What is the use of art?

О ПОЛЬЗЕ ИСКУССТВА

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Alexey Penzin – Dmitry Vilensky /// What's the Use?

Dmitry Vilensky: The theme of our number is formulated in the style of "crude thought," which often asks art or critical reflection a simple question: "What's the use of what you do?" This question can, of course, provoke a quite negative reaction: it might be regarded as completely out of bounds, naive or just meaningless. If we take a closer look, however, we'll find that it is both legitimate and essential. It is clear that when we analyze it, we arrive at the traditional problem of the difference between the exchange and use values of everything produced by human activity. Today, we can hardly take seriously the idea that art's importance has to do with its anti-functionality, with its eluding attempts to instrumentalize it on the part of the culture industry or direct political action. The idea of the modernist object's "silence" is merely reinforced by the astronomically high price it commands on the market. The idea that art should dissolve into life, that it should be totally abolished in favor of daily life's most basic functions, can likewise hardly be taken seriously. Based on the opposition between "to have" and "to be," this old rhetoric risks descending into pure moralizing. How can we today find a way to continue not only the project of *Bildung*—the process of individual development via aesthetic education (despite all the obvious sympathy for it)—but also find a new continuation for the project of art and thought as a "coming out under the open sky of the sense of solidarity" (Schiller)? From Schiller's time on, the goal of art as aesthetic education was the harmonious development of the individual, the formation of a whole man capable of creativity. This concept, however, was oriented toward the individual bourgeois subject: in the final analysis, it leads to the formation of the egoistic individual. It is clear that a return to this concept today would be reactionary, which is exactly what the last Documenta proved.

At the same time, I think that there is a general consensus about Andre Gorz's statement that today's decisive battle is shaping up around the production of subjectivity. This statement brings us back to an important starting point for this number—the analysis of Soviet Productionism, which in the starkest form posed the question of a program of "life-construction." As Boris Arvatov declared in his book *Art and Production*, "Art as an immediate and deliberately employed instrument of life-construction: such is the formula for the existence of proletarian art."

Can we share these sentiments today? And where today can we find a way to continue the project of proletarian art? On the one hand, we are living during the prolonged transition to post-Fordism and knowledge capitalism. The farewell to the conveyor belt unties our hands—but where today is that factory the Productionists dreamed of? What once upon a time was a source of hope for progress and emancipation turned out, historically, to be a reactionary phenomenon that had to be overcome. The formation of "new social subjects," whose analysis Italian operaismo undertook in the sixties, is the complete opposite of what the Productionists hoped for. The natural exodus of workers from the factory began, and along with it the "assembly line/collectivist" model of subject formation and the forms of its political organization also began to collapse. Where today can we find that factory, or those means of production, whose seizure would supply us with a maximally precise emancipatory impulse?

Today this factory is ubiquitous. The development of capitalism allows us to see the production of false subjectivity in the totality of capital's practices, which are now realized everywhere: in the thick of daily life, in institutes of culture, in the very networks of social interaction. The factory is *nowhere* and *everywhere*. It is this understanding that opens up new zones of struggle, not simply for non-alienated labor and knowledge, but also for desubjectivation and the break with labor.

In this new situation, although I have a clear sense that many activists don't understand this, I'm not afraid to say that, as never before, we need *another* kind of knowledge and art. We need it as we need clean air: we need it to produce "oxygen" in an atmosphere totally polluted by the byproducts of the "creative industries." But what should this knowledge/art look like? Where is the place that it can be useful and meaningful?

Alexei Penzin: I have been interested in a similar set of questions lately—in regards to theory, or rather, philosophy. On the one hand, this is connected with the experience of interaction within our group and on our platform, where philosophers, artists, and activists sometimes find an almost elusive and hard-to-define but quite effective "working model." On the other hand, these questions are provoked by the overall situation in contemporary cultural production. Here we see a kind of overproduction of theory, as well as the staging of this theory as a decorative "appendix" to artistic and activist events (i.e., theoretical conferences as discursive platforms for all manner of biennials, major exhibitions, social forums, etc.)

We can observe numerous instances of the overproduction, commercialization, and "decorativeness" of theory—for example, quite scholarly but secondary texts chockablock with citations of the most "fashionable" names and texts, or all those thick but incomprehensible catalogues and "theoretical documents" published in connection with art projects. This is not even to mention the assembly line at work in theory's standard zone of academia, where cognitive capitalism's production of knowledge is carried out with the same competitive gusto and intensity as the production of irons, TV sets or weapons. All this is crowned by a system of intellectual "superstars," who, even when they take quite radical, critical stances, are unable to resist their quite decorative function as thinkers and "keynote speakers" at an endless series of seminars and conferences.

So this is my question: what could be the real (not decorative) utility of theory and philosophy? This question really does appear naive. We will be told that theory explains to us what happens; it enables us to recognize our place in the configuration of political and social reality, to identify vectors of impact and struggle. But this obvious argument is situated on the level of the *object*, of the world that theory is meant to interpret. At the same time, it is not always clear how this works vis-à-vis the specific subjectivities that create the "demand" for theory. What is the use of theory and philosophy for you, Dima, or for me, for all those people who work as "professionals" in this field or who have a need for this knowledge in their work as activists or artists?

DV: In order to get at a preliminary answer to this question, I would note that we shouldn't separate discourse (theory) from artistic practice and political innovation. My answer is simple: knowledge should be/is unified. Theory—the concept—is an organic element of art, and aesthetic experience is a necessary component of theoretical reflection. That is, inspiration doesn't recognize the category of genre. A quotation, a painting or a song can inspire me. What matters is what this state of inspiration becomes.

AP: Here I need to make a didactic and, at the same time, investigative digression into the field of contemporary philosophy, which tries to answer quite ancient questions. We should begin with one of the "stone tablets" of radical leftist thought. Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach states: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." This is usually understood to mean that Marx is breaking with the tradition of speculative, idealist philosophy by introducing the dimension of praxis, the transformation of reality. However, as Marx emphasizes, it is important to keep in mind that, during the historical process that forms the structures of production, the subject itself will also be transformed along with the object, with nature. Therefore, according to a widespread opinion, Marx leaves behind philosophy as reflection and enters the realm of politics and history. He thus becomes something like an "anti-philosopher." In fact, however, Marx does not break with philosophy. On the contrary, he rediscovers its fundamental practical vocation, which dates to Greek philosophy, on a new level.

We might find a key to a contemporary understanding of the Eleventh Thesis in Michel Foucault's late-period works on the "care of the self" or in the work of another thinker, Pierre Hadot, a specialist on antiquity. He advanced the concept of "philosophy as a way of life" and "spiritual exercise." Although the term "spiritual" now sounds dubious, Hadot examines it in a wholly materialistic way. He means that "spiritual" practices relate to the entire realm of subjectivity (intellect, affect, will, desire, body, etc.). Foucault was in dialogue with the work of Hadot during the final years of his life. Unlike the now extremely popular theory of "biopolitics," Foucault's late period is of little interest to the radical and critical communities. Moreover, his later ideas about "practices of the self" run the risk of being interpreted by the right in the spirit of progressive liberal individualism or, even worse, of being appropriated by conservative seekers after "spirituality." They are also sometimes practically taken as examples of "resignation," reconciliation with existence, where a focus on personal autonomy, on stoical "autarky" is seen as the solution. Or they are seen as a species of "neo-dandyism," that is, if we proceed from Foucault's concluding aphorism about "life as a work of art."

DV: I'd like to interrupt you here. I agree that these interpretations are quite banal statements that anyone could take up, and they're quite vulnerable to criticism. I would say that today as never before we need to insist that there are values that are much more important than the value of an individual, finite life, and I make this assertion first and foremost about myself. I think that Badiou is right when he radically critiques the bases of individual consciousness and calls on us to adopt new forms of fearlessness and self-denial. Do you remember the passage about "courage" in the book about Sarkozy? We don't need life as a work of art, or the work of art as life. We need a total reassessment of what art can give us and how it becomes part of our everyday life.

AP: I agree. I will say something about Badiou's theory of the subject a bit later. It is vital to place Foucault and Hadot's research in the correct context of revolutionary practice: then they might present themselves to us in an utterly new aspect. In essence, Foucault gives us all the keys to a "leftist" interpretation of his work in his lecture course "Hermeneutics of the Subject." Of course it would be absurd to discuss this entire complex problematic in this introductory dialogue, but I

will try to sketch a practical schema that might prove useful, and not just to "theorists."

What are "practices of the self" per Foucault, or philosophical "exercises," as Hadot calls them? They are quite concrete things, and they're far from abstract flights of speculative thought. They are particular techniques that were transmitted within certain Hellenistic philosophical schools. They included, for example, meditation, constant attention to one's own subjectivity, awareness, control over inner speech, deliberate cultivation of habits, written self-evaluations, concentration on the present moment. But they also included practices of care for others, practices that are impossible without "care of the self": a dialogical relationship to the interlocutor, the desire to change his position during the course of the conversation, pedagogy, etc. The revolutionary aspect of "practices of the self" has to do with the fact that they open the way to a radical transformation of the subject, to a spasmodic alteration of the subject, which the ancient Greeks called *metanoia*, "change of mind." As Foucault never tires of repeating, only this change gives the subject access to the truth. On the other hand, there is also a reverse effect that the truth has on the subject as it transfigures and "illuminates" it. This is the cycle of subjectivity formation. (See the following diagrams, in which ***S*** designates subjectivity, and ***S'*** stands for its new form, the result of these changes.)

Practice of the self (exercise) *Truth*
S =======================> S'
Subjectivity formation *Metanoia*

Thus, returning to Marx (whose dissertation was on the ancient philosophers Epicurus and Democritus), we might argue that he transfers the ancient philosophical practice of subject-formation into the collective dimension. It is telling that, in his dissertation, Marx underscores the significance of the "subjective form"—"the spiritual carrier of the philosophical systems, which has until now been almost entirely ignored in favor of their metaphysical characteristics." I would not say that Marx "discovered" praxis; rather, he reinvented it on a new basis. Individual "exercises" are replaced by social practice, which leads to the formation of class subjectivity and revolution, which takes the place formerly occupied by *metanoia* in this schema.

Social practice *Communism*
S ==========================> S'
Formation of class subjectivity *Revolution*

Of course, the old individualist schema of subjectivation is superimposed on the new, collective schema, and thus makes it easier to understand. For example, if we compare revolution with *metanoia*, we discover many characteristic traits. Hadot describes the transformation of the subject as occurring along two vectors: the return to certain basic foundations of subjectivity, the totality of its history, and, subsequently, its transformation. We find this trait in revolutionary experience as well: the leap into the past, when the entire previous history of oppression is reanimated and made relevant. This is followed by a repressive withdrawal and then a decisive transformation of the past.

The question is how this schema of subjectivation is changing today. It is obvious that, during our time of reaction, depoliticization, and atomization, the formation of class subjectivity has malfunctioned. Foucault's turn to antiquity as a project for reevaluating the instruments of subject formation was—in mediated fashion, of course—symptomatic of this. How can we continue this line of thought today from a leftist political perspective? As an experiment, we might hypothesize that the concept of "multitudes," the new social subjects posited by Italian post-operaismo, provides us with the basis for talking about a new, "mixed" means of subject formation. The individual and collective dimensions of subjectivation are fused as a "singularity," and the place of social practice is occupied by "immaterial labor," a performative act whose product is to be found in itself. It is precisely this that we can describe as an "exercise," the correlation of subjectivity with itself! And revolution, perhaps, gives way to "exodus"—a rupture, the subtraction of subjectivity from the existing capitalist system of exploitation—thus opening a path to the "commons."

Immaterial labor as "exercise" *The commons*
S =========================> S'
Formation of the "multitude" *Exodus*

We could declare the "end" of philosophy qua "metaphysics," as has been done so often in the past decades, but it is impossible to neutralize, to finalize its practical, evental aspect, which consists in subjectivity formation. *It is this practice of subjectivation, which philosophy either explicitly or implicitly contains, that constitutes its "utility."* It is this practical aspect that also differentiates philosophy—not just any philosophy, of course, but a particular line from antiquity to contemporary currents of materialist thought—from "theory," which is an interdisciplinary collection of objectivizing discourses within the humanities and social sciences, and makes it more akin, rather, to political activism and art.

DV: That is a very important remark. During a recent discussion, when a number of activists criticized the practices of Chto Delat for their lack of direct engagement, I also once again thought hard about why we, despite our political sympathies and solidarity, don't participate "enough" in real struggles. Now I would say that for us, perhaps, this aspect of distancing ourselves from many practices of social activism and art is a characteristic trait. These practices take the form of producing service packages for normalizing the lives of problem communities. That is, for us, they are obviously conservative and defensive in character: they are of *"little interest"* to us because at bottom they are normalizing in nature. And that is why we are so often accused of ratcheting up a revolutionary pathos that now just ends up sagging. For grassroots struggles, this pathos is not very acceptable, and it also elicits rejection on the part of the "objectivizing discourses within the humanities and the social sciences." This is now an enormous problem for any kind of revolutionary thought, which has limited opportunities to verify itself in practice. It is vital to find the opportunity to *"stand one's ground"* despite everything—this is that selfsame "courage," according to Badiou. But at the same time we have to try and avoid the collapse into madness and total marginalization that we often see happening within revolutionary leftist sects.

AP: As we confront these red-hot contradictions of the current moment, perhaps it is worth turning to historical experience. It is interesting to compare the practical aspect of philosophy that I have just sketched with the political and artistic project of the avant-garde known as "life-construction." For in essence this project likewise has its basis in Marx's Eleventh Thesis, seen as the reinvention of antiquity's practices of subjectivity, their transfer into the realm of the collective—that is, the realm of class subjectivities. It would also be interesting to discuss those changes that mark the formation of the subjectivity of "multitudes," in which the individual and the collective dimensions intersect and commingle.

