

On things and comrades

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The light is from the East... not only the liberation of the working class. The light is from the East – in a new relation to man, to woman, and to objects. Objects in our hands should also be equal, also be comrades, and not black, gloomy slaves like they have here.

The art of the East should be nationalized and rationed out. Objects will be understood, will become people's friends and comrades, and people will begin to know how to laugh and enjoy and converse with things...

Alexander Rodchenko, May 04, 1925, Paris (cited in Lavrentiev et al., 2005: 169)

'Our things in our hands must be also equals, also comrades...' – wrote Alexander Rodchenko, a prominent figure of Russian Constructivism, in his letter from Paris in 1925. The quote is increasingly favored by many, from anti-consumerism activists and advocates for alternative economy to corporate designers and marketers. All see 're-examination of our relationships to objects' as a way to 'enhance our [consumer] lives'¹. In 1925, this was a call to construct new kinds of objects and in doing so to forge new ways of social organizing – to build a new society.

Rodchenko used the word *tovarishch* (an egalitarian revolutionary address at the time) to indicate a need for a radically different socio-political conception of objects and our relations to them. In this note, I reflect on how the

¹ For an activist take on 'objects as comrades' see <http://piecesofyoutopia.com/wordpress/>, for a corporate orientation, see <http://jonhoward.typepad.com/livingbrands/2011/11/umair-haque-meaningful-brands-amplify-human-potential.html>.

Constructivists' ideas about objects played out in Soviet material culture. Soviet goods indeed acquired a somewhat different status to products in a capitalist market; however, objects as *tovarishch* never seemed to have been able to escape the *tovar* in *tovarishch*. As if standing in the way of Rodchenko's liberation mission, the etymological roots of the word *tovarishch* uphold an object-subject tension: *tovarishch* is derived from the noun *tovar*, meaning any object in exchange; a commodity, merchandise, etc. In fact, before being adopted by revolutionaries, *tovarishch* referred to 'business or trade associates'².

I am aware of the linguistic determinism implied. Nevertheless, in the subsequent discussion, I choose several meanings of *tovarishch* in Russian in order to tell a story about how Soviet goods historically hung suspended in the midair point of 'not quite a commodity'. My goal here is not to dampen the current enthusiasm for Constructivists' thoughts on objects but instead to suggest that there is much to be explored in terms of the politics of consumption in their vision of a new social world premised on a different relationship to things.

Tovarishch, n – a comrade; a common form of revolutionary address since about 1905

Russian Constructivism is an artistic movement born in the turbulent years of World War I and the Russian Revolution, and is now often defined by the utopian ideal of revolutionary art improving the everyday lives of individuals and the broader collective (Gough, 2005; Kiaer, 2005; Margolin, 1997). While Constructivism was not a homogeneous movement, its various factions shared the common belief that the role of an artist was not to document the revolution and mirror society, but to realize the revolution and lead the masses into the building of a new society (Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990). As Alexei Gan (1922, c.f. Groys, 1992: 24) declared in his 'Constructivism' manifesto:

We should not reflect, depict and interpret reality, but should build practically and express the planned objectives of the newly active working class, the proletariat...must all become Constructivists in the general business of the building and the movement of the many millioned human mass.

Accordingly, art was to be displaced into the world and put to the service of production. In the early 1920s Russia, during the 'capitalism-light' market economy of the New Economic Policy (NEP), Constructivism turned into

² In all linguistic references, I use two authoritative sources on Russian language: Vasmer (1986) and Ozhegov and Shvedova (1992).

Production Art³. For Constructivists, participation in production extended beyond a tradition of ‘applied art’ or even ‘technological construction’ to the design of fundamentally different relations between individuals and objects (Gough, 2005). This agenda was premised on the thesis that the social consciousness and society’s world-view are influenced by both the process of making objects in production and the process of using objects in everyday life, and that the human relation to things becomes definitive of social relations. Then, a social and ideological transformation is possible through consumption (not just production), where the new socialist objects, ‘connected as coworkers with human practice’ will produce the human subjects of socialist modernity (Arvatov, 1923[1997]: 126).

