

at stake, it is claimed, was ‘an experience of the unknowable – or, at least, the *discursively* unknowable ... a way of undergoing, a giving of self and a completion of thought.’ He quotes a fragment of Aristotle that distinguishes between two types of knowing, the didactic (or discursive) and the initiatory (Kerényi refers to ‘wordless knowing’), and that says of the initiates that they ‘do not have to learn something but that, after having become capable, they experience and are disposed to it’. This second mode of *theoria* thus involves the conservation (*soteria*) of potentiality. (A transformation of the archaic fertility motif?)

In the course of the six chapters making up this well-designed little book (handsomely illustrated by Monica Ferrando, who also provides a useful selection from ancient sources at the back), Agamben touches on various intertwined topics: the relation of the mystery cults to European painting, to early Hegel, and to the image philosophies of Warburg and Benjamin; the essentially comic, not tragic, character of the Eleusinian rituals (is the distinction really proper here?); the Dionysian animality or monstrosity of the triple goddess and the Medusan aspect of the *korē* or divine child in particular; and, finally, the research of Odo Casel, a twentieth-century German Benedictine monk, for whom Christian liturgy was in essence not doctrine but mystery. Although elsewhere (*Opus Dei*, 2012; 2013) Agamben examines in more detail the so-called Liturgical Movement inspired by the lexical studies of Casel and his students, and the incontestable lines of filiation linking the sacramental liturgy and pagan mysteries, here he stresses the difference between the realm of certainty in which the evolved Christian sacrament operates and the originally ‘precarious’ salvation – quoting *The Golden Ass* – supposed to be effected in the performance of the mysteries. The citation of Apuleius’ novel occasions reflection on ‘the essential connection’ between the novel form and the mystery cults: ‘If there is somewhere today where an echo of the ancient mysteries can ... be heard, it is not in the liturgical splendor of the Catholic Church but in the extreme life resolutions offered by the novel form.... Whether it be Lucius in *The Golden Ass* or Isabel Archer in James’s *Portrait of a Lady*, the novel places us before a *mysterion* in which life itself is at once that which initiates us and that into which we are initiated.’

The unspeakable girl is just such a threshold phenomenon: a zone of indistinction between youth and age, male and female, animality and divinity. She is life itself in so far as ‘it does not allow itself to be “spoken,” inasmuch as it cannot be defined by age,

family, sexual identity or social rule’. The silence of the initiates – and everyone, including slaves, was eligible for initiation, so long as they had not defiled themselves through a blood crime – is thus comparable to what Agamben, in *Means without End* (1996; 2000), calls the silence of philosophy, the intimation of what cannot be said; that is, the ‘exposure of the being-in-language of human beings – pure gesturality.’ Here, with this quick recollection of the concept of ontological word (‘book of life’) in biblical tradition, the pathos of the unsayable deepens. For the sphere of pure gesturality, ‘pure means’ (Benjamin’s term in ‘Critique of Violence’) – the sphere of initiation – is intelligible as a politics whose end is justice without law.

Howard Eiland

Disappeared

Alexei Gan, *Constructivism*, trans. Christina Lodder, Editorial Tenov, Barcelona, 2014. 178 pp., €25.00 pb., 978 8 49392 312 9.

One of the implications of this belated translation of Alexei Gan’s 1922 manifesto *Constructivism* is that it has taken around ninety years for the materials for understanding the Soviet avant-garde as a whole to be available in English. Information came in trickles for decades, with misunderstandings, mistranslations and anachronisms abounding – ranging from minor mistakes (the presentation of wildly fractious and internally divided groups as a unified movement) to major (the presentation of Constructivists as ‘utopian’ aesthetes, way out of their depth in politics). The work of Catherine Cooke and Christina Lodder in the 1980s made the largest contribution to providing a more accurate account, but Lodder’s translation of the first major manifesto of Soviet Constructivism is a milestone in understanding just exactly what was happening among these small groups of ex-painters, ex-sculptors, ex-poets, designers, directors and architects.

Alexei Gan is one of the lesser-known of these – with none of the ‘iconic’ fame of a Lissitzky, Popova or Rodchenko – which is curious given his centrality to the movement in all its facets. As Lodder points out in her introduction, his work spanned anarchist and Proletkult theatre in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, close collaboration with Rodchenko and Stepanova in the First Working Group

of Constructivists, and the editorship and design of two journals – *Kino-Fot*, a short run 1922–23 film magazine that contained issues on Charlie Chaplin, Thomas Edison and the first publication of Dziga Vertov’s manifestos, and the more successful *Sovremennaya Arhitektura* (SA), which ran for four years from 1926 to 1930 as the main organ of Soviet modernist architecture. He also wrote what may have been the fullest and most radical statement of what Constructivism was, what its aims were and how it perceived itself. One reason why Gan is not so well known is that he wasn’t – unlike a Rodchenko or a Lissitzky, no matter how reluctant – in any way an ‘artist’, and his works cannot be consumed in the same manner. As a designer, his main contribution was in terms of simple and legible layouts; as an architect, he designed small, demountable wooden kiosks. He made films, but unlike the montaged documentary work of his wife, Esfir Shub, they have not survived. His theatre scripts, for Moscow’s Mass Action group, are also lost, and Lodder speculates that this is because they were intended to be improvised by their proletarian actors.