I am not sure that "aesthetic education" in Schiller's sense or, for example, the *Bildungsroman* as a literary genre wholly fit the scheme of subject formation that I talked about. Nor am I sure that "desubjectivation" is something so promising right now. Schiller's paradigm, of course, is linked to the formation of bourgeois subjectivity, whose historical apex was the French Revolution. But it is unlikely that the utopian image of a harmonious, stable, consummated aesthetic identity (in Kantian fashion, Schiller speaks of the "eternal unity of the self," that is, of the transcendental subject) can be correlated with a revolutionary proletarian subjectivity, or with the activist subjectivity that is taking shape now. It is also telling that Schiller decisively rejects the notion of "utility" with regard to art insofar as, if you follow the arguments in his "Letters," utility had become the "crude scale" of his bourgeois, commercial age. Obviously, here utility is understood precisely as *exchange* value, not use value, if we adopt the Marxian terms that you employed at the beginning of this conversation.

In our context, perhaps, the prototypical *Bildungsroman* might be Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* [Chto delat?], where the main character, a fairly atypical young man named Rakhmetov, diligently engages in practices of the self, in asceticism, motivated by his desire to become a kind of "professional revolutionary." And then Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother* shows the transition from this scheme of individual subjectivation to the formation of class subjectivity via involvement in collective activist processes.

The experiments of Productionism and the Soviet avant-garde of the nineteen-twenties as a whole were, of course, an expression of the emergence of a new post-Revolutionary subjectivity. The avant-garde produced an entire program for the "formation of a new humanity." The "utility" of art and philosophy for its realization was enormous. Whereas art before the Revolution had been a mere "laboratory of forms," afterwards it became a laboratory of life itself, of its forms—that is, of subjectivity. But during the Stalinist and later Soviet periods, this post-Revolutionary program was appropriated and reformulated in official Party rhetoric, where it was turned into nearly meaningless blah-blah.

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Drawings by Marjetica Potrč from the series 'The Future is Now", 2005
(Drawing No.1 and 2 of 10)

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However, on the whole I think that the special Soviet subjectivity whose foundations were laid in the avant-garde culture of the twenties was a sui generis phenomenon, whose value and uniqueness it would be hard to diminish against the backdrop provided by the monstrous banality of contemporary capitalist life. We are still faced with the task of discovering it again as something useful and real, as a practice.

Perhaps it made sense to talk about "desubjectivation" when it was believed that the agencies and ideological apparatuses of the capitalist state produce subjectivity itself, and that subjectivities themselves, as fixed identities, are convenient, visible points for the application of subjugation strategies. But the perspective of late-period Foucault and the research of Hadot (these two thinkers differed on a number of points in the way they interpreted practices of subjectivity, but we will pass over this here) enable us to speak of subjectivity formation as a process of *metanoia* and "transfiguration" that takes place in an explosive, uncontrolled, revolutionary fashion, although it relies on a systematic emancipatory practice.

We might find similarities in this perspective with Badiou's theory, in which subjectivation takes place in parallel with the truth-event and is maintained by faithfulness to this event. According to Badiou, however, subjectivation occurs as it were in a "miraculous," quasi-theological manner that does not depend on our efforts, on *the practice of subjectivity itself*. For Badiou, the subject is in one way or another situated in the logic of an objective "situation," and the aspect of a practical "manufacture of subjectivity" is forfeited. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that Badiou's model of the event and the truth-procedure is an insufficiently critical take on the Christian paradigm. Moreover, if we accept the analysis of Foucault and Hadot, the Christian *dispositif* in essence "intercepts" and reinterprets "practices of the self" as practices of submission, not emancipation, consigning philosophy to a mere abstract theoretical role. Thus, *metanoia* turns into the "repentance" of the sinner and his subsequent submission to religious dogma. In this sense, Foucault's uncompleted theorizing reveals, in my view, a more promising and "useful" (to re-invoke our term) perspective.

Recently, I was at a talk by Carine Clément, the French sociologist who heads the Institute for Collective Action in Moscow. She presented the findings of her research on the new social movements in Russia. It was interesting that, in her analysis of the processes by which the new movements are formed, she used a scheme whose poles were two stances: that of the "philistine" (the passive, apolitical citizen), on the one hand, and that of the activist, on the other hand. This, in essence, is a particular variation on the subjectivity formation schema. Clément cited the testimony of her activist-respondents, who described their experience of moving towards activist stances. They talked about how they had begun to see their lives from a new perspective, as being connected to the social whole. They said that they had gained a sense of self-worth, confidence, strength, and collective solidarity, the readiness to defend their positions. It is simply amazing the degree to which this coincides with the effects of subject formation that the Stoics had already discovered back in their day. The transformation of the subject causes it to see the world from the universal perspective of the whole, the totality, just as Pierre Hadot describes, as well as giving it a sense of personal strength and indomitable fearlessness. How distant this is from the contemporary neoliberal frame of mind, from the repudiation of any claims to the truth, from a certain atmosphere of diffuse hedonism. In the aggregate, all this is in fact total "desubjectivation," which wholly supports the existing status quo.

DV: It's really great that you've been able to show me the sources of this entire problematic. I'd like to respond to you by analyzing one of my favorite quotations from Paulo Freire: *[I]f the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution? This is a question of the greatest importance; one aspect of the reply is to be found in the distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them.*

Why this quotation? First, it clearly demonstrates that *metanoia*—change in consciousness—has definite boundaries: it is obviously limited by the class and social conditions of man's existence. Yes, at present we are capable only of gaining a presentiment of life in fullness and harmony, but our subjectivity is adumbrated by conflict with society, to which even the universal finitude of our existence provides no resolution. This is precisely why the project of the historical Soviet avant-garde is so valuable today: because it records an unprecedented experiment in the transformation of life that today resembles the stories of travelers who have returned from an unknown country. But today we don't have a map that would tell us where this country was located. That is, we practically have to start from scratch in drawing up the maps and tracing travel routes.

Second, the grammar of this quotation quite precisely poses the question about processes of organization. "Them": this is obviously all those people who by virtue of their class status acutely experience the injustice of the world, but who at the same time possess sufficient knowledge to be aware of the strategic tasks of their own emancipation. That is, according to the old, universally accepted model, there are certain privileged external agents who develop and wield these practices of emancipation. In previous times, these were people connected to God and the Church; they were followed by revolutionary parties and psychoanalysts. After the obvious downfall of these mediators, the question remains: is education possible without a teacher? Today it is the figure of the teacher/pedagogue—as the figure of repression under the sign of education—who is rightly and seriously under suspicion.

On the other hand, you have to be a complete idiot not to recognize that pure self-education is impossible. A person is always oriented towards various practices that have already been created by other people and whose experience is recorded in books, music, and art: education is the collective experience of turning to what has already been created. And here is where the abracadabra begins. That is, you have to introduce the factor of some kind of "illumination" that reveals the new and the unknown: how do we demonstrate the material premises of this leap in consciousness? Perhaps art preserves the species memory of freedom and is capable of giving us the basis for developing a project of emancipating consciousness? Is this where its fundamental utility lies? It clearly doesn't involve producing normative canons of aesthetic education, but involves faithfulness to the practice of its negation and renewal.

AP: I'm aware of your love of quotations as a form of recording already existing collective experience. By the way, I think that the practice of citation—of singling out those places in a text that provoke "illumination," change your mindset, and impart a new impulse to thought and practice—also has a transformative effect. For example, one of the pedagogical practices of the schools of antiquity was the compilation of special lists of quotations and sayings, which would always be "at hand" as a practical guide during the emergencies that arise in a human's life. In contemporary academic practice, on the contrary, quotations often serve a purely "decorative" function, or they are instrumentalized in order to add additional symbolic value to a text.

I think that the practice of citation might be regarded precisely as an example of the technique of emancipatory self-education. But I'm not sure that the figure of the mentor has to be so problematized in the "pedagogy of the oppressed" as to be excluded from it altogether. The teacher transmits not only abstract knowledge and theory, but also elements of those subjectivation practices of which he is the living medium. It's a question of the political solidarity of "teachers" with those who are undergoing the process of education. Although, of course today's alienated and instrumentalized system of education, which promotes the spread of the figure of the formal or (even worse) authoritarian teacher-administrator, is quite uninspiring.

By the way, Walter Benjamin set great store by quotations. If you remember, he dreamed of writing a book that would consist only of brilliantly selected quotations, and he almost realized this plan in the *Arcades Project*. In general, Benjamin is an extremely important and unorthodox figure in Marxist thought if you look at him in terms of the practices of subject transformation that interest us here. There is no doubt that, explicitly or implicitly, he attached a special significance to these practices. I have in mind his famous theme of "profane illuminations," which he outlined in his essay on Surrealism. Benjamin meant that, in its origins, the very structure of the religious experience of "illumination" is preserved in the wholly materialistic practice of subject formation. We can confiscate these practices from the repressive structures of religiosity and place them in the service of emancipatory ends. According to Benjamin, they form a "materialistic, anthropological inspiration."

Benjamin describes "profane illuminations" as part of the Surrealist practice of transforming perception of ordinary things, which renders them strange, unnatural, ridiculous and even uncanny, as in a dream. According to Benjamin, this transfiguration of our perception of the world—the estrangement that demonstrates its artificiality, its unnaturalness, and hence the possibility that it can be radically changed—is one of the conditions of political revolution. Thus, we see that, according to Benjamin, the individual, particular subjectivation achieved in Surrealist experiments is a step on the road to the revolutionary subjectivation of society as a whole. Perhaps we might summarize this model by saying that avant-garde art operates on the level of individual subjectivity, but it alters it in such a way that pre-conditions emerge (of course, not the only ones) for the process of revolutionary subjectivity formation to move to the collective level.

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Igor Chubarov /// Productionism: Art of the Revolution or Design for the Proletariat?

The now-traditional view of the Russian avant-garde and Constructivism, which limits itself to two or three big names (Kandinsky, Malevich) or discrete works by leading figures (Rodchenko, Tatlin), reduces not only the sociopolitical context of these artistic phenomena, but also the dominant form in which they existed during their historical period—namely, as a form of Productionist art, which conceived itself as a species of collective artistic labor. It was a social practice that aimed at the revolutionary renewal of society and the creation of new types of relations among people—communist relations, to be precise. It was an art that could not imagine the creation of new artistic forms happening outside the transformation of social forms, and by this transformation it had in mind the production of "forms of intercourse" (Marx).

Nevertheless, the participation in Productionism of such renowned figures as Olga Rozanova, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, Karl Ioganson, Gustav Klutsis, Moisei Ginzburg, Konstantin Melnikov, Anton Lavinsky, Alexander Vesnin, the Stenberg Brothers, El Lissitsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Tretyakov, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Dziga Vertov is often put down to passing leftist fancies or the forced "collectivization" of artists in the complicated circumstances of the first years of Soviet power. As a result, we know all these names either separately or as members of an amorphous "leftist avant-garde," rather than as a broad movement engaged in the creation of a new material and intellectual culture for an enormous country—that is, in a project whose scale was unprecedented for artists. Art historians keenly discuss Suprematism or Expressionism, the struggle between non-figurative art and realism, but all of them are inclined to underestimate the epoch-making decision by twenty-five prominent leftist artists in 1921 to remove Wassily Kandinsky from his post as chair of the INKhUK (Institute for Artistic Culture). They thus made a total institutional break with easel painting and moved into mass production and political agitation. The same should be said of the theorists of Productionism who joined artists in the LEF group—Alexei Gan, Nikolai Tarabukin, Boris Kushner, David Arkin, Sergei Tretyakov, Nikolai Chuzhak, Osip Brik, and Boris Arvatov. They opened up whole new fronts in the study of art and culture, and they developed alternative artistic methods and strategies. Over the past eighty years, however, their writings have not been republished and have remained the object only of biased criticism. In fact, the work of such scholars as Arvatov, who were among the founders of the sociology of art, might prove, mutatis mutandis, quite relevant today for a critical grasp of the processes that have led to the fusion of art, the market, neoliberal ideology, and mass culture.

The Historical Context

Although it declared itself as a primarily leftist, communist art, Productionism was not, however, an isolated phenomenon, an anomalous instance of political excess in the history of art. Formally and in terms of content, it was linked to such paramount artistic currents of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as Romanticism, Cubo-Futurism, Abstractionism, Arts and Crafts, and the Bauhaus. It manifested and tested ideas and practices that these other groups had abandoned at the level of declared intuitions.

It was, however, the association of Productionism's practitioners and theorists with the ideas of communism and with the 1917 Russian Revolution that determined to a great extent its tragic ambivalence. It was this that prevented the movement from putting down firm roots and realizing itself fully in history.

The Productionists did not limit themselves to the role of production technologists and designers of the new industrialized lifestyle. Instead, they hoped that their work would have a more fundamental impact on socioeconomic processes. Thus, they linked the relevance of their theory of art to the success of revolutionary transformations at all levels of social existence. This success did not depend only on art, even art understood from the Productionist viewpoint. For the technicization of artistic labor did not solve the problem of industrial labor, but merely framed it, especially under conditions where production itself was underdeveloped. This explains to a great degree why the ideas of the Productionists resounded with confidence only in the early twenties. By the early thirties, these artistic initiatives maintained some kind of presence perhaps only in architecture and, partly, in journalism, and the movement as a whole was exposed to constant pressure from the mounting Stalinist reaction.

Formulation of the Problem

The question is whether the cause of these events was a fateful mistake made by the Productionists within their project itself or something mostly external to it—that is, the failure of the Revolution itself, the gradual curtailment of the communist project. Correspondingly, did Productionist art itself cease to be "communist" as a result, thereby forever relinquishing its relevance?

Although I hope to answer these questions, I have not set myself the task of reconstructing the entire history of Productionist art in the revolutionary Russia of the nineteen-twenties. There are already several good (albeit variously tendentious) studies on this topic [1].

