

## Book Reviews

### ***The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution.***

Maria Gough

Berkeley: U Ca Press, 2005. 268 pp; 99 illus; 9 color; \$49.95 cloth.

### ***Imagine No Possessions. The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism.***

Christina Kiaer.

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005. 384 pp; 110 illus., 24 color; \$39.95 cloth.

Although an interest in Russian Constructivism has not always gripped the imagination of American historians of Russian art, we have not remained ignorant of this movement. Periodically, the American interest in Russian art has been spurred by the interests of specific groups, with theater and architectural historians often providing the impetus. With respect to art history, Camilla Gray's book, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, first published in 1962 (NY: Thames & Hudson, reissued 1986), long provided the only information we had in English, followed by the more specialized work of John Bowlit, detailing, in particular, the Russian experiment in stage design. It wasn't until the 1983 publication of Christina Lodder's seminal book, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press), that we had any real sense of just how much had been overlooked. Since the 1990s, however, this situation has changed dramatically as art historians and curators gained access to art works and archival materials that had been inaccessible throughout much of the twentieth century. To the non-specialist in Russian studies, this phase is of interest for two reasons: it illuminates the intricacies of a movement which was often summarized by the slogan, "Down with art," and it provides a paradigmatic case of the interaction between the methods of the historian, the accessibility of data, and prevailing historical narratives.

Two of the most recent products of the new accessibility are the books by Christina Kiaer and Maria Gough under review. Worthy of consideration by any reader with an interest in Russian culture and art historical methods, they also reward the attention of non-specialists. Intent on recognizing the political undercurrents in the work of the Constructivists, they turn to the art works, to statements made by the artists, and to contemporary documents which elucidate the artists' meanings in unexpected ways. Their broader reach, however, is in the area of the meaning of modernism. Both writers open up the debate about 20th century modernism and the avant-garde in surprising ways, with implications that will surely reverberate in other studies of modernism.

Each book recognizes the traditional division of Constructivism into two periods: an experimental or laboratory phase, and a period devoted to the production of objects. However while both focus on the latter phase, they do not approach it in the same way and they do not operate within the same theoretical framework. Indeed, the most striking difference between them lies in Gough's suggestion that the production phase of Constructivism was itself divided into two branches, one of which can only be called "productive" in the sense of producing strategies and ideas, since it did not produce objects. If Gough's modernism is predicated on the elimination of the object and the Constructivists' responses to their own demand to give up art and enter the factory, Kiaer's modernism involves a re-conceptualization of the object as made for consumers in a socialist economy. The paradox implicit in Kiaer's book and its title is the possession which is not truly possessed by an individual.

Gough begins what may be the more provocative of the two books with a thorough examination of the debates of the Working Group of Constructivists over the difference between a "composition" and a "construction." Providing an exceptionally close reading of the words and sketches made by the artists, Gough bases her analysis of their differences in a sophisticated discussion of structural dynamics and engineering principles. She concludes that Karl Ioganson, a Latvian-born and largely understudied member of the group, anticipated the discovery of the structural principle of "tensegrity" in his non-functional spatial constructions. Tensegrity is defined by Gough as a system in which the integrity of the structure is maintained through the dynamic tension of the materials, the placement of parts, and the dimensions of these parts. Less concerned with the ownership of this discovery (the principle would be "re-discovered" approximately twenty years later), Gough emphasizes the fact that Ioganson's work was not made with function in mind. He made it to demonstrate a principle of structure that existed purely in itself, regardless of its application. With this, Gough says, Ioganson achieved "a precise instantiation of the failure of the doctrine of functionalism and the triumph, instead, of a non-instrumental mode of invention" (p. 99) – invention for the sake of invention. Gough thus lays the groundwork for an even more innovative argument in which she asserts that if invention can precede the formulation of a goal or knowledge of its use, then the construction was not a goal-oriented product and Constructivism cannot be defined as teleological in the traditional understanding of functionalism.

Gough's challenge to conventional understandings of the second or production phase of Constructivism then forces serious reconsideration of the meaning of Constructivism and its contribution to 20th century modernism. In the most powerful and troubling part of her argument, she suggests that this phase itself has two branches, an object-oriented trajectory which is design-focused and a process-oriented trajectory which rejects the object to focus on the process of production. That it is essential to her goal of establishing a political basis for constructivism is clear. But it is equally clear that she is leading to a model of Constructivism which may be difficult to reconcile with our traditional understanding of this movement and of an artist.