Constructivism was written at the point when the post-Civil War consolidation of Bolshevik power seemed to the avant-garde to coincide with a loss of territory to traditional art. One of Gan’s Mass Action spectacles for May Day 1920 in Moscow was rejected in favour of a production of Sophocles. Gan’s jibes at ‘the petit-bourgeois pince-nez’ of fine art is interpreted by Lodder as a jibe at the pince-nez-wearing Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, who sponsored the Constructivists as merely one of many fellow-travelling art factions rather than as the definitive expression of communism in the field of culture. For Gan, this showed a defective understanding of Marxism:

The relationship between the substructure and the superstructure, i.e the change in the superstructure as a result of changes in the relations of production – all this is forgotten as soon as a communist confronts beauty. *He becomes strange and submissive...* [I]n the field of art we are turning back to epochs that were less perfect, more crude, and in essence extremely anti-communist.

This is explained by the fact that ‘we lack Marxist literacy ... as soon as we approach art, we stop being Marxists.’ He recommends not that party members become more sophisticated aesthetes, but that they take their Marxism more seriously. ‘Our so-called ideologists insist on universal human values’, Gan writes, and much of *Constructivism* is an attack on

the very notion of any universal, eternal or imperishable values whatsoever, particularly with respect to culture.

Gan’s self-designed layouts, manipulating standard printers’ typefaces, boxes and block borders, organize dense passages of argumentation, quotation (from Marx, Bukharin and Bogdanov) and interjected, graphically emphasized slogans and declarations, which are mostly on the same theme. ‘Art is indissolubly linked: to theology, to metaphysics, to mysticism. Death to art!’ This total rejection of any continuation of ‘art’ is intrinsic to Gan’s definition of Constructivism, and explains why the least interesting aspect of the book is its short outlining of the Constructivist trinity of ‘tectonics, faktura and construction’, meaning, roughly, a preoccupation with flux, material and structure. It was never clear that this in itself would produce ‘the communist expression of material structures’, and indeed the book ends with a short denunciation of ‘western Constructivists’ – naming *L’Esprit Nouveau*, *De Stijl* and *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* – for turning Constructivism back into ‘art’. Lodder quotes Stepanova frustratedly declaring that ‘Gan knows nothing about art’, and this perhaps is what made him a better Constructivist.

What really differentiates the two strands of Constructivism is a question of methodology, and here *Constructivism* stands as one of the first steps in a sequence that continues with the work of Sergei Tretyakov, Brecht’s work on film and radio, and Benjamin’s ‘The Author as Producer’, where art is to be abolished for the sake of its democratic communist dissolution into collectives using reproductive technology to produce their own culture for their own purposes. In this context, the denunciation of ‘art’ that runs through the entire book is not that of Dada, which denounced art while producing, exhibiting and selling artworks, but a call for something quite different.

What was necessary was ‘to establish a scientific approach to the business of constructing new buildings and services that will be able to meet the demands of communist culture in its transitional state, i.e., in its flux’. Accordingly, Gan advocates that Constructivists move on from their laboratory experiments, such as the lightweight sculptures exhibited in 1920 by the First Working Group of Constructivists, in favour of ‘real experiments within life itself’, as ‘Communism is essentially dynamic, and its first and most simple task is to realize a planned order and consciousness throughout the whole social and economic activity

of the masses themselves.' Gan still believes this will be done by, not for or at or against the masses, and that the architect's role is as their instrument. The divisions of labour that are necessary within that are not something he troubles himself over.

Needless to say, in this turn from 'sculpture' to architecture, the historical city is to be destroyed completely and utterly, as 'our modern capitalist cities or cities of petty bourgeois provincial comfort have turned out to be the staunch allies of counter revolution'. Its squares are too small for mass actions, its housing is too small, its offices too poky and subdivided for the activities of Soviet organizations, the buildings in the streets are too 'awkward, varied and bulky', and the 'eclecticism of architectural forms' is too 'subjective and tendentious'. In general, 'the sign of private property protrudes at every step', as do the 'temples of the ruling religion', which 'infect the young with [their] spirituality'. Only the 'communist city' as expressed by the Constructivists will be able to 'create a clear idea of communal property in citizens'. In exchange for this will be the city of the communist flux: 'it is essential to teach ourselves how to build so that the dynamism of the product produced will not be an abstract or illusionary dynamism for visual impression, but an authentic

dynamism of concrete movement'. In practice, what this means is that 'if communism needs a building for today it must be provided, bearing in mind that tomorrow it will require the next form, and that this subsequent form must be supplied, so that it will not replace yesterday's form but supplement it, and in turn supplement the next form required.' So the communist city as Gan conceives it will be in a perpetual state of planned, consciously anticipated change. His conception of communist architecture would be fulfilled much more in the kiosks he designed for the Moscow co-op Mosselprom than in any actual buildings designed by Constructivist architects in the 1920s and early 1930s, none of which even remotely approached the sort of lightweight adaptability that Gan considers to be the minimum requirement. Planning, for Gan, is not (unlike say, the early Le Corbusier and the Paris purists, or, to an extent, Malevich and the Suprematists) about the establishment of ideal and eternal types, but a question of constant – yet conscious – change.