I avoid this reconstruction all the more so because this phenomenon was quite heterogeneous: it included the simplistic declarations of the Proletkult (Alexander Bogdanov) and émigré aestheticism (the Berlin journal *Veshch*—"Thing") along with well-conceived theoretical conceptions and impressive artistic achievements (the theorists and practitioners of the LEF circle, INKhUK, VKhUTEMAS). Hence I will focus only on formulating the overall ideology of this ambiguous phenomenon, what with its stark approach to posing questions and its obvious contradictions. In addition, I intend to answer the following questions in this text:

1. What was Productionist art's logical and political connection to modernism and the pre-Revolutionary Russian avant-garde?
2. How did Productionism differ from the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus? That is, why is it wrong, despite superficial similarities, to reduce Productionism to applied/decorative arts and design?
3. What is the link between the Constructivists and Productionists, on the one hand, and Situationism and contemporary political media art, on the other? That is, where in the contemporary world might Productionism find its heirs?

Achievements

Among the most commonly recalled fundamental achievements of the Productionists is the Soviet section at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, in Paris: Melnikov designed the pavilion itself, while the central exposition was Rodchenko's famous Workers' Club. Other frequently cited highlights are Tatlin's furniture, Popova's textiles, Miller and Stepanova's designs for work uniforms, the advertising posters of the Stenbergs, the photomontages of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko, Gan and El Lissitsky's avant-garde graphic design, Lavinsky's models and buildings for the city of the future, the Suprematist dishware of Malevich's followers, Meyerhold's biomechanics for the theater, and Vertov's Kino Eye movement.

It was not the achievements of particular artists that distinguished Productionism, however, but the movement itself and the original conception of art that emerged from their daily experience of toiling in workshops, factories, schools and colleges, and art institutions. Although it has been repudiated by art historians and half-forgotten by contemporary artists, this conception remains unsurpassed to this day.

The undertaking to return art to the popular masses was not just a slogan. It was also part of the concrete task of organizing the industrial arts and arts education in a country that was essentially illiterate, backward, and exhausted by war and famine. Moreover, this return was, at a minimum, associated with the democratization of Russian society and the ideals of popular rule, and, simultaneously, with the no less pressing problems of creating a mass society and the continuing division of labor. Productionist artists and theorists were thus faced with problems that, while not reducible to one another, were essentially intermeshed: the emancipation of labor; the return to it of the creative character it had forfeited under capitalism; and the democratization of art itself in terms of its new collective author and mass consumer. The task was to coordinate production and consumption via the figure of the "artist in the factory," to make art a mass phenomenon without diminishing its quality and revolutionary import. The existence of art in the regime of mass production/consumption—that is, not only in the laboratory of formal experiments aimed at an elite audience capable of appreciating them—confronted the Productionists with questions that much later theorists of modernism (Adorno, Greenberg) were unable to answer positively without once again confining the artist within a quite precarious autonomy and herding the masses into the reservation of kitsch and "bad taste."

Labor and the Production of Things

Thus, the basic dilemma in the conception of the Productionists was already conditioned by the Kantian antinomy within the notion of art as, on the one hand, a practice capable of restoring the unity of humanity's rational and sensual, natural and social essences; and, on the other hand, as an exclusive ability bound only to the individual genius of the artist. The latter notion, dominant in the history of contemporary art, widened the gap between art making and material production, and in turn reflected the general trend toward the division of social labor.

The Productionists proposed their own method of overcoming this antinomy, a method that differed from Schiller's "state of beauty in appearance." They regarded art from the viewpoint of labor and advanced the idea of mastery as the skillful production of things instead of the notion of the artist as genius. "Every artwork is a thing," wrote the authors of *The Art of the Commune*. "The art of the future is not connoisseurship, but labor itself transfigured," declared Tarabukin [2].

In the historical reconstruction of art undertaken by Arvatov (*Art and Production*, Moscow, 1926), although the artist was conceived as a "master" who had emerged from the workshops of the Middle Ages, he differed from the craftsman only by virtue of his mastery. That is, it was not that the craftsman had been an artist once upon a time, but that the artist had once been a craftsman. Like the craftsman, he had been inscribed in society's system of daily needs and practices. Right up until the early bourgeois age, he was not engaged in the production of discrete luxury items and museum pieces, but in the full-blooded reproduction of society's entire system of vital activity.

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Drawings by Marjetica Potrč from the series 'The Future is Now", 2005
(Drawing No.3 and 4 of 10)

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That is why, by the way, that the art of antiquity, which we still imagine as the "norm and unattainable model" (Marx, *Grundrisse*), was viewed as such, according to Arvatov, not by virtue of its "classicism" or "realism," but because it was incorporated into the religious practices, architecture, and infrastructure of the democratic *polis*.

This strain of historicism assumed that a new transformation of art was possible: art could be returned from its Hegelian wanderings round the circles of alienation—palaces, museums, and galleries—into the daily lives of people. Moreover, Arvatov, Gan, and Tarabukin saw the future of art not in a return to cottage craftwork, as Ruskin and Morris (and Proudhon) would have had it. On the contrary, artists would be involved in the organization of industrialized machine production as engineers and inventors.

In his typically radical manner, Osip Brik raised the stakes when he wrote, "Why is the manufacture of a still life more 'basic' than the manufacture of chintz? The experience of the easel painter is not the experience of the artist as such, but merely the experience of one particular instance of painterly labor" [3]. Of course, the comparison of a still life to chintz was a bit invidious. The problem evoked by this comparison involves the applied nature of art when it makes the transition from the artist's studio to the production floor—for example, when a Suprematist painting is transferred onto a new medium such as a porcelain plate. Tarabukin and Brik, however, were dreaming of something bigger: namely, art's infiltration "into the 'economic mystery' of the thing." In this connection Brik wrote: "Productionist art's principal idea is that a thing's outward appearance is determined by its economic function, not by abstract, aesthetic considerations."

We might imagine that they had in mind the simple notion of masterfully produced designer items. This is not quite accurate, and the attempt on the part of Soviet art historians in the sixties to rehabilitate Productionist art by reducing it to design is explained solely by the ideological conjuncture.As a minimum program for a time when the economy and productive forces were underdeveloped, Arvatov proposed the manufacture of comfortable furniture and clothing, the development of an "economical gait," and an efficient work and domestic environments. At the same time, he was perhaps overly optimistic in his assumption that these products were capable not only of improving the general welfare, but also of altering people's perceptual/sensual habits, thus gradually shifting society towards the maximum program of the Productionists. That is, as they discussed chintz, machines, and even domestic life, their real target was the individual, or rather, her increasing capacities and species being/social essence, now in a process of transformation.

The New Life and Its Overcoming

Wholly in the spirit of the early Marx, Arvatov, Tarabukin, and (even!) Ilya Ehrenburg viewed the emancipation of things only as a dialectical stage towards total de-reification, as the overcoming of the fetishistic mediation of social relations as relations between things. "The worker not only liberates the thing from man; he also liberates man from the thing. The thing is not his yoke, but his joy. Art is the creation of things (which, although not crudely utilitarian, are always necessary)" (Ilya Ehrenburg, [4]).

Therefore, there was nothing anti-artistic about the notion that the thing's efficiency and utility (its "tectonics," according to Constructivist canons) were equivalent to its artistic qualities. The way that the Productionists framed the question about the origins of artistic creation can be compared in this sense (and without straining the point) to Nietzsche's genealogy of morals. As we know, Nietzsche exposed the utterly unethical basis of our pleasant moral norms. Just like Nietzsche, however, the Productionists spoke not so much of a return to a pre-ethical/pre-aesthetic (pre-cultural) stage (that is, the production of merely useful domestic items), as of the transfiguration of life itself. This transfiguration would overcome the threat of a new reification brought on by the proletariat's ownership of the means of production. The Productionists thus understood daily life in a maximally broad and dynamic sense: the new life would not so much supply people with comfortable, affordable housing, dishes, and furnishings (that is, it was not the organization of things), as much it would introduce a grammar of new relations between people based on a new relation to things. According to the Productionists, things had to be overcome as much as daily life did. As Arvatov wrote, "The total merger of artistic forms with the forms of daily life [and] the creation of a maximally organized, efficient, and ceaselessly fashioned being will supply not only harmony of life—the most joyous and complete unfolding of all social activities—but will also destroy the very notion of daily life. Daily life—that is, something static and ossified—will die insofar as the forms of being (which today takes the form of daily life) will be altered endlessly as productive forces evolve" [5]

Here we find the principal difference between Productionism and the ideas of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier or the Werkbund. Unlike the founders of Productionist art in Russia, their western comrades-in-arms advocated the utility, economy, and efficiency of daily consumer items, and for them these qualities were fairly abstract aesthetic principles based on a lopsided notion of technical progress. Given the constant substitution of pure technicism for art, the possibility of fetishizing manufactured things and even sacralizing them was thus preserved.

Russian designers, on the contrary, saw a solution to this problem in a balance between production and consumption that would be based on the manufacture of temporary, as it were "disposable" (Tarabukin) things. By virtue of their collective production and social consumption, the individual would be able to avoid becoming attached to them. For the problem with things is not whether they can be individually possessed as private property, but whether they are able to satisfy the elementary needs of any person whatsoever.

ArvatovArvatov interpreted easel-based visual art as the illusory supplementation of capitalism's under-organized world of daily life. This form of daily life could be overcome only under a socialist economy, which he understood as a return to a quasi-natural economy that presumed collective production and the consumption of the fruits of this "high-quality labor" as its use values. Correspondingly, he saw art's future in the creation and appropriation of universal culture by all members of society according to their creative skills and levels of mastery.

As for easel painting, under socialism it would be turned into an "art of social pressure—that is, into an art that would try to provoke determinate, concrete behaviors". Moreover, it should be realized without mediation in the daily life of workers, revolutionizing it from within: "It is not that the working life should be brought to the theatrical stage, but that theatrical action should unfold in life". That is why Arvatov proposed turning museums into research institutes, rather than storehouses of "eternal treasures" for admiration by an idle public. He gave pride of place to the new media—photography, cinema, radio, and "literary factography" (newspapers). With its basis in these new democratic media, proletarian art, according to Arvatov, should combine the "objective fixation" of real facts with their "dialectical montage," by which he meant the formalist principle of "baring the device of artistic mastery," a technique that revealed the "fetishistic" mysteries of art.

Here, Arvatov anticipated a number of ideas that western historiography ascribes exclusively to Walter Benjamin. In particular, Arvatov penned the following "Benjaminian" phrase: "Instead of socializing aesthetics, scholars aestheticized the social milieu".

Arvatov interpreted the "socialization of aesthetics" as the organization of artistic labor within a regime of direct cooperation between producer and consumer, which also links him to Benjamin: "Proletarian artistic collectives should become members of collectives or associations in those fields of production whose material is designed by the given branch of art. Thus, for example, an agit-theater joins the propaganda apparatus as its organ. A theater of mass and other daily actions is linked to institutes of physical education and communal organizations. Poets are members of magazine-and-newspaper associations and, via them, are linked to linguistic societies. Industrial artists carry out commissions from industrial centers and are part of their organizational system. And so forth". Arvatov also had an affinity to the much later strategies of the Situationists: "Actor training needs to be recreated in such a way that instructors of the theatrical craft would be able to teach people how to walk down the street, organize festivities, make speeches, comport oneself in various concrete situations, and so forth".

Arvatov sometimes took his idea of the total artistic organization of daily life to a maniacal extreme: "Every person should be qualified to walk, speak, and arrange the world of things around him with their qualitative properties". But in the conclusion of his *Art and Production* he nevertheless reserved a niche even for the fine arts: "Insofar as absolute organization is practically unattainable, and insofar as one or another element of disorganization is always preserved in the personal life of the members of a socialist society, then we must think that the supplement of the visual arts will remain under socialism as well. [...] In this artistically organized self-manifestation and intercourse, the personality will, apparently, compensate for its personal dissatisfaction".

Abstractionists and Productionists: Towards the Problem of the Avant-Garde's Legacy

The Productionists were quite aware that the old regime's "thing" would disappear under conditions of modern industrial production (Tarabukin). In this sense, the Productionists had no choice but to be abstractionists: they were heirs to the non-figurative tradition not only in its negative aspect (the critique of representative and figurative art), but also in terms of its positive affirmation of the contemporary world's non-figurative nature. For in what other way would the utilitarian works of Productionist art have differed from the designer articles of the Werkbund or the furniture of the Bauhaus? Thus, the Productionists paid negative recognition to the fact that leftist art could not be reduced to the production of the elements of material culture, even if we understand it as Bogdanov did, as the identity of the spiritual and the material in the idea of total sociocultural organization.

Of course, they never mentioned this directly in their manifestos. Moreover, they even sometimes consigned pure Constructivists to the ranks of "bourgeois" artists. Thus, one of the excesses committed by the theorists of LEF and the INKhUK was their needlessly rigoristic rejection of their predecessors and allies in the struggle against bourgeois art and bourgeois society. This, it has to be said, made them bear a striking resemblance to the Futurists themselves.

Cubo-Futurism and non-figurative art had contained not only a negative (illusory) critique of capitalist society: their non-figurativeness expressed not only the non-figurativeness of the exploited worker, but also the future non-figurativeness of the communist. It was thus all the more strange to criticize pre-Revolutionary Futurists for the absence in their practice of a link-up with the production of things under conditions where production itself was in the hands of the capitalists.

The more sober-minded Productionists (Tarabukin and Arvatov, again) realized that, under contemporary industrial conditions, Productionist art was more a wish than a reality, thus primarily taking the form of laboratory experiments and political agitation. In this sense as well it was no different from the art of the abstractionists and the Futurists, whose work those very same LEFists legitimated as a formal laboratory of the art of the future under capitalism, and propaganda art under Soviet power.