In ‘Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing’ (1923[1997]), Boris Arvatov, a key theorist of Constructivism, describes what socialist objects might be like vis-à-vis the things of bourgeois culture. First, socialist objects will be liberated from the enslavement of the commodity status, from an exchange-mediated valuation. Things will be valued based on their productive qualification and use-value. Unlike commodities, socialist objects will ‘[speak] for themselves’ – not displaying socio-ideological categories but ‘laying bare their constructive essence,’ and their material forms will serve only to articulate and make visible their purpose (ibid.: 123, 126). For Arvatov, the purpose of an object included its ‘utilitarian-technical purpose’ and its socio-political utility in organizing everyday life (ibid.; Margolin, 1997).

Second, given the Constructivists’ regard for technology, socialist objects would be principally industrially mass-manufactured goods, stripped of anything that would obscure their *tselesobraznost*’ (expediency) and/or prevent them from participating honestly in social processes (Kiaer, 2005: 33). They were to be dynamic, flexible, and affective, and able to adapt instantly to the needs of social practice (Arvatov, 1923[1997]: 126). Through these qualities, socialist objects would assist in developing, amplifying and enriching humans’ sensory, physical, and mental capacities. As such, they would differ from ‘completed, fixed, static, and consequently, dead’ capitalist commodities that alienate human senses, sedate consciousness and isolate people from nature (ibid.: 122).

Third, active socialist objects would shape both physical and psychological regimens of culture. As Alexander Vesnin (1922, c.f. Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990: 68) stated:

3 The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921-1928 legalized market for agricultural produce and goods manufactured in small-scale private enterprises; this temporary policy aimed to deal with chronic product shortages and revive the post Civil War devastated economy.

Each particular object created by the contemporary artist must enter life as an active force that organizes the consciousness of human beings, acting both psychologically and physiologically, and prompting energetic activity.

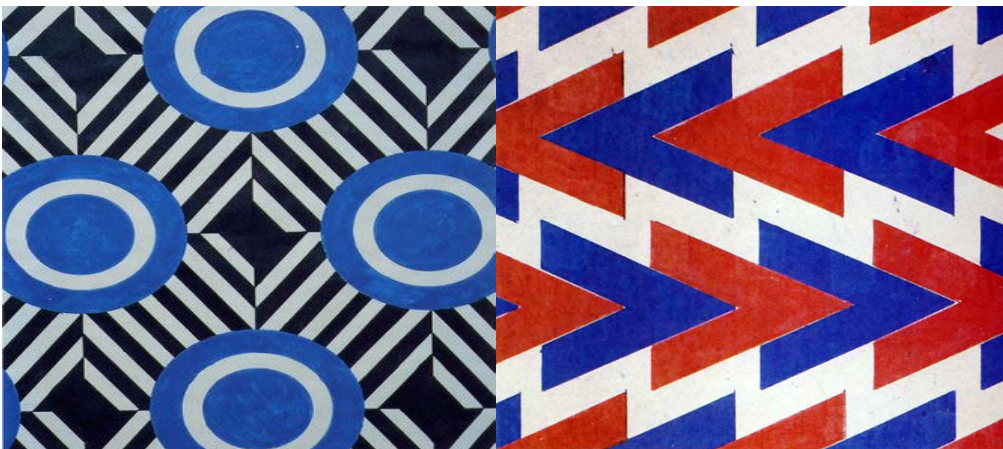


Figure 1: Varvara Stepanova wearing a dress of fabric produced to her own design. Photograph by Alexander Rodchenko, 1924.

Thus, Kiaer (2005) argues, in a Constructivist object, the commodity fetish and the implicated individual desires will not be eliminated but harnessed and reoriented towards collective goals and for the benefit of the collective.

The examples of how that conceptual ideal was to be realized, however, are scarce⁴. The work of two artists – Varvara Stepanova and Liubov’ Popova – in designing textile patterns and Soviet clothing nevertheless provides some insight (Kiaer, 2005; Rodchenko et al., 1991). The artists shared the vision that bold geometric graphics in primary colors would transform the drab world of women dominated by

patriarchal floral patterns but approached the task of constructing Soviet dress somewhat differently. Stepanova focused on making patterns with optical



Figures 2 & 3: Varvana Stepanova’s ‘optical’ designs for fabric, 1924.

4 In ‘Rodchenko in Paris’, Kiaer (2005) offers a fine discussion of Rodchenko’s Worker’s Club exhibit as a socialist object.

variations and kept simple boxy cuts in her designs. That is, the object's dynamism came from a chromatic vibrating effect in the fabric pattern. The effect multiplied when the same costume was seen on several bodies at once, thus a pattern was designed not so much for the sake of decoration but rather for the sake of enhancing sociality (Margolin, 1997).