This is not an architectural or urbanist argument but one rooted in Gan's understanding of Marxism, which comes via sources both orthodox (Bukharin) and unorthodox (Bogdanov). The longest single quotation is from Bogdanov's 1914 *The Science of*



Social Consciousness, which traces art's emergence out of the communal and authoritarian culture of the Middle Ages into the introspection of the bourgeois era. Gan finds in Bogdanov something more interesting than diaphanous commonplaces about the tastes of the bourgeoisie. In the text quoted, Bogdanov rejects 'politicized' art as being every bit as 'fetishistic' as pure art.

the theory of 'public art' ... maintains that an artist must endeavour to make his works serve society, convey useful ideas, and inspire virtuous feelings ... [W]hen art is required to offer itself consciously to serve, for instance, a political objective or a moral doctrine, it simply becomes an 'applied' art of the kind that is used for the decoration and comfort of people's domestic dwellings.

Gan's interpretation of this is that art with a 'political' subject matter, such as that being sponsored by the Commissariat of Enlightenment, is still art, and is limited by that fact, becoming at best a 'political' style of decoration. Constructivism, on the other hand, 'should not reflect, portray or interpret reality, but actually construct and express the planned objectives of the new, vigorous and active class, the proletariat'.

One of the book's targets – named and cited, unlike Lunacharsky – is Jules Destree, who was, at the time Gan was writing, Belgium's minister of arts, from 'the opportunistic faction of socialists'. His scorn for Destree's rhetoric is the nearest Gan comes to humour. 'Boots will be worn out, pills will take effect, but a work of art ... becomes an inexhaustible source of sublime joy for all mankind' claims the Belgian Social Democrat – an ancient Greek sculpture, *La Marseillaise*: these 'are always young and immortal, always inexhaustible', they are 'sources of eternally fresh and infinite joys'. For Gan, these are completely absurd statements, preposterous and ideological, as the meanings of such works are constantly changing along with material circumstance and historical movements. Citing Marx on Proudhon, Gan declares that 'the demand for final solutions and eternal truths must lose all meaning, in our eyes, once and for all. It is time to eliminate this foul atavism in ourselves.'

Gan demands that Bolsheviks be better Marxists, but what kind of a Marxist was he himself? Although his arguments on culture can be highly sophisticated, the limitations of his time are clear in the evident belief in linear historical progress. Gan doesn't argue in Second International style that socialism will emerge inevitably out of capitalism

without the need for violent intervention – 'our intellect cannot be lulled into accepting such a definition. Otherwise, all the practical activity of the proletarian revolution would be completely nonsensical' – but he does argue that the October revolution confirms a progressive interpretation of history, where the proletarian revolution in the Russian Empire allegedly emerges out of the chrysalis of the high-tech capitalism of the second industrial revolution – the age of the telephone, the cinema, the ocean liner, the organized monopoly firm.

This is obviously an inadequate reading of the revolution itself, and one that would have certain consequences for the Constructivists themselves – the Gan-designed pages of *Sovremennaya Arhitektura* are full of glass and steel projects for skyscrapers, domes and motorized disurbanist cities, in a vast, low-tech, overwhelmingly peasant expanse; in retrospect, Gan's wooden kiosks, placed on Moscow streets to sell cheap cigarettes, were a much more intelligent, suitable form of communist architecture than the 'Constructivist architecture' that actually emerged. 'For a constructivist to be able to build today', wrote Gan, 'it is absolutely essential to know exactly what communism is and what it might require tomorrow'. Similarly, Gan's understanding of what 'communism' was becoming and what it was actually going to require was some way off, but the criticism of eternal values and final solutions suggests he had some inkling of what the combination of conservatism and authoritarianism might mean for the proletarian revolution. Gan disappeared in the late 1930s, according to some accounts after calling Stalin a 'pock-marked swine'.

Most of all, *Constructivism* makes clear that just how distant the Constructivists are from us. Even the most 'radical' art is intrinsically part of networks and institutions that Gan would have regarded as cultic, elitist, capitalistic and abhorrent. He would also have considered this to be unavoidable, given the material conditions under which art is produced; the movement that he describes from 'art', a product of a bourgeois society, to 'constructivism', a methodology for a society in transition from capitalism to communism, leaves no room for artists under capitalism to create 'the communist expression of material structures'; that is precisely why the 'Western Constructivists' couldn't fully abandon art – because the societies they made their work in had not abandoned capitalism.

Owen Hatherley