The leftist theorists made their most serious mistake, however, when they subjugated contemporary artistic practice exclusively to industrial production. They thus took as reality a situation in which the artist would produce things whose usefulness was in no contradiction with their artistic qualities. They made this ideal the basis of their doctrine, thus inevitably substituting their above-mentioned maximum program for their minimum program and vice versa.

It was not just a matter of Brik's "chintz," of course. Nor, since we are on the subject, was it a matter of canvass. The problem had to do, rather, with the notion of the "frame" and the limits of art. This frame is not a constant, nor does it depend exclusively on art itself. In revolutionary periods, this frame is violated and begins to shift. Therefore when the

most advanced strata of Russian society adopted the utopian project, smashed the resistance of the ruling class, and then set about constructing the new life, nothing else remained for art but to aestheticize this project's successes or failures (leftist and rightist traditionalists) or try and cruise in the wake of its realization (abstractionists and Productionists). But as soon this project itself began to stall, artists were again faced with a choice: to continue the Productionist strategy by now only ideologically servicing a merely nominal socialist state (for they had already been ejected from production), or to shift to criticizing this project via artistic means and from an even more radical position. As a result, the Productionists got caught between the trials of applied design and utopian designs for the future.
Unfortunately, the utopia of Productionist art remained only a wish during the twenties—a possible horizon of art's development that, for the first time in history, unfolded into such a broad panorama before Russian artists and theorists.

The Lessons of Productionist Art

Thus, the main lesson of the Productionism of the twenties is that when our understanding of art is at a crossroads—when we cannot decide whether art is knowledge, propaganda, entertainment, utility or life-construction—we are not at all obliged to follow only one of these perspectives. The heterogeneous nature of art enables us to regard it from all these viewpoints, without reducing it to one of them absolutely. However, consideration of art's social and historical character should be the basis of these viewpoints: this is the most vital condition for the emancipation of art from commercial subjugation and ideological capture.
The history of Productionism shows us convincingly that avant-garde art cannot "depict" reality via representative strategies or produce "things themselves" under capitalist property relations without betraying itself. Moreover, within the contemporary art market, with its systems of brands, stars, and political spin, both these strategies have become intertwined to the point of indistinction, manifesting themselves either as decorative or political design for the ruling classes.
The artist has to be able to forego attachments to things or their absence, for life changes endlessly and becomes more complicated by the minute. Thus, under capitalism, the only way to remain faithful to oneself and the avant-garde is to maintain a critical distance to the forms and relations it foists on us. The artist has to develop strategies so that the fruits of her labor are not appropriated by the market and by bourgeois culture; she has to actively employ and invent new media and artistic techniques that they have not yet assimilated. In this sense, Arvatov's testament remains relevant: "The fetishism of aesthetic materials should be destroyed"; "the fetishism of aesthetic techniques, forms, and tasks should be destroyed"; "the fetishism of aesthetic instruments should be destroyed".
In positive terms, today as well the leftist artist should be in search of the "best political tendency" as the main condition of the aesthetic quality of his work (Benjamin, "The Author as Producer"). A reassessment of the achievements and defeats of Soviet Productionism might prove invaluable experience for artists as they search for and articulate this new, emergent historical tendency.

Endnotes:
In the main text, references to books published in Russian are given only in English, although in many or all cases, no published translations of these works in English exist.
1. From the Easel to the Machine, Moscow, 1923, p. 23
2. See, for example, A.I. Mazaev, Kontseptsiia 'proizvodstvennogo iskusstva' 20-kh godov [The concept of 'productionist art' of the 1920s]. Moscow, 1975
3. From Paintings to Chintz," *LEF* 2 (1924), pp. 27–34
4. Nevertheless, It Does Move, Berlin, 1922, pp. 135–136
5. Art and Production, p. 117.

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Now, it is true that opinions matter greatly, but the best are of no use if they make nothing useful out of those who hold them. The best political tendency is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed. And these attitude the writer can demonstrate only in his particular activity - that is in writing. A political tendency is a necessary but never sufficient condition for the organising function of a work. This further requires a directing, instructing stance on the part of the writer. And today this must be demanded more than ever before. An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one. What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consummers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.

Walter Benjamin
The Author as Producer, 1934

Drawings by Marjetica Potrč from the series 'The Future is Now", 2005
(Drawing No.6 and 7 of 10)

Spaces for Art, Political L

Lolita Jablonskiene in coversation with Dmitry Vilensky

Lolita Jablonskiene: I would like to start our conversation with a historical note, taking a glance at Alexander Rodchenko's Workers' Club. After all, you chose to reference its title in the name of your project. I know that you have some interesting and rarely published material on Rodchenko's Club? What is it and why does it appeal to you?

Dmitry Vilensky: The idea of the Activist Club diverges from the original concept of the Workers' Club introduced in the USSR in the mid-1920s and represented by the famous piece made by Alexander Rodchenko. Created in 1925 for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, it was never produced in real life. So it was a sort of a model of how such a places should be organized. The piece introduced a western bourgeois audience to the completely different method of staging cultural activities in workers' free time in the USSR (such as "Lenin's Corner," a space for gatherings, or the performance of "Live Newspapers," etc.) The task of the workers' club was to orient the workers in issues of political struggle, and introduce them to a different type of aesthetic experience. It critically undermined the obsolete idea of an idle consumer, who, through the experience of the art object in the museum, could elicit pleasure and "emancipate" herself from shabby everyday existence. It was about building a space based on educational methodology and creativity. When we were preparing our first approach to the concept of an activist club, in Paris in 2007 (actually, this was imbued with an intriguing symbolism because Paris is the place where the original Rodchenko Workers' Club disappeared after being given to the French Communist Party), I came across a publication by bookstorming.com and Galerie Decimus Magnus Art Editeurs (www.michelaubry.fr/livres.html), meticulous documentation of the reconstruction of Rodchenko's Workers' Club done by the French artist Michel Aubry. It was very inspiring to see one of the most famous works of the Russian avant-garde in an amazingly detailed reconstruction. Also, it shed light on many details of the composition that were not visible in the historical photographic documentation of the project. Of course there have been several recent attempts to reconstruct this piece. Christiane Post attempted something at the 6th Werkleitz Biennale; there was an installation by Susan Kelly, "What is to be done?"; and a reading room at the exhibition Forms of Protest, at Van Abbemuseum. I was not interested in reconstruction but in a process that I would call the "actualization" of the concept of the workers' club, how it could be fitted into the space of a contemporary art institution with all its limitations. So this self-imposed challenge was almost the same as the one the Soviet government had once placed upon Rodchenko: namely, to show the bourgeois public another means of producing the space where art—and aesthetic experience—can come together with political learning and subjectivation. Or, to put it another way, how the artist can claim the true value of art. Another aspect of my inspiration was the current discussion on the concept and role of social centers. This was one topic of discussion at the recent conference at MACBA in Barcelona, "Molecular Museum. Towards a New Kind of Institutionality," which tackled the relation between museums and social centers. I think that for all of us who consider art works to be more than objects of pleasure and entertainment for the rich, but as an important experience that can transform a person's subjectivity and make them feel more free and human, the concept of the social centre, as a place where we can reveal the pure use-value of art and ignore its exchange value, is more important than the concept of the museum. The museum emerged in an epoch when the new bourgeoisie was the revolutionary class in society. Now the new social centers strive to serve a broad caste of oppressed people and give them a chance to appreciate culture within a framework of fighting for their rights of recognition. The discussion about the future of social centers can be connected with the concept of the workers' club developed in the Soviet Union because they share an approach to the value of art and the people that participate in its production. Today, the situation is more confusing, what with all the changes in class composition and the placement of the factory inside the society as a whole. So I think that there is a desirable space where we can imagine and demand the hybridization of museums and social centers.

LJ: Sharing a common experience of the Soviet past, we both know that Rodchenko's project was a semi-utopia. It was never introduced into life, however. Workers' clubs or workers' culture houses, political corners et al. did exist in the Soviet system of organizing the political education and leisure time of workers. How would you account for your choice of Rodchenko's Club as a prototype or archetype instead of some nearby culture house that still bears signs—and the memory—of workers' bodies and the ambiguities of such places? How do you measure the effective balance between the utopian and the prospective in your Activist Club?

DV: Perhaps I would be more inspired if I was trying to develop a functioning social center, rather than working in the institutional art framework. I share Charles Baudelaire's inspiration, as embodied in the passage, "It is an immense joy to set up house in the middle of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite." Once, for me, there was a moment when it sounded almost achievable, when, after an exhibition in Dresden, there was a chance that my construction-module could be moved to a place where it could serve its intended function. Unfortunately, it never happened.

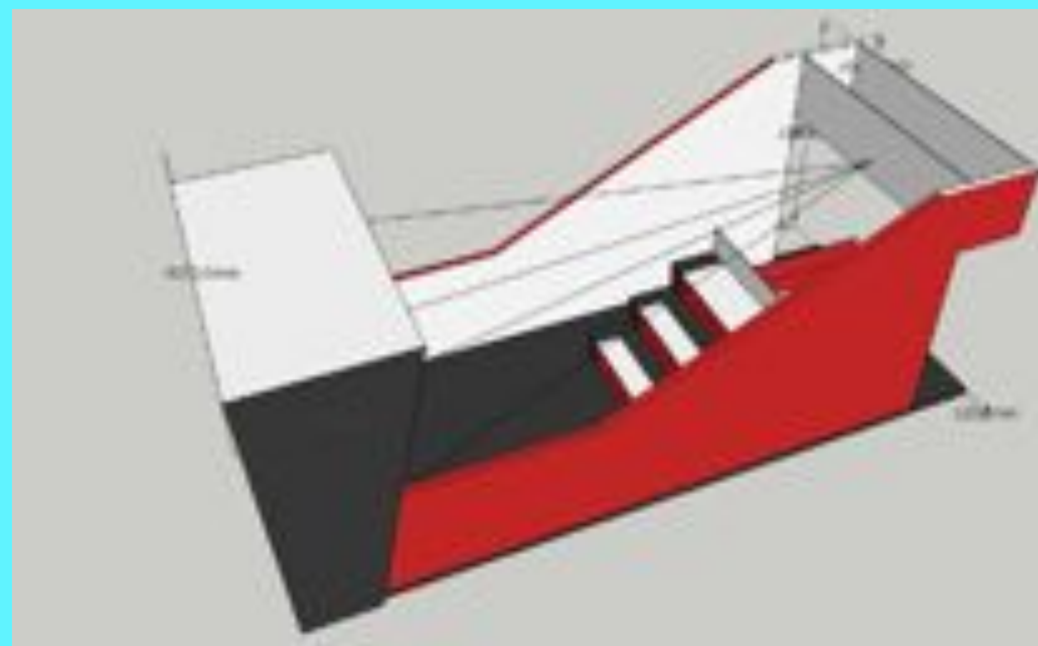
In reality, such things are hard to implement because there are very few resources for their realization and, frankly, the Russian social and political situation is incomparable with the Western European one: chances for non-institutional work are very limited. So, Rodchenko's Workers' Club is impossible to imagine without the whole post-Revolutionary situation—it is deeply rooted in the context of its time. That's why the idea of a workers' club is useless today. For me, the shift from worker to activist is important. Historically, the worker's identity had a marked political position, but I doubt that it does now. Today, political subjectivity is shaped inside and outside labor relations, and the position of the political subject is determined more through one's stance as an activist.But the idea of the transformation of the privileged art consumer's leisure time into the learning time of the oppressed is still worth attempting to actualize. And in this way I am very inspired by the situation that has emerged recently in different social centers in Europe, where activists are building their own environments for self-educational activities, centered on cinema, and on reading and discussion spaces. But I am often disappointed by the trashy imagination of the spatial production that is normally realized in such centers, squats, and protest camps. I personally feel good inside them and of course prefer them much more than the over-hyped lounges that are so much adored by the new "creative class," which are so disgusting in their cozy hedonism. I think that such spaces should be organized differently. As my friends from Universidad Nomada postulate: For quite a while now, a certain portmanteau word has been circulating in the Universidad Nomada's discussions, in an attempt to sum up what we believe should be one of the results of the critical work carried out by the social movements and other post-socialist political actors. We talk about creating new mental prototypes for political action. (http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0508/universidadnomada/en) The same approach should be developed in relation to spatial practices. In this particular installation of the Activist Club, which was realized for an art institution, we were trying to demonstrate how these "spatial prototypes" could be realized. And I hope that is one of the possible ways in which art can be developed today.

LJ: What kind of activities have you been organizing at the Activist Club? Talks, debates, and exhibitions? Anything else?

DV: First, in the institutional framework my constructions serve as contextualization modules that provide viewers the chance to experience the artwork produced by our collective in a proper setting. These are spaces where we screen our film and video works, distribute newspapers and other printed materials, where it is possible to accommodate seminar activities and discussions or run sociological research involving the public. These are spaces for contact with the public and their feedback, and the structure of the spaces is organized to serve these needs. Also, I would call them "take-away spaces"—we welcome any collective in need of a place for gathering and screening something. They can use them for their own purposes.

LJ: "Engineering" (social and aesthetic) was a key concept for Rodchenko. How do you relate to it in both its social and aesthetic ambition? I believe that, for the Constructivists, being an "engineer" meant being in the avant-garde of the new age and the art revolution. How would you describe the identity of the contemporary artist-activist?

DV: I am not sure about "engineering." I think in our post-Fordist time it is even more confusing to talk about "engineering" than it was in the days of the mass Fordist mobilization of labor forces.As such, it is not engineering but the process of self-organized education that enables a new class sensibility—that is, new skills that facilitate a new subjectivity. Currently, in this time of the crisis of political activism and the growing pressure exerted by the capitalization of culture, it is still could consider in a wake of old discussions. Should artists produce for the proletariat or should the proletariat produce its own art? I think we need to reconsider the role of the avant-garde artist as a historical figure and try to analyze



how this role relates to the contemporary figure of the artist-important for us to demonstrate our fidelity to the history of human emancipation. For me, this struggle lies at the core of aesthetics and art. Also, the idea of the transversality of the struggle (see Gerald Rauning's important book Art and Revolution, published recently by Semiotext(e)) is something that should shape the position of the activist. Defining an "artist-activist" is a difficult and ever-returning task that we should consider in a wake of old discussions — should artists produce for the proletariat or should the proletariat produce its own art? I think we need to reconsider the role of an avant-garde artist as a historical figure and try to analyse how this role relates to the contemporary figure of the artist-activist.