By the fifth chapter of her book, Gough has shown that Ioganson understood the productivist platform as one which emphasized the process of production rather than the product. The inherent problem at this point, for Ioganson and for Constructivism, was a fundamental contradiction between the Marxist goal of overcoming the alienation of labor produced by machine-age inventions and the Bolshevik goal of increasing productivity. Gough asks which side of the debate did Ioganson support: the goal of improving the quality of products by giving workers more control over their work? Or increasing productivity and the rationalization of the process of the production?

Here, in a move that reflects the unusual nature of her thesis, Gough looks closely at Ioganson's period of involvement in the Prokatchik factory. As the fourth Constructivist now known to have entered factory production, he was the only one of those four known to be involved in a capacity which exceeded the design of products. Making meticulous use of rare and unusual archival materials (ranging from Ioganson's communications to records of the factory's management methods and plans for change), Gough connects his initial involvement in the factory as a metal-cutter with his first achievement as a "constructor." Through his invention and rationalization of a process for treating or finishing metal, he acted as both constructor and promoter of a new economic basis for production. If this step does not strike us as extraordinary or even related to art, it is only the beginning of Ioganson's process of implementing (and redefining) Constructivism in the factory as he becomes more centrally involved in the Party, fulfilling a range of propagandist and managerial roles. As Gough examines changes in the Party's relationship to workers and Ioganson's relationship to the Party, she builds toward the definition she sees as lying at the base of Ioganson's endeavors in Prokatchik: "a conceptualization of the *konstruktor* as an engineer of the totality of relationships within an industrial enterprise" (p. 181).

Gough wishes to complicate our understanding of Constructivism, pointing out that whether by choice or exigency, Ioganson's position has reversed the

Constructivist priority (which she reads as having been the goal of decreasing alienation from labor before improving productivity) and increasingly approximated that of the Party with its focus on the intensification of labor practices and productivity. Doing so, however, has pointed to fundamental contradictions lying at the base of the Constructivists' principles. But didn't these contradictions, as Gough herself elaborated, already exist in the Party's goals? And if so, hasn't Ioganson essentially assimilated himself to them?

Gough admits that Ioganson failed in some respects, even as he succeeded in penetrating industrial production in a way that few, if any, other Constructivists did. Yet, the implied irony is that Ioganson could not succeed, given that the theoretical basis of Constructivism was built on contradictions and the only possible success was his illumination of this conflict. Indeed, it almost seems as though failure is the only outcome which could have substantiated the trajectory that Gough describes. If Constructivism did, in fact, make a determined move away from the creation of objects to a "non-determinist" and "non-object" position, and if the logical implication of this rupture is that the Constructivist must enter the factory in something which is similar to an administrative or managerial position, then any other Constructivist role is – by default – either not an example of Constructivism or a greater failure than that obtained by Ioganson.

The possibility that this is the real implication of Gough's work is supported by the connection between her ideas and those of Walter Benjamin, a connection certainly affirmed in the title of her book and its evocation of Benjamin's article, "The Author as Producer," with both scholars turning to the writer Sergei Tretyakov's involvement in a collective farm as confirmation of this role. But here we must question the seeming conclusion: is it only possible to be a *konstruktor* by being involved in real life? The point which Gough seems to make is that the artist in real life is a manager of real life, and that the artist as a creator of anything which has an aesthetic existence, on no matter what plane we find it, is not a Constructivist.

Is it possible, then, to call a Constructivist an artist? If the avant-garde of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century might answer that question affirmatively, it is not clear that the Constructivists did. That seems to be the unanswered question raised by *The Artist as Producer*.

Christina Kiaer also situates Constructivism in the politics of the moment, but she does this quite differently. Foregrounding the conditions of the New Economic Policy (NEP) as precisely those to which the Constructivists responded, she argues that they strove to redefine the object and to articulate how a socialist society might imagine a different user/object relationship than that which exists under capitalism. Whereas Gough dispenses

with the first trajectory of production art as one traditionally associated with the “fashioning” of utilitarian objects (a development with which she is not concerned), Kiaer turns her attention to precisely those objects which she sees as more complex and multifarious rather than merely well-designed and functional. The concept of the “socialist object,” she suggests, is a unique and ideological contribution of Constructivism. Thus, while both books converge in their stated goals of questioning and reframing Constructivism, they diverge in their discussion of the Constructivist entanglement with Party politics and the importance each gives or denies to the role of the object in the Constructivist program. This difference could not be more significant as it speaks not only to methodology but to the primary actors in each narrative.