Popova, for her part, focused on constructing versatile designs. Her full cut dresses often featured design elements, such as a large sash, that transformed a dress through use, rather than tailoring. That is to say, the object's dynamism was to be found in the transformative possibilities of the garment itself.



Figure 4: Varvara Stepanova's clothing designs, 1900-1930. Image reproduced in Lavrentiev (1988).

Overall however, the realities of the 1920s Soviet economy meant few opportunities for participation in mass production. Much of the Constructivists' effort thus focused on making sets for theater and cinema. The demonstration of new objects on stage sought to exemplify

absolutely new ways of life... against the setting of an old type of house' and to promote the vision of socialist living based on intelligence, discipline, and collective self-improvement. (Margolin, 1997: 101)

This logic also underlined the Constructivists' work in 'commercial propaganda' for several state-owned enterprises. The Constructivists marketed a variety of products from books, stationary, and light bulbs to cigarettes, biscuits, and rubbers. Whatever a product, their overtly didactic 'advertising constructions' often depicted objects in a singular functionality – a rubber boot was shown shielding from the rain, pacifiers – being sucked, and cookies – being devoured. Simplified graphics, photomontage, and flat colors were used to impress upon a

largely illiterate audience the urgency of adopting state-produced goods. Furthermore, in lieu of ‘products in [consumer] hands’, advertising posters, packaging, and logos were designed to ‘lead the attack on the trivial tastes’ represented by old bourgeois goods and open public’s eye to the beauty of socialist industry (ibid.: 113).

The determination of Constructivists notwithstanding, their work in building socialist objects and constructing a new collective-oriented material culture remained marginal. By the early 1930s, the art movement had been pushed out of the public arena, discredited and eventually squashed by the Stalinist regime. The Constructivists’ thesis on the transformative potential of consumption and the conception of everyday objects as *tovarishch* was too avant-garde for a time that came to be dominated by productivist visions of modern progress; and their experiments in organizing everyday life differently were too radical for the regime. Still, some Constructivists’ sensibilities found their peculiar realization in the Soviet material culture.



Figure 5: Liubov' Popova's dress design 1920s.

Tovarishch, n. – an appointed official; a formal title [*Tovarishch Ministra*] in a tsarist government since 1802

In the early 1930s, civil unrest swept the Soviet country. Reading popular discontent as a sign of the inability of the backward masses to internalize progressive socialist ideals, officials started the ideological campaign for *kul'turnost'* (literally, culturedness). The campaign sought to indoctrinate people into the values of socialism. In essence, it was a Soviet version of the ‘civilizing projects’ already underway in the interwar Europe and aimed at constructing modern – clean, physically able, and disciplined – subjects. In the Soviet case, the project also involved elementary literacy, proper manners, appropriate attire, aesthetic appreciation of culture and some basic knowledge of Communist ideology (see Hoffmann, 2003).

The Constructivists' notion that 'appropriate kinds of goods,' that is *socialist goods*, could serve instrumental purposes of collective ideological advancement became a cornerstone of the government's campaign and informed the 'cultured Soviet trade' system built at the time (Hessler, 2004). Thus, a special category of Soviet good – *kul't tovary* (cultured goods) such as stationery, musical instruments, watches, and sporting equipment was introduced and certain market techniques were adapted to serve the ideological purpose. For example, Soviet mail-order trade was set with the understanding that

every package delivered to peasants and teachers would be the best concrete agitator for Soviet industry, cities and workers. Through this package, we could have a wide and continuous political and cultural influence not only on the package recipients but dozens of their neighbors. (Iliin-Landski, 1928: 21)

Also, the state ran advertising campaigns for a variety of consumer goods so as to inform people of product usage, to promote new habits and to 'develop their taste' (see Snopkov et al., 2007). Thus, effectively in the 1930s Soviet Union, consumption emerged as a route towards the construction of a modern cultured Soviet citizenry (Hoffmann, 2003).