I think that this definition is really important. As Jacques Rancière once mentioned (and I fully agree with him): If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is […] not on the side of the advanced detachments of artistic innovation but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures of life to come.This is exactly the main concern of the activist-artist, who is not trying to dictate to the masses what art should be, but works in close connection with resistance movements and tries to find a form of representation for the vitality of struggle and social transformation and disseminate it back into the movement. I think it is about constructing an organic exchange between art and the everyday experience of people. Art can gain experiences from the everyday and at the same time penetrate the texture of people's consciousness and life, helping them to understand their place in history and deepen their process of becoming.

LJ: I am deeply interested in your concept of "self-education," both its tradition in Russia and its Futurist ambitions. You relate it to the activist position, don't you?

DV: Yes, I really do. The theme of self-education flows from the notion of self-organization. What do we mean when we talk about this notion today? Self-organization is a collective process of taking on political functions and addressing tasks that have been excluded from the field of real politics or pushed out of public space. Thus, the process of self-education is inseparable from the positioning of collective dissent within the existing order of things. It demands the transformation of the status quo. Self-organization searches for a form through which it can express the voices of dissenting subjectivity. Since self-organization demands something lacking in a concrete historical moment and a concrete local situation, its most important characteristic is the lack of knowledge. At the same time, the lack of knowledge does not entail

earning and Subjectivation

the rejection of cognitive approaches that are already known. The state of a creative lack-of-knowledge is the point of departure for action. Practices of self-education have been extraordinarily important in Russian history. Often semi-illegal and in opposition to official institutions of power, such intimate circles were able to formulate some of the most striking phenomena in Russian thought and culture. Notwithstanding their marginal position, they made an invaluable contribution to the historical victory over the repressive state structures that in Russia always intertwine with capital. Their experience still inspires us today, as we once again look for ways to educate ourselves in the current atmosphere of growing coercion, state violence, and direct repression.

LJ: Your Activist Club has been installed on several occasions already. Does it change each time? And, if so, how site-specific does it become? Rodchenko's project, I believe, was based on a universal concept that could be "exported." Thus, it was no coincidence that it was donated to the French Communist Party after the Paris Exhibition. Finally, how do you balance the didactic and the participatory elements of your project?

DV: For our group and for me, the participatory moment is very important. So what we are building are the spaces where the viewer can encounter the work of art in a proper and (as we understand it) educational setting. I do not think that this necessitates a universal "concept," but we should try to develop a method, an approach to the production of the space that can have a universal dimension. And I think that these claims for universality are sometimes misunderstood as something totalizing or exclusive of any difference. But you do not have to be a philosopher to recognize that is not the case. True universality is built upon singular, local, and differentiated experiences, exactly as Marx noted (in The Communist Manifesto): *"From the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature."* So all realizations of activist clubs in different contexts are different but they share a universal approach.

LJ: In one issue of the Chto Delat newspaper that you publish (the issue on "Critique and Truth"), you explain your strategy as "making spaces where the group can carry out its work, spaces that are largely independent from the system." What are these spaces and what is their potential? In the outline of my project for this issue of the Printed Project I have pointed to the hybridity of spaces that surround us. I will give you an example. When I was working in Moscow implementing a special project for the 2nd Moscow Biennale at the Winzavod Contemporary Art Centre, I had constant encounters with migrant construction workers who lived and worked in the same complex. Their huts were actually scattered around the Biennale venues, and one could not avoid the feeling of both being together with them and deliberately ignoring their presence at the same time. How does your Activist Club function in regard to the hybridity of social space?

DV: It could be anywhere, but the issue of space and its potentiality should be considered alongside the issues of the possibility of the situation that might arise in the space. Regarding your experience, if by any chance you encountered a strike or a protest by the migrant workers that would block the opening of your show, what would you do? Stop working in solidarity or hire other workers who would help you make your deadline?
My answer to this challenge would be to produce a space of the exhibition that maintains the potentiality to be transformed and welcome a different sort of activity: the workers could take it over if they felt the need for it. Such spaces could be useful in a crisis situation. Or you could imagine another situation where these workers would have an organization, and they needed a place where they could gather and share their experience and meet activists who support their struggle. If we consider art spaces to be truly public spaces, then they could serve these needs and at the same time maintain uncompromising aesthetic quality. That would be for me an ideal model of what you called hybridity of space.

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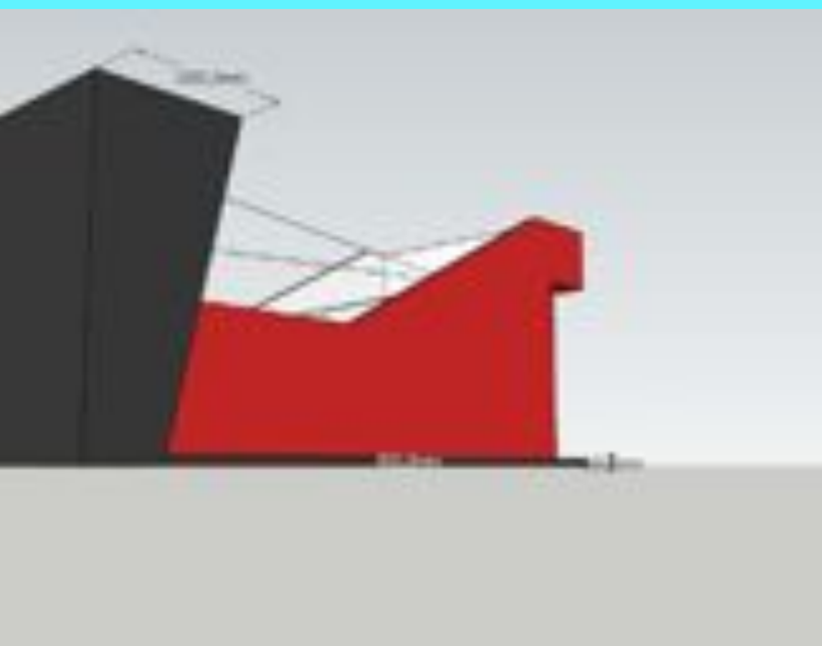

Striving to be realists in the authentic, broad sense of the word, we once again repeat Lenin's half-forgotten thesis: "You can become a communist only when you have enriched your memory with knowledge of all the riches that humanity has created." That is why we have chosen for our installation at the Van Abbemuseum a series of paintings from the museum's collection that represent the twentieth-century realist tradition.

For us, these paintings symbolize the aesthetic and political value of this tradition. Socialist realism, which betrayed the mode of critical engagement with reality, was a distorted continuation of this tradition.

By designating an alternate expositional and interpretive context for these works, we can establish the dialogue with them that is so vital to us. The insertion of critical realism in the context of the new avant-garde art paradigm finds its basis in the notion of art as an activist-educational practice, as well as in the process of reassessing the role of the museum, which even after its mythical "death" still remains one of the principal sites for the production of art's value and significance.
The ability to see realist painting with a fresh gaze is not merely a primary component of universal aesthetic experience, but also a powerful instrument of politicization, whose current potential seems more relevant to us than the potential of modernist abstractions.

Illustrations:
(Top): Installation view of Activist Club (Kino-Discussion Module) at the exhibition "Electrifications of Brains", Motoren Halle, Riesa efau, Dresden.
(Bottom): Charley Toorop, Volkslogement, 1928. Van Abbemuseum Collection
(Left): 3D simulation of the Activist Club (Kino-Discussion Module) made by Theo Wajon based on sketches by Dmitry Vilensky

John Roberts /// Productivism and Its Contradictions.

Lenin's decision to reintroduce certain aspects of the free market into the Soviet Union after the ravages of War Communism was a form of what might be called '*revolutionary pragmatism*'. The industrial base of the country was devastated, the working class atomised, and peasant discontent widespread, and therefore, a modicum of modernity had to be restored immediately. Without this, Lenin surmised, the fledgling revolution could be split apart and lost by the failure of the new state to meet simple, everyday needs. One of the immediate effects of the New Economic Policy (NEP) was, of course, the rise of a new bourgeoisie, with its speculation, parasitism, conspicuous consumption, and petit-bourgeois tastes; another was the return to various forms of speeding up and coercion within the factory, resulting in widespread workers' resentment. For many Bolsheviks on the left, then, (and subsequently) this is where the revolution was actually 'lost' as the technical transformations put in place by the Party (within a largely antiquated factory system) were immediately subsumed under a new disciplinary productivist regime. For Lenin there was no way of getting around this if the infrastructure of the state was not to collapse; for Lenin's critics (including many workers themselves) it was one thing to protect the revolution, another to be worse off, and suffer increased levels of control. The NEP then was profoundly transformative of the direction of the revolution, because it forced the Party to address the limits of workers' emancipation in conditions of general need. It is no surprise therefore that the factory itself becomes a source of massive political and cultural struggle and self-definition for the revolution during this period, because it is the factory that bears the full weight of the New Economic Policy. Indeed, the operations, relations and dynamic of the factory becomes a key focus of the revolution's ideal horizons, as right and left seek to adjust their positions to the new Policy. Thus at one end of the ideological spectrum Alexei Gastev [1] proposed various time and motion programmes in order to create increased worker efficiency, punctuality, and hygiene, (all this backed, initially, by the Central Committee and its fascination with American-style Taylorism) and, at the other end, the various cultural initiatives developed by the newly emergent avant-garde (Constructivism and Productivism), that wanted new work practices, new forms of production, and, essentially, a return to the early Bolshevik debate on worker self-management and the *relations of production*. [2]

That it is the cultural left that largely addresses the condition and form of the factory is indicative of how desperate the situation had become for the Central Committee. Under the continuing threat of Allied intervention, industrial production and efficiency levels had to improve without delay. In this respect the outcome of this struggle within the factory was pretty much preordained: debate on the relations of production and the 'free worker' *would have to be postponed*. Yet, despite these constraints, for a few years the cultural left not only debated at length the notion of the 'emancipated factory' and the possible place of art within its disciplinary regime but, were able to establish an actual presence in the factories themselves. This presence was very small, but it is larger than hitherto imagined.

The notion - much emphasized in most histories of the Soviet avant-garde - that Productivist theory never left the drawing board, has been undermined by the extensive archival research recently of Maria Gough. Gough's writing on the programme of 'consultative' work undertaken by the Constructivist/Productivist Karl Ioganson in the Prokatchik rolling mill in Moscow between 1923 and 1926, goes some way to correcting this impression. [3] Ioganson's work on various aspects of the labour process in Prokatchik reveals an artist engaged in collaboration with workers on improving various technical processes of metal finishing – and with some success. However we should be wary here. Such involvement is not the tip of an iceberg; direct involvement by artists in the factory system was indeed rare in this period. But what Gough does reveal is the extent to which initiatives like Ioganson's represent one striking material manifestation of widespread debate about the labour process and the NEP in the factory itself. Factories in this period were places of open and clandestine discussion about the immediate impact of the NEP, conducted mainly under the auspices of factory discussion groups that, initially at least, were not controlled by officious 'red' managers. In this sense the place for Ioganson and others had already been prepared. On this basis, Productivism can be seen, contrary to most accounts, as a direct response to the rise of the NEP, and, as such, an opportunity for Productivism to develop its thinking and intervene in the labour process, rather than being, the point where Productivism goes into immediate decline. As Christina Kiaer, has also argued, far from the rise of the NEP jeopardising the emergence of Constructivism and Productivism – preparing both for their eventual Stalinist demise – for a few years the NEP galvanized Productivism to develop and act on the theoretical work it had done in INKhUK between 1920 and 1923.[4] So, following Gough and Kiaer, we might say, for our critical purposes here, that there are two interrelated dynamics in mid-twenties Productivism: the emancipatory Productivism of INKhUK best represented by Boris Arvatov - the great theorist of Productivism [5] - and the applied-Productivism of the shop-floor, exemplified by Iagonson and by many of the debates that took place in factories during this period. Now, even if the single and singular example of Iagonson, doesn't quite test emancipatory-Productivism in action, it none the less provides an interesting and valuable insight into how the artist operates in the factory under the auspices of Productivist ideology, and the inherent contradictions of Productivism itself as it comes into conflict with the labour process.

Three Productivisms

By 1922 INKhUK had established a Productivist platform in contradistinction to Constructivism's post-easel social interventionism, identifiable, in main, with Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky. In this, leading members of this platform, Osip Brik, Boris Kushner and Boris Arvatov, argued that the skills and aims of the artist needed to be repositioned with the technical purview and discipline of industrial production itself; and that Constructivism, for all its emphasis on the technical reskilling of the artist, made a fetish of the artist *as* engineer. Indeed, the status of the engineer in Constructivist-Productivist debate in INKhUK is exactly what needed to be challenged in the move from Constructivism to Productivism. For, the re-functioning of the artist wasn't just a matter of raising the technical and scientific level of the artist, but of situating art *within* the relations of production, as a transformative technical and scientific force. In this respect there is a concerted shift of attention in Brik and Arvatov, in particular, to the notion that the site of art's research-value lies in the factory, and not in the studio or artistic research-centre. As Arvatov argues, in 1923, it is the job of Productivism to instigate experimental laboratories in factories.[6] In fact, eventually the broader aim is to transform the factory into a research-centre and source of general creativity, and as such facilitate the factory as the form-giving site of future collective practice. This is because at the point of production within the factory, art is able to offer an actual foundational transformation of the relations of production and the social relations of art. Allied to, and transformative of, the labour process, art reconfigures what artists and workers do and what constitutes the meaning of production and the character and quality of industrially produced objects. But if Productivism asserts that the factory is the ideal horizon of art's labour and its socially transformative potential, nonetheless it is unclear precisely what is expected of the artist once he or she is on the shop floor. Much of the remaining discussion between Constructivist and Productivist platforms in INKhUK is taken up with this problem. From what place and under what terms does the Productivist artist actually begin his or her work? What form should the collaboration between artist, designer, technician and worker take? What role should there be for experimentation? And, is experimentation actually generalisable? Are Arvatov's 'experimental laboratories' viable in cheese factories, shoe factories and lamp shade factories, as much as car factories? These question boil down to three categories of Productivist praxis, and as such involve the dissolution or subsumption of the artist under three different headings that cross both applied-Productivism and emancipatory-Productivism.

