As the epigraph to its introductory chapter informs us, Christina Kiaer's *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* takes its title from John Lennon's utopian-tinged 1971 hit 'Imagine', in which the former Beatle intones his listeners to imagine a world freed not only from the burdens of nationalism and war, but from possessiveness itself. If this pop culture connection may initially seem a bit hokey (it did, at least, to this reader), Lennon's lyrics in fact serve as a perfect title and opening gambit for Kiaer's study. For beyond its plaintive idealism, Lennon's song evinces something of both the specific transformative yearnings of the most ambitious popular culture, as well as – in its continued popularity on iPods, radio stations, and 'best-of' lists – the continuing hold of past cultural forms on the always-unfulfilled present.

Both of these concerns – popular culture and the dialectical relationship of past and present – are central to Kiaer's wide-ranging and immensely readable study, which investigates the concept of the 'socialist object' in Russia of the 1920s and seeks to position this as arguably Russian constructivism's most compelling contribution to twentieth-century avant-garde culture. Kiaer's notion of a specifically socialist object is guided above all by the Soviet theorist Boris Arvatov's brilliant 1925 essay, 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing' (Kiaer's English translation of which appeared in the journal *October* in 1997), which imagines a new form of post-Revolutionary thing that exists not as passive use object or commodity fetish, but rather as an active 'comrade' of the people who use and interact with it, shaping new experiences of consumption, labour, and subjectivity itself. The socialist object, be it an overcoat or the latest technological gadget (for Arvatov speaks not of rarefied artworks, but everyday things), is to be flexible, portable, expedient, transparent, and – because of just these qualities – 'emotional', engaging consumer fantasy and utilizing the expanded creative possibilities of industrial modernity for specifically socialist ends. As Kiaer argues with a nod to Walter Benjamin, it seeks to awaken people from the dream sleep of capitalism and lead them, fully sensitized, into a reinvented socialist future.

The six chapters of *Imagine No Possessions* examine this proposal by focusing on engagements in the 1920s with utilitarian production by several key constructivist figures: Vladimir Tatlin's design of men's sportswear and a wood-burning stove intended for use in domestic kitchens; Liubov' Popova and Varvara Stepanova's fabric and clothing designs, including work with the First State Cotton-Printing Factory; Aleksandr Rodchenko's collaborations with Vladimir Mayakovsky on product advertising and packaging and his design of a worker's club interior for the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels* in Paris; and, in her epilogue, the collaboration of Vsevolod Meyerhold, El Lissitzky, and Sergei Tret'iakov on the 1926 play *I
Want a Child! Although Arvatov's essay mentions neither constructivism nor art, Kiaer's central thesis is that these art-into-life projects comprise a focused attempt to realize just the sort of comradely thing he describes – and, most significantly, to re-imagine possession and objecthood themselves for a culture on the tumultuous path towards socialism.

In her very first pages, Kiaer stresses the primary importance of the particular historical moment in which her tale unfolds: that of the New Economic Policy (NEP), Lenin's attempt, beginning in late 1921, to resuscitate the Soviet economy from its disastrous post-Revolutionary contraction by partially reintroducing private trade. NEP, in prioritizing capitalist means to ensure the success of communist revolution, established a fundamental contradiction at the core of budding Soviet society. Rather than understanding this contradictory environment as a universally negative force on the constructivist project, however – as something that necessarily led to the ‘failure’ of the movement's original goals and the corruption of its initial focus on modernist self-critique – Kiaer seeks to rethink Russian constructivism through the newfound emphasis on consumption, rather than just production, that NEP demanded. She asks: ‘what if we were to understand NEP not as a total defeat of revolutionary ideals and of Productivist goals along with it, but as a circumstance that forced these ideals and goals to take a different, but perhaps still productive, path towards socialism?’ (25) The result, she answers, would be a study – her study – that examines the utilitarian objects of Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stepanova, and others not as halting compromises (as has largely been the case so far), but rather as an actual expansion of constructivism's terms. Constructivism thus conceived, Kiaer contends, is in fact emboldened by its necessary confrontation with ‘the power and tenacity of the commodity fetish within modernity’ (26), and driven by the desire to redirect this power towards a socialist transformation of the most basic elements of everyday life.

Kiaer's most compelling discussions of this proposal come in her chapters on the textile and clothing designs by Stepanova and Popova and the advertising and packaging collaborations of Rodchenko and Mayakovsky. In both cases, the dilemma facing these artists was to produce successful socialist interventions within the most capitalist of enterprises – fashion and marketing – and to do this within the chaotic and contradictory environment of NEP. For Stepanova and Popova, Kiaer illustrates, designing clothes meant negotiating changing formations of gender in post-Revolutionary Soviet society – both working with, and attempting to challenge, the ‘individual fantasies and desires’ that drove these. If Stepanova's designs thus evince a desire to elide sexual difference in the name of functional transparency, Popova actively looked to contemporary, mostly Western European, women's fashion in her textile work. In so doing, Kiaer argues, the artist both responded to consumer fantasy – to the desire to be fashionable, just as active in the Moscow of 1923 as that of 2008 – while simultaneously rendering transparent, through the studied ‘clumsiness’ of her dresses, ‘not just labor value, but the labored production of femininity’ itself (132). Both of these urges, Kiaer's chapter
concludes, are essential to the expanded constructivist project during NEP: to make objects that are both transparent and, in Arvatov's phrasing, 'emotional', at once things and comrades alike.

