

Celebrating Suprematism

*New Approaches to the Art
of Kazimir Malevich*

Edited by Christina Lodder



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New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich

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Éva Forgács

is an art historian, art critic and curator. She was professor at the László Moholy-Nagy University in her native Budapest and worked as curator at the Hungarian Museum of Decorative Arts. She has a PhD in Art History from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and has published several essays and monographs on various aspects of Modernism in edited volumes, textbooks, and journals. Her main field of research and study has been the history of the Bauhaus and the Russian and Central European Avant-Gardes. She relocated to Los Angeles in 1993 and has been teaching at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California, since 1994. Forgacs was co-curator (with Nancy Perloff) of *Monuments of the Future: Designs by El Lissitzky* (Getty Research Institute, 1998), and was consultant for LACMA's *Central European Avant-Gardes* exhibition in 2002. 2016-2018 she was President of SHERA (Society of Historians of Russian and East European Art and Architecture), served as book-review editor of *Centropa*, is Advisory Board member of EAM (European Network of Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies), and is member-elect of the International Academic Committee of the Bauhaus Institute, Chinese Academy of Art. Forgács was awarded the EURIAS scholarship, and was a research fellow

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Regina Khidekel

received her MA and PhD from the Academy of Arts in Leningrad. An art critic and curator, she was the art director of the Diaghilev Art Center (1990-1993, the first unofficial art organisation in St. Petersburg following perestroika); the founding director of the Russian American Cultural Center in New York (1998); and the founding president of the Lazar Khidekel Society (2010). Regina Khidekel has frequently contributed to Russian and American journals such

as *Iskusstvo*, *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo*, *Teatr*, *Tvorchestvo*, and *ArtNews*, as well as numerous catalogues and books, including *It's the Real Thing: Soviet and Post-Soviet Sots Art and American Pop Art* (Minnesota University Press, 1998). Dr Khidekel has made a substantial contribution to the scholarship on Lazar Khidekel through her cataloguing and organisational activities for the Lazar Khidekel Archive, her research, and her curatorial expertise, which has resulted in several international exhibitions, conferences, lectures and publications. Above all, she edited and contributed to the monograph *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism* (Prestel Publishing, 2014).

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Irina Vakar

is an art historian and researcher at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. She is the author of approximately 100 publications and is a regular participant in conferences, both in Russia and abroad. Her research interests include the Russian Avant-Garde, the oeuvre of Kazimir Malevich, Russian-French exchanges, art criticism, and Russian Symbolism. She has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Cubisme-Cubism-Kubismus* (Hannover, Moscow, 2003); *The Jack of Diamonds* (Moscow, 2005); *Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii* (Moscow, 2006); *Petr Konchalovskii* (Moscow, 2010); *Aleksandr Deineka* (Moscow, Rome, 2010-2011); *Boris Grigoriev* (Moscow, 2011); *Natalia Goncharova* (Moscow, 2013-2014); and *Georgii Iakulov* (Moscow, 2015). She initiated and co-curated the major retrospective and catalogue of Malevich's work at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1989.

Introduction

Christina Lodder

The contents of *Celebrating Suprematism* are based on the papers that were delivered at the conference – ‘Celebrating One Hundred Years of Suprematism’ – which was held at the Harriman Institute of Columbia University, New York, in December 2015, to mark the centenary of the emergence of Suprematism in May 1915 and its entrance onto the Russian public arena in November and December that year.¹ The conference was arranged by the Malevich Society, in association with the Harriman Institute, the Lazar Khidekel Society, the Society of Historians of Eastern European, Eurasian and Russian Art and Architecture (SHERA), and the organisation, Russian Art and Culture.

Conceived as a forum to highlight the latest research into Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematism and its aesthetic, philosophical, and theoretical ramifications, the conference brought together scholars from America, Russia and Europe. Established specialists as well as a younger generation of experts were able to share the results of their most recent investigations and engage in very fruitful discussions. Many of the new insights that they produced have been facilitated by the increasing accessibility of primary materials.

Since the 2005 conference ‘Rethinking Malevich’, which was also organised by the Malevich Society, and the publication of the conference proceedings in 2007,² a significant number of new studies on Malevich have appeared and a great deal of primary material has been published. Most importantly for the English-speaking world, Irina Vakar and Tatiana Mikienko’s ground-breaking, two-volume *Malevich about Himself, Contemporaries about Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism* [*Malevich o sebe. Sovremenniki o Malevich.*

1 Malevich showed three Suprematist canvases at *The Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art. Embroidery and Carpets from Artists’ Designs* [*Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva. Vyshivki i kovry po eskizam khudozhnikov*] (Moscow: Galereia Lemers’e, 1915), which opened on 6 November 1915, several weeks before Malevich showed thirty-nine Suprematist paintings at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0,10 (Zero-Ten)* [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaiia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol’-desiat’)*] (Petrograd: Khudozhestvennoe Biuro N. E. Dobychinoi, 19 November 1915 – 19 January 1916).

2 Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich’s Birth* (London: Pindar Press, 2007). This contains a detailed account by Charlotte Douglas of the various primary materials that had been published prior to 2005, as well as a brief history by Christina Lodder of Malevich scholarship in Russia and the West.

Pis'ma. Dokumenty. Vospominaniia. Kritika] has appeared in an English translation as Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*.³

In addition, Malevich's seminal text on objectless art, *Die gegenstandlose Welt*,⁴ has been issued in a new English translation.⁵ This more accurate version of the text is based on the Russian version and reinstates sections that were omitted from the highly edited and distorted German translation, which was published as the 11th Bauhaus Book in 1927. The new translation is accompanied and amplified by the inclusion of two hitherto unpublished texts, produced within the context of the Bauhaus book by Malevich in 1927.⁶ Both of these major projects were supported by the Malevich Society.

Alongside this freshly available translated material, numerous exhibitions, including the Malevich shows at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Tate Modern in London, have contained new visual material and new research.⁷ The Stedelijk augmented this information with their impressive and detailed catalogue of the Collection amassed by Nikolai Khardzhiev, which contains an extensive section on Malevich, comprising 183 items in all and over fifty Suprematist drawings.⁸ The fact that each item is reproduced and in high quality means that anyone unable to visit the Collection itself is still able to gain a fine understanding of the numerous drawings it contains.

The publication of rare or unique documents produced by Malevich and his colleagues is extremely useful for all scholars studying the artist, wherever they live. Until 2003, the almanac that Malevich and his group of supporters published in 1920 as *Unovis No. 1* was only publicly available in the Manuscript Department of the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow – difficult

3 Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015)

4 Kasimir Malewitsch, *Die gegenstandlose Welt*. Bauhausbücher 11 (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927).

5 Kazimir Malevich, 'The World as Objectlessness' in Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel / Hatje Cantz, 2014), 145-200.

6 'Two Autograph Manuscripts by Kazimir Malevich within the Context of the Bauhaus Book', in *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, 203-211.

7 *Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde: Featuring Selections from the Khardzhiev and Costakis Collections* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2013); and Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014).

8 Gert Imanse and Frank Lamoën, with Anna Ostrovskaya and Elvie Casteleijn, eds., *Russian Avant-Garde, The Khardzhiev Collection, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: nai010 publishers / Khardzhiev Foundation / Stedelijk Museum, 2013). For the extensive Malevich section, see *Ibid.*, 310-407, nos. 399-582.

to access and in a rather fragile condition.⁹ It is now accessible in a facsimile edition meticulously prepared by Dr Tatiana Goriacheva, accompanied by a convenient supplement, which reprints the texts accurately (and more legibly than the original) in tandem with an extremely helpful introduction and enlightening commentaries and notes.¹⁰

Until recently, certain archival materials remained closed to Western scholars, most significantly the numerous unpublished manuscripts and other materials that were confiscated from Nikolai Khardzhiev in 1994 and now form part of the collection of the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art in Moscow. Fortunately, this problem was partially rectified in 2017 by the appearance of the first volume of *The Archive of N. I. Khardzhiev: Russian Avant-Garde: Materials and Documents from the Collection of RGALI*.¹¹ The enthusiasm this development has generated will undoubtedly be matched when the second volume appears.

Although many materials have appeared since 2015, the year marking the centenary of Suprematism, both Russian and Western scholars found themselves at that time with more substantial resources at their command than they had possessed a decade earlier, and thus in a much better position to study the movement and its founder, to establish a firmer chronology of its development, to gain insights into the creative process, and to acquire a more profound understanding of the ideas and impulses that surrounded the emergence and subsequent development of Suprematism.

Obviously, central to any discussion of Suprematism is the role of *The Black Square* [*Chernyi kvadrat*], which was initially simply called *The Quadrilateral* [*Chetyreugol'nik*], but rapidly acquired the present title.¹² The painting was produced in early summer 1915 and publicly exhibited for the first time in December 1915 in Petrograd at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*. In 2015, in recognition of the centenary of the painting's creation, the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, where the work now resides, undertook a detailed examination of the canvas, using the very latest techniques. Irina Vakar's paper details and discusses the results of that scientific scrutiny. Surprisingly, and contrary to the expectations of most scholars, who thought that

9 Manuscript Department, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, fond 76, no. 9.

10 *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil'noe izdanie*, ed. Tat'iana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel'stvo Skanrus, 2003); and Tat'ina Goriacheva, 'Unovis No. 1, Vitebsk, 1920. Prilozhenie k faksimil'nomu izdaniuu', *ibid.*

11 *Arkhiv N. I. Khardzhiev. Russkii avangard: materialy i dokumenty iz sobraniia RGALI*, tom 1 (Moscow: RGALI, 2017).

12 See *Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0.10 (nol'-desiat')*. *Katalog* (Petrograd, 1915), no. 39.

the work underneath *The Black Square* was an earlier Suprematist painting, the examination revealed that the 1915 painting hides not one, but two compositions. The first image, produced in a Cubo-Futurist idiom, was succeeded by a Proto-Suprematist composition, which was then painted over with the image of *The Black Square*. This evidence forces us to reconsider established theories about the painting's creation. It suggests that the conception of the work was far more complicated than is commonly believed, and that *The Black Square* may, indeed, have been the first Suprematist painting.

Having produced *The Black Square* and other Suprematist works, how did Malevich react and what did he think about his important breakthrough? Charlotte Douglas tackles the period that immediately followed the completion of the first Suprematist painting in early summer 1915, and the first public exhibitions of the Suprematist works in November and December 1915. Using Malevich's correspondence, she discusses the artist's various formal experiments and the ideas that he considered as he struggled to give his radical new work a solid theoretical grounding. Although scholars have usually dated Suprematism's engagement with the wider sphere to the post-revolutionary period, Professor Douglas reveals that right from the beginning, Malevich construed Suprematism as a way of looking at the entire world, rather than as merely another style of painting. She argues that Malevich saw it reflected systematically in music, sculpture, design, painting, architecture, and even the universe – a kind of natural, visual mathematics. Inevitably, this early understanding persisted throughout the course of Suprematism, underpinning and influencing its evolution.

Among the important ideas that clearly inspired Malevich at this point were notions concerning the fourth dimension, evident in the subtitle he gave to his painting *Boy with Knapsack – 'Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension'*. Linda Dalrymple Henderson had explored the connection between the Russian Avant-Garde and the writings of Peter Ouspensky and the British 'hyper-space philosopher' Charles Howard Hinton in her earlier work.¹³ In her essay for this volume, she relates these ideas (which pre-dated the temporal fourth dimension of Einsteinian Relativity Theory and its 'space-time' continuum), to the science that actually excited the imaginations of the public and artists alike in the 1900s and 1910s – the ether physics of the late nineteenth century. During the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century, the discovery of the X-ray, radioactivity, and the Hertzian waves that stimulated the development

13 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983; rev. ed., Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

of wireless telegraphy offered a new image of matter as dematerialising into space, and of space itself as being filled with electromagnetic waves, vibrating in the ubiquitous, imponderable medium known as the ether. The fourth dimension was often discussed in relation to the ether of space, with the two concepts functioning in tandem as signs of an invisible 'meta-reality', just beyond the reach of human vision. The subject of the ether is one of the major lacunae in the history of early-twentieth century art, and Professor Henderson restores the concept to the discussion of Malevich and his Suprematist works, whose titles have long made clear the artist's interest in topics such as electromagnetism and wireless telegraphy.

In a further examination of the intersection between art, science and technology, Dr Alexander Bouras looks at another hitherto neglected aspect of the cultural and intellectual context surrounding Malevich and the emergence of Suprematism – the ideas concerning creativity and invention, as formulated and promoted by the thinker Petr Engelmeier. For Engelmeier, creativity [*tvorchestvo*] in all fields of human activity resulted from a three-part process: intuition, reason, and craftsmanship [*masterstvo*]. Dr Bouras demonstrates that these concepts were fundamental for the Russian Avant-Garde's development of the theory of 'artistic culture' and are crucial to understanding notions of the creative process as expressed in the theory and practice of Suprematism.

Among the elements constituting the Russian Avant-Garde's definition of 'artistic culture' was the concept of *faktura* [texture]. Elaborated by Vladimir Markov and others, it is important for understanding the significance of materiality and immateriality in Suprematism. Maria Kokkori, Alexander Bouras, and Irina Karasik have collaborated in their discussion of Malevich's interest in matter and *faktura*, placing his investigations within the context of science and technology. In Malevich's teaching, *faktura* fused the material and immaterial, challenging preconceptions about its meaning, practice, purpose, and use. Malevich and his students at Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art) explored *faktura* as an idea, a formless phenomenon, a technological or scientific development, and a focus for future discoveries. In this respect, the visual and literary Avant-Garde shared certain interests, especially in carborundum – an electromagnetic, metallic substance. It was the subject of Aleksei Kruchenykh's poem 'Chemical Famine – A Ballad to the Stone Carborundum' [*Golod khimicheskii – ballady o kamne karborunde*] and at the same time an object of intense theoretical and practical exploration at Unovis.

Indeed, in the post-revolutionary period, Unovis became a central factor in Malevich's further development of Suprematism. Very soon after producing his first Suprematist painting, Malevich had sought to organise a

group of supporters around his approach. In 1916, he had created the short-lived Supremus group, but it was only after he arrived in the Belorussian city of Vitebsk, in November 1919, that he finally succeeded in establishing 'a party of supremacy' – Unovis – which was set up in January-February 1920, within the Vitebsk People's Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche). By the summer of that year, the Suprematists had come to dominate the school. Yet as soon as he had founded his Suprematist party, Malevich wanted to extend it and the influence of his ideas beyond Vitebsk, hoping to gain the support of art schools in other cities of Soviet Russia, and above all in Moscow. Dr Alexander Lisov provides an illuminating discussion of Malevich's attempts to achieve this goal. Not surprisingly, the geographical proximity of Smolensk to Vitebsk encouraged the creation of a branch of Unovis there in April 1920, which was run by the artists Władysław Strzemiński (Vladislav Strzheminskii) and Katarzyna Kobro (Ekaterina Kobro). Another branch was established in Orenburg, with Ivan Kudriashev at the helm. Both groups were relatively small and short lived, although the Orenburg branch played a major role in organising Unovis's Moscow exhibition of 1921.

One of Malevich's most active supporters within the Vitebsk Unovis, was El Lissitzky. Dr Samuel Johnson examines the relationship between these two artists through the lens of architecture. An initially productive collaboration between the two men, based on a mutually acceptable division between theory and practice, was upset when Lissitzky moved to Germany in winter 1921. Their relationship resumed in 1924, when Lissitzky was convalescing in Switzerland, where he renewed his focus on architecture, working on the design of his signature building, the *Wolkenbügel* and publishing articles in *Das Kunstblatt* and *ABC*. At this time, Malevich was also engaged with architecture. Concentrating on the divergent architectural paths of these former colleagues, Dr Johnson clarifies aspects of Lissitzky and Malevich's collaboration and their respective views on the built environment.

Not surprisingly, architecture was a key concern for Malevich in extending Suprematism out into the wider world and it played an important role in Unovis's aspirations. Among the students who were taught by Lissitzky in the Studio of Architecture and Typography was Lazar Khidekel, who made a major contribution to developing a Suprematist architecture. Dr Regina Khidekel traces his development from planar Suprematism to volumetric Suprematism, encompassing axonometric projections, three-dimensional models, architectures, and his articulation of what has been called Suprematism's first truly architectural project – his design for a Workers' Club of 1926. In the mid-1920s, directly inspired by Suprematism and its notion of an organic form-creating continuum, Khidekel explored various philosophical, scientific and techno-

logical approaches, and proposed innovative design solutions for creating new urban environments, where people would be able to live in harmony with nature and would be protected from disasters – both natural and man-made.

Malevich's aspiration to reconstruct the world according to Suprematist principles was not only realised in the work undertaken by the members of Unovis, but was also developed in a whole body of theoretical texts that the artist wrote while living in Vitebsk. Many of these actually appeared in print, but some remained as manuscripts. In 1920, in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, Malevich announced that he would shortly be publishing a text entitled 'We as utilitarian perfection'.¹⁴ It never appeared, but Dr Tatiana Goriacheva has discovered a fragment of the missing manuscript in the Nikolai Khardzhiev papers now in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow. In her essay, Dr Goriacheva discusses this text, analysing Malevich's argument that it is essential to replace individualistic tendencies in art with collective creativity. At the same time, she places Malevich's thinking within the wider context of notions of utility and the concept of the 'We' in Russian culture.