The rise of TeZhe, the state trust for cosmetics, is illustrative in this regard⁵. A product category seemingly incongruous with the socialist value of collective spiritual development, cosmetics, became implicated in the campaign for the culturedness of the masses. Polina Zhemchuzhina (wife of the Head of the Government at the time and later herself a Minister of Fishing Industry) was at the helm of TeZhe, charged with the Party's task of culturally uplifting the masses. In 1934, she declared the imminent industrialization of the Soviet cosmetics production in order to deliver 'beauty to everyday citizenry' (Zhemchuzhina, 1934: 8). Echoing the Constructivists, she insisted that unlike capitalist cosmetics, Soviet products were 'to be science-based: every product (cream, liquid soaps, lipstick) [were to] have a hygienic function' (ibid.). Thanks to her political connections, no expense was spared in purchasing foreign technologies, employing foreign specialists, setting agricultural zones for the cultivation of oil-rich plants and even the establishment of chemical research institutes.

By the mid-1930s, *TeZhe* was the largest category producer in Europe and a pioneer in industrial-scale medicinal enrichment of products – tooth powders with vitamin C and creams with pro-vitamin A and B-carotene. Not only did the

5 A detailed discussion of this case, including all the references to the original sources, can be found in Kravets and Sandikci (2013).

project yield success in creating smart products, but the propagandistic efforts set *TeZhe* out in their attempts to use consumer goods as a means of transforming everyday life and social consciousness. With the Constructivist dictum in mind, Zhemchuzhina stated that *TeZhe* products must carry out ‘cultured work’: that is, they must motivate citizens to take ‘correct and rational care of their bodies’ (No Author, 1935: 50). Toward this end, all products had to be ‘nicely packaged,’ since adults are ‘similar to children, who are more willing to wash with finely colored and shaped soaps’ (Zhemchuzhina, 1936: 56) Many artists were commissioned to design *TeZhe*’s bottles and labels, working on the Constructivism-informed directive that

package design was a part of the cultural revolution, and since images on products penetrated deeply into people’s minds, designs should transmit an ideological message, rather than communicate a package contents. (Zemenkov, 1930)

TeZhe’s commercial propaganda operated on the Constructivist principle of socialist construction; messages were explicitly didactic both with regards to product usage and with regards to their ideological purpose. The general pitch was that with the help of *TeZhe* products, women would be ‘cultured in body, attire, and manners’, thus achieving an aesthetic appearance essential for personal growth and for ‘equal participation in building a new beautiful Soviet life’⁶. As Hoffmann (2003) explains, the emphasis on appearance did not intend to turn women into sex objects but to accentuate their obligation to society in line with the Stalinist 1930s pro-natal policies. Overall, *TeZhe* framed the consumption of Soviet cosmetics as a civic duty, not an individual choice and stressed the importance of individuals adopting body-care regimes for the betterment of the Soviet collective.

With respect to the politics of consumption, the *TeZhe* case and the cultured Soviet trade policies of the 1930s are remarkable (and still awaiting a thorough investigation). This was a period when many political and economic decisions were made with the Constructivism-inspired belief that consumer goods were the best propagandists and the most effective agitators for the Soviet values and the Soviet way of living. Here, everyday objects could concretely speak to the backward populations, infusing them with socialist sensibilities, training them into progressive habits, and demonstrating the achievements (and promises) of the Soviet state. Put differently, Soviet goods were here conceived as socio-ideologically progressive, and as such were called upon to government service to lead the charge in the project of civilizing and politically uplifting the regressive masses.

⁶ Interview with P. Zhemchuzhina in the popular Soviet women’s weekly *Rabotnisa* (March, 1936) titled ‘Once again on beauty and culture’, 17-18.

Tovarishch, n. – a companion; someone who is frequently in the company of another; and often employed to assist, live with, or travel with another

The pre-World War II militarization and post-war need to rebuild the country were among the factors that led to the decommissioning of consumption from its strategic duty in the Soviet apparatus. Consumer good industries became the secondary sector i.e. financed according to the remainder principle. The Constructivist instruction to make objects that could be mass produced, having ‘an overall organization based on standardization, utility, health considerations, etc., serving the consumer as the entire collective’ (Lavinky, 1922; c.f. Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990: 81) came to dominate product design logic. The instruction was codified in the system of state standards (*gosudarstvenniyi standart* – GOST), originally set up in 1925. GOST was a set of normative specifications which sought to assure product functionality and safety, serving as a means of regulating production so as to achieve statewide efficiencies.

