad movement of students was probably their most fruitful productivist endeavor.

In 1924, the Vesnins followed on the Palace of Labor with projects for the Leningrad *Pravda* building, an airplane hanger, and the Arcos building. The last of these won its design competition in March, lending the constructivist tendency legitimacy in architectural circles beyond the VKhUTEMAS, MIGI, and MVTU students. Many entries in the important competitions of 1925—for the Moscow Telegraph building and

---

<sup>52</sup> This may have been sparked by another *Style and Epoch*-related lecture by Ginzburg, delivered on 8 February 1924. Ginzburg, *Style and Epoch*: 7. Ginzburg also began promoting the Vesnins in his writing around this time. See Moisei Ginzburg, "V poiskakh sovremennoi arkhitektury," *Khudozhnik i zritel'* 1 (January 1924): 57-60.

<sup>53</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 469.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*: 470-474.

the Textile Building—imitated the Vesnins' style,<sup>55</sup> leading to the impression that constructivism had become the dominant tendency in architecture. This impression was further supported by the success of the Soviet pavilion at the Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels in spring of 1925. Although the pavilion was designed by Konstantin Melnikov, who was not a constructivist in the INKhUK sense, it had a constructivist look and received an enormous amount of attention as such in the foreign press. Rodchenko's constructivist worker's club was installed at the same exhibition and also elicited positive reviews.<sup>56</sup> This positive publicity likely prompted the powers that were—in this case, the director of the Art Department of Glavnauka, Pavel Novitskii—to approach Ginzburg later that year with the idea of publishing a journal about modern Soviet architecture.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, the idea to produce the journal *SA* actually came *before*, and served as the impetus to, the official organization of OSA. Once again, it was the founding of a journal that finally served to crystallize a movement that had been years in the making. This can be understood in terms of a point that I made in chapter 4: that a print organ was the means of production for the communist city. In endowing Ginzburg with such a means, Novitskii's offer shifted balances of power, which in turn redrew alliances. Ginzburg's initial counterproposal to Novitskii was that the new journal be the organ of the group of architects that had formed around his friend Vesnin, perhaps also including the INKhUK productivists, whose journal *Lef* had lost funding in January. The concept would be to

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*: 463-465.

<sup>56</sup> For more on Rodchenko's club and trip to Paris, see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*: 198-240.

<sup>57</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 480.

unite architects, productivists, and other specialists on the basis of their constructivist ideological orientation, rather than attempting a union on the basis of discipline, as he had tried to do in MAO.<sup>58</sup> Reportedly, the Lefists were enthusiastic, but their efforts—in particular, Brik’s—to dominate the entire venture alienated Ginzburg and the architects, who eventually opted to retain a stricter focus on architecture.<sup>59</sup> It is not clear whether Brik and the other *Lef* editors were deliberately excluded or simply uninterested in a secondary role, but Rodchenko ended up being the only one from *Lef* to join the editorial board of the new magazine. Gan, who had been acquainted with the Vesnins from 1921-22 and Ginzburg from at least 1924,<sup>60</sup> became the other representative of extra-architectural constructivism, as well as the journal’s designer from 1926 through 1928.<sup>61</sup> The journal brought the growing movement for constructivism in architecture to an entirely new level. They eventually expanded branches of OSA to cities throughout the

---

<sup>58</sup> Their first statement to Mossovet proposed including “people who are not professional architects, but *closely connected to building production and united by a common ideology* (such as constructors, inventors of building materials, production specialists, mechanics, chemists, technologists, and workers in the field of factory construction).” V. Khazanova, *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury 1926-1932. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: Nauka, 1970): 67.

<sup>59</sup> This is Khan-Magomedov’s account. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 480.

<sup>60</sup> Evidence of his acquaintance with Viktor Vesnin from 1921-1922 is preserved in RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 317, l. 1. Ginzburg published Gan’s kiosks in *Style and Epoch* and Gan hosted a lecture by Ginzburg on constructivism in architecture in April 1924. “Konstruktivisty,” *Zrelishcha* 77 (11-16 March 1924): 10. Gan later claimed that Vesnin credited him (Gan) with converting him to a constructivist approach. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 106, l. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Ivan Leonidov designed one number in 1928, probably because Gan was in the hospital at the time.

Soviet Union, including Leningrad, Sverdlovsk, Kazan, Kharkov, Tomsk, Novosibirsk, Kiev, and Baku.<sup>62</sup>

It has been suggested that the longevity and geographically broad circulation of *SA* was evidence of constructivism's dominance among the various tendencies in Soviet architecture.<sup>63</sup> Yet, as I begin to return to the issue of montage, I would like to point out that this dominance was not, or at least was not merely, the result of their views being correct. It was something that they had worked hard to produce, and by particular methods. Architectural constructivism became a broad-based movement not only by the Vesnins compellingly implementing constructivist ideas in architectural projects like the Palace of Labor, but also by persuasively implementing the same thinking in the VKhUTEMAS curriculum, public debate, and the press. At the end of their first year in print, *SA*'s editors acknowledged these two aspects of their mission, enumerating in their list of the year's accomplishments both "outlining a method" and "establishing connections."<sup>64</sup>

Within the atmosphere of intense polemics and competition among artistic tendencies that characterized the mid twenties, the approach that OSA took to purveying their ideas was structured by an interesting combination of openness to outsiders and intolerance of difference. In this sense, it was not the same formation as the familial relationships of the *kruzhok*. OSA's version of kinship involved "rallying" adherents

---

<sup>62</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 480.

<sup>63</sup> Senkevitch, "Moisei Ginzburg and the Emergence of a Constructivist Theory."

<sup>64</sup> *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 5-6: inside back cover.

around “a closely knit and singular ideology.”<sup>65</sup> As they put it in the editorial statement in the first issue of *SA*,

The magazine *Contemporary Architecture* represents, for the most part, the work of the members of the Union of Contemporary Architects (OSA), who are connected by common architectural views and aspirations.

Nevertheless, *Contemporary Architecture* has no intention of being an isolated inner circle. Just the opposite, the editors strive in every way to systematically reflect [*otrazhat*'] all of the exciting questions of our architectural modernity.

*Contemporary Architecture* opens its pages equally and broadly to all likeminded thinkers [*edinomyshlennikam*] scattered not only within the USSR's borders, but also throughout the world.<sup>66</sup>

The editorial statement's reference to an inner circle takes aim at the family ties and exclusive nature of a *kruzhok*-based organization. They strove instead for something more open and universal: “to defend the rights of the new man” was one way that they formulated it in the same issue.<sup>67</sup> The pages of *SA* were open equally and broadly to these new men, who were defined and united by their ability to see the same exciting questions of architectural modernity that *SA*'s editors objectively “reflected.” In this sense, they echoed the logic of Gan's article of 1922 on the communist city in chapter 4, in which the

---

<sup>65</sup> The quotation is from OSA's appeal to Glavnauka of 15 April 1926. It explicitly contrasts OSA's unified ideology to MAO's heterogeneity. Published in Khazanova, *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury*: 69. [сплочение...тесно спаянных единой идеологией]

<sup>66</sup> *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 1: inside front cover. [Журнал *Современная архитектура* является, по преимуществу, результатом работ членов Объединения Современных Архитекторов (ОСА), связанных общими архитектурными взглядами и устремлениями. / Тем не менее *Современная Архитектура* не намеревается замкнуться в своем внутреннем кругу. Наоборот, редакция всячески стремится систематически отражать все волнующие вопросы нашей архитектурой современности. / И точно так же *Современная Архитектура* широко открывает свои страницы всем своим единомышленникам, рассеянными не только в пределах СССР, но и всего мира.]

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* [*Современная архитектура* стремится всячески отстаивать право нового человека]

constructivists were able to see what the NEPmen could not. This model of group formation, while an alternative to the *kruzhok*, was no less exclusive. It substituted the binding of historical roots with that of “likeminded thinking.” As the examples of derisive mode of montage with which I started demonstrate, one issue on which OSA’s members were likeminded was that a lot of other points of view were invalid.

The magazine’s unsympathetic and mocking presentations functioned to normalize the group’s position, defining it as the dominant from which all other tendencies diverged. The vehemence of its attacks on those who were not likeminded has something in common with theorizations of fascism such as Alice Kaplan’s or Klaus Theweleit’s, which both turn to psychological theories of ego formation in order to explain fascist violence as a mass psychosis.<sup>68</sup> For example, Theweleit concludes that the fascist male reacted negatively and violently toward his social others because he had defined himself so exclusively by way of external agencies, such as school and the military, that he experienced any threat to the dominance of those agencies as the threat of his own dissolution.<sup>69</sup>

SA’s mode of negatively defining their own likemindedness was not identical to the phenomenon Theweleit describes, but it can be similarly understood as a reactive device for warding off the threat of dissolution. Constructivism’s aesthetic of embeddedness and its transpersonal style involved defining form through the balance of

---

<sup>68</sup> Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>69</sup> In addition to Theweleit, see Hal Foster’s summary in Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993): 114-122.

all relevant contemporary forces. It was structured around unbounded open networks to such an extent that even its delimiting structures, I have argued, doubled as ways of connecting.<sup>70</sup> Having opened its forms, including the pages of its journal, in this way—“equally and broadly”—the category of likemindedness was a way of shoring up the group’s borders within the highly competitive environment of NEP, in which it was necessary to operate defensively and offensively in relation to competing trends.<sup>71</sup> Yet, if, as Hal Foster has argued, the psychological formation that Theweleit describes resulted in an aesthetic of wholeness and an aversion to anything disfigured—Foster cites the Fascist predilection for sculpture such as Arno Breker’s *Readiness* (1939, fig 121) and its definition of anything disjunctive or disfigured as degenerate<sup>72</sup>—the aesthetics would seem to be reversed in *SA*’s use of derisive montage, where neo-classical wholeness was ridiculed by way of fragmentation and disfigurement.

The parallel aligns better if we change registers and compare *SA*’s presentations of buildings with something like the Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937 (fig 122).<sup>73</sup> The show infamously exhibited modernist works with the intention of vilifying them as un-German (or Jewish-Bolshevik). They hung the works in an unflattering way and accompanied them with negative wall texts, which often stated the shockingly high price

---

<sup>70</sup> I refer to my discussion of the rural kiosk in chapter 4.

<sup>71</sup> For more on the competitive politics of architectural groups from 1928 onwards, in addition to Anderson, see Danilo Udovicki-Selb, “Between Modernism and Socialist Realism: Soviet Architectural Culture under Stalin’s Revolution from Above, 1928-1938,” *JSAH* 68: 4 (2010): 466-495.

<sup>72</sup> Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*: 114-122.

<sup>73</sup> This show can be productively compared to exhibitions held in Russia in the early thirties. See Masha Chlenova’s forthcoming dissertation, “On Display: Transformations of the Avant-Garde in Soviet Public Culture, 1928-1933” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia, 2010).

a museum had paid to acquire the work.<sup>74</sup> This last strategy finds an exact match in Leonidov's "Architectural *Kunstkamera*" (fig 123), where he reprinted an article illustrating Ivan Zholtovskii's neo-Renaissance Gosbank building with a crudely drawn arrow pointing out the enormous sum—four million rubles—that it had cost to build. As Anderson explains, Leonidov's point was not only unkindly stated but also gave a false impression, cropping out the part of the original article that explained how the building's excessive cost had nothing to do with its style, but rather with the complex foundation work required to negotiate a problematic site.<sup>75</sup> Leonidov used montage's operations of excerpting, cropping, and juxtaposition not to unmask falsity but to produce it.

If Gan's effort to retain some level of objectivity in his montages in *Kino-Fot* was informed by a faith in humanity's faculty for rational thinking, Leonidov's presentation served a reified and fetishized version of that ideological position. Leonidov's aim was to make a rational-appearing argument that Zholtovskii's revival style was irrationally expensive. He disregarded the facts—or in Gan's words, let the methodology transgress—in order to define the building as un-rational, un-constructivist, and un-embedded in contemporary culture, in much the same way that the Degenerate Art Exhibition attempted to present modernist abstraction as un-German. In this light, my earlier reiteration of the common assumption that Zholtovskii's aesthetics came down on the side of classicism and wholeness while constructivism was allied with the fragmented should be reevaluated. The more accurate parallel may be the reverse: something like

---

<sup>74</sup> See Stephanie Barron, ed., *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991).

<sup>75</sup> The site was formerly a river. Anderson, "The Journal States its Aims": 32-33.

dada montage was to fascism as architectural eclecticism was to constructivism. Constructivism may not have mimetically reproduced classical forms, but it conceived of itself as the style organic to a unified contemporary Soviet culture in much the same way that art historians such as Winkelman understood the style of the Greeks. The parallel requires a stylistic realignment, or inversion, insofar as Nazi art was understood as organic to the traditionally German while constructivism aimed at embeddedness in the radically contemporary. Yet they functionally mirror each other, each defending a self-defined dominant against forms indigenous to some outside culture, whether defined nationalistically, racially, or temporally.

When OSA held its own exhibition of international contemporary architecture in the summer of 1927, its technologies of exclusion were not derision, but selective inclusion. Like the journal *SA*, the exhibition was an assignment given to the group by Novitskii at Glavnauka, and Gan did much of the organizational work, sending out the notices of acceptance to the various participants and designing the exhibition's poster and other printed materials (fig 124).<sup>76</sup> Note that in the poster he used a neat and more rationally employed version of the cut and paste arrows that Leonidov used later in his *Kunstkamera*. Novitskii's charge was to celebrate the achievements of the first ten years of the October Revolution, but OSA focused exclusively on modern trends in architecture. The acceptance letter that Gan sent to Leonidov justified his Lenin Institute project's inclusion in the exhibition in these terms: the project "clearly attests to the new orientation in architecture," it was "fulfilled with a great...understanding of modernity,"

---

<sup>76</sup> He sent out at least one such notice, to Leonidov, which is preserved as RGALI f. 681, op. 1, d. 1436, l. 5.

and foreign visitors and the press had been particularly interested in the project.<sup>77</sup> Of the variety of Soviet architectural groups practicing at that moment, OSA included only themselves and ASNOVA. The latter refused to participate, so that in the end the exhibition consisted of the work of OSA members, student work from VKhUTEMAS, MTVU, and other regional institutes, and entries from France, Germany, Holland, Poland, Chekoslovakia, Belgium, and Switzerland.<sup>78</sup> Novitskii, presumably a new man, defended the selection in his essay in the catalogue, writing that it could be considered an objective reflection: “one need not understand modernity simply chronologically...Not all artistic tendencies that currently exist can be called modern.”<sup>79</sup> Selective inclusion was another way of achieving the cohesion of the communist city, by letting everything else die away.

### **CERTIFICATE FOR KAZIMIR MALEVICH: A PRODUCTIVIST APPROACH TO CRITICISM**

In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to consider a third mode of montage, one that represents an alternative approach to wholeness and difference. Dubbing it “a productivist approach to criticism,” Gan introduced the idea in the fall of 1927 in an article published in *SA* entitled “Certificate for Kazimir Malevich” (*Spravka o Kazimire*

---

<sup>77</sup> RGALI f. 681, op. 1, d. 1436, l. 5. [ясно свидетельствует о новой архитектурной установке, выполненной с большой изобретательностью и пониманием современности.]

<sup>78</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 486.

<sup>79</sup> Pavel Novitskii, *Pervoi vystavki sovremennoi arkhitektury RSFSR* (Moscow: 1927).

*Maleviche*, fig 125).<sup>80</sup> The article is illustrated with two of Malevich's spatial architectons, forms enough out of their element in *SA* to create a disjunctive juxtaposition akin to Rodchenko's photomontages within Kuleshov's text in *Kino-Fot*. The critical approach that Gan delineates in the article also holds onto the aim of producing a common truth. Yet this approach also differs markedly from the two modes of montage already explored with regard to its valuation of difference. Employing a self-consciously constructive relationship to conflicting points of view, it treats Malevich's otherness as raw material in a productivist construction of synthetic reality.

Gan's proposal for a productivist approach to criticism, I will argue, was an attempt to exit the atmosphere of animosity and entrenched groups by developing a methodology of relation more in keeping with his own preferences and ideals. Certainly Gan took and dished out more than his share of insults in the press and in public debates during these years, developing a reputation for ideological militancy. Yet Gan's work also manifested a preference for loose and free association—this was one place where his anarchist roots cropped up. On a basic personal level, the atmosphere of entrenchment was clearly not good for Gan. His closest collegial relationships went through a series of dramatic ups and downs in the mid twenties, beginning with his falling out with Rodchenko and Stepanova in 1923. In the fall of 1924, he had major public breakup with Vertov, who had been his other closest colleague.<sup>81</sup> In December of 1923, Gan organized the new First Working Group of Constructivists out of students from the educational

---

<sup>80</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche," *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1927, no. 3: 104-106. *SA*'s issues were not dated, but 1927, no. 3 had to have come out after August 4.

<sup>81</sup> See my discussion in chapter 6.

subgroup, and this group seems to have functioned with equal measures of harmony and obscurity. But the easy camaraderie in which constructivism had coalesced was strained. He had clearly collected a hefty pile of chips on his shoulder by May of 1924, when he published a list accusing just about everyone else of being a “false constructivist,” including “the ‘constructivist-poets,’ the ‘constructivists from the Kamernyi Theater,’ the ‘constructivists from the Meierkhold Theater,’ the ‘constructivists from LEF,’ the ‘constructivists from TsIT,’ and others.”<sup>82</sup> Arguably encompassing all of the members of the original First Working Group and then some,<sup>83</sup> Gan’s list is an extremely simplistic example of the same derisive technique that I described above: he defined everyone other than himself as un-constructivist. I described this technique above as a means of group formation, but for Gan it often resulted in isolation.

This militancy and isolation contrasted sharply to the stance he had assumed during his heyday. When he was the constructor of mass action in amateur theater and in the early days of the First Working Group, his work had entailed shuttling back and forth between organizations. He was often a double agent, agitating for anarchism within Bolshevik organizations, infiltrating *Theater Bulletin* to publicize mass action, and

---

<sup>82</sup> Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 179. [«конструктивисты поэты», «конструктивисты из Камерного театра», «конструктивисты театра Мейерхольда», «конструктивисты из ЛЕФа», «конструктивисты из ЦИТа», и другие... являются лжеконструктивистами.]

<sup>83</sup> The Stenberg and Medunetskii designed the journal of the Kamernyi Theater, *7 dnei MKT*, in late 1923 and early 1924. Rodchenko and Stepanova had been part of Lef from 1923. When Gan writes “the constructivists from TsIT,” he may be referring to those designing covers for their books, such as Sergei Senkin, who designed the cover for Platon Kerzhentsev’s *Bor’ba za vremia* in 1924. He also might have been referring to Ioganson. As Maria Gough has shown, Ioganson became interested in designing more productive labor techniques in 1923-1924, both within INKhUK and while working in a metalworking factory (see Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 151-190).

promoting the Commfaction's agenda within the artists at IZO and INKhUK. In those early years, his artist colleagues' need for total consensus often left him frustrated. Amidst the arguments surrounding the unsuccessful effort in 1919 to form a work commune called KOMSUPRBEZ (or Commune of Suprematists and Nonobjectivists), he reportedly carped: "I just don't understand...It is [no more than] a domestic matter, but now you have a rupture. Here I...work with anarchists, maximalists, and Bolsheviks. They fight among themselves, but still they don't break up."<sup>84</sup> Again at the same meeting, he complained that he always had to serve as mediator: "I am not going to play that role; Rodchenko berates Malevich, and Malevich conspicuously ignores Rodchenko...and I'm supposed to communicate between them..."<sup>85</sup>

Gan's preference for negotiation over consensus also came up in reference to Lef's effort to form a new union of the Left Front of the Arts in 1925. Gan was the primary opponent of the effort at the conference convened by Lef in January. Mayakovsky stated flatly, "Comrade Gan doesn't like the idea of a union."<sup>86</sup> Yet transcripts record that his position was more nuanced. He conceded that, "the left front must certainly...make itself a more monolithic force than before," but he qualified the point on the basis of the character of the organization: "For this, you cannot continue the family relations that have always been present on the left front. With these family

---

<sup>84</sup> Diary entry of 11 January 1919. Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994): 66. [Я только не понимаю...Это ваше семейное дело, но у Вас сейчас же разрыв; вот Я, например, работаю с анархистами, с максималистами, и с большевиками, но они, ругаясь между собой, все-таки не разрывают...]

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*: 63, 65. [Я такую роль не буду играть; Родченко ругает Малевича, а Малевич демонстративно умалчивает о Родченко... а я буду взаимно информировать...]

<sup>86</sup> RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 23. [Товарищу Гану не нравится объединение]

relations, you do nothing. The editors of *Lef* know this from first-hand experience.” Mayakovsky dismissed Gan’s opposition as a personality defect, but for Gan it was a true difference in approach: “They tell me that Mayakovsky says that those who do not drink tea with us don’t agree with anyone. But, you see, that’s exactly it. We haven’t come to drink tea, but to negotiate a solution.”<sup>87</sup> Negotiation between, rather than loyalty to, was the mode of relation that Gan favored. This preference structured his aesthetics as much as his personal politics. For example, it is the foundational logic for the demonstration of everyday life, with its emphasis on opening up provincial perspectives through networks.

What we know of Gan’s relationship to OSA conforms to this pattern. In surviving snapshots of their meetings (figs 4-5), Gan appears to have been an engaged and vocal participant in the group. He also served in several capacities beyond the design of the journal: he was OSA’s secretary in 1927, organized the group’s First Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture that same summer, and arranged for the OSA conference of 1928.<sup>88</sup> Yet he was not particularly involved in the politics of the movement that I described above. He designed the journal from the beginning, but he was not at the first

---

<sup>87</sup> RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 20ob. [левый фронт...должен из себя создать более монолитную силу чем до сих пор. Но для этого нельзя продолжать ту семейную обстановку, которая была до сих пор на левом фронте. Семейной обстановкой тут ничего не сделаешь. Редакция журнала “ЛЕФ” узнала это на собственном опыте. Мне говорили, что Маяковский заявил как то кто только у нас чай не пил - а ни с кем не сговорились. Вот именно, мы не чай к вам приходили пить, а договариваться.]

<sup>88</sup> The First OSA Conference took place in Moscow in April 1928. Ginzburg gave a talk called “What is Constructivism?” We know that Gan attended because he appears in a group photo. Khan-Magomedov, *Konstruktivizm*: 490.

organizational meeting at the end of 1925.<sup>89</sup> The first documentation of his involvement outside of his design of *SA* was his signature on OSA's request for admittance to the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN) in July of 1926.<sup>90</sup> OSA began functioning as an organization and publishing *SA* in the beginning of 1926, but their path to official approval and acceptance into a governmental institution was protracted and involved several appeals to different organizations over the course of 1926.<sup>91</sup> Gan had often been an effective liaison in these kinds of politico-administrative problems, and, indeed, it was the appeal to GAKhN in July that went through. Thus, even though OSA participated in the politics of exclusionary group formation that I described in the previous section, the particular roles that Gan played there involved negotiating between organizations rather than shoring up the boundaries between them. He produced their publication, their exhibition, and their conference—all ways of connecting the group to a larger audience.

Against this background, it seems significant that Gan's proposal for a productivist mode of criticism came out in an issue of *SA* right after one of the more vicious and insane-looking of the journal's derisive attacks (fig 126). The multi-page presentation pointed to the formal similarities between the buildings then being constructed by Zholtovskii and those of the sixteenth century by reproducing newspaper

---

<sup>89</sup> See "Zaiavlenie ob' edineniia sovremennykh arkhitekturov 'OSA' v khudozhestvennyi otdel glavnauki Narkomprosa" (April 1926), in Khazanova, *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury*: 69.

<sup>90</sup> RGALI f. 941, op. 1, d. 79, l. 135.

<sup>91</sup> They started out in February by appealing to Mossovet (the Moscow city council), and then in April petitioned the Art Department of Glavnauka (the science, art, and museum administration), before finally submitting the paperwork that Gan signed, to GAKhN, in July. The relevant documents have been published in Khazanova, *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury*: 67-69.

clippings about Zholtovskii's work marred by question marks, arrows, and other alterations in a hasty scrawl. The presentation makes clear that there was very little common, or likeminded, between Zholtovskii and OSA. Although Malevich was not Zholtovskii, in OSA's terms, he was also fairly non-likeminded. As we have already seen, Malevich's UNOVIS group had been a major rival for constructivism, as had Malevich's chief progeny, Lissitzky. And, unlike the rivalry between Gan and Lef, constructivism's rift with UNOVIS was based on an enormous aesthetic difference: it was the affirmation of art versus the affirmation of everyday life. In choosing Malevich for his case study, Gan chose to open the journal's pages to difference, but without employing the same dismissive tone and derisive tactics that had been applied to Zholtovskii in the previous issue.

Although Malevich and Gan had cast their lots with different camps, they did share an affinity on some level. Gan had published Malevich's articles in *Anarkhiia* in 1918, even coauthoring one article with him, and Malevich was part of the short-lived KOMSUPRBEZ effort in January 1919. During that group's meetings, the future constructivists Rodchenko and Stepanova expressed annoyance with Malevich and jealousy for Gan's obvious deference toward him. Stepanova reported that, "in general, Gan reverentially echoes Malevich and finds everything that he says terribly important."<sup>92</sup> She accused Malevich of being a speculator, stating that "Malevich is an entrepreneur...He has money," whereas "we receive money for our work and goods and nothing more." Gan responded curtly, "Malevich works too—indeed, more than all of

---

<sup>92</sup> Diary entry of 11 January 1919. Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet*: 64. [Ган вообще благоговейно поддакивает Малевичу и находит все, что то говорит, ужасно важным...]

us..."<sup>93</sup> After this group broke up, Gan, as we know, eventually went on to more closely associate with Rodchenko and Stepanova while Malevich moved to Vitebsk and then St. Petersburg, but Gan continued to support Malevich from time to time, facilitating an exhibition in December of 1920 and storing Malevich's paintings in his apartment in 1922.<sup>94</sup> Thus, Gan's relationship to Malevich was one of interest but not identity. They shared experiences but not familial affection, and Gan found Malevich's work compelling even though it did not conform to the tenets of his own constructivist system. Malevich, for his part, also had mixed feeling about Gan. In a letter of 1924, he scolded Lissitzky for "falling in with the likes of Gan and Rodchenko, for becoming a constructor."<sup>95</sup>

Given the particularities of this relationship, it would have been difficult for Gan to have produced one of the fully laudatory or fully condemnatory presentations characteristic of the polemical criticism of the period. And, indeed, Gan wrote that, with regard to Malevich, his article was merely a *spravka*, a word used to designate an informational statement or certificate of a very basic qualification. It is most often used for the letter you get from a doctor to prove that you are healthy enough to participate in some relatively normal activity, such as going to school or using a community pool. The

---

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*: 65. [Малевич—предприниматель...у него деньги, мы даем труд или товар, за что получаем деньги и больше ничего.] [Но Малевич тоже дает труд, и больше нас всех...]

<sup>94</sup> Gan's participation in the exhibition is mentioned in A. A. Sidorov, "Khudozhestvennye vystavki," *Tvorchestvo* 2-4 (February-April 1920): 34. His storing the paintings is in Anna Konopleva, "Aleksii Mikhailovich Gan," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 49 (2000): 212-221.

<sup>95</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letter to El Lissitzky of 7 June 1924, in *Pis'ma Kazimira Malevicha El' Lisitzkomu i Nikolaiu Puninu*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Pinakoteka, 2000): 6. [вы...попали к Гану, Родченко, конструктором стали]

*spravka* involves a process of judgment and the potential for exclusion, but it implies a fairly high level of tolerance of difference, testifying to little more than the fact that you are a healthy human being.

The real target of Gan's polemics in the article was not Malevich, but criticism itself, or at least a particular mode of evaluation practiced by what he terms "our juror art critics" (*nashi prisiazhnye iskusstvovedy*). According to Gan's definition, the juror art critic approaches each work of art like a detective, attempting to uncover the intentions and worldview of the artist who produced it. By divining the ideological content at the work's origin in a process that Gan compares to Talmudic study, he produces a final judgment of the artist based on the worldview crystallized in the work. In the example of Malevich's *Black Square*, the question asked by the juror art critic is whether the square represents the "decay of the bourgeoisie or, conversely, the ascent of the young class of the proletariat."<sup>96</sup> At stake in this choice is a judgment about whether the work is inherently good or bad, correct or incorrect—whether it is with us or against us.

Gan conceded that the work of the juror art critic can be understood as a materialist approach insofar as it forgoes traditional judgments of aesthetic beauty. Its focus on the way that art is a product of its historical context leans on the Marxist materialist doctrine of base and superstructure, the idea that, as Marx wrote, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that

---

<sup>96</sup> Gan, "Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche": 106. [разложение буржуазии или, наоборот, восхождение молодого класса пролетариата]

determines their consciousness.”<sup>97</sup> Yet Gan also asked his readers to consider that this might not be the only materialist approach possible. Just as the most advanced art no longer strove to express or reflect one or another ideological position but to actually participate in a production process, criticism itself might be developed along a more productive line.