In connection with the Suprematists' collective commitment to using their artistic skills to reconstruct the environment, they became involved with textile design. This move predated the Revolution of 1917, and in her essay, Dr Julia Tulovsky emphasises the significance of textiles for the establishment and acceptance of the Suprematist movement in the 1910s, and the importance of Suprematism for developing new approaches in avant-garde textiles during the 1920s. She points out that the first public manifestation of Suprematism was in the context of embroidery at the *Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art. Embroidery and Carpets from Artists' Designs*, which opened on 6 November 1915, several weeks before the legendary display of Suprematist paintings at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*.¹⁵ She argues that Suprematist designs for embroidery were largely the channel through which other avant-garde artists, such as Nadezhda Udaltsova, absorbed the new style and that these designs by Malevich and his students became an important medium for disseminating the visual system of Suprematism into the real world.

In tandem with textile design, Suprematism also became involved in ceramics. *The Black Square*, with its immense symbolic meaning and iconic status in twentieth-century art, acted as a design module and even became a trademark for porcelain. The brief cooperation of Malevich and his students with

14 K. Malevich, *Suprematism. 34 risunka* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920), 4.

15 *Katalog vystavki sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva. Vyshivki i kovry po eskizam khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Galereia Lemers'e, 1915), and *Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol'-desiat')* (Petrograd: Khudozhestvennoe biuro N. E. Dobychnoi, 1915)

the State Porcelain Factory, Petrograd, in the early 1920s had a crucial impact not only on the development of Suprematism's visual language, but also on Soviet design. The sensory qualities of porcelain – its whiteness, shine, and plasticity – made it an excellent medium for experimenting with planar and volumetric Suprematism. Dr Yulia Karpova discusses the work of Malevich, Ilia Chashnik, Lazar Khidekel, and Nikolai Suetin in devising new approaches to designing and decorating porcelain. Tracing the Suprematist legacy in the post-war production of the Leningrad Porcelain Factory, she examines work by Suetin, Anna Leporskaia, Eduard Krimmer (Malevich's students) and others. Dr Karpova uses Suprematist porcelain to present a nuanced story of Soviet ceramics, focusing on subtle continuities, rather than shifts and ruptures.

Suprematism was a vital component of Russian and Soviet Culture during the 1910s and 1920s, but its influence also spread far beyond the country's borders. Professor Éva Forgács looks at the way in which artists in Eastern Europe came to acquire a knowledge of Malevich and Suprematism during the 1920s. The artist's most direct contact was with Polish artists, especially Kbro and Strzemiński whom he had first encountered in Moscow in 1919 and who had been members of the Smolensk Unovis in 1920. They were among the founders of the Polish avant-garde group *Blok* in 1924. Their profound understanding and absorption of Suprematism is reflected in the way they criticised it.¹⁶ Yet, for many artists, the first opportunity to encounter Malevich's actual works was the *First Russian Art Exhibition* [*Erste russische Kunstausstellung*] in Berlin, in October 1922. This was extensively reviewed by Eastern-European avant-garde figures, including Lajos Kassák, Ernő Kállai, Alfréd Kemény, and Branko Ve Poljanski, all of whom singled out Malevich as one of the most outstanding, or *the* most outstanding artist in Russia. This set the tone for Malevich's later reception in Eastern Europe. Excerpts from Malevich's writings, which appeared in the 1925 *Europa Almanach*, were widely read, inspiring the Hungarian painter Lajos Vajda (1908-1941) to make eleven pages of detailed notes. Malevich and Suprematism were celebrated during the artist's 1927 trip to Poland, but they were also attacked in Mieczysław Szczuka's article 'The Funeral of Suprematism'.¹⁷ Malevich's subsequent solo exhibition in Berlin,

16 See, for instance, Henryk Stażewski, 'O suprematisme w malarstwie', *Blok*, 1 (8 March 1924); English translation as 'Untitled Statements on Suprematism and Painting', trans. Wanda Kemp-Welch, in Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, with LACMA, 2002), 492-493.

17 Mieczysław Szczuka, 'Pozgonne suprematyzmu' [The Funeral of Suprematism], *Dzwignia*, 2-3 (1927); trans. Wanda Kemp-Welch, in *Between Worlds*, 664-666.

along with the publication of *Die gegenstandslose Welt* as a Bauhaus Book that same year, brought further awareness of his theory and practice to the world outside Russia. As well as generating highly positive reviews, the exhibition also prompted László Moholy-Nagy to invite Malevich to join the 'Painting and Photography' debate in the journal *i 10*. Malevich's pro-painting contribution was not published, and his attitude was considered idiosyncratic. In fact, his reputation for being independent from the mainstream in both his art and discourse greatly contributed to the post-war myth in Eastern Europe of him being the most free-spirited artist of his time.

In 1920s Russia, however, Malevich and Unovis's engagement with architecture and reconstructing Russian reality operated in parallel with Constructivism, which had emerged in early 1921 with an ostensibly similar aim of harnessing artistic skills to create a totally new environment. While Suprematism has tended to be linked with a quintessentially aesthetic approach as well as more spiritual and metaphysical values, Constructivism has been firmly connected with materialist attitudes and the practical, industrial and ideological imperatives associated with Communism and the Bolsheviks. Christina Loder acknowledges the existence of fundamental artistic and theoretical differences dividing the two movements, but argues for a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between them, identifying affinities (both theoretical and practical) that the two movements shared, particularly in the early years, as expressed in their essential approaches towards the analysis of the elements of art, as well as in their attitudes regarding artistic invention and the role of art in society.

All the essays in *Celebrating Suprematism* focus on the creation and immediate development and dissemination of Suprematism in the 1910s and 1920s, although sometimes hinting at repercussions and influence exerted beyond that period. In fact, the influence of Suprematism is far more profound and long-lasting than the chronological parameters of this study suggest. There is no doubt that interest in Malevich and his objectless art is still an important factor in the cultural life of Russia and the West. Today, more than one hundred years after Suprematism emerged, and was unveiled to the public, it continues to have a visual and theoretical impact on artistic practice across all media and throughout the world.

1 City Names

Reflecting the troubled history of Russia is the changing name for the city of Peter the Great, which was founded as St. Petersburg at the beginning of the

eighteenth century. Following the outbreak of the First World War on 1 August 1914, it was renamed Petrograd, which sounded more patriotic. When Lenin died ten years later the city became Leningrad in his honour, and that is how it was known for over seventy years. Only with the fall of Communism in 1991 did it revert to its pre-1914 name of St. Petersburg. In this book, the city is called by the name current at the time about which the author is writing.

This practice has been adopted throughout the text in relation to the names of other cities, which were also changed in the wake of the Revolution, although those changes have frequently been reversed since the demise of Communism.

2 The Calendar

On 31 January 1918 Russia caught up with the rest of Europe and adopted the Gregorian calendar. Before this, dates in Russia were still established on the basis of the Julian calendar, which, by the twentieth century was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar and was frequently designated 'Old Style'. Dates given according to the Gregorian calendar were designated 'New Style'. Hence the Bolshevik uprising took place on 25 October 1917 according to the Russian calendar (Old Style), but on 7 November according to Western usage (New Style). This is why it is called the October Revolution, but its anniversary is celebrated on 7 November. Throughout this book, dates are given in accordance with the calendar in use at the time.

3 System of Transliteration

The system of transliteration used in this text is the Library of Congress System, with the alteration that a single or double diacritical mark denoting the Russian hard and soft signs have been omitted from people's names and surnames when they occur in the main body of the text. Russian surnames have usually been rendered according to this system, except where particular variants have become well established in Western usage, for example, Wassily Kandinsky, not Vasiliï Kandinskii; El Lissitzky, not Lazar Lisitskii; and Vladimir Mayakovsky, not Vladimir Maiakovskii. This also extends to institutions, such as the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, which uses this transliteration rather than Tretiakov.

New Information Concerning *The Black Square*

Irina Vakar

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* [*Chernyi kvadrat*] of 1915 is acknowledged to be one of the emblematic works of modern culture (Fig. 1.1).¹ It is one of those rare, truly revolutionary works that overturned established notions of art. There are very few such works, and all of them were created within a decade. Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* of 1907 dramatically pushed the boundaries of what could be considered aesthetically acceptable, mixing categories of beauty and ugliness, while the first readymade, Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913, demonstrated the possibility of removing an object from its everyday context and providing it with a completely new meaning. From this perspective, the radicalism of Malevich's *Black Square*, produced two years later, does not seem so striking. Nevertheless, during the 100 years since its creation, the painting has proved to be of phenomenal heuristic value.

The Black Square is a paradoxical work. Technically executed as an easel painting (with oil paint on canvas), it introduced new mechanisms for generating meaning, which are, in theory, alien to painting as an art form. The work provokes explanations, interpretations, reminiscences, and brain games, but it does not exclude the possibility of contemplation or even meditation. For artists today, it is an object to be manipulated in countless, very diverse ways. For theoreticians, it has provided the stimulus for numerous speculations. Malevich himself repeatedly returned to this work during the twenty years after its creation and until the end of his life, finding new meanings in it as well as semantic overtones. I am going to list some of them.

According to Malevich, the initial idea of *The Black Square* is related to the décor and costumes that he designed for the performance in December 1913 of the opera *Victory over the Sun* by Aleksei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matiushin. This suggests that the image was initially conceived as an antithesis to the sun (which in itself opens up a wide field for interpretation), and a sign of

1 When the painting was first shown at the *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* it was listed as *The Quadrilateral* [*Chetyreugol'nik*], see *Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0.10 (nol'-desiat')*. *Katalog* (Petrograd, 1915), no 98.

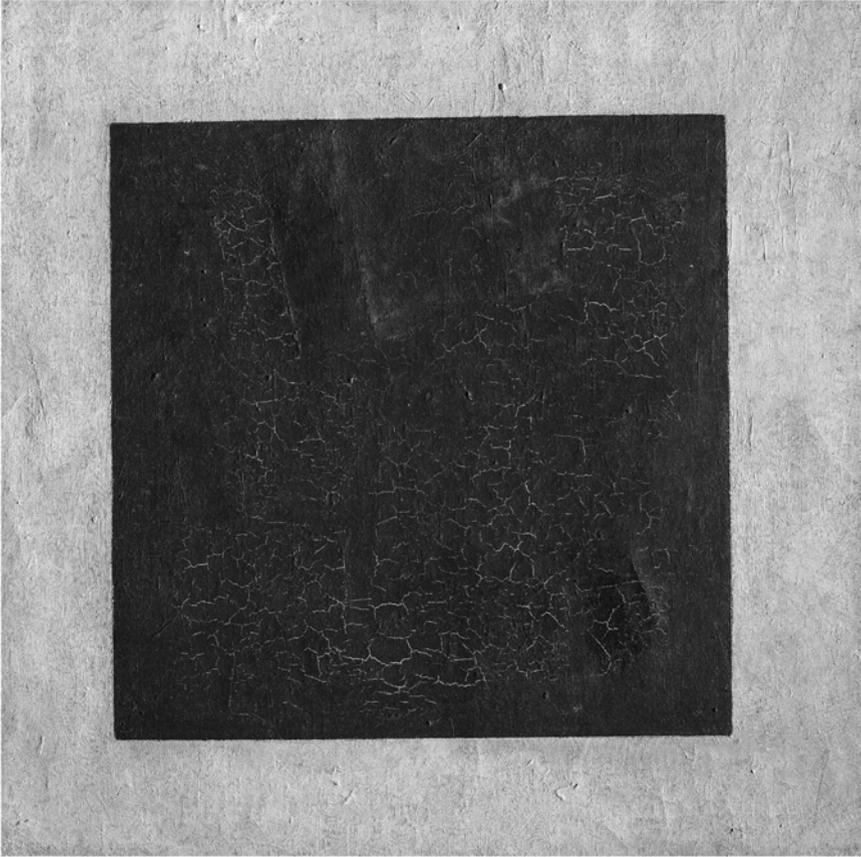


FIGURE 1.1 Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.5 × 79.5 cm., State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

that victory.² Malevich also provided an alternative reading, which is purely formal: *The Black Square* is ‘the embryo of all possibilities’, the primary element, the primary shape, ‘the progenitor of the cube and the sphere’, a circle and a cross, which then, disintegrating into small elements, forms the Suprematist universe.³ In this context, *The Black Square* acts as an alternative to

2 Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii recorded discussing Malevich’s article ‘The White Sun and the Black Square’ [Beloe solntse i chernyi kvadrat], dealing with this theme. See *Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii. K 100-letiiu s dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery, 2006), 282.

3 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin [Beginning of June 1915]; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmund, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 1: 66.

natural 'bodies', a form born of the creative will (later Malevich would repeat his favourite example: here is a chair – it does not exist in nature, it has been invented by a man). From 1916 onwards, the artist opposed the living 'face' of Suprematist forms and *The Black Square* to the carrion of naturalistic painting, which he called dead.⁴ In December 1915, at the *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol'-desiat')*], Malevich displayed the painting across the corner of the room, as an 'icon of my time'.⁵ During the Vitebsk period, he declared that it embodied the 'principle of economy';⁶ and discovered in it a universal capacity for replication: the square was used as an emblem, a sign, and a module of the new style. The author saw the image of the cosmos in it, as well as 'what, at one point, people saw in the face of God'.⁷ At the end of the 1920s, Malevich claimed that he wanted it to convey 'infinity and eternity', and spoke about the richness of its 'pure' objectless sensations. Such a conceptual range is truly unique, it surpasses even the substantive aspects of mature Suprematism. It is not by chance that the artist called *The Black Square* 'the most objectless work'.⁸

I examine at length the history of these and other interpretations of the painting in my book *Kazimir Malevich: 'The Black Square'*,⁹ which was published by the State Tretyakov Gallery as part of the series 'The History of a Masterpiece', in order to mark the centenary of the 0.10 exhibition, which opened in December 1915. The series comprises small-sized books, which are popular and accessible to the general public, but also incorporate the latest scholarly research on the work in question. As preparation for this publication, a comprehensive study of the painting was carried out by the gallery's conservation specialists, Ekaterina Voronina and Irina Rustamova, with contributions from other members of the conservation team. The results of this intensive examination have been included in the book as an appendix. Although technical studies of *The Black Square* started as early as the 1990s, the latest equipment

4 See, for instance, K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism]* (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1916); English translation in K. S. Malevich: *Essays on Art 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 19-41.

5 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Alexandre Benois, May 1916; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 85.

6 See, for instance, K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 127.

7 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Pavel Ettinger, 3 April 1920; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 127

8 As recorded in Nikolai Khardzhiev, *Diary Entries [1931]*; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 406.

9 Irina Vakar, *Kazimir Malevich. Chernyi kvadrat* (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery, 2015).

and the use of digital technologies has provided new, more accurate data.¹⁰ The results were so unexpected that they demanded a great deal of thought and a detailed analysis. In this paper, I should like to look at the way in which this new material, despite its 'provisional' character, sheds important light on the genesis of this famous painting.

Firstly, please, let me remind you of the known facts. Until the 1970s, the author's dating of *The Black Square* was not questioned: Malevich dated it back to 1913, the time of the production of the opera *Victory over the Sun*.¹¹ Today, it has been firmly established that *The Black Square* was painted in May or June 1915, when Malevich was making new drawings for the re-publication of the opera's libretto, because the previous sketches had remained with Levkii Zheverzhev, who had sponsored the production.¹² For reasons that are not completely clear, Malevich presented these new drawings as 'found' sketches from 1913.¹³ By the end of May 1915, three drawings had been finished. On 27 May, Malevich referred to one of these drawings in a letter to his friend the artist and musician Mikhail Matiushin, stating significantly, 'This drawing is going to be important for painting. What has been done unconsciously is now yielding extraordinary fruits'.¹⁴ According to Nikolai Khardzhiev, it was a drawing with the image of a black square (Fig. 1.2), which suggests that the painting of the same name had already been conceived, or even painted. Despite this, it was not until almost two weeks later that Malevich informed Matiushin that he was sending him three pictures, including *The Black Square* 'in the form in which they were executed in 1913'.¹⁵ The date of the registered letter, in which

10 For earlier investigations, see Viktorina A. Lukhanov, 'A Study of Technique: Ten Paintings by Malevich in the Tretyakov Gallery', in *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), 195.

11 See, for instance, K. S. Malevich, 'Suprematizm', [Suprematism], *Katalog desiatoi Gosudarstvennoi vystavki. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 121. The date of 1913 for *The Black Square* was first contested by Troels Andersen, Evgenii Kovtun and Nikolai Khardzhiev. See Troels Andersen, *Malevich* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970); Evgenii Kovtun, ed., 'Pis'ma K. S. Malevicha k M. V. Matiushinu', *Ezhгодnik Rukopisnogo otedela Pushkinskogo Doma na 1974* (Leningrad, 1976), 177-195; and N. Khardzhiev, K. S. Malevich, and M. V. Matiushin, *K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm: Gileia, 1976).

12 Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus* (Moscow: Tri Kvadrata, 2009), 52-3; English version, Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 46-7.

13 See, for instance, Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin [27 May 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 65. Malevich wrote that 'I found one draft [of a drawing] here at my place, and I think that it really should be included in the book'.

14 Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, [27 May 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 65.

15 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [Beginning of June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 65.



FIGURE 1.2 Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Square*, 1915, pencil on paper, 9 × 8.2 cm., State Literary Museum, Moscow.

they were enclosed, has been recently established by Aleksandra Shatskikh – as 9 June 1915.¹⁶

In 2009, Shatskikh presented a new hypothesis about the creation of the painting. According to her, the drawing with a black square was created immediately after the painting, and on the following day – on 9 June – it was sent to Matiushin. Consequently, the painted *Black Square* can be dated to 8 June 1915.¹⁷

Yet the question arises: which drawing did Malevich describe on 27 May as ‘going to be very important for painting’? Shatskikh believes that it is an objectless image with a black trapezoid and small details (Fig. 1.3). This is the same composition as one of the Suprematist paintings from 1915, now at the

16 Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus*, 52-3; and Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 46-7.

