Art and Production

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Boris Arvatov

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Introduction

Art and 'Life-building': The Legacy of Boris Arvatov

John Roberts

Boris Arvatov's *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo* (*Art and Production*) was first published in Moscow in 1926, and was published in an amended form in German (*Kunst und Produktion*) by Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich in 1972, and then in Spanish and Italian the following year. As with many other key texts from the Soviet avant-garde from the 1920s and 1930s, its reception in the Anglophone world has been fragmented and beset by hearsay. So on the hundredth anniversary of the October Revolution, this first English translation is an excellent opportunity for English readers to acquaint themselves directly with a canonic, revolutionary and avant-garde text. I say directly, for although the work still awaits a wider readership, Arvatov's thinking has had a significant impact on the Anglo-American, new Soviet avant-garde studies and art history over the last 20 years. Christina Kiaer's *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Soviet Constructivism* (2005) and Maria Gough's *The Author as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (2005), both draw on Arvatov and his theory of art-as-production, as a way of redrawing the conventional historical map of the Soviet avant-garde –

that Arvatov's Productivism[1] was a failure, certainly compared to the successes of Constructivism – and of testing some of the unexamined assumptions of contemporary art theory. Thus, there has been an interesting convergence between the Arvatov theorized in these two books, and the recent 'social turn' in contemporary art and theory globally, with its emphasis predominantly on 'social construction' and the necessary temporality of artistic production, as opposed to the gallery-based display of art objects and image production.

This does not mean that we can impose Arvatov's thinking onto this 'social turn'. The revolutionary conditions under which Arvatov develops his notions of art-as-production and 'life-construction' or 'life-building' are, for all obvious reasons, very different from today. Yet, Arvatov's thinking, driven as it is by the political, technical and cultural demands of the early years of the Russian Revolution, addresses some of the substantive problems and issues that define the post-traditional status of art in the twentieth century and today. What might art do once it steps outside of the studio and gallery? What kind of skills and resources might artists rely on once they abandon painting or freestanding sculpture, or even photography? In what sense is the artist a 'collective

1. There is some terminological ambiguity over 'Productivism'. Arvatov himself doesn't use the term, preferring mostly 'productionist art' ('proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo'); also contemporary Russian scholars, such as Igor Chubarov, tend also to use productionist art or 'Productionism' ('produkzionism') (*Kollektivnaya thuvstvennost's: teorii i praktiki levogo avangarda*, Izdatel'stvo Vyshei Shkoly Ekonomiki, Moskva, 2014). However, in Anglo-American, German and French art history (Christina Lodder, Maria Zalambani, Brandon Taylor, Christina Kiaer and Maria Gough), it is 'productivism' that is preferred, given the tendency of Western art histories to taxonomize through 'isms'. In order to maintain a semblance of continuity, I use 'Productivism' here.

worker', in the same way that the labour-power of workers is organized collectively? How might artists contribute to a collective product or process? How might artistic creativity, then, be directed to the transformation of social appearances and the built environment? As such, in what ways is the artist now – after the crisis of art's traditional artisanal function – a *specialist in non-specialism*, so to speak, a producer of things and meanings across disciplinary boundaries and practices?

All these questions preoccupied Arvatov and his generation of Constructivists and Productivists, just as all these questions dominate the theory and practice of the new participatory and community-based, post-object art today. Yet, if there are clear overlaps here, there is one thing that concerns Arvatov more than anything else. If art – in the second decade of the twentieth century – is now post-artisanal having left the traditional arts behind, and the artist's skills, therefore, are part of an extended social division of labour, is it possible for art to actually enter the relations of production itself? Can art in fact contribute to, and help direct, economic production? Arvatov believed it could, and should. That is, for Arvatov, the revolutionary and technical changes of the Bolshevik Revolution not only demanded a cultural reorientation of art's priorities – consciousness raising; new forms of cognition through art and film – but a material-functional reordering of art's use-values. If art was to truly transform its bourgeois identity and escape its old hierarchies, if it was truly to accept its post-artisanal and post-aesthetic condition, then it should make itself available to the technical demands of modern industrial labour. This would involve, necessarily, not only a radical transformation of the artist and the category of art itself, and the materials artists work on; but also, most importantly, the very *site* of artistic production. In short: the

artist should enter the factory. For if artists were technicians and labourers above all, then where else should their skills be better used and developed, but amongst other labourers and technicians?