Firstly, the notion of the artist as a facilitator of improved techniques and machine processes in the factory (the artist as engineer, who dissolves his or identity into that of technician); secondly, the artist who contributes to the improved design of products (the artist as designer who collaborates on raising the quality of goods); and thirdly, the artist who seeks to transform the consciousness of production itself in the technical and cognitive use of experiments within production in order to contribute to labour's emancipation (the artist as inventor, who as such the artist who retains his independent identity as thinker and intellectual). These categories, at various points, overlap in the thinking of Arvatov, Kusher and Brik; in so far as, at no point do Productivists actually want to give up their status as artist-intellectuals completely (for to do so would transfer 'cultural thinking' to the engineer and technician as a whole), just as at no point do they want to return to the notion of the artist as independent producer or critic (for to do so is to lose what has been achieved by pushing art decisively into production).

This is why few of these problems are sorted out in practice in Productivist theory, because the respective problems and demands of these positions were never tested in depth across different kinds workplaces. And consequently, this is why Gough's analysis of Ioganson's tenure at the Prokatchik factory is highly instructive, because Ioganson's work is one of the few instances where some of the ideals and conflicts of Productivism are demonstrated in practice. Ioganson began his career in INKhUK as a primary-structure Constructivist in which freestanding forms were built from geometric units. When he entered Prokatchik this position had changed to one close to that of the Productivist-inventor, in which the artist contributes to the labour process in order to raise the creative level of production of overall. In other words, he enters, Prokatchik, at some level armed with the ideals of emancipatory-Productivism: namely, that the artist's technical skill in contributing to the transformation of patterns of production, contributes to the general *re-functioning* of the worker into artist as whole. It is not too clear, from Gough's account, though, what Ioganson expected from his tenure at Prokatchik, but suffice it to say given the ferment of the times, he was certainly not there simply to make up the numbers. Yet, the strictures of the NEP soon undid any notion that his work was contributing either to the production of a 'new worker' or a new factory. Indeed, it is clear from the start what the managers of Prokatchik wanted: someone who could contribute to raising production, and improve or finesse the means of production. They certainly did not want someone to set up an 'experimental laboratory' inside the factory or lead discussions on workers' alienation amongst workers themselves. Thus, soon into his tenure at the factory he is encouraged to contribute his technical skills in removing the 'backward-looking' craft processes and attitudes still prevalent in certain parts of the factory. In the finishing shop, for instance, he introduces an automatic dipping process that removes the slow application of finishes by hand – an actual, concrete technical advance. In other words he is fully encouraged to take on the NEP's quasi-Taylorist ideology of rationalization and increased productivity. Thus - as if blind to the NEP pressures he is

working under - in a work-in-progress paper that Iagonson writes for INKhUK in January 1924, [7] he extols the virtues and success of the rationalization process he is involved in, as if emancipatory-Productivism's critique of the labour process was a luxury that inventor-Productivists, and any other applied-Productivists, couldn't afford. He lists a number of outcomes he has achieved at Prokatchik, the first of which reads: "The first concrete work of a *konstruktor*, and his first concrete achievements – the raising of the productivity of labour by 150%". [8]

No doubt some such automated dipping process needed to be introduced – at least to militate against injury and persistent poisoning of metal workers, as much as to increase efficiency. However, this is not what Arvatov and other Productivists – who in 1921-22 were stressing how better it was for artists to study at technical college than art school – would have wanted to hear: a Productivist artist contributing to Party-led rationalization shutting down factory debate on the labour process and workers' alienation! The response to the paper is unrecorded, but there is good evidence to assume that it would have chastened many Productivists, and perhaps would have confirmed some of Arvatov's reservations about the possibility of an emancipatory-Productivism operating under prevailing conditions in the factory system.

For, despite being identifiable with the artist's shift to the factory, Arvatov's writing in the 1920s on Productivism and Constructivism (collected in *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo*. [*Art and Production*] in Moscow in 1926) is somewhat ambiguous about the factory as the foundational site of transformative practice. Like Alexsei Gan, Kushner and Brik, in the early 1920s he exhorts artists to move either into the factory or think of the factory as a potential locus for real transformative work on the relations between art and labour. But correspondingly he also sees the emancipatory effects of Productivism, broadly, as lying in artists and specialists taking collective control over technological and technical processes outside of the factory (as in new forms of architecture, urban development, transportation), as part of an expansion of artistic technique into environmental technique and design. Moreover, in *Art and Production* in the essay 'Art in the System of Proletarian Culture' (1926) he widens the notion of the Productivist as an organiser of material structures and intersubjective flow of social processes to cover all social and cultural activities. The new Productivism will "invest artistic activity in everything". [9] Indeed the "proletarian artist must experience all material and want to organise it artistically, whether that be using noise in music, street jargon in poetry, iron and aluminium in arts and crafts, and circus tricks in the theatre". [10] This is clearly closer to a conventional (Constructivist) avant-gardism, than it is to the inventor-Productivism of Ioganson; and perhaps Ioganson wouldn't have recognised this position as Productivism at all, and maybe said as much to Arvatov, Brik and others. Consequently, it is revealing how fraught and intense the struggle over the relations of production had become for revolutionary artists who thought that the factory was the natural home, the only home, of art. Clearly as the NEP unfolded, and the NEP transformed into Stalinist collectivism the factory was a more intractable material problem than early Productivism had imagined. It is possible then that Ioganson's intervention at Prokatchik – the guinea pig of Productivism, we might call it on current evidence - actually confirmed this for many Productivists, particularly as the forces of reaction were consolidating their hold after the death of Lenin, making it highly dangerous for artists to assume any role in production, beyond the most perfunctory and affirmative contribution. The factory, as the imaginary link between art, labour and communism after 1927, therefore is increasingly off the cultural agenda for artists. What once was the possible crucible of 'free labour' becomes the redoubt of hierarchy and instrumental thinking. Indeed, with the demise, or withdrawal, of Productivism, the factory loses its identity as a kind of cultural unit, or place of cultural relations – and its key transformative role in the communist imaginary – to be replaced by various forms of revolutionary symbolism centred mostly away from the centrality of the factory on the progressive functions of the revolutionary state. This, essentially, is what constitutes the majority turn in LEF thinking to representational practices after 1925.

"GRAFFITY MARKS MY TEMPORARY TERRITORY IN THE CITY. HERE, MY BODY IS THE ULTIMATE FRONTIER. THIS IS WHY I TATTOO MYSELF, TO MARK PERMANENCY."
GRAFFITI INVADER

~GRAFFITI FAÇADES, SÃO PAULO~

Factory-free Productivism

Perhaps, then, factory Productivism is not the terminus of 'failed' revolutionary avant-gardism, at all. Rather, it is the site where art's vulnerability as praxis within the labour process is exposed to the inexorable demands of production, and as such exposes, philosophically and politically, art's relationship to productive labour to an important *limit condition*. Maybe Arvatov realised there could be no emancipatory-Productivism centred on the labour process distinct, that is, from art's place in the destruction of the alienation of the labour process itself. The actual revolutionary destruction of the labour process, though, was not on the Productivist agenda. Firstly, because of the chronic under-industrialisation of the Soviet economy and falling levels of productivity, but secondly, for artists and theorists to focus on the labour process under the NEP was to expose Soviet labour to the realisation that it is no less subject to the law of value (increased speed of production, technical division, and inter-enterprise competition) than labour in the capitalist West. Debates on the value-form are thus, largely glossed over in Productivism, certainly until the late 1920s after Trotsky's exile, when a state capitalist analysis of the Soviet Union gains a foothold within the Left Opposition, particularly in the labour camps. [11] As such, it is the absence of a discussion on the value-form that prevents Productivism asking the most obvious question of its revolutionary efforts: why intervene in the factory in the first place, given that what distinguishes the critical force of art is precisely its relative absence from the strictures of the value process. That is art, unlike productive labour, art is not subject overall to a process of socialised reproduction, even if it employs advanced technical means of reproducibility, such as photography. [12] This means that's art's 'free' labour – *all the way down* - is in a position to critique the determinate labour of the factory, as a reflection on the conditions of free labour itself, by demonstrating to determinate labour what is free labour. Why then subjugate the 'free labour' of art *to* the discipline of the value form? This is a crucial question, and is perhaps one of the reasons why emancipatory-Productivism, after the demise of historic avant-garde and the rise of the neo-avant-garde in the West, has tended to avoid work on and with the labour process: firstly it is too difficult (limited access; factory hierarchy; market constraints) and secondly the rewards are minimal, particularly in non-revolutionary situations. It is hard to think of any successful factory-based projects by artists indebted to emancipatory-Productivism after the 1920s. The nearest we get is the Tucumán Arde (Tucumán is Burning) collective in Argentina in the 1960s. However, their work was conducted largely in alliance with workers or ex-workers *outside* the factory. [13] Similarly, in the early 1970s the British Artists Placement Group managed to get inside a number of factories, but only to establish the most innocuous or ameliorative discussions between art and labour. Indeed what comes to shape and direct the memory of Productivism under the auspices of the neo-avant-garde after WW11 is a version of Arvatov's *secondary* Productivism – the expansion of artistic technique into environmental technique. This has largely been mediated through the debate on the 'everyday' via Henri Lefebvre, a debate that Arvatov, of course, was a major contributor to in the 1920s. [14]
As a limit case of the avant-garde and of the potential transformative function of art within the labour process, the emancipatory-Productivism of Ioganson, then, is highly instructive on why the factory has mostly disappeared as an imaginary site of praxis in advanced art over the last 80 years. In this respect the Iagonson's tenure in Prokatchik reveals the structural power of the law of value, and what Marx called the real subsumption of labour under its coercions. It reveals, therefore, what might and might not realistically taken into the factory and taken from the factory, and how artistic labour might and might not contribute to the critique of the value-form from inside the labour process.

Footnotes:

1. For a discussion of Gastev, see Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks, Vol 1, The Crisis of Renewal 1917-1924*, Pluto Press, London and Concord Mass., 1991
2. See Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1997
3. Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, California University Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005. In 1924 the factory rolled alloys and nonferrous metal and employed 196 workers.
4. Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism,* MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, 2005
5. Boris Arvatov, *Kunst und Producktion* [1926], Karl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1972
6. See Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, p177
7-8 Gough, p168
9. Boris Arvatov, *Kunst und Produktion*, op cit, p13
10. Boris Arvatov, ibid, p14
11. See Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*, Ink-Links, London, 1979
12. For a brief discussion of art's relative absence from the law of value, see Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1970. For an extension of this analysis, see I.I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, Black and Red, Detroit, 1972
13. See Maria Teresa Cramuglio and Nicolás Rosa 'Tucumán is Burning' statement of the exhibition, in *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the Avant-Garde*, edited by Inés Katzenstein, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2004
14. For a defence of a quasi secondary-Productivist position, see Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol 11*: *Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, translated by John Moore and Introduced by Michael Trebitsch, Verso, London and New York, 2002. And for a discussion of Aravtov and the earlier debate on the 'everyday' see John Roberts. *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory*, Pluto Press, London 2006

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Drawings by Marjetica Potrč from the series 'Patterns Project", 2007
(Drawing No.1 and 2 of 7)

Devin Fore /// Soviet Factography: Production Art in an Information Age

If facts destroy theory, then all the better for theory.
Viktor Shklovsky, "In Defense of the Sociological Method," 1927

Any discussion of factography first has to deal with the conspicuous strangeness of the word "factography" itself, an awkward and selfconsciously technicist term coined in Russia in the latter half of the 1920s to designate a certain aesthetic practice preoccupied with the inscription of facts. Those who are familiar with contemporaneous avant-garde movements in other countries and who may also be skeptical of the early Soviet zeal for linguistic invention will wonder if factography is not simply another word for documentary.

Despite indisputable filiations between factography and practices outside of Russia which were similarly engaged in the project of chronicling modernization and its concomitant transformations to the conditions of human experience, there are critical distinctions to be made between the Soviet factographic avant-garde and documentary as it is traditionally conceived. The chief divergence is one of epistemological disposition: if the term "documentary," which was created in 1926 by filmmaker John Grierson came to designate work that strives to create the most objective depiction of reality possible, then this passive and impartial representational practice could not be farther from factography's ambitions. Indeed, Sergei Tret'iakov, the most famous figure in the movement, founded his entire praxeology on the notion of "operativity," on the claim not to veridically reflect reality in his work, but to actively transform reality through it. The objectivism of an indifferent documentary had no place in the interventionist practices of the factographers.

Although we can thus begin to posit certain differences between factography and conventional documentary impulses, hazarding a normative definition of the factographic genre presents additional problems. The movement's manifest preference for the photo-essay and other intermedial hybrids, for example, thwarts customary aesthetic classification and complicates attempts to delimit a coherent factographic style. Futurists by provenance, the factographers who published in the journal Novyi lef paid little heed to the traditional divisions between the arts. Tret'iakov, who worked as a photographer, prose author, dramatist, reporter, film scenarist, radio commentator, and lyrical poet, considered genre as a shifting and protean aspect of the art work that must be dynamically and expediently negotiated in the process of aesthetic production. For him, style and genre were not fixed values.