It is important that the position of the juror art critic was not a political position but a methodological one, and they existed on both the right and the left. One good leftist example is a collection of essays published by Proletkul't in 1926. The book's project was to define new criteria for criticism that would distinguish once and for all between aesthetic formalism and authentic left-front art. The introductory essay explains that while constructivist and formalist objects might seem similar and have similar roots, in fact they existed on entirely different planes. The one treats form as an immanent aesthetic device, while the other considers form to be a product and tool in a social-historical dialectic. The editors emphasize that the difference between these two groups was so vast as to create an utterly either/or situation. The new leftist “art becomes artistically imperceptible” outside of its connection with contemporaneity, and when constructivism is “sequestered in a single artistic form,” it only “proves [its] utter senselessness [*bessmyslennost'*].”<sup>98</sup> As similar as these two types of work might look on

---

<sup>97</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977).

<sup>98</sup> “О текучих художественных расслоениях (Вместо введения),” *На пути искусства. Сборник статей*, ed. V. M. Bliumenfel'd, V. F. Pletnev, N. F. Chuzhak (Moscow: Proletkul't, 1926: 3-6. [новая художественная культура целиком оперлась на...связь с производящей современностью,» вне которой, «искусство стало художественно

first glance, they were actually easy to differentiate if you had the right critical lens: formalist criticism makes the productivist work “imperceptible,” while productivist criticism renders formalist work “utterly senseless.” By choosing the proper criteria, one could make the offending work disappear.

Gan would have agreed with the basic distinction behind this formulation. It is based on the same definition of constructivism that Gan laid out in 1921 and 1922, wherein the self-contained “abstracted-illusionistic” work was replaced by objects fully embedded in their physical environment and historical moment.<sup>99</sup> And, indeed, Gan’s own position on criticism at that time articulates a similar argument to that made by the editors of the *Proletkul’t* volume. In the spring of 1922, Gan faulted the academic critic A. A. Sidorov for dismissing abstraction in his season’s-end review—“we have, thank god, outgrown [it],” Sidorov wrote.<sup>100</sup> The year had obviously been an important one for constructivist abstraction, and Gan suggested that Sidorov had simply been blind to what was important that year because he was looking exclusively for art that matched his own criteria. “In reality,” Gan wrote, “the life of the visual arts...depends on the economic, social, and political organization of society more than on the subjective desires of contemporary art critics.”<sup>101</sup> Gan goes on, as the *Proletkul’t* editors would later, to

---

неощутимым] [с особой наглядностью показывает всю бессмысленность конструктивима одной художественной формы и замкнутого в ней.]

<sup>99</sup> See my discussion in chapter 2.

<sup>100</sup> Gan quotes his review. Aleksei Gan, “O sovremennykh khudozhestvennykh gruppirovkakh,” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 35 (17-23 April 1922): 6-7. [Мы, слава богу, уже изживаем.]

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* [в действительности, же жизнь изобразительного искусства...зависит от хозяйственной, общественной и политической организации общества больше, чем от субъективных желаний современных искусствоведов]

explain the way in which the revolution had transformed previously isolated nonobjective art into socially meaningful work. This new socially meaningful work should not be “grouped according to aesthetic attributes,...but according to productivist attributes.”<sup>102</sup> Critics like Sidorov had no means of perceiving the new art, because they “do not approach it scientifically, but evaluate it in terms of taste.”<sup>103</sup>

Gan’s response to Sidorov affirms and rejects the same types of work that the Proletkul’t volume does, but it also condemns their critical methodology. Sidorov and the Proletkul’t editors share an approach insofar as they both strive to render certain phenomena more visible and others irrelevant through judgment, however radically different their criteria for judgment might be. In his response to Sidorov in 1922, Gan proposed a “scientific approach,” free from preference for a particular sort of art object or the specific standards that validate it. The scientific approach would focus instead on utilizing “productivist attributes” (*priznaky proizvodstvennye*)—that is, the vestiges or symptomatic traces of the work’s production—to determine “how and under what conditions the trend appeared, how it developed..., how it came to...differentiate itself..., and what it has become in the present time.”<sup>104</sup> Gan goes on to demonstrate the scientific methodology by making distinctions between the abstraction of Rodchenko and that of Malevich based on the differences in the two artists’ responses to post-revolutionary

---

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* [группируются не по эстетическому признаку...по признаку производственному]

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* [к нему подходят не научно, а берут его в разрезе вкусового определения]

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* [Необходимо установить как и при каких условиях возникло это течение, как оно развивалось..., как оно стало...дифференцироваться..., и к чему оно...пришло в данный момент.]

conditions. The scientific approach makes distinctions between the artists that renders *both* trends more visible and better understood.

In his “*Spravka*” of 1927, Gan retains this openness to examining different practices, but he also replaces the scientific approach with a productivist one. Gan starts with a rhetorical question from the scientific methodology’s arsenal, inquiring about the origins of the works: how would Malevich himself describe these works with volumetric form? Probably with some “metaphysical formulation,” Gan posits, which “produces little...for the materialist intellect.” Malevich works “intuitively.” The roots of his forms “float in the living welter [*v zhivom sumbure*] of his subconscious, where his ample experience maunders about.”<sup>105</sup> The hyperbole in Gan’s language here is an acknowledgement of the disdain that he should feel, as a constructivist, for such a working process, but, even more, it pokes fun at the hysterical militancy behind his own and his constructivist colleagues’ bias.<sup>106</sup>

For, Gan goes on, to determine the work’s value based on the artist’s motivations and process is a “scholarly absurdity” (*uchenaia nelepost*’) of which Malevich had often been the victim.<sup>107</sup> None of Malevich’s metaphysical formulations really matter if the

---

<sup>105</sup> Gan, “*Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche*”: 106. [мало дает...материалистически мыслящему интеллекту] [плавают в живом сумбуре его подсознания, в котором бродит достаточное количество опыта]

<sup>106</sup> Hubertus Gassner has read constructivism’s forms, particularly the laboratory constructions, as analogs for transparent consciousness, free from any pockets of subconscious irrationality. Hubertus Gassner, “The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization,” in *The Great Utopia: the Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum and Rizzoli, 1992): 298-319. Kiaer develops the idea in her discussion of Rodchenko’s workers club. Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*: 198-240.

<sup>107</sup> Gan, “*Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche*”: 104.

object is assessed from the outside as a form. Here, Gan's productivist approach clearly departs from his scientific approach of 1922. The critic's relation to the object is now the important fact, while the object's relation to the artist has become insignificant. Gan demonstrates his point via the simple critical act of inserting the images from Malevich's architecton project into the pages of the constructivist architectural journal. Severed from Malevich's larger suprematist oeuvre, the forms lose any Malevichian spiritual content and read as models or renderings for new buildings. Paging through the journal, they look so much like architecture that one is surprised to see Malevich's name in the title of the article. At the same time, the architectons also stand out in the context of the journal for the freshness of the forms. They inject something new into the architectural arena, something that the rationally minded, purpose-driven constructivist architects would not have created on their own. Gan writes, "there may be nothing in suprematism's volumetric compositions related to the utilitarian [*byto-poleznykh*] properties of an object, ...but in the sense of the *abstract* search for *new* forms as such, they have enormous significance."<sup>108</sup> Finding new forms to replace the outdated classical repertoire was one of the "chief obstacles on the path of formal solutions of new architecture's tasks."<sup>109</sup> Whatever motivations Malevich might claim for his work, "Malevich does not

---

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*: 106. [но, если в объемных композициях супрематизма нет быто-полезных свойств вещи, ...то в смысле абстрактных исканий новой формы, как таковой, они имеют огромное значение]

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* [главные предприятия на пути формальных решений задач новой архитектуры]

just talk, he *does*, and that which he *does* [or makes]...has huge psychological significance.”<sup>110</sup>

It is important to note that Gan’s approach not only does not require an analysis of the historical or ideological motivation behind the forms, but it is also crucial that that the productivist critic *not* perform this analysis. Gan stresses that Malevich’s work relates only “outwardly” to the problems of modern architecture.<sup>111</sup> These forms may be born out of the shadowy depths of the artist’s subconscious, where there may be all manner of personal spiritual inspiration motivating their creation. Nevertheless, the minute the artist completes the work, it becomes a dead and empty form. Like nature, it has no inherent meaning, direction, or purpose. The job of criticism is to reanimate it, ascribe it a new function, and send it a new direction. Even in 1919, Gan had responded to Stepanova’s charges that Malevich was a mystic, saying “I don’t see any mysticism in Malevich.”<sup>112</sup> It is precisely because he does not look for the mysticism that he is able to see the object’s productivist potential. Does Malevich’s *Black Square* represent “the decay of the bourgeoisie or, conversely, the ascent of the young class of the proletariat?” Gan’s answer is that this may not be the right question. Once pulled out of the context of its creation, the *Black Square* becomes a perfectly useable form, one that Gan refunctions, rather wittily, as the end-of-article mark (fig 125a). Note that insofar as the object’s relevant “productivist attributes” are no longer the traces of the labor that went into it, but

---

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* [Малевич не только говорит, он *делает*, и, то, что удается Малевичу *сделать*...имеет огромное психологическое значение]

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Recorded in Stepanova’s diary entry of 11 January 1919. Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhnet zhit*: 65. [Я не вижу у Малевича мистики]

its potential for use, Gan's proposal relies on properties associated with the commodity form as analyzed in Marx's *Capital*. Yet this too is characteristic of the approach: he departs from an analytical mode of applied Marxism, switching over toward a productive use of its insights.

The productivist critic encounters the work not as a scientist, historian, or judge, but rather as a builder of interpretive bridges that allow the trace of one practice to become a building block within another. If his scientific approach of 1922 focused on the embeddedness of the production of an object by reconstructing the conditions that produced it, it also assumed the relationship most fundamental to the critical process—that between work and critic—to be one of detachment. In 1927 the relationship between object and critic becomes the only important one, making the critical process itself into an embedded and constructive practice. As a mode of montage—of assembling modular parts to produce a new whole—this approach radically departs from the other two modes I have described. Gan's critical montage in *Kino-Fot* considered difference a falsity to be unmasked, and the derisive montage of Leonidov's "*Kunstkamera*" treated it as a threat to be eradicated. In both cases, the conceit was that montage draws attention to a reality or common truth that already exists in the world. Gan's productivist approach, in contrast, saw the difference represented by Malevich's idiosyncrasies as a possibility, one that could be coopted and employed in a new hybrid construction. In shifting from the scientific analysis of the past to the self-conscious production of the present, Gan's proposal has something in common with critical approaches such as Barthes' concept of

the death of the author or Walter Benjamin's notion of reactivating fragments of history in the present.<sup>113</sup> It was also a step in the same direction as socialist realism.

All of this said, Gan's productivist approach to criticism may ironically be most valuable as an artifact in exactly the empirical sense that Gan eschews. The shift from the scientific approach of 1922 to the productivist approach of 1927 was the result of lived experience, and that lived experience, I will now suggest, was indicative of larger shifts. Coming straight on the heels of the scathing attack on Zholtovskii in *SA* and OSA's exclusive architectural exhibition, Gan's "*Spravka*" does not represent another example of that dynamic, but it was one individual's response to it. A methodology for reconciliation, it was his proposal for a way out of the larger atmosphere of reaction by developing a way for Rodchenko and Malevich to talk together again in the same room. The "*Spravka*" also has to be understood as part of a larger crisis in Gan's work and his thinking about himself. He wrote it only a few months before entering the Donskaia Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital as the result of some combination of nervous exhaustion and alcoholism. He had been having related problems since about 1925, and he would remain under the Donskaia doctors' care off and on from November 1927 through 1930.<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1977); Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 253-267.

<sup>114</sup> Letters between Gan and Shub dated 21 November to 12 December 1927 are the best record of Gan's hospitalization. He seems to have lived there full time until early in 1928, after which he continued part-time. He mentions receiving a series of injections (*ukoly* and *vduvaniia*), baths, and shock therapy (*elektrizatsiia*), along with a daily routine of exercises, tea, and reading (RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 105, ll. 21, 26-27). He was able to continue working while there, and seems to have been able to leave on occasion. For example, he appears to have attended the meeting about Shub's *Velikii put'* on 25

The “Donskaia solution,” as he called it, temporally corresponds to relevant changes in the larger historical situation in 1927. As David Joravsky has argued, even though the First Five Year Plan did not officially begin until 1928, the atmosphere began to change in 1927, as members of the left opposition were increasingly hounded and a new sort of intelligentsia, composed of technical specialists rather than revolutionaries, became a dominant social class.<sup>115</sup> This marginalization occurred at the same time that the 1917 Revolution was being memorialized left and right. OSA’s architectural exhibition was meant to be a tenth anniversary exhibition, and Gan was featured in a similar exhibition on Soviet graphic production curated by Lissitzky. Shub’s first feature-length films, *The Fall of the Romanovs* (*Padenie dinastii Romanovykh*) and *The Great Way* (*Velikii put’*), which came out in February and November, respectively, were also commissioned for the occasion. With the notable exception of the OSA exhibition that Gan had organized—which, remember, was devoted to contemporary international

---

November 1927.

The Donskaia Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital (*Donskaia Nevro-psikhiatricheskaia lechebnitsa*), part of the Solov’ev Hospital, is located near the Donskoi Monastery in the south of Moscow, and continues to function as a hospital with a psychiatric clinic (the *klinika nevrozov* was listed in an online guide to finding help for depression in 2005). During World War I, it was used to treat war trauma and served Red-Army soldiers exclusively during the Civil War (V. D. Denisov, “50 let moskovskoi gorodskoi klinicheskoi psikhiatricheskoi bol’nitse no 8 im. Z. P. Solov’eva,” *Zhurnal nevropatologii i psikhatrii imeni S.S. Korsakova* 65, no. 5 [1965]: 772). The head physician in the 1920s, when Gan was there, was V. A. Giliarovskii, a pioneer in the Soviet mental health movement. He later described the hospital as treating mild disorders and early borderline cases that would have previously been overlooked, also noting that they were one of the first hospitals to try malaria therapy, insulin shock therapy, and seizure therapy. (“*Avtobiografiia Giliarovskogo Vasiliia Alekseevicha*” [1951], GARF f. R-9592, op. 1, d. 5, l. 1). My thanks to Ben Zajicek for generously sharing his research on Donskaia.

<sup>115</sup> David Joravsky, “The Construction of the Stalinist Psyche,” *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978): 105-128.

architecture and had no real historical component—these exhibitions had the effect of putting the Revolution in the past. One viewer commenting on Shub’s *The Great Way*, which was composed entirely of found footage, suggested that it was a veritable “museum of the Revolution, just like the one at 59 Tverskaia Street.”<sup>116</sup>

At the same time that the Revolution of 1917 was being celebrated in the realm of representation, the perpetual revolution favored by the left opposition was being definitively squashed. Trotsky, who was the most visible symbol of that movement, was expelled from the Central Committee in October and then from the Communist Party on November 12. He was exiled to Kazakhstan early in 1928, when many of his rank-and-file followers were also expelled. There is no evidence that Gan had any personal relationship with Trotsky, but he would have been associated with him in a general sense. There also may have been a distant personal connection, since Trotsky had been the head of the Revvoensovet while Gan was employed by PUR. Also note that the copy of *Long Life the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* with which I opened, and which is from the collection of the Russian State Library in Moscow, is inscribed on the upper left corner of the front cover, “*T. Trotskomu,*” or “*To Comrade Trotsky,*” in handwriting similar to Gan’s (fig 113). He may have forwarded the booklet to Trotsky through former PUR contacts in an effort to garner support for his cinematic project.

Whether a distant personal relationship or a symbolic political one, the association would have had a newly grim relevance by the end of 1927. Just how grim would not

---

<sup>116</sup> The Museum of the Revolution was located at 59 Tverskaia. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 214, l. 3.

become apparent until later, and some sense of it can be gleaned from a story told by Shub's grandson, Aleksandr Konoplev, who recounted that as a child in the 1950s,

I stumbled on the thin brochure *Constructivism* while digging through the old books that surfaced after Shub died. I brought it to [mother] to look at, turning to a portrait of Trotsky. She tore the thin booklet, almost a notebook, from my hands, ...ran to the desk and quickly painted over the ill-fated portrait with an ink and large brush. Afterwards she made me promise not to show this publication to anyone and threatened to throw it out.<sup>117</sup>

What Konoplev remembered as *Constructivism* must have been *Long Life the Demonstration of Everyday Life!*, which is a similar format but thinner and more notebook-like, and which contains a still from Vertov's thirteenth edition of *Kino-Pravda* depicting Trotsky on a tribune (fig 127). In any case, his mother's reaction speaks of a fear of association so strong that she felt compelled to obliterate the image with ink.

As David King has shown, this inking-out of politically dangerous figures was a common practice during the purges. For example, figure 128 shows how Isaac Zelenskii appeared, face and name covered by ink, in Rodchenko's copy of *Ten Years of Uzbekistan*, a book which he himself had designed in 1934.<sup>118</sup> The practice can be seen as the disturbingly logical conclusion to the trend begun with Rodchenko's *x* in *Lef* and continued in *SA's x's* and arrows. The sense of frustrated communication and the

---

<sup>117</sup> Aleksandr Konoplev, introduction to Konopleva, "Aleksi Gan": 212. [роясь в старых книгах, появившихся после смерти Э. И. Шуб, я наткнулся на тоненькую брошюрку «Конструктивизм» и принес ей посмотреть ее, открыв на развороте с портретом Л. Троцкого. Тоненькая книжечка, почти тетрадка, была вырвана у меня из рук...подвежав к моему рабочему столу, мама выстро тушью и большой кистью замазала злосчастный портрет. После чего с меня слово никому не показывать это издание, пригрозив выбросить его.]

<sup>118</sup> Isaac Zelenskii, the secretary of the Central Asian Bureau, was purged in 1938. For more on the alteration of photographs, see David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997).

rudimentary level of argumentation is finally reduced to a single gesture of refusal, a blot. Leah Dickerman has discussed such alteration of photographs in conjunction with the rise of socialist realism, noting the surprising number of examples which, like Rodchenko's copy of the portrait of Zelenskii, make no effort to fully remove the image from "the realm of visibility." According to Dickerman, in "flaunting their scars," they introduced an element of conflict into socialist realism, a phenomenon that has been seen as conflictless, indeed, malevolently so.<sup>119</sup> As a mode of conflict, it is a starkly black and white one, one that conforms to a "Down with...! Long live...!" rationality. It is precisely the mode of conflict that Gan was attempting to escape by developing his productivist mode of criticism.

Yet one need not jump ahead to Trotsky's arrest and the purges to link the shift in Gan's thinking about criticism to changing times. Already in 1925, in a letter to Shub where he first talks about his "illness," he expressed a keen awareness that the crisis that he was experiencing was related to his falling out of step with contemporaneity. The letter is worth quoting at length because it describes so well one possible motivation for his development of the productivist approach to Malevich. He writes,

In the years of Revolution...the most complex social circumstances pushed thoughts *to their logical conclusion* and people with initiative, who did not fear thinking things through *to the end*, and who did not fear any conclusion, walked in step with events, noting and formulating the new problems of the day...

But now, here it is, "our today," and from my point of view it is an inconceivably complex, extremely confusing moment too...On the one hand, we are moving forward, that is, our economy is rehabilitating itself. On the other hand,...we must not prolong [our] culture, but rather turn back to letters, to paintings, to spectacles, to artistic cinogramms [*kinogramam*], and so on. For me, this means a choice between entering this work and rejecting everything I have

---

<sup>119</sup> Leah Dickerman, "Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography," *October* 93 (summer 2000): 139-153.

done until now, or continuing my production (primarily typography, cinematography, and construction) and working exclusively on theoretical work.

The time of slogans and formulas for the present day has gone, *especially* for me. I have never tossed out a slogan without intending it to enter life. This obliges me to approach my work in another way, that is, to approach it not with short articles [*stateikami*], reports [*dokladami*], and three-minute speeches... These days a book dedicated to the Marxist formulation of some cultural, scientific, or artistic question comes out every day. One must read, and not only read, one must study, and of course not talk with anyone, that is to say, not shoot the breeze [*boltat*]. Everything has to be adjusted, considered, brought to order *anew*, but a more complicated one,...an order of a second level, rather than the first, where we spoke in slogans and only slogans.

This is a very sparse diagram of the characteristics and the reasons for my illness.<sup>120</sup>

Gan's sloganeering style of thinking and doing had been a perfect match for the Revolution. He was someone who was not afraid "to think things through to the end" and who was willing to implement every slogan in life, no matter what the conclusion. By

---

<sup>120</sup> Letter to Shub of 16 August 1925. Paragraph breaks are mine. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 105, ll. 10-11. [в результате минувших лет пролетарской революции сложнейшие общественные движения вызывали мысли до *конца*, и люди с инициативой, люди, способные не боясь додумывать до *конца*, не боясь никаких выводов, шли в ногу с событиями, отмечая и формулируя новые проблемы дня... Вот это-то «наше сегодня», с моей точки зрения, и является невероятно сложным, крайне запутанным моментом... С одной стороны, мы идем вперед, т.е. наше хозяйство восстанавливается, а с другой... мы должны не продолжать культуру, а вернуться вспять к букварям, к картинкам, к спектаклям, к художественным кинограммам и т.д. и т.д. Для меня это значит – или войти в эту работу и отказаться от всего того, над чем я работал все это время, - или, не бросая своего производства (типографии, кинематографии и сооружений главным образом), заняться теперь же исключительно большой и научной теоретической работой. Время лозунгов и формул на текущий день – прошло вообще, а для меня *в особенности*. Нет лозунгов, брошенных мною, чтобы они не вошли в жизнь. Это-то и обязывает меня иначе подходить к своим работам, т.е. подходить не статьками, не докладками и не выступлениями на 3 минуты. Сейчас... каждый день выходит книга, связанная и посвященная с тем и тому или иному вопросу по культуре, науке и искусству в марксистском освещении. Нужно читать и не только читать – нужно штудировать и, конечно, ни с кем не говорить, вернее, не болтать. Все должно быть выверено, рассчитано, приведено *снова* в порядок, но более сложный... в порядок второй уже ступени, а не той первой – где мы говорили лозунгами и только лозунгами. / Вот в очень скудной схеме характеристика... и причины моего недуга.]

1925, the conclusion he was having to reckon with was that the work had changed, and that change was making him and his work increasing obsolete. That year, 1925, seems early for him to be saying what he seems to be saying: that his work in typography, cinematography, and construction were being supplanted by a return to language, painting, and artistic spectacles—that is, by a return to order. Typography, cinema, and temporary architectural structures were the right outlets for constructivism because of their inherent embeddedness in the moment, their ability to immediately respond to and shape contemporary everyday life. Yet this same quality also situated them in the era of slogans, reports, and three-minute speeches, which by 1927 belonged in a museum. Gan's only choice if he wanted to continue pursuing such work was to let go of his embeddedness in life and move into “theoretical work.”

In this light, it seems likely that Gan's productivist approach may have contained an element of doing unto others what he would have them do unto him. His own world of perpetual revolution had begun to seem as otherworldly as Malevich's suprematist concoctions. Nevertheless, the shift in personal perspective may also have led him to some insights of a more “concrete human character.” Perhaps there was some value in individual theoretical work and the variations that such private projects engendered. If the politics of full consensus and refusal expressed by Leonidov's “*Kunstkamera*” represented a mode of conflict, it was a battle to the death. It aimed to eradicate its opponent, and thus also the possibility of conflict itself. In the letter of 1925, we see Gan beginning to realize that he would eventually lose that battle and looking for a place to escape from the fray. In the “*Spravka*,” he attempted to develop an approach by which that escape might be recuperated as a raw material. It may have taken the threat of his

own elimination for Gan to consider the value of otherness, but it had been a precondition to the processes of negotiation and compromise that had structured his understanding of constructivism all along. As Gan wrote to Shub in a letter of July 1927, “without factionalism, art is a blot, without factionalism...the battle for new types of artistic labor is social eclecticism. The social mandate will not be fulfilled with that.”<sup>121</sup> Yet factionalism did not have to mean a battle of slogans of the “Down with...! Long live...!” variety. In its purest form, constructivism had defined itself through its relationships to things outside of itself, not through all-out political battle and negation, but through compromise, argument, and negotiation. In this sense, the dialectical method of thinking was just as much an end as a means.

Yet it *was* still a means. For Gan, difference was a motor that needed to be maintained in order to produce new synthetic conclusions. He elaborated on the importance of both detail and theory in the same letter to Shub with which I began this chapter:

Without scientific bases and a socially principled attitude,...without theoretical labor and interpretation, the practical side of production is no more than a good detail. A logically consistent and intelligent synthesis of these two aspects (theory and practice, or practice and theory) produces nothing more than what we call a phenomenon.

Gan points out that the relationship between theory and practice, or between interpretation and detail, was a simple fact of human experience, “nothing more than a phenomenon,” a synthesis of fact and worldview. Note that the position of “theoretical

---

<sup>121</sup> Letter to Shub, probably the end of July 1927. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 105, ll. 12-13. [Без фракционности искусство – это клякса, без фракционности, без партийности борьба за новые виды художественного труда это – социальный эклектизм. С ним и при помощи его социального заказа не выполняют.]

work,” which he described earlier as a mode of continuing his production *outside of* everyday life, serves here instead as the means of connection. He continues,

The more harmonious these (artistic) phenomena are in the sense of coordinating the scientific theoretical part with the socially productive part, the sooner the “provincial” [*oblastnoe*] phenomenon becomes a shared social phenomenon [*iavlenie sotsial'no-obshchestvennym*]. This explains how a cinematic phenomenon may come to be shared by the broadest social understanding.

Theoretical work is not divorced from the nitty-gritty of fact, nor is it embedded in it. Reality results from their gradual approach of each other in an ever more harmonious synthesis. It is the level of harmony that determines whether theoretical work produces a new specific detail or a shared social phenomenon. The former are still useful—like Malevich’s architects, they feed the dialectical system—but the latter, Gan concludes, “is why it is worth working. It is uninteresting to strive for anything else.”<sup>122</sup>

In understanding reality as socially constructed, Gan’s productivist approach to criticism participated in the same shift that led to socialist realism, while also outlining a potential path for its development that was, in the end, a road not taken. That does not mean that it did not have any shared social existence, however. As a final point in this chapter, I will briefly consider the afterlife of Gan’s productivist approach in the

---

<sup>122</sup> Letter to Shub of 6 December 1927. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 105, ll. 29-30.

[практическая сторона производства без научных обоснований, без общественно принципиальной установки – ...без теоретического труда, без теоретического осмысливания и наоборот – только частность, хорошая частность не больше. Последовательной осмысленный синтез этих двух видов (теории и практики или практики и теории) – дают уже нечто больше что мы называем явлением в такой то области. И чем эти явления (художественного порядка) стройнее в смысле увязки научно-теоретической части с част[ью] общественно-производственной тем скорее это “областное” явление становится явлением социально-общественным. Пояснено: кинематографическое явление может стать общественным в самом широком социальном понимании. Ради этого стоит работать. Не стремясь к этому работать неинтересны.]

development of constructivist architecture by examining the third number *SA* in 1929. Gan relinquished the design of *SA* at the end of 1928, and there is no evidence that he had any hand in this issue, but the ideas expressed there suggest that his productivist approach had legs. As if to announce the connection, the first page is crowned by a new design by the Vesnin Brothers for the Lenin Library, which bears remarkable resemblance to the suprematist architecton reproduced in Gan's "*Spravka*" (figs 129-130). The two other large projects covered in the issue were Ivan Leonidov's project for a "Club of a New Social Type" and Nikolai Sokolov's spa hotel (*kurortnaia gostinitsa*), which is presented under the heading "An Experiment in Architectural Thinking." Both Leonidov and Sokolov were part of the younger generation of architects, and the purpose of their projects seems to have been to explore a new working method.<sup>123</sup> Although the actual theme of the third number is "The Structure of Culture and Leisure," the issue was originally advertised with the theme, "The Working Method of the Constructivist Architect,"<sup>124</sup> and both architects present their projects in innovative ways. While the Vesnins' library project retains the traditional method of presentation via plans and elevations, Leonidov and Sokolov have put together a series of montages of clipped images on panels (figs 131-133).

Leonidov's presentation of his club drew on the same techniques he had utilized a year earlier in his "Architectural *Kunstkamera*." He includes a number of images on each panel, labeling one "How NOT to build," another "How NOT to display things," and

---

<sup>123</sup> For more on Leonidov, see Gozak, *Ivan Leonidov*; on Sokolov, see S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Nikolai Sokolov* (Moscow: Russkii avangard: 2009).

<sup>124</sup> It is listed this way in the last issue of 1928.

simply crossing other images out with an *x*. Note that his use of all-caps on the “not” (fig 131b and c) mimics Gan’s typographical presentation of the slogan-style statement on the first page of *SA*, 1926, no. 3 (fig 75b), which reads “Architects! Do *NOT* imitate technological forms. Learn the builder’s method.” Without dwelling on each of Leonidov’s panels, I will point out that by crossing out half of the images, the presentations visually conform to the structure of a “Down with...! Long live...!” slogan. The club should *not* be a place for spectacle-based arts like painting and ballet, but rather for more athletic activities (figs 131d). Similarly, when demonstrating a plan for a new club, one should *not* show pictures of the clubs outer form (fig 131c), but presumably do what he is doing—show images of the activities that would take place there.

