

Art in Theory

1900–1990

An Anthology of Changing Ideas

Edited by Charles Harrison
and Paul Wood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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