In this regard, the factographic conceptualization of genre is indebted to the model of cultural evolution described by Iurii Tynianov in his 1924 Lef essay "On the Literary Fact." [1] Because the dividing lines between genres are always shifting, because the territories of textual forms are constantly dislocating one another, Tynianov suggested, it is impossible to establish any fixed or immutable definition of genre. There is no generic "absolutism," as Nikolai Chuzhak wrote in 1929 in his introduction to the Lef anthology The Literature of Fact. Like Tynianov, the factographers viewed the aesthetic "fact" not as something apodictic and timeless, but as a phenomenon which
resulted from a procedure of cultural valorization. The members of Lef, in other words, understood factography not as a static genre, but as a mode of praxis. For them, the fact was the outcome of a process of production. The very etymology of the word fact, which comes from the Latin word facere —"to make" or "to do" (this derivation is also reflected in the French word le fait, the past participle of the verb faire)—bears witness to the fact's constructed nature. The fact is quite literally made.

While some would align the fact with the *Ding an sich* of Idealist philosophy, and others would equate it with objective matter, the stuff of ontological materialism, Tret'iakov rejected both the Scylla of noumenalism and Charybdis of phenomenalism, advocating instead a conception of the fact as an action, a process, an operation. His stance thus recalled the famous adage of Vico, verum factum: "the truth is an act." And so while it may be nearly impossible to specify steadfast stylistic or generic markers for factographic work, its modal and act-oriented practice nonetheless prompts an observation about its genealogy, namely, that factography was the immediate heir to the Soviet production art of the early 1920s. Both movements pursued an art whose task was not to reflect human experience, but to actively construct and organize it. Yet there was a pronounced divergence between first-generation production art and factography in the way that their practitioners understood experience. In an effort to correct the error of a nonutilitarian laboratory Constructivism that
reduced the art work to a combinatory scheme made of conventional signs, production art recognized only the sensuous and somatic features of objects that were designed for everyday deployment; [2] and factography in turn challenged the onesided positivism of this production art by reincorporating into its conception of the object the symbolic and ideological systems that had been neglected by its predecessor. In this regard, factography can be understood as a sublation of laboratory Constructivism's formalist-structuralist logic and early production art's hypermaterialism. As Benjamin H. D. Buchloh demonstrated in his formative essay "From Faktura to Factography," the factographers engaged not just with physical and dimensional bodies, but also with bodies of collective social knowledge and networks of communication. [3]

Within this reorientation of artistic practices toward information and discourse, moreover, they conceived of signification not as a mere system of mimetic reflection, but as an act of productive labor. This sweeping reconceptualization of the relationship between work and semiosis belonged to a specific historical moment in the 1920s, that of the precipitate transformation of the Soviet Union into a modern media society. It is indeed impossible to comprehend the factographic project without taking into account the concurrent explosion of new media technologies and their attending mass cultural formations. This decade not only underwent a media revolution effected by the advent of radio broadcasting, the introduction of sound into film, and the photomechanical procedures which enabled the proliferation of the illustrated press, but it also witnessed the emergence of popular photography organizations, widespread literacy
campaigns that drastically changed the lived relationship to language, and a worker-correspondent movement which aspired to transform the consumer of information into its author. New media became ordinary facts of life.

That factography began to reach the apogee of its influence and methodological cogency around 1927, the year which Guy Debord later established as the inaugural year of the society of the spectacle, [4] is thus in no way incidental, for factographic practices presupposed a society on the cusp of the modern media age. In this society, where the distinction between the object and its image grew increasingly tenuous, the factographers understood acts of signification not as veridical reflections or reduplications of an ontologically more primary reality, but as actual and objective components of everyday, lived experience. The era that saw the closure of the gap between life and its representation challenged the Soviet avant-garde to develop models of production and manufacture that encompassed physical and psychic experience alike.

Although many elements within its program were articulated already by the mid-1920s, the dehiscence of the factographic movement in the final years of the decade coincided with the massive industrial prometheanism of the first Five-Year Plan, which was launched in 1928. This conjunction confirms a general pattern of historical consonance between industrialization campaigns and the documentary projects that intended to record and archive these transformations. For documentary enterprises have always been drawn to the sites of rapid modernization and social reorganization: consider the great photographic commission of the 1850s, the Mission Heliographique, one of whose tasks was to record Paris at the threshold of Haussmannization; or the lure of Germany's Ruhrgebiet for the New Objectivity journalists who regarded the industrial province as the epicenter of new cultural formations in the 1920s; or the photographic archive of the Farm Security Administration, which captured premodern, small-town America at the moment of its extinction during the era of the New Deal reforms.

Soviet factography was similarly fixated on colossal enterprises such as the organization of collective farms, the construction of the dam on the Dnepr River, or Magnitogorsk's feat of urban and social engineering. Within a single decade, a country that had been almost completely deindustrialized by the civil war became one of the most dramatic lessons in accelerated modernization. Looking back on that epoch, one Soviet reporter marveled that "everything was new, everything was for the first time. The first factories, the first
kolkhozes, the first collective kitchens. . . . Just information in and of itself was interesting."[5] With so many cultural and technical revolutions occurring simultaneously, the Soviet Union in the 1920s was, to borrow Dziga Vertov's phrase, a "factory of facts." [6]
At the same time that we can infer a prevailing historical correspondence between modernization and a variety of documentary projects designed to record these transformations, we additionally note that, in the case of factography, the Five-Year Plan clearly contributed more than just content or thematics.

The factographers not only depicted the construction of factories and reorganization of society, but also actively participated in these changes by incorporating advanced technical methods and media into their own practices. In making the Five-Year Plan the foundation of their art, the members of Lef were not only witnesses to but also collaborators in the modernization of culture itself. Mayakovsky would summarize this strategy in a laconic poetological formula from 1927: "Less AKhRR, more industrialization." [7] Their sweeping reassessment of the technics of genre and their manufacture of innovative aesthetic "facts" commensurate with the new socialist reality belonged to a moment of radical transvaluation in the systems of signification. Seeking to recoordinate the symbolic codes of language and art with the new social configurations and forces of production that emerged in the postrevolutionary epoch, the Futurist factographers responded to the demand for a novel language that could not only designate the objects of socialist modernity but that could also give expression to the new human relations, institutions, and ideological principles that had come into being in the wake of 1917. From his 1923 "Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art" to his "The Writer and the Socialist Village" of 1931, so many of Tret'iakov's texts take as their point of departure the observation that factography both facilitated, and was itself conditioned by, a revolution in language.

In their struggle to industrialize and restructure the conventions of signification itself, in their pursuit of what the poet and scientist Aleksei Gastev called the "technification of the word" [tekhnizatsiia slova], the factographers rejected the legacy of belles lettres and fine arts, and instead turned to science as the discursive basis for their work. In 1928 Tret'iakov, for example, proclaimed his agreement with a statement by a Komsomol member that "one technician is much more necessary than ten bad poets"; Tret'iakov moreover added that "we would be agreeable even to omitting the word 'bad'" from this statement. [8] For it

was in applied technological and scientific methods that the factographers discovered a deautonomized and functionalist sphere of knowledge-production that promised to deskill obscurantist traditions of aesthetic creation and reorganize outmoded, artisanal conditions of authorship in accordance with collective methods of modern production.

Here we must point out, however, that the experimental science pursued by the factographers was quite dissimilar to the abstract calculus of Western rationalism. Unlike the latter, an idealist method that begins its inquiry with already reified theorems and ends by only reconfirming these hypotheses once again, factography was an inductive, epistemologically compromised science that took the absolute particular, rather than the universal, as its point of departure. By thinking through its objects rather than theorizing axiomatically about them, this empirical, sociological science reestablished points of contact between the chaotic contingency of material phenomena and the speculative logic of abstract cognition. Their efforts to redress the gap between abstract knowledge and lived quotidian existence situate the factographers within the current of "phenomenological Marxism," which thrived in the 1920s and which undertook the construction of what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have described as a comprehensive "context of living" [Lebenszusammenhang][9]—a framework for human experience that is cognitively coherent yet experientially concrete and sensuous. An art of theorizing the unique specimen, of mediating fact and law, factography was an indexical art. The singularity and incommensurability of factographic work returns us again to the vexing question of factography as a genre. Since each object produced by the factographers represented a singular impression, the strategies presented by Futurist factography consequently had few, if any, generic precedents.

Unlike today's documentaries, which have in the era of reality television been exhaustively consolidated into a recognizable style that signifies authenticity and immediacy, in the 1920s these techniques had not yet been codified as an established set of reality effects. The plurality of names by which this practice was designated in the Soviet Union—factography, reportage, factism, documentarity— suggest that there was no single methodology or conceptual model that could encompass all of the manifestations of this tentative practice. Hence Georg Lukacs's disdainful characterization of documentary in 1932 as an "experiment in form" [Formexperiment].[10] Using a phrase from one of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's essays, we could describe the photographic work of the members of Lef as "unprecedented" [beispiellos].[11] The literary texts of the factographers, each of which was similarly an equivalent only to itself, assumed the form of the ocherk, a prose genre that was part scientific inquiry, part literary composition, and whose closest approximates in the Western European tradition would be the essay or the short sketch. And yet we should be circumspect about describing the ocherk as a genre at all, as Tret'iakov cautioned in his prefatory remarks to a talk about the ocherk, which he delivered in Moscow in 1934: "I don't want to use the word 'genre' here, even though I can't find a different word. The ocherk is not a genre. The ocherk is a great movement. You have dozens of diverse genres there—an intersection of strata, as they say in geology. The ocherk is located at the point of contact between artistic literature and the newspaper."[12]

Indeed, Tret'iakov's remarks on the volatility of the ocherk as a literary category resonate with comments that Benjamin made in Paris the same year, when he suggested that the Soviet newspaper had set a "mighty recasting of literary forms" in motion. [13] The ocherk
was in this regard the perfect literary analogue to the "unprecedented" snapshot, a constitutionally minor form that resisted generic classification and that, indeed, destroyed the very conditions of the discrete aesthetic medium. Somewhere between science and literature, this "experiment in form" could be more accurately described as a rhetorical practice than as an identifiable class of aesthetic work. Given the deliberate mutability and ephemerality of its compositions, it is apt that this "literature of becoming," as Chuzhak called factography, produced no masterpieces and no canon. Scarcely fit for monumentalization, the presentist ocherk "expires quickly," Shklovsky noted, and "can't survive past its own moment."[14]

So what is left of the factographic movement today? A prodigious number of documents and records, a scattered collection of works which have been largely ignored by students of the great movements in fine arts and belles lettres. Already anticipating this future disinterest of scholars, the apostate of reportage Joseph Roth observed from Germany in 1930 that the "current Russian literature is in fact, with few exceptions, a collection of material for cultural historians," and nothing more. [15]

Dismissive as Roth's remark is, it nonetheless quite accurately portrays the encyclopedic ambitions of the factographic program: Tret'iakov demanded that every single corner of the country be scrutinized and documented by the masses of worker-correspondents; Maksim Gorky called for the production of 10,000 biographies of Russians, chronicles of the quotidian lives of typical, even unremarkable, citizens; and Aleksandr Rodchenko proposed that individuals' lives be captured in an open-ended photographic archive that would be composed of an infinite number of momentary snapshots. Like Borges's story about a seventeenth-century cartographer who tried to create a map of the Empire that was the exact size of the kingdom itself—a sprawling representation of the world that coincided at every point with it—the factographers went about constructing a vast archive that was coextensive with reality itself.

Perennially "in search of the present tense," [16] these projects engaged operatively in their own historical moment and expired with the passage of the reality to which these interventions corresponded. But insofar as they uncover a forgotten response to the media of modernity, these fossils possess a certain archaeological value for us. They return us to a critical juncture in the development of spectacle society and point out a path that was not taken: in contrast to the technological determinism that today increasingly dominates contemporary theoretical perspectives on the media, factography insisted that these media are historically variable constructions that are the precipitates of concrete social and political systems; and against the positivist approaches that currently underwrite this determinism, factography recalls a moment when technologies of representation such as photography did not constitute a discrete medium or a stable genre. The case of factography reminds us that the information media which continue to structure experience to this
day are in no way ontological givens, but are themselves generated through operative acts of congitive and perceptual labor. A production art fit for a media age, Soviet factography shows us that the consumption of information is never simply a passive act.

This text is a slightly edited version of the introduction to OCTOBER 118, Fall 2006, pp. 3–10. © 2006 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Footnotes:

1. Iurii Tynianov, "The Literary Fact," in Modern Genre Theory, ed. David Duff, trans. Ann Shukman, (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 29–49.
2. On first-generation production art, see Christina Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).
3. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," October 30 (Fall 1984), pp. 82–119.
4. Guy Debord, Comments on the Society of the Spectacle, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1990), p. 3.
5. E. Mikulin, "Gody i dni," quoted in L. A. Az'muko, "Eshche raz o 'literature fakta' (K voprosu ob evoliutsii teoreticheskikh vzgliadov S. M. Tret'iakov vo vtoroi polovine 20–kh godov)," in Problemy stanovleniia sotsialisticheskogo realizma v russkoi i zarubzhenoi literature, ed. N. V. Kovrigina (Irkutsk: 1972), p. 59.
6. Dziga Vertov, "The Factory of Facts," in Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 59.
7. Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Tol'ko ne vospominaniia," Novyi lef, nos. 8–9 (1927), p. 38. AKhRR was the acronym for the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, an organization of artists who depicted revolutionary thematics with techniques borrowed from the critical realists of the nineteenth century.
8. Sergei Tret'iakov, "Happy New Year! Happy New Lef!," in Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, ed. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 267.
9. See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois
and Proletarian Public Sphere, trans. Peter Labanyi et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
10. Georg Lukacs, "Reportage or Portrayal?," in Essays on Realism, ed. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980), p. 59.
11. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Unprecedented Photography," trans. Joel Agee, in Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 83–85.
12. Tret'iakov's talk at the Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie po khudozhestvennomu ocherku, RGALI, f. 631, o. 1, d. 70–73, p. 18.
13. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 771.
14. Viktor Shklovsky, Poiski optimizma (Moscow: Izd-vo Federatsiia, 1931), p. 4.
15. Joseph Roth, "Schluss mit der 'neuen Sachlichkeit'!," in Das journalistische Werk 1929–1939, vol. 3 of Werke, ed. Klaus Westermann (Cologne: Kiepenhauer and Witsch, 1989), p. 159.
16. This was the title of one of Boris Agapov's ocherki, which was reprinted in his Tekhnicheskie rasskazy (Moscow: Izd-vo Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1936).