17 Ibid.

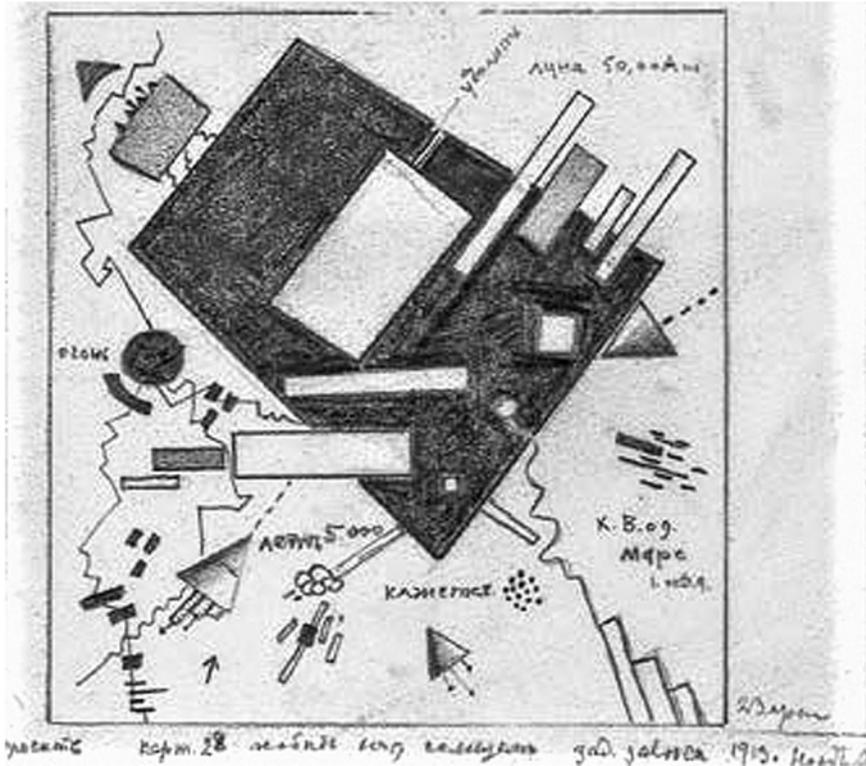


FIGURE 1.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Design of a Backdrop for the First Act of the Opera 'Victory over the Sun'*, 1915, pencil on paper, 10 × 9.5 cm., State Literary Museum, Moscow.

Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Fig. 1.4). It is this painting that Shatskikh considers to be the first Suprematist painting.¹⁸ She argues that it was followed by other Suprematist works, and only two weeks later was *The Black Square* conceived and then executed.

Strictly speaking, the exact date when *The Black Square* was created is not of great significance for the history of art. What is important is the logic of the artist's creative thought and the sequence of his discoveries. It is in this respect that the question of what lies beneath the black paint of *The Black Square* is especially relevant.

This question has long interested specialists and non-specialists alike. Researchers used to agree that the underlying composition is the direct prede-

18 See also Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'Malevich, Curator of Malevich', in *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001), 149.

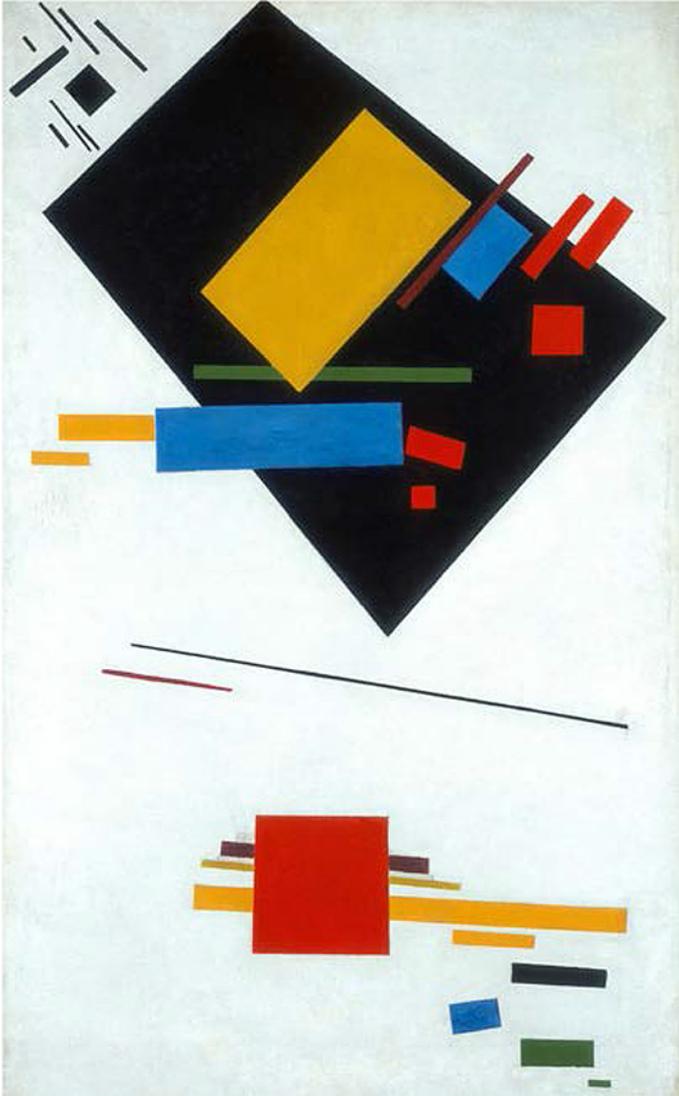


FIGURE 1.4 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1915, oil on canvas, 101.5 × 62 cm., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

cessor to *The Black Square*. Nobody also doubted the explanation of the emergence of *The Black Square*, which seems rather odd. Malevich knew about the techniques of painting (he had studied under Fedor Rerberg, a specialist in this area), but, in this instance, he seems to have broken all the rules, by overloading the layer of paint. Specialists used to believe that the reason for this was the intense creative excitement that he experienced in inventing the con-

cept of *The Black Square*. It was assumed that, not having another canvas to hand, the artist rapidly covered up a work in front of him with black paint, which eventually led to the development of serious craquelure on the surface of the painting. According to this narrative, the picture was painted quickly, over a very short period of time.

The main issue could be reduced to the question: what kind of composition is beneath *The Black Square*? Is it Cubo-Futurist or Suprematist? If it is Cubo-Futurist, then Malevich's statement that *The Black Square* was the first Suprematist painting would be confirmed. If it is Suprematist, his assertion would be disproved. Recently, many scholars (including myself) have tended to accept the second version, because one can see fragments of pure colours through the craquelure, even with the naked eye, and hints of geometric planes in the overall configuration. Consequently, the prevailing view used to be that Malevich was indulging in mystification and confusing his contemporaries and everyone ever since by claiming that *The Black Square* was his first Suprematist painting.

The investigations conducted by Voronina and Rustamova have effectively destroyed this interpretation. The process of the creation of the painting has turned out to be far more complicated and time-consuming than was previously believed. Thus, it has been discovered that there are not just one, but two images underneath *The Black Square* – the original one and another one that is directly beneath the black paint of the central quadrilateral. The initial composition is quite clearly visible in the consolidated radiograph, which comprises 12 radiographs of separate fragments of the painting, which have been combined by a graphics editor (Fig. 1.5). The image occupies the entire surface of the canvas. It was painted on the author's ground and suffers from minor craquelure. The borders of the planes are clearly visible, and they allow us to make an approximate reconstruction of the composition (Fig. 1.6). This image recalls Malevich's Cubo-Futurist paintings from 1913-1914, such as *The Guardsman* of 1913 (Fig. 1.7). The areas of paint reveal only one definite coloured area, which is a tiny orange plane to the extreme right of the composition.

Let us consider for a moment what this data tells us. Having conceived a new picture and not having any blank canvases, Malevich seems to have taken what was to hand and what was obviously not too valuable to him – a canvas painted a year or two before, which no longer seemed relevant, and most importantly was of the right size and format for implementing his idea. So, he started a new, experimental composition.

Malevich applied a layer of white zinc oxide in the form of a square over the central part of the 'old' painting (within the boundaries of the future *Black Square*) and started painting a new composition (let's call it Proto-Suprematist) (Fig. 1.8). It seems to have consisted of contiguous semi-

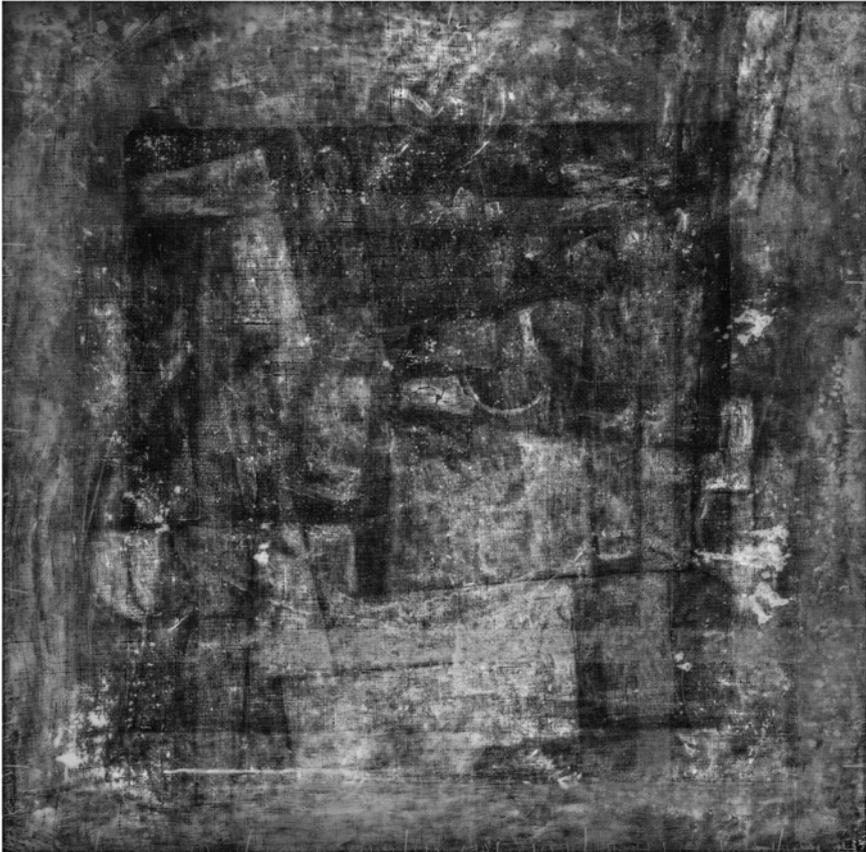


FIGURE 1.5 Consolidated X-Ray image of the paintings beneath *The Black Square*. The image represents the consolidation of 12 x-rays.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW.

transparent stains of yellow, blue, pink, purple, and other colours; it is these that can be seen through the craquelure. These are spots of colour, which do not possess any clear edges (or at least, such edges have not been detected). Only some of the planes of colour have rectangular shapes (green and yellow), which are fairly well-defined and possess a pronounced texture, suggesting that this part of the composition was close to completion. But, apparently, for some reason, it did not satisfy Malevich. Although the overall composition does not look finished, the artist covered it with a thin layer of varnish or glue, and then began to implement a new plan.

Along the borders of the white square, Malevich laid a strip of black paint with a glossy sheen, about three or four centimetres wide. At the same time, he began to define the edges of the white margins, using white lead paint.



FIGURE 1.6 Reconstruction of the first painting, a Cubo-Futurist Composition.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW.

Then, the artist covered the whole field of the square with a different type of black paint. This has been identified, using an X-ray-fluorescence analyser, as a black iron oxide pigment, containing a considerable amount of dark green dye (copper arsenide) and chalk as a filler (chalk was added to impart a cloudiness to the surface). To complete the work, the margins were covered with a dense layer of zinc oxide (Fig. 1.1).

What does this information tell us? Firstly, it confirms the testimony of one memoirist: 'Malevich said that for *The Black Square*, he mixed a special paint: velvety, which did not glitter and did not wither. His student, the unforgettable Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia remembered the recipe'.¹⁹ This is especially important, because, in recent years, experts have too often tended to discount

19 Boris Bezobrazov, 'At Malevich's Lectures', 1998; in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 373.



FIGURE 1.7 Kazimir Malevich, *The Guardsman*, 1913, oil on canvas, 57 × 66.5 cm., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Malevich's statements as hoaxes, instead of checking them. As we shall see, in this case, it has turned out that what the artist said actually contains valuable and accurate information.

Secondly, the results of the analysis contradict the prevailing notion of the spontaneity and the rapid pace at which the picture was created. The multi-layered painting of *The Black Square* indicates that Malevich's concept emerged out of explorations that he conducted directly on the surface of the canvas, and that the process of the work's execution was thorough and thoughtful.

Thirdly, although we do not have all the information that would enable us to reach a final conclusion, the obtained (preliminary) image of the underlying composition suggests that it was not Suprematist. Here, the colour planes are contiguous to each other and even seem to flow into one another; they do not possess strictly geometric shapes; and the white ground is missing. This composition denotes some kind of intermediate stage between Cubo-Futurism, Alogism, and Suprematism. We do not know of any other work in Malevich's entire oeuvre that is stylistically similar to the revealed image. There is still,

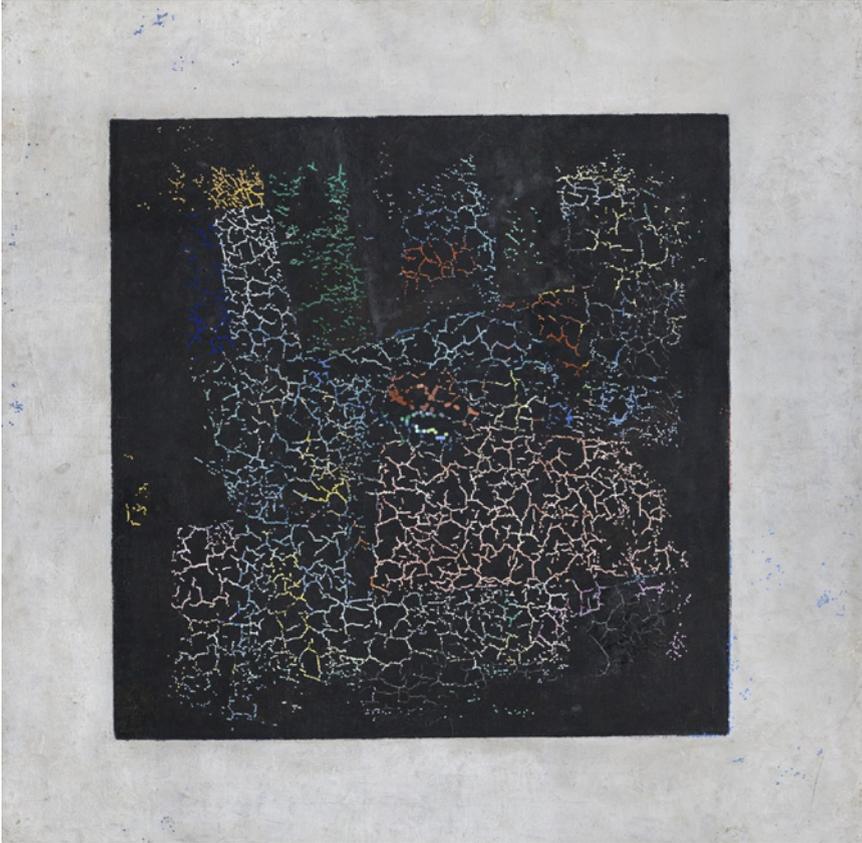


FIGURE 1.8 Radiograph of Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Square*, 1915, revealing a Proto-Suprematist Composition underneath.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW.

therefore, much work to be done to analyse the revealed image and to find analogues.

The Black Square was now complete. What happened next?

According to Leporskaia (as retold in two different memoirs), Malevich said: 'I could not sleep or eat for a week, I wanted to understand what I had done, but I could not do that'.²⁰ Even if the words of the artist have been preserved inaccurately, or he himself exaggerated the extent of his excitement, there is

20 Anna Leporskaia, cited in Hannah Vaitmaier, ed., *Sobranie Lentsa Shenberga. Evropeiskoe dvizhenie v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve s 1958 goda po nastoiashchee vremia* (Munich: Edition Kants, 1989), 98. See also O. V. Pokrovskii, 'Trevogi i plamenem', *Chasy* (Leningrad), 1 (1976): 224; English translation, Oleg Pokrovsky, 'Alarm and Flames', in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 374.



FIGURE 1.9 Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.5 × 79.5 cm., State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Detail showing the painting's white border with the words 'Battle of the negroes' [Битва негров – *Bytva negrov*], written in pencil, clearly visible.

no reason to doubt that he actually felt this excitement. The sense of bewilderment that everyone who encounters *The Black Square* instantly feels, must have been experienced by its author first of all. In this respect, the latest technological research has revealed some interesting new information, which may modify our knowledge and understanding.

