

INTRODUCTION

Embedded Aesthetics and Situated History

A YEAR BEFORE JOINING ALEKSEI GAN in founding the Working Group of Constructivists, Varvara Stepanova noted a peculiar orientation in her future colleague. In March 1920, she recorded in her diary with apparent bemusement, “Gan considers agitation as important as creating a work.”¹ As cofounder of the working group, the framer of their theoretical program, and the only person involved in nearly all of constructivism’s manifestations across disciplines—including mass festivals, the “laboratory period,” theater, industrial design, print, cinema, and architecture—Gan was ubiquitous within the movement, even arguably its central figure, but his position was also idiosyncratic. Never a professional artist per se, he worked primarily as a political organizer. Stepanova’s comment perceptively points to the fundamental insight Gan brought to the constructivist project from that experience: within a society organized around mass production and public spaces, part of the construction of any object was the construction of a broad public for it. From Gan’s standpoint, the “work of art” was less an object

than a labor process through which new publics were constituted and new modes of sociality cultivated.

This book presents a new understanding of Russian constructivism by retelling its story from that perspective, with Gan as its central protagonist. At times that tale will feel heroic, but equally oftentimes tragic. Mostly it will be a gritty on-the-ground story about bumbling through the trials and errors of working to shape an evolving political field from a position deeply embedded within it. Indeed, I will argue that Gan's reckoning with that condition is at the core of his contribution. Through his work, constructivism emerges as a variant of aesthetic modernism that acknowledged and consciously worked with and within the specificities and constraints of historical conditions. Grappling with the question of what exactly it would be like to make art from that embedded position will require working through all seven of the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, in this introduction, I attempt to conceptualize some broad stakes as I see them. Many are more narrowly art historical—about recovering an oeuvre and repositioning a movement in evolving master narratives. Others have broader implications.

Comparing two depictions of Gan illustrates the crux of the intervention at its narrowest and most fundamental.² Both fall within the then-common subgenre of “portrait of the artist as constructor.” The first is a photograph taken in 1924 by the third of the original constructivist cohort, Aleksandr Rodchenko (fig. 1). The second is a caricature published by Stepanova in the weekly entertainment review *Zrelishcha* (Shows) two years earlier (fig. 2). Rodchenko's photograph is by far the most commonly reproduced image of Gan. It describes well his position within the existing literature, where he has been known as constructivism's “ideologue” and sometimes also as a graphic designer. Rodchenko depicts him in the latter role. Bent over his workbench, triangle and pencil in hand, Gan is working to design the covers for two magazines, *Proletkino* (Prolet-cinema) and *Technology and Life* (*Tekhnika i zhizn*). The image aptly illustrates the terms of an interpretive paradigm lying behind several generations of scholarship, in which the group's self-proclaimed search for “the communist expression of material structures” is located in their cultivation of a new relationship between artist and material.³ By attending to the inherent properties of industrial materials and designing utilitarian objects, the artist-constructor trades in the subjective mark making of easel painting for a materialist mode of making that heeds Marx's injunction “to test the truth of one's thinking in practice.”⁴

If this materialism has been the lynchpin of constructivism's claim on politics, Rodchenko's portrait also demonstrates the literal logic that underwrites it. The relationship central to the image is between artist and object, man and material, Gan and the magazines. That is, it is an image about labor, about the transformation of the material world into a human product.⁵ Even the relationship inherent to the image's existence—that to Rodchenko and his camera—is conspicuously downplayed. If there is a political aspect to the portrait, it lies in the utility of the objects of Gan's labor—the magazines. Their job is to communicate and persuade. Yet within the labor-oriented



FIGURE 1
Aleksandr Rodchenko, photograph
of Aleksei Gan. 1924. Courtesy of
A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova
Archive, Moscow.

interpretation of constructivism, these print objects are marginal examples. Composed of images and information, rather than constructed of concrete and steel, they seem like a compromise—not material enough—at best a way of promoting constructivism at a time when entry into real construction was not viable.⁶ Similarly, Gan is defined as an ideologue or agitman, not as a constructor in his own right.

Stepanova's caricature rests on an alternative understanding of Gan's role. The accompanying text is clear about his status as constructor—it reads "constructor Aleksei Gan"—but there is no reference to material-making. Instead she depicts Gan standing, even striding, dressed in overcoat, hat, boots, and driving goggles, with a copy of the magazine *Kino-Fot* (Cinema-photo) clutched in his right hand. He is outfitted not for making but for going out, moving around, and distributing things. Those things are precisely the same things—magazines—that he was making in Rodchenko's portrait, but the magazine takes up a new relative role, operating in the position occupied by a pencil in the photograph. No longer Gan's object but his instrument, the magazine is a tool of communication, residing in the place of a handshake or a wave.