Sokolov’s experiment is similar insofar as it departs from the usual architectural plans by relying on photographic images clipped from the press (fig 132), but he uses the clippings less to present the project to us than as a component in his working method as an architect. As his article explains, in order to design structures that fulfill specific social functions, the architect must bring his own subjective experience into his projects. He interprets this somewhat literally by physically inserting photographic clippings onto his work surface, where they become a part of the material to be worked, augmenting the architect’s more standard toolbox of graph paper, ruler, and pencil.<sup>125</sup> For example, in the first panel the spa hotel’s project is defined in simple and emotive terms that bracket the

---

<sup>125</sup> The working method bears similarity to the parallel that Christina Kiaer has drawn between Rodchenko’s laboratory period spatial constructions and his photomontage *Pro Eto* (1923). She discusses the photomontages as organizing figurative images and the personal desires represented by them in the same way that the spatial constructions organize materials and space. Sokolov’s project, in a sense, combines what Kiaer has proposed as a parallel, developing an architectural structure by pulling those affective fragments into his working process. See Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*: 146-158.

nuts and bolts of building construction in favor of articulating the project's social dimension (fig 132b). The left half represents the crowded din of the modern city by superimposing concentric arcs suggesting sound waves on top of a jumble of fragmented photographs of buildings. The caption reads,

First page. He is still outside the boundaries of the project. This is the point from which the architect departs [*ottalkivaetsiia*]. It is the place from which the weary city dweller runs. I can't. I can't bear the conditions of city life any longer. I can't look at these houses, these streets, and all the rest any more. I'm going to the spa.<sup>126</sup>

On the right-hand side of the same panel, Sokolov begins to imagine the wholesome pleasures for which city experience instills yearning: children gorge themselves on fruit, using "their hands and their whole body." In the caption below, he dwells on the restorative power of an unmediated relationship to nature, in which its bounty is simply there for the taking.

This sets Sokolov off onto an idea for the actual form of the spa building and grounds, which in the second panel resemble an octopus (fig 132c). The handwriting on the left makes the link to the previous panel, reading "With their hands! hands! hands!!!" In the panels that follow, Sokolov brainstorms on still other possible structures (figs 132d-g). Only the first is defined by what it is not, the city. The rest pull their inspiration from his personal reactions to various images. Sokolov arrives at his final design (fig 133) not by a hard-and-fast definition of what should and should not be, but by following tangents, playfully considering various ideas, and incorporating selected elements from a

---

<sup>126</sup> N. B. Sokolov, "Опыт архитектурного мышления. Тема: курортная гостиница," *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*, 1929, no. 3: 95. [Лист первый. Он еще вне пределов самого проекта. Это то, от чего отталкивается архитектор. Это то, от чего утомленный горожанин. Я не могу. Не могу дольше переносить условия городской жизни. Не могу больше видеть этих домов, улиц и проч. Я еду на курорт.]

number of options. His ideas come out of the interaction among the task at hand, the images, and his imagination. At the end of the essay, he presents his conclusion:

Think with your head and not with your ruler. Search for the form of the object not on the basis of the most convenient thing to do with your compasses, triangles, and rulers, but on the basis of everything that you know from your own subjective experience and that of others about the vital needs of human beings. The most sensitive and complete tool for the preservation of [this experience] is the living person himself, and especially his head.<sup>127</sup>

This statement is a do/don't position of sorts, yet one can hardly call it derisive. Even the loopy handwriting in which its opening phrase is rendered is a much kinder and more expressive script than the *x*'s and arrows of the Leonidov presentation (fig 133a).

With his spa hotel project, Sokolov developed Gan's productivist approach into a real method for the construction of a communist city, in which drawing in elements from the outside in turn draw ideas out from within him. In doing so, he proposes a methodology in which form is defined not through private vision, nor by the entirely unsubjective balance of external forces, but through a negotiation between a real human subject with a particular experience and the world around him. This was also the working method of the constructivist journal as a whole. It introduced a broad range of materials from the social, economic, political, and technical life of the country into the individual producer's working frame. In this respect, the first issue of 1930, designed by Varvara Stepanova on the theme of the green city, may be the epitome of the form (fig 134). By weaving together an homage to the recently deceased Mayakovsky, evocative

---

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*: 99. [Думайте головой а не линейкой. Ищите форму вещи основании того, что удобнее выполнить нашими циркулями, треугольниками и линейками, а на основании всего опыта чужого и субъективного, для сохранения которого наиболее полным и чутким аппаратом является сам живой человек и его голова и особенности.]

photographs of nature by Rodchenko, and plans for new types of green cities, she inserts ephemeral fragments of shared lived experience into the journal's frame. The hope was that these pieces of life would also be preserved in the architect's process and thereby passed on into the new built environment. That the pages of the journal are the place where these wishes are best preserved is both the failure of the journal project and testament that, as a viable constructivist object, its construction far surpassed the long list of projects that it served to promote.

## CHAPTER 6

***Island of the Young Pioneers,  
or How They Thought the Work Could Be Fun***

Real art is the expression of man's pleasure in labor.  
- William Morris, 1882<sup>1</sup>

Although they knew the meaning of life, which is equivalent to eternal happiness, their faces were nevertheless gloomy and thin, and instead of the peace of life, they possessed exhaustion.  
- Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, 1929<sup>2</sup>

In chapters 4 and 5, I presented Gan's project for the demonstration of everyday life as a battle to overcome space. He envisioned mass-media networks as broadly circulating a common experience, bridging the enormous expanse of the Soviet Union and eliminating provincial bias. In this chapter, I will look at the same project in terms of a battle to overcome time, as an effort to better organize time and the activities that were to fill it. As has been noted elsewhere, the Revolution may have been about sudden emancipation, but it was also about rapid modernization.<sup>3</sup> This chapter is about how these two projects were imagined, by Gan and others, to harmoniously coincide.

---

<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Morris in "Contributor's Club," *The Atlantic Monthly* 297 (July 1882): 139. The more common citation is Morris's preface to John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter of the Stones of Venice* (London: George Allen, 1892).

<sup>2</sup> Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit* (1929-1930), trans. Mirra Ginzburg (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1994): 14.

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Hubertus Gassner, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon Guggenheim Museum, 1992): 302-305; and Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).

I take the phrase “the battle for time” most directly from one of Gan’s films, a work commissioned by The Central Committee for Communications in 1924 and entitled *In the Battle for Time and Space* (V bor’be za vremia i prostranstvo),<sup>4</sup> but the language was hardly Gan’s invention. Indeed, his borrowing it bears witness to his participation in a larger discussion in which the phrase “the battle for time” commonly referred to efforts to modernize, or rationalize, labor processes, often through Taylorist techniques of scientific organization, a field of study known in the Soviet context as NOT (*Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda*, or The Scientific Organization of Labor).<sup>5</sup> Newspapers such as *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* spoke matter-of-factly about developments in the battle for time in the same way that we grew accustomed to news about the war on terror. It would be only a small simplification to say that this was the battle that most defined the Soviet twenties, from the early discussions of “the Taylor system” to the irrational enthusiasm for labor of the First Five Year Plan.<sup>6</sup> All of Gan’s work, embedded as it was, had some relation to these ideas. Here I will define that relationship through a study of his work as a filmmaker, particularly his one feature-length film, *Island of the Young Pioneers*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Proletkino listed the film as a coming attraction in February 1924, and Gan began work on it in October. It is not clear that it was completed.

<sup>5</sup> I refer to the ideas of Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose book *Principles of Scientific Management* came out in 1911.

<sup>6</sup> The First Five Year Plan (1928-1932) was the economic program that followed the New Economic Policy. It replaced the partial market economy with central planning and focused on building up heavy industry and collectivizing agriculture.

In the literature on Soviet cinema, Gan's *Island of the Young Pioneers* has only ever been mentioned in passing, and even then it is assumed to have been a disaster.<sup>7</sup> This conclusion is based on the only readily accessible primary source on it, the reviews in the press, which range from mildly dismissive to mercilessly derisive. The fact that Soviet cinema giant Dziga Vertov, formerly one of Gan's closest allies, stopped speaking to Gan because of the film also does little to recommend it, and since the film has not been preserved, it is nearly impossible to dispute these assessments by analyzing it on its own terms.<sup>8</sup> In the following, I have done my best to reconstruct its contours from without, through the reviews, archival documentation of its production and distribution, Gan's statements and other film work, and everything that we know of Gan thus far. Although hardly ideal, this outside-in approach is in some sense appropriate to Gan's aesthetics. Like all of Gan's work, the film takes its meaning through relationship to its context, which in this case, I will argue, was the battle for time.

### **AUTOMOBILES, AIRPLANES, AND TANKS**

Since my argument relies on Gan's film being part of a larger imagination, I will start by casting the net broadly and then pulling it back in. First, let's lay out the overarching stakes of the chapter by reaching forward to the middle of the First Five Year Plan and

---

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Tsivian, "Dziga Vertov and His Time," in *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, ed. Yuri Tsivian, trans. Julian Graffy (Gemonia, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Konopleva refers to fragments preserved at Gosfilmofond in 1986. It was not there in 2006. Anna Konopleva, "Aleksi Mikhailovich Gan," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 49 (2000): 214.

looking again at Esfir' Shub's film *Today* of 1930. This is, of course, also a reaching backwards, to the beginning of this dissertation, where, recall, I presented a comparison of a reindeer-drawn sled on a mud-stained snowy path next to an image of a dirigible floating above the modern skyscrapers and gridded streets of New York City (figs 6-7). Recall too that Shub purposefully withdrew the most obvious temporal interpretation of the comparison—that they represented a primitive past and a modern future—by making a point of insisting that both scenes were “today.” They were contemporary demonstrations of everyday life.

The fact that the first was gathered in Russia and the second in the United States lends the comparison a second temporal reading, and this is the one that gives the juxtaposition its edge. The vision of New York is not just a utopian image productive of desire for a modernized Soviet future, but also a real image inspiring comparison, and with it feelings of shame, envy, and fear. Toward the end of the film, Shub builds on the last of these emotions with an intense sequence about military preparedness. Amidst images of tanks, battleships, and airplanes, often advancing directly toward the viewer, the intertitles read, “They prepare new imperialist wars,” “They prepare for the fall of the Soviet Union,” “We are on guard and prepared. The proletariat of the world is prepared to defend the Soviet Union” (fig 135). Thus, over the course of its six reels, Shub's film lays out the terms of a rather daunting game of catch-up: we must hurry to close the technology gap, in time and or else.

Shub presents a task demoralizing in its enormity, but not without also providing a spot of hope for its achievement. Between the sled and the advancing tanks, she offers a series of comparisons between Soviet and American life, arguing through juxtaposition

that communist social and economic organization was a technology in its own right, a silver bullet with the potential for closing the gap. In her images of American life, capitalist labor and capitalist leisure are both equally mind-numbing and wasteful. The factory assembly line is crowded and messy (fig 136), and vast resources are spent on leisure activities involving elaborate machines for the production of artificial appearances and thrills (figs 137-140). Every image of movement is disorganized, all hustle and bustle, sound and fury (figs 141-142). Surely all of this unorganized expenditure will add up to nothing. In contrast, Shub's images of Soviet life portray movement as purposeful and directed to the point that it takes on an eerie formal beauty and stillness. The construction of a paper mill on a river in the Northern province of Karelia channels nature's raw power to man's advantage (compare figs 143-144). Trains efficiently transport people and things (figs 145-146). Workers are absorbed in their work and move with a graceful grounded intensity (figs 147-149). Indeed, they are so fulfilled by their work that they spend their leisure time in related pursuits, attending a lecture on the First Five Year Plan at the House of Culture and organizing a festive tractor brigade to help out with some plowing (figs 150-151). The energy that flew off in every direction in the images of New York is conserved and productively channeled by organization and unalienated labor.

There is, I think, still something that works about the juxtaposition that Shub set up. New York seems fun, but wrong; and the images of genuine fulfillment in productive work also hold a certain appeal. At the same time, I think that some part of the rationality that held her argument together has been lost. It is the same part that found great heroism

in the coal miner Aleksei Stakhanov's producing fourteen times his production quota,<sup>9</sup> that gave birth to the slogan "five in four,"<sup>10</sup> and that made it seem normal for Joseph Stalin to declare in 1931, "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or they will crush us."<sup>11</sup> All of these, including Shub's film, were expressions of a historically specific rationality known as the Soviet cult of labor.

One way to think about the motivations productive of this rationality is through what the economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron theorized as backwardness. Gerschenkron was born in Odessa in 1904, fled the Revolution in 1920, and was educated in Austria before moving to the United States. His work on backwardness, published in the early 1940s, was his attempt to explain phenomena like Soviet communism and National Socialism by characterizing them as responses to the same game of catch-up that Shub figures. He proposed that England was the only country in which capitalism and modernization had evolved organically in tandem. Looking at patterns in the subsequent modernization of France, Italy, Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, and Russia, he concluded that those latterday efforts were not natural evolutions, but collective campaigns motivated by the combination of knowledge of the existence of modernity

---

<sup>9</sup> As Katerina Clark has shown, Stakhanov's fame belongs to a somewhat different era, one that began in the mid thirties and celebrated "remarkable people" over the collective. I include him here in order to suggest that the potential for Stakhanovism's emergence evolved out of the early twenties—there were continuities as well as differences. For an analysis of the differences, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The slogan means that they should strive to accomplish all the tasks laid out for the First Five Year Plan ahead of schedule (in four years).

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Stalin, "The Tasks of Economic Executives," in *Problems of Leninism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976): 529.

elsewhere (England) and the stubbornness of stagnation at home. This produced such a high level of collective fear and desire that radical levels of economic and social intervention by the state or other large institutions seemed justified. This intervention usually came in the form of central organization and the forced reduction of domestic consumption. The radicality of the measures increased in direct proportion to the society's degree of backwardness. Indeed, some of the very conditions that had produced stagnation in backward countries—for example, a population accustomed to a low standard of living and minimal freedoms—were conditions favorable to the implementation of these centralized initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

One of the virtues of Gerschenkron's analysis is that it provides a coherent explanation of why revolution occurred in a country like Russia rather than in one more industrially advanced. Note that in this respect Gerschenkron's theory explicitly works against Marx's, particularly his notion of uniform stages of development. Instead of representing the endpoint in a succession from feudalism to capitalism to communism, the Russian Revolution was for Gerschenkron an event that harnessed the special characteristics of feudal subjectivity to construct modernity quickly and on the cheap. Marxism was the ideology that made that project seem bearable by providing a basis for believing that labor could feel different if one were to collectively own the means of production.

I would suggest that this Marxist notion was the glue, or the specific rationality, that bound together Shub's depiction of Soviet labor. It was because her factory workers

---

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandr Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1962): 5-51.

were laboring for their own benefit that they were so intently focused on and fulfilled by their work. Perhaps because satisfaction in factory labor was not a feeling that many could reference, Shub resorted to expressing it in terms of other human experiences. For example, in a sequence in which she alternates between two shots of mixed gender worker pairs, she articulates the idea via biblical and biological analogy (figs 152-153): like Eve for Adam, work completes them. Similarly, she gives her workers an intense concentration in their eyes and graceful purpose in their hands that evokes the integration of mind and body experienced in the process of making art. Compare the images of workers in figures 147-148 and 153 with Mikhail Nesterov's portrait of the sculptor Vera Mukhina of 1940 (fig 154).<sup>13</sup> The subject of all three of these images is less the worker or the object on which they are working, than the loop of tension running from eye to object to hand and back. Shub taps into William Morris's adage, "art is the expression of man's pleasure in labor."

Investment in this aspect of Marx's thinking was not, of course, unique to Shub's imagination. For instance, I described Gan's constructivism in its early theoretical formulations as a labor process in which an intimate give-and-take between subject and object resulted in the co-production of both parties. And while Shub's depictions of factory labor were relatively sober, promising something like self-actualization, other depictions expressed its appeal in other ways. There is a scene in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* that has always bothered me for this reason. Released only a year before Shub's *Today*, Vertov's film contains a sequence with a young woman at work on an assembly line packaging cigarettes (fig 155). The shot is so similar in composition to

---

<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Nesterov was a painter active before the Revolution and again in the 1930s.

two of Shub's (figs 148-149) as to suggest that she intended us to make the comparison. Yet, whereas in Shub's images the women's expressions are serious and their attention fully directed toward their task, in Vertov's the girl's mood is strangely giddy. She pays no attention to the motions of her hands and seems to perform the bundling and folding operations without thinking. In Shub's *Today*, mindnumbing capitalist fun was compensation for equally mindnumbing alienated labor, and she proposed socialist labor as an alternative in which work and pleasure came together in one fulfilling and humanizing activity. Vertov instead attempts to compete with New York's diversions on their own terms. If everything is mindnumbing anyway, he seems to argue, why can't work and fun be the same thing.

Like Shub, Vertov defined the feeling of factory labor in terms of other experiences. The shots of the cigarette packager are interspersed with other activities that become automatic as they become routine, such as typing, playing piano, and operating a telephone switchboard (fig 156). He intends us to understand the girl's giddiness as the feeling when conscious thought is suddenly freed from physical activity. Vertov may very well have genuinely believed that this joyous consciousness in labor was a realistic possibility. Antonio Gramsci had the same idea in the 1930s, when he wrote about the split between conscious attention and mechanized movement that occurs in factory labor. He also used the example of typesetters and typists, who, he points out, do a better job the less conscious interest they take in the content of the text. Once the labor process becomes automatic, he wrote, "what really happens is that the brain of the worker, far from being mummified, reaches a state of complete freedom. The only thing that is completely mechanized is the physical gesture." This switchover then leaves "the brain

free and unencumbered for other occupations.” Thus, a human being does not become a “trained gorilla” just because he is performing a repetitive task. Once those movements become automatic, they are a second nature, and the worker remains fully human, mind freed from the details of his body.<sup>14</sup>

Even if Vertov believed that the happy freedom of consciousness that his images proposed was possible in the way that Gramsci described, it does not mean that it was. Indeed, my tendency is to believe that it definitely was not. Nonetheless, I think that there is something actual and effective about the sequence. In viewing this segment of the film, the degree of disconnect between the girl’s expression and the activity of her hands has always caused me to feel an irrational giddiness myself. That feeling, at least, is real and should be taken into account.

Alice Kaplan has made a powerful argument about such feelings in her study of French fascism and literature. Like Gerschenkron, she assumes fascism to be a reactive response to rapid modernization. Drawing on Melanie Klein’s theory of partial object identification, she suggests that people dealt with their anxieties about modernity by mentally separating its desired products—the “automobiles, airplanes, tanks,” and the freedom and power that they promised—from its feared social byproducts, such as rootlessness, dependence on strangers, and the boredom tied to division of labor. Once the two sides of modernization were thus separated and attached to two different objects in the psyche, the desired technology could be claimed as the achievement of the self (or collective self), while the blame for the negative aspects of the technology could be

---

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Nowell Smith and Quentin Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1971): 308-310.

projected into the (primarily Jewish) other, expelled, and eliminated.<sup>15</sup> In comparison to the reconceptualization of the self that would be required to incorporate the whole object—modernization *and* its discontents—this rearrangement of the psyche offered a delirious shortcut to happiness. As in John Heartfield’s satirical photomontage, it made it seem as if you could have your automobiles, airplanes, and tanks, and eat them too (fig 157). Without denying that the Soviet psyche had its own set of scapegoats, the idea that I want to take from Kaplan is one level more abstract: desires and fears sometimes combine to carve out a psychological path of lower resistance in the face of a problem of seemingly insurmountable magnitude. When this happens on a collective scale—that is, when it is affirmed by others—it seems rational. Furthermore, that rationality, or the seeming-objective of the otherwise irrational shortcut, is something that people will take measures to preserve.

The Soviet push to modernize in the twenties was motivated partially by shame, partially by desire, and partially by fear of another world war. These feelings were, I think, legitimate. Yet how could anyone confront the facts of the situation—particularly that your personal sacrifice would probably not pay off in one lifetime—with a sober mind? This is where the irrational exuberance of the First Five Year Plan comes in, along with Shub’s fulfilled factory workers and Vertov’s giddy cigarette packager. They manifest a psychological shortcut in which the work was redefined as fun. This psychic economy, like Kaplan’s, was a mass psychosis. The only reality to which it connected was the jolt of happiness that it was designed to produce, and I hardly need describe the

---

<sup>15</sup> Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 3-40.

damage to reality incurred in the maintenance of the delusion. For, the creation of the shortcut does not actually change the reality of the situation, nor the impossible magnitude of the task at hand. Although, then again, I have been arguing throughout this dissertation that it does.

I have proposed again and again that a crucial component of Gan's constructivism was his taking account of social norms and relational truths. His agitational work, object-based or otherwise, was a way of constructing and shaping these forms of rationality, and he set great store in the idea that another world was possible just by getting everyone to see things in the same way. Gan always grounded this idea in a Marxist notion of practice, in the idea that you must test the truth of your thinking in the world around you. Here I mean to interrogate the validity of such a project when it is based upon social affirmation, that is, on testing the truth of one's thinking against the norm.

### **THE RATIONALIZATION OF ARTISTIC LABOR, 1918-1924**

Now that I have gotten ahead of myself, let's go back to the beginning. The battle for time may have ended in irrational exuberance, but it began with some very sober equations. Its foundational logic is well illustrated in an article entitled "Time Builds Airplanes," first published by Platon Kerzhentsev in the summer of 1923. Kerzhentsev, a former Proletkul't and worker-peasant theater leader, had just founded an organization for the promotion of NOT called the Time League. In the article, he describes his experience of conversion to the project:

At a congress of the Soviets I sat next to an American journalist. The meeting was scheduled for 11 am. As often happens here, by 1 pm it had still not commenced. The journalist asked me, "How many people are in this hall?"

“About 3,500.”

“And there are quite a few fitters, metal-turners, and pattern-makers among them?”

“Yes, they are probably mostly workers with various specialties.”

My American then scribbled something in his notebook and said, “We lost 7,000 working hours today waiting for this meeting. With that, we could have built not just one, but two airplanes.”

We waited another “half-airplane” and only then did the meeting start.

It is time for us to express our endless tardiness in real quantities, for example, in terms of the airplanes of our air force. Then we will sooner become conscious of the economic peril caused by our laxity. Then we will learn to value time and work punctually.

In saving time, we strengthen our industry and fortify our air force.<sup>16</sup>

Note first that this passage introduces at a much earlier moment the same constellation that we saw in Shub’s *Today*, that is, the United States, military preparedness, and the efficient use of the minutes and hours of the day. And although Kerzhentsev has left out the element of pleasure in labor, the silver bullet is still labor organization. The level-headed calculations of the American journalist inspire an epiphany for Kerzhentsev: time could be converted into concrete terms.

---

<sup>16</sup> I have altered the paragraph breaks. The article was originally published in *Pravda* on 18 July 1923. I have taken it from Platon Kerzhentsev, “Vremia Stroit Aeroplany,” *Bor’ba za Vremia* (Moscow: Krasnaia Nov’, 1924): 3. [На одном съезде Советов я сидел рядом с американским журналистом. Заседание, назначенное в 11 ч., до часу еще не начиналось, как это у нас часто бывает. Журналист меня спросил: / – Сколько человек в зале? / – Тысячи три с половиной. / – Среди них много слесарей, токарей, модельщиков? / – Да, вероятно, в зале преобладают рабочие разных специальностей. / Тогда мой американец, что-то черкнув в книжечке, сказал: / – Мы сегодня потеряли 7 тысяч рабочих часов в ожидании начала заседания. При такой затрате рабочей силы можно было построить один, а то и два аэроплана. / Мы прождали еще «с пол-аэроплана», и только тогда заседание началось. / В самом деле, нам пора выражать наши бесконечные запаздывания в каких-то реальных величинах, например в аэропланах нашего воздушного флота. Тогда мы скорее осознаем экономическую гибельность нашей расхлябанности. Тогда мы научимся ценить время и работать с точностью. / Сберегая время, мы усиливаем нашу промышленность, укрепляем наш воздушный флот.]

For someone like Kerzhentsev this realization was appealing for two reasons. Most basically, the idea of transforming something as abstract as time into real things like airplanes was an attractive notion in a country desperately short of material goods. As Kerzhentsev put it, “we are like a Bedouin who finds himself in the desert with one bottle of water,”<sup>17</sup> and organization and efficiency promised survival by making more out of nothing. A second and equally important byproduct of redefining time as concrete in this way was that it made these efficiency measures more acceptable within Marxist terms by ideologically rebranding what had been a suspect commodity. As long as time had been money, it had carried the negative tinge of abstract capitalist speculation. But “it is time to revalue time,” Kerzhentsev argued. “For us, time is a *material* value.”<sup>18</sup>

By the time Kerzhentsev published this article in 1923, his task was to build broad mass support for ideas whose benefit and political correctness had been examined in more elite circles already for several years. He referred to this article and others like it as “agitation in the battle for time.”<sup>19</sup> Later that year as part of the same campaign he founded the journal *Vremia* (Time, fig 84), whose cover Gan designed, and by the end of 1924 his Time League had established nearly eight hundred cells throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> This period coincided with Gan’s crusade for the demonstration of everyday life in cinema. His book *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* came out in the

---

<sup>17</sup> Platon Kerzhentsev, *Bor’ba za vremia* (Moscow: Krasnaia Nov’, 1924). [Мы, как бедуин, очутившийся в пустыне с одной бутылкой воды.]

<sup>18</sup> My emphasis. *Ibid.* [пора произвести переоценку времени] [время является для нас материальной ценностью]

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 3.

<sup>20</sup> The organization was liquidated at the end of 1925. See L. Pamilla and V. Chukovich, *NOT—Velenie vremeni* (Minsk: Belarus’, 1973): 35-36.

summer of 1923, he was involved in numerous public debates throughout 1923 and 1924, and he produced *Island of the Young Pioneers* in the summer of 1924. This concurrence, I will eventually argue, was more than mere temporal coincidence. First, I would like to situate Gan's thinking in relation to the range of positions on labor efficiency and organization that developed between 1918 and Gan's production of the film in 1924.

Taylorist ideas about organizing labor initially occupied an unstable ideological position in the Soviet context, because they had been used in the West primarily with the aim of increasing profits. Lenin had vocally criticized the Taylor system before the war as an essentially capitalist technology of exploitation.<sup>21</sup> When faced with the desperate economy of 1918, he reconsidered his position, issuing a statement in late April suggesting they at least “raise the question” of “what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system,...try it out,” and see if they could “adapt it to [their] own ends.”<sup>22</sup> The next few years saw an extended debate on the socialist potential of Taylor's ideas and prerevolutionary Russian labor-organization studies. By 1920, a Soviet version of the science was rechristened “the scientific organization of labor,” or NOT, and the leading figure—a poet and political organizer among St. Petersburg's metal workers, Aleksei Gastev—founded an institute for NOT's development called the Central Institute of Labor, or TsIT (*Tsentral'nyi institut truda*).

---

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “‘Nauchnaia’ sistema vyzhivaniia pota” (1913) and “Sistema Teilora—poraboshchenie cheloveka mashinnoi” (1914), in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1961): vol. 23, 18-19, and vol. 24, 229-230.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government” (1918), in Lenin, *Collected Works*, trans. Clemens Dutt, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Moscow: Progress, 1965): vol. 27, 257-259.

In simple terms, Gastev's work was based on the categorization of existing factory work into five levels. On one extreme was the most skilled labor, which retained some of the individual creative initiative of an artisanal craft, and on the other was the heavy lifting, work much like Shub's reindeer performed. The goal of Gastev's NOT was to eliminate both ends of this spectrum and expand the center, so that most everyone's job would involve the execution of a standardized and preprogrammed routine. The paradigmatic example was a job like operating a metal-stamping machine, in which both the machine and the most efficient way to operate it could be studied and refined by specialists at a place like TsIT, who could then simply train workers to perform it in the best way. The most obvious advantage to this system for Gastev was that it resulted in greater efficiency in production, thus addressing the country's economic dire straits, but Gastev also emphasized that it would have desirable social byproducts. It would produce the new proletarian subjectivity that all of those Proletkul't agitators were striving to produce through activities like amateur theater. Just as Marx described in *The Grundrisse*, the machine would take over the character previously attributed to the individual human subject, harboring all knowledge and skill.<sup>23</sup> Proletarian subjects would then be free to understand themselves not as bourgeois individuals with their own initiative and interests, but as parts of a whole, or "cogs in a giant machine," as Gastev wrote.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the creation of this new class of cog-subjects relied on the simultaneous creation of a new class of labor scientist-engineers. That was the province

---

<sup>23</sup> I refer to Marx's "Fragment on Machines." See my discussion in chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>24</sup> Aleksei Gastev, "O tendentsiakh proletarskoi kul'tury," *Proletarskaia kultura* 9-10 (June-July 1919): 35-46.

of TsIT.

This last point about the division of labor between workers and specialists was perceived by many as an ideological glitch in Gastev's plan. One figure early to condemn it as fundamentally uncommunist was Aleksandr Bogdanov, who, having written on Taylorism prior to the Revolution, was an important voice in the first years of NOT debate.<sup>25</sup> Gastev's caste system was also duly noted, often in a more opportunistic way, by artists and cultural workers, particularly when in August of 1921 TsIT received state funding for its laboratory research on metal-cutting techniques in the same budgetary restructuring in which funding for arts organizations was cut. The extent to which these allocations of resources were understood as direct tradeoffs is well illustrated by the controversy in the fall of 1921 surrounding the liquidation of the Bolshoi Theater. The head of Narkompros, Anatole Lunacharsky, noted that "every month around two billion rubles is spent to upkeep this theater, which would be enough to hire four thousand schoolteachers."<sup>26</sup>

A phenomenon like Vsevolod Meierkhold's biomechanical acting technique, which may be the most famous example of the incorporation of ideas from NOT within the arts, should probably be understood in this light. He only began developing it after his RSFSR

---

<sup>25</sup> Bogdanov's writings on the scientific organization of labor appeared regularly in the Proletkul't organ *Proletarskaia kul'tura* from the journal's founding in July 1918. He responds to Gastev on this point in Aleksandr Bogdanov, "O tendentsiakh proletarskoi kul'tury (Otvét A. Gastevu)," *Proletarskaia kul'tura* 9-10 (June-July 1919): 46-52.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Tsivian, "Dziga Vertov and His Time": 21.