On the white margin of *The Black Square*, are the remains of some writing in pencil, which was clearly inscribed on dry paint (Fig. 1.9). It is difficult to say with any certainty who is responsible for having written these words. The writing has been authenticated as Malevich's by one graphologist, although other specialists have questioned this attribution. Since the inscription is on dry paint, it could have been added to the work at any time since 1915. The first two words can be read as 'Battle of the Negroes' [Битва негров – *Bytva negrov*]; the end of the phrase is illegible, but presumably stands for 'during the night', which in Russian could be 'в темноте', 'в пещере', or 'в ноchiu'. There are several ways of explaining this phrase. Of course, it is highly unlikely that the phrase was written by Malevich himself, but probably by someone who was mocking *The Black Square*. Yet, whoever was the author, the words clearly allude to the monochromatic work by Alphonse Allais, entitled *Combat de Nègres dans une cave, pendant la nuit* [*Battle of Negroes in a Cellar, at Night*] of 1893, which consists of a black rectangle, and had been conceived as an artistic joke. Since Allais was not a well-known figure in Russia at this time, the author of the inscription might have been recalling an episode that was recorded in the newspaper *The Russian Word* [*Russkoe Slovo*] in 1911. Apparently, the students of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture had organised a joke exhibition, where 'the first place was occupied by a panel, *A Fight of Negroes at Night*', which consisted of 'a black ink banner with white dots – [denoting] stars and the eyes of black fighters'.²¹

21 [B.A], 'Khudozhestvennye parodii', *Russkoe slovo*, 290 (17 December 1911): 7.

If Malevich was the author of the inscription, it raises several important issues.²² It would, for instance, suggest that his reaction to the birth of his 'royal infant' was totally unexpected.²³ After profound consideration, experimentation and explorations, the author would seem to have actually doubted his achievement and raised questions about this abstract image: Is it a painting at all? Can it be treated seriously?

We are used to regarding Malevich, his personality and his works as being full of seriousness and dramatic pathos. At the same time, we somehow tend to forget that a sense of humour and an aptitude for self-irony were integral to his nature. The incorporation of text, written almost like a piece of graffiti, would relate *The Black Square* to the artist's previous work and the type of paintings that he was producing before Suprematism. During his Alogist period (from 1914 till early 1915), Malevich was actively using texts in his works, such as *An Englishman in Moscow*, of 1914, which contains several phrases, including 'Racing Society' [*skakovoe obshchestvo*] and 'Partial Eclipse' [*chas-tichnoe zatmenie*].²⁴ There is also a design of a backcloth for the opera *Victory over the Sun* of 1913 that contains the word 'silly' [*glupo*] in the margin, as well as a black and white sketch of early 1915 inscribed with the phrase 'what impudence' [*kakaia naglost'*] (Fig. 1.10, 1.11). Other objectless drawings (including ones with squares), also contain annotations and inscriptions. Sometimes, the image has disappeared completely in the drawings, giving way to an arrangement of letters, as in *Prografachnik*, or a single framed word as in *The Village*.²⁵ This was typical of Alogism. But in Suprematism, the word was banished from the painted surface: there are no signatures, no dates, no letters or numbers. The inscription on *The Black Square*, if it is in Malevich's hand, would appear to confirm the transitional nature of this work, which, it appears, nobody could have guessed during the last hundred years.

All of this leads us to the conclusion that *The Black Square* was, almost certainly, the first Suprematist painting. In my opinion, the prolonged process of working on the canvas indicates that Malevich approached the development

22 It is highly unlikely that Malevich knew of Allais's work, so if he did write the inscription, he would almost certainly have been recalling the 1911 joke exhibition. More research is needed in order to clarify this and other the issues surrounding the inscription.

23 Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu*; Malevich: *Essays*, 1: 38.

24 Kazimir Malevich, *An Englishman in Moscow* [*Anglichanin v Moskve*], 1914, oil on canvas, 88 × 57 cm., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

25 Kazimir Malevich, *Prografachnik*, 1914, pencil on graph paper, 10.6 × 16.8 cm.; and *The Village* [*Derevnia*], 1913-14, pencil on graph paper, 13.3 × 11 cm., both Khardzhiev-Chaga Art Foundation, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

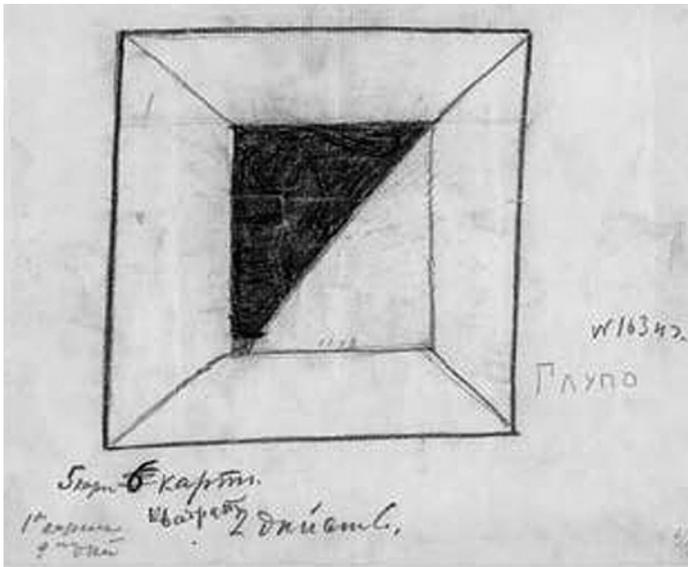


FIGURE 1.10 Kazimir Malevich. *Design of a Backcloth for the First Scene of the Second Act of the Opera 'Victory over the Sun'*, 1913, pencil on paper, 21 × 27 cm. State Museum of Theatre and Music, St. Petersburg. The word 'silly' [глупо – *glupo*] is to the right of the design.

of Suprematism in various ways. Firstly, he approached it by restoring and renewing colour: the pure colour of the Proto-Suprematist composition beneath *The Black Square* was an attempt to move away from the muted colours of Cubism, and towards pure 'colour-painting' [*tsvetopis'*]. Secondly, with *The Black Square*, he purified and simplified the forms to produce geometric shapes. Nevertheless, neither in the Proto-Suprematist composition underlying *The Black Square*, nor in the square of *The Black Square* itself could a very important part of the future system be found – the white ground, regarded as 'the white abyss', which evokes the sensation of weightlessness or flying.²⁶

The most difficult part, I suppose, was this transition to a new understanding of the ground as a conventional designation of space. For the white ground in a drawing (i.e. on a sheet of paper) or in the applied arts, such as in embroidery, appliqué, painting on ceramics, walls, stoves or shutters (i.e. on a functional surface), is not the same as in a painting, where the ground is always seen as a spatial environment, conveying meaning and expressing a certain view of the world.

26 Malevich, 'Suprematizm', *Katalog desiatoi gosudarstvennoi vystavki*; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 122.

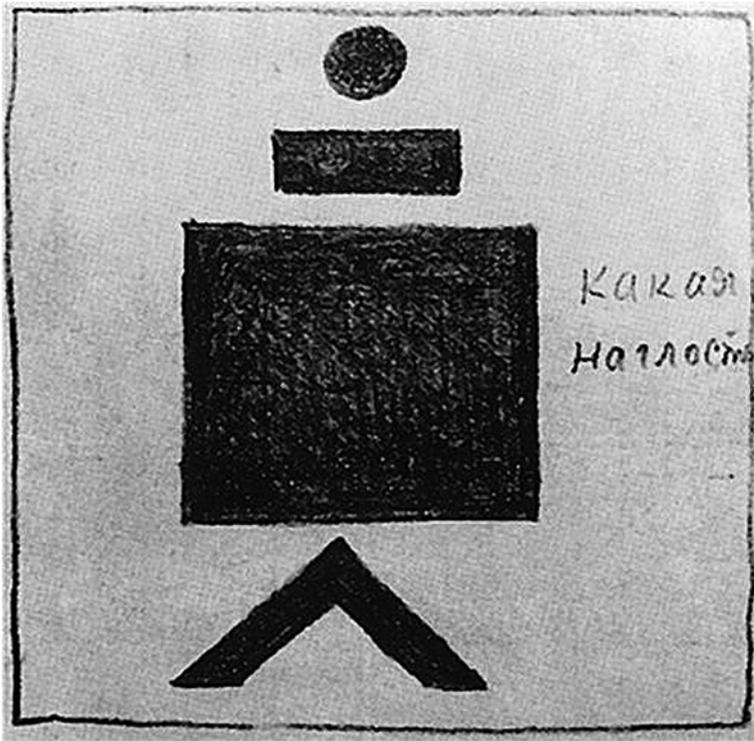


FIGURE 1.11 Kazimir Malevich, Alogist drawing, early 1915, pencil on paper, private collection. The inscription reads 'What impudence' [какая наглость – *Kakaya naglost'*].

That is why it is particularly difficult to accept Shatskikh's argument that after having made the drawing of the trapezoid (Fig. 1.3), Malevich immediately created its pictorial equivalent (Fig. 1.4), which became the first Suprematist painting. Mentally placing *The Black Square* and *Suprematist Composition* with trapezoid (Fig. 1.4) next to each other, one can feel how different was the creative self-awareness of their author in each work. *The Black Square* seems to reflect the searching, doubt and hesitation of an artist at a crossroads. *Suprematist Composition* with trapezoid, however, looks different: the composition is precise, the technique is perfected, the texture is not overloaded. The picture seems to have been born without any pangs – the drawing seems to have been transferred to the large canvas almost unchanged. If this is the first Suprematist painting, the transition itself, the first step towards the realm of geometric abstraction, unknown to Malevich, appears to have been quite easy for him, judging by the precision of the solution. Is that possible? The testimony of the artist about the long and painful gestation of *The Black Square* is far more credible; it denies the possibility of such a sequence of events.

Reflecting on the question of which painting was created first – *The Black Square* or *Suprematist Composition* with trapezoid (Fig. 1.4) – one should keep in mind yet another circumstance. In May and early June of 1915, when *The Black Square* was created, Malevich did not have any blank canvases on which he could carry out experiments freely. At that time, it is possible that he covered up other earlier paintings. Yet, within a short space of time – by late June or early July – Ivan Kliun arrived at the dacha in Kuntsevo and witnessed the following situation:

... on the roof of the shed in the yard there were plenty of sub-frames with stretched canvases on them drying in the sun. I asked Malevich: for what purpose? 'But you see, Ivan Vasilevich, I want to paint forty paintings, where simple geometric shapes of different colours will be depicted, and these shapes will be situated in a way that there is no connection or gravitation between them.'²⁷

Clearly, by this time, Malevich had already fully formulated the concept of Suprematism. Moreover, he already knew how he would be able to present his discovery to the public: the artist had already conceived the 0.10 exhibition, for which he had to create a large body of new paintings. Subsequently, as preparatory sketches for these new works, he used those first drawings (in particular, the one with the black trapezoid) which were created simultaneously with the drawing, *The Black Square* (Fig. 1.2). If further studies of canvases, like *Suprematist Composition* with trapezoid and other Suprematist paintings, reveal that the supports are identical, we will be able to get closer to a more accurate understanding of how Suprematism emerged and developed.

Yet among the many riddles that the artist set before us, one remains unsolved: why did Malevich deceive Matiushin and everyone else, including us, by stating that he was sending 'old' drawings, and thus implying that he had already conceived *The Black Square* back in 1913? The answer, in my opinion, lies in Malevich's inherent commitment to perfectionism. In 1915, Malevich did not just want to repeat the drawings for *Victory over the Sun*, he wanted to improve them; and he was annoyed that the idea of the black square as the antithesis of the sun had not come to him back in 1913. One can draw an analogy with another deception by Malevich, which was discovered many years ago: in 1928-1929 he gave a series of new paintings early dates – from the 1900s and 1910s. The reasons for that hoax are known: he had left his early paintings

27 See I. V. Kliun, *Moi put' v iskusstve. Vospominaniia, stat'i, dnevniki* (Moscow: RA, 1999), 93.

in Germany, and it was safer to attribute formal experiments to the pre-Soviet period.²⁸ All of that is true. But let us not forget that around 1930, Malevich was also planning to organise a solo exhibition in Paris and was persistently painting in the spirit of Impressionism, making it an integral element of his creative evolution. Once, when a student asked him why he had not taken his exhibition to Paris from Berlin, Malevich replied, 'Well, you have to ... know where to take it: you can take pottery to Berlin, but you have to take porcelain to Paris.'²⁹

28 Concerning this issue, see Elena V. Basner, 'Zhivopis' Malevicha iz sobraniia Russkogo museia', in *Kazimir Malevich v Russkom Muzei* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), 15-27.

29 Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii, 'Malevich is an Inexhaustible Topic', 1991; in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 297.

Defining Suprematism: The Year of Discovery

Charlotte Douglas

This essay concerns the period from May 1915 to June 1916, the first year of Kazimir Malevich's encounter with Suprematism.¹ It is an attempt to identify the artist's own understanding and explanation of Suprematism at a time when he was making his initial drawings and paintings, preparing for their first public exhibition, and attempting to understand their true nature. Relying primarily on Malevich's contemporaneous letters and writings, this essay focuses on his conceptual and philosophical notions regarding Suprematism, and his struggle to provide it with a solid theoretical grounding.²

Suprematism emerged out of Malevich's search for a new art that would supersede Russian Futurism and Cubo-Futurism, styles which, although inspired initially by Italian Futurism, had themselves dominated avant-garde art in Russia for several years. In the months leading up to Suprematism, Malevich had been experimenting with a manner of painting that, at times, combined uninflected planes with identifiable objects within the same composition, a style that he termed Alogism or Februaryism [*Fevralizm*].³ In the course of this intensive work, he gradually began to perceive the planar objectless passages, that had been an integral part of the Alogist style, as complete works of art in themselves. But rather than regard this new approach simply as another style of painting, from the very beginning Malevich thought of these objectless compositions as a fundamentally new way of visualising the world.

The artist did not decide upon the name 'Suprematism' straight away. Nevertheless, he did understand immediately that it was, in a sense, 'morphological' or 'modular', because of its strictly geometric nature, and that visually it

1 All dates in this essay are those of the Julian calendar, which was used in Russia until 1918. To convert to the Western (Gregorian) calendar, add 13 days.

2 Quotations in this article come principally – with occasional minor alterations in translation – from the first volume of *Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition compiled and edited by Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko, English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), hereafter Malevich, *Letters*.

3 For a thorough discussion of Alogism and Februaryism, see Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marion Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

elicited new, underlying concepts that might relate to all the arts. Something similar had been done before: by 1914, Italian Futurist artists had devised a comprehensive programme that encompassed Futurist stylistic approaches to painting, sculpture, photography, cinema, music, stage design, poetry, architecture, and clothing. So, despite Suprematism's fundamental structural difference from Futurism, it is understandable that quite soon after identifying his new approach to drawing and painting, Malevich turned to developing Suprematist poetry, sculpture, music, design, architecture and, indeed, a whole Suprematist universe.⁴

Malevich made the first Suprematist paintings during May 1915, while spending the summer at a rented dacha in the village of Kuntsevo, near Moscow.⁵ From time to time, his friend the poet and theorist Aleksei Kruchenykh (1886-1968) stayed there with him.⁶ Kruchenykh was a principal figure in the Russian Avant-Garde; among much else, he was one of the initiators of the transrational, beyonsense [*zaum'*] words and poetry, and had written the absurdist libretto for the now-famous Russian Cubo-Futurist 'opera' *Victory over the Sun*.⁷

Kruchenykh first joined Malevich at the dacha in mid-May, and by late in the month, under the influence of Malevich's new painting, they had already dreamed up a journal entitled *Zero*. As Malevich explained to Mikhail Matiushin (1861-1934), a close friend who was a composer and the publisher of *Victory's* libretto, 'Since we are planning to reduce everything to zero, we have decided to call it *Zero* [*Nol'*], after which we ourselves will move beyond zero'.⁸ Throughout the summer and into the autumn, Malevich worked on developing visual Suprematism, sending drawings to Matiushin in Petrograd, and pretending that they came from the original production of *Victory* that the three men, Malevich, Kruchenykh and Matiushin, had worked on together two years previously.⁹

4 In March 1915, the Italian Futurists Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero also published 'The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe'; English translation in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973).

5 This date is generally accepted by most Malevich scholars. Malevich spent several summers in Kuntsevo.

6 Kruchenykh came and went between Moscow and Kuntsevo from May until early August 1915. See Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Pis'ma A. Shemshurinu i M. Matiushinu* (Moscow: Gileia, 2012).

7 Kruchenykh's 'libretto', illustrated with Malevich's set and costume designs, and a few bars of Matiushin's music was published as a small booklet. See Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Pobeda nad solntsem* [Victory over the Sun] (St. Petersburg: Svet, 1913).

8 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, 29 May 1915; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 65.

9 For instance, Malevich sent drawings to Matiushin in three undated letters [27 May and two at the beginning of June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 65-66.

After he returned to Moscow that autumn, Malevich began planning for an exhibition that would introduce his new work. He had no doubt that critics and viewers would require some explanation of the strange objectless paintings to be presented at the exhibition, but exactly what it meant for him to go 'beyond zero' was difficult for him to convey in words. When he tried to write an explanation of Suprematism for a booklet to be distributed at the exhibition, a text that would tell a puzzled audience just what Suprematism was – a guide to what, in fact, they would be seeing at that very moment – he found it extremely difficult. It was late September before he had even decided what to call his new work.¹⁰

Although Malevich was enthusiastic and fully convinced of Suprematism's importance, it was apparently almost impossible for him to express in words exactly what it was meant to be, or why it was important. What he did manage to say, however, and what he placed at the very beginning of his text, was the fact that Suprematism applied equally to all the arts. In part, he was following the example of his Italian Futurist predecessors, but Malevich's interpretation of his new forms was quite different from the Italian theories, which derived from science, technology, and the rhythms of modern life. Malevich's text begins:

All former and contemporary painting before Suprematism, and sculpture, the word, and music were enslaved by the form of nature, and they await their liberation in order to speak their own language, and not rely upon the intellect, sense, logic, philosophy, psychology, the various laws of causality and the technical changes in life.¹¹

It was a good beginning, but from that point on, he described only the historical origins of painting styles, especially Cubism. He did not return to the topic of Suprematism until the last page of the text – and then quite briefly. He ended abruptly, with a promise to his readers that sometime *later* he would write about Suprematism:

I have transformed myself into a zero of form, and gone beyond '0' to '1'.