FIGURE 2
 Varvara Stepanova, "Constructor Aleksei Gan,"
 as published in *Zrelishcha* 7 (October 1922).

Although it is possible to interpret this activity as auxiliary—Gan is out distributing the objects he constructed in the Rodchenko portrait—in this book I read it the other way around. Constructing popular support and cultivating grassroots participation become integral parts of the labor of realizing the projects promoted by the magazine. The “communist expression of material structures” involves shaping the material world not as an individual but through the organization of a collective coauthor. The artist-constructor “tests the truth of his thinking” in social practice and against the norm.

If there is an “object” implied in Stepanova’s portrayal, it is the audience or public that Gan hoped to solicit for *Kino-Fot*, and by extension for cinema and photography. Yet this would again be the wrong way to understand the relationships inherent to constructivism’s aesthetics—or so I hope to convince you. Understanding Gan’s work, I will argue, relies on replacing the subject-object relationships of the artist-constructor paradigm with a model conceived as fundamentally political, structured by intersubjective relationships. That is, we must understand Gan as a constituent part of the public he strove to shape. He acted on it from a position embedded in it, and it acted with equal force on him too. Within the context of the Russian Revolution and the early Soviet period, this reconfiguration stemmed from the imperative to flatten class hierarchies. The constructivist had to contend with coauthoring with peasants and workers—again, that is why it was a communist expression. Extended more broadly, this reorganization also provides an alternative conceptualization for the constructiv-

ist relationship to materials figured by Rodchenko. In attending to the properties of materials, the constructivist brought on the material world as another equal coauthor. Once “nature” is no longer conceived as the ground on which the artist acts, labor becomes politics. When ground overtakes figure as the subject of history—as in revolution—there is a glimpse of what it might be like to be a constituent part of a world made whole. This vision promised another way of being, thinking, making, and relating that, while difficult to conceptualize, was also hard to shake. The aesthetics corresponding to this world related to all hitherto-existing modernist aesthetic theory in the same way that Marx did to Hegel, by turning it on its head.⁷ It replaced art’s autonomy with an art formed under pressure, within the sum total of forces acting on it in the social, economic, political, intellectual, and technological reality of the moment. I call this an aesthetics of embeddedness.

EMBEDDEDNESS

By embeddedness I mean to describe, most simply, the opposite of autonomy. Thinking of an object, or a subject for that matter, as embedded is to understand it as dependent on a larger totality that is both mutually generative and mutually constraining, as opposed to its operating with unconstrained freedom in an open field sheltered within bounds. The aesthetics of autonomy are now commonly associated with the postwar versions advocated by Clement Greenberg and, in another way, by Theodor Adorno, in which art functioned as a negative politics, or a space of negation, outside the political pressures of life.⁸ In the early twentieth century, however, advocates for autonomy were motivated by something more like a desire for a global art history able to universalize formal judgments across contexts. For example, Clive Bell, in his *Art* of 1913, sought “a complete theory of visual art” capable of “distinguishing a work of art from a handsaw,” whether it was beholding “Santa Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, [or] the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne.” He concluded that “great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place.” Its value lies in the way that “for a moment we are shut off from human interests; . . . lifted above the stream of life.”⁹ Constructivism is often characterized as an objective and rational aesthetic, and thus might seem to participate in a similar universalizing ethos. Yet Gan’s thinking relied on precisely the opposite dynamic: an assumption of embeddedness in life’s stream, within the constantly shifting specificities of a particular time and place, rather than being “lifted above” them. In their pure forms, both modes—autonomy and embeddedness—should probably be understood as dystopian extremes, and we will see that Gan experimented with hybrid combinations of the two. In this introduction, I focus on *embeddedness* as the term requiring more elaboration within a field that has traditionally assumed some form of autonomy, or its transgression, as a precondition for defining an object or practice as art at all.

This attempt to recover an embedded approach within modern art should be situated within a long line of efforts to expand our understanding of “modernism” beyond the postwar narrative that emphasized progress toward greater formal autonomy and medium specificity. That understanding was only just taking shape—most notably in Greenberg’s and Adorno’s work—when Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger responded with their respective theories of the avant-garde.¹⁰ These laid the foundation for a generation of scholarship that opposed Greenberg’s formalism with a counternarrative depicting modernism as heterogeneous in medium, disciplinarily promiscuous, and politically engaged, usually in opposition to a dominant norm. More recent efforts, mine among them, have further broadened the field in ways informed by interest in participative, relational, and socially engaged art of the 1990s and 2000s.¹¹ Among these were renewed interest in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, and attempts to excavate a prototype for relational aesthetics in futurist and Dada performances.¹² In some sense, the shifting set of assumptions behind this relational turn also made necessary the emergence of concepts such as “alternative” and then “entangled” modernities, which, rather than render cultural artifacts unencumbered as Bell did, endeavor to reconcile their embeddedness with the complex pluralities and interdependencies that characterize a multiply centered global environment.¹³

