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The radical political imagination

Art between virtuosic execution and the new classes of struggles

Marcelo Expósito

In Memory of Ulises Carrión and Antonio Artero

> "To believe in the world as it is also means to deploy the capacity to act against the devices of subjugation and domination in order to not let oneself be governed. It also means to believe in new meanings, constellations, modes of being so that the struggle against the same relations of domination and subjugation can be initiated to be able to govern oneself."
> (Maurizio Lazzarato, 1994)

> "The activities in which "the product is not separable from the act of producing" have a mercurial and ambiguous status that is not always and not completely grasped by the critique of political economy.[...] The pianist and the dancer stand precariously balanced on a watershed that divides two antithetical destinies: on the one hand, they may become examples of "wage-labour that is not at the same time productive labour"; on the

> other, they have a quality that is suggestive of political action. Their nature is essentially amphibian. So far, however, each of the potential developments inherent in the figure of the performing artist--poiesis or praxis, Work or Action-- seems to exclude its opposite. The status of waged laborer tends to militate against political vocation, and vice versa. From a certain point onward, however, the alternative changes into a complicity--the aut-aut gives way to a paradoxical et-et: the virtuoso works (in fact she or he is a worker par excellence) not despite the fact, but precisely because of the fact that her or his activity is closely reminiscent of political praxis." (Paolo Virno, *Virtuosity and Revolution*, 1993)

The Russian Soviet revolutionary art produced between the 1910s and 1930s continues to exert a powerful influence on many aspects of our cultural models today. But historically, references to it have tended to oscillate between fetishising its formal inventions and either exalting or denigrating its idealism, which has been portrayed as totally unattainable voluntarism within a more global chimera (*the* revolution, represented in the image and likeness of a mythological monster that – supposedly – always ends up devouring its children). Likewise, certain dominant visions of the Russian Soviet avant-gardes have tended to stifle its *event* dimension – the potency of its emergence as a singularity and a difference that should not be reconciled with the stable continuum of both the history of art and mass politics. There has, furthermore, been a tendency to overlook the strong impact of said event beyond its historical bounds, in the many experiences that undertook to explore the political nature of art in subsequent decades, driven by a desire to embrace processes of profound social change.

Against this background, the monographic issue of the journal *transversal* that this text is the prologue to,[1] poses the question of the *becoming actual* of said event, always in what we could call a Foucaldian dual sense: as an exploration of some aspects of current practices in which said event still resonates, that is, the ways in which it is constitutive of the present moment, and as an attempt to identify the conditions under which the potential of the original event could be reactivated. Within this framework, what we propose here is a three-way approach to the historical experience that it set out to explore. Firstly, the idea was to articulate a *genealogy*; secondly, to apply a *critical reading*; and thirdly, to trace the current *actuality* of two of the most important guidelines that channelled the process of political and artistic radicalization of the Russian Soviet avant-garde: *productivism* and *factography*.

To begin with, we must acknowledge our debt to the work carried out by the German-American historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in his critical recovery of the Russian Soviet avant-gardes in the early eighties. There is no doubt that Buchloh's work has made it possible for the subsequent extensive research carried out by historians and art critics – including some of the contributors to this issue of *transversal* –, to have developed in a context of such rich complexity. Buchloh's foundational work is an essential precondition for this editorial project[2]. Buchloh chose to inject a sharp challenge into a specific framework: to put it briefly, he forcefully contested the way in which Alfred Barr, the first director and ideological founder of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), did everything he could to historiographically deny or play down the political vehemence embraced by some sectors of constructivism – a process that he himself witnessed during a visit to the Soviet Union in 1927 –, thus enabling him to establish and export a depoliticised internationalist discourse on modern art,

which later turned out to serve the interests of the liberal model of society in the struggles for cultural hegemony during the Cold War. But aside from the factors that contributed to shaping this historiographical framework of discussion, Buchloh's original texts revealed that this political vehemence, which was principally enacted through the productivist and factographic hypotheses, went hand in hand with an overflowing of the established frameworks inherited from the art institution. And, contrary to the judgement passed down by academic, historiographic, artistic and even political tradition, this overflowing did not lead to the abandonment of the experimental tools produced during the autonomous stage of the art, literary and theatre avant-gardes, but rather deepened them. To put it bluntly, but with a necessary directness: the productivist and factographic experiences proved that the politicisation of art and its overflowing into industrial production and social activism does not destroy the complexity of the hypotheses and technical and formal tools of avant-garde art practice. Although this brief introduction precludes an exegesis of Buchloh's arguments, we can engage in a simple reading exercise, based on his two texts published in 1984, "From Faktura to Factography" and "Since Realism there was...(On the current conditions of factographic art)"[3]. In the preliminary paragraphs of the two essays, which contain a concise description of the mood in Soviet Russia in the early twenties, a few lines are repeated: "There was the general awareness among artists and cultural theoreticians that they were participating in a final transformation of the modernist vanguard aesthetic, as they irrevocably changed those conditions of art production and reception inherited from bourgeois society and its institutions."