10 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 24 September 2015; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 68.

11 K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm [From Cubism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting]* (Petrograd: L. Ia. Ginzburg, 1916); Full English translation in Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1980), 107-110; quote, 108.

Believing that Cubo-Futurism has finished its tasks, I am crossing over to Suprematism, to a new realism in painting, to objectless creation.

In time, I will say more about Suprematism, painting, sculpture and the dynamics of musical masses.¹²

At the end of October, with time before a projected December exhibition becoming short, Malevich sent his text for evaluation by Matiushin, his prospective publisher. In Kuntsevo almost five months previously, he had asked Matiushin to be his adviser while he wrestled with his new distinctive art: 'I need a person with whom I can speak frankly and who can help me posit a theory based on the origins [*vozniknoveniia*] of painting. I think that person can only be you'.¹³ Malevich was aware that his text was not really a satisfactory explanation of Suprematism but, nevertheless, he hoped that Matiushin would help him to edit and publish it. Matiushin, of course, noticed that it was not really about Suprematism at all.

In a lengthy six-page letter, which includes a flurry of various reactions to Matiushin's objections, Malevich sounds agitated and indecisive:

As for my article being a reiteration, as you write, I don't think so ... I completely agree with you that it is all about Cubo-Futurism and that there is very little about Suprematism. But I thought that with this article I was making a modest explanation of Cubo-Futurism and of Painting in general and ending with a stipulation to write about Suprematism in the future ... I considered it necessary to write a little about basic ideas. But I was afraid that the article would be too long, as you wrote. That's why I shortened it ... I consider that the ending is a little truncated, something has to be added ... It's missing the main thing, Suprematism. So now, I'm thinking that it is more sensible not to publish it, and to publish something on Suprematism ... I would just like my article to be published, because in it I make a certain analysis and reach a milestone on the road to Suprematism and document my works, so that no one steals my [author's] right from me ... I cannot imagine. You write, 'Delete certain things from my article in order not to obscure my ideas' ... It seems to me that if you delete, then that's it, because my idea is essentially indicated only at the end ... I apologise for these troubles, and I am again thinking of not publishing.¹⁴

12 Douglas, *Swans*, 110.

13 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [beginning of June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 66.

14 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [end of October 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 70-71.

In the end, of course, Matiushin did publish it; the booklet appeared in late November, in time for the opening of the exhibition in Petrograd on 19 December. Malevich avoided the problem of what to call the exhibition by sticking to numbers: his initial idea of zero, plus the number ten, signifying the number of artists who would, he hoped, go beyond zero – and a grudging compromise with the recalcitrant Russian Futurists: *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*.¹⁵

But curiously, throughout October and into November, an intense time leading up to the exhibition, and a time when he was also having ‘bad premonitions’ about the war and surviving in the army, uppermost in Malevich’s mind was not painting at all, but music. He first mentioned music to Matiushin on 12 October, saying that he had produced a ‘musical analysis’ of

The musical origin of forms that arise as a soul experiences the conditions of life around it. The ‘I’ within the chaos of things, the origin of musical melody.

A crossing over to a stasis of musical sound, and to a dynamic movement of musical masses.

A liberation of the instrument and the elevation of the musical wave above one’s I.

That is what keeps swirling around in my head.¹⁶

At this very early time – October 1915 – a time when Malevich had only just thought up a name for his new work, when none of that work had ever been exhibited, and few people knew, or could even imagine, what it looked like, he began to demand that composers – in particular a childhood friend, the composer Nikolai Roslavets (1881-1944) – produce a corresponding music of geometric forms.

Malevich had recently encountered Roslavets – by then a fairly well-known composer – at an early organisational meeting for a new arts school in Moscow, which Malevich had been invited to join as a professor of contemporary painting. There, during an exchange of views about the mission of the school, instead of speaking about familiar modes of art, Malevich took the opportunity to put forward his ideas about geometric form, (i.e. Suprematism) in several types of art, especially music. He reported to Matiushin:

15 *Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0.10 (nol'-desiat')* [*The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*] opened at Nadezhda Dobychina's gallery [Khudozhestvennoe biuro N. E. Dobychinoin] in Petrograd on 19 December 1915.

16 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 12 October 1915; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 69.

The views that I expressed about music and the decorative and theatre arts were received with bewilderment and rejection, because my form does not express anything.

At the meeting, he had lectured his old friend Roslavets, in particular, on the primacy of a new music and its proper structure.

I committed a terrible blunder in pointing out to Roslavets that contemporary music must move toward expressing musical layers and must have the length and thickness of a musical mass moving in time, and what's more, that a dynamism of musical masses must alternate with stasis, that is, with delaying the musical sound mass in time.¹⁷

When Malevich was sarcastically asked where he had graduated in music, he abruptly resigned.

Malevich was not the only member of the Russian Avant-Garde to take an interest in the new music. Alexander Scriabin's compositions with their association of chords and atonal harmonies with specific colours inspired many contemporary artists and composers. But unlike Scriabin, and Wassily Kandinsky, Mikhail Matiushin and Nikolai Kulbin (1868-1917), for example, Malevich does not seem to have focused on defining new scales or microtones, or exploring musical colour symbolism, but rather concentrated on geometric forms and the purely physical qualities of sound – mass, stasis and dynamism.

What could have sparked such a vision of music? Although Malevich was convinced that music was quite important, initially he did not simply turn to Matiushin, who, after all, was a violinist and composer, for the task of creating Suprematist music. This would seem to have been the most natural and convenient thing to do, but apparently Malevich felt that Matiushin's music was too distant from what he had in mind. Two years earlier, when Matiushin published excerpts from *Victory over the Sun*, he had included a few bars of music with quarter-tone notes.¹⁸ But this music did not in any way suggest musical masses or geometric forms.

Yet it is not surprising that Malevich so insistently coupled Suprematism with music, among the other arts. The war-time era just prior to and after the

17 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 19 October 1915; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 69.

18 Even so, there does not seem to have been any quarter-tone music in the performances of *Victory*, although in 1915 Matiushin did publish *A Guide to the Study of Quarter Tone for the Violin*. See Matiushin, *Rukovodstvo k izucheniiu chetvertogo tona dlia skripki* (Petrograd: Zhuravl', 1915).

Revolution was a time of intense musical innovation and energetic advancement of new theories in music, which were inevitably associated with modern and avant-garde art. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Scriabin's association of musical tones with particular colours, for example, was widely debated among contemporary artists. Kandinsky saw explicit expressive meanings conveyed by sounds, shapes, and colours. But there were even more radical musical ideas, represented by a pioneering group of composers and music theorists, such as Nikolai Kulbin, Arthur Lourié (Artur Lur'e, 1892-1966), Roslavets, and Arsenii Avraamov (1886-1944). Each, in his own way, was intent on replacing the classical 12-tone scale with new sounds – sounds produced by nature and the environment, overtones, new harmonies, microtones, dissonance and even noises – for the sake of developing a more modern music.¹⁹

A possible source of inspiration was the composer Arthur Lourié's 'visual music', which was notated on the page in isolated sections or blocks, leaving blank areas between groups of notes. In 1915, he composed a work descriptively called 'Forms in the Air'.²⁰ The young Lourié was well known in St. Petersburg by the time that *Victory* was staged there at the end of 1913. He was especially close to Malevich's colleague, the artist and musical theorist Nikolai Kulbin, who enthusiastically introduced him to the Petersburg Futurists, including the habitués of the Stray Dog Cabaret. Although Lourié dressed as a dandy,²¹ and his music often sounded more romantic than avant-garde, between 1910 and 1916 he could reliably be found at every major avant-garde event in the city. Vladimir Mayakovsky had good reason to assert, 'Whoever doesn't know

19 They all knew each other and were on cordial terms. When Avraamov moved to St. Petersburg from Norway, it was Roslavets who wrote a letter of introduction for him to Kulbin. For more on these composers, see Douglas, *Swans*; B. M. Kalaushin, ed., *Apollon* (St. Petersburg: Apollon, 1995) vol. 1, books 1, 2 [Kulbin]; Klara Moricz and Simon Morrison, eds., *Funeral Games in Honor of Arthur Vincent Lourié* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) [Lourié]; Marina Lobanova, *Nikolai Andreevich Roslavets i kul'tura ego vremeni* (Moscow: Petroglif, 2011) [Roslavets]; and Andrey Smirnov, *Sound in Z* (London: Koenig Books, 2013) [Avraamov].

20 Aleksandra Shatskikh rejects the idea that Malevich had anything to do with Lourié or his work, mainly because of the incompatibility of Lourié's 'Petersburg decadent' habits of dress and behaviour with Malevich's own manners and activities. See Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 203-204.

21 The writer Aleksandr Kuprin described Lourié: 'Always in a bright green suit of outlandish cut, decorated with huge, green, saucer-sized buttons in the front and back and on the cuffs, a great flat collar, and with his long, veined neck with an Adam's apple left bare, wearing large open shoes with high heels like a French woman'. Ali-Khan [A. I. Kuprin], 'Pokhnozheniia "Zelenoi loshadki"' [The Escapades of a 'Green Hobby-Horse'], *Novaia Russkaia zhizn'* (Helsinki), 21 April 1920. Cited in B. Kats and R. Timenchik, *Anna Akhmatova i muzyka. Issledovatel'skie ocherki* (Leningrad: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1989), 32.

Lourié is a blockhead!"²² Lourié had taken part in the writing and publication of a manifesto entitled 'We and the West', which advocated modern painting, poetry and music.²³ In a photograph of the crowd assembled for Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's first lecture in Petersburg on 1 February 1914, Marinetti is shown seated in the centre, Lourié on his right, and Kulbin on his left.²⁴ Two days after Marinetti departed for Moscow, a programme entitled 'Our answer to Marinetti' was arranged at the Concert Hall of Petersburg's Swedish Church. It began with lectures by the poet Benedikt Livshits and Lourié, two of the three signatories of the recent 'We and the West' manifesto. Livshits spoke about 'Italian and Russian Futurism and their Interrelations', while Lourié lectured on 'The Music of Italian Futurism'.

A poster announcing the event enumerates Lourié's theses: 1) 'The Art of Sounds of the Italians and their 15 noises [*shumikh*]; 2) 'The Real 'Art of Sound' — the music of interference — higher chromaticism — chromo-acoustics'.²⁵ The list of the respondents included Kulbin, Roman Jakobson, Kruchenykh, David Burluk, and Roslavets.²⁶

An article by Lourié on 'higher chromaticism' (microtones) appeared in late February 1915, in the inaugural issue of the almanac *Sagittarius* [*Strelets*], a publication most likely of special interest to Kruchenykh and Malevich.²⁷ In

22 'Tot dur'e, kto ne znaet Lur'e', cited in Roman Gul', *Ia Unes Rossiu* (New York: Most, 1984), 11: 88.

23 G. Iakulov, B. Livshits, and A. V. Lur'e, 'My i Zapad', reprinted in V. N. Terekhina and A. P. Zemenk, eds., *Russkii Futurizm* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1999), 243-244.

24 On Marinetti and Lourié, see Aleksandr E. Parnis, 'K istorii odnoi polemiki. F. T. Marinetti i russkie futuristi' [The History of a Polemic: F. T. Marinetti and the Russian Futurists] in *Futurizm – radikal'naiia revol'iutsiia. Italiia – Rossiia. K 100 letiiu khudozhestvennogo dvizheniia* (Moscow: Krasnaia Ploshchad, 2008), 183, note 40.

25 The poster is reproduced in Parnis, 'K istorii', 184.

26 Roslavets did not appear at the event. At the time, he was a tuberculosis patient at a sanitarium in Yalta, and so could not participate.

27 Artur Lur'e, 'K muzike vysshego khromatizma' [Towards a Music of Greater Chromaticism], *Strelets*, 1 (1915): 81-83. As an illustration of Lourié's chromaticism, the article included music for his 1912 piano piece *Prélude*. In addition to Lourié's article, the almanac contained a poem by Kruchenykh, two new lithographs by his companion Olga Rozanova, and an article about Wyndham Lewis and the English Vorticists, illustrated with a reproduction of Lewis's *Portrait of an English Woman*. On the possible importance of this article to Malevich, see Charlotte Douglas, 'The Art of Pure Design', in Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture and the Decorative Arts* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 86-111; [available online at charlottedouglas.academia.edu.]. The almanac was published in February 1915; a celebration of the publication was held at the Stray Dog Cabaret on 25 February 1915. For a description of the festivities see A. E. Parnis and R. D. Timenchik, 'Programmy "Brodiachei Sobaki"', *Pamiatniki kul'tury. Ezhegodnik 1983* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1985), 241-242.

the spring of 1915, Lourié was pictured in the press with Kulbin, Olga Rozanova, and Mayakovsky.²⁸ At a gathering later that year, Lourié encountered Malevich personally at ‘apartment no. 5’ in the Petrograd Academy of Arts, and Lourié was also present at the 0.10 exhibition, where he played, and perhaps displayed, ‘Synthèses’, his 1914 composition for piano.²⁹ Matiushin’s critical review of the exhibition included the enigmatic phrase, ‘Kulbinism was evidenced ... by Lourié, who played musically with Malevich’s little squares’.³⁰

Undoubtedly, a significant impetus for Malevich’s insistence on a ‘Suprematist music’ came from the Italian Futurists’ own bold entry into music, including the invention and energetic concerts of Luigi Russolo’s ‘noise machines’, the intoners [*intonarumori*]. Malevich was a close follower of Italian Futurist art and theorising. In addition to numerous reports in the Russian press about the latest Futurist events throughout Europe, and the publication of individual manifestos, three books of translated Futurist manifestos were published in Russian in 1914.³¹ Malevich was quite familiar with this literature, even copying out passages for his own use.³² He was keenly involved in Marinetti’s controversial visit to Moscow, arguing publicly in the newspaper *Virgin Soil* [*Nov’*] against Mikhail Larionov’s angry and inhospitable reaction to the Italian’s visit.³³

In publicising Suprematism, Malevich adhered quite closely to the Futurist model, quickly associating it with the other arts – poetry, sculpture, ornament,

28 The photograph appeared in *Sinii zhurnal* (Petrograd), 12 (21 March 1915): 7.

29 Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 204.

30 Mikhail Matiushin, ‘O vystavke “Poslednikh futuristov”’, *Al'manakh vesennii* (Petrograd, 1916), 17–18; English translation, ‘On the Last Futurist Exhibition’, in Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 123.

31 The three publications are: Genrikh Tasteven, *Futurizm: na puti k novomu simvolizmu* (Moscow: Iris, 1914); Mikhail A. Engelgardt, *Futurizm* (St. Petersburg: Prometei, 1914); and Vadim Shershenevich, ed. and trans., *Manifesty italianskogo futurizma. Sobranie manifestov* (Moscow: Tipografiia Russkago tovarishchestva, 1914), which included thirteen manifestos, among them Umberto Boccioni’s ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture’; Carlo Carrà’s ‘The Painting of Sounds, Noises, and Smells’; and Filippo Marinetti’s ‘The Variety Theatre’.

32 On Malevich’s copying and occasionally quoting (and misquoting) from Marinetti, see Irina Vakar, ‘Afterward: Kazimir Malevich and his Contemporaries: A Biography in Personalities’, Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 579.

33 See *Nov’*, 12 (28 January 1914): 5; and Aurora Egidio, ‘The Collision of Italian and Russian Futurism: Marinetti’s Visit to Russia’, in Rosamund Bartlett and Sarah Dadswell, eds., *Victory over the Sun: The World’s First Futurist Opera* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012), 310. For Malevich’s letter, see Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 1: 25. For details about press coverage, see Andrei V. Krusanov, *Russkii avangard: 1907–1932* (St. Petersburg: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996), 1: chapter 2, section 4.

and music. The interest of the Italian Futurists in music stood out sharply in their manifestos and demonstrations.³⁴ There were performances of the intoners in several European cities in 1914.³⁵ The bold Futurist music was repeatedly cited in debates, lectures, and the Russian press. At the same time that he was urging Roslavets to produce geometric music, Malevich was complaining to Matiushin that Roslavets was behind the times, and was not Futurist enough:

Roslavets understands a little, but as a person he becomes too passionately enthusiastic ... He doesn't have the mind of a Futurist. He is publishing a lot of sheet music for his romances based on poems by Severianin and Gnedov.³⁶ Damn. It makes me furious that he writes like that. It looks like I will be giving concerts myself soon to show that it is all wrong. More and more these musical masses, blocks, layers of some 20 chords hurled into space, keep appearing [to me], along with the frozen mass of a musical cube. I keep hearing these 700-pound layers of sound flying about, and also the alogism of instruments in the music.³⁷

Even so, when Malevich suddenly (and briefly) had some hope of financial and other support for Suprematism and its world-wide recognition, he finally resorted to Matiushin for musical help. At the beginning of November, the wealthy Natalia Davydova had come to see him and viewed his new work enthusiastically. She was about to open an exhibition in Moscow of handwork from Verbovka, her Ukrainian estate. Seizing the opportunity, Malevich swiftly contributed three Suprematist works to her exhibition, which were shown simply as designs for two scarfs and a cushion.³⁸ He wrote to Matiushin excitedly, asking him to give up art and concentrate on music:

34 The Italian Futurist music manifestos included Balilla Pratella's, 'Manifesto of Futurist Musicians', published 1912; Luigi Russolo's, 'The Art of Noises', 1913; and Carlo Carrà's 'The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells', 1913.