More than the historical politics of the avant-gardes themselves, contemporary politics has been the motor driving this historiography onward. Its trajectory should probably be understood less as a progressive expansion of the aesthetics of an actually existing object called “modernism” than as a series of shifts in relational perspectives, in which every historian produces the history she needs. Greenberg’s medium specificity and Adorno’s negative dialectics served a historical function in the postwar period of salvaging modern art from its entwinement with the cultural formations that led to the Second World War (they made it possible “to write poetry after Auschwitz”).¹⁴ It bears mentioning that the force of this imperative far outlasted the high modernist moment. The subsequent era of scholarship, which often explicitly reacted against Greenberg’s medial purity, usually preserved his aversion to political miscegenation, taking care to separate a “good” politics—progressive, leftist, emancipatory—from the “bad” politics of totalitarian repression and return to order. Boris Groys was one of the few to transgress this taboo in *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1988), and his assertion that a totalitarian politics was latent in the avant-garde was widely treated as a provocation to be controverted.¹⁵ My interest in “recovering” an embedded aesthetics in this material must similarly be situated in my experience of the past two decades. The root difference between the present account and those formed in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union lies largely in experiencing the erosion of public institutions, such as the university and the museum, and categories valued in Enlightenment discourses, such as science and truth, less as emancipatory critiques of conservative institutions than as neoliberal machinations to dismantle the public sphere. Or, more pertinently, it seemed plausible that they were simultaneously both, and that our

framing of ideas like freedom, autonomy, dependence, and the common in Manichean terms required reconsideration if we were to avoid blindly arguing ourselves into a world in which no one wants to live.

Thinking of constructivism as an embedded aesthetics requires just such a suspension of assumptions and reevaluation of judgments. The first, at least with reference to art historical narratives, is that it repositions constructivism in opposition to the avant-garde. Going back to Gustave Courbet's "Realist Manifesto" of 1855, the avant-garde was defined by artists throwing off the strictures of academic convention in the name of greater autonomy and freedom. They attempted to disembed themselves from art's institutions in order to enter "life," conceived as a wide-open expanse. I take this language of embedding and disembedding from sociology and economics, where it developed over the course of the twentieth century to explain the relative freedom of markets from social obligations, non-economic values, and institutional structures.¹⁶ As Mark Granovetter explained in his classic recapitulation of the problem in 1985, a rational and autonomous market was contingent on atomized or "under-socialized" actors, whose economic decisions were free, or disembedded, from social mores. Some assumed embeddedness to be a property of premodern cultures. Modernization involved disembedding oversocialized actors so that they could participate freely in markets, rather than encumber the invisible hand in its governing work with their failure to act rationally in their own economic self-interest. For others, however, embeddedness in social structures was a necessary social protection that could not be outgrown.¹⁷ This latter position draws on the work of early twentieth-century economic historian Karl Polanyi. Polanyi debunked the notion that the free market was a natural law artificially impeded by regulation, arguing instead that markets grew up in tandem with their regulation through a reactive-symbiotic process—a "double movement." For him, a pure and unregulated, formally free market was not natural but impossible, a "stark utopia" whose realization would entail the catastrophic destruction of the social and the natural environment necessary to sustain it.¹⁸ Embeddedness was the handbrake that protected the social and natural from the savage effects of an unfettered market.¹⁹ Although Polanyi's case study was eighteenth-century England, he was clearly thinking about the rise of radical social protectionist movements like Soviet Communism and National Socialism, which he was forced to flee in 1933.

Recently, Fred Block and Margaret Somers returned to Polanyi's understanding of embeddedness to argue something slightly different—that markets are never "less embedded." Those who advocate "freeing" markets from cultural constraints obscure that they are simply *re-embedding* them in another ideational complex, one with its own values, narratives, institutions, and stakeholders: a "market fundamentalism."²⁰ The avant-garde's freeing itself from the academy might be similarly understood, not as a disembedding of artistic production from academic institutions, but as an unacknowledged re-embedding of art in the values, narratives, and institutions dominating "life" in late nineteenth-century Paris. The early avant-garde's celebration of

innovation, autonomy, risk, and speculation and its rejection of tradition and emulation, were the artistic expression of the same values that underwrote bourgeois capitalism.²¹ The avant-garde also took that market as its economic base, even as it obscured its dependence by framing its gestures in terms of freedom from the institutions of an earlier regime.