This point of intersection between the two essays constitutes the synthesis of an artistic and political program that has been

periodically resumed in the course of the last century, and that we also seek to contribute to through this editorial project: it entails bringing about overflowings of the art institution, based on an analysis of the modifications that have taken place in it as a result of more general transformations of the material, technical and political structure of our societies. These overflowings may either contribute to channelling those changes towards processes of collective emancipation, or, instead, help to reproduce and perfect the sophistication of devices of social subjection. Whether one or the other prevails will depend largely on the political will to act, not so much in the specific sphere of art or culture as fields split off and separated from social activity, but rather (and this is another of the great historical lessons of the factographic and productivist lines) within the social machine that Marx called *general intellect*, the domain of mass intellectuality. The attentive reader is sure to have grasped the reference: reactivating the memory of productivism and factography in the present also means updating the inescapable interpellation implicit in two of Walter Benjamin's seminal texts, written in the thirties as a hypothesis of theoretical intervention in interwar tensions, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and "The Author as Producer". The theses that Benjamin puts forward in this pair of essays hover over the whole of this journal. They are inescapably one of the principal theoretical-critical backdrops against which to measure this compilation of essays, to which this brief text is an introduction, and which we will now turn to.

The content in this issue of *transversal* is organised in such a way as to explode the academic assumption that imposes a classic three-way split between historiographic discourse, artistic practice and art criticism. While essays such as those by Christina Kiaer and Devin Fore[4] are at the level of the important historiographic research

projects that they have carried out in recent years – and which have inspired the recent work of Jaime Videl[5] –, their hypotheses for reading specific aspects of the radicalisation of the Russian Soviet avant-garde rest on interpretative tools that are also used in what we could call the "theoretical turn" of certain artistic practices in recent decades. Inversely, the contributions by Dmitry Vilensky, Hito Steyerl, Marko Peljhan and Doug Ashford[6] inspired on their own artistic practice are at the same time also historiographical. And the need to set up complex articulations between the fields that derive from the abovementioned three-way split seems to be the programmatic foundation for the contributions by Brian Holmes and Gerald Raunig[7], based on a conception of art theory and criticism that seems to be guided by both the philosophical legacy of critical theory and current political situation of militant activism.

Kiaer turns her lens to the path adopted by the Moscow constructivist group, in relation to what was principally a gradual withdrawal from the spaces of the art institution in order to embrace mass industrial production. A reading with a feminist slant allows Kiaer to make a distinction between the apparently "hard" model of productivism, according to which artists would seek to dissolve their practice within factory production, thus reinforcing the masculinist imaginary of the proletariat that was hegemonic in the twentieth century workers movement; and a "soft" model, according to which constructivist experiments in the field of perception and the constructive moulding of images and objects could expand towards the mass production of useful artefacts, allowing a transformation of the domain of everyday life by promoting what we could describe as a new "non-capitalist" relationship between the (individual and social) subject and things. In keeping with Kiaer's retrospective interpretation, I would

venture that destroying the capitalist reification of the subject and of social life – as non-masculinist productivism sought to do – would not involve establishing a new type of direct, transparent relationship between the subject and things – a controversial idea that would undoubtedly clash with the psychoanalytic base that underlies the methodology of Kiaer's feminist reading. Rather, it would mean understanding this other productivist project as a search for new forms of individual and collective subjectivation, which, having the construction of socialism as their aim, involve a collective management of desire and drives in a way other than that established during capitalist modernity and deepened in the societies of mass consumption.