35 Performances were held in Milan, Genoa, and London in 1914.

36 Igor Severianin (1887-1941) and Vasilisk (Vasilii) Gnedov (1890-1978) were modernist poets associated with the Ego Futurist group. Their work often exhibited a sentimentality or self-centered lyricism that had little in common with Malevich's aesthetic interests.

37 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [October – November 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 72. Malevich wrote '20 pud layers of sound', by which he meant something like 'huge and heavy' layers. 20 pud is equivalent to 722.3 lbs or 327.6 kilos.

38 The exhibition opened on 6 November 1915, thus becoming the first public showing of Suprematism anywhere. See *Katalog vystavki sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva. Vyshivki i kovry po eskizam khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Galereia Lemers'e, 1915). For a description of the exhibition and a photograph, see Douglas, 'The Art of Pure Design', 86-111. For a detailed biography of Davydova and further analysis of the exhibition, see Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 69-81.

Throw away your brush and prepare the music, there are enough Painting warriors in our ranks. But you are the only one with our idea. Search for new forms for sound, in order to be ready. I will write to Kruchenykh and tell him to write new words for performances.³⁹

Lurking behind all Malevich's discussions of early Suprematism is a central question, similar to one that has plagued mathematicians throughout history: was Suprematism discovered or invented? Art historians, basing their judgments on the artist's evolution from his Cubist and Alogist works, tend to say that Malevich *invented* or *created* Suprematism. But initially, Malevich himself didn't claim anything of the sort; in fact, that was a good part of the reason he had such difficulty in formulating the brochure *From Cubism to Suprematism*. Suprematism seemed so startlingly new to him, that he found it difficult to trace logically its gradual development from earlier forms. Throughout the available early letters and texts, he treated Suprematism as a discovery — either of a physical space (such as when he wrote, 'I am crossing over to Suprematism') or the visual revelation of a law of nature. To Malevich, Suprematism *felt* like a discovery. He believed that in some significant sense it was *true* — that for the first time it made a pre-existing reality visible. Indeed, that was why he called it the 'New Reality'.

In early June 1915, while he was still in Kuntsevo and working on the first Suprematist canvases, Malevich wrote to Matiushin,

In view of the alarming times that the War is bringing upon us, I am being forced to work terribly intensively, and I am painting pictures (they are not exactly pictures, the time for pictures is past).⁴⁰

This observation draws attention to the fact that, from the very beginning, Malevich regarded Suprematist works as something other than normal paintings. 'The time for pictures is past' was a conclusion that Malevich came to right away, in the very first period of Suprematism. But if he was not painting pictures, one wonders, what were they?

He himself did not find the answer easy to come by. Even after the *0.10* exhibition had closed, the artist continued his efforts to understand the nature of

39 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 5 November 1915; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 72.

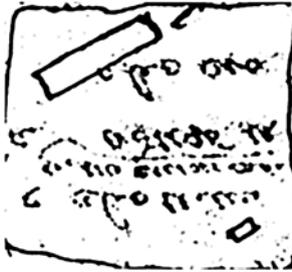
40 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [beginning of June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 66. In December 1920, Malevich wrote something similar: 'There can be no talk of painting in Suprematism. Painting has long ago been outlived, and the painter himself is no more than a prejudice of the past'. ['O zhivopisi v suprematizme ne mozhet byt' rechi, zhivopis' davno izzhita, i sam khudozhnik predrassudok proshlogo']; K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 189.

his new work.⁴¹ To him, it seemed to reveal locations in space, where Suprematist forms manifested a logical structure, and demonstrated some fundamental law.

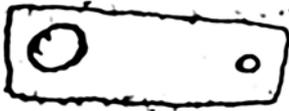
Early in April 1916, two and a half months after the *0.10* exhibition had closed, Malevich reported his artistic progress to Matiushin:

The war keeps shortening my days, while I am working diligently on my *Supremus*. I am now painting *Supremus No. 51*, in which I am discovering very complicated combinations. I am seized by terror, I feel in contact with space; still, this is not new, though its magnitude exceeds everything that has happened up to now.

The main thing is that I am finding something new in the picture, a law of the birth of forms contingent on their distance from each other. But it's strange that in the world, their [inter]dependence in space is such that two forms of the same scale do not exist in a relationship to each



other.



Khlebnikov was at my place and took several drawings to measure their relationships ... but I don't know if he'll notice what I noticed: the



attraction of the forms, so that in my painting *No. 51*, the law of its construction becomes clearly visible. Perhaps [it is] how the World and its forms are designed; the connection and attraction

⁴¹ *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* closed on 19 January 1916.

and scale of one form to another establish the placement of their relationship.⁴²

I have just remembered Khlebnikov's definition of capital cities, and their places of origin. Isn't there an attraction of the sum of the lines of a person to the sum of the forms in the location of a great node of settlement?

....

A capital city is a form in relation to which everything else is constructed, etc.⁴³ The numbers discovered by Khlebnikov may speak to the fact that there lies in *Supremus* something great, possessing a direct law, or even the actual law of world creation itself. That through me passes a force, the general harmony of creative laws that guides everyone and everything, which up until now has not seemed important.

.... I wonder, are there bodies like these in the



world, in space? I think they

exist, but we do not know them.⁴⁴

It is too bad that Khleb is not here, then I would talk to him about the forms of paintings; the unconscious is fading more and more, and more and more you start to feel the clarity of a definite Law.

I almost feel like calling my painting *No. 51* some kind of chart, by which one could read obscure secrets for our 'I'.

No. 51 is doing a lot of enormous things for me. What a pity that so few can read it.⁴⁵

42 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 4 April 1916; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 79-80. The force of attraction to which Malevich was referring is Isaac Newton's law of Universal Gravitational Attraction, which states that any two bodies in the universe *attract* each other with a force that is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.

43 Here, Malevich was referring to Velimir Khlebnikov's theory that major cities appear on the surface of the Earth in accordance with a natural order established by planetary forces. It was published in the journal of the *Union of Youth*, which Malevich knew well. See Khlebnikov 'Uchitel' i uchenik', *Soiuz molodezhi*, 3 (1913); reprinted in Velimir Khlebnikov, *Tvoreniiia*, ed. M. Ia. Poliakova (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 586; English translation in *The Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov: Volume 1, Letters and Theoretical Writings*, trans. Paul Schmidt, ed. Charlotte Douglas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 279-280.

44 Malevich here seems to have been wondering about the ultimate material reality of the forms in his paintings.

45 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 4 April 1916; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 79-80.

In speaking of 'the connection and attraction and scale' in the design of the world, Malevich was referring to Isaac Newton's well-known law of Universal Gravitational Attraction. What was astonishing to the artist was how this law seems to turn up in Suprematism. It was this apparent power of Suprematism to penetrate outer space and reveal a working universe that made it something more than mere picture-making for him; 'I almost feel like calling my painting *No. 51* some kind of chart on which one could read hidden secrets for our I'. Suprematism was Malevich's telescope, his celestial guide, providing glimpses of the cosmos and us within it, and revealing secrets that might be deciphered. In April 1916, this was the closest that he could come to explaining his new Suprematist paintings.

By early May, Malevich had returned to Kuntsevo for the summer. There, he had time to reflect on his accomplishments during the previous year, to prepare a new edition of the brochure, to think about Suprematist poetry, and to get ready to enter the army.⁴⁶ In June, he wrote to Matiushin, summarising his ideas:

The keys of Suprematism lead me to the discovery of that which is not yet recognized. My new painting does not belong solely to the earth. The earth has been abandoned like a house infested with termites. And, indeed, in a person, in his consciousness, lies an aspiration to space, the attraction of a 'liftoff from planet earth'.

Futurism and Cubism worked almost exclusively on developing space, but its form, being tied to objectness, did not permit of even imagining the presence of universal space; *its* space was bounded by the space that divided each thing from other things on earth.

But a plane of painterly colour hung on a sheet of white canvas gives a strong sensation of space directly to our consciousness, it transports me to a fathomless void, where one senses around oneself the creative nodes of the universe.⁴⁷

During the first year of Suprematism, Malevich focused on two major subjects: music and the cosmos. But why these two? Did he see a connection between

46 Malevich advocated combining letters and sounds in a kind of sound poetry. He approached poetic structure in the same way as he did music, i.e. as 'the distribution of letters and sound masses in space, which resembles Suprematism in painting. These masses will hang in space and will make it possible for our consciousness to penetrate further and further from the earth'; Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [before 23 June 1916]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 89-90.

47 Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [before 23 June 1916]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 89-90.

two such apparently disparate domains? While the simple historical analogy between Italian Futurist music and Malevich's geometricised music may have stimulated his initial interest, ultimately this does not seem to have been his principal motivation for the turn to music. More likely, both the interest in music, and his cosmic ruminations, were the beginning of his tireless quest for significant form, form that he believed lay at the origin of all things.

What Malevich seems to have been looking for in music was not written music especially, but the *performance* of Suprematism, that which is heard. In October, Malevich had told Matiushin directly that he was looking for the origin of forms in music, forms that were created from the environment, the 'conditions of life'. At the moment when it appeared that his new art would be financially supported, so that he could do whatever he most desired, he beseeched Matiushin to give up painting, and to concentrate instead on sound for a new kind of performance and theatrical presentation. In performance, invisible sound moves in response to unseen physical laws, quite similar to the way celestial bodies move in space.

The geometries of Suprematism gave powerful fuel to Malevich's belief that such a form or forms were essential, that is, that they lay at the core, not only of music, but also of the whole natural world, as well as art and culture generally. Rather than seek inspiration from a particular composer or written piece of music, Malevich sought evidence of a common pattern in sound and in the cosmos – a simple form underlying the structure of everything, including music and his new painting. By the spring of 1916, he was pondering the existence in space of specific shapes found in his art. Suprematism, for him, contained so much latent power that he thought it might lead him to the underlying organisation of the world.

As time went on, the musings of this initial year would find their way into the artist's later work – the art and pedagogical principles developed in Vitebsk, his central theory of the additional element, and the architectural models of his space dwellings. These early reflections underlay and sustained Malevich's completely autonomous abstract art, born 'in potential' – at the very beginning.

Malevich, the Fourth Dimension, and the Ether of Space One Hundred Years Later

Linda Dalrymple Henderson

The importance of the concept of a fourth dimension of space for Kazimir Malevich and his colleagues, the musician/painter Mikhail Matiushin and the poet Aleksei Kruchenykh, has long been acknowledged in scholarship on the Russian Avant-Garde.¹ Malevich made his interest in the subject clear by referring specifically to the ‘fourth dimension’ in the titles and subtitles of certain of his Suprematist works shown at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* in December 1915 (Fig. 3.1). Central for Malevich and his friends were the writings of the Russian mystical philosopher Peter D. Ouspensky (Petr Demianovich Uspenskii), notably *The Fourth Dimension* of 1909 and *Tertium Organum* of 1911, and, through him, the pioneering ‘hyperspace philosophy’ of the Englishman Charles Howard Hinton (*A New Era of Thought*, 1888; and *The Fourth Dimension*, 1904).² Yet, the idea of a possible fourth dimension of space, which might hold a reality truer than that of visual perception, did not arrive in Russia in a vacuum. Occult publications (both Theosophical and spiritualist) had been major vehicles for the popularisation of the notion, and

1 The fourth dimension has been a theme in the literature on Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde since the early 1970s. Charlotte Douglas and I completed dissertations involving the topic in 1975 (Henderson, Yale University) and 1976 (Douglas, The University of Texas at Austin). These subsequently appeared as Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983; rev. ed., Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013); and Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980). See also Susan Compton, ‘Malevich and the Fourth Dimension’, *Studio International*, 187 (April 1974): 190–95.

2 See Petr Demianovich Uspenskii, *Chetvertoe izmerenie. Opyt izsledovaniia oblasti neizmerimago* [The Fourth Dimension: An Experiment in the Examination of the Realm of the Immeasurable] (St. Petersburg: Trud, 1910 [1909]); and Uspenskii, *Tertium Organum. Kliuch k zagadkam mira* [Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World] (St. Petersburg: Trud, 1911); English translation, P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought, A Key to the Enigmas of the World*, trans. from 2nd Russian ed. (1916) by Claude Bragdon and Nicholas Bessaraboff (2nd American ed., rev., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922). See also ‘The Fourth Dimension’, in P. D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe: Principles of the Psycho-*

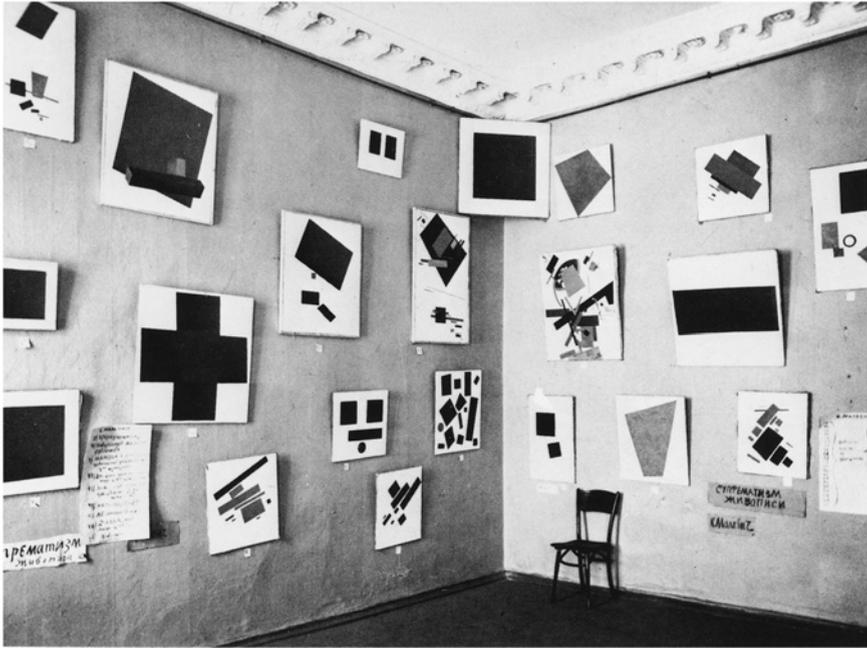


FIGURE 3.1 The display of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist canvases at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, December 1915 – January 1916, Petrograd.

from the 1880s onwards it was also often associated with the scientific hypothesis of a space-filling 'ether'. Both of these concepts figured prominently in the international cultures of science and occultism, which were often interconnected in this period and which served as the backdrop for the innovations of many modern artists.³

logical Method in Its Application to Problems of Science, Religion, and Art, trans. R. R. Merton (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1931).

Hinton's books inaugurated what I have termed 'hyperspace philosophy'; see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension* (1983), 25; (2013), 120; Charles Howard Hinton, *A New Era of Thought* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1888); and Hinton, *The Fourth Dimension* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1904; and New York: John Lane, 1904). For Russian translations, see Charles Howard Hinton, *Chetvertoe izmerenie i era novoi mysli* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Novyi Chelovek, 1915); and Hinton, *Vospitanie vobrazhenie i chetvertoe izmerenie* (St. Petersburg: Trud, 1915).

- 3 See L. D. Henderson, 'The Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism: *Die Uebersinnliche Welt* and the International Cultures of Science and Occultism', *Glass Bead* (Paris), 0 (2016), <http://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-forgotten-meta-realities-of-modernism/>. For an overview of the impact of the fourth dimension on modern artists, see Henderson, 'The Image and

The fourth dimension and the ether stood as signs of the invisible ‘meta-realities’ that were a vital part of the layperson’s world view for much of the first two decades of the twentieth century. At the same time that the psychophysicist Wilhelm Wundt, so important for the Russian Avant-Garde and for Ouspensky, was studying the processes of sensation and perception, discoveries and developments in physics in the 1890s, such as X-rays, the electron, radioactivity, and wireless telegraphy, were making it evident that ‘nature’ included much more than what the human eye can detect.⁴ This scientific milieu, to which the ether was central and which formed the larger context of interest in a supra-sensible fourth spatial dimension, has long been missing from histories of modern art and modernism more generally.

Part of the problem in recovering this historical moment is the fact that Albert Einstein and Relativity Theory, which gained widespread public attention only in late 1919, subsequently overshadowed our knowledge of the ether physics that reigned in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁵ Although Einstein did not declare that there was no ether, he did assert that it had no mechanical properties and was, therefore, irrelevant to his new physics. Likewise, General Relativity, incorporating Hermann Minkowski’s 1908 positing of a four-dimensional space-time continuum, redefined the fourth dimension as time, the view that would dominate discussions of the fourth dimension from the 1920s onward. Only the late twentieth-century emergence of

Imagination of the Fourth Dimension in Twentieth-Century Art and Culture’, *Configurations*, 17 (Winter 2009): 131-60. For the occult context of the ether and its relevance for František Kupka and Umberto Boccioni, see Henderson, ‘Vibratory Modernism: Kupka, Boccioni, and the Ether of Space’, in Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, eds., *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 126-49. On Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and the ether, see Henderson, ‘Abstraction, the Ether, and the Fourth Dimension: Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich in Context’, in Marian Ackermann and Isabelle Malz, eds., *Kandinsky, Malewitsch, Mondrian: Der Weisse Abgrund Unendlichkeit / The Infinite White Abyss* (Düsseldorf: Kunst-sammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2014), 37-55 (German), 233-44 (English), which includes a brief version of the Hinton-Ouspensky-ether reading of Malevich offered here.

