

sion, fanaticism, and freedom. For the real creators of our technological culture, the material things of this culture are not only objects of utility, but also immediate experiences, events in their spiritual life. Such an attitude toward the machine leads to its aestheticization: there are not only expedient machines, but also beautiful machines. At many exhibitions prizes are awarded for beautiful motorcars, and anyone who likes cars is well aware that a car really can be beautiful.

Of course, nowadays there are already many machines aesthetically designed and beautiful in the full sense of the word. This nonhuman beauty, this new form, is curious, differing as it does profoundly and essentially from the forms established in contemporary art.

It is interesting to note who first implemented these forms. Not being artists by profession, they prejudiced acceptance of these forms through their own influence; but it was these people—engineers, designers, professional workers—who were the first, perhaps unconsciously, to divine a new beauty, a new life, where they had previously been inclined to see only the art of necessity, utility, and constraint. Love of the machine gave birth to the machine's beauty; without this love its finish, its color, its polish, and even its form would have remained a void aesthetically. The artistic implementation of its motive is manifest in the inexorable details. This has been an unconscious impulse, the germination of a new life on the ruins of the old.

By now, it seems to me, the new creative will has sufficiently defined itself, but consciousness of it and understanding of it have still not been clarified by any means. It is essential to work along these lines. The word of liberation must be pronounced.

ALEXEI GAN: From *Constructivism* (1922)

Alexei Gan's Konstruktivizm (Constructivism) was published in the small town of Tver in 1922, though two of its short statements bear

These excerpts from Konstruktivizm [Constructivism] (Tver, 1922) have been translated by John Bowl.

the dates 1920 and 1921. Arising from the foregoing program of the Productivist Group, it is the first attempt to present constructivism as a novel and coherent artistic ideology. And it is worth emphasizing that the typographical design is integral to this aim. Lissitzky was later to single out Gan in this connection, as a producer of books who worked "in the printing-works itself, along with the compositor and the machine." Obviously this close relationship between the typographer and the worker on the shop floor directly exemplified Gan's view of constructivism.

In addition to his graphic and typographic work, Gan was to be associated with the OSA, or Union of Contemporary Architects, founded by M. Ginsburg and the Vesnin brothers in 1925. He designed the title page of their magazine, SA (standing for Sovremennaya Arkhitektura [Contemporary Architecture]), which began publication in 1926, and contributed critical articles on such topics as "Constructivism in the Cinema" (see p. 127).

CONSTRUCTIVISM IS A PHENOMENON OF OUR AGE. IT AROSE IN 1920 AMID THE "MASS ACTION" LEFTIST PAINTERS AND IDEOLOGISTS.

THE PRESENT PUBLICATION IS AN AGITATIONAL BOOK WITH WHICH THE CONSTRUCTIVISTS BEGIN THE STRUGGLE WITH THE SUPPORTERS OF TRADITIONAL ART.

Moscow, 1922

WE DECLARE UNCOMPROMISING

WAR ON ART!

The 1st Working Group of Constructivists
1920,
Moscow



Cover of Alexei Gan's *Constructivism*, 1922. The ground is white, with Gan's name in red and the word "Constructivism" in white on a black block.

LONG LIVE

THE COMMUNIST EXPRESSION

OF MATERIAL

CONSTRUCTIONS!

The 1st Working Group of Constructivists
1921,
Moscow

From: Revolutionary-Marxist Thought in Words and Podagrism
in Practice

. . . But the victory of materialism in the field of artistic labor is also on the eve of its triumph.

The proletarian revolution is not a word of flagellation but a real whip, which expels parasitism from man's practical reality in whatever guise it hides its repulsive being.

The present moment within the framework of objective conditions obliges us to declare that the current position of social development is advancing with the omen that artistic culture of the past is unacceptable.

The fact that all so-called art is permeated with the most reactionary idealism is the product of extreme individualism; this individualism shoves it in the direction of new, unnecessary amusements with experiments in refining subjective beauty.

ART

IS INDISSOLUBLY LINKED:

WITH THEOLOGY,

METAPHYSICS,

AND MYSTICISM.

It emerged during the epoch of primeval cultures, when technique existed in "the embryonic state of tools" and forms of economy floundered in utter primitiveness.

It passed through the forge of the guild craftsmen of the Middle Ages.

It was artificially reheated by the hypocrisy of bourgeois culture and, finally, crashed against the mechanical world of our age.