According to this logic, of course, every aesthetics is embedded. What makes constructivism important is that it was structured not around the denial of that fact but around its recognition and, further, its embrace. Gan accepted and self-consciously participated in the construction of the system in which he was situated. In this sense, he extended Block and Somers's line of thinking in the same way that Nancy Fraser has in her recent assessment of the current state of feminism, which also draws on Polanyi. For her, second-wave feminism sheds light on the complex interrelationships between forces of marketization and social protection. Feminists collaborated with market forces to achieve liberation from the traditional roles in which they were embedded. Framing their disembedding from those roles in terms of freedom, they failed to see that they were re-embedding themselves in market forces that came with new forms of domination. They thereby forfeited participation in negotiating the new conditions under which they lived and worked.²²

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Gan's thinking was his acceptance and creative reorganization of these kinds of tradeoffs. Constructivism was his attempt to define the form that art might take under conditions of socialism, which he saw, perhaps simplistically, as a system in which positions of advantage were liquidated through a full flattening of power hierarchies. What is remarkable about his constructivism is that it takes account of the fact that this flattening of power was not power's elimination but its redistribution, so that pressures were exerted laterally and reciprocally rather than hierarchically. For many, the revolution's appeal was freedom, understood as emancipation from the tsar and his regime. The poet Georgy Adamovich later reflected on this phenomenon as a bait and switch: the February Revolution, he wrote, "came with the stamp of freedom, and so few were afraid and most rejoiced—who doesn't want freedom? But October, without disavowing those words about freedom, took place in the name of equality . . . in the most primitive of its forms."²³ Adamovich continued by describing how some leaders of the revolution believed that they could harmoniously synthesize these ideals of equality and freedom.²⁴ He clearly considered this belief a delusion founded on unresolvable contradictions. Yet resolving the ostensible contradiction in this pairing is precisely what Gan attempted to do, not by means of obfuscation with mythic or utopian worldviews, but through a reorganization of knowledge and perception around a radically realist collectivist ontology, one founded on the reality of politics. The revolution was about freedom, but for it to also be about equality it could not be simply about freedom from power. It was instead about the freedom to make a collective choice about forms of unfreedom—or to negotiate the conditions in which to re-embed.

A similar line of thinking has been richly developed in the past three decades by feminist scholars, who argue that the association of terms like *objectivity*, *totality*, and *freedom* with domination is historically specific. They draw on Hannah Arendt's concept of nonsovereignty, which is based on the premise that freedom in the sense of unconstrained agency can exist only under specific conditions—namely, in the absence of other equal subjects. Under those conditions, its companion term must be either *autonomy* or *slavery*, *separation* or *domination*.²⁵ As Wendy Brown points out, the concept of freedom itself is inherently relational, defined in opposition to whatever is conceived locally as oppressive.²⁶ In the Athenian democracy so influential for European philosophy, the realm of material necessity was regarded as the oppressive force. Free men were defined by their independence from the mundane concerns of everyday life. This was what distinguished them from women and slaves. Freedom was predicated on domination. In Enlightenment-era thinking, freedom came to rely on the concept of autonomy instead, focusing on protecting individuals from encroachment by others or the state, often through a discourse of individual rights. This definition of freedom requires, in Brown's words, "an atomistic ontology" based on the Hobbesian notion that the autonomous individual is humanity's natural state.²⁷

As Terry Eagleton has noted, the conceit of the autonomous human subject, and the definition of freedom that it underwrote, was progressive in the eighteenth century, when it provided a means of imagining emancipation from political absolutism, at least for the propertied white adult men then conceived as human subjects.²⁸ Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the conceit was clearly a fiction. It is just as true, if not truer, to say that humans cannot exist alone. Indeed, under some conditions, the incessant pressure to individuate might even be considered the oppressive force from which one might desire relief, as Jodi Dean has recently argued about late capitalism.²⁹ Thus we should be able to imagine other ways of understanding freedom that assume human nature to be social. Etymologically, the word *freedom* already has a social character; it is related to *friend*, perhaps because that relationship, based on affection, is undertaken freely rather than by compulsion.³⁰ Within sociological and economic thinking, embeddedness refers to factors like affection and concern about the opinions of others that work against the competitive relationships that facilitate a free market.³¹ If we assume those embedded aspects of existence as given, we might define a form of nonsovereign freedom that would accompany a society of equals by acting within the limitations of the common.³² For those who have enjoyed agency as atomized individuals, this kind of freedom feels like a constraint, like dependence and limitation. But when organizing collectively in the face of common challenges, it can feel instead like a much more powerful form of agency. As Kathi Weeks argues, at its best, it holds out hope for a creative practice of world-building.³³ This world-building function is what Gan desired from constructivism.