As such for Arvatov this involved a radical rethinking of the artist's creativity, even within the functionalist ambitions of Constructivist circles, which were still too attached for his liking to a model of the individual producer and to art as revolutionary representation and social decoration. Opposed initially to Constructivism's research-based artistic functionalism, he encouraged artists to think of themselves as technicians who had finally left the self-image of individual creativity behind, even when this individuality was attached to collective projects or to the educative requirements of the new state. Thus, rather than designing revolutionary objects, symbols or propaganda-tokens – or even revolutionary-functional objects in the spirit of Alexander Rodchenko's famous information kiosks (1919) – artists should subordinate their technical skills to the greater collective discipline of the labour process and the workshop. For it is in the factory and the workshop where the erosion of the distinction between workers (as culturally excluded) and artists (culturally privileged), individual ideas and collective creativity will be tested and challenged in practice, and the real work of a new egalitarian culture created. Artists, then, should enter the factory as part of the collective transformation of the relations of production called forth by the revolution, and by the demand to transform production for profit into production for need. Accordingly, artists should not simply join the technical staff or the production line in order to do the bidding of technicians and managers, but work in dialogue with managers, technicians and labourers on transforming the content and form of industrial labour

and the life of the factory. And to do this convincingly, artists should know as much about the given labour process as those technicians and labourers who labour in the factory themselves.

Hence, under these conditions artists require a different 'skill set' than anything hitherto expected or demanded of artists in bourgeois culture: they should be able to think of what they do creatively as part of teamwork, and – in situations where 'expressive values' are not required – should think of making as a contribution to the solution of the formal and technical problems of production. To do this, Arvatov suggested that it would be better for artists to bypass art schools and art academies altogether, and go and study engineering and the sciences. This would then allow artists or artist-technicians to expand the use-values of art and the meaning of creativity to the productive and scientific realm generally. By increasing the technical and scientific knowledge of artists, artists would be in a position to have a determinate say over the big decisions of production: what is to be produced, with what resources and with what scientific inputs and to what ends. In this sense the functional and practical field of operation of the artist becomes the modern intellectual and social division of labour itself. 'Socio-technical purposiveness is the only governing law, the only criterion of artistic, i.e., form-inventing activity'. Thus, if the confidence of this vision is, at one level, defined by an avant-garde revaluation of all values common at the time, it is also, on another level, an immediate response to the chronic crisis of Soviet industry after the Civil War; factories were running at extremely low capacity, given the shortage of raw materials and workers. Therefore, there was a cognitive dissonance between what factories were realistically able to produce and Bolshevik images of a new industrial culture.

Productivism's concern with the qualitative and technical problems of labour was, consequently, a response to this gap, and to the general underdevelopment of economic production in conditions of general need. Improving the technical conditions of the labour process and productivity, for Arvatov, was the first step in the revolutionary transformation of the relations of production.

This radical re-visioning of art and the artist under the auspices of this new productive role is the theme of *Art and Production*. Written during the cultural maelstrom of the early years of the revolution, when artists and intellectuals were beginning to rethink all aspects of visual culture and the identity of the artist, it sees the revolution as a harbinger of an epochal change in notions of 'making', 'doing' and 'creativity'. Arvatov's principal theoretical concern, therefore, is to delink the received assumptions about what artists do from the practical demands and emancipatory horizons of the 'new age of labour'. As such his primary concern is to re-define the wholly limited understanding of creativity historically in bourgeois culture and the rise of the autonomous-aesthetic artwork produced (by an individual practitioner) for exchange on the market. In this he follows Marx and Engels of *The German Ideology* (1846) and the Romantic anti-capitalism of William Morris and John Ruskin, in insisting that this shift was fundamentally detrimental to the social use-values of art. Art became subordinate to the discrete aesthetic interests of practitioners, patrons, collectors, and art's small bourgeois audience, separate from art's communal and shared function.

Unlike Marx and the Romantic anti-capitalists (largely writing before the full industrialization of culture), Arvatov is not interested in the fate of the individual artwork under these conditions: that is, certain artworks lack of a general audience,

or the increasing separation of artistic skills as the measure of human creativity and autonomy and the routinized skills of the industrialized worker. This is because such issues are secondary to the fundamental question of art's technical and social organization under Soviet post-revolutionary conditions. Art now is not about the production of *things* as *exemplary things*, 'for all', or even non-exemplary things, but the production of new material relations in which things will be divorced from the weight of their fetishization. This is what appears remarkably stark about Arvatov's historical account of the bourgeois period in *Art and Production*: all artworks, irrespective of their achievement, incomparable aesthetic value, or critical significance, ultimately represent the failure of humanity to organize creativity on an equal and non-dominative basis. Arvatov's idea, accordingly, that art is 'unorganized' under bourgeois culture, is not nihilism, crude scientistic functionalism, or Jacobin disgust at privilege, but represents a sober epistemological assessment about what is truly revolutionary about the Russian Revolution for humanity.