Kiaer, who also makes rich use of primary sources, gives us a reading of Constructivism which is more psychologically nuanced than Gough’s (or Ioganson’s) Constructivism. If failures occurred, they must be seen in the light of the psychodynamic complexity of a society in the process of forging new roles, not just for objects but for people. This process was complicated by the reality that NEP had more in common with capitalism than socialism, and ultimately was only a short interlude between the Revolution and the start of the concerted effort at the end of the 1920s to impose new communist regimes in industry, agriculture and life. NEP, a period of chaos, confusion, and contradictory values, was also a time of progress and an attempt to reinstate Moscow’s place in modern society. As Kiaer describes in a personal note in the book, living in Moscow during the upheavals of the early 1990s may not have been too dissimilar from living there in the 1920s. Having made a similar observation, I found that Kiaer’s decision to focus on the refashioning of the commodity object in this period of turmoil is a decision which derives sustenance from the complexities of that life. Although we may want to argue with some of her psychoanalytic readings of the artworks (as other critics have done), the context for her study certainly invites and rewards them.

The animating dynamic in Kiaer’s book is a dialectic of materialism and the object. Kiaer reviews Boris Arvatov’s theory of the “thing,” (she translates the Russian “veshch” as thing, rather than as “object), and identifies as key to his thinking the belief that it is not just the system of production which must be changed; the nature of things must also change. As she goes on to note, “this obsessive, even unseemly emphasis on the things themselves characterizes the particular Constructivist version of materialism” (p. 33). Underlying Kiaer’s vision of a utopian Constructivism, this “unseemly” materialism also informs her argument with Peter Bürger’s theory of the avant-garde. Bürger, she observes, could not envision a version of modernity in which the avant-garde

engaged with mass production. Kiaer, by redefining the “socialist object” as something which shares a relationship with its human partner, sees it as an essential (and avant-garde) contribution to the creation of a “noncapitalist form of modernity” (p. 1).

Kiaer’s interest therefore lies in the objects, the people who made them, and their potential users. Having made her case for the importance of the object to Constructivism in the first chapter, the remainder of the book is a series of case studies of important but often unfamiliar examples: Tatlin’s designs for clothing and a stove; Popova’s design for a flapper-inspired dress; Rodchenko’s constructivist advertisement for cookies, ironically and deliberately paired with a poem by Mayakovsky about a future which, unlike the present, is devoid of material possessions; Meierkhhold and El Lissitsky’s unrealized production of Tretiakov’s play, *I Want a Child*, in which the object to be produced is the new human; and Rodchenko’s furniture for the Worker’s Club exhibited in Paris in 1925 (although she is less concerned with the furniture than with Rodchenko’s understanding of objects and object desire). As this list should make clear, Kiaer’s focus is broad. Not limited to one artist or constructor, and not limited to one medium or type of object, her argument develops incrementally chapter by chapter, including contradictions which inhere in all the objects under discussion and which motivate the Constructivists in their continued quest to create a new type of commodity for the commodity culture of socialism.

As demonstrated in her discussion of the Constructivist flapper dress, each of Kiaer’s chapters has its own rewards and pleasures for the reader. Although neither Popova nor Stepanova are strangers to those who study Constructivism, their role in fabric design is usually dealt with in short shrift by remarking that they were the first or only constructivists to enter factory work (which we now know to be untrue). Discussion usually ends there as attention turns to their work in theater (about which Kiaer says very little). The dress, however, provides entry to an unusual “object” and to Kiaer’s discussion of Constructivist functionalism. Recall that for Gough, function was a misleading and erroneous emphasis. Central to Kiaer’s argument is the belief that consumption – the person’s desire to possess something – is as important as what the object does. This desire compels us to pay attention to such things as female dresses and fashion which have not always been examined under the rubric of Constructivism, especially when the artist who designed it had also designed “worker’s production clothing.”