- 4 For the developments discussed here, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction: II. Cubism, Futurism, and Ether Physics in the Early Twentieth Century’, *Science in Context*, 17 (Winter 2004): 445-66. For an excellent introduction to physics in this period, see Alex Keller, *The Infancy of Atomic Physics: Hercules in His Cradle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).
- 5 On Relativity Theory and the eclipse expedition, see Helge Kragh, *Quantum Generations: A History of Physics in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Thomas F. Glick, ed., *The Comparative Reception of Relativity* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1987). On the delayed reception of Relativity Theory, see Henderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction: I. Writing Modern Art and Science—An Overview’, *Science in Context*, 423-45.

string theory and new cosmologies involving higher dimensions of space—along with computer graphics—would bring the fourth dimension back to widespread popular attention.⁶

In her 1991 essay ‘Malevich and Western European Art Theory’, Charlotte Douglas argued for the importance of the transnational circulation of artistic ideas in Europe and Russia and noted ‘changes in the way the world was viewed due to the popularization of new scientific concepts and the rush of new technology’, including flight.⁷ As she states, ‘Abstract styles were the attempt to see deeply into the structure of the world, to bring together former dichotomies—matter and spirit, material and energy’.⁸ The essay that follows owes its inspiration to Douglas’s pioneering exploration of the Russian Avant-Garde and the stimulus that it derived from the science of figures such as Wundt and Ernst Mach.⁹ My goal here, however, is to enlarge that background by incorporating the popular scientific milieu of ether physics and related scientific discoveries as the setting for the interest of both Ouspensky and the Russian Avant-Garde in the fourth dimension.

Background: The Fourth Dimension and the Ether

In January 1916, Matiushin, in an article on the *0.10* exhibition, named the figures who had been crucial sources for the Avant-Garde on the issue of space: ‘Lobachevsky, Riemann, Poincaré, Bouché, Hinton, and Minkowski’.¹⁰ Matiushin emphasised the mathematical sources that had stimulated interest in new kinds of spaces: the pioneers and advocates of the curvilinear ‘non-Euclidean’ geometries, Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky, Georg Friedrich Bernhard Riemann, and Henri Poincaré. He concluded with a reference to the very

6 See Henderson, ‘Reintroduction’, in *Fourth Dimension* (2013), 65-91.

7 Charlotte Douglas, ‘Malevich and Western European Art Theory’, in *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician* (New York: Abbeville, 1991), 56.

8 *Ibid.*, 60.

9 On Wundt’s importance, see Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 69-70; and Douglas, ‘Malevich and Western European Art Theory’, 58-59. See also Gerald Janacek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University, 1996), 14-21. On Mach, see Douglas, ‘Mach and Malevich: Sensation, Suprematism, and the Objectless World’, *The Structurist*, 49/50 (2009/2010): 58-65.

10 Mikhail Matiushin, ‘O vystavki poslednikh futuristov’, *Ocharovannyi strannik*, 10 (Spring 1916): 16 [signed January 1916]; English translation as ‘About the Exhibition of “The Last Futurists”’, in Matthew Drutt, ed., *In Search of 0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler / Hatje Cantz, 2015), 247-48. Here, Boucher is misidentified as ‘possibly Maxime Böcher’ (*ibid.*, 248).

latest science, that of Hermann Minkowski, to which he may have been exposed in the popular writings by the physicist Nikolai Alekseevich Umov.¹¹ Matiushin neglected to mention publicly Ouspensky, who was a key source on the fourth dimension for himself, Kruchenykh, and Malevich, but he did name Hinton, whom they had discovered through Ouspensky, and whose books Ouspensky translated and published in 1915. Matiushin's omission may be due, in part, to the fact that Ouspensky had criticised the Avant-Garde in the second edition of his *Fourth Dimension* in 1914.¹²

The previously unidentified presence in this list is that of 'Bouché'—Maurice Boucher, whose 1903 *Essai sur l'hyperespace: Le Temps, la matière, et l'énergie* was translated into Russian in 1914 as *Chetvertoe izmerenie*.¹³ Boucher, like Poincaré, embraced ether physics, and his book, with its extensive discussion of both the fourth dimension and the ether, had been important for artists in Paris, including Marcel Duchamp.¹⁴ Boucher's text highlights the contemporary recognition of the limitations of the human eye in the wake of discoveries such as the X-ray, emphasising that 'Our senses, on the whole, give us only deformed images of real phenomena', a central theme in Ouspensky's writing as well.¹⁵ Recounting recent developments in science in his discussions of matter, energy and ether, Boucher connected these topics to the fourth dimension, drawing on Hinton, as Ouspensky would do extensively as well. Philosophically committed to infinity and continuity, to which he devoted an entire chapter, Boucher drew on a spatial fourth dimension to explain the penetrability of matter as well as the relation of the ether to the three-dimensional world, including gravitation.¹⁶ Five years before Minkowski, Boucher actually posited an 'Espace-Temps à 4 dimensions'. In contrast to Relativity Theory's highly mathematical, finite 'space-time continuum', however, Boucher's

11 On the non-Euclidean geometries and these figures, especially Poincaré, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 1, and the section of chap. 5 on non-Euclidean geometry and Relativity Theory in Russia. It was the n -dimensional geometry of higher dimensions, also developed in the nineteenth century, that gave birth to the popular tradition of 'the fourth dimension' (ibid., chap. 1). Poincaré's opposition to Einstein and continued belief in the ether kept Relativity Theory from having a major impact in France (see Glick, *Comparative Reception of Relativity*, 113-23). On Umov, see note 19 below.

12 See Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, at note 158.

13 See Maurice Boucher, *Essai sur l'hyperespace: Le Temps, la matière, et l'énergie* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1903); and Boucher, *Chetvertoe izmerenie* (St. Petersburg: Izd. B.S. Bychkovskago, 1914).

14 See L. D. Henderson, *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 167-68.

15 Boucher, *Essai*, 64.

16 Ibid., chap. 2 ('L'Infini et le continu'). On the ether and gravitation, see ibid., 156-61.

‘Espace-Temps’ was filled with ether and was infinite in its extent.¹⁷ In 1914, the Russian translation of Boucher’s book gave the Avant-Garde a strong infusion of ether physics tied directly to the spatial fourth dimension.

For the 1916 edition of *Tertium Organum*, Ouspensky added a new chapter recounting a 1911 lecture by Umov before the Mendeleevskian Convention on Minkowski and the new Relativity physics (with no mention of Einstein’s name).¹⁸ Yet that publication appeared after the emergence of Suprematism in 1915, and because the new theory was generally so little popularised, apart from advocates like Umov, early discussions of Relativity Theory would not have undercut contemporary enthusiasm for the ether—particularly with the publication of Boucher in 1914.¹⁹ Indeed, in contrast to the oft-repeated narratives of the seeming immediate triumph of Einstein, his theories continued to face resistance in the 1910s, particularly from advocates of the ether, which still had strong proponents in Russia, Germany, England, France and elsewhere.²⁰

17 Ibid., 169. Typical of the French resistance to Einstein, Boucher’s text was reprinted in France in 1927, and he continued to promote his views.

18 See Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), chap. 11.

19 On the range of positions within the physics community at this time in Russia, including Umov and O. D. Khvolson, who were both important advocates of Relativity Theory, see Alexander Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture 1861-1917* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1970), 362-82; and V. P. Vizgin and G. E. Gorelik, ‘The Reception of the Theory of Relativity in Russia and the USSR’, in Glick, *Comparative Reception of Relativity*, 265-75.

On Umov’s 1911 lecture and its subsequent publication in several sources, see Douglas, ‘Mach and Malevich’, 59 and note 11, where she also quotes Roman Jakobson’s mention of Umov and Khvolson.

According to Aleksandr Parnis, Jakobson wrote to Kruchenykh in February 1914, ‘compar[ing] the experiments of Marinetti’s innovations with the theory of Albert Einstein’ and telling Kruchenykh, ‘You know, before you, not one of the poets talked about a “Worldbackwards”; Biely and Marinetti felt it a little bit, and by the way, this great thesis is completely scientific (although you were talking about poetry as against mathematics) and clearly described in the theory of relativity’. See Aleksandr Parnis, ‘K istorii odnoi polemiki: F. T. Marinetti i russkie futuristy’, [Toward the History of One Polemic: F. T. Marinetti and the Russian Futurists], in *Futurizm. Radikal’naia revoliutsiia. Italiia-Rossiiia* (Moscow: Krasnaia Ploshchad, 2008), 179. For the letter, Parnis cites Nikolai Khardzhiev, ‘Polemichnoe imia’, *Pamir* (Dushambe), 2 (1987): 164. I am indebted to Charlotte Douglas for this reference. Like others of his age across Europe (he was 18 in 1914), Jakobson was a member of the younger generation, which would embrace and draw actively upon Einstein’s ideas. In contrast, Kruchenykh was 28 in 1914 and was largely grounded in a world that preceded that of Einstein.

Although Einstein ultimately triumphed, there was no clear sense for the public before 1919 that his theories (and especially his denial of the ether) was correct. For a discussion of the science that attracted the Russian public during this period, see below.

20 See Milena Wazeck, *Einstein’s Opponents: The Public Controversy about the Theory of Relativity in the 1920s*, trans. Geoffrey S. Koby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

The response of Claude Bragdon, Ouspensky's American counterpart as an advocate of the fourth dimension and later the translator of *Tertium Organum*, was typical. Having heard something of the new Relativity Theory, he complained of the 'Relativists' in his 1916 book *Four-Dimensional Vistas*: 'If they take away the ether, they must give something in its stead.'²¹

Because the ether was largely forgotten in the wake of Einstein's ascent during the 1920s, it is useful to clarify the meaning of this long-forgotten concept in the later nineteenth century. Although a 'luminiferous ether' had first come to the public's attention in the context of the wave theory of light in the 1820s, by the 1890s, a variety of additional functions had been attributed to it by scientists, so that the ether could seem very new. Writing in 1883 in *Nature*, the prominent British physicist Sir Oliver Lodge explained, 'One continuous substance filling all space: which can vibrate as light; which can be sheared into positive and negative electricity; which in whirls constitutes matter; and which transmits by continuity, and not by impact, every action and reaction of which matter is capable. This is the modern view of the ether and its functions.'²² In Russia, the interest in Lodge was so great that his 1889 book *Modern Views of Electricity* (based on his articles in *Nature*), appeared in Russian even before it was published in English, and his writings continued to be translated, including his important *The Ether of Space* of 1909.²³

While Lord Kelvin's earlier 'vortex theory of matter' had posited matter as formed from swirling vortices of ether (like smoke rings), after the identification of the electron in 1897, Lodge had proposed what he called 'the electric theory of matter,' based on the interaction of electrons and the ether.²⁴ Both Wassily Kandinsky and Umberto Boccioni referred to the theory in their

21 Claude Bragdon, *Four-Dimensional Vistas* (Rochester, NY: The Manas Press, 1916), 36.

22 Oliver Lodge, 'The Ether and Its Functions,' *Nature*, 27 (1 February 1883): 330. On the history of ether theories, see G. N. Cantor and M. J. S. Hodge, eds., *Conceptions of Ether: Studies in the History of Ether Theories 1740-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), especially Daniel Siegel, 'Thomson, Maxwell, and the Universal Ether in Victorian Physics,' *ibid.*, 239-68.

23 See Sir Oliver Lodge, *Mirovoi efir* (Odessa: Mathesis, 1911). Lodge's history of astronomy, *Pioneers of Science* (1893) was translated as *Pionery nauki* (St. Petersburg: F. Pavlenkova, 1901). For the Theosophists' awareness of Lodge, see Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than the Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). She cites Lodge's article 'Bessmertie dushi' [Immortal Souls], *Teosoficheskoe obozrenie*, 3 (1907): 115-25. For the Russian translation of Lodge's *Modern Views of Electricity*, see Theodore Besterman, *A Bibliography of Sir Oliver Lodge* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 23-24.

24 See Sir Oliver Lodge, 'Electric Theory of Matter,' *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 109 (August 1904): 383-89; and Keller, *Infancy of Atomic Physics*, chap. 8.

writings, suggesting, in Boccioni's words, that 'matter is only energy'.²⁵ Gustave Le Bon was a key populariser of these new ideas and of the ether, and his bestselling *L'Evolution de la matière* (1905) appeared in Russian translation in 1910.²⁶ There he asserted, 'The greater part of physical phenomena – light, heat, radiant electricity, etc., are considered to have their seat in the ether ... its existence has forced itself upon us long since, and appears to be more assured than that of matter itself'.²⁷ A friend of the philosopher Henri Bergson and a source for the Cubists in Paris, Le Bon viewed matter as merely a temporary condensation of 'intra-atomic energy'.²⁸

Le Bon was responding, in part, to the discovery of the first radioactive elements by Marie and Pierre Curie in 1898 and their subsequent high-profile research, along with that of Ernest Rutherford. Radioactivity was a highly popular topic in both popular scientific and occult writing, since it offered the surprising image of matter as continually emitting alpha and beta particles and gamma rays, as well as the prospect of an unlimited new source of energy.²⁹ The identification of radioactive beta particles as infinitesimal, speeding electrons, helped keep research on the structure of the atom in the news. Since radioactivity was widely interpreted as a universal property, matter in general was often discussed as dematerialising into the ether and, at the same time, being formed from it, creating an identity for the ether as a liminal realm of diffusion and cohesion. 'How much we ourselves are matter and how much ether is, in these days, a very moot question', pondered popular science writer Robert Kennedy Duncan in 1905.³⁰ Not only matter, but space itself had a new

25 See Umberto Boccioni, *Pittura scultura futuriste (dinamismo plastico)* (Milan: Edizioni Futuriste di 'Poesia', 1914), 326; and Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., Verlag, 1912); English translation, *On the Spiritual in Art* in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 142.

26 See Gustave Le Bon, *L'Evolution de la matière* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1905), Russian translation, D-r Gustav Lebon, *Evolutsiia materii* (St. Petersburg: Tovarishchestvo 'Obshchestvennaia pol'za', 1909). Le Bon's *L'Evolution des forces* appeared from the same publisher in 1910. Both books were reprinted in 1911, and the earlier book was reprinted again in 1912 and 1914. Douglas documents Mitrofan Vasilevich Lodyzhenskii's discussion of Le Bon's writings in 'Mach and Malevich', 64, note 11. Le Bon was a prominent figure because of the multiple Russian editions of his writings on crowd psychology.

27 Le Bon, *L'Evolution de la matière*, 82.

28 *Ibid.*, 9. Bergson's writings were well known in Russia. See Charlotte Douglas, 'Suprematism: The Sensible Dimension', *The Russian Review*, 34 (July 1975): 966-81. On Matiushin and Elena Guro's awareness of Le Bon and Bergson, see note 49 below.

29 For the history of radioactivity, see Keller, *Infancy of Atomic Physics*, chaps. 5, 6.

30 Robert Kennedy Duncan, *The New Knowledge* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1905), 5.

image in this period: it was now understood as filled with ether and vibrating waves, offering new possibilities for communications. As Sir William Crookes declared in his 1898 Presidential Address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 'Ether vibrations have powers and attributes equal to any demand — even to the transmission of thought'.³¹

The Russian Avant-Garde, the New Science, and Further Stimuli, Including Italian Futurism

'Our energy is the energy of Radium ... Our principle = the dazzling renewal of scientific discoveries', asserted the Russian Futurist poet Vasilii Kamenskii in a manuscript of 1914.³² Kamenskii's fellow Futurist Mikhail Larionov made his interest in the latest science the most overt of any Russian artist—in the style of painting he termed 'Rayism' and in his manifestos on the topic.³³ Larionov considered Rayism to be an extension of Impressionist painting (inflected by Cubism, Futurism, and Orphism), in which rays of light themselves were his subject-matter. As Douglas has written so suggestively, 'Larionov conceived of this process almost as putting the canvas into the air to skim off the light image as it trembled in space like a mirage'.³⁴ What the painter understood as trembling were vibrating waves in the ether—as he stated, 'the ceaseless and intense drama of the rays that constitute the unity of all things'.³⁵ In addition to visible light, in his 1913 'Rayist Painting' manifesto, Larionov referred to 'Radioactive Rays. Ultraviolet rays. Reflectivity', and his library contained sources on subjects such as X-rays and other related aspects of the new

31 'Address by Sir William Crookes, President', *Report of the Sixty-Eighth Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1898)* (London: John Murray, 1899), 31.

32 Vasilii Kamenskii, untitled ms., quoted in Anthony Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 137.

33 Parton considers the popular scientific context for Larionov's Rayism, such as X-rays and radioactivity, including information about Russian publications focussing on these issues and works in Larionov's library (*Mikhail Larionov*, 137-41). The standard view of the ether as 'scientifically discredited', however, led Parton to wonder how it 'found its way into the rayist manifestos' (*ibid.* 138).

