Arvatov, Boris (1886-1940)

Born in Kiev, Ukraine (then Russia) in 1886, Boris Ignatievich Arvatov (Борис Игнатьевич Арватов) was a leading Russian and Soviet Marxist art critic who contributed to theories of Constructivism and art production. An ardent Marxist, Arvatov became a Communist Party member in 1920 and served as a commissar on the Polish front. After the Civil War, Arvatov focused his political ideas on a new notion of art. In his books and articles, he proposed that art should move beyond non-utilitarian bourgeois forms, towards work produced by an artist-constructor in a way that uses the Communist system of material production as its model. In his 1922 essay “Пролетариат и левое искусство” (“The Proletariat and Leftist Art”), he wrote that Modernist European art, especially Cézanne and Picasso “have unconsciously been cleaning up the fields of old art and have plowed them ready for the proletarian sowing” (226). This historical materialist interpretation of Modernist Art saw it as the revolutionary stage in the progress toward liberation. In 1923, Arvatov was placed in a psychiatric hospital for shell-shock treatment, where he spent the rest of his life. Despite his confinement, he continued to write for Constructivist journals, notably *ЛЕФ* (*Левый фронт искусств*, or *LEF*, *Left Front of the Arts*), and, in 1930, saw the publication of *Об агитационном и производственном искусстве* (“On Agitational and Production Art”).

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List of works

All primary sources are the English translations.

Arvatov, B. (1988) ‘The Proletariat and Leftist Art’, trans. J. Bowlt in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*,New York: Viking Press, 225-230.

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References and further reading

Andrews, R. and Kalinovska M. (eds.) (1990) *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932*,New York: Rizzoli.

Kiaer, C. (1997) ‘Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects’ *October* (81): 105-118. <bit.ly/OzjyWx>

Lodder, C. (1985) *Russian Constructivism*,New Haven: Yale.