We will see in the chapters that follow that Gan positioned constructivism, with its nonsovereign form of freedom, as the mechanism by which socialist society would

laterally self-govern, or collectively build the world to be shared. The element of self-governance is confusing, because it contains the same impulse associated with Adam Smith's invisible hand, or the "common sense" that Immanuel Kant proposed underlies judgments of ethics and aesthetics.³⁴ When Smith posited that the public good was served by individuals pursuing their own best interests, or Kant, conversely, suggested that an inborn common sense ensured universal and disinterested judgment, they both hoped to prove that a society of autonomous individuals was capable of being "lawful without a law."³⁵ Nature was the authority guaranteeing both systems; self-governance relied on cultivating human nature on an individual level, on faith in "just being yourself."

Polanyi and his followers debunked nature as the authority underwriting Smith's free market. Kant's conjoining of ethics and aesthetics has also long been criticized for the elitist perspective that informs its assumption that disinterested autonomy was humanity's natural state. Few are fortunate enough to be able to make decisions free of necessity, and those who are, at least arguably, enjoy that position through systemic inequality and exclusion that must be considered deeply unethical in themselves. Political realists have similarly questioned recourse to ethical abstractions or natural laws on the grounds that their primary function is to avoid overt politics. Invoking an abstract authority obviates the necessity of legitimating the exercise of power. In this view, true politics functions only when the "basic legitimation demand" is satisfied—that is, when the exercise of power is believed to be valid by a critical mass of those governed by it.³⁶ The line between such consensus and the ethical law that Kant proposes is fuzzy. It revolves around a question of authority also productively discussed by Arendt. In the essay "What Is Authority?" she begins with the assumption that the politics of modernity were motivated by a crisis of authority brought on by erosion of divine right.³⁷ Authority is often wrongly conflated with power and violence, she points out, when in fact the concepts are not allies but alternatives. Authority is accepted precisely because it averts the need for coercion, guaranteeing stability through voluntary subscription rather than resorting to force. She also posits a third alternative—persuasion—but conditionally. Persuasion could be sufficient only within a fully egalitarian system.³⁸ Although she does not propose it as such, persuasion within an egalitarian structure can be considered another way of constructing authority, laterally rather than hierarchically. It meets the basic legitimation demand simply and without abstractions, through uniform distribution. Socialism, at least in Gan's understanding, opened up this third option. It allowed a true politics to emerge, a governance by the art of persuasion. Constructivism was the infrastructure for that art.

By way of elaboration, it's worth inserting a second point of critique of Kant's ethics—that even within the disinterested autonomous positions carved out through systemic inequality, elites do not necessarily behave all that ethically. Historical specificity aside, recent studies suggest the contrary—that those less materially well-off are much more likely to behave ethically than those who are financially and socially privileged.³⁹ One might conclude that empirically it's not disinterested autonomy but

greater embeddedness in the everyday mire of necessity that develops the instinct for “doing unto others.” Even if one interprets this cynically as a politics of self-preservation rather than as an ethics, it does not produce the same contradiction. It makes sense to be attentive, fair, and compassionate toward others when one is entwined in ongoing interdependent relationships of mutual aid. Practicing ethics is no longer like playing the piano, a genteel accomplishment cultivated for abstract ends like the good or the beautiful, but a politics of everyday life. It is the politics of ground or of a classless society. It is an embedded politics.

This is important in that it introduces a class element to the priority that Gan placed on constructivism’s embedded mode. It suggests that this relational way of thinking, being, and relating might emerge inherently from working-class culture and experience, just as philosophies revolving around the conceit of autonomy were informed by bourgeois experience. In a recent study of Aleksandr Bogdanov’s tectology, McKenzie Wark has suggestively written about the possibility of a “low theory,” a working-class approach to organizing knowledge aimed at replacing bourgeois philosophy.⁴⁰ The similarity to Gan’s thinking is no coincidence: Gan was heavily influenced by Bogdanov, who crops up in several sections of this book. Wark’s contention is that philosophy’s organizing assumptions stemmed from the bourgeoisie’s efforts to universalize its own experience, holding sacred and molding a worldview around the fictions they found most valuable (e.g., autonomy). Knowledge molded instead by “a labor perspective” would be structured by working-class values, such as collaboration, interdependence, and, in Wark’s words, “found[ing] a totality within which to cultivate the surplus of life.”⁴¹ If Adorno proposed negative dialectics as an alternative to philosophy’s “thinking in models,” it was also structured as philosophy’s negative reflection.⁴² Low theory was not a philosophy at all, not a way of interpreting the world but of changing it. It was a “poetics and technics,” a way of aesthetically and materially coauthoring the world on the ground.⁴³