Rodchenko and Mayakovsky's advertising and packaging designs, Kiaer argues, attempt a similarly dialectical feat: to negotiate between wish-images of the past (for the products they marketed were almost universally pre-Revolutionary in origin) and the urgencies and demands of a socialist culture to come. Focusing on the blatant orality that characterizes much of their advertising work, Kiaer describes the Rodchenko/Mayakovsky collaborations – for products including cooking oil, cigarettes, and cookies – as 'transitional objects' akin to a child's pacifier (which, as luck would have it, is the subject of one of their best-known advertising efforts). Just as a pacifier eases the child's taking leave of its mother's breast, Kiaer contends, so these commercial images, in both engaging past desires and analysing the psychic structures that drive them, aid in the passage to an emerging socialist future. The pair's 1923 design of an advertising poster for Red October cookies, for instance, stresses the cookies' pre-Revolutionary brand name and continues from their earlier advertisements in featuring an active little girl at its centre, but combines these elements – along with its oesophagus-like spiral of cascading cookies and evocation of Rodchenko's own constructivist sculpture – into a complexly self-conscious pictorial metaphor of the present coming to meet and confront the past. The advertisement thus demonstrates, Kiaer argues, that 'desire [can] be comprehended – rather than repressed – and eventually harnessed for socialism through the socialist object' (195).

As these chapter excurses suggest, Imagine No Possessions is broad in its historical knowledge and ambitious in its theoretical reach. Full of archival nuggets – who knew, for instance, that the Lef theorist Osip Brik was also on the managerial payroll of the industrial conglomerate Moysel'prom? – and information-laden discussions of topics from early Soviet fashion to the organization of industrial production during NEP, Kiaer's study is clearly the product of extensive archival digging. But perhaps most impressive is the intensity of the analytical grinder through which the book's empirical findings are put: with the aid of theoretical impulses ranging from Benjamin and Arvatov to the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, Kiaer constellates these into much more than the sum of their parts, producing a truly innovative reading of the objects and historical debates at hand. Nobody before, certainly, has thought to put Rodchenko and Winnicott together, much less to read Popova through competing theories of the commodity fetish.

There are prices to be paid on both sides of the ledger, to be sure: Kiaer's broad reach occasionally obscures the arguments of her individual chapters, while her theoretical engagements can become repetitious (mentions of the 'flash' of the Benjaminitian dialectical image and the redemption of consumer fantasy by the socialist object are frequent). And her visual analyses, if almost always adventurous, can certainly invite scepticism: her repeated spotting of vaginal imagery, for instance, or her reading of Rodchenko and Mayakovsky's
advertisement of 1925 for Triple Peaks beer as ‘a visual metaphor of anal rape’ (234). But these questionable moments are themselves redeemed by the sheer historical density and analytical vigour of her study. Kiaer both draws us into the chaotic atmosphere of Russian life during NEP and asks us, in no uncertain terms, to re-think constructivism in the process. Indeed, the final reach of her study is not just constructivism, or NEP, or even Russia itself; just like Lennon in 1971, she wants ultimately to draw her audience to the contemplation of its own situation – to ask us to ‘imagine no possessions’ in the midst of the capitalist triumphalism and totalized market that have come to dominate Russia and the West alike.2

Together with Maria Gough's *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (which similarly follows the constructivists' path into industrial production, though with far more attention to the 'laboratory' work that immediately preceded this shift and a near-monographic focus on the artist Karl Ioganson), *Imagine No Possessions* marks 2005 as a banner year for our understanding of the early Soviet avant-garde: as far as constructivism is concerned, arguably the most significant since Christina Lodder's seminal study *Russian Constructivism* appeared in 1983.3 With newly flexible Russian archival policies and a growing number of young scholars mining the country's avant-garde past, we can duly hope that further re-imaginings on the order of Kiaer's are soon to come.

Footnotes

1 Of particular note in Kiaer's pursuit of this argument is her discussion of several preliminary Mayakovsky sketches for these advertisements, reproduced in her book for the very first time.

2 Although this reader, at least, wished that Kiaer had more rigorously engaged the relevance of her project for cultural politics today. For is there any more 'comradely object' than the iPod (and now iPhone), that ever-present reminder of the increasingly dematerialized structures of contemporary capitalism? And given Kiaer's focus on the shifting cookie market in pre- and post-Revolutionary Russia, what are we to make of the fact that the dominant cookie factory in Russia today carries the oddly out-of-time brand name 'Bolshevik', even as it is owned by the French multinational food conglomerate Danon? (Indeed, the Bolshevik brand continues to steal market share from the still-existent Red October company — whose advertisements Rodchenko and Mayakovsky designed — due in large part to the latter's inability, as a wholly Russian-owned firm, to afford the extensive television advertising so crucial for today's market.)