34 Charlotte Douglas, 'The New Russian Art and Italian Futurism', *Art Journal*, 34 (Spring 1975): 233.

35 Mikhail Larionov, 'Le Rayonisme Pictural', *Montjoie!*, 4/5/6 (April/May/June 1914): 15; English translation in John E. Bowlton, ed., and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism* (rev. ed., London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 101.

science.³⁶ Although Larionov did not use the term ether, in his 1914 essay 'Le Rayonisme Pictural', he mentioned 'plastic emanations' and 'intangible forms', and asserted that 'Rayism is the painting ... of these *infinite* products with which the whole of space is filled'.³⁷

Malevich was likewise profoundly interested in energies and invisible realities, and his writings and art reflect the new conceptions of matter and space, even if he trumpeted those concerns less overtly than Larionov. In his 1916 text, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism*, Malevich declared, 'Objects have vanished like smoke; to attain the new artistic culture, art advances toward creation as an end in itself and toward domination over the forms of nature'.³⁸ Suprematism focused not on superficial objects or surfaces, but on 'inherent forms': 'Solid matter does not exist in nature. There is only energy', the painter declared in 1921.³⁹ The discovery in the Nikolai Khardzhiev Collection of the 1916 drawing *Composition 14t* (*Suprematism: Sensation of Electric[ity]*) (Fig. 3.6) makes Malevich's scientific interests clear.⁴⁰ Here, he seems to have used his newly developed Suprematist

36 Mikhail Larionov, 'Rayonist [Rayist] Painting', in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 98. Also see note 33 above.

37 Larionov, 'Le Rayonisme Pictural', in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 100. Larionov also referred to the fourth dimension in his text 'Rayist Painting'. See Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5; and Parton, *Mikhail Larionov*, 131-37.

38 Kazimir Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k Suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1916); English translation 'From Cubism to Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism', in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 119. Malevich echoed that sentiment in the 1920s, asserting, 'Everything which we call nature, in the last analysis, is a figment of the imagination, having no relation whatsoever to reality' See Kasimir Malevich, *Die gegenstandlose Welt* (Munich: Verlag Albert Langen, 1927); English translation, Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Co., 1959), 20.

39 Kazimir Malevich, 'Futurizm-Suprematizm', 1921, ms; English translation, 'Futurism-Suprematism, 1921: An Extract', trans. John. E. Bowlt in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 178. For 'inherent forms', see Kazimir Malevich, *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* (Petrograd: L. Ia Ginzburg, 1916); English translation 'From Cubism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting' in Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 109; and Douglas, 'Malevich and Western European Art Theory', 60.

40 Because of the unusual form of the root of 'electric' that Malevich recorded on the drawing, his title has been translated variously as 'Sensation of Electricity' and 'Sensation of the Electron' (the latter in Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'The Cosmos and the Canvas', *Tate Etc.*, 31 (summer 2014), <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/cosmos-and-canvas>). Troels Andersen records the inscription as 'ощущение электричеч', which he translates as 'Sensation of Electric(ity)'. See Troels Andersen, *K. S. Malevich: The Leporskaya Archive* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011), 134. The transliteration

style, epitomised by *The Black Square* (centered in the corner like an icon), to suggest the subatomic realm of electricity within the atom, with what may be rectilinear signs for electrons in orbit (Fig. 3.1) It is little wonder that Matiushin referred to Malevich as a 'galvanic current' and 'major accumulating force' in describing the affect he had on other artists in his January 1916 review of *o.10*.⁴¹

In his early 1920s essay 'Suprematism as Objectlessness', Malevich, echoing earlier ideas such as the electric theory of matter, wrote that matter 'does not have ... a material unit or an indivisible particle'.⁴² He likewise speculated about X-rays and, ultimately, their limitations: 'After Roentgen's ray must come a more supple light of knowledge'.⁴³ And he presciently predicted the future discovery of ever smaller subatomic particles, writing that 'from atoms, and atoms from electrons and ions, future science will prove that electrons and ions consist of other x-s'.⁴⁴ Finally, looking back from the 1920s in 'Suprematism as Pure Cognition', the painter confirmed his earlier awareness of radioactivity and ether as he meditated on the scientific explanation of the Northern Lights as related to nitrogen: 'If the new science about nitrogen, radium and ether considers the cause of many phenomena, it will thereby discover a whole series of these forces, which *used to be called God*, dispersed through all phenomena'.⁴⁵

Clearly, along with the fourth dimension, the popularised science of ether physics and related discoveries was a significant impetus for Malevich's transformation of painting. The question remains: how did he and his colleagues encounter the scientific theories and discoveries that were circulating in Europe in the years before the First World War? And how did he understand the relation of his Suprematist style to both the fourth dimension and the ether?

would be *elektriches* and not *elektron*, coming closer to the German *electrisch* for 'electric'. Malevich's usage suggests ideas such as the 'electric theory of matter' and electrons as the substructure of matter.

41 See Matiushin, 'About the Exhibition of "The Last Futurists"', *In Search of o.10*, 248.

42 Malevich, 'Suprematism as Objectlessness', quoted in Douglas, 'Mach and Malevich', 59; Douglas notes that the text was completed by February 1922 (*ibid.*, 58).

43 Kazimir Malevich, 'Non-Objectivity', in K. S. Malevich, *The World as Non-Objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922-25*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Edmund T. Little (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1976), 85.

44 *Ibid.*, 66.

45 Kazimir Malevich, 'Mir kak bespredmetnost'. Trud i otdykh' [The World as Objectlessness: Work and Relaxation], in K. S. Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995-2004), IV: 234; quoted in Douglas, 'Mach and Malevich', 60.

There is still much to be done to recover the history of science as popularly known in early twentieth-century Russia, since historians of science have focused primarily on Einstein's ascent and not on the continued presence of ether physics in the period before and during the First World War. Although physics paled in comparison to the prominence of Russian chemistry at this time, Alexander Vucinich's scholarly discussion of pre-Einsteinian physics in Russia provides some clues.⁴⁶ For example, in 1912 the Moscow Society for the Study and Popularisation of Physics was founded.⁴⁷ More widespread was the impact of the journal *Scientific Word* [*Nauchnoe slovo*], which was dedicated to popularising science. In 1905, it published an article in which Umov asserted that while 'at the end of the century we thought that science had already penetrated the innermost depths of nature ... now we know that it had worked on the thin surface of the physical universe'. For Umov, recent work in physics and chemistry suggested 'a single reality lying far beyond our senses'.⁴⁸ As noted earlier, translations of European popular science texts were regularly published in Russia, including Le Bon's *L'Evolution de la matière*, Lodge's *The Ether of Space*, and Poincaré's *La Science et l'hypothèse* of 1902. Isabel Wünsche has documented Matiushin's knowledge of Le Bon's *L'Evolution de la matière* and the work of the French astronomer Camille Flammarion, whom Ouspensky quoted.⁴⁹

The international interest in Dimitrii Mendeleev and the periodic table of elements meant that the field of chemistry in Russia created high-profile routes for popular information on the latest views on the nature of matter, including radioactivity and atomic theory.⁵⁰ Vucinich notes the awareness in Russia of the British chemist Crookes, who, like Lodge and Flammarion, was also interested in spiritualism and telepathy. Crookes's attitudes were shared by the Russian chemist Aleksandr Butlerov, and Vucinich acknowledges that a

46 See Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture*, 362-82.

47 *Ibid.*, 367.

48 Umov, as quoted in *ibid.*, 371.

49 See Isabel Wünsche, *The Organic School of the Russian Avant-Garde: Nature's Creative Principles* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 78, note 185, where she discusses the books with which Matiushin was familiar, including Bergson and Ouspensky. For Ouspensky's quote, see note 93 below.

50 Vucinich's early treatment of Mendeleev (*Science in Russian Culture*, 147-65) has now been supplanted by Michael D. Gordin's *A Well-Ordered Thing: Dimitrii Mendeleev and the Shadow of the Periodic Table* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), which provides an extensive discussion of Mendeleev's response to the threat to his system he perceived in radioactivity (chap. 8). Mendeleev's writings also served to direct attention to the ether, since he hoped to counter the problem of radioactivity by establishing the ether as a unifying element in the periodic table (see *ibid.*, 217-27).

number of chemists in Russia were interested in spiritualism.⁵¹ Butlerov was among the scientists whose researches Kandinsky lauded in his 1911 text *On the Spiritual in Art*, along with the Leipzig astronomer, spiritualist, and advocate of the fourth dimension Johann Karl Friedrich Zöllner, the Russian zoologist and spiritualist Nikolai Petrovich Vagner, Crookes, Flammarion, the French physiologist and founder of *Annales des science psychique* Charles Richet, and the Italian criminologist and spiritualism supporter Cesare Lombroso.⁵²

Because of their relevance to Mendeleev's theories, new developments in radioactivity and atomic theory were followed closely by Russian scientists and received considerable popular coverage as well. Two books on radioactivity by Marie Curie were published in Russian in 1912 and 1913, following upon translations of books by Rutherford's collaborators, Frederick Soddy and William Ramsay.⁵³ Radioactivity was often discussed in terms of alchemy, including by Soddy and Ramsay, and it is not surprising that chemist N. A. Shilov, who had worked in Rutherford's Cambridge laboratory for six months in 1914, filled the 1,000-seat lecture hall at the Moscow Polytechnical Museum for four lectures on radioactivity that autumn.⁵⁴ When the Russian Futurist poet Benedikt Livshits later described the avant-garde protagonist Nikolai Kulbin's

51 See Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture*, 138-47. While Vucinich downplays Butlerov's spiritualism, Gordin provides a far more balanced treatment of the subject, acknowledging the way in which science and spiritualism interpenetrated in this period. See his chapter 8 ('Chasing Ghosts'), which also addresses the commission that the critic Mendeleev headed to investigate spiritualist phenomena. See also Maria Carlson, 'Fashionable Occultism: Spiritualism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, and Hermeticism in Fin-de-Siècle Russia', in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 135-52. For Crookes and spiritualism, see Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture*, 146-47, 392; and Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). On Crookes's international reputation among occultists, see Henderson, 'The Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism'.

Vucinich maintains a strict distinction that was not clear at the time: 'During this period, Butlerov the scientist was completely separated from Butlerov the spiritualist' (*Science in Russian Culture*, 145).

52 Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*; in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings*, 143. In 1911, Nikolai Kulbin read a Russian version of Kandinsky's text at the Second All-Russian Congress of Artists in St. Petersburg. See John E. Bowlt and Rose-Carol Washton Long, *The Life of Vasilli Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of 'On the Spiritual in Art'* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980), 1.

53 For the Curie books, see Parton, *Mikhail Larionov*, 232, note 35; Frederick Soddy, *Radii i ego razgadka* (Odessa: Mathesis, 1910); and William Ramsay, *Noviieishaiia khimiia: v dvukh chastiakh* (Moscow: I. D. Sytina, 1910).

54 See Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture*, 393. N. A. Morozov, who advocated an evolutionary theory of chemical elements, gave highly popular lectures, predicting the future

lectures of 1912 as 'a salad of Bergson, Ramsay, and Picasso', this was the Ramsay to whom he was referring.⁵⁵

In addition to popular scientific texts, the occult books and periodicals that further promulgated these ideas, and sources such as Boucher and Ouspensky, another direct stimulus for Malevich and his colleagues' interest in the new science would have been the manifestos of the Italian Futurists. Scholars have not been fully alert to the significant role that science played for the Futurists Boccioni and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who lectured in Russia in 1914.⁵⁶ Futurist manifestos were regularly translated and published in Russia, including two major texts that refer specifically to X-rays: 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto' of 1910 and 'The Exhibitors to the Public', which accompanied the Futurists' 1912 Paris-London-Berlin exhibition. Both manifestos appeared in the June 1912 issue of the *Union of Youth* journal, the vehicle for the circle around Matiushin, which Malevich joined soon afterwards. In addition, thirteen manifestos were published in an anthology in 1914, and another Futurist collection also appeared that year.⁵⁷ As has been amply documented, members of the Avant-Garde, such as David Burliuk, Ilia Zdanevich, and Alexandra Exter travelled extensively in Europe at this time, offering further opportunities for interchange. In particular, the painter Exter's close personal relationship with the Italian Futurist poet Ardengo Soffici in Paris gave her a direct connection to the Futurists' scientific interests.⁵⁸ Soffici's poem 'Raggio' of 1914, for example, concerns rays and evokes the ether in treating the universe

alchemical transmutation of elements (*ibid.*, 365). For Ouspensky's citing of Morozov, see Ouspensky, 'The Fourth Dimension', in *New Model of the Universe*, 80-85; and Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, at note 31.

55 See Benedikt Livshits, *Polutorglazny strelets* [The One and a Half-Eyed Archer] (Leningrad, 1933), as quoted in Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 6. I am grateful to Brian Shaw for directing me to this Ramsay reference.

56 Parton notes Boccioni's reference to the 'vivifying current of science' in the 1910 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto' (*Mikhail Larionov*, 137). On Futurism in Russia, see Douglas, 'New Russian Art and Italian Futurism'. On Marinetti's visit, see Aurora Egidio, 'The Collision of Italian and Russian Futurism: Marinetti's Visit to Russia', in Rosamund Bartlett and Sarah Dadswell, eds., *Victory over the Sun: The World's First Futurist Opera* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012), 237-53.

57 For Russian translations of Italian manifestos, see Douglas, 'New Russian Art and Italian Futurism', 230, 232, note 28. Jeremy Howard documents the two manifestos published in the *Union of Youth* journal in June 1912. See Howard, *The Union of Youth: An Artist's Society of the Russian Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 119.

58 For Exter's connection to Soffici and her importance for Malevich during 1915, see Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origins of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 66-69.

as a 'continuous whole' and 'a flux of energy with diverse rhythms from granite to thought'.⁵⁹

Boccioni was the primary author of the manifestos relating to Futurist painting, and in the 1910 'Technical Manifesto' he had queried, 'Why should we forget in our creations the doubled power of our sight, capable of giving results analogous to those of the X-rays?'⁶⁰ Although Boccioni's treatise *Pittura scultura futuriste* was not published until 1914, he had completed the text by 1913, making clear the fundamental importance of the new science for Futurist creativity:

Why does science have the courage to formulate hypotheses transcending the experimental, and art, which is intuition itself, still remains at the stage of making experimental copies of reality ... The electric theory of matter, according to which matter is only energy or, in other words condensed electricity, and exists only as force, is a hypothesis confirming my intuition ... Around us pass energies that are being observed and studied; from our bodies emanate fluids of power, attraction or repulsion ... Hertzian waves carry the feverish pulse of the races thousands of kilometres across oceans, across deserts ... Electrons revolve in the atom by tens of thousands, separated one from the other like the planets of the solar system and, like them, have an orbit and a speed inconceivable for us.⁶¹

Boccioni was a particular enthusiast of the ether, and in *Pittura scultura futuriste*, he equated the 'unique form of continuity in space', the title of his most famous sculpture, with 'the materialisation of the fluid, of the ethereal, of the imponderable'.⁶² In paintings, too, such as *Elasticity* (1912) and *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* (1913; Fig. 3.2), Boccioni sought to materialise the 'atmosphere', as he often termed the ether. From Lodge's latest theories, he understood the ether as an elastic, structural field of great energies.⁶³ As he explained

59 Ardengo Soffici, 'Raggio', *Lacerba* (1 July 1914), 195. I am grateful to Elisa Valentini for her new translation of this important poem.

60 Umberto Boccioni et al., 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto' (April 1910), in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 28. Douglas argued that Boccioni was important for Malevich in 'New Russian Art and Italian Futurism', 235-38. I initially discussed Boccioni and the ether in Henderson, 'Vibratory Modernism', in Clarke and Henderson, *From Energy to Information*, 126-49.

61 Boccioni, *Pittura scultura futuriste*, 326-28.

62 *Ibid.*, 325.

63 I argue this case in 'Umberto Boccioni's *Elasticity*, Italian Futurism, and the Ether of Space', in Jaume Navarro, ed., *Ether and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).



FIGURE 3.2 Umberto Boccioni, *Dynamism of a Soccer Player*, 1913, oil on canvas, 193.2 × 201 cm., The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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in 'Plastic Foundations of Futurist Sculpture and Painting' of 1913, 'The *distances* between one object and another are not just empty spaces, but are occupied by material continuities made up of varying intensities, continuities which we reveal with perceptible lines that do not correspond to any photographic truth'.⁶⁴ In *Dynamism of a Soccer Player*, Boccioni, as Cubist painters

64 Boccioni, 'Plastic Foundations of Futurist Sculpture and Painting', in Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman, eds., *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 140-41; see also Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 88-89, with variations in translation.

had also done, sought to give visual form to the invisible ether and its energies, using chiaroscuro modelling to dematerialise the edges of forms, merging them with their environment, as the new paradigms of space and matter suggested.⁶⁵

The subject of Malevich's Suprematist canvas *Painterly Realism of a Football Player: Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension* of 1915 (Fig. 3.3) is thought to be a response to Boccioni's image, and it serves well in a consideration of Malevich's style. While Boccioni had, in passing, claimed the fourth dimension for Futurism, contrasting the Futurists' dynamic 'unfolding of forces and forms' to the stasis of Cubism, it was not a major concern for him in comparison to the ether.⁶⁶ In contrast, for Malevich – through Ouspensky – the fourth dimension was a defining aspect of Suprematism, associated with the evolution of higher consciousness. Yet, because, at this time, the ether was so closely tied to the fourth dimension in the context of occultism and because Ouspensky followed Hinton in emphasising this connection, a re-reading of the Russian mystic philosopher's writings offers significant new insights into the emergence of Malevich's Suprematist style during 1915.

Re-examining Malevich's Sources on the Fourth Dimension

In his study of the Union of Youth circle around Matiushin in St. Petersburg, Jeremy Howard identified what is probably the first statement on the fourth dimension by a member of the Avant-Garde. In spring 1910, during a lecture, given at the last of his Triangle Group exhibitions, the physician and artist Nikolai Kulbin asserted, 'It is possible to violate