While the imaginary that had been hegemonic in shaping the classic proletarian identity is important in much of Dziga Vertov's work, Devin Fore's reading of the film *Entuziazm* (1931) aims to reveal how Vertov's project was less about using film as a "mirror of reality", and more about raising the hypothesis of cinematic practice as a machinic *agencement* between the subject and technology. This assemblage would be projected (literally, given that we are talking about film practice) in the shaping of *dispositifs*, within which the viewer would experience resubjectivation in close relationship to technological development. In this way, filmmaking would turn out to be the privileged site for showing the current condition of social production, while at the same time putting into practice a technology for the production of socialist subjectivity. (This thesis, which Benjamin literally put forward in his essay on the mechanical reproduction of the work of art, is exactly the same as that which Gerald Raunig identifies in Sergei Tretyakov's production of literature and Gustav Klucis's production of photomontages and propaganda posters; and which Jaime Vindel explores in its updating in a different time and place – avant-garde

art in Argentina in the sixties.) In terms of the articulation of the subject and the object through the mediation of technology, the type of machinic assemblage that Vertov imagined and put into practice is undoubtedly more complex than the simple relationship based on solidarity or comradeship between individuals and socialist objects that Rodchenko had proposed. But it would not have differed much from the modus operandi that he would have wished for his Workers' Club, constructed in Paris in 1925, a project which lies at the intersection of the essays by Kiaer and Dmitry Vilensky. The Workers' Club sought to be nothing other than a machine for political subjectivation. From Vilensky's reading we can also infer another aspect that is crucial for doing away with the historiographic presupposition around the relationship between art and politics in the Russian Soviet avant-gardes. What this and other essays included in this journal show is that the political function of art that the productivist and factographic models put forward does not always and exclusively consist of agitation and the inducement to awakening consciousness, but rather of the production of *mechanisms and dispositifs of political subjectivation* that do not necessarily match the classic model of the "artwork" as an object with clearly defined contours or an essential and recognisable aesthetic. Beyond their formal and technical difference, the machinic assemblage of Vertov's film practice, Rodchenko's Worker's Club and the Pressa Pavilion coordinated by El Lissitzky all display the aforementioned qualities. The collaborative *dispositifs* of simultaneous political and artistic production orchestrated by Vilensky and his group Chto delat?, just like the different versions of the Makrolab project developed by Marko Peljhan, reveal a sharp understanding of those historic experimental artefacts, which they successfully actualize in the current context[8].

Earlier we mentioned a three-way approach to the historical experience being considered here, and so far I have focused on the construction of its *genealogy* and on several projects that in some sense update it. But in order to avoid becoming an idealizing apologia, or a superfluous decontextualised revival, it is essential to apply a *critical reading* to the process of the Russian Soviet avant-gardes. In this sense, our editorial project cannot avoid asking as many questions as the certainties that have been expressed so far. What can be the relevance of an art of production today, when we are in the course of a revolution in the mode of capitalist production that has extended labour exploitation to the realm of subjectivity and to the sphere of everyday life? Accordingly, what would be the "post-Fordist program" for an updated art of production? How can we put into practice an articulation of art and production that does not contribute to the aestheticised forms of politics and mass consumption?

To the question: what is the point of an art dedicated to recording the facts today? or, what is the role of the documentary utopia – the production of a universal language that accounts for each and every moment of everyday life – in the context of societies of control?, Hito Steyerl offers a very simple response: in societies of control, the function of documentality is, precisely, to control. Steyerl is categorical when it comes to pointing out the sinister nature of the totalitarian dimension arising from the intersection between the total planning of subjectivity and the utopia of technology applied to the total recording of everyday life. Just as Doug Ashford is when he warns us of the danger of accepting the dogma of realism as the privileged mode of expression for artistic activism, in the guise of a language of direct and transparent communication; particularly given that co-opted realist forms are prone to be instrumental in the attempt to anchor meanings

within social structures and (artistic and non-artistic) institutions, whereas the purpose or art should be to de-structure meanings rather than to reproduce the stability of signs. Perhaps also in this sense, Brian Holmes suggests that being faithful to the historical project of the radicalised Russian Soviet avant-garde involves reversing some of its terms, at this moment in history when, given the current conditions of the capitalist mode of production, we need to subvert and escape precisely from the totalitarian control of production over the subject.

It may be that the construction of socialism is no longer the aim of the project — inherited from certain avant-gardes — which seeks to articulate art and politics. But it takes no more than a glance at the current state of things and social subjectivity to understand that the prospect of such an articulation can only continue to be that of contributing to the process of collective emancipation.