Gan’s constructivism relies on the same faith in human nature, in “lawfulness without a law,” that dominated Enlightenment thinking. Its promise to succeed where others had failed lay in the labor perspective Wark identifies. The material sense of this claim is the one more commonly explored in scholarship on constructivism, in which the experience of labor itself—the artist’s work with material *faktura* and the socialist subject’s interaction with *byt’*, or everyday life—becomes a unifying force.⁴⁴ Consciousness is molded through praxis. This idea had a long history in Russian radical politics. In 1871, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin offered his own answer to the question “What is authority?” His terms suggest a desire to articulate an embedded mode by means of a language still molded by relationships of dominance. Pointing to the natural laws of the physical world, he writes, “We are absolutely the slaves of these laws. But in such slavery there is no humiliation, or, rather, it is not slavery at all. For . . . these laws are not outside of us; they are inherent in us; . . . we live, we breathe, we act, we think, we wish only through these laws.”⁴⁵ What Gan adds to that heritage is the idea that there is also a social aspect to the objective reality that shapes, even enslaves,

our thinking and is woven into the ways that we live, breathe, act, think, and wish. That is, there is social practice too.⁴⁶

The aesthetics of the early avant-garde was based on a dream of autonomous sovereignty, of acting freely and even remaking the world according to one's vision. Yet under its regime, artists more commonly lived the opposite synthesis—isolated, ineffectual, and entirely subject to market whims. Constructivism was instead informed by the social experience of labor, by the worldview of subjects for whom atomization had never felt like freedom. This is the difference between Kant's common sense and Gan's embedded aesthetics. Just being oneself in a vacuum may very well develop into a self for self's sake, but being ourselves in relation qualitatively changes the equation. It replaces a false universalism predicated on inequality with one continually reconstituted on the basis of an equal distribution of power. Again, this was what made constructivism a "communist expression."

CONSTRUCTIVIST REALISM

Developing embeddedness as the binary companion of autonomy opens a space in which the significance and potential of other phenomena can be reevaluated. Viktor Shklovsky's 1919 "Art as Device," for example, takes on another valence. One of the Russian avant-garde's most prominent exports to the canon of modernism, this essay articulates his influential concept of estrangement (*ostranenie*). The term refers to art's capacity to defamiliarize the world, enabling deeper understanding by frustrating easy recognition.⁴⁷ It should be emphasized that Shklovsky's notion does not involve objective distance. He specifically notes the difference between *ostranenie*, a neologism that entered Russian in 1916, and *otstranenie*, an older word implying distance or withdrawal from the world.⁴⁸ The difference is sometimes marked in translation by using the neologism *enstrangement*.⁴⁹ Shklovsky's *ostranenie* involved not distance but heightened perception achieved through a "laboriousness" (*zatrudnenie*) in which comprehension was productively slowed by the difficulty of form. The essay is usually associated with formalist poetry and painterly abstraction, and therefore with the aesthetics of futurism's "slap in the face of public taste."⁵⁰ Yet Shklovsky's description of *ostranenie* as a miredness in form seems equally at home within an embedded paradigm. Indeed, one of his primary examples in the essay is an extremely embodied one from the canon of nineteenth-century realism. He cites Leo Tolstoy's device in the short story "Strider" (*Kholstomer*), in which Tolstoy narrates from the perspective of a horse in order to make the human world strange. Like Shklovsky, the horse values labor. From his equine perspective, it is his species' advantage: "Leaving aside other good reasons for our superiority," the horse pontificates, "I am now convinced that what distinguishes us from humans and gives us the right to claim a higher place on the ladder of living creatures is simply this: that the human species is guided, above all, by *words*, while ours is guided by *deeds*." Shklovsky writes, "To return sensation to the limbs, in order to make us feel objects, man has been given the tool of art."⁵¹

Shklovsky's description of this laborious and embodied mode of knowing the world might be understood as a mode of objectivity restructured from an embedded perspective, a companion to the embedded form of agency outlined above. This concept has also been developed by feminist scholars—most notably, Donna Haraway in her 1988 proposal for “situated knowledges.” She saw the idea as a means out of a false dichotomy dominating scholarship at that time, when a postmodern relativism was positioned as an alternative to a universalist understanding of objective knowledge. Rather than presenting a choice, she argued, these modes both rely on the same epistemological foundation—what she called “the god trick”—a claim on the part of the interpreter to be universal and omniscient, both nowhere and everywhere at once.⁵² She advocated instead for a form of “feminist objectivity” that holds onto belief in objective truth but simultaneously acknowledges that every view of that truth is partial, informed by the perspective of an embodied subject with a specific position and investments. It is a measurement taken with a particular tool, or an image produced by a specific lens. For Haraway, only this “partial perspective promises objective vision, . . . allowing us to be answerable for what we learn how to see.”⁵³