For Arvatov, as for his comrades in Left Front of the Arts (LEF), the Russian Revolution is, for the first time in history, a moment when the majority of people possess the possibility of transforming culture in their own interests as a process of collective free creation. Removed from the domain of narrowly defined aesthetic tradition, 'art' in its non-professional capacity as shared technique, becomes the everyday domain of skilled and unskilled, artist and non-artist, professionally trained and amateur alike. In this way the relationship between creativity, techniques and praxis, undergoes a fundamental realignment. Divorced from the production of discrete aesthetic objects largely for private consumption, artistic judgement and

technique are 'externalized' in modern technical processes, enabling these processes to contribute to the overall socialization of culture across practices, disciplines and classes and therefore contributing directly to the 'processes of life-building', (*processy zhiznestroitel'stva*). Arvatov calls this interconnection between the socialization of culture and everyday practice, 'general social technique' (*obsche-sozial'naya tekhnika*), as a way of highlighting the transformative opportunities afforded art and culture by the new technical and technological advances of the new industrial epoch. As such, the major proletarian task of the Productivist revolution in art is the 'eradication' of the distinction between artistic technique and general social technique. For, without the breakdown of this distinction, there can be no practicable entry of art into 'life-building'.

The link connection between 'life-building' and 'general social technique' is Arvatov's version of the familiar avant-garde notion of the subsumption of art into life. Art dissolves itself into life-process, as the precursor to the general dissolution of the distinction between intellectual labour and manual labour, of creative labour and routinized or instrumental labour, of artists and workers. But for Arvatov, this isn't simply, a matter of extending the forms and judgements of art *into* everyday life but of challenging what is meant by 'art' and 'everyday life', 'art' and 'production' as such. Hence: the central importance of 'organization' to his Productivist vision. Art's contribution to life-building lies, not in the aesthetic re-enchantment of the everyday, of the application of an external aesthetic uplift to all things – 'aesthetic gourmandism' he calls it – but in the artistic re-functioning of the practicable domain of objects and their relations, beginning with production itself. In the hands of the artist-technician and proletarian-as-artist:

> In its hands the machine, the printing press in polygraphy and textile printing, electricity, radio, motor transportation, lighting technology, etc., can become versatile but incomparably more powerful instruments of artistic labour. Thus, the revolutionary task of proletarian art is the mastery of all kinds of advanced technique with its instruments, with its division of labour, with its tendency to collectivize, and with its methods of planning. A unique 'electrification' of art, engineerism in artistic labour – this is the formal purpose of contemporary proletarian practice.

Thus, the challenge to the distinction between creative labour and productive labour, artistic technique and general social technique, has to begin at the point, historically in the modern period, where this distinction is overwhelmingly grounded – production in the factory – if the revolution is to be more than a revolution in ideas, appearances or cultural sensibility. Arvatov's decision to focus on the factory is the result, therefore, of a deliberate political and philosophical decision: to take the revolution to the heart of labour, as a way of drawing out the truly emancipatory possibilities of the revolution.

That this creates all kinds of practical problems is not at all surprising. The Party was suspicious of outside intervention in factories, particularly by artists; the workers were suspicious of those – non-workers – keen to work along side them; factory managers – Red Managers – were suspicious of meddlers, particularly those who had an agenda, and were keen to talk about workers' organization inside the factory and alienation and 'artists-as-workers' and 'workers-as-artists'. Even in the early years of the revolution – in the period of ideological flux and general leftism – the Productivists found it particularly

hard to get inside factories or to get their ideas adopted administratively, no more so than against the backdrop of low capacity, intense speed-ups, and the chronic shortage of materials. However, there was one key exception to this rule: Karl Ioganson's tenure at the Prokatchik metal factory in Moscow, from 1923–4. A member of INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) in Moscow from 1920–24, and the producer of freestanding geometric ('spatial') constructivist sculptures, Ioganson was employed as a metal cutter in the factory. But, presumably on the basis of his wide technical skills and knowledge, it appears as if he was also allowed by management to contribute to the rearrangement of workshop practices, through the invention and application of a new kind of device for finishing non-ferrous metals. As Gough says in her extensive and illuminating analysis of Ioganson's tenure:

> In place of the 'handicraft method' of application, involving the hand-dipping of each article in a finishing coating, or perhaps its application by brush, Ioganson proposes a new method, which presumably involves either the mechanization of the dipping process by the construction device attached to an automatic feed or the introduction of spray-gun coating.[2]

Ioganson was very pleased with the success of this, and wrote a report to this effect for INKhUK – his changes certainly alleviated unnecessary injuries and poisoning in the metal-dipping sector. But the success of Ioganson's intervention is less to do with his great powers of persuasion

2. Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005, p. 168.