The Russian Soviet revolutionary art produced between the 1910s and 1930s continues to exert a powerful influence on many aspects of our cultural models today. But historically, references to it have tended to oscillate between fetishising its formal inventions and either exalting or denigrating its idealism, which has been portrayed as totally unattainable voluntarism within a more global chimera (*the* revolution, represented in the image and likeness of a mythological monster that – supposedly – always ends up devouring its children). Likewise, certain dominant visions of the Russian Soviet avant-gardes have tended to stifle its *event* dimension – the potency of its emergence as a singularity and a difference that should not be reconciled with the stable continuum of both the history of art and mass politics. There has, furthermore, been a tendency to overlook the strong impact of said event beyond its historical bounds, in the many experiences that undertook to explore the political nature of art in subsequent

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relationship between the (individual and social) subject and things. In keeping with Kiaer's retrospective interpretation, I would venture that destroying the capitalist reification of the subject and of social life – as non-masculinist productivism sought to do – would not involve establishing a new type of direct, transparent relationship between the subject and things – a controversial idea that would undoubtedly clash with the psychoanalytic base that underlies the methodology of Kiaer's feminist reading. Rather, it would mean understanding this other productivist project as a search for new forms of individual and collective subjectivation, which, having the construction of socialism as their aim, involve a collective management of desire and drives in a way other than that established during capitalist modernity and deepened in the societies of mass consumption.

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photomontages and propaganda posters; and which Jaime Vindel explores in its updating in a different time and place – avant-garde art in Argentina in the sixties.) In terms of the articulation of the subject and the object through the mediation of technology, the type of machinic assemblage that Vertov imagined and put into practice is undoubtedly more complex than the simple relationship based on solidarity or comradeship between individuals and socialist objects that Rodchenko had proposed. But it would not have differed much from the modus operandi that he would have wished for his Workers' Club, constructed in Paris in 1925, a project which lies at the intersection of the essays by Kiaer and Dmitry Vilensky. The Workers' Club sought to be nothing other than a machine for political subjectivation. From Vilensky's reading we can also infer another aspect that is crucial for doing away with the historiographic presupposition around the relationship between art and politics in the Russian Soviet avant-gardes. What this and other essays included in this journal show is that the political function of art that the productivist and factographic models put forward does not always and exclusively consist of agitation and the inducement to awakening consciousness, but rather of the production of *mechanisms and dispositifs of political subjectivation* that do not necessarily match the classic model of the "artwork" as an object with clearly defined contours or an essential and recognisable aesthetic. Beyond their formal and technical difference, the machinic assemblage of Vertov's film practice, Rodchenko's Worker's Club and the Pressa Pavilion coordinated by El Lissitzky all display the aforementioned qualities. The collaborative *dispositifs* of simultaneous political and artistic production orchestrated by Vilensky and his group Chto delat?, just like the different versions of the Makrolab project developed by Marko Peljhan, reveal a sharp understanding of those historic

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[1] This monographic issue of *transversal* is an extended version of the book that was published jointly by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in 2010 under the title *The New Productivisms* (with texts by Marcelo Expósito, Christina Kiaer, Devin Fore, Dmitry Vilensky, Hito Steyerl, Doug Ashford and Brian Holmes, which are joined by essays by Gerald Raunig and Jaime Vindel in this new *transversal* edition). The book has its origins in the seminar *The New Productivisms* which took place at the Museu d'Art Contemporani

de Barcelona (MACBA) on the 27th and 28th of March, 2009 (http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_nuevosproductivismos_en.pdf) as part of *The Political Imagination* courses that have been offered by MACBA's Independent Studies Program (PEI) since 2006 (see http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_pei1.pdf and http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_pei3.pdf), and in conjunction with an ambitious exhibition that had opened a few weeks earlier at the same museum, *Universal Archive. The Condition of the Document and the Modern Photographic Utopia* (see the interview with Jorge Ribalta by Miguel Lopez, "Ver la modernidad desde la fotografía es como entrar a la historia por la puerta de servicio" in *ramona*, no. 88, March 2009 http://www.ramona.org.ar/node/25193). As such, the seminar was part of a cluster of activities that surveyed the *simultaneously political and artistic* radicalisation of some sectors of the Russian Soviet avant-gardes, as a founding instance of an overflowing of the art institution that subsequently generated complex articulations between art, politics, activism and mass communication over the course of a century.

We thank Madeline Carey, Marta García and Clara Plasencia (from the Independent Studies Program (PEI), and the MACBA's Public Programs and Publications services, respectively) for permission to publish the texts and for their dedication to the administrative procedures that have allowed the original book to become this *transversal* monograph.