Haraway's concept of situated knowledges relies on understanding oneself and one's subject as embedded, but it does not account for the social influence on an embedded subject's perception, or the way that false consciousness (which is to say, all consciousness) is supported by corroboration. This problem has been addressed by Quentin Meillassoux, best known as one of a number of scholars often grouped as “new materialists” or “speculative realists.” Concerned about the rise of strongly held counterfactual beliefs among certain groups (e.g., denial of climate change), Meillassoux began to question the basic premises of Kantian phenomenology.⁵⁴ He starts by critiquing the “strong correlationism” of being and thought that stems from Kant's understanding of human finitude, the notion that human subjectivity is never able to fully access the thing-in-itself. In Meillassoux's view, this structure leaves open the door to radically fantastical worldviews formed entirely on the basis of faith in whatever version of reality one might assemble subjectively. On an individual level, constructing realities that depart significantly from empirical observation resembles madness, but when affirmed by the consensus of a community, such constructions have real impact.⁵⁵ They are easy to condemn in cases in which beliefs radically contradict one's own, but everyone operates within some of these socially affirmed constructions. Indeed, it is one corollary to the assumption that humans cannot exist alone. An embedded form of objectivity must then take account not only of differences among specific subject positions but also of the pressures that erode and mold those differences into the universalisms that, however contingent, are woven into the ways that we live, breathe, act, think, and wish. Meillassoux is a philosopher, not a low theorist, and his proposal for exiting this collective solipsism represents the opposite of situating knowledge. What he calls “speculative materialism” involves treating knowledge as *a priori*—that is, as unrelated to embodied phenomenological experience. He is

interested in “the nature of the world without us,” which he proposes can only be known as a set of speculative possibilities based in logically consistent methods of thinking such as mathematics.⁵⁶ Like Shklovsky’s interpretation of Tolstoy’s device in “Strider,” his approach to realism seeks estrangement, a decentering of an anthropocentric perspective, but it also forfeits the embeddedness in embodied experience that the horse and Shklovsky value. In this sense, it is strangely utopian, no place and not of this world.⁵⁷

Gan also referred to constructivism as a form of realism.⁵⁸ It was a socialist realism, albeit one clearly distinct from the monumental painting and sculpture usually associated with that combination of terms. His realism did not present a seamless image of a constructed reality within the bounds of a canvas. It attempted to facilitate the collective construction of reality itself by developing a mechanism by which to collectively coauthor the truth of that moment’s thinking. How does this embedded paradigm, with its laterally constituted form of authority, avoid devolving into the dystopia of panoptical surveillance or the catastrophic groupthink of strong correlationism? Indeed, how is it any different than the “capitalist realism” described by Mark Fisher as the neoliberal belief that no other world is possible and that everything must submit to the market’s regime?⁵⁹ Gan eventually asked a version of this question too. His hope was that the difference lay in a reversal of means and ends. With constructivism, Gan attempted to put the means for constructing the common in our hands. In 1918, he wrote, “The will to consciousness is greater than the will to faith. I am shouting about the conscious construction of the current moment’s proletarian ethos.”⁶⁰ He hoped that the shadowy formation of universalisms based on abstract authorities, in which one feels compelled to simply believe, could be transformed into the conscious construction of provisional solidarities for politically purposive ends.

The weak link in Gan’s constructivism may be the same as in Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges: how do we ensure that we are answerable for what we see and say? Mikhail Bakhtin was also occupied with this question of answerability in the years after the revolution, when he attempted to work out a reconciliation between autonomy and embeddedness that intersects with the hybridization efforts we will see Gan exploring in the following chapters.⁶¹ As Michael Holquist explains, Bakhtin’s aesthetics of answerability replaced the “as if,” or the “ought,” that underwrites Kantian judgment with the concept of “no alibi in existence,” in which one is bound to answer in life for what is experienced in art.⁶² Art may sometimes allow us to experience the world differently, but we are still always an embedded constituent of that world, responsible for the part that we play in it.

GAN’S SITUATION

I have organized this book as a monograph about a single figure, preserving Gan’s story as the central thread. This choice merits some discussion from a methodological standpoint, insofar as Gan intended constructivism to dismantle and supplant pre-

cisely that notion of art that stems from a focus on autonomous authors and discrete objects.⁶³ One part of the rationale for organizing the book around Gan's experience is pragmatic: no one has previously reconstructed his career from archival sources on this level, and the legibility of that contribution deserves some priority.⁶⁴ I would also like to defend the methodological legitimacy of writing an account organized around a specific person's experience as a way of situating history, or embedding it in a specific perspective. Particularly when treating a context whose histories have been shaped by heavy ideological hands, assembling one person's truth becomes a mode of objectivity, a means of grounding historical abstractions. Part of the conservatism of the art-historical monograph is a function of the selective perspectives in which they most often situate us. The other part is the privileging of a specific perspective as universal. Gan's marginality within histories of constructivism does not make this a situated history, any more than his centrality to the movement makes this history the definitive narrative. Rather, this study positions us in the history of constructivism through an identifiable (or marked) perspective.