Theater #1 was condemned as too costly in that same summer of 1921.<sup>27</sup> Although his experiments analyzing actors' movements no doubt resulted in some fascinating artistic insights, the subsequent scholarly confusion over what exactly the purpose of biomechanics was may be due to the fact that it was, first and foremost, a strategy for accessing that upper caste of Gastev's social order.<sup>28</sup> Gan later came to precisely this conclusion about Meierkhold's motivations,<sup>29</sup> and, indeed, it is hard not to read some cynicism into Meierkhold's timing, as well as into statements like "the Taylor system will enable us to act out in one hour what we currently take four hours to present."<sup>30</sup> At the same, time you can hardly blame him. Given the choices offered by Gastev's reorganization of society, which side would you want to be on?

This period was also the one in which constructivism developed its aesthetic of "nothing accidental and nothing unaccounted for,"<sup>31</sup> and concepts like laboratory work and the artist-constructor have to be understood in NOT's terms too. Both concepts have long shaped understandings of early constructivism, proposing that the movement was an

---

<sup>27</sup> The Moscow Soviet decided to close the theater in June 1921. It closed its doors on 6 September. Alma Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1996): 32.

<sup>28</sup> Alma Law and Mel Gordon's book on biomechanics summarizes the scholarly confusion surrounding biomechanics. See Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics*: 1-9.

<sup>29</sup> In 1925, Gan suggested that Meierkhold's affiliation with Lef had been an opportunistic flirtation during the Civil War period, but that he was never a committed advocate. RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Siegfried Zielenski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006): 242.

<sup>31</sup> This phrase originated with Rodchenko. Gan cites it in Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver': Tverskoe izdatel'stvo, 1922): 65. [Ничего случайного, безучетного]

effort to refunction the artist's creative and intuitive approach to material making for practical application in factory production. Most scholars have emphasized that, in comparison to the role of the bourgeois artist, this move transformed the artist into a worker. Yet the artist-constructor was really more of a specialist than a run-of-the-mill factory worker. He was an industrial designer, or a new kind of scientist or engineer (in Russian the word *konstruktor* is also the word for an engineer).<sup>32</sup> Much like Gastev's labor researchers at TsIT, the artist-constructor worked out the best way to make something before passing off the plans to the rank and file. Maria Gough's recent study of Karl Ioganson has finally provided us with a meticulously researched account of one such project. She shows that Ioganson's work as an artist-constructor in the Prokatchik metalworking factory in 1923 extended beyond merely designing individual objects; it also encompassed the design of the production process and the ideological orientation of the workers.<sup>33</sup> Such a job may or may not have been more appealing than the work of a bourgeois artist, but it was certainly a step up from its silent social counterpart, the dutiful worker who executed the artist-constructor's designs. Note also that Boris Groys's much maligned theory—that Soviet social engineering, or the “total art of Stalinism,” was programmed into the avant-garde's earliest aspirations—must be considered correct within the terms of this interpretation.<sup>34</sup> Even if Groys's theory is not true to every facet

---

<sup>32</sup> See especially Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 151-190.

<sup>34</sup> Groys argued that Stalinism should be understood as a total aestheticization of society continuous with the Soviet avant-garde's project of the sublation of art into life. The avant-garde impulse to preserve the absolute agency usually exercised in the organization

of historical reality, it is the logical conclusion to be drawn from a purely theoretical extension of the laboratory and artist-constructor models.

Against this background, Gan's self-identification as a "constructor of mass action" also takes on new historical resonance, beginning to seem like a self-conscious attempt on Gan's part to position himself in parallel to Gastev, who might easily have claimed a similar title. And, indeed, if we look back into Gan's early work, he seems to have been one of Gastev's earliest advocates. His "*Tvorchestvo*" section of the newspaper *Anarkhiia* (Anarchy) was, in May of 1918, one of the first publications to introduce him to a Moscow audience.<sup>35</sup> At that point, Gastev was not yet known as a labor scientist but as a worker poet, and Gan placed nearly a dozen of his poems in *Anarchy* in May and June after hearing about his work through cultural-enlightenment circles.<sup>36</sup> Although Gan did not explicitly link Gastev to Taylorist ideas, it seems likely that there was some connection, since the poems first showed up in *Anarchy* less than two weeks after the publication of Lenin's call to reevaluate the Taylor system.

---

of an autonomous work of art and apply this mode of organization toward "life," or the organization society at large, became the model on which the "total art of Stalinism" was based. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> It may have been the first. Kendall Bailes cites as Gastev's first Moscow publications those appearing in the Proletkul't journal *Proletarskaia kul'tura*, which was founded in July 1918, several months after their publication in *Anarchy*. *Anarchy* also introduces him as if he would be new to the readers. Kendall E. Bailes, "Aleksi Gastev and the Controversy over Taylorism, 1918-1924," *Soviet Studies* 29: 3 (1977): 376.

<sup>36</sup> Rogdai, who was either a close associate of Gan's or a pseudonym, heard about Gastev at the Moscow Conference of Proletarian Cultural Enlightenment Organizations in February 1918. Gan gave a paper on proletarian theater at the same event. Rogdai, "'Bashnia' Alekseia Gasteva," *Anarkhiia* 56 (11 May 1918): 4.

In the one article that Gan authored about Gastev at that time, however, he articulated his investment not in terms of the organization of labor but in those of proletarian culture. According to Gan, Gastev's work was important because, unlike worker poets of the past, his verse did not manifest an oppressed disposition. It also differed from that of bourgeois artists with labor sympathies—he mentions the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier and poet Emile Verhaeren—in that his genius lay not in his artistic mastery, but “in his organic connection to the culture of the ‘world’s millions.’” Gan probably knew very little about Gastev, whose actual background was in the lower rungs of the intelligentsia, but whatever Gastev actually was, what is important for me here is what he represented for Gan at that time, and that was a manifestation of a proletarian culture come out victorious. As a proletarian subject, Gan wrote, “Gastev loves the factory, loves the machine, and cries out with joy and jubilation: ‘We are together’.”<sup>37</sup> He was living proof of the possibility that unalienated labor could feel free and fun.

The labor-organization landscape began to change beginning in July of 1918, at the same time that *Anarchy* was shut down and that Gan temporarily disappeared.<sup>38</sup> Gastev's poetry now appeared in several new print venues, often alongside more specific discussions of Taylorist ideas.<sup>39</sup> For example, the description of Gastev's project that I

---

<sup>37</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Pevets rabocheho udar,” *Anarkhiia* 69 (26 May 1918): 4. [его творческая изобретательность останавливается только перед тем, что органически связано с ним и с той культурой, стоят которую “мировые миллиарды.”] [Гастев любит завод, любит машину, и от радости и торжества кричит: / “Мы вместе.”]

<sup>38</sup> As discussed in chapters 1 and 3, *Anarchy* closed the first week in July of 1918 and records of Gan disappear until December.

<sup>39</sup> For example, in *Proletarskaia kul'tura*, *Tvorchestvo*, and *Vestnik zhizn'*.

gave above was drawn largely from one of his articles appearing in the new Proletkul't journal *Proletarskaia kultura* (Proletarian Culture) in 1919. Even though Meierkhold did not found his biomechanical acting technique until 1921, ideas about labor organization appeared in debates in the theatrical arena already in 1920, and Gan's writing about theater in particular requires situating within the context of NOT. Indeed, what has often been described as Gan's anti-art position is more accurately characterized as a position for the rationalization of labor. For Gan, art was a category of work that had been privileged in bourgeois society, and building a socialist system meant liquidating such positions. This does not mean that he was against artistic experience per se, but he was uncompromising in his opposition to the existence of a privileged class of art professionals. This is why he was involved in amateur theater and forms like mass action that included the entire population.

Gan explained his thinking on this topic in an article published in the fall of 1920. As we saw in chapter 2, this was a period when Gan was participating in debates about the continued value of new revolutionary forms of theater such as mass action. Many assumed that, with the Civil War coming to a close, these mass forms were no longer appropriate and prerevolutionary professional theatrical traditions would resume. Gan began by lodging an accusation against such theatrical restorationists:

[The new revolutionary theater] grows cold from the deathly breath of professional theater's supporters, for whom the routine tasks of our revolutionary day seem to be somebody else's problem.

In one way or another they still accept an ideal of communism, or communism in the ideal, but whatever is heavy and dirty in the struggle for

communism makes their flesh crawl. They rush on to endlessly play and play [or playact and playact] further and further from reality.<sup>40</sup>

Recall from chapter 1 the homonymy of “play” and “playacting” in the Russian word *igra*. Here Gan employs it once again to redefine professional theater workers as shirkers. Unwilling to participate in the difficult labor of building the new republic, they were instead expending their energy in a fight to preserve their own cushy jobs as artists and actors.

Gan continues, presumably speaking on behalf of the mass actionists, by proposing a different relationship toward work and play. He writes,

We don't want to play. We are working seriously on those tasks that advance the conditions of the present moment.

*The path of free labor! That is real living happiness.*

To bring real content to light for “the development of a new social connection, a new discipline of social labor, of a new world-historical structuring of the entire national and then the international economy”—that is the greatest, real and living, earthly freedom [*volia*]. It is the freedom of the communist..., the communist joy of labor that has triumphed.

Not to understand these practical truths is not to understand the real properties and qualities of the proletarian revolution.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Gan published this article twice, first as Aleksei Gan, “Nasha bor’ba,” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (September 7, 1920): 1; and then in 1922 as part of Aleksei Gan, “Bor’ba za massovoe deistvo,” *O teatre* (Tver: Tverskoe izdatel'stvo, 1922): 72. [делается холодно от могильного дыхания сторонников профтеатра, которым чужды очередные задачи нашего революционного дня. / Идеал коммунизма или коммунизм в идеале, еще туда-сюда, они принимают, но грязь и тяжесть борьбы за коммунизм их приводит в содрогание. И они спешат играть и играть без конца, только бы дальше от действительности.]

<sup>41</sup> In the middle of the passage, the quote is from Lenin. Gan, “Nasha bor’ba”: 1. [Мы не хотим играть. Мы работаем серьезно над теми задачами, которые выдвигаются условиями текущего момента. / *Путь свободного труда!—Вот реальное живое счастье.* / Вскрыть действительное содержание при «выработке новой общественной связи, новой дисциплины общественного труда, нового всемирно исторического уклада всего народного, а затем и международного хозяйства,»--вот величайшая, живая, реальная и земная наша воля—воля коммуниста..., ...коммунистической радости торжествующего труда. / Не понимать этих

Gan's practical truths are confusing in the context of a theatrical discourse, but they are straightforward in any other. For Gan, the one essential defining requirement of communism was that everyone be on the same level. This meant that no one could hide in the false compounds of playacting and artwork. All acting and work had to be applied to the dirt and gravity of everyday life. As a model for labor, Gan's total liquidation of art is admittedly less appealing than the idea of the laboratory artist-constructor, which focused on making work more like art, at least for some people. Yet, like the examples from Shub's and Vertov's films, Gan does his best to paint this new socialist labor in positive terms such as happiness, freedom, and joy. His positive characterization is also underwritten by the same argument: that work would feel good once the proletariat had triumphed and was no longer working for anyone other than themselves. As he had initially imagined Gastev feeling, it was possible to love the factory and to love the machine because of this newly lateral mode of social connection—that is, because we are all together.

There are two important qualifications, or clarifications, to what I have just said. First, note that the being-together of Gan's early investment in Gastev contradicted the stratified system that actually resulted from Gastev's scientific organization, and it is important that this went in two directions. Not only did communism eliminate the position of the privileged artist, but it would also eliminate the same sector of work that Gastev's system aimed to increase, that is, the mindless execution of standardized tasks. Second, Gan did not want to eliminate artistic work altogether, but rather to eliminate it

---

практических истин, значит не понимать действительных свойств и качеств пролетарской революции]

as a privileged profession and autonomous realm of pure play. Artistic labor and skills were, after all, crucial to making the films and print objects that we saw in chapters 4 and 5 were crucial tools in the construction of the communist city. Still, the only way to preserve this artistic labor for Gan was to rationalize it, or tie it to society's practical needs and available resources. This was the essence of his constructivist discipline of tectonics, as well as the motivation behind the constructivist valuation of *tselesoobraznost'*, or expediency.

Looking back in 1925 on the reasons for constructivism's founding—in fact, at a meeting organized by Lef with the aim of soliciting organizational advice from Gastev—Gan explicitly positioned constructivism as an attempt to define an alternative to Gastev's system. He explained that the constructivists believed that

In order to make a well-qualified skilled worker who is not torn from life, you have to develop his initiative, so that he is not just a worker whom one orders around... We did not want to play the dummy who just blindly does what he is told. So we decided that our production must connect to the ideology of labor, and we established a first discipline called tectonics. This discipline contained two elements: one element was the ideal ideological structure of the object, but the other was the possibility of executing the object.<sup>42</sup>

Here, Gan acknowledges that the impetus to their founding constructivism was related to wanting to preserve some agency in their work. Yet his gradual migration from the general worker “he” to the personal “we” implies that he saw the constructivists as the

---

<sup>42</sup> RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 37. [Для того, чтобы сделать хорошего квалифицированного мастера не оторванного от жизни, нужно развить его инициативу, нужно, чтобы он не только работникам, которому только заказывают... Мы не хотели играть роль незнаек, которому что ни скажешь он беспрекословно выполнит. Мы решили, что наше производство нужно связать с идеологией общественного производства. Таким образом, у нас была установлена первая дисциплина, которая называлась тектоникой. Эта дисциплина вкропала в себя два начала: одно начал - это та идейная идеологическая постройка такой-то вещи, а другая указывала возможности как произвести эту вещь]

objects of labor organization as much as its engineers. They would not carve out their own job satisfaction at the expense of regular workers. Instead, they would strive to bring all labor into the same balance of agency and responsibility. As artists, this would mean forfeiting the freedom of fully autonomous play by engaging with the demands and limitations of the overall economy, but other kinds of workers would become more engaged in such questions as well. They would become qualified skilled workers with initiative rather than just dummies doing what they were told. This idea was similar to Gastev's system in that it relied on the expansion of a middle ground and the elimination of extremes, but it also accomplished that goal more completely by integrating the role of governance into every worker's job description. Gastev's overclass of specialists was replaced by tectonics: work would be organized through a self-directed collective's best group effort to stand up to the dirt and heft of the task at hand.

In this sense, as in so many others, Gan's thinking was in line with Bogdanov's, who argued that socialist labor and industrialization need not produce a homogeneity of cogs. It would rather expand the number of creative and highly skilled workers, since routine mindless tasks would be increasingly automated and mechanized. Rather than require the direction of specialists, these creative skilled workers would organize themselves. As he wrote in 1919,

The proletarian collective is distinguished and defined by a special organizational bond known as *comradely cooperation*. This is a kind of cooperation in which the roles of organizing and fulfilling are not divided but are combined among the general mass of workers, so that there is no authority by force or unreasoning subordination but a common will which decides, and everyone participates in the fulfillment of a common task. Where work demands the direct supervision of an individual person, there will emerge, instead of authority and force, a comradely recognition of competence. He who in one endeavor was the instructor may then in another follow the directions of a comrade whom he had just been supervising: the

organizer and executor often change places.<sup>43</sup>

Bogdanov's idea of comradely cooperation provides one way to understand Gan's thinking about a nonhierarchical form of labor organization, and one that is applicable to nearly every episode in his career, from his work in amateur proletarian theater and mass action, to the transpersonal and dialogical development of constructivist style, his practice-based pedagogy, and finally to the demonstration of everyday life represented by mass-media forms like journals and films. I have described all of these in earlier chapters as attempts to develop the lateral modes of collective self-organization very much like what Bogdanov describes.

Because Gan's overall project has so many points of intersection with Bogdanov's thinking, it is tempting to simply collapse Gan's work into a relationship of identity with it. Gan's most salient position within the field of film—his advocacy of newsreel-style documentary films such as Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* instead of fiction films—can also be understood in Bogdanovian terms: as I argued in chapter 5, part of his investment in such films was that the wide circulation of the same set of images could serve as a technique for constructing a common subject position, a “concrete human character,” by creating a

---

<sup>43</sup> Bogdanov, “O tendentsiakh proletarskoi kul'tury”: 51. [Пролетарский коллектив отличается и определяется особой организационной связью, которая называется *товарическим сотрудничеством*. Это такое сотрудничество, в котором организаторская и исполнительская роль не разъединены, а связаны в общей совокупности работников, так что нет властного авторитета и не рассуждающего подчинения, а есть общая воля, которая решает,—и участие каждого в выполнении общего дела. Где же работа требует прямого руководства отдельного лица, там вместо авторитета и власти выступает товарищески признаваемая компетентность; и тот, кто в одном деле был инструктором, в другом может в сейчас же следовать указаниям товарища, которым только что руководил: организатор и исполнитель часто меняются местами]

common viewing experience.<sup>44</sup> It was a technical means of building Bogdanov's comradely cooperation by producing a virtual experience of being together.

Yet Gan's thinking about labor organization also had something in common with the calculations proposed by Kerzhentsev in his "Time Builds Airplanes," and we have at least as much evidence to connect Gan to Kerzhentsev as we have for linking him to Bogdanov: Gan and Kerzhentsev were both involved in worker-peasant theater after the Revolution and Gan designed the cover for the journal *Time* in 1923. Furthermore, Kerzhentsevian logic emerges particularly prominently in Gan's thinking about the cinema industry during the same period that Kerzhentsev was waging his battle for time in 1923. Before I go on to elaborate, let me point out that although Kerzhentsev's attempt to build broad support for labor rationalization had something in common with Bogdanov's vision, he also explicitly defined his position as separate from Bogdanov's. While this move may have been merely political, one can also note substantive differences. Kerzhentsev's campaign related to Bogdanov's in its attempt to wrest the project of rationalizing labor from the hands of specialists and make it the concern of a budding comradely cooperative. But Kerzhentsev's group was less concerned with making labor more creative and fulfilling than with more traditional labor concerns such as improving working conditions and wages. Kerzhentsev also separated his group from Gastev and TsIT on the same issues, complaining that TsIT's methods of scientific observation were too abstracted from the real concerns of everyday life and that gains made by more efficient labor should be applied toward raising wages and shortening

---

<sup>44</sup> Aleksei Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!* (Moscow: Press V. N. Pozniakova, 1923): 12. [конкретной человеческой личности]

working hours rather than invested in industrial expansion, as was Gastev's recommendation.<sup>45</sup>

My point here is not to define Gan as Kerzhentsevian rather than Bogdanovite, but to show that, by the fall of 1923, the field of labor organization was defined by a number of interrelated but distinct positions, each with its own aims, interests, and perspective. Gan's thinking can be tied to Bogdanov's project of creating comradely cooperation, but it is also related to the economic equations of Kerzhentsev, and even Gastev. A hard-nosed economic perspective was somewhat in evidence in the passage on theater that I cited earlier, but Gan became more explicit about it as he began to apply his labor ideas to the film industry in 1923.<sup>46</sup> For, if one half of his argument for the demonstration of everyday life was that it would create a new social bond across distances, then the other, more prosaic half was it was much more economical than building sets and hiring professional actors. As he wrote, "human material (live nature), [is] the cheapest and most unique kind."<sup>47</sup> This had been proven, Gan pointed out, in the years of extreme material poverty following the Revolution, when newsreel film thrived and fiction film completely died out.<sup>48</sup> All of those sets, props, writers, directors, and

---

<sup>45</sup> Gastev was nominally on the editorial board of *Time*, but, as Kendall Bailes has noted, the relationship was fraught. Bailes, "Alekssei Gastev and the Controversy over Taylorism": 388-390.

<sup>46</sup> Note that Ioganson also entered the factory in 1923. Gough, *The Artist as Producer*: 151-190.

<sup>47</sup> Alekssei Gan, "Kino avangard," *Kino-Fot 2* (8-15 September 1922): 1. [человеческий материал (живая натура), самый дешевый и единственный.]

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

actors were expensive, but all one needed to make a film of everyday life was a man with a movie camera.

The economic conservatism of the newsreel, which had dominated by default during the Civil War years, required a more complex set of motivating justifications after the economy began to revive and people became interested in making art films again. Lenin's Directive on Cinema Affairs of January 1922, which declared cinema to be the most important of the arts, seemed to offer would-be filmmakers encouragement, as well as specific license to work on fiction films.<sup>49</sup> In the directive, Lenin mentioned that a certain percentage of films might be produced as pure entertainment in order to get the masses in the door, where they would also see propaganda films. This idea was eventually interpreted as a more precise production quota: the percentage of fiction films and newsreels should be seventy-five and twenty-five, respectively. This was referred to as the Leninist proportion.<sup>50</sup>

Yet the reality of the early twenties was that resources were still too scarce, or still too needed elsewhere, to allow for much domestic film production. The state provided little funding for their film agency, Goskino, assuming that the industry could be largely self-sustaining and possibly even a source of revenue for the state.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in 1922, most of the films on offer in Moscow cinemas were reedited foreign and prerevolutionary

---

<sup>49</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "Directive on Cinema Affairs" (17 January 1922), in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, trans. Richard Taylor (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 56.

<sup>50</sup> Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, *The Film Factory*: 53.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* Trotsky suggested that it might be a money-making venture for the state, on the model of the Tsarist monopoly on vodka, in Lev Trotsky, "Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema," in *The Film Factory*: 94-97.

films,<sup>52</sup> and a year after Lenin's directive, in January 1923, a report in *Pravda* observed that "as far as our own film production is concerned, it is on a level close to nothing."<sup>53</sup> The first half of 1923 saw a series of desperate efforts to get the industry off the ground. Many film companies held competitions for new scripts on socialist themes,<sup>54</sup> and the state's cinema branch, Goskino, privatized parts of production and distribution with the idea that it would be easier to attract foreign capital and ensure that *something* was produced, even if it was only escapist commercial films.<sup>55</sup> Yet, these competition-based strategies created their own problems: Goskino lost the only advantage it ever had, its monopoly, and had to compete with other agencies to purchase supplies and foreign films,<sup>56</sup> and the script competitions resulted in the production of a lot of redundant material.

By the fall of 1923, the general perception of the industry was that it was hopelessly entangled by a mess of cross-purposes. The impression was aptly communicated in a way resonant with the terms of this chapter by a cartoon published in September (fig 158).

---

<sup>52</sup> Gan comments on this in Aleksei Gan, "Pervoe," *Kino-Fot* 3 (September 1922): 1. Also see Richard Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema, 1917-1929* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 75-76.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema*: 75.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Kino-Sever announced competitions for scripts on "contemporary family relations" and "historical subjects" in March. Another solicited scripts on "world revolution and class war" and "against the opiates of capital, religion, alcoholism, and class collaboration." VUFKU held a competition for scripts on the "romantic heroic struggle of the proletariat in the international fight of labor with capital," and a Vladivostok organization solicited scripts about the Komsomol. V. I. Fomin, ed., *Letopis' rossiiskogo kino, 1863-1929* (Moscow: Materik, 2004): 403, 409, 411.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema*: 75-77. Also see the list of attempts to attract foreign investment in Fomin, *Letopis' rossiiskogo kino*: 407.

<sup>56</sup> Article of 19 July 1923 in *Pravda*. Cited in Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema*: 77.

The Soviet film industry is depicted as a cart with various anthropomorphized animals pulling in different directions.<sup>57</sup> The quotation at the top is from the head of Narkompros, Anatole Lunacharsky: “It took a lot of effort just to get the cart moving.” The caption beneath reads, “And yet this is where the cart is now.”<sup>58</sup> An article in *Pravda* presented a similar conclusion, writing that “although we are short of both means and personnel, we could nevertheless do many times more than we are doing at the moment if we were to work in an agreed and friendly manner, according to a single plan.”<sup>59</sup> In August, the privatization scheme was reevaluated and more state funding allocated to Goskino.<sup>60</sup> At meetings on 4 and 11 September, a commission known as the Mantsev commission was formed to make a study of the situation and come up with a plan to rationalize and centralize production.<sup>61</sup> Debates on the question continued through the fall.

This was the atmosphere into which Gan launched his campaign for frugality in filmmaking. His *Long Live the Demonstration of Life!* came out around the same time that the Mantsev commission formed,<sup>62</sup> and it seems plausible that it was with an eye to

---

<sup>57</sup> The animals refer to figures in the cinema world. For example, the swan probably refers to Nikolai Lebedev, a historian and film journalist who also edited *Proletkino* (*lebed'* means swan).

<sup>58</sup> Published in *Kino-Gazeta* 1 (11 September 1923): 1.

<sup>59</sup> Article of 19 July 1923 in *Pravda*. Cited in Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema*: 77.

<sup>60</sup> Fomin, *Letopis' rossiiskogo kino*: 412. The cartoon may refer to the situation that immediately followed this reorganization rather than to the era of privatization, but for my purposes it is valid as a general characterization.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema*: 77-78.

<sup>62</sup> The first review of the book that I have seen is Boris G., “Aleksei Gan o byte,” *Zrelishcha* 54 (26 September 1923): 13. The earliest the book could have come out is late May 1923, when Vertov’s sixteenth *Kino-Pravda* came out.

influencing the Mantsev commission's central plan that Gan forwarded the copy now in the Russian State Library to Trotsky,<sup>63</sup> particularly considering Trotsky had only just published his paean to the socio-economic value of cinema, "Vodka, the Church, and Cinema," in July.<sup>64</sup> Gan's book argued for the development of a film industry based on the use of that cheapest and most unique of materials, everyday life, and it pointed to the sixteen existing issues of Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* as proof of the viability of the form within difficult circumstances. As he wrote, "In the one year of its existence, *Kino-Pravda* has showed us...sixteen experiments, sixteen examples, sixteen models for a new form of Soviet cinema. All of these experiments are constructed on live human material from the active revolutionary environment." While everyone "all around... was crying out about how we need artistic revolutionary scripts,...the modest workers of *Kino-Pravda* strove to create a new type, a new form of film, not out of fiction but out of fact."<sup>65</sup> Amidst an industry seemingly stymied by objective conditions, the demonstration of everyday life was so economically viable that it already existed.

That fall and the following spring were packed with a series of debates, both live and in the press, on what sort of cinema the central plan should pursue. A cover of

---

<sup>63</sup> As I pointed out in chapter 5, the cover of the book (fig 113) is inscribed "to Comrade Trotsky" in handwriting similar to Gan's.

<sup>64</sup> Trotsky, "Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema": 94-97.

<sup>65</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 2. [Таких шестнадцать опытов, шестнадцать примеров, шестнадцать образцов новых форм советской кинематографии показала нам «Кино-Правда,» за год своего существования. Все эти опыты построены на живом человеческом материале революционно-действующей среды. Не на вымыслах, а на были,...пытались искренние работники «Кино-Правды» создать новый вид, новую форму кино-картины...*Вокруг...все...кричали: нам необходим художественный революционный сценарий.*]

*Zrelishcha* (Shows) advertised one such event (fig 159), and gives some sense of the format of these discussions. It bills the evening as a screening of films of “all times, styles, forms, and kinds,” followed by a debate among filmmakers and cinema administrators, among whom were Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Aleksandr Razumnyi, Vertov, and Gan, who is billed at the lower edge of the page as the representative of the constructivists. This type of event was known as “discussional,” and although often marked by polemical and combative argument, they were intended to dialogically narrow in on a common plan or approach, much as I argued in chapter 4 the discussions of the First Working Group of Constructivists did for the development of constructivist style.

The same issue of *Zrelishcha* was also largely comprised of articles by and about Gan in which he pushed his agenda for economic common sense in filmmaking. In the first, he assessed the current situation:

It is difficult to predict how the objective conditions with which [Soviet cinema] has to contend will shape up.

For the time being, I can only fear that efforts are not being directed beneficially. Here’s why.

The cinema business is extremely complicated, with a whole set of industrial, technical, and chemical processes.

We are desperately impoverished in this sense. All our hopes are “across the border” [*za-granitsu*].

Furthermore, until now, a huge role has been played in the film industry by elements that are essentially unproductive artistic personnel.

When it comes to cinema production in the technical sense, they only talk, think, and dream...

Art films are made, film dramas are purchased on the outside market, societies and departments are organized, scripts rain down like hail.

The general frame of mind is to make one’s own “high-art” film, a revolutionary art film, an agitational art film, a united and indivisible film, again, an art film, a film artistic to the point of oblivion. No matter what you do, this frame of mind is going to produce art films.

Huh? What? How did that happen?

It’s a mystery! [*neizvestno*]

Let it remain a mystery! That's how we get mystery art film...  
 Isn't it time to seriously think about the apparatus, about the chemicals, in short, about the things that actually really need to be developed in Soviet cinema? And isn't it time to activate live human nature, the heroes of our real everyday life?<sup>66</sup>

Here Gan addresses the assumption that getting the cinema industry off the ground meant installing a full-scale studio with actors, directors, scripts, and feature fiction films. He argues that in their current climate they needed to focus resources, both human and material, on the technical basics. In short, he was asking people to confront the current conditions with a sober mind. Just as time wasted was an airplane lost and every performance at the Bolshoi was a teacher unpaid, everyone needed to come to grips with the math and understand a basic fact: you couldn't have your art cinema and eat too.