The realities of centralized planning produced systemic GOST reductivism. Firstly, while the number of standards grew over the years, many products were strictly limited in sizes, configurations and specifications. Secondly, the GOST system combined with the principle of bare-minimum in the state resource allocation meant that Soviet goods often were only minimally functional. Lemonade was drinkable, cheese was edible, and dress was wearable but with no promise about quality or value beyond that basic utility. What is more, the GOST system meant that even minimal functionality was a generalized one and required consumer participation in defining object’s utility. For example, as Gurova (2008) reports, there were only three brassiere sizes available in 1946; hence, many women bought merely an item called ‘brassiere’ which was not yet a usable product. In that sense, people often referred to a Soviet good as *polufabrikat* (pre-fabricated, not-ready-made), emphasizing that a product required investments of time, effort and capital before it could look and work properly.

Soviet consumption was a labor intensive practice. The efforts needed to acquire goods in the economy defined by a chronic deficit is now well-documented (e.g., Gurova, 2008; Klumbytë, 2010). Additionally, a substantive amount of work went to activate a product’s utility, to use it daily, and to keep it in use for as long as possible. Indeed, if construction is ‘a functional organization of material elements,’ characterized by ‘the best use of the materials,’ then everyone became a Constructivist (Andrews and Kalinovska, 1990: 65). Just as Arvatov had wished, Soviet goods now demanded ‘constant contact’ and ‘compel[led] people physically, and thus also psychologically, to reckon with them’ (1923[1997]: 126).

To illustrate, often an item bought as a ‘dress’ needed to be fitted to a size and style before it could be worn. In fitting, one had to be mindful of keeping possibilities for reuse open. Accordingly, sleeves, shoulders, and collar would be modified through tailoring, whereas body cut and length were adjusted in wearing, for example, with belts and pins. In this way, larger parts of an item (pieces of fabric) would be optimally preserved for future reuse. For the same reason, people opted for hand-washing and developed particular techniques of careful wearing and storing things. The authors of the collection on the Soviet ‘Repair Society’⁷ argue that this consumption orientation towards continuous use and reuse derives not only from the conditions of pervasive deficit but also, importantly, from the individual’s non-alienable labor invested in making a product usable. Possible similarities in psychological effects notwithstanding, the work of Soviet consumption was different from DIY/customization practices in the West.

By and large, this work was not a Martha Stewart craft hobby as self-actualization, neither was it a bohemian act of self-expression and/or creative resistance, nor purely a practice of austerity driven money saving. Rather, the nature of objects (*polufabrikat*) simply demanded work of re-design and individualization. Thus, customization was not a practice undertaken on occasion or a chosen endeavor but the very mode of Soviet consumption created and imposed by broader structural conditions. The compulsory school ‘lessons of labor’ (*urok truda*), where every girl learnt to make a basic dress and every boy to build a chair, and the popular genre of ‘Crafty Hands’ publications, assured that everyone could participate in such modes of consumption.

So Soviet goods were different from capitalist commodities. In the Soviet economy, objects appeared free, at least to an extent, from producer determinism. Archival pages of ‘Handy Hints’ in the women’s weekly *Rabotnitsa*, evince a strange realization of the Constructivists’ utopia: in Soviet consumption, everything is changeable, possible to make and improve (Margolin, 1997). And the bitterly proverbial ‘101 Uses of Female Stockings’ is a twisted reality of the Constructivists’ dream of infinite transformable – anything can be totally changed whatever the original material form (Rodchenko et al., 1991). Then, in Soviet time, what one actually bought was *potentiality* waiting to be (re)defined as a particular object. One bought ‘in case’, meaning regardless of what an item claimed to be, and with the distinct possibility that it could be (made) useful now

7 *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*, a Russian sociological journal published a series under the title ‘Repair Society’ with articles by Gerasimova E. and S. Chuikina (2004, v. 34) and Gurova O. (2004, v. 34) among others; available at <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2004/34/>.

or later, to oneself or someone else, and importantly with the intention of multiple reuses. That is, the object's use value was only tentatively inscribed in Soviet goods - the onus was on a consumer to create and articulate that value. The embedded imperative for contact with 'productive reality' meant that Soviet goods indexed social value differently than 'bourgeois things' (Arvatov, 1923 [1997]): socio-ideological categorization was not only a matter of possession (certain goods and/or quantities) but also a matter of knowledge and skills. Within the Soviet mode of consumption, an unusable and/or discarded product was not an indication of an object's defect or failing, but of the failure and uselessness (*nikchemnost*) of a person (Gurova, 2008).