Gan's position within that history has both strategic advantages and blind spots. As a figure undeniably central to the movement yet marginal in the existing literature, he is well situated to facilitate a new point of view on many of constructivism's most important episodes. He straddled political orientations, artistic disciplines, and institutions. His story thus challenges simplistic categorizations and allows us to trace organic connections among contexts that might otherwise seem disparate. Further, his perspective was informed by an experience of dramatically ebbing and waning fortunes within the period's unstable politics. He began in the anarchist movement, which was suppressed by the Bolsheviks in 1918. After working with Bolshevik organizations for most of the twenties, he was again pushed out. Eventually he was arrested for counterrevolutionary activity in 1941 and executed in 1942.⁶⁵ He thus allows us to see the era's politics not in terms of absolute goods and evils, but as a complex and shifting landscape. In many ways, Gan's story is a classic example of what Branden Joseph, drawing on Mike Kelley, has identified as a "minor history." In Kelley's words, these are "histories . . . that have yet found no need to be written" and must then "find their way into history via forms that already exist."⁶⁶ Gan has been a minor character in constructivism's story for decades, waiting for someone to have a reason to want to see through his eyes. Perhaps the most compelling reason to select him as a protagonist now is that the issues central to his work—inequality, intellectual labor, and the political contingency of fact—have come back to the fore.

A number of factors have contributed to obscuring the details of Gan's background, and the reconstruction of his story has required a degree of speculation and imagination. Thus, he offers an unstable and blurry lens, however well situated. Before the revolution, he likely worked in underground political organizations, which left few records for obvious reasons. During the Soviet period, information on non-Bolshevik political movements, such as the anarchist movement, was shaped by bias and

censorship. Making matters worse, a fire in Gan's apartment and studio sometime before 1922 destroyed early work and correspondence.⁶⁷ Few people were interested in preserving whatever might have survived his death. His first wife, Olga, died early in 1920, and his only child, Katya, seems to have been raised from infancy by Olga's relatives in Ukraine.⁶⁸ Most of what we have of his personal correspondence comes from the archive of filmmaker Esfir' Shub, with whom he lived during the twenties and early thirties. If there was more material, Shub may have destroyed it after he disappeared in 1934, assuming that he had been arrested. She neglects to mention him by name in the memoirs that she published in 1959. Despite including lengthy accounts of other colleagues, the memoir refers to him only obliquely as "a constructivist dressed in riding breeches and a military-style jacket" (this was Gan's signature attire), who claimed to speak "on behalf of the Union of Breadmakers" (Gan worked with the union in 1917).⁶⁹ Shub's daughter by a previous marriage, Anna Konopleva-Shub, provided a valuable document when she wrote down her reminiscences of Gan in 1986. It is limited by its source material, however, which was her mother's archive, her recollection of secondhand information passed on much later, and her own memories from a period over fifty years earlier, which she experienced from a distance because she lived primarily with her father.

That is all to say that many obstacles have stood in the way of the somewhat meager claim that *I think* Gan was born in Moscow in 1887.⁷⁰ This date revises those previously published: 1889, 1893, and 1895. The difference is significant in that it makes him four-to-nine years older than colleagues such as Rodchenko, Stepanova, Dziga Vertov, and Moisei Ginzburg. Whereas the other constructivists were in their early to midtwenties in 1917, Gan would have been thirty, old enough to have been eighteen during the 1905 revolution and to have had a career before the war. We have only vague clues about what that career entailed. His Red Army records list his prerevolutionary class status variously as *intelligent* and *dvorianin*.⁷¹ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this background would have guaranteed an education and certain privileges but not necessarily wealth. As a class, the *dvorianstvo* usually served in lower-level military and administrative posts, which gradually decreased in relative wealth and power as capitalism took hold in Russia's economy.

Military records also refer ambiguously to an education at a "school of painting."⁷² This was common shorthand for the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture attended by many figures of the Russian avant-garde.⁷³ A self-portrait dated to the teens provides further evidence of an art school education and evinces a dreamy symbolist aesthetic and artistic acumen antithetical to Gan's later work (fig. 3).⁷⁴ Gan's student years, roughly 1905–9, would have coincided with the school's most aesthetically and politically radical period. As Jane Sharp notes, the school, like many Moscow universities, was a center of revolutionary activity in 1905.⁷⁵ The scandalous exhibitions and raucous debates that marked the prewar Moscow avant-garde led by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova emerged amid the aftermath, when failed