This economic argument was the second foundation to Gan's thinking about the cinematic demonstration of everyday life. He was not necessarily promising that this plan

---

<sup>66</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Nakanune kino sezona," *Zrelishcha* 54 (26 September 1923): 12. [Трудно предсказать, как сложатся объективные условия, в которых ей придется развиваться. / Пока-что можно только опасаться в смысле того, что общее настроение направлено не в ее пользу. И вот почему. / Кино-дело чрезвычайно сложное предприятие, разделяющееся на целый ряд индустриально-технических и химических производств. / В этом отношении мы бедны до отчаяния. Все наши надежды и упования на «за-границу.» / Кроме того в кино-деле до сих пор играет огромную роль непродуманный по существу элемент, называемый художественным персоналом. / О кино-промышленности в ее техническом понимании у нас еще только говорят, думают, мечтают... / Ставятся художественные кино-картины, закупаются на внешнем рынке кино-драмы, организуются отделы и общества, градом сыпятся сценарии. / Общее настроение – делать свою «высоко-художественную» революционно-художественную, агитационно-художественную, единую, неделимую, опять художественную, до бесчувствия художественную, во что бы то ни стало именно художественную кинематографию. / Чем? Откуда? Из чего? / Неизвестно! / Пусть будет неизвестно! Так и делается неизвестно-художественная кинематография. / ... Не время ли серьезно подумать об аппаратуре, об химикалии – словом о том, из чего собственно фактически должна развиваться советская кинематография? / Не пора ли активизировать живую человеческую натуру, героев нашего реального быта?]

would be more joyful or more fulfilling; he was just asking people to put two and two together and understand that some concessions would have to be made. This attitude, needless to say, did not win him many friends among those struggling to find funding for their art films. Essentially, he was campaigning to put a lot of people out of good jobs. These politics probably motivated a good deal of the ridicule in the contemporary press aimed toward Gan and Vertov. Gan was characterized as a “master of self-promotional matters,” and his project as “the demonstration of stupidity.”<sup>67</sup> Vertov’s group of cameramen—who called themselves “kinoks,” a term combining cinema (*kino*) and oc-  
 as in oculur—were redubbed kinococcus, that is, a kino-bacteria plaguing the industry.<sup>68</sup> An account of Gan’s and Vertov’s appearance at a public screening and debate in the fall of 1923 described both as clownish naysayers: the man on stage was “not Gan, but a hooli-Gan,” and Vertov just repeated “Down with this! Down with that!” (*Doloi! Doloi! Doloi!*), “downing” (*doloil*) everything so that he would not have to formulate a real opinion.<sup>69</sup>

Vertov was one of the few people in the cinema industry who stood to gain from Gan’s plan, and in the months of their being jointly attacked in the press and in public debates the two became very closely associated. Vertov later cited Gan as his only

---

<sup>67</sup> “Obzor pechati,” *Kino-Gazeta* 3 (25 September 1923): 2; and V. E., “Demonstratsiia gluposti,” *Kino-Gazeta* 3 (25 September 1923): 2.

<sup>68</sup> Aleksandr Anoshchenko, “Kinokoki,” in *Lines of Resistance*: 90-92.

<sup>69</sup> Pingvin, “Malen’kii Fel’eton. Kino-Dispute 26-go sentibria,” *Kino-Gazeta* 4 (3 October 1923): 2. The pun on Gan’s name is probably meant to refer to Gan’s reputation for heavy drinking. *Gon* is related to the word for distilling spirits (e.g., home-distilled liquor is called *samogon*, or self-distilled. Lavrientiev notes that friends jokingly called him “Vinogan.” Aleksandr Lavrentiev, “Zagadki Alekseia Gana,” *Da* 2-3 (1995): 9.

champion during these years,<sup>70</sup> he attended the first meeting of the second incarnation of the First Working Group of Constructivists in December 1923, and Gan continued to write in support of him in the press in the spring, when they also appeared at several more public debates as the representatives of non-art cinema.<sup>71</sup> How this close alliance was transformed into bitter enmity during the summer of 1924 will be the subject for the next section, as I finally examine Gan's *Island of the Young Pioneers*.

### ***ISLAND OF THE YOUNG PIONEERS***

Gan's rise and fall as a filmmaker hinged on his one major film project, *Island of the Young Pioneers*. When it premiered on 22 September 1924, it was billed as a demonstration of the everyday life of the Young Pioneers from the Bauman neighborhood in Moscow,<sup>72</sup> but it was also a demonstration of a new approach to filmmaking that was simultaneously a new approach to the rationalization of labor. As such, it seems to have largely fallen on deaf ears, perplexing not only those predisposed to oppose Gan, but also potential advocates such as Vertov. According to contemporary reviews, the crux of the controversy was that Gan had based the film on a script. After all of his championing of documentary and ranting against playacting, Gan had essentially

---

<sup>70</sup> Dziga Vertov, "On *Kino-Pravda*," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 43.

<sup>71</sup> Proletkino invited them to screen their films at a coming gathering in April. Ol., "V studii Proletkino," *Zrelishcha* 83-84 (27 April-4 May 1924): 16. They appeared together again at a public debate on 9 June 1924. And Gan wrote on Vertov in Aleksei Gan, "Recognition for the *Kinocs*," in *Lines of Resistance*: 64-65.

<sup>72</sup> The Young Pioneers was a Soviet youth organization, modeled on the Boy Scouts, founded in spring of 1922.

employed the Young Pioneers as actors in a dramatized version of their own everyday life. In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to make some sense of Gan's decision to produce such a film by reconstructing the circumstances surrounding its creation, focusing in particular on its role in Gan's relationship with Vertov. This reading of the film will provide a final way of understanding the conjunction of art and labor in Gan's thinking.

Let's start by laying out the controversy surrounding the film's reception. One reviewer noted in response to *Island's* premiere that given Gan's two years of polemics, his onus was to prove that his idea for the demonstration of everyday life was both possible and desirable.<sup>73</sup> In that, he concluded, Gan had failed. Gan had produced "a rather carefully made, dramatized newsreel." It was not exactly bad, but it was also no different than any art film, with a script, actors, and a director. The last of these, the reviewer was intent on emphasizing, was the "uncompromising" Gan himself.<sup>74</sup> Other reviews applauded the pioneer theme and its Soviet tone, free from the bourgeois notes and arty cinematography of "salon" and detective films, but they found Gan's treatment superficial. It was too staged to be real, not organized enough to be dramatic, and, most importantly considering Gan's claims, it did not show the actual everyday life of the Young Pioneers.<sup>75</sup> With regard to the last point, the nail on the coffin came in the form of statements to that effect by actual Young Pioneers, which were published in multiple

---

<sup>73</sup> V. E., "Ostrov iunikh pionerov," *Kino-Gazeta* 56 (30 September 1924): 2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> X. X., "Iuniye pionery," *Izvestiia* (24 September 1924): 6; Boris Gusman, review of *Ostrov iunikh pionerov*, *Pravda* (24 September 1924): 5; I., "Iunye pionery (fil'ma Proletkino)," *Vecherniaia Moskva* 218 (23 September 1924): 3.

venues under the headline “Young Pioneers against Film about Them.”<sup>76</sup> After all of Gan’s criticism of actors and scripts, it is difficult to think of an accusation more damning.

Some part of this negative reception can be attributed to the animosity that had accumulated toward Gan and his anti-art invective. Yet the assessment that the film was scripted and directed does seem to have been an honest one. It is corroborated by Gan’s own writing about the film, as well as the intertitles that have been preserved in the Proletkino archive. Indeed, Gan straightforwardly announced its staged aspects in its first intertitle, which reads,

A film [*kino-kartina*] from the everyday life of young Leninists. In episodes with performances [*s igrami*]. The episodes are taken from the life of the Pioneers of the Bauman neighborhood. The performances [*igry*] are taken from a script by Vladimir Verevkin. Directed by Aleksei Gan [*stavil Aleksei Gan*]. Filmed by Mikhail Vladimirkii.<sup>77</sup>

In choosing the word *kino-kartina*, Gan characterized *Island* as a moving “picture” in the sense of a painting rather than in the sense of a “cinematograph,” or a record of reality sampled via a semi-scientific device. And after all of the insults he had thrown at playacting, or *igra*, it is striking that he used the word twice in this introductory description. The film was a series of performances, or “episodes with *igrami*.” Thus, even if the press was particularly eager to point out the contradictions between Gan’s practice

---

<sup>76</sup> “Iunye pionery protiv kartiny o nikh,” *Rabochii zritel'* 24 (26 October 1924): 21; “Iunye pionery protiv kartiny o nikh,” *Kino-Gazeta* 61 (4 November 1924): 2.

<sup>77</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, ll. 8-9. [Кино-картина из быта юных ленинцев. В эпизодах с играми. Эпизоды взяты из жизни пионеров Бауманского района. Игры по сценарию Влайдмра Веревкина. Ставил Алексей Ган. Снимал Михаил Владиморский.]

and his preaching, those contradictions were real and explicitly stated. It seemed that when given the opportunity to make his own pioneer art film, Gan had sold out.

Gan was well aware that the film would draw this criticism, but his writings about it suggest that he himself understood it to be an uncompromising experiment in the same project of rationalizing artistic labor that he had been advocating all along. As he explained in the issue of *Proletkino* that came out before the film's premiere,

In *Island of the Pioneers*, I uncompromisingly carried out the fundamental tasks of constructivism: the practical realization of forms of rationalized artistic labor in cinema.

What does this mean?

Above all, it means that I constructed a true cinema-object not on everyday life, but out of everyday life...No less important, [I] activated living and functioning nature..., live human material...There is not a whiff in any of my work...of professional acting...

Let my opponents talk, let my allies send condolences—allegedly I have strayed from the intended path. Not true.

The only truth is that I managed to go from words to deeds.

The deed, which is transmitting ideology, demands tactics.

*Island of the Pioneers* is the first tactical step in the victory of constructivism in the cinema sector of the united front of artistic labor.<sup>78</sup>

This passage suggests that Gan's campaign against art film was an effort to rationalize cinematic labor, which is to say, to economize by eliminating paid artistic personnel. Pre-

---

<sup>78</sup> It is unclear why Gan omits "Young" from the title in this article. I have altered the paragraph breaks. Aleksei Gan, "Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta," *Proletkino* 4-5 (August 1924): 18. [В «Остров пионеров» я непоколебимо проводил основные задачи конструктивизма,--практически осуществляя формы рационализации художественного труда в кинематографии. / Что это значит? / Прежде всего, это значит, что я настоящую кино-вещь строил не на быте, а из быта... / ...не менее важное, что проводилось мною в этой работе,—это активизация живой и действующей природы...живой человеческий материал...Во всей вещи у меня и не пахло профессиональным духом всемогущего актерства. / Пусть говорят мои противники, пусть соболезнают мои союзники, будто вы я отказался от намеченных путей,—это не верно. / Верно только одно. Я от слов съумел притти к делу. / Дело, проводящее идеологию, требует тактики. / «Остров пионеров»--первый тактический шаг к победе конструктивизма на кинематографическом участке единого фронта художественного труда.]

premiere promotional materials echoed Gan's emphasis on the fact that no professional actors had been employed to make the film. Only amateurs—Pioneers, Komsomol members,<sup>79</sup> and workers—had participated.<sup>80</sup> The Pioneers were “used by the filmmaker as actively functioning live material, thanks to which he was able to document contemporary life for the screen.”<sup>81</sup> While everyone else had interpreted the Leninist proportion as license to seek financing for new art films, Gan had gone straight for deeds, proving that a seventy-five percent fiction film could be made on a shoestring if labor was free.

As Gan predicted, his opponents did talk, and his ally Vertov did too. In an article of 21 October, Vertov condemned his former colleague, beginning by reiterating his own anti-art position in the same terms that Gan had utilized the year before: “The very term ‘art’ is counter-revolutionary in essence,” he wrote, “since it shelters a whole caste of privileged people.” But then he went on to separate himself from Gan's more recent polemics and film, writing that

In destroying...the term “art,” we should not, of course, bring it back in another form, let's say under the sauce of “artistic labor.”

*What is Aleksei Gan's mistake?*

The fundamental mistake made by the official opponent of art, Aleksei Gan, is that, in turning away from the “professional spirit of omnipotent acting,”

---

<sup>79</sup> The Komsomol, or the Communist Union of Youth (*Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhi*), was the slightly older version of the Young Pioneers established in 1918. Members were age fourteen to twenty-eight.

<sup>80</sup> “Pionery na ekrane,” *Vecherniaia Moskva* 217 (22 September 1924): 3; and Nikolai Iudin, “Proizvodstvo Proletkino. Ostrov iunyh pionerov,” *Proletkino* 4-5 (August 1924): 17-18.

<sup>81</sup> Iudin, “Proizvodstvo Proletkino. Ostrov iunyh pionerov”: 18. [использован постановщиком, как живой и активно-действующий материал, благодаря которому осуществлена возможность фиксации для экрана современного быта.]

he forces Pioneers to be actors, under the slogan of “the rationalization of artistic labor.”

Gan’s fundamental mistake is that, in overcoming the bureaucratic formalism of criticism, he “inveigles the perfectly innocent Young Pioneers into art...”

We, of course, would prefer dry newsreel to the interference of a script into daily life and into the work of the people living on our planet...

We do not prevent anyone else from living.

We only film facts, and we transmit them through the screen into the consciousness of the workers. We consider our chief task to be explaining the world as it is.<sup>82</sup>

From our present-day perspective, it would be tempting to conclude that Aleksei Gan’s fundamental mistake was to replace a caste of privileged workers with what amounted to unpaid child labor. Yet the labor exploitation aspect does not seem to have been Vertov’s primary concern. His problem with Gan’s scheme was that he was intervening in everyday life, tainting the perfectly innocent and artless Pioneers by drawing them into participation in a scripted performance. Vertov swore instead that he would first do no harm. He would not meddle in the facts, but objectively reflect them as they were.

Part of the force driving Vertov’s censure of Gan no doubt issued from his having staked a large part of his reputation on the objectivity of his own approach to filmmaking. The kinoks’ method was to go out into everyday life with a simple camera and without an elaborate crew. I cited this spare means as a money-saving measure above, but it also had the advantage of making the cameraman agile and inconspicuous, enabling him to “catch life unawares,” as the kinok slogan put it. The appeal of this approach was that it minimized subjective mediation by the filmmaker. The kinok was not an artist with a particular vision, but a mere operator of the machinic “cinema-eye” (*kino-glaz*). The

---

<sup>82</sup> I have altered the translation slightly. Dziga Vertov, “An Answer to Five Questions,” in *Lines of Resistance*: 92-95.

latter, and thus also the former, was able to record bits and pieces of everyday life with an impartiality impossible for subjective human eyes, thereby producing “a communist decoding of...the world as it is.”<sup>83</sup> Vertov’s montage of these fragments was often inventive, sometimes to the point where he was criticized for using too many confusing formalist cinematic tricks, but the authenticity of the images themselves was key to the integrity of the project. Indeed, he compared the movie camera to other optical devices for scientific observation, such as the microscope and telescope.<sup>84</sup> This point has also been foundational to his reputation in later scholarship. For example, in Yuri Tsivian’s introduction to his recent collection of Vertov documents, he takes for granted that the occasional purpose-shot footage that appears in most of Vertov’s films was a compromise with his otherwise “unbending stand” on the issue.<sup>85</sup>

Another compelling force behind Vertov’s protest may have been that Vertov himself was about to release a film that could easily have been charged with the same crime for which Gan and his *Island* were then being crucified. He published the statement quoted above on 21 October, only ten days before the release of his own first feature-length film *Kino-Eye* (*Kino-Glaz*). In his writings about *Kino-Eye*, Vertov explicitly pointed to its microscope-like observation as the point on which the film differed from

---

<sup>83</sup> Dziga Vertov, “Kino-Eye,” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*: 66.

<sup>84</sup> Dziga Vertov, “An Introductory Speech before a Showing of the First Part of *Kino-Eye*,” in *Lines of Resistance*: 99.

<sup>85</sup> Tsivian, “Dziga Vertov and His Time”: 15.

Gan's scripted effort.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, most reviewers noted what is obvious when one watches the film: that many of Vertov's scenes also appear staged. As one reviewer wrote,

Dziga Vertov rejects fiction films, and with them the need for the participation in a film of actors, a director, and a scriptwriter. And yet, as one might expect, most of the scenes in his *Kino-Eye* are staged (true, not by professional actors, but that's not important). This staging is carried out more subtly than in the work of Aleksei Gan, but any filmmaker can see it. If there is staging, then there is a director. That role is played by Dziga Vertov, who is always hiding behind his kino-eye.

But the film does lack one essential pivot of the feature film: there is no theme, plot, or script. And that is precisely the weakest aspect of the film.

The film was intended to provide a "demonstration of daily life," "life caught unawares," but...instead...we have a cinematographic *kunstkamera*.<sup>87</sup>

In calling the film a *kunstkamera*, the reviewer was likely referring to the cinematographic stunts for which Vertov was often criticized, such as unusual camera angles and the famous sequences where he runs the film backwards.<sup>88</sup> But the primary criticism here is the same as that of Gan's *Island*: *Kino-Eye* was a bad art film. It was not quite as obviously staged as Gan's, but its bigger problem was that it was not staged and scripted enough. In this light, it appears that Vertov's rejection of Gan may have been a case of protesting too much. His attempt to distance himself after the negative reception of *Island* was prophylactic damage control before his own film's release.

---

<sup>86</sup> Vertov made this point in the article of 21 October and in his introductory speech at the film's preliminary screening on 13 October. Vertov, "An Introductory Speech before a Showing of the First Part of *Kino-Eye*": 99-103.

<sup>87</sup> I have altered the translation slightly. Vladimir Erofeev, "Kino-Eye," in *Lines of Resistance*: 105-106.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Boris Gusman, "On *Kino-Eye*" (15 October 1924), in *Lines of Resistance*: 104-105.

There were some other obvious similarities between Gan's and Vertov's films that might have caused Vertov to feel particularly vulnerable to the comparison. Most obviously, *Kino-Eye* was also structured around the activities of the Young Pioneers. Indeed, the scenes featuring Pioneers are the ones that appear most to be staged. They function to shape the film into more pointed thematic episodes than a straight newsreel could hope to achieve. For example, in the sequence where the Pioneers go into a local café and confront its patrons about the hazard to society represented by drinking and smoking—apparently they increase the risk of contracting tuberculosis—the patrons might plausibly be candid examples of “life caught unawares,” but surely the Pioneer girl who asks for donations to the tuberculosis fund and the children who hover in the windows above the café's garden, dropping fliers down on the men drinking below, have been coordinated in some way by Vertov (see fig 160). This is also true in the sequence where the Pioneers go into the local market and query the merchants as to their prices (fig 161). Vertov seems to have mixed Pioneer actor-participants with undirected bystanders. The nature of the artistry involved in this strategy is particularly well illustrated in figure 161h, where the woman identified earlier as one of the Pioneers' mothers gone to the market to buy meat stands out against a sea of regular shoppers because of her white shirt and head scarf. Except for the costuming choice, the shot appears entirely candid.

In addition to their common focus on Pioneers, Vertov's and Gan's films contained some similar themes, and possibly also similar settings. The intertitles and reviews of *Island* refer to episodes where the Young Pioneers confront the social issue of

alcoholism, as Vertov did in the café sequence, as well as homelessness,<sup>89</sup> which is another theme that makes a brief appearance in *Kino-Eye*. While it is impossible to know for sure, parts of the two films may have shot in the same locations. According to an account by Shub's daughter, Anna Konopleva, the bulk of *Island* was shot at a Pioneer camp on the banks of the Moscow River near Zvenigorod where she herself was a camper that summer,<sup>90</sup> and one of the intertitles in *Kino-Eye* specifies that the Pioneers take a boat "upriver to the village of Sannikovo," a small town about seven miles from Zvenigorod. Thus, they were at least shot in relatively close geographic proximity. Footage from a location identifiable from *Kino-Eye*'s diving scene appeared in a film on which Gan worked later that year, a newsreel entitled *Delegation of English Trade-Unionists in the USSR* (*Delegatsiia angliskikh tred'iunionov v SSSR*). Part of its second reel illustrates a trade-unionist's speech on socialist culture with summer scenes of adults diving, as well as Pioneers swimming, running, and boating. These summer scenes could not have been collected during the period when the English trade unionists were actually visiting (November). Therefore it had to have been refunctioned footage from somewhere, quite plausibly *Island*.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 8; and Iudin, "Proizvodstvo Proletkino. Ostrov iunikh pionerov": 17-18.

<sup>90</sup> Zvenigorod is a small town thirty miles west of Moscow. Konopleva, "Aleksii Mikhailovich Gan": 214.

<sup>91</sup> According to a form on which Gan enumerated the film projects in which he had participated, he worked on five films altogether, which he listed in shorthand as *Young Pioneers*, *The 7<sup>th</sup> October*, *Trade Unions*, *Communications* (*Sviaz'*), and *Hello Kadrona* (RGALI f. 675, op. 2, d. 139, l. 1). *Communications* most likely refers to the film I mentioned earlier, *In the Battle for Time and Space* (*V bor'be za vremia i prostranstvo*), which was commissioned by The Central Committee for Communications. *The 7<sup>th</sup> October* and *Trade Unions* were probably two newsreel-style films currently preserved at

Taking these similarities as a point of departure, I would like to consider in the next part of my argument that Gan and Vertov may have produced the two films in tandem as parallel experiments in the development of a new mode of filmmaking. We know that the films were made during the same period, the summer of 1924, and a later letter from Vertov to Shub suggests that they were connected on some basic logistical levels. Evidently, it was Vertov who had presented Gan with the possibility of them both making a film. He donated part of his own Goskino budget to Gan's project and convinced his brother, the cameraman Mikhail Kaufman, to shoot both films simultaneously. The only condition upon which he had insisted, according to the letter, was that Gan not use a script.<sup>92</sup> There are numerous equally plausible ways of interpreting these bits and pieces of evidence, and in a sense it does not matter which is correct. The value of the speculative exercise lies in setting up a comparison that will further elucidate the specificities of Gan's constructivist approach.

That said, everything that we know of Gan and Vertov's joint activities in the year leading up to their films would be consistent with the idea of parallel experiments. As we have seen, they participated in a series of debates designed to dialogically evolve a Soviet

---

RGAKFD under the titles *The Seventh Anniversary of the October Revolution* (Jaia godovshchina Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii, 1924) and *Delegation of English Trade-Unionists in the USSR* (Delegatsiia angliskikh tred'unionov v SSSR, 1925). A note in the Proletkino archive suggests that *Delegation* was edited by a Comrade Korak (GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 70). The footage of the Congress of Trade Unions, which comprises the first part of the film, was attributed to a cameraman named Liubimovyi, and the footage of the English trade-unionists' excursion through the USSR that appears in the second half of the film was taken by an Egiazorov (*Proletkino* 6-7 [1924]: 64). It is unclear what Gan's role in *Delegation* might have been. He worked as a "cinema worker" at Proletkino in the winter of 1924-1925 and could have been involved on any number of menial capacities, but it also seems possible that his contribution was the footage used for the summer sporting section.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Vertov to Shub of 23 September 1924. RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 305, l. 1.

approach to filmmaking through a process of screening examples and debating their merits and faults. Gan analyzed *Kino-Pravda* in this way in his booklet *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!*, treating each installment as an “experiment” in a project of developing a new form. One aspect of their activity that has not, to the best of my knowledge, been previously noted is that they were also both involved in a more formal group for the promotion of proletarian cinema called The Society of Builders of Proletarian Cinema (OSPK, or *Obshchestvo stroitel'ei proletarskogo kino*), which was organized by Proletkino, the film company that distributed *Island of the Young Pioneers*. Proletkino was a joint-stock company (*aktsionernoe obshchestvo*) formed by the All-Soviet Central Council of Trade Unions (*Vsesoiuznyi tsentral'nyi sovet professional'nykh soiuzov*), the Red Army’s political enlightenment branch (PUR), and the Central Committee of Railroad, Metal, Mining, and Art Workers late in 1922. In amidst the messy effort to privatize and attract foreign capital in 1923, they were assigned the task of developing an ideologically correct Soviet cinema by cultivating new cadres of communist cinema workers, producing films on proletarian themes, and developing pricing structures that favored nonprofit venues such as workers clubs.<sup>93</sup> In 1923, most of its production consisted of newsreels, although it also managed to put out two fiction films toward the end of the year.<sup>94</sup> Neither Gan nor Vertov was initially affiliated with

---

<sup>93</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 20a; GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 2, l. 5. A resolution officially assigning Proletkino to these tasks was made at the Twelfth Party Congress on 25 April 1923. It is reproduced in *VKP(b) v rezoliutsiakh I resheniiakh s'ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1936): 522-523.

<sup>94</sup> The first Proletkino newsreels came out at the beginning of June. The two fiction films, *Brigade Commander Ivanov* and *Struggle for the Ultimatum*, came out in November and December, respectively. Fomin, *Letopis' rossiiskogo kino*: 408, 418, 420.

Proletkino.<sup>95</sup> They only became involved when the OSPK began to get organized in the fall of 1923.<sup>96</sup>

The OSPK was exactly the type of organization in which we should, by now, expect Gan to have participated. Like Kerzhentsev's Time League, or any number of other agitational initiatives intended to build support for a movement, its job was to organize local cells to set up workers theaters, boycott bourgeois films, hold film discussion groups, and otherwise agitate for Proletkino's productions. Indeed, it was the OSPK who suggested that Proletkino popularize their image by redesigning their journal *Proletkino*.<sup>97</sup> As I discussed in chapter 4, this was the probable motivation behind Gan's constructivist redesign later that year (figs 86-87). The organization used the same terminology of the "inner front" and "outer front" that Gan employed in his other agitwork, and in general the group based their organizational identity on established agitwork paradigms. As one of their first memos stated, "for us, this form of organization is not new. We turn to it when, in the process of Soviet construction, it becomes necessary to fulfill a pressing task [*udarnuiu zadachu*] on the outer front. The construction of proletarian cinema is also equally pressing and important in...our

---

<sup>95</sup> Gan initially separated constructivist cinema from it in January 1923. Aleksei Gan, "Two Paths," in *The Film Factory*: 83.

<sup>96</sup> OSPK's initiating group formed in October 1923, and the first official meeting took place on 16 March 1924 (Fomin, *Letopis' rossiiskogo kino*: 417, 435). Gan first began advocating for Proletkino in November 1923. See Aleksei Gan, "Kino v shestom oktjabre," *Zrelishcha* 61 (November 1923): 20-22; and Aleksei Gan, "Bor'ba za ul'timatum," *Zrelishcha* 68 (December 1923-January 1924): 19.

<sup>97</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, ll. 167, 172.

cultural-enlightenment work on the inner front.”<sup>98</sup> Particularly considering that PUR was one of Proletkino’s coinvestors, Gan must have felt very at home in the OSPK.

This digression into the OSPK is important to my story because both Gan and Vertov served as part of its Artistic-Technical-Scientific Section when the group devised its general plan for drawing the proletariat into cinema work. The plan has been preserved in the Proletkino archive, and although it is undated, it was most likely written in the spring or early summer of 1924—that is, during the same period when, according to my hypothesis, Gan and Vertov would have come up with the idea to produce parallel experimental films. I am reproducing the plan in full here because it is not available otherwise and its content and form help to set the stage on which the duo of Young-Pioneer films make sense. It reads:

Plan for the Practical Activity of the Artistic-Technical-Scientific Section of OSPK

Commission: Bassalygo, Akmolinskii, Razumnyi, Martov, Lebedinskii, Rodov, Lelevich, Chizhevskii, Baratov, Vertov, Gan, Bokhanov, Shtegel’man, Tikhonov, Antoshevskii, Iudin, Pokrovskii, and others.

First Period: Familiarize interested parties from the masses with cinema—its production, techniques, and ideological work.

Second Period: Attract the masses into the active work of Proletkino as actors [*naturshchiki*], scriptwriters, and so on.

Third Period: Selection and qualification of the forces that were formerly workers, peasants, and laborers of the USSR for the job of creating proletarian ideological films.

---

<sup>98</sup> GARF R-8326, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 7-8. [Для нас не нова эта форма организации: мы прибегаем к ней в процессе советского строительства, когда нужно выполнить ударную задачу на внешнем фронте. Строительство Пролетарского Кино мы считаем такой же ударной и важной задачей в области нашей культурно-просветительной работы на внутренних фронтах.]

Work of the First Period: Organize lectures, trials, screenings, circles, corners, interviews, and so on, for resolving artistic, technical, scientific, and ideological issues in Soviet cinema production (production and purchasing) in a way that criticizes bourgeois tendencies in film and establishes a foundation for our ideological production.

Here especially enters in the matter of publishing short...brochures and leaflets on cinema work which explain to the masses their task and aspiration to be active and self-directed (*samodeiatel'nyi*), and to participate directly in production.

Work of the Second Period: Developmental work [*prorabotka*] on the practice of the workers and peasants that have come to Soviet cinema. Study in laboratories, shooting footage, etc.