Soviet goods of the post-World War II period came close to the Constructivists' ideal of socialist goods: extremely adaptable and transformable, thus dynamic, they always evinced labor (as only a DIY object can), implicated mindful consumption, and were thoroughly social (Arvatov, 1923 [1997]; Gough, 2005; Kiaer, 2005). Their acquisition and consumption were premised on and constitutive of various socialities and solidarities across the generations of Soviet people (Gurova, 2008; Klumbytė, 2010). Still, Soviet goods were not *bona fide* Rodchenko's *tovarishch*: highly personalized and individualized in consumption, they stood in opposition to the Constructivists' values of universality and primacy of objective value.

The dynamism of objects, based on reductivism in production and increase of labor in consumption, overburdened consumers with the responsibility for the total design of their daily lives (and the image they offered to the outside world) and resulted in anxiety of self-design (being subjected to aesthetic and ethical judgments of the state and the publics) and over-dependence upon the taste of others. The Constructivists' intense flexibility of objects posited as emancipation for both objects and people, in fact turned into a form of control; the requisite work of consumption psycho-physically bound people to 'the material world of things' and to the system of often oppressive social forms of everyday life. Put differently, Soviet goods of the state planned economy were more like bad travel companions: people you end up with by virtue of circumstances and whose presence, with time, becomes nauseating and burdensome because they require constant attention and investment of emotional and physical labor.

Tovarishch, n. – a friend; a person regarded with affection and trust; a fellow soldier

The end of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s for many people meant liberation from the oppressive ‘camaraderie’ of Soviet goods. A few years ago, I interviewed a woman in her 60s, who said that ‘freedom was about not having to wash and dry plastic bags’. Some scholars suggest that the Soviet regime indeed imploded due to the bottled-up desire for the very fashionable, embellished, disposable goods that Rodchenko resented in Paris (see Fehérváry, 2009). The desire that, as Constructivists recognized, could not be destroyed on a Party order, rather ought to be to redirect towards collective goals. Apparently, Soviet products (highly standardized, minimally functional, and without alternatives) dismally failed. Yet, despite this failure and the collapse of the entire Soviet economy, Soviet goods did not disappear completely. Recent market reports state that goods manufactured according to Soviet GOSTs still dominate many product categories. More remarkably, some Soviet goods emerged as cultural artifacts, assuming a central role in making sense of the past and present society.

In ‘From stigma to cult’, Merkel (2006) discusses the cult of the Trabi, an East German car. Similarly, Klumbytė (2010) tells of the reincarnation of the ‘Soviet sausage’ as a socio-political symbol in Lithuania. I have also I explored the cultural iconization of the Soviet cheese *Druzhba* (friendship) in Russia (Kravets and Orge, 2010). These accounts demonstrate that Soviet goods were propelled to such cultural status by a high degree of standardization, normalization, and durability across space and time, the values so praised by Constructivists but also so damned as tangible evidence of socialist economic inefficiency (see Fehérváry, 2009). However, *contra* Constructivists, today the focus on ‘material form’ – specifically, aesthetic constancy– not only trumps a product’s utility (and deficiencies and failings thereof) but transforms a Soviet good into a mythical figure – a hero, which triumphantly survived the ordeals of living under the Soviet regime and the regime’s breakdown. A Soviet good appears endowed with an array of human qualities and an anthropomorphic power of agency. To illustrate, I would like to reproduce here a poem⁸ to Soviet cheese:

8 This poem by Igor Ignatiev was broadcasted in the radio program on 14 November 2003. Archived print-out is available at www.echo.msk.ru/programs/plsyrok.

Российский плавленный сырок
 В года суровых испытаний
 Во дни сомнений и метаний
 Был над тобой не властен рок.
 Ветрами грозными продул,
 Ты воплощал народный гений,
 И был для многих поколений
 Скорее символ, чем продукт.
 В эпоху непроглядной тьмы
 Кремлевским в пику истуканам,
 Разливши водку по стаканам,
 Тобой закусывали мы.
 Хотя и меньше, чем едой,
 Но ты был больше, чем закуской.
 Ты был идеей нашей русской
 И путеводною звездой...

Russian processed cheese. In days of doubts and quests, fate was powerless over you. Blasted by formidable winds, you embodied people's genius. And for many generations, you have been more of a symbol than a product.