[2] I will list some aspects of historiographical research that has inspired and guided this editorial project, along with Buchloh's work. The recognition of the importance of the productivist tendency of constructivism put forward by Christina Lodder in *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). The role played by photography in overcoming the autonomous

phase of the avant-garde and the massification of its experimental hypotheses and artefacts, as explained by Margarita Tupitsyn in *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). The thorough analysis of the internal diversity of the productivist process that Maria Gough applies in *The Artist as Producer. Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). The light that Christina Kiaer sheds on extra-artistic practices of the production of objects for the transformation of everyday life following the autonomous stage of constructivism, in *Imagine no Possessions. The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2005). The essays by Devin Fore, accompanied by the publication of the writings of Serguei Tretiakov, which set out the principles of a factographic writing (see «The Operative Word in Soviet Factography», *October*, 118, Winter 2006). The articulation of the models of radicalization of the Russian-Soviet avant-garde with other projects of concatenation of art and politics, particularly in contemporary experiences of the last two decades, proposed by Gerald Raunig in *Art and Revolution. Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century.* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), and *Tausend Maschinen. Eine kleine Philosophie der Maschine als sozialer Bewegung.* (Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2008; English version: *A Thousand Machines. A Concise Philosophy of the Machine as Social Movement,* Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010). Finally, the book edited by Jorge Ribalta, which begins precisely at the point where Buchloh's narrative leaves off, the first propaganda pavilions commissioned by the Soviet government and created by El Lissitzky: *Public Photographic Spaces. Propaganda Exhibitions from Pressa to The Family of Man, 1928-1955* (Barcelona: MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009).

It is no accident that this note only mentions essays published over the past two decades: one of the theses that structured the seminar was to attempt to identify singular forms of art/politics articulation in the current historical cycle of conflict, which could be considered part of an updating of the Russian Soviet models of radicalisation. Historiographical research processes such as those mentioned here, and these new artistic-political experiences have been taking place in parallel over the past twenty years, although there have rarely been connections between them. This seminar and editorial project explicitly puts forward the need to carry out innovative articulations between one lot and the other, in order to overcome this tendency to disconnection. Some of these reflections are expressed in more detail in my text "Walter Benjamin, productivista" (http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_benjaminproductivista.pdf).

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[4] See Kiaer, «"Into Production!": The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism» (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/kiaer/en) and Fore, «Arbeit sans phrase» (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/fore/es).

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[6] See Vilensky, «Activist Club or on the Concept of Cultural Houses, Social Centers & Museums» (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/vilensky/en); Steyerl, «Truth Unmade. Productivism and Factography» (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/steyerl/en); and Ashford, «Group Material: Abstraction as the Onset of the Real» (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/ashford/en).

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[9] This monographic issue of *transversal* is an extended version of the book that was published jointly by the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in 2010 under the title *The New Productivisms* (with texts by Marcelo Expósito, Christina Kiaer, Devin Fore, Dmitry Vilensky, Hito Steyerl, Doug Ashford and Brian Holmes, which are joined by essays by Gerald Raunig and Jaime Vindel in this new *transversal* edition). The book has its origins in the seminar *The New Productivisms* which took place at the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) on the 27th and 28th of March, 2009 (http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_nuevosproductivismos_en.pdf) as part of *The Political Imagination* courses that have been offered by MACBA’s Independent Studies Program (PEI) since 2006 (see http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_pei1.pdf and http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_pei3.pdf), and in conjunction with an ambitious exhibition that had opened a few weeks earlier at

the same museum, *Universal Archive. The Condition of the Document and the Modern Photographic Utopia* (see the interview with Jorge Ribalta by Miguel Lopez, "Ver la modernidad desde la fotografía es como entrar a la historia por la puerta de servicio" in *ramona*, no. 88, March 2009 http://www.ramona.org.ar/node/25193). As such, the seminar was part of a cluster of activities that surveyed the *simultaneously political and artistic* radicalisation of some sectors of the Russian Soviet avant-gardes, as a founding instance of an overflowing of the art institution that subsequently generated complex articulations between art, politics, activism and mass communication over the course of a century

We thank Madeline Carey, Marta García and Clara Plasencia (from the Independent Studies Program (PEI), and the MACBA's Public Programs and Publications services, respectively) for permission to publish the texts and for their dedication to the administrative procedures that have allowed the original book to become this *transversal* monograph.

[10] I will list some aspects of historiographical research that has inspired and guided this editorial project, along with Buchloh's work. The recognition of the importance of the productivist tendency of constructivism put forward by Christina Lodder in *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). The role played by photography in overcoming the autonomous phase of the avant-garde and the massification of its experimental hypotheses and artefacts, as explained by Margarita Tupitsyn in *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). The thorough analysis of the internal diversity of the productivist process that Maria Gough applies in *The Artist as Producer. Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). The light that Christina Kiaer sheds on extra-artistic practices of the production of objects for the

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