Work of the Third Period: Thorough preparation for work in a strictly defined specialty, that is, formalization by means of the qualification of separate representatives, which have been in contact with production and want to work in it in the future.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 177. [План практической деятельности художественно-техническо-научной секции ОСПК. / Состав: / Бассалыго, Акмолинский, Разумный, Мартов, Лебединский, Родов, Лелевич, Чижевский, Баратов, Вертов, Ган, Боханов, Штегельман, Тихонов, Антошевский, Юдин, Покровский и др. / Первый период: Ознакомление интересующихся из массы кинематографией - с ее производством, технической и идеологической деятельностью. / Второй период: / Вовлечение массы в активную работу "Пролеткино," как натурщиков, сценаристов и т.д. / Третий период: / Отбор и квалификация сил, которые представили раньше рабочие, крестьяне и трудящиеся СССР - для дела создания пролетарской идеологической фильма. / РАБОТА ПЕРВОГО ПЕРИОДА. / Устройство и организация лекций, судов, сеансов, кружков, уголков, беседований и т.д., разрабатывающих вопросы художественной, технической и научной, а также идеологической работы в советской кино-промышленности (производство и прокат) - в плане критики буржуазных тенденций на фильме и установление основ нашей идеологической продукции. / Особо входит сюда дело выпуска кратких и понумерных брошюр и листовок по кино работе, кои разъяснили бы массам задачи и стремления к активности и самостоятельности в непосредственном участии на производстве. / РАБОТА ВТОРОГО ПЕРИОДА / Проработка на практике сил рабочих и крестьян, пришедших в советское кино - учеба в лабораториях, на съемках и проч. / РАБОТА ТРЕТЬЕГО ПЕРИОДА / Всесторонняя подготовка к деятельности в сфере строго органиченной специальности, т.е., оформление сил путем квалификаций отдельных представителей, соприкоснувшихся и в дальнейшем желающих работать в производстве.]

In essence, the plan outlines an internship-based strategy for producing new cadres of worker filmmakers. The first step was to attract workers to the field by organizing public debates and publishing brochures, much as Gan and Vertov had already done in the fall of 1923. The second phase was to include the masses in active work as actors, directors, and so on. Finally, interested worker participants would train in specialized areas.

As a training program, the OSPK's Plan for Practical Activity can be considered a Bogdanovian variation on NOT. Workers were to be trained to become creative workers with initiative—note the emphasis on active and self-directed, or *samodeiatel'nyi*, participation—rather than to fulfill preprogrammed norms on a factory assembly line. The OSPK considered this plan to be both ideologically correct and a more efficient means of production. They argued the latter point by suggesting that involving regular workers in the film production apparatus would cut down on bureaucracy and misguided approximations of the popular by integrating producers and consumers.<sup>100</sup> The second phase of the OSPK's project, in which the masses were to be brought into the process of film production, also provides a straightforward explanation for Gan's decision to draft the Young Pioneers as actors in the making of *Island of the Young Pioneers*, as well as for why Vertov might have strayed from his policy of objective reflection and had the Pioneers act in his film too.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, "Deklaratsiia Obshchestva stroitelei proletarskogo kino," *Proletkino* 1 (February 1924): 38.

<sup>101</sup> Vertov later talked about working with a group of Young Pioneers in making *Kino-Eye*. He also mentioned that his decision to do a feature-length film was based on wanting to compete in commercial theaters, another of Proletkino and OSPK's goals. Dziga Vertov, "Kino-Eye": 66-67, 75-76.

The question that remains is how Gan's and Vertov's approaches to this project differed so irreconcilably as to cause the fissure in the fall. One place to start is to compare the *Kino-Eye* sequences that I have already presented with the surviving images that can be traced to Gan's *Island*. We have a grand total of six fragmented stills from *Island*, all of which appear in a montaged illustration accompanying a promotional review in *Proletkino* (fig 162). They include images of the Pioneers crouching in a wheat field, standing in front of a tent, and talking amongst themselves, either on a street in a small town or in a Pioneer camp. The cover of the same journal features one of the stills, which depicts two children standing knee deep in water (fig 86).

First, note that the mixing of Pioneer actors and bystanders that I pointed out in the earlier stills from *Kino-Eye* is not relevant to any of these images from *Island*, which contain only Young Pioneers. The intertitles mention several adult characters and several venues, but there is no indication that Gan used Vertov's technique of filming the Pioneers in crowded public spaces or of montaging candid footage into the staged segments. Pioneer-only scenes also make up large sections of *Kino-Eye*, and some can be compared directly to those from *Island*. For example, two scenes of swimming or bathing (figs 163-164) have some thematic relation to the image on the *Proletkino* cover, and both films contained scenes of Pioneers in fields of wheat (compare figs 165 and 166). The latter comparison is notable for the difference between the striking formal geometry of Vertov's line of marching Pioneers and the hammy sense of suspense created by Gan's, who crouch in the grass like highway robbers. Both images have a constructed quality and military overtones, but the former's lies in regiment and discipline, while the latter's issues from the children posing as a rough-and-tumble band of brothers. While it

is difficult to make a larger generalization in the case of Gan's film because of the minimal evidence, the sense of coordination through discipline in the Vertov image extends to many of his depictions of Pioneers. Indeed, in nearly all shots in which they walk together, they do so in lockstep. While this seems vaguely appropriate in scenes where they are marching in line (fig 167), it also happens in more casual situations: notice the two boys at the front of the otherwise disheveled group that walks along the sidewalk in figure 168 and the two girls in figure 169 as they approach the wall to hang a poster.

We can only guess at how Vertov managed to synchronize his Pioneers' strides, but their machinic rhythm does correspond well on a metaphorical level to his vision for filmmaking, in which the camera-eye clicks along mechanically producing a record of life as a series of measurements taken at regular intervals. This parallel between the cinema-eye and the Young Pioneers is arguably the primary theme of the film. Vertov proposes that the Pioneers' very youth affords them a rational and objective point of view inaccessible to grown-ups prejudiced by experience. The sequences in the cafe and the market both depict children who, like the cinema-eye, catch their unsuspecting elders unawares. They observe undetected from a second-story window before confronting the men below with the correlation between drinking and smoking and tuberculosis. In the market, the Pioneers rationally interrogate the prices of various commodities, recording their findings in their notebooks, again like the camera, and perhaps also doing some calculations in the mode of Kerzhentsev's American journalist (figs 161b and e). Vertov draws the parallel between Young Pioneer and camera surveillance once again in the scene where a Pioneer boy perches in a tree observing a diver (fig 170). Vertov then

immediately cuts to a sequence in which he runs footage of another diver both backward and forward, demonstrating how the camera allows for objective deconstruction and analysis of the athlete's movement (fig 171). Thus, although the film features the *Pioneers*, it is about the kino-eye—hence, the title. The *Pioneers* stand in as the kino-eye's anthropomorphic avatar.

In the scenes of the market and café, the *Pioneers*' confrontational interaction with bystanders would seem to produce a contradiction with Vertov's claim that his approach to filmmaking did not interfere in everyday life. If this is a dramatized manifesto on the functioning of the cinema-eye, these scenes seem to document that in fact it did interfere with the life of those living on the planet. Yet when Vertov talked about the film later, in 1926, he made clear that most of these scenes were constructed via montage. They were "not limited by time and space," as he wrote, but instead, "filmed at different times, in different villages, and edited together into a single whole." Only one scene, the one where the *Pioneers* raise a flag, reflects a unitary experience. He specifically noted that "the cafe and the market...were also done through montage."<sup>102</sup> In reviewing those sequences, there are moments where *Pioneers* and bystanders are present in the same shot, but most of the interactions have been constructed through a montage of close-ups. For example, when the boy asks about the price of beef in the market, Vertov gives the impression that he is speaking to the butcher by alternating between close-ups of the two characters' faces (figs 161c and d). In the wider shot, however, the butcher's face is cropped out (fig 161b). Thus, Vertov and his *Pioneers* may plausibly have kept to his rule. Few of the depicted confrontations or interactions actually occurred.

---

<sup>102</sup> Dziga Vertov, "Kino-Eye": 76. I have altered the translation slightly.

There is something disconcerting about the children's surveillance, as well as about Vertov's insistence that the kino-eye's observation be anonymous and one-way. A cartoon published in *Kino-Gazeta* (Cinema Gazette) in September 1923 also pointed to this creepy aspect of Vertov's approach (fig 172). The cartoon came out around the same time as Gan's *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* and it is captioned with reference to that project, "'Demonstration of Everyday Life' by the 'Kinok' Method." The image's intention is to poke fun at Vertov's insistence on detached observation by depicting him filming the private life of a family through a hole in the wall; it suggests that "catching life unawares" is another name for a peeping Tom. It also effectively illustrates the relationship between observer and observed inherent in Vertov's method, which is reminiscent of diagrams of the camera obscura that have been used to model Kantian epistemology in studies of spectatorship (fig 173).<sup>103</sup> If *Kino-Eye* was part of the OSPK project of drawing the masses into filmmaking, Vertov has done so while maintaining this basic structure. The Pioneers in the film are sometimes included as objects of observation and sometimes as unseen observers; either way, he places them securely on one or the other side of the wall. Gan's use of a script for *Island* violated this boundary by allowing the filmmaker to shape the object of representation. It is no wonder Vertov felt betrayed. Not only had Gan used a script after Vertov explicitly asked him not to, but his use of the script destroyed the foundation on which Vertov's project was built.

It may have taken the release of Gan's film to bring the magnitude of their differences to Vertov's attention, but looking back at Gan's presentation of Vertov in his

---

<sup>103</sup> See especially Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992): 25-66.

publications, one can find moments in which the fissure is visible already in the beginning of 1923. One example comes in the final number of *Kino-Fot*, where Gan published a two-page spread with an article by Lev Kuleshov about one of the films purchased on the foreign market after NEP was implemented, *House of Hate* (fig 174a). He has illustrated it with two unrelated stills from Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* (figs 174b-c). Kuleshov's article explains that despite the film's bourgeois flaws, it had merit as a vehicle for the actress Pearl White, whom Kuleshov praises as an extraordinary *naturshchik*.<sup>104</sup> Traditionally, the word *naturshchik* was used for an artist's model,<sup>105</sup> but Kuleshov developed it in the twenties into a concept for a new kind of actor. Derived from the word *natura*, or nature, the *naturshchik* was a real person who behaved naturally in front of the camera rather than playacting, but who was also naturally extraordinarily expressive and photogenic. As Kuleshov wrote, "we know that in cinema theatrical actors...[and] ordinary people...are unacceptable. We need unusual people, 'monsters' ...able to cultivate their bodies."<sup>106</sup> The term was also sometimes used to describe someone specially trained by a particular director to actually *be* the person he wanted to film.<sup>107</sup> For Gan to illustrate this article with stills from Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* was to present a critical juxtaposition, and one which Gan defined more precisely when

---

<sup>104</sup> Lev Kuleshov, "Dom nenavisti," *Kino-Fot* 6 (8 January 1923): 4-5.

<sup>105</sup> My thanks to Molly Brunson for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>106</sup> Lev Kuleshov, "Esli teper'...", *Kino-Fot* 3 (19-25 September 1922): 4. [Мы знаем, что на кинематографе... театральные актеры,...обыкновенный человек...неприемлем. Нам нужны необыкновенные люди, нам нужны «чудовища»..., которые сумели бы воспитать свое тело.]

<sup>107</sup> For example, O. Rakhmanova, "O metode vospitaniia aktera," *Kinozhurnal ARK*, 1925, no. 6-7: 11.

he presented the same stills again in *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* with the caption “*Kino-Pravda*’s nature” (fig 175).<sup>108</sup> The comparison draws attention to the two filmmakers’ differing interpretations of working with real and natural people as subjects: Kuleshov proposed producing those people, whereas Vertov wanted to objectively record them as they were.

Because Gan went on to closely associate with Vertov rather than Kuleshov, it is tempting to read this juxtaposition as critical of the concept of the *naturshchik*, but Gan probably intended the presentation to expose the peculiarities of both positions. Indeed, he went on to use the term *naturshchik* to refer to the role of his Young Pioneers in *Island*.<sup>109</sup> It was also used in the OSPK’s plan, which called for “attracting the masses into Proletkino’s active work as *naturshchiks*, scriptwriters, and so on.” Nor should this position be surprising given what we know of Gan’s understanding of constructivism. Thinking back to chapter 2, recall that he excluded the possibility of an autonomous observer just as much as an autonomous art object. His was an art of embeddedness and relation in which thinking would be tested in practice, consciousness would never “stop on this side of the phenomenon,” and people and objects would simultaneously produce each other in the labor process.

Gan’s position against Gastev’s overclass of labor scientists is also relevant here, particularly since photography and film were used in scientific labor studies as a means of measuring worker’s movements (for example, fig 176), and the sequence with the

---

<sup>108</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 7-9.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*: 15.

cigarette packager in *Man with a Movie Camera* somewhat resembles such studies.<sup>110</sup> Of course, Vertov's kinoks, as modest camera operators, did not aspire to become a privileged class. If anything, they went out of their way to be plain workers, and this was an aspect of Vertov's work that Gan applauded. At a discussion of the seventeenth issue of *Kino-Pravda*, when Vertov was accused of cobbling together a film not like a filmmaker but like a shoemaker, Gan responded, "if we only had more of these shoemakers, everything would be ok."<sup>111</sup> At the same time, Vertov's methodology was based on the same model of detached scientific observation that Gastev's was. In a sense, Vertov's approach was to put the general population in the position of the observed worker *and* the observing scientist. Through the technical apparatus of his kinoks and *Kino-Pravda* they would acquire the ability to stand outside and critically analyze themselves. As Yuri Tsivian has argued, this project can be interpreted as materialist in its aims: in *Kino-Eye*, he attempted to bring the labor origins of consumer goods to light in the well-known sequence where he reversed the film, tracing the path of meat sold at market back to the slaughter yard from which it came. In Tsivian's words, "the ambition of Vertov's cinema [was]...to disclose invisible connections between things,"<sup>112</sup> and perhaps also to give people the critical distance from which they could really see them.

---

<sup>110</sup> For more on the use of chronophotography in studying physical labor, see Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 116-117. I do not know that TsIT used film in their scientific studies, but they did put out a short film about their work in September of 1923. See *Kino-Gazeta* 4 (2 October 1923): 2.

<sup>111</sup> Vertov recounts the incident in Dziga Vertov, "On the Significance of Nonacted Cinema," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*: 37.

<sup>112</sup> Tsivian, "Dziga Vertov and His Time": 9-14.

Yet, as far as Gan was concerned, Vertov's materialism was a surface structure built on a Kantian foundation. They may have agreed about eliminating the class division between observer and observed, but Gan went significantly further, proposing that the process of detached observation, even self-observation, be eliminated altogether. And although the overall impression given by Gan's *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* is that Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* was Soviet cinema's greatest hope, the text also included a substantial critique of Vertov on this point. Gan narrated the development of *Kino-Pravda* as a progression of experiments, beginning with straight newsreels and evolving in the direction of the demonstration of everyday life without ever quite arriving there. The first four numbers of the series, Gan explained, were clearly composed of footage received from random cameramen (non-kinoks), and therefore shot in the old "one-sided" way. That is, "they just filmed it," Gan wrote. "Nature was not activated...All productive attention was directed toward the montage."<sup>113</sup> By the time you get to the tenth *Kino-Pravda*, however, you could see that the material was being gathered with a theme in mind—that is, it was being purpose-shot. The collection of footage thus became an integral part of the construction of the film. It was all done from a kinok perspective.

If for Tsivian purpose-shot footage compromised the ideal version of Vertov's project, for Gan Vertov's progression in *Kino-Pravda* from random to purposeful was an evolution in the right direction. Indeed, Vertov would have to go much further in this

---

<sup>113</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 7. [просто снять...Натура не активизировалась...Все производственное внимание было направлено на монтаж.]

respect to realize the demonstration of everyday life that Gan envisioned. Unfortunately, Gan pointed out, the kinoks' method inherently limited their ability to do so. As he wrote,

The *Kino-Pravda* workers approached the matter from only one side: they learned to use the camera to capture formal manifestations of proletarian daily life in an outer ritualistic way...and they achieved significant mastery in montage. In this regard,...their work has not fully realized the depiction of daily life, since they almost always capture nature in a single outer moment of demonstration...The most important thing is absent: the moving levers, the cementing principles, the sharpness of the contradictions of actual everyday life that make a person burn inside, its sensuousness on the level of mood.<sup>114</sup>

Here Gan pulls his criticism of Vertov directly from Marx's critique of Feuerbach: "the chief defect" of this form of "materialism...is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, as practice*."<sup>115</sup> To really demonstrate everyday life in all of its depth and emotional complexity would require more than capturing its appearance from the outside. Gan pushed the point again at the end of the book: the kinoks needed to learn "not to fulfill newsreel needs like a clerk, but to grasp daily life in its most alive form, in the moment and in all its complexity...The anonymous man, with his nonobjective passions and pure spirit,...is rather quickly excluded from real life."<sup>116</sup> In other words, the kinoks

---

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*: 4-5. [Работники *Кино-Правды* подошли только с одной стороны к этому делу: они научились брать аппаратом внешнюю, так сказать, обрядовую сторону формального разряжения пролетарского быта и достигли значительного мастерства в монтаже. В этом отношении...их работа не имеет полной завершенности в изображении быта, т.к. их натура почти всюду захвачена только в одном внешнем моменте демонстрации...Нет самого важного: двигающих рычагов, цементирующих начал, остроты противоречий действующего быта, в котором всегда горит человеческое нутро, его чувственность в степень настроения]

<sup>115</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," trans. W. Lough, in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969): 13.

<sup>116</sup> This seems to have been a particularly important line for Gan. He republished it in another article that fall. Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 11-12; and Aleksei

needed to get more involved. Gan's characterization of Vertov's methods is not quite as mocking in tone as the *Kino-Gazeta* cartoon, but it is equally critical of the foundation of Vertov's work. In remaining objective outside observers—dispassionate, anonymous, and pure of spirit—they disqualified themselves from ever really grasping the most important aspects of the life they aspired to record.

It bears repeating that this evaluation of Vertov's detached approach is entirely consistent with Gan's understanding of constructivism as I developed it in chapter 2. Detached observation was the mode of the abstracted-illusionistic image, not the concrete material one. The demonstration of everyday life required active involvement, in the same way that understanding Rodchenko's hanging spatial constructions required walking around them, folding them up, and reinstalling them in another configuration. This embedded and interactive relationship is what defined a materialist work for Gan. In approaching the project of the demonstration of everyday life via film, one also had to actively work with the material in order to know it. The difference was that it was live human material rather than plywood. It was only with this interactive materialist consciousness that you could construct a film in which the inner essence of reality, its "sensuousness on the level of mood," was revealed; only then could "the real characters

---

Gan, "1 'demonstratsiia gluposti' v ustakh Liusera Uol'," *Zrelishcha* 60 (30 October-2 November 1923): 19. [Не по чиновнически выполнять хроникерские обязанности, а самым живым образом схватывать быт на лету во всей его разнообразной сложности... Анонимный человек, с безпредметными страстями, с какою то чистой душой, ... немедленно исключается из реально действующей жизни]

of our common life—the train conductors, machinists, bakers...—stand at their full height.”<sup>117</sup>

Thus, although Vertov has often been characterized as the most important representative of constructivism in cinema,<sup>118</sup> he represented a position aesthetically opposed to constructivism as Gan understood it.<sup>119</sup> In *Kino-Fot* and *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* Gan’s betrayal was delivered with a kiss—he couched his criticism in subtle juxtapositions and convoluted sentences buried under more accessible expressions of praise. Vertov may even have taken aspects of this criticism to heart when he decided to employ more purpose-shot footage and narrative structure in *Kino-Eye*. The fundamental nature of their differences only became apparent when Gan produced as his own exemplar a version of the demonstration of everyday life in which the Young Pioneers were incorporated as Kuleshovian *naturshchiks* rather than kino-eyes. According to Vertov’s letter to Shub, at some point in the summer, Vertov started to hear rumors about a script, and then more about set designers sent out to spruce up the Pioneer camp in which Gan’s film was set. When he confronted Gan about it, Gan

---

<sup>117</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 11-12. [Перед материалистическим сознанием, во весь рост встают действительные персонажи нашего общественного быта: вагоновожатый, машинист, пекарь...]

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film: The Man with a Movie Camera: A Cinematic Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Annette Michelson, “Man with the Movie Camera: From Magician to Epistemologist,” *Artforum* 10:7 (March 1972): 60-72.

<sup>119</sup> Vertov and Gan seemed to recognize the difference, even before the *Island* fiasco. They appeared in debates as representatives of the kinoks and constructivists, respectively, and Vertov indicates that the public was wrong to conflate them in his letter to Shub. RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 305, ll. 1-3.

assured him that there was no need to worry and Vertov believed him,<sup>120</sup> but he was obviously unprepared for what came next.

For, based on Gan's constructivist rhetoric and no-nonsense position on the rationalization of artistic labor, the one thing that you least expect is that the product of his materialist approach to filmmaking would be as much like an artwork as like a newsreel. Yet, this position is clear enough when one bothers to look. In *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!*, he writes,

Described in the language of the art lover, a film in the mode of the demonstration of everyday life must be a finished work. It is a small job to montage together separate moments, or episodic everyday phenomena, into one film more or less united by a lucky title. The most unexpected chance occurrences, happenings, and events always have an organic connection to the basic root of common everyday life. When you take [these events] in the shell of their outer manifestation, you need to know how to reveal an inner essence... Only then can you build a living film of daily life that really acts, one that both grows from and gradually departs from the newsreel.<sup>121</sup>

In this passage, it may be best to think about Gan as resorting to the language of the art lover in the same way that he often resorted to extreme anti-art statements: it was a way of countering an assumption, which in this case was that he was wholly in favor of the very most objective sort of newsreel. Instead, he seems to have been in agreement with

---

<sup>120</sup> Letter from Vertov to Shub, 23 September 1924. RGALI f. 2091, op. 2, d. 305, ll. 1-3.

<sup>121</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 4-5. [Фильма демонстрирующая быт, выражаясь языком искусствователя, должна быть законченным произведением. Мало, средствами монтаж, связывать отдельные моменты, эпизодические бытовые явления в одну кино-картину, объединенную более или менее удачным заглавием. Самые неожиданные случаи, происшествия и события всегда имеют органическую связь с основным корнем общественного быта и нужно уметь, беря их в скорлупе внешнего проявления, вскрывать внутреннюю сущность... Только на этом можно построить живую фильму реально действующего быта, постепенно этом можно построить живую фильму реально действующего быта, постепенно отходя от хроники, из которой собственно и вырастает эта новая кино-форма.]

Eisenstein's well-known evaluation of the newsreel's place in the history of cinema as akin to cave drawings in the history of art.<sup>122</sup> It was a primitive stage on the road to more sophisticated forms.

For Gan, these more sophisticated forms could not be art films that used professional actors to produce spectacles. He would “not let footage produced by playactors, directors, and artists any closer than the range of a cannon shot.” Instead, the key was “to draw living nature into the work.”<sup>123</sup> As in his early work in amateur theater and mass action, his film would utilize aspects of art and life, but in new combination. For Gan, the sharp division then being drawn between scripted and documentary film—or “played” (*igrovoi*) and “nonplayed” (*neigrovoi*) film, as they were termed—was a false dichotomy created by enforcing the wrong border. As he complained, “workers in this field swing back and forth like a pendulum: from newsreel to artistic drama, from drama to newsreel, as if there were no other directions.” He ends the book by suggesting, “it makes sense to conduct a series of practical experiments with nature that ‘acts’ in a real way” (*deistvuiushchei*, not *igruiushchei*).<sup>124</sup>

Gan's *Island of the Young Pioneers* was his practical experiment in developing a third direction based on a form of acting in which performance and reality coincide.

---

<sup>122</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, “Pokhvala kinokhronike,” in *Metod*, vol. 2, ed. Naum Kleiman (Moscow: Muzei Kino, 2002): 449.

<sup>123</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 14. [не подпускать к месту съемки лицедия, режиссера, и художника по крайней мере на расстояние пушечного выстрела] [втянуть в работу эту живую натуру]

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*: 10, 14. [Работающие в этой области словно маятники качаются из стороны в сторону: от хроники к художественной кино-драмы к хронике. Других направлений как будто и нет.] [В отношении же реально действующей природы следует перед съемкой проделать ряд практических опытов.]

Judging from the subtitles, the film was structured by a more unified narrative than *Kino-Eye*, even when the themes were similar. The plot revolves around a brother and sister, Vava and Lida, who leave home because their father is abusive and anticommunist—the final straw is when he beats the children and calls them “lousy commies” after he catches them reading the Pioneer magazine *Baraban* (Drum).<sup>125</sup> They in some way confront the issue of illegal moonshine production (it is unclear precisely how), before coming upon a pair of homeless kids, Petka and Khriashchka.<sup>126</sup> With the words, “Whoever is with us, follow us. You were a stranger [*chuzhoi*], but you will become a brother,”<sup>127</sup> they all go together to the Pioneer camp. There, the intertitles suggest, they all begin to live a wholesome and productive communal life: they have lessons, go hiking and diving, work on a farm, practice good hygiene, and make everything with their own hands.<sup>128</sup> They live a little like Marx imagined in *The German Ideology*, fishing in the morning and writing criticism in the afternoon.

What is interesting about Gan’s choice to set the story in a Pioneer camp is that many of the activities that have been written into the script are the same sorts of activities

---

<sup>125</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 8. [коммуняка паршивые] See also Gusman, review of *Ostrov iunikh pionerov: 5*. The intertitles specify a publication titled *Baraban*, which most likely was the pioneer magazine that began publication in March-April of 1923. I am indebted to John MacKay for bringing the magazine to my attention.

<sup>126</sup> Boris Gusman’s review of the film clarifies that Petka and Khriashchka are homeless and that they join the pioneers. He also refers to an episode in which the Pioneers track down illegal distillers in the mode of a detective film, but this seems to come in a later episode. Gusman, review of *Ostrov iunikh pionerov: 5*.

<sup>127</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 8. [Кто за нас, иди за нами. Был чужой, а станешь брат.]

<sup>128</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 8. The hygiene, hiking, diving, and farmwork themes also appear in *Kino-Eye*.

in which children might engage at a summer camp anyway. Moreover, they would probably perform those activities at a summer camp under the direction of a camp councilor, whose purpose would not be to produce a spectacle, but to help the kids cultivate their skills, talents, and initiative, much in the same way that I argued in chapter 1 was foundational to Gan's understanding of amateur theater and mass action. That Gan understood the project in this way is supported by his naming the leader of the Pioneer camp Verevkin.<sup>129</sup> This is the same name as the scriptwriter credited in the first intertitle, and my guess is that the real Verevkin probably "played" himself in the film. Konopleva—who, remember, was a Young Pioneer at the camp that summer and who recounted that the "filming was an event for us kids"—also characterized Gan's work with the children in ways that suggest a camp councilor:

Gan worked confidently, happily, and calmly. He knew what he wanted, and he loved children. He knew how to communicate with us on an equal level, and at every opportunity we all gleefully gathered around this tall man (*vysochennogo cheloveka*) who sang to us around the campfire the song about potatoes and "Blue Nights, Light Up with Campfires" in a beautiful strong voice.<sup>130</sup>

The songs that Konopleva mentions are two of the earliest Pioneer songs,<sup>131</sup> and thus lend a historical and cultural specificity to the proceedings, but the general idea—as well as the nostalgia with which Konopleva presents it—is familiar to anyone who has ever been

---

<sup>129</sup> That Verevkin was camp leader is clarified in Gusman, review of *Ostrov iunikh pionerov*: 5.

<sup>130</sup> Konopleva, "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan": 214. [съёмки были для нас, ребятишек, событием] [работал Ган уверенно, весело и спокойно. Знал, чего хотел, любил детей, умел общаться с нами на равных, и все мы при каждой возможности радостно окуржали этого высоченного человек, который красивым сильным голосом пел с нами у костра песню про картошку и «Взвейтесь кострами, синие ночи...»]

<sup>131</sup> *Potato* (Kartoshka) and *Blue Nights, Light Up with Campfires* (Vzveites' kostrami, sinie nochi)

to a summer camp. In her expression of the children's adulation for the visiting filmmaker, Konopleva also highlights the difference between Gan's constructivist approach and Vertov's kinokism. Rather than unobtrusively observe like a machinic kino-eye, Gan used all his most human abilities to charismatically draw the Pioneers into the work. He made the film by making his presence—tall and strong-voiced—central. It was the most marked and memorable event of the Pioneers' summer.

Gan elaborated on this working strategy in a discussion of the relationship between Verevkin's script and the Pioneer's activity where he emphasized that the action recorded on film was really an interaction among a combination of factors. He wrote,

The story offered by comrade Verevkin's script did not weigh down on life in my work. Instead, the everyday life of the Young Pioneers absorbed the story and made it possible to capture the essence of the young Leninists in their immediate reality...In the process of the work, sentient human material lived and functioned without swerving from normal daily behavior...