During the epoch of bleak darkness, in spite of Kremlin dummies, we poured vodka into glasses and chased it down with you. Although less than a meal, you were certainly more than a snack. You were our Russian (national) idea. And a guiding star...

Clearly, albeit poetically over-expressed, a Soviet product is presented here as a *tovarishch* in the romantic sense – someone who endured the same difficulties, shared the same dangers, strived for the same cause and has therefore become highly regarded. Imbued with affective values, an object appears to have transcended its original object-ness but in a manner that so flagrantly defies the Constructivists' ideal! In this case, the object becomes an extreme objectification, a concretion of past events and experiences, a memory touchstone, a fixture binding social practices, an index of cultural values, and a symbol of the Soviet epoch, which makes it into a non-objective entity – an icon. It is a fetish par excellence of the Soviet life that never was⁹. This ascent to an iconic status casts goods such as Druzhba cheese and 'Soviet sausage' as valuable economic entities in the sign-value dominated post-Fordist market economy. The symbolic qualities ascribed to Soviet goods and the mere recognizability of their 'material form' among the peoples of former Soviet territories means that the exchange value of everyday Soviet goods now well exceeds their use value (see Klumbytë, 2010). Thus, in post-socialist Russia, transformed (through collective processes of remembering and forgetting the Soviet past) into a *tovarishch*, a Soviet product, like *Druzhba*, became a valued *tovar* and a private property, a capitalist object proper.

9 For a detailed discussion of this process and life of Soviet products in post-socialist Russia see Kravets and Orge (2010).

Coda

In telling this story of Soviet goods, my intent was not to contribute to the current sentiments that the socialist project is dead and that the Constructivists' ideals are thoroughly utopian endorsements of Bolshevik rule. Instead, my discussion attempts to suggest the need to attend more precisely to the ideological and political dimensions of Constructivism. Both the Constructivists' own experimentations and the grotesque Soviet attempts to differently construct 'the world of everyday things' were hampered by a poor material base in Russia and the Party's focus on rapid modernization of a heavy industry. The Constructivists' utopian vision, then, was left largely un-translated. Aware of the organizing effects of objects on human subjects, theirs was a vision for a fundamental restructuring of social relations and social conditions premised on different relationships to things. What could these different relations be and how could they be constructed? This remains an open question.

Arvatov, Rodchenko and others proposed that we make an object equal, a co-worker and a comrade, i.e. a subject, with the belief that a subject position is inherently liberatory, bound to equality and new forms of social organization. The history of struggles for emancipation, however, attests to the limits of a subject status. Obtaining socio-political rights often does not result in an elimination of inequalities and a fundamental change of the power structure that sustained the relations of objectification. One form of objectification tends to be replaced by another, in fact many others. As one becomes a subject of politics, she also becomes an object of policies and markets. Also, contrary to the Constructivists' faith in the emancipatory power of technology for both things and people, technology made objectification easier and also aided the proliferation of forms of objectification.

This is not to suggest that we, as subjects, are not implicated in objectifying ourselves. As human subjects, we seem entangled in a chain of objectification and self-objectification (see Bartky, 1990). To become equal with an object, then, I propose we embrace the *tovar* in *tovarishch* and give up our romantic attachment to a subject position. I do not propose this as an exercise in empathy. Many current discussions on subject-object relations, particularly in the context of sustainability, take this general route of empathy i.e. we must see and/or treat objects differently, from 'take better care of objects' to 'recognize that objects have their own phenomenology'.

I would instead suggest, in the spirit of Constructivist experimentation, the following: why not become a 'black on black' – a formless, un-individual, non-

identity-able mass over black¹⁰, and accept, rather than avoid, the invisibility, silence, and unknown-ness of matter. After all, one way that the Constructivists tried to eliminate the well-worn world of social conventions, principles, structures, and forms (of representation) was to dissolve them into abstraction. The idea was to erase differences and bring out alternative forms of connections and relations, in order for a new essence of an aesthetico-political organization to emerge.

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10 In 1918 Rodchenko created a series of 'Black on Black' paintings. In Russian avant-garde, the concept of 'black' is complex, yet scarcely elaborated. Roughly put, as 'no color,' black represents nothing but itself, still it does not denote a passive emptiness but a space of an infinite generative potential (e.g., Lavrentiev et al., 2005: 14-15; 98).

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