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Drawings by Marjetica Potrč from the series 'Patterns Project", 2007
(Drawing No.3 and 4 of 7)

David Riff /// when art once again becomes useful

1.
When we ask “what is the use of art?” today, it immediately sounds like an admission of ontological guilt. Aesthetic enjoyment, still the use of art par excellence, is nowhere to be found, at least not in its messianic form. Art is generalized into production and now works on a much more modest scale; sometimes it makes people think, sometimes it makes them smile, sometimes it makes them ask the right questions, and that’s all we should aim for, right?

Wrong. Because it gets much worse. Since the early 20th century, it has been clear that the commodity *really* is in the process of subsuming everyday life, and this was generally understood as a challenge to the use of art from two different sides. On the one hand, you had the radical leveling of all art through the commodity form. Money, the great matchmaker, is indifferent to art’s many uses. In the mute world of commodities, where all human labor is equal, the singularity of aesthetic experience makes no particular difference; all artworks mirror one another. This is why it becomes possible to use a Rembrandt as an ironing board. Art is something you bump into while you’re thinking about money. That produced the strange non-objectivity or emptiness at the very heart of all the things we perversely love. Art becomes a foreign entity that leaves us - its producers - non-objective, bereft of the very skin on our backs. All we can do is mime this non-objectivity, reproducing an aura of wry disengagement and haughty uselessness.

On the other hand, the rationalization of industrial production - be it in order to reestablish and heighten revenue in an age of imperial crisis or to modernize and lethally disambiguate unevenly developed mixed economies - created an economic and social demand for new experimental uses of mimetic and aesthetic functions that art traditionally limited to the studio and the salon. Art was to generalize aesthetic enjoyment, making itself truly useful in all fields, and redefining the very terms of use in the process. The point was not to turn a Rembrandt into an ironing board, but to create ironing board that could be just as aesthetically meaningful as a Rembrandt, thus redefining ironing as an aesthetic activity, freeing it from the drudgery of reproduction, and unleashing the productive force of the universalized creativity of human species-being. That would be a facto-graphic creativity: it would tell its own story as a concrete reality, reconstituting a new objectivity with plenty of room for contradiction. But the messianism of this idea backfired; it became accomplice to the cataclysmic implementation of Fordism, and created the sites of its post-Fordist reload. And by now, it is fetishized as the peculiar (and often highly contradictory) “consciousness” or “spirit” of the avant-garde, as far from us as the art of ancient Greece.

There is another problem. Actually, contemporary art has not killed but heightened all the avant-grade’s contradictions. Art is more useful than ever, *though not to us*. The culture industry produces unpreceded amounts of fast moving ideological commodities, in part by co-opting armies of critical-minded, quasi-politicized amateurs, and introducing them to an endless workday of the professional audience. Audiences flood to biennials to gain new subjectivity-sensuality-responsibility (these are the key services we provide) that they then reproduce on a lower level. This is the new Proletkult, but one biopolitically advantageous to the elite. It resubsumes any political resistance and forges a new experimental ethic or spirit for white collar workers. Strangely enough, aesthetic enjoyment - as I said, the use of art par excellence - is key to this “creative” neo-Stakhanovite identity because it insists that there is, in the endless workday, still a space for contemplation and that this contemplation is somehow productive (perhaps precisely because it is the last bastion of political being). This space for contemplation within the endless workday is then frozen, taken out of use, and marked up as an object for the elite, to be recycled as a glamorous backdrop for the VIP lounge. And that is contemporary art, always a small catastrophe. This hopefully still makes us ask: what is going on here? How did it come to this? How can we fight against this negativity? Which useful definition of art could we design? Must we abandon the idea of aesthetic enjoyment once and for all, or must we, on the contrary reclaim it?

2.
One way to resist the idea of art’s uselessness is to understand that WE are all productivists, factographers, muralists, biographers of things and worker-correspondents. We are living in an age of the total internalization of the production line, its domestication in the home-office, where we work day and night without stopping. And that does not just mean that we are working with instruments captured from communists in a bourgeois factory (that is always the case), but that we have at our disposal a toolbox that we can reclaim with a minimum of effort.

Take, for example, the theory of the “comrade thing,” any artstudent’s ideal companion. The theory of the comrade thing, as articulated in the period immediately following laboratory constructivism, projected a subject-object whose use is not self-cannibalism (as Marx describes consumption under the regime of private property in his early texts), but mutual use, non-alienated utility that produces only one thing, namely truth. Today’s comrade-thing, at least potentially, is the personal computer, a multifunctional object that goes well beyond anything the boldest communist futurists ever imagined (and that is including Khlebnikov’s “world radio”).

It is not techno-messianism to realize that the computer is a gateway to any number of texts, textures, and forms, reproductions that we must enjoy in search of their lost original, and not just a production site in the post-Fordist panopticum. Our comrade-thing allows us to have phone sex with lovers even if they are very far away. It allows us to reproduce endlessly, and, when we are done, to consume lofi copies of Hollywood movies and sitcoms. The world of Google, Skype, and Wikipedia is not just a tool, but actually allows us to inhale massive doses of culture, providing unprecedented levels of access to classics that were previously guarded jealously as part of the ruling class’ victory parade. The paradox is that the elite is busy with contemporary art, for which it reclaims a status of auratic singularity, a secular cult status fixed to one place and one time. Even for professionals, access to this generalized, never-changing “new” is always limited. But the classics are just out there online, requiring a minimum effort to be found and cracked. This extends far beyond the avant-garde, and includes the entire history of art, including the disputed legacy of realism.

Usually, the availability of this legacy represents that possibility of contemplation and genuine aesthetic enjoyment in the midst of the endless workday. It expresses the idea that Rembrandt need not be an ironing board, but can simply be Rembrandt, even in the age of digital reproduction. But there is nothing contemplative about teaching ourselves how to look at such paintings; we inevitably use the optics of the reciprocal readymade to brush history against the grain. It is here that we discover an “aesthetic of resistance” beyond contemplation; we see that all art tells not only the heroic story of money and power, but always also contains an unconscious communism, a self-idenity of the senses, an emancipative experience that carries down through its conflicted folds.

We see this weak messianism as a material force because we realize that mimesis, even in a state of slavery, cannot help but tell the truth about itself and the contradictions of its time, and that this helpless urge to tell the truth can be brought to consciousness. It is this coming to consciousness that seems so politically important today; the object of our critique comes back into focus, and the political mimesis of criticality - otherwise generalized, blurred, and romantic - moves from the abstract to the concrete. This is the moment when art once again becomes useful, no longer just a mimetic resonator, but as a medium for truth in its sensual form.

David Riff - art critc, translator, writer, founding member of Chto Delat workgroup, lives in Moscow

IT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE. WHAT IS SHOWN IN TIRANA TODAY WAS ALSO REALIZED IN EARLY MODERNIST INTERIORS.

“LET'S PERSONALIZE MODERNISM!” LE CORBUSIER ON HIS MURALS IN EILEEN GRAY'S E-1027

~PAINTED INTERIOR, E-1027~

Authors of this issue: Marjetica Potrc | Alexey Penzin & Dmitry Vilensky | Igor Chubarov | Lolita Jablonskiene | John Roberts | Devin Fore | David Riff | Keti Chukhrov

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Keti Chukhrov /// On the Use and Harm of Art for Life

It is a commonplace that art is useless, that art is not utilitarian. This is in fact the case. However, art's anti-utilitarianism often implies elitism, while, on the contrary, the resistance to elitism often results in the instrumentalization of art, in the application of its idioms towards one or another practical end.

In the former case, art turns into a sacred institution for the chosen few. In the latter, it functions as a form of social therapy or cultural production.

In the twenty-first century, each of these vectors seems to have run its course. Why? Because in the near future we will be more and more often confronted with the retreat of art from the places we traditionally have found it—concert halls, museums, theaters, galleries, etc.—and its reappearance in arbitrary, unpredictable places.

This means it will no longer be necessary to report back to the high priests of various artistic guilds and, therefore, to present oneself in those representative places where legitimation in literature, music, theater, and art is conferred.

Many cultural and intellectual figures accuse succeeding generations of a lack of culture and memory. This, no doubt, is quite often the case. But if we take a closer look at these "omniscient" devotees of culture and art, we will discover their flagrant cultural and artistic ignorance—of course, that is, if we hold art and culture to be a history of humanity's creative breakthroughs, not narrow professional mastery. We will find that musicians know nothing of contemporary art; that contemporary artists have no clue about the history of music or the history of painting; that writers are unacquainted with philosophy, while philosophers have no faith that real art continues to be made. (This is not to mention so-called professional writers, composers, artists, and actors. These Neanderthals are in need not only of education, but also of medical treatment.)

In other words, there is no scholar, historian or critic of art who knows art in general, as a totality. Such figures as Hegel, Benjamin, and Adorno aspired to this kind of knowledge, but even they had their limitations. For example, Hegel and Benjamin had little understanding of music, while Adorno in all likelihood had a poor grasp of photography, cinema, and the contemporary art scene.

I have no wish to affirm that one should know and remember everything. It is just that, if this is impossible, then we should not pass off the machinery of cultural circulation for memory. There is the domain of culture; there are scholarly studies that expand the archive. But there is no such thing as universal cultural memory. This is because memory belongs to the individual, and the individual will remember mainly what she finds meaningful, whether that is Dante, Shakespeare, the Wanderers or Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*. And that is why culture is not universal. Its archive is enormous, but it remains captive to particulars.

The miracle is that art has access to this kind of universality. Unlike culture, art has the potential to seize all potentialities. Because it takes for granted the existence of many different expressive idioms, it is greater than and superior to these idioms. It is entirely possible that art has now reached the stage of emancipation from the fetters of genre and craft. But I don't at all have in mind a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Deleuze and Guattari gave a precise description of this universal potential in *Anti-Oedipus*: *[P]ure positive multiplicities where everything is possible, without exclusiveness or negation, syntheses operating without a plan, where the connections are transverse, the disjunctions included, the conjunctions polyvocal, indifferent to their underlying support, since this matter that serves them precisely as a support receives no specificity from any structural or personal unity, but appears as the body without organs that fills the space each time an intensity fills it; signs of desire that compose a signifying chain but that are not themselves signifying, and do not answer to the rules of a linguistic game of chess, but instead to the lottery drawings that sometimes cause a word to be chosen, sometimes a design, sometimes a thing or a piece of a thing.*
Such is their immanent analysis of the creative process.

This is exactly how it is: creative inspiration is a lottery in which one thing, and then another pops out, for everything is given. Everything is given to everyone. Art is not situated in genre, method, artwork or the consciousness of a particular "artist," but in the space between everything and everyone. The selection will no longer be made the way we traditionally imagine it—via the construction of the artistic product from a combination of the conceptual, the aesthetically beautiful, the politically problematic, the personally lyrical, the stylistically fine-tuned, and (most important) the generically determinate. This is when poetry can consist only of verbal components and cannot intermingle with song or cinema; when sculpture must not recombine dynamically with elements of choreography or actionism; when dance cannot be a concept, and video cannot be combined with acting, etc.

No. The choice will be made in the artistic mode of human beings, in that way and to that degree that it is potentially open to each individual, and to the extent to which previously incompatible things and signs—images, sounds, video recordings, speech, reflections, acting, song—can be accommodated within this choice.

Professional communities and institutions of success and careerist accumulation, which stifle the possibility of creative risk and experiment, obstruct the recognition of this reality. The role of such a stifling "guild" is often played by the presumption that a strictly observed continuity of artistic experience exists—who inherits what from whom. We need to forget all these fantasies. There is no need to toss anyone or anything from the steamship of contemporaneity. We simply need to understand that everything is given to everyone. Otherwise, the existence of life on earth has no meaning.

And the history of culture is not a universal given, but merely a barrier erected to keep out all these masses. For it is this defensive scab that either profanes all the great art produced before our time by calling for a postmodernist mingling of the intensive, the heroic, the half-baked, and the petit-bourgeois; or, on the contrary, turns the history of art into a moribund archive and a mausoleum. For art, these conservative institutions and positions are the same thing as the institution of monarchy for a society. Warhol, Beuys, Guy Debord and the Situationists—to different degrees, under different conditions, and, perhaps, operating with different (not always compatible) worldviews—already foresaw the potential of art's universal openness. (Beuys, for example, had the ontological and political openness of art in mind when he said that anyone could be an artist. He likewise proved the world's variety and difference could penetrate the work of art.) However, their prophecies were quickly overturned by the valorizing gestures of contemporary art, and hence all these aspirations reappeared as the self-representation of an exclusive individuality.

Nowadays, despite the sheer number of cultural institutions, the quantity of artistic potentials that can be thought within them is quite meager.

Therefore, of course, while we have to use the funds and capacities of these institutions, we should not do so at the price of losing a multiple perspective on the world and castrating unpredictable creative processes, the possibilities and multiplicities in whose absence art becomes barren. We have entered open waters. Full steam ahead.

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Drawings by Marjetica Potrč from the series 'Patterns Project", 2007 (Drawing No.6 and 7 of 7)

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Drawing No.2/7 by Marjetica Potrč from the series “Homo Ludens”, 2008