The natural, material, and technical environment [*sreda*] participated as immediately as the human material [*sreda*]. The frames were structured naturally, without any aesthetic inclination.<sup>132</sup>

For Gan, Verevkin's script was a little like a chemical catalyst, or, more simply, like salt: when the Young Pioneers absorbed it, it brought out their essence, or new aspects of their inherent properties. Also important was that the environment and the Pioneers themselves played as much of a role in shaping the action recorded on film as the script or the montage did. In setting the majority of the action on the isolated "island" of the Pioneer

---

<sup>132</sup> I have altered the paragraph breaks. Gan, "Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta": 18. [У меня не сюжет, предложенный мне сценарием тов. Веревкина, довлел над бытом, а быт юных пионеров, поглотив сюжет, дал возможность зафиксировать бытие юных ленинцев в их непосредственной действительности... / Живой человеческий материал—жил и действовал в процессе работы, не уклоняясь от обычных поведений своего дня... / Природная, материальная и техническая среда—участвовала так же непосредственно, как и среда людская. / Кадры строились естественно, без всякого эстетического заноса]

camp the film allows the children to demonstrate their natural and authentic behavior under altered conditions, where the old routines and mindsets deeply engrained in the consciousnesses of their elders were not operative. It was precisely because the Pioneers were *separated from* the old version of the everyday that they would be able to practice living in a new way, thereby building a new communist everyday. They were not playacting, but living life under other conditions. Lastly, Gan's emphasis on his minimal artfulness in montage positions the film in contrast to Vertov, whom Gan had criticized in *Long Live the Demonstration of Life!* as concentrating his productive energy on the montage stage. Gan instead structured the film on the level of reality, by allowing reality to absorb the script. For Gan, this represented a new "materialist approach," one that both freed filmmaking "from bourgeois art cinema's illustrations of literary subjects on a flat screen" and "overc[a]me the banal formalism of the newsreel."<sup>133</sup>

Although this strategy relied on creating a space apart, it also had an art-into-life component. The demonstration of this new life on film was intended to reenter everyday life as proof that another way of living was possible, inspiring others to follow suit. Gan had outlined this goal in fall of 1923, when he wrote in *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* that the new cinema would be led by the Komsomol, the slightly older version of the Young Pioneers:

We have no doubt that the Komsomol members will be the pioneers in constructing this mode of filmmaking. They will be the great *naturshchiks*—not affected poseurs, but demonstrators. Their organized youthful mass will be the

---

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* [Такой материалистический подход освобождает нас от экранной иллюстрации литературного сюжета буржуазной, художественной кинематографии, преодолевает казенный формализм хроники и дает возможность производственно установить приемы тематической съемки социалистического характера]

first active living material. They will ignite others. The construction of everyday life will be activated and we will go from capturing life to demonstrating it.<sup>134</sup>

Here Gan talks about the demonstration of everyday life as neither documentary nor fiction, but another direction in which life was demonstrated—or modeled—as it could be. Both a performance and a reality, it is a good example of how Gan’s constructivism approached the aims and strategies of socialist realism. A promotional pre-premiere review in *Proletkino* also emphasizes the value of the film as an instructive exemplar: “I’m telling you,” the author writes, “it is no fairytale. Yes, it is reality, for *such an island exists*...It is the *collective of Young Pioneers*, the builders of communist everyday life.” He adds that “we are directed toward it,” and that adults are wrong to assume that children had nothing to teach them.<sup>135</sup>

This divide between adults and children is another theme shared by *Kino-Eye* and *Island*. In both films, it represents the relationship between the old and the new, the past and the future, and experience and innocence. The division stands in for the traditional hierarchy, and its overturning, that is foundational to Revolutionary politics, as well as to Gan’s aesthetics. The children’s lack of experience in the old world is their advantage in the new. In *Kino-Eye*, innocence is the quality that lends Vertov’s Pioneers their objective vision. It is also what allows Gan’s Pioneers to readily relate to one another in

---

<sup>134</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 15. [И мы не сомневаемся, что именно комсомольцы будет пионерами в деле строения такой кинематографии. Они дадут главных натурщиков, не кривляк, а демонстрантов. Их организованная юношеская масса будет первым активным живым материалом, она зажжет других, строение быта активизируется и мы от фиксации быта перейдем к его демонстрации.]

<sup>135</sup> Iudin, “Proizvodstvo Proletkino. Ostrov iunykh pionerov”: 17. [Предупреждаю—это не сказка. / Да, это действительность—ибо *макой остров существует*. /...Мы направляемся к нему! /...это *коллектив юных пионеров, строителей коммунистического быта*]

new, more communist ways. Gan and Vertov diverge, however, when it comes to the valuation of experience. In Vertov's aesthetic system, the loss of innocence would always be a liability, because it diminished the objectivity of the cinema-eye. The value of Gan's island, in contrast, was to provide a space for acquiring experience in a new way of living, producing a new socialist consciousness, not sullyng it. In this sense, Gan's method directly opposed Vertov's policy of noninterference and later assembly of fragments "not limited by time and space" into a narrative whole. Gan's project relied on creating real experiences with real interactions that would lead to the actual development of the real people participating in them, even if this involved creating a separate space in which this alternate reality could take place.

This aspect of Gan's aesthetic may be best demonstrated in an episode toward the end of *Island* that is also one of the stranger parts of the film. The kids have constructed platforms in the forest "for *igry*"—that is, for games or for playacting; either would be appropriate in this context. "We will play Makhnoites and Budennovites," the intertitle reads, referring to followers of Nester Makhno, the leader of the Ukrainian anarcho-communist rebels who held out against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War, and Semion Budennyi, a military commander in the Red Army closely allied with Stalin. The intertitles continue, "Who wants to be a Makhnoite? Who wants to be a Budennovite? You have to cast your lot." After what appears to be a mock battle something like capture

the flag, the two groups decide, “it’s time to change sides.”<sup>136</sup> The Makhnoites become Budennovites, and vice versa, and they perform the battle again.

As in so many of the works I have examined in this chapter, Gan presents us with a military theme. The children are playing war, learning to fight for us against them. As with most recurring themes in Soviet art, military preparedness was probably on some level mandated, or suggested, by some higher power. In July, Vertov also wrote about the kino-eye in military terms, stating that its goal was to “unite on the screen the proletarians of all countries against the capitalists of all countries,”<sup>137</sup> and there is a military aspect to *Kino-Eye*’s images of disciplined marching and repetition of the slogan “be prepared.” Indeed, the Pioneer organization itself, which was modeled on the Boy Scouts, was intended to prepare the next generation for military service. Yet Gan presents an unusual take on the theme when he has the children switch sides. The gesture has something in common with Bogdanov’s idea of comradely cooperation, in which workers would rotate in and out of leadership roles depending on their areas of competence, but with a slightly different emphasis. The game becomes something akin to an empathy-building role-playing exercise. Gan means the Pioneers to be prepared, but not for a nationalistic vilification of otherness. He prepares them to put themselves in other people’s shoes.

By specifying that those shoes belong to anarchists and Bolsheviks, Gan is, in a sense, asking the Pioneers to put themselves in his shoes. He had switched sides in 1918 when he joined the Red Army and the Communist Party after working with the Moscow

---

<sup>136</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 9. [Будем играть в Махновцев и Буденовцев. / Кто хочет быть Махновцем. / Кто хочет быть Буденовцем. / Придется бросить жребий.] [Пришлось переменить положение.]

<sup>137</sup> Dziga Vertov, “The Artistic Drama and the Kino-Eye,” in *Lines of Resistance*: 106.

Federation of Anarchist Groups. With this gesture, Gan allows his subjective experience into the film in a way inadmissible in Vertov's project. Moreover, he stages a relationship of compromise and reconciliation at odds with the harsh criticality of Vertov's *Kino-Eye*. In Vertov, the children relate to the adults by sneaking up on them and making self-righteous demands. They outsmart the salespeople at the market by writing down and comparing prices rather than negotiating. The fliers that they distribute to the men drinking in the café are no more diplomatic (fig 160f). Addressed, "Adults! This is our ultimatum!", they tell the adults in no uncertain terms that by drinking and smoking they are helping tuberculosis to attack children. That may well be, but in the second animated flyer, where the adult is slumped in his chair, clearly exhausted after a day of work, the Pioneer might do better to be a little more empathetic. In a culture where literacy rates mapped onto the generational divide, the fact that both of these episodes revolve around reading and writing taps into a specific anxiety related to the reversal of traditional power dynamics. The children's power over the adults stems from their observational acuity—that is, their likeness to the recording device of the camera—and their access to written language and math. In the market scene, Vertov emphasizes their pencils and notebooks (figs 161a, b and e). Particularly striking is the moment when the boy withdraws from the oral exchange with the meat seller to concentrate on his notes (figs 161 b and f). The isolation of consciousness represented by this gesture of withdrawal mirrors Vertov's larger project. It also represents the most truthful shot in the sequence if we are to believe Vertov's claim that *Kino-Eye*'s interactions were not actual, but constructed via montage.

In Gan's *Island*, the question of what to do with adults—or, more generally, what to do about the outmoded relics of the old world that nonetheless continue to exist—is

treated with more compassion. Lida and Vava's father embodies everything that was wrong about patriarchal bourgeois consciousness. He abuses those weaker than himself. He has nothing to gain from communism and makes clear that he is against it. Still, the children feel affection for him, and when he is put on trial for child abuse, they do not want to break off relations with him.<sup>138</sup> According to one review, rather than abandon him to the criminal justice system, the children decide to convince him of the value of Pioneer ways; he immediately reforms, transforming on screen from beastly to kind-hearted. The reviewer faults this conversion scene for downplaying the complexity of the situation with a simple and rather saccharine resolution,<sup>139</sup> but the contrast with the treatment of adults figured by Vertov is still instructive. If in *Kino-Eye* the Pioneers attempt to convert adult strangers to healthy living by confronting them with facts and slogans, conversion in *Island* comes through personal relationship. The father's transformation is made possible through his love for the children and theirs for him—that is, not through hard-line demands, but through compassion and forgiveness. The approach involves empathizing with the other's position, much like in the game of Makhnoites and Budennovites.

Considering Gan's work with magazines and journals, it is not surprising that the Pioneer magazine *Drum* plays a prominent role in the film. The intertitles introduce Lida by stating that she loves reading it, and it seems to provide her and Vava's initial connection to the Pioneer movement. We have already seen that it precipitated the rift between the children and their father. It appears once more at the end of the

---

<sup>138</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 8.

<sup>139</sup> X. X., "Iuniye pinonery": 6.

trial/conversion episode, where the intertitles indicate that text from *Drum* appears on the screen.<sup>140</sup> Unfortunately the content of the figured text remains unspecified, but its appearance in the film is still significant insofar as it demonstrates the role of the constructivist object as I explained it in chapter 4. Lida and Vava's everyday life is dominated by an abusive father. As children, this accident of birth is the primary condition in which they are embedded. It would be all that they knew if it were not for *Drum's* collection of images and texts about Pioneer life. The magazine is, in a sense, their island of Young Pioneers. As the promotional reviewer wrote of Gan's film, "it is no fairytale," but an existing model of what reality could be were it dominated by another set of norms and values. Vava and Lida's experience in that alternate reality may initially be an escape from their everyday life, but the consciousness developed there also enables them to return and effect transformation at home. In this way, the magazine also functions in the film as a model for the function of Gan's constructivist mass-media objects more generally, including his film. It turns the children into builders of a communist way of life.

By this point, it should be clear that *Island of the Young Pioneers* was another of Gan's projects for collective self-development, but how was it a plan for rationalizing labor? I would now like to consider that Gan's drafting the Young Pioneers into his artwork as performers was an economic decision. This was partially in the sense that I articulated earlier—it allowed him to eliminate professional actors from the payroll. But the second half to the economy was that using amateur actors was a fair rationing of participation in a formerly privileged type of work. In this regard, Gan may have drawn

---

<sup>140</sup> GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 8ob.

less on Gastev, Bogdanov, and Kerzhentsev than on his suprematist associate, the “affirmer of new art” Kazimir Malevich. Malevich had waged his own eccentric battle for time in February 1921 in an unpublished article entitled “Idleness as the Real Truth of Humanity.” There, he took up the mysterious problem with which I began this chapter: wherefrom this cultish devotion to labor?

Malevich’s explanation was that labor ideologies developed to cover up the secret truth that idleness, or leisure time, was the most important human value—both the motivation behind labor and a restorative component necessary to support it. This great truth had been buried deeply under slogans suggestive of the opposite—that idle hands were the devil’s playground, idleness was the mother of vice, and so on—for the sensible reason that if people “did not work, the whole country would die and the entire population starve.”<sup>141</sup> In the socialist system,

This explains how...the supreme curse of God on man, labor, became the highest blessing. Everyone must take the blessing, or be threatened with starvation. That is the meaning that lies at the bottom of the working labor system. Never has man in any other system felt closer to a common death and never has he seen that production holds not only well-being for all, but also for each. In a communal labor system, death stands before everyone, and before everyone stands one task: to save oneself through labor.<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Kazimir Malevich, “Len’ kak deistvitel’naia istina chelovechestva,” *Kazimir Malevich. Sobranie socheneniiia v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gilea, 2004): 179. [не будет трудиться, вся страна придет к смерти, и целому народу угрожает смерть.]

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* [Вот почему...повисшее проклятие трудом Бога над человеком—труд—в социалистических системах получает наивысшее благословение. Под это благословение должен стать каждый, иначе ему угрожает смерть голодная. Вот какой смысл кроется в рабоче-трудовой системе. Смысл этот в том, что при всех других системах никогда человек не чувствовал бы приближения смерти общего и никогда не видел бы, что в производстве кроется не только благополучие для общего, но и для каждого. В трудовой общей же системе перед каждым становится смерть, перед каждым лежит одна задача: спасти себя через труд.]

In distributing labor and its rewards evenly, the socialist system transformed life and death from a personal lifecycle into a mass phenomenon. In fact, this provides another good explanation of the conjunction of work and war in Shub's *Today* and Kerzhentsev's "Time Builds Airplanes." Linking work to war exchanged the personal terms in which it was usually understood for those of the then-familiar experience of war, with its personal sacrifice in pursuit of collective victory or collective death.

More relevant to Gan's work, Malevich goes on to point out that the socialist system, which "strove to equalize everyone in labor," still needed a way "to equalize everyone in leisure."<sup>143</sup> The capitalists had done this by allowing the accumulation of money, which served as a storehouse of future leisure—the ruble was "nothing other than a piece of idleness," Malevich wrote.<sup>144</sup> Traditional cultures also had their own low-tech leisure management systems, which amounted to something like common sense: labor was considered "simply a practical necessity, like making dinner, not the essence of human self-realization," and within that way of thinking it was "assumed that there must be time after labor to work on completing one's self," often through creative activities.<sup>145</sup> At this point, Malevich's text becomes confused, and on precisely the points that most fascinated Gan. For, on the one hand, Malevich muses, these artistic and scholarly activities are also labor, "albeit of another order, one related to creative discovery, freedom of action, freedom of experience, and investigation," and albeit one which "not

---

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.* [было стремление, чтобы всех уравнить в труде...уравнить всех в лени.]

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*: 180. [не что другое, как кусочек лени.]

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*: 182. [простая необходимость чисто харчевого порядка, и что он не является главной сутью человеческого совершенства, и что по-за трудом должно остаться время, через которое возможно было бы работать над совершенством.]

many people are able to enter.”<sup>146</sup> On the other hand, these creative activities—he uses the word *tvorchestvo*—are “a second half of human labor.” They provide respite and rejuvenation, but also a space for thinking creatively, which, he points out, is the only way to invent the new technologies that shorten working hours.<sup>147</sup>

Gan’s project in *Island* is more focused on social equity than creative invention, but the logic of redistributing labor and leisure is the same. Writing about constructivism in March 1924, the same month that the OSPK began meeting and that he would have begun thinking about producing his experimental film, Gan described the project plainly in those terms:

Revolutionary...constructivism does not strive to create new types of art. It develops forms of artistic labor through which workers can actually enter into artistic labor without losing touch with their material labor...

Not to create separate kinds of special labor, but to organically merge with existing types of material production—that is the real path of our constructivism...Revolutionary constructivism wrenches photography and cinematography from the hands of art-makers. Constructivism digs art’s grave.<sup>148</sup>

The passage is aggressive in its attitude toward art, but also fateful. Constructivism was a revolutionary new economy in which both halves of human labor are distributed evenly, so that everyone would have some experience with dirt and gravity, as well as with

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* [правда, другого порядка, и этот другой порядок относится к творческим выявлению, к свободе действия, к свободному опыту, исканию]

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> Aleksei Gan, “Konstruktivizm mogil’ shchik iskusstva,” *Zrelishcha* 78 (18-23 March 1924): 5-6. [Революционный...конструктивизм не стремится создавать новые виды искусства. Он развивает такие формы художественного труда, через которые трудящиеся действительно, не отрываясь от своего материального труда, вошли бы в труд художественный.../...Не создавать отдельные виды особого труда, а органически слиться с существующими видами материального производства— вот настоящие пути нашего конструктивизма...Революционный конструктивизм—вырывает из рук искусствовладельцев фотографию и кинематографию... / Конструктивизм—могилище искусства.]

creative work. Setting up such an egalitarian system was not exactly the same as cold-blooded murder of professional art, but still, art would die just because it would have no place to live.

Part of the advantage of this new rationalized economy was of course economic, and another was simply that fair was fair. Less obviously, Gan seems to have seen it as a way to address the geopolitical aspect of the battle for time as I defined it in the beginning, albeit by a vastly different route. For, despite Gan's belligerent rhetoric, he also talked about his constructivist economy as a mode of conflict avoidance, writing,

[It is when you get] mixed up in webs of yesterday's habits, in forms of relation that seem to exist even though they have already ceased to do so, [that] conflicts, arguments, and, finally, tragedies crop up at every step. These authentic tragedies...do not just happen [*razygryvaiutsia*], but are realized and even materialized by people, who live and do not play at life. Their execution and materialization permeate the hours and days of our lives.<sup>149</sup>

Preprogrammed routines, military discipline, and unthinking execution of habitual forms promised more tanks and airplanes per hour. Yet, they were also productive of the friction and discord that ultimately led to the same larger tragedies for which they were intended to prepare. The world did not need to produce art any more than it needed to produce tanks, at least as long as it produced people able to think beyond the next step in their assigned routine and their own narrow self-interest. In that process of self-production lay the utility of art. In this sense, Gan's battle for time was a battle for everyone to have the time to be a complete human being.

---

<sup>149</sup> Gan, *Da zdravstvuet demonstratsiia byta!*: 13. [путается в сетях вчерашних привычек...отчего на каждом шагу возникают конфликты, ссоры и, наконец, трагедии...И так подлинные трагедии...не разыгрываются, а осуществляются даже овеществляются самими живущими, а не играющими в жизнь людьми. Этим осуществлением и овеществлением пронизаны все часы и дни нашей жизни.]

Perhaps I have spent too much time in Gan's shoes myself, because this seems like a sensible idea to me. It also seems to take Marx as a practical analytics rather than false solace in a hopeless situation. Gan had more trouble convincing those professional artists whose grave constructivism was digging. The film seemed to do relatively well in distribution,<sup>150</sup> but this was no consolation for those in the industry. One account reported on Gan's appearance at another discussion screening, of 12 November 1924, where Gan's *Island* was one of the specimens.<sup>151</sup> When he got up to elaborate on the plan he had demonstrated in his film—to fully replace actors with the “dramatization of everyday life” (*instsenirovkoï byta*)—he met with “definite obstruction” from the actors in the audience, who made it impossible to hear by coughing and making noise. Interestingly, in the reviewer's assessment, Gan still won the debate—there was no denying the soundness of his logic.<sup>152</sup> Yet, if he won that battle, it was only to lose the war, and on a number of fronts.

On the aesthetic front, the socialist realist forms that emerged in the late twenties and thirties took all of the wrong lessons from the aesthetics of his film; monumental painting and major fiction films were far from the model of amateur participation that fed his vision. On the political front, his game of us versus them was transformed into mindless nationalistic boosterism, and on the labor front, all those obstructionist actors in

---

<sup>150</sup> Proletkino's records and advertisements for screenings indicate that *Island* did as well as Proletkino's other films. It was shown in numerous venues in Moscow and elsewhere. GARF f. R-8326, op. 1, d. 11, l. 157.

<sup>151</sup> Called “An Evening of Cinema Production,” the event included Anoshenko, Mitrin, Sabinskii, Mur, Pudovkin, Room, Tikhonovich, Vertov, Gan, and Gorchilin. They screened several films, including *Young Pioneers* and some works in progress. “Kino smotr,” *Kino-Gazeta* 63 (18 November 1924): 2.

<sup>152</sup> A. Kor., “Kino-Boi,” *Rabochii zritel'* 28 (26 November-2 December 1924): 14.

the audience may have been right—in the end, Gan’s rationalization rhetoric lost its nuances and only contributed to the collective hurrah surrounding the cult of labor. Gan himself ended up in a psychiatric hospital talking about how he was very tired.<sup>153</sup> While it may have been the least of his worries, in alienating art’s professionals, Gan also lost on the historical front. This is the only one I have been able to reclaim for him here. As a space for giving his case a fair trial, perhaps it is a step toward redressing the rest.

---

<sup>153</sup> Explaining the reasons for his illness to Shub, he wrote, “you think that I’m an alcoholic..., but my sickness is of another order. I say it again and again: I simply cannot produce [*rodit*]. I simply cannot get engaged in work while I have not solved the main problem of what needs to be done.” Undated letter, c. 1928-1934. RGALI f. 3035, op. 1, d. 106, l. 1-2. [Ты думаешь, я алкоголик...но болезнь моя иного порядка. Еще и еще раз говорю: я никак не могу родить. Я никак не могу взяться за работу, пока не решу главное – что надо делать.]

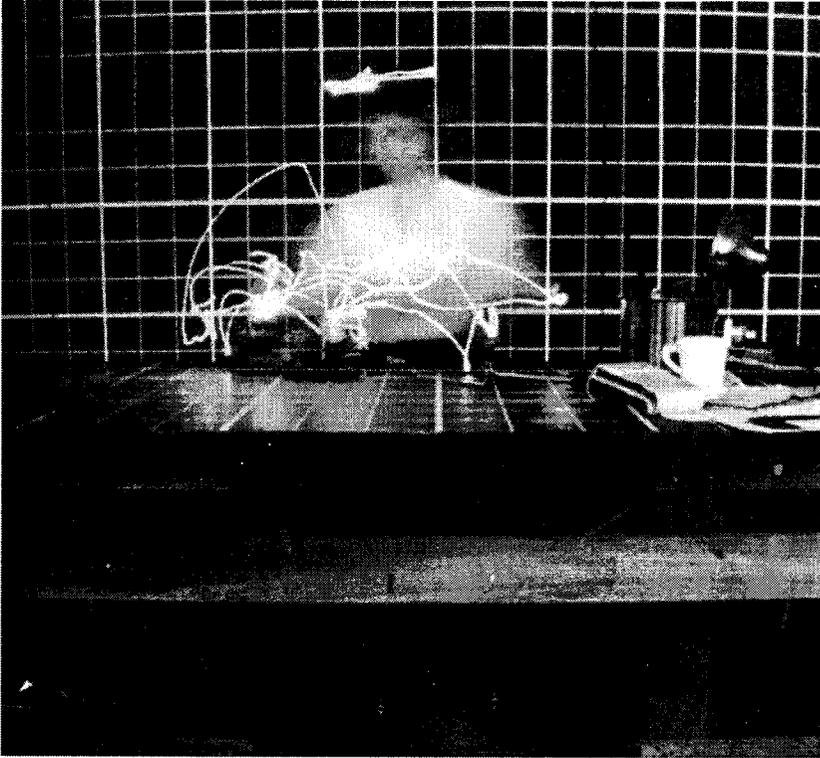


Figure 176. Frank Gilbreth, Motion efficiency study, c. 1914

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archives

- GARF      *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv rossiskoi federatsii*  
State Archive of the Russian Federation
- IZO RGB    *Otdel izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva, Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia biblioteka*  
Fine Art Division, Russian State Library
- OR GTG     *Otdel rukopisei, Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia galleria*  
Manuscript Division, State Tret'iakov Gallery
- RGALI      *Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva*  
Russian State Archive of Literature and Art
- RGAKFD    *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv kinofotodokumentov*  
Russian State Archive of Cinema- and Photo-Documents
- RGVA      *Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv*  
Russian State Military Archive
- TsGAMO    *Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Moskovskoi oblasti*  
Central State Archive of the Moscow Region

Periodicals Cited

- Anarkhiia*  
*Avangard*  
*Brigada khudozhnikov*  
*Ermitazh*  
*Iskusstvo*  
*Izvestiia*  
*Izvestiia khudozhestvenno-prosvetitel'nogo otdela Moskovskogo Soveta Rab., Sold. I Kr.*  
*Deputatov*  
*Izvestiia ASNOVA*  
*Izvestiia Narodnogo Komissariata po Voennym Delam*  
*Khudozhnik i zritel'*  
*Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'*  
*Kino-Fot*  
*Kino-Gazeta*  
*Kinozhurnal ARK*  
*Krasnyi transportnik*  
*Lef*  
*Poligraficheskoe proizvodstvo*

*Pravda*  
*Proizvodstvennyi zhurnal*  
*Proletarskaia kul'tura*  
*Proletkino*  
*Rabochii zritel'*  
*Russkoe iskusstvo*  
*Sovremennaia arkhitektura*  
*Teatral'naia Moskva*  
*Tekhnika i zhizn'*  
*Tvorchestvo*  
*Vecherniaia Moskva*  
*Vestnik iskusstv*  
*Vestnik teatra*  
*Vestnik zhizni*  
*Vremia*  
*Vol'nyi golos truda*  
*Za proletarskoe iskusstvo*  
*Zrelishcha*

#### Published Sources Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973.
- Akhmatova, O. V. *Russkii konstruktivizm (opyt sotsial'no-filosofskogo analiza)*. Moscow: Sputnik, 2001.
- Aksionernoie obshchestvo O. I. Leman*. St. Petersburg and Moscow: 1914.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.
- Anderson, Richard. "The Journal States its Aims: Partisanship and the Party Line in the Soviet Architectural Press." In *Architecture in Print: Design and Debate in the Soviet Union, 1919-1935*, edited by Richard Anderson and Kristin Romberg, 25-36. New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Gallery in the City of New York, 2005.
- Anoshchenko, Aleksandr. "Kinokoki." In *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, translated by Julian Graffy, 90-92. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932*. New York: Rizzoli, 1990.
- Arvatov, Boris. "Agit-kino." *Kino-fot* 2 (September 1922): 2

- . “Da zdravstvuet raskol! K levoi konferentsii.” *Zrelishcha* 2 (September 1922): 7-8.
- . Review of *Veshch'. Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 7 (September–October 1922): 341-342.
- Avrich, Paul. *The Russian Anarchists*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- Bailes, Kendall E. “Aleksei Gastev and the Controversy over Taylorism, 1918-1924.” *Soviet Studies* 29: 3 (1977): 373-394.
- Bann, Stephen, ed. *The Tradition of Constructivism*. New York: Viking Press, 1974.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- Barron, Stephanie, ed. “*Degenerate Art*”: *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991.
- Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” In *Image/Music/Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday, 1977.
- Batchen, Geoffrey. *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 253-267. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- . “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 217-251. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Berghaus, Gunter. *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*. Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996.
- Berman, Marshall. *All That is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.
- Biggart, John. “The Rehabilitation of Bogdanov.” In *Bogdanov and His Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky), 1873-1928*, edited by John Biggart, G. D. Gloveli, and Avraham Yassour, 6-14. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 1998.
- Bliumenfel'd, V. M., V. F. Pletnev, N. F. Chuzhak, eds. *Na putiakh iskusstva. Sbornik statei*. Moscow: Proletkul't, 1926.

- Bogdanov, Aleksandr. *Essays in Tektology, the General Science of Organization*. Translated by George Gorelik. Seaside, Cal.: Intersystems Publications, 1984.
- . *Filosofia zhivogo opyta: populiarnye ocherki*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1920.
- . *Kratkii kurs ekonomicheskoi nauki*. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1920.
- . *Nauka ob obshchestvennom soznanii: kratkii kurs ideologicheskoi nauki v voprosakh i otvietakh*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Moscow and Petrograd: Kniga, 1923.
- . "O tendentsiakh proletarskoi kul'tury (Otvét A. Gastevu)." *Proletarskaia kul'tura* 9-10 (June-July 1919): 46-52.
- Bois, Yve-Alain. "The Semiology of Cubism." In *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, edited by Lynn Zelevansky, 169-208. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992.
- Borovoi, Aleksei, ed. *Mikhailu Bakuninu. 1876-1926. Ocherki istorii anarkhicheskogo dvizheniia v Rossii*. Moscow: Golos truda, 1926.
- Botar, Oliver. *Természet és technika: Az újraértelmezett Moholy-Nagy, 1916 1923*. Budapest: Vince Kiado, 2007.
- Bowlt, John, ed. *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- Bonnell, Victoria E. *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900-1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Bötticher, Carl. *Die Tektonik der Hellenen*. 3 vols. Potsdam: Ferdinand Reigl, 1844-1852.
- Brik, Osip. "Into Production!" In *The Tradition of Constructivism*, edited by Stephen Bann, translated by Richard Sherwood, 83-85. New York: Da Capo Press, 1974.
- . "Usluzhivyi estet." *Lef* 1 (March 1923): 92-103.
- Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art." *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 43.
- . "Cold War Constructivism." In *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, edited by Serge Guilbaut, 85-110. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.
- . "From Faktura to Factography." *October* 30 (fall 1984): 82-119.

- Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics." *October* 62 (fall 1992): 3-41.
- . *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000.
- Bukharin, Nikolai. *Historical Materialism*. New York: International Publishers, 1925.
- and E. Preobrazhensky. *Azbuka kommunizma: Populiarnoe ob"iasnenie programmy Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii*. N.p.: 1921.
- Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Burliuk, D., Aleksandr Kruchenykh, V. Mayakovsky, and V. Klebnikov. "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste." In *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, edited and translated by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, 51-52. Washington, DC: New Academia, 2004.
- Cage, John. *Silence*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961.
- Cassiday, Julie A. *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen*. Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000.
- Chappell, Warren and Robert Bringhurst. *A Short History of the Printed Word*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Point Roberts, WA and Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 1999.
- Chlenova, Masha. "On Display: Transformations of the Avant-Garde in Soviet Public Culture, 1928-1933." Forthcoming.
- Clark, Katerina. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Clark, T. J. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Cooke, Catherine. "Sources of a Radical Mission in the Early Soviet Profession: Aleksei Gan and the Moscow Anarchists." In *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Neil Leach, 13-37. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- , Vladimir Tolstoy, and Irina Bibikova, eds. *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918-33*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1990.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.
- Degot, Ekaterina. *Bor'ba za znamia. Sovetskoe iskusstvo mezhdu Trotskim i Stalinym. 1926-1936*. Moscow: Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008.