Just as Gough questioned the functional orientation of Constructivism, so, too, does Kiaer, using her discussion of the dress to develop a redefinition of these utilitarian goals. Because the Constructivists themselves engaged in a discourse about “transparency” in the work of the object,

she argues that their own rhetoric contributed to a tendency to define function too narrowly. Rather than suggesting that the goal of function is a canard, Kiaer opens the discourse to consideration of a goal which directly connects the power of the commodity-object to socialism. This is a significant revision, implying that the goal for the Constructivist in production is not solely efficient design or rationalization of a production process; the goal must also include creating an object which will appeal to the eventual user. Yet this appeal must also include a new understanding of how the user and the object interface with one another. By positing the ideal of arousing desire, not one we normally associate with Constructivism, Kiaer can consider the visual transformations created by the optical, geometric patterns on the textiles designed by Popova and Stepanova as communicating messages about the transformation of everyday life and everyday objects. Popova's design for a flapper dress becomes an example that rationalizes the female desire to be fashionable and the fact that the object must appeal to the user who has that desire, even if the potential user is a typically unfashionable, working woman from the provinces. Kiaer's analysis of the dress also acknowledges its clumsy design, but she argues that this clumsiness is intentional. Indeed, her argument is that in the presumed failure of the dress lies its success: "The purpose of this flapper dress is not only to clothe a female body efficiently but to elicit the belief that, in wearing this dress instead of a Western or NEP-produced one, the woman who wears it is more rational and more emancipated ... than nonsocialist wearers of [nonsocialist] flapper dresses" (p. 130). Function in the case of Popova's dress inheres not in the facilitation of performance or the process of production but in the goal of recognizing desire and redirecting it toward a new type of product in a new society. The argument is at once subtle, unusual, and convincing, inviting the reader to reconsider some of our more standard interpretations of Popova (and Stepanova's) work in other domains (such as the theater) along with other standardized readings of the functionalism of Constructivism. It may also, as Gough did, invite us to reconsider the meaning of failure. I pose this notion in light of the fact that both writers do not avoid the implication of failure in the work of the Constructivists but at the same time, their redefinitions of Constructivism make failure an unlikely success story.

In the end, both books leave us with many unanswered questions and some unsettling points of difference. Both authors have reframed an important piece of art history. Gough's book may be the more tendentious of the two, given that her goal is the excavation and delineation of what she describes as an "alternate trajectory" of Constructivism, and given that if this trajectory does exist, it almost inevitably has to suggest that this movement was a failure. Although Gough does not shy away from this

conclusion, she does not place the blame solely on the shoulders of the Constructivists. What does make her argument problematic is the fact that her "dissenting" trajectory is based primarily on the path of one person (Loganson). Yet her proposal is intriguing, in part because of the thorough and wide-ranging analysis of the materials which underlie her thesis, and in part because she herself is aware of its fragility.

If Gough argues that there are two trajectories in the second phase of Constructivism, Kiaer accepts the more traditional understanding of a single second phase. But her exegesis of this phase, like Gough's, departs from the familiar discourse, although not in the same way. For Gough, utopian Constructivism ultimately should be understood as process-driven, and not as object-driven. In Kiaer's narrative, by contrast, utopian Constructivism weds the Marxist goal of reducing worker exploitation (as objects become standardized) to a newly recognized role of objects as sites of desire. Both writers, therefore, acknowledge a contradiction in the context for Constructivism's entry into the revolution; their players, nonetheless, do not resolve it in the same way. But it may be the case, in fact, that both explanations are necessary to what continues to be a necessarily incomplete picture of an exciting period of art history.

Roann Barris  
Radford University

***Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya.***

Mary Miller and Simon Martin; Kathleen Berrin, curator.  
*Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Thames & Hudson, 2004. 304 pages; b&w and col. ill., maps, \$50.00 cloth.*

***Lords of Creation: The Origins of Sacred Maya Kingship.***

Virginia M. Fields and Dorie Reents-Budet.  
*Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Scala Publishers Ltd., 2005. 287 pages; b&w and col. ill., \$60.00 cloth.*

Art historical scholarship on Precolumbian topics has evolved at a lightning pace over the last two decades. The most dramatic insights have come as a result of the decipherment of the Mesoamerican hieroglyphic writing system, aided in no small part by intensive archaeological investigations throughout the ancient Americas. In the realm of Maya studies, these advancements have allowed for the development and production of blockbuster exhibitions and attendant catalogs which focus on more specific themes or aspects of ancient Maya culture and art than were previously possible. Historically, such exhibitions took a broadly defined approach to Precolumbian or Maya art, focusing on a variety of objects from diverse areas or times and lumping them all



## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: [Book reviews]  
SOURCE: Southeast Coll Art Conf Rev 15 no2 2007

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://www.secollegeart.org/>