DEATH TO ART!

IT AROSE NATURALLY

DEVELOPED NATURALLY

AND DISAPPEARED NATURALLY.

MARXISTS MUST WORK IN ORDER TO ELUCIDATE ITS DEATH SCIENTIFICALLY AND TO FORMULATE NEW PHENOMENA OF ARTISTIC LABOR WITHIN THE NEW HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT OF OUR TIME.

In the specific situation of our day, a gravitation toward the technical acme and social interpretation can be observed in the work of the masters of revolutionary art.

CONSTRUCTIVISM IS ADVANCING—THE SLENDER CHILD OF AN INDUSTRIAL CULTURE.

FOR A LONG TIME CAPITALISM HAS LET IT ROT UNDERGROUND.

IT HAS BEEN LIBERATED BY—THE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION.

A NEW CHRONOLOGY BEGINS

WITH OCTOBER 25, 1917.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF OCTOBER ARE

THE EPOCHS OF PRIMEVAL
AUTHORITARIAN AND
INDIVIDUALISTIC
CULTURES—
OF POWER AND SPIRIT

ON OUR SIDE IS
THE FIRST CULTURE
OF ORGANIZED LABOR AND INTELLECT!

Past cultures, i.e., cultures of power and spirit, depicted art. "Beautiful" and "imperishable," it served by its visual means religion, philosophy, and all the so-called spiritual culture of the past.

Art speculatively materialized "spirituality" by illustrating sacred history, divine secrets, universal enigmas, abstract joys and sorrows, speculative truths of philosophy, and other childish games of adults whose norms of behavior were determined by the economic conditions of society in this or that historical reality.

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL SYSTEM CONDITIONED BY THE NEW ECONOMIC
STRUCTURE GIVES RISE TO NEW FORMS AND MEANS OF EXPRESSION.

THE EMERGENT CULTURE
OF LABOR AND INTELLECT
WILL BE EXPRESSED BY

INTELLECTUAL-MATERIAL PRODUCTION.

THE FIRST SLOGAN OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IS DOWN WITH SPECULATIVE
ACTIVITY IN ARTISTIC LABOR!

WE—PROCLAIMED THE CONSTRUCTIVISTS IN THEIR PROGRAM—
DECLARE UNCOMPROMISING WAR ON ART.

OUR AGE IS THE AGE OF INDUSTRY.
 AND SCULPTURE MUST GIVE WAY TO
 A SPATIAL SOLUTION OF THE OBJECT.
 PAINTING CANNOT COMPETE WITH PHOTOGRAPHY.
 THE THEATER BECOMES LUDICROUS WHEN
 THE OUTBURSTS OF "MASS ACTION" ARE
 PRESENTED AS THE PRODUCT OF OUR TIMES.
 ARCHITECTURE IS POWERLESS TO HALT
 THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTRUCTIVISM.
 CONSTRUCTIVISM AND MASS ACTION ARE
 INDISSOLUBLY LINKED TO THE LABOR SYSTEM
 OF OUR REVOLUTIONARY WAY OF LIFE.

TECTONICS
TEXTURE
CONSTRUCTION

Having preserved the firm material and formal bases of art—i.e., color, line, plane, volume, and action—artistic work, materialistically intelligible, will rise to the conditions of purposeful activity, and intellectual-material production will open up new means of artistic expression.

We should not reflect, depict, and interpret reality but should build practically and express the planned objectives of the new actively working class, the proletariat, which "is building the foundation of future society and is building it in the capacity of a class subject, an organized force having a plan and the supreme will power to carry out this plan despite all obstacles"!

And it is now, when the proletarian revolution has conquered, and its destructive-creative course is blazing further and further the iron paths to a culture organized on the great plan of social production, that the master of color and line, the combiner of spatiovolumetrical solids, and the organizer of mass action—all must become construc-

tivists in the general business of construction and movement of the human millions.

In order to approach this new work, which has never been met with in the whole of human history, it is necessary first of all to embark on fresh paths of practical searches.

To find the Communist expression of material constructions, i.e., to establish a scientific base for the approach to constructing buildings and services that would fulfill the demands of Communist culture in its transient state, in its fluidity, in a word, in all the formations of its historical movement beginning with the period of destruction—this is the primary objective of intellectual-material production in the field of building, i.e., constructivism.

Its second objective consists in establishing scientific bases for approaches to the organization and consolidation of mass labor processes, mass movements in all of society's production, i.e., to inaugurate the first planned scheme of living human "mass action."

These are the basic and primary objectives of intellectual-material production in the field of artistic labor.

If we study the disturbed concrete reality in which we have been living since the first hour of the days of October 1917, if we analyze step by step the stages of these revolutionary transformations, and if we learn the complicated maneuvers of proletarian strategy, we will be convinced that we have endured and are enduring so many calamities simply because not everywhere and not always have there been and are there any comrades prepared and able consciously to master the functions arising spontaneously during revolutionary development.

This phenomenon affected all fronts of the Revolution.

We do not mean this or that profession, this or that trade. That's not the point.

Revolution is the highest form of social transformation, it requires specific *knowledge* and *initiative* that only it possesses.

It was possible to comprehend this practical truth fully in the Revolution itself after the many victories and intense efforts to consolidate its achievements.

Similarly, in art profound and significant changes occurred.

Proletarian October gave black earth to the seeds of leftist art. Its best and most talented creators came to power. For four years groups of specialists small in quantity but important in quality supervised art

throughout the country, rebuilding schools and mobilizing forces. But even this fortunate atmosphere did not succeed in firmly establishing new forms of artistic expression since the leftist groups did not find in their midst socially conscious revolutionaries. They placed individual and professional achievements in their craft above the tasks of the proletarian revolution. This was the main reason for their downfall.

But the Revolution develops and intensifies, and along with it the innovators of leftist art develop and grow intellectually.

Intellectual-material production is confronted with this problem: by what means, *how* to create and educate a group of workers in the sphere of artistic labor in order really to cope with and come to grips with the everyday problems that rise before us as if out of the ground at every turning in the race of evolution.

From a formal point of view some of the masters of leftist art possess exceptional gifts and sufficient wherewithal to set to work. They lack the principle of organization.

Constructivism is attempting to formulate this.

It indissolubly unites the ideological with the formal.

The masters of intellectual-material production in the field of artistic labor are collectively embarking on the road of Communist enlightenment.

Scientific Communism is the main subject of their studies.

The Soviet system and its practice is the only school of constructivism.

The theory of historical materialism through which the constructivists are assimilating history as a whole and the basic laws and course of the development of capitalist society serve them equally as a method of studying the history of art. The latter, like all social phenomena, is for the constructivists the product of human activity conditioned by the technological and economic conditions in which it arose and developed. While not having an immediate and direct relation to it, they, as production workers, are creating in the process of their general study a science of the history of its formal development.

We must bear in mind that our present society is one of transition from capitalism to Communism and that constructivism cannot divorce itself from the basis, i.e., the economic life, of our present society; the constructivists consider the practical reality of the Soviet system their only school, in which they carry out endless experiments tirelessly and unflinchingly.

Dialectical materialism is for constructivism a compass that indicates the paths and distant objectives of the future. The method of dialectical materialism opens up an unexplored field in the planning and discovery of new forms of material constructions. This abstraction does not divorce it from empirical activity. Constructivism strides confidently over the earth while all its essential ideas are to be found in Communism.

In order to single out qualified (in a Marxist sense) practitioners and theoreticians of constructivism, it is essential to channel work into a definite system, to create disciplines through which all the experimental labor processes of the constructivists would be directed.

Behind the leftist artists lies a productive path of successful and unsuccessful experiments, discoveries, and defeats. By the second decade of the twentieth century their innovative efforts were already known. Among these precise analysis can establish vague but nevertheless persistent tendencies toward the principles of industrial production: texture as a form of supply, as a form of pictorial display for visual perception and the search for constructional laws as a form of surface resolution. Leftist painting revolved around these two principles of industrial production persistently repulsing the old traditions of art. The suprematists, abstractionists, and "nonidealists" came nearer and nearer to the pure mastery of the artistic labor of intellectual-material production, but they did not manage to sever the umbilical cord that still held and joined them to the traditional art of the Old Believers.

Constructivism has played the role of midwife.

Apart from the material-formal principles of industrial production, i.e., of texture and of constructional laws, constructivism has given us a third principle and the first discipline, namely, tectonics.

We have already mentioned that the leftist artists, developing within the conditions of bourgeois culture, refused to serve the tastes and needs of the bourgeoisie. In this respect they were the first revolutionary nucleus in the sphere of cultural establishments and canons and violated its sluggish well-being. Even then they had begun to approach the problems of production in the field of artistic labor. But those new social conditions had not yet arisen within which they would have been able to interpret socially and to express themselves thematically in the products of their craft.

The proletarian revolution did this.

Over the four years of its triumphant advance the ideological and

intellectual representatives of leftist art have been assimilating the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat. Their formal achievements have been joined by a new ally—the materialism of the working class. Laboratory work on texture and constructions within the narrow framework of painting, sculpture, and senseless architecture unconnected with the reconstruction of the whole of the social organism has, for them, the true specialists in artistic production, become insignificant and absurd.

AND WHILE THE PHILISTINES AND AESTHETES TOGETHER WITH A CHOIR OF LIKE-MINDED INTELLECTUALS DREAMED THAT THEY WOULD "HARMONICALLY DEAFEN" THE WHOLE WORLD WITH THEIR MUSICAL ART AND TUNE ITS MERCANTILE SOUL TO THE SOVIET PITCH;

WOULD REVEAL WITH THEIR SYMBOLIC-REALISTIC PICTURES OF ILLITERATE AND IGNORANT RUSSIA THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL REVOLUTION, AND WOULD IMMEDIATELY DRAMATIZE COMMUNISM IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL THEATERS THROUGHOUT THE LAND—

The positive nucleus of the bearers of leftist art began to line up along the front of the revolution itself.

From laboratory work the constructivists have passed to practical activity.

TECTONICS ██████████

TEXTURE ██████████

AND CONSTRUCTION ██████████

—these are the disciplines through whose help we can emerge from the dead end of traditional art's aestheticizing professionalism onto the path of purposeful realization of the new tasks of artistic activity in the field of the emergent Communist culture.

WITHOUT ART, BY MEANS OF INTELLECTUAL-MATERIAL PRODUCTION, THE CONSTRUCTIVIST JOINS THE PROLETARIAN ORDER FOR THE STRUGGLE WITH THE PAST, FOR THE CONQUEST OF THE FUTURE.

BORIS ARVATOV: From *Art and Class* (1923)

*Boris Arvatov was born in Kiev in 1896 and died in 1940. During the 1920s, he became a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Artistic Department). He also worked at Inkhuk (Institute of Artistic Culture) both in Moscow and Petrograd. In 1923, the year *Iskusstvo i klassy* (Art and Class) was published, he took part in founding Lef and was a cosignatory of the first editorial: "Whom Is Lef Alerting?" His theoretical work represents one of the most rigorous attempts to place art upon a firm and practical basis in the new revolutionary society.*

From Easel Art

. . . modern painting has passed from the imitative to the abstract picture. This process advanced in two directions. The first of them—expressionism— . . . was the path on which forms were treated emotionally, the path of extreme idealistic individualism.

The second direction among the so-called abstract painters is quite contrary to the first. It is constructivism (Cézanne—Picasso—Tatlin).

The radical leading faction of our modern intelligentsia, i.e., the so-called technological intelligentsia, has been brought up in the industrial centers of our contemporary reality, has been permeated with the positivism of the natural sciences—has been "Americanized." The spirit of action, work, invention, and technological achievement has become its own spirit. Whereas the former intelligentsia soared in the cloudy heights of "pure" ideology, the new, "urbanized" intelligentsia has made the world of objects, material reality, the center of its attention. These people wanted first and foremost to build and construct.

These excerpts from *Iskusstvo i klassy* [Art and Class] (Moscow/Petrograd, 1923), have been translated by John Bowlit.

**The Tradition of
Constructivism**

**Edited and with an Introduction
by Stephen Bann**

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The names of those who have contributed translations to this collection are mentioned elsewhere. It may, however, be necessary to mention that those texts in a foreign language that already existed in English versions have, for the most part, been reproduced without substantial change. In some cases, the version itself has the status of a historical document as a result of the time and circumstances of its publication. In other cases, slight emendations have been made to secure greater fidelity to the original.

It is perhaps important to emphasize that the primary aim of these translations has been to remain faithful to the distinctive phraseology of the original texts, and that some of the more opaque passages are therefore condemned to remain opaque. The constructivists worked on language and through language; their writings formed an integral feature of their program. But clarity and elegance of expression neither were nor could have been their ultimate aim in all circumstances.

Stephen Bann

Canterbury, November 1971