- Denisov, V. D. "50 let moskovskoi gorodskoi klinicheskoi psikhiatricheskoi bol'nitse no 8 im. Z. P. Solov'eva." *Zhurnal nevropatologii i psikhatrii imeni S.S. Korsakova* 65, no. 5 (1965): 772-774.
- Dickerman, Leah. "Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1997.
- . "Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography." *October* 93 (summer 2000): 139-153.
- . "The Propagandizing of Things." In *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, edited by Magdalena Dobrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, 62-96. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998.
- Dmitriev, M. *Tekhnika knigi: prakticheskoe posobie po naborno-knizhnomu delu dlia tipografskikh rabochikh I rabotnikov izdatel'stv.* Khar'kov: Proletarii, 1925.
- Doane, Mary Anne. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Dobrowski, Magdalena, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998.
- Doherty, Brigid. "See: 'We Are All Neurosthenics'! or, the Trauma of Dada Montage." *Critical Inquiry* 24: 1 (autumn 1997): 82-132.
- Douglas, Charlotte. "Energetic Abstraction: Ostwald, Bogdanov, and Russian Post-Revolutionary Art." In *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, 76-94. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Ehrenburg, Ilya. *A vse taki ona vertit'sia.* Berlin and Moscow: Gelikon, 1922.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. "Pokhvala kinokhronike." In *Metod*, edited by Naum Kleiman, vol. 2, 449-455. Moscow: Muzei Kino, 2002.
- Engels, Friedrich. *Feuerbach: The Roots of the Socialist Philosophy.* Translated by Austin Lewis. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1903.
- Erofeev, Vladimir. "Kino-Eye." In *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, translated by Julian Graffy, 105-106. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- Fedoseev, P. N. and K. U. Chernenko, eds. *Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo soiuzu v rezoliutsiiakh I resheniiakh s"ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TSK.* 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Vol. 1. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury: 1954.

- Fishelev, Mikhail. *Fabrika knigi krasnyi proletarii. Istoriia tipografii byvsh. "T-va I. N. Kushnerev I Ko."* Moscow: Izdatel'stvo legkoi promyshlennosti, 1932.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Fomin, V. I., ed. *Letopis' rossiiskogo kino, 1863-1929.* Moscow: Materik, 2004.
- Fore, Devin. Introduction to Sergei Tret'iakov, "The Theater of Attractions." Translated by Kristin Romberg. *October* 118 (fall 2006): 19-26.
- . "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography." *October* 118 (fall 2006): 95-131.
- Foster, Hal, et al. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism.* New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004.
- . *Compulsive Beauty.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993.
- Gan, Aleksei. "1 'demonstratsiia gluposti' v ustakh Liusena Uol'." *Zrelishcha* 60 (October-November 1923): 19.
- . "Beseda s V. F. Stepanovoi." *Zrelishcha* 16 (December 1922): 10-12.
- . "Bor'ba za 'massovoe deistvo'." In *O teatre*, 49-80. Tver': Tverskoe izdatel'stvo, 1922.
- . "Bor'ba za ul'timatum." *Zrelishcha* 68 (December 1923-January 1924): 19.
- . "Chto takoe konstruktivizm?" *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1928, no. 3: 79.
- . "The Cinematograph and Cinema." In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, edited by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, translated by Richard Taylor, 67-68. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Kino." *Tekhnika i zhizn'* 4 (1925): 16.
- . "Kino avangard." *Kino-Fot* 2 (September 1922): 1.
- . "Kino v shestom oktiabre." *Zrelishcha* 61 (November 1923): 20-22.
- . "K nashei konferentsii." *Ermitazh* 15 (Aug 1922): 3.
- . "Kommunisticheskii gorod (V planovykh razrabotkakh konstruktivistov)." *Teatral'naia Moskva* 40 (May 1922): 5-6.
- . *Konstruktivizm.* Tver': Tverskoe izdatel'stvo, 1922.
- . "Konstruktivizm. Otvet Lefu." *Zrelishcha* 55 (September-October 1923): 12-13.

- . “Konstruktivizm mogil’ shchik iskusstva.” *Zrelishcha* 78 (March 1924): 5-6.
- . “Konstruktivizm v nabore i verste.” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2: inside back cover.
- . “Konstruktivizm v tipografskom proizvodstve.” *Al’manakh proletkul’ta*. Moscow: Vserossiskii Proletkul’t, 1925.
- . “K nashei konferentsii.” *Ermitazh* 15 (August 1922): 3.
- . “K poetam proletarskikh pesen.” *Anarkhiia* 11 (March 1918): 2.
- . “K sotrudnikam Proletarskogo teatra.” *Anarkhiia* 43 (April 1918): 4.
- . “‘The Left Front’ and Cinema.” In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, edited by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, translated by Richard Taylor, 75-77. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . “Massovoe deistvo.” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (September 1920): 12.
- . “Massovoe deistvo. Sostiazanie i bor’ba.” *Vestnik teatra* 66 (August 1920): 3.
- . “My voiuem.” *Kino-Fot* 3 (September 1922): 8.
- . “Muzei Morozova.” *Anarkhiia* 45 (April 1918): 3.
- . “Nakanune kino sezona.” *Zrelishcha* 54 (26 September 1923): 12.
- . “Nasha bor’ba.” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (September 1920): 1-2.
- . “Nasha spravka.” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 2: inside front cover.
- . “O pozitsiakh vnutrennego fronta RKT.” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (September 1920): 9.
- . “Opytnyi plan dlia massogo stsenariia.” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (September 1920): 14.
- . “O sovremennykh khudozhestvennykh gruppirovkakh.” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 35 (April 1922): 6-7.
- . “Otkrytoe pis’mo V. E. Meierkholdu.” *Ermitazh* 8 (July 1922): 11.
- . “Pervoe.” *Kino-Fot* 3 (September 1922): 1.
- . “Pevets rabocheho udar.” *Anarkhiia* 69 (May 1918): 4.
- . “Proletkul’t.” *Anarkhiia* 14 (March 1918): 4.
- . “Proletarskii teatr.” *Anarkhiia* 56 (May 1918): 4.

- . “‘Proletarskii teatr’ Pishchevnikov (k istorii samodeiatel’nykh stsenicheskikh kollektivov proletariata.” *Vestnik teatra* 66 (August 1920): 13-14.
- . “Recognition for the *Kinocs*.” In *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, translated by Julian Graffy, 64-65. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- . “Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche.” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1927, no. 3. 104-107.
- . “Togda, teper’, i my.” *Anarkhiia* 47 (April 1918): 4.
- . “Two Paths.” In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, edited by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, translated by Richard Taylor, 83. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- , Kazimir Malevich, and Aleksei Morgunov. “The Problems of Art and the Role of its Suppressors.” In K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, edited by Troels Anderson, translated by Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, 49. New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1968.
- [Gan], Alekso. “Obzor faktov.” *Vestnik teatra* 67 (September 1920): 3-4.
- G-n, A[leksei]. “Stroiashchiisia Khabarovsk. Na stroike doma kommuny. ” *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* (October 1931).
- G[an], A[leksei]. “Chetyre serii (k izdaniuu Khudozhestvenno-Agitatsionnoi literatury).” *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn’* 4/5 (May-October 1920): 19-20.
- . “Chto sleduet delat’.” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 44 (June 1922): 8.
- . “Ditia.” *Teatral’naia Moskva* 35 (April 1922): 19.
- . “Proletarskii teatr.” *Anarkhiia* 97 (June 1918): 4.
- [Gan, Aleksei]. “Konstruktivisty.” *Ermitazh* 13 (August 1922): 3.
- . “Konstruktivizm v poligrafii.” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1928, no. 3: 80.
- . “‘Massovoe Deistvo’.” *Ermitazh* 12 (August 1922): 3-4.
- . “Pечатnyi material dlia kritiki smontirovannyi konstruktivistom Rodchenko.” *Kino-Fot* 1 (August 1922): 13.
- . Statement in *Ermitazh* 3 (May-June 1922): 3.
- Gassner, Hubertus. “The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization.” In *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, 302-305. New York: Solomon Guggenheim Museum, 1992.

- Gastev, Aleksei. "O tendentsiakh proletarskoi kul'tury." *Proletarskaia kultura* 9-10 (June-July 1919): 35-46.
- Gerschenkron, Alexander. *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1962.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes." In *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Pierce*, edited by Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeonk, eds., 81-118. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988.
- Ginzburg, Moisei. "V poiskakh sovremennoi arkhitektury." *Khudozhnik i zritel'* 1 (January 1924): 57-60.
- . *Style and Epoch*. Translated by Anatole Senkevitch. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982.
- Gordin, Br. "K pervomu maia." *Anarkhiia* 47 (April 1918): 1.
- Goriacheva, Tat'iana. "Suprematizm i konstruktivizm. K istorii vsaimootnoshenii." *Iskusstvoznanie* 2 (2003): 409-422.
- Gough, Maria. "Back in the USSR: John Heartfield, Gustav Klucis, and the Medium of Soviet Propaganda." *New German Critique* 36, no. 2 (2009): 133-183.
- . "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde." *RES* 36 (autumn 1999): 32-60.
- . "Radical Tourism: Sergei Tret'iakov at the Communist Lighthouse." *October* 118 (fall 2006): 158-178.
- . "Switched on: Notes on Radio, Automata, and the Bright Red Star." In *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917-1937: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*, edited by Leah Dickerman, 39-55. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.
- . *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Gozak, Andrei. *Ivan Leonidov*. Moscow: Zhiraf, 2002.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Geoffrey Nowell Smith and Quentin Hoare. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- Gray, Camilla. *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962.

- Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." In *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O'Brien, vol. 4, 85-94. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Groys, Boris. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Translated by Charles Rougle. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Guillemin, Anna. "The Style of Linguistics: Aby Warburg, Karl Vossler, and Hermann Osthoff." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69: 4 (October 2008): 605-626.
- Gusman, Boris. "On Kino-Eye." In *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, translated by Julian Graffy, 104-105. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- . Review of *Ostrov iunikh pionerov*. *Pravda* (September 1924): 5.
- Häfner, Lutz. "The Assassination of Count Mirbach and the 'July Uprising' of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow, 1918." *Russian Review* 50: 3 (summer 1991): 324-44.
- Hutchings, Stephen C. "Photographic Eye as Poetic I: Mayakovsky's and Rodchenko's *Pro Eto* Project (1923)." *History of Photography* 24: 4 (winter 2000): 300-307.
- Iudin, Nikolai. "Proizvodstvo Proletkino. Ostrov iunikh pionerov." *Proletkino* 4-5 (August 1924): 17-18.
- Janecek, Gerald. "Kruchenykh contra Gutenberg." In *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934*, edited by Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye, 41-49. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002.
- Joravsky, David. "The Construction of the Stalinist Psyche." In *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick, 105-128. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Joseph, Branden. *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003.
- Judd, Donald. "Specific Objects." *Arts Yearbook* 8 (New York: Arts Digest, 1965): 94.
- Kachurin, Pamela Jill. "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Retreat of the Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era." Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1998.
- Kaphetse, Anna, ed. *Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1930: The G. Costakis Collection*. Athens: Ministry of Culture, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, and European Cultural Center of Delphi, 1995.
- Kaplan, Alice Yaeger. *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.
- Karginov, German. *Rodchenko*. Translated by Elisabeth Hoch. London: Thames and Hudson, 1979.
- Keen, Whitney B. *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*. New York: Universe Books, 1983.
- Kelly, Catriona. "'A Laboratory for the Manufacture of Proletarian Writers': The *Stengazeta* (Wall Newspaper), *Kul'turnost'* and the Language of Politics in the Early Soviet Period." *Europe-Asia Studies* 54 no. 4 (2002): 573-602.
- Kerzhentsev, Platon. "Bor'ba na s"ezde." *Vestnik teatra* 44 (December 1919): 5.
- . *Bor'ba za Vremia*. Moscow: Krasnaia Nov', 1924.
- . *Tvorcheskii teatr. Puti sotsialisticheskogo teatra*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vserossiiskogo tsentral'nogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta sovetov RSKiK deputatov, 1919.
- Khan-Magomedov, S. O. *Aleksandr Vesnin i Konstruktivizm. Zhivopis', teatr, arkhitektura, risunok, knizhnaia grafika, oformlenie prazdnikov*. Moscow: Arkhitektura, 2007.
- . *INKhUK i rannyi konstruktivizm*. Moscow: Arkhitektura, 1994.
- . "INKhUK: vzniknovenie, formirovanie i pervyi period raboty. 1920." *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 2 (1981): 332-368.
- . *Konstruktivizm. Kontseptsiiia formoobrazovaniia*. Moscow: Stroizdat, 2003.
- . *Nikolai Sokolov*. Moscow: Russkii avangard: 2009.
- . *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina*. Moscow: Galart, 1995.
- . "Psikhotekhnicheskaiia laboratoriiia VKhUTEINa." *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika* 1 (1978): 16-22.
- . *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, edited by Vieri Quilici. London: Thames and Hudson, 1986.
- . "Zhivskul'ptarkh." *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo* 5 (1978): 32-35.
- . *Zhivskul'ptarkh, 1919-1920: pervaiia tvorcheskaia organizatsiia sovetskogo arkhitekturnogo avangarda*. Moscow: Arkhitektura, 1993.
- and Vieri Quilici. *Alexandre Rodchenko. L'Oeuvre complet*. Paris: Philippe Sers, 1986.

- Khazanova, V. *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury 1926-1932. Dokumenty i materialy*. Moscow: Nauka, 1970.
- Khudolei, V. "Anarkhicheskie techeniia nakanune 1917 g." In *Ocherki istorii anarkhicheskogo dvizheniia v Rossii*, edited by Aleksei Borovoi, 314-322. Moscow: Golos truda, 1926.
- Kiaer, Christina. *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2005.
- . "Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s." *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (2005): 323-345.
- King, David. *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1997.
- Koenker, Diane. *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- . *Republic of Labor: Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Konopleva, Anna. "Aleksei Mikhailovich Gan." *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 49 (2000). 212-221.
- Korsgaard, Christine M., et al. *The Sources of Normativity*. Edited by Onora O'Neill. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1996.
- Krauss, Rosalind. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985.
- . *Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.
- Krichevskii, Vladimir. *Oblozhka: graficheskoe litso ephokhi revoliutionnogo natiska*. Moscow: Samolet, 2002.
- Kuleshov, Lev. "Americanism." In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, edited by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, translated by Richard Taylor, 72-73. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Dom nenavisti." *Kino-Fot* 6 (January 1923): 4-5.
- . "Esli teper'..." *Kino-Fot* 3 (September 1922): 4.
- Kuppers, Sophie. "Proizvodstvennaia grafika na vystavke." *Poligraficheskoe proizvodstvo*, 1927, no. 10: 14

- Lavrentiev, Alexander. *Laboratoriia konstruktivizma*. Moscow: Grant, 2000.
- . *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*. Edited by John Bowlt. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988.
- . “Zagadki Alekseia Gana.” *Da* 2-3 (1995): 3.
- Lavin, Maud. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photographs of Hannah Höch*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Law, Alma and Mel Gordon. *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1996.
- Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*. Translated by Frederick Etchells. New York: Dover Publications: 1986.
- Leighen, Patricia. *Re-ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Lenin, V. I. “Directive on Cinema Affairs.” In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, edited by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, translated by Richard Taylor, 56. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government.” In *Collected Works*, translated by Clemens Dutt, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 27, 257-259. Moscow: Progress, 1965.
- . “‘Nauchnaia’ sistema vyzhivaniia pota.” In *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 23, 18-19. Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1961.
- . “Sistema Teilora—poraboshchenie cheloveka mashinoi.” In *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 24, 229-230. Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1961.
- . “Where to Begin?” In *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 5, 13-24. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961.
- Lenoe, Matthew Edward. “Stalinist Mass Journalism and the Transformation of Soviet Newspapers, 1926–32.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1997.
- Lissitzsky, El and Ilya Ehrenburg. “Blokada Rossii konchaetsiia.” *Veshch’* 1-2 (March-April 1922): 1.
- . “Kniga s tochke zreniia zretiel’nogo vospriiatiiia—visual’naia kniga.” *Iskusstvo knigi* 3 (1962): 167.
- Lodder, Christina. *Constructivist Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937*. London: Pindar, 2005.

- . “Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s.” In *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-32*, 99-116. New York: Rizzoli, 1990.
- . *Russian Constructivism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.
- . “The Transition to Constructivism.” In *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, 266-281. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992.
- Malevich, Kazimir. *Chernyi kvadrat*. Edited by A. S. Shatskikh. Saint Petersburg: Azbuka, 2001.
- . “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism.” In *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism*, edited and translated by John Bowl, 116-135. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- . “Len’ kak deistvitel’naia istina chelovechestva.” In *Sobranie socheneniia v piati tomakh*, edited by A. S. Shatskikh, vol. 5, 179-187. Moscow: Gilea, 2004.
- . *Sobranie sochenenii v piati tomakh*. Edited by A. S. Shatskikh and A. D. Sarabianov. Vol. 1. Moscow: Gilea, 1995.
- . Letter to El Lissitzky. In *Pis'ma Kazimira Malevicha El' Lisitzkomu i Nikolaiu Puninu*, edited by A. S. Shatskikh, 5-7. Moscow: Pinakoteka, 2000.
- Mallgrave, Harry Francis. Introduction to *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics: A Handbook for Technicians, Artists, and Friends of the Arts*, by Gottfried Semper. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004.
- Margolin, Victor. *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Markov, Vladimir. *Russian Futurism: A History*. Washington, DC: New Academia, 2006.
- Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.
- . *The Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin, 1973.
- . “Theses on Feuerbach.” In *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1, translated by W. Lough, 13-15. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969.
- Maximoff, G. P. *The Guillotine at Work: Twenty Years of Terror in Russia (Data and Documents)*. Chicago: The Chicago Section of the Alexander Berkman Fund, 1940.
- Mayakovsky, Vladimir. *What is Good and What is Bad*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979.

- Mazaev, A. I. *Kontsepsiia "proizvodstvennogo iskusstva" 20x godov*. Moscow: Nauka, 1975.
- . *Prazdnik kak sotsial'no-khudozhestvennoe iavlenie. Opyt istoriko-teoreticheskogo issledovaniia*. Moscow: Nauka: 1978.
- Mally, Lynn. *Culture of the Future: The Proletkul't Movement in Revolutionary Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- . *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938*. Ithaca: Cornell, 2000.
- Michelson, Annette. "Man with the Movie Camera: From Magician to Epistemologist." *Artforum* 10:7 (March 1972): 60-72.
- Mikhailov, B. B. "O nekotorykh metodologicheskikh poiskakh sovetskogo iskusstvovedeniia." *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 75 (1976): 282-298.
- Mikhailov, S. "Proletarskii teatr (vpechatleniia)." *Anarkhiia* 43 and 46 (April 1918): 4.
- Morison, Stanley. *The Typographic Book, 1450-1935*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Morris, William. Preface to *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter of the Stones of Venice*, by John Ruskin. London: George Allen, 1892.
- Mudrak, Myroslava M. and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt. "Environment of Propaganda: Russians and Soviet Expositions and Pavilions in the West." In *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1910-1930*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992.
- Nächtigaller, Roland and Hubertus Gassner. "3x1=1: Vesc Objet Gegenstand." *Veshch' / Objet / Gegenstand*. Baden: Verlag Lars Müller, 1994.
- Nesbit, Peter. "Some Facts on the Organizational History of the van Diemen Exhibition." *The First Russian Show: A Commemoration of the van Diemen Exhibition, Berlin, 1922*, 67-72. London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983.
- Novikov, Andrei. "Derevenskii kiosk." *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1926, no. 1: 35.
- Novitskii, Pavel. *Pervoi vystavki sovremennoi arkhitektury RSFSR*. Moscow: 1927.
- Odom, Anne and Wendy R. Salmond, eds. *Treasures into Tractors: the Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938*. Washington, D.C.: Hillwood, 2009.
- Oille, Jennifer. "'Konstruktivizm' and 'Kinematografiya'." *Artforum* 16: 9 (1978): 44-49.

- Orlovsky, Serge. "Moscow Theaters, 1917-1941." In *Soviet Theaters, 1917-41: A Collection of Articles*, edited by Martha Bradshaw, 1-127. New York: Research Program on the USSR, 1954.
- Pamilla, L. and V. Chukovich. *NOT—Velenie vremeni*. Minsk: Belarus', 1973.
- Passanti, Francesco. "The Vernacular, Modernism, and Le Corbusier." *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56 (December 1997): 442-443.
- Passuth, Krisztina. *Moholy-Nagy*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1985.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Pertsov, Viktor. *Reviziia levogo fronta v sovremennom russkom iskusstve*. Moscow: Vserossiskii Proletkul't, 1925.
- Petric, Vlada. *Constructivism in Film: The Man with a Movie Camera: A Cinematic Analysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Pingvin. "Malen'kii Fel'eton. Kino-Dispute 26-go sentibria." *Kino-Gazeta* 4 (October 1923): 2.
- Platonov, Andrei. *The Foundation Pit*. Translated by Mirra Ginzburg. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1994.
- Poggioli, Renato. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Gerald Fitzgerald. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Quilici, Vieri. "The Magazine *SA*: A Constructivist Creation." *Rassegna* 38: 2 (1989): 10-25.
- Rabinbach, Anson. *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Rakhmanova, O. "O metode vospitaniia aktera." *Kinozhurnal ARK*, 1925, no. 6-7: 11.
- Raunig, Gerald. *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*. Translated by Aileen Derieg. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007.
- Rodchenko, Aleksandr. "Konstruktivisty," *LEF* 1 (March 1923): 252.
- . "Osobniaki." *Anarkhiia* 51 (May 1918). 4.
- Rogdai. "'Bashnia' Alekseia Gasteva." *Anarkhiia* 56 (May 1918): 4.
- . "'Proletarskii teatr' Pishchevnikov (k istorii samodeiatel'nykh stsenicheskikh kollektivov proletariata)." *Vestnik teatra* 66 (August 1920): 13-14.

- . “Zhizn’ pekaria.” *Anarkhiia* 97 (June 1918): 4.
- Romberg, Kristin. “From *Veshch’* to *SA*: Journal as Object.” In *Architecture in Print: Design and Debate in the Soviet Union, 1919-1935*, edited by Richard Anderson and Kristin Romberg, 15-24. New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Gallery, 2005.
- Rowell, Margit and Deborah Wye, eds. *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002.
- Rubin, Isaak Illich. *Ocherki po teorii stoimosti Marksa*. Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1924.
- Rudnitsky, Konstantin. *Russian and Soviet Theater, 1905-1932*. Edited by Lesley Milne. Translated by Rosane Permar. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988.
- Sametskaia, E. B. “A. V. Morozov i sozдание gosudarstvennogo muzeia keramiki.” *Muzei* 6 (1986): 159-164.
- de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Riedlinger. Translated by Roy Harris. London: Duckworth, 1983.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated by E. F. J. Payne. Vol. 2. New York: Dover, 1966.
- Schwartz, Frederic. *The Werkbund: Design Theory & Mass Culture before the First World War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Semper, Gottfried. *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*. Translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004.
- Senkevitch, Anatole. “Moisei Ginzburg and the Emergence of a Constructivist Theory of Architecture.” Introduction to *Style and Epoch*, by Moisei Ginzburg, 10-33. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982.
- Senter, Terence A. “Moholy-Nagy: The Transitional Years.” In *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From Bauhaus to the New World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Serge, V. *One Year of the Russian Revolution*. Translated by Peter Sedgewick. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972.
- Sharp, Jane. “The Russian Avant-Garde and Its Audience: Moscow 1913.” *Modernism/Modernity* 6:3 (September 1999).
- Shitsgal, A. G. *Russkii tipografskii shrift*. Moscow: Kniga, 1974.

- Shklovskii, Viktor. *Khod konia*. Berlin: Gelikon, 1923.
- Shub, Esfir'. *Krupnym planom*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1959.
- . *Zhizn' moia—kinematograf*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972.
- Sidorina, Elena. *Russkii konstruktivizm: istoki, idei, praktiki*. Moscow: n.p., 1995.
- Sidorov, A. A. *Iskusstvo knigi*. Moscow: Dom Pechati, 1922.
- . "Khudozhestvennye vystavki." *Tvorchestvo* 2-4 (February-April 1920): 34.
- Smirnov, N. G. "Konstruktivizm kak epokha v iskusstve." *Zrelishcha* 62 (November 1923): 4.
- Sokolov, A. *Spravochnaia knizhka naborshchika*. Khar'kov: Kar'kovskaia shkola pechatnogo del im. A. Baginskogo, 1925.
- Sokolov, N. B. "Opyt arkhitekturnogo myshleniia. Tema: kurortnaia gostinitsa." *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1929, no. 3: 95-99.
- Stalin, Joseph. "The Tasks of Economic Executives." In *Problems of Leninism*, 519-531. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976.
- Steinberg, Leo. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Steinberg, Mark. *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925*. Ithaca: Cornell, 2002.
- Stepanova, Varvara. *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda*. Moscow: Sfera, 1994.
- Stephan, Halina. *"Lef" and the Left Front of the Arts*. Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1981.
- Swift, E. Anthony. *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Tafari, Manfredo. "USSR – Berlin, 1922: From Populism to 'Constructivist International'." In *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*, edited by Joan Ockman, 121-179. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Tarabukin, Nikolai. Review of G. V. Vel'flin. *Istolkovanie iskusstva. Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 7 (September-October 1922): 341.
- Taylor, Richard, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema, 1917-1929*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- and Ian Christie, eds. *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

- Theweleit, Klaus. *Male Fantasies*. Vol. 1. Translated by Stephen Conway. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Tikhanovich, V. "Golaia zemlia. T. Gan vmesto RKP." *Vestnik teatra* 67 (September 1920): 2-3.
- Titova, G. V. *Tvorcheskii teatr i teatral'nyi konstruktivizm*. Saint Petersburg: Saint Petersburg Academy of Theatrical Arts, 1995.
- Trotsky, Leon. *Literature and Revolution*. Edited by William Keach. Translated by Rose Strunsky. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005.
- . "Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema." In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, edited by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, translated by Richard Taylor, 94-97. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Tsivian, Yuri. "Dziga Vertov and His Time." Introduction to *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, 1-28. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- Twyman, Michael. *Printing, 1770-1970: An Illustrated History of Its Development and Uses in England*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970.
- Udovicki-Selb, Danilo. "Between Modernism and Socialist Realism: Soviet Architectural Culture under Stalin's Revolution from Above, 1928-1938." *JSAH* 68: 4 (2010): 466-495.
- Vertov, Dziga. "An Answer to Five Questions." In *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, translated by Julian Graffy, 92-95. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- . "The Artistic Drama and the Kino-Eye." In *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, translated by Julian Graffy, 106-107. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- . "An Introductory Speech before a Showing of the First Part of *Kino-Eye*." In *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, translated by Julian Graffy, 99-103. Gemona, Udine: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004.
- . "Kino-Eye." In *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited by Annette Michelson, translated by Kevin O'Brien, 60-79. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- . "Kinoks: A Revolution." In *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited by Annette Michelson, translated by Kevin O'Brien, 17-18. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

- . “On *Kino-Pravda*.” In *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited by Annette Michelson, translated by Kevin O’Brien, 43-47. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- . “On the Significance of Nonacted Cinema.” In *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, edited by Annette Michelson, translated by Kevin O’Brien, 35-37. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Vkhutemaska. “Levaia metafizika.” *Lef* 4 (August-December 1924): 219
- Virno, Paolo. *Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004.
- von Geldern, James. *Bolshevik Festivals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Wachtel, Andrew, and Ilya Vinitsky. *Russian Literature*. Cambridge, England: Polity, 2009.
- Williams, Robert. “Collective Immortality: The Syndicalist Origins of Proletarian Culture, 1905-1910.” *Slavic Review* 39, no. 3 (1980): 389-400.
- Winckelmann, Johann. *Winckelmann. Writings on Art*. Edited by David Irwin. New York: Phaidon Press, 1972.
- Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. Translated by M.D. Hottinger. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1950.
- Yaroslavsky, Em. *Anarkhizm v Rossii (kak istoriia razreshila spor mezhdu anarkhistami i kommunistami v russkoi revoliutsii)*. Moscow: OGIZ, 1939.
- Zhemchuzhnyi, Vitalii. “Aleksii Gan: “Konstruktivizm.” *Zrelishcha* 9 (October 1922): 8.
- . “Konferentsiia ‘levykh’.” *Ermitazh* 12 (August 1922): 3
- . “Konferentsiia ‘levykh.’ Mysli po povodu.” *Ermitazh* 14 (August 1922): 3.
- Zielenski, Siegfried. *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*. Translated by Gloria Custance. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006.
- Zygas, Kestutis Paul. Untitled text about *Veshch’*. *Oppositions* 5 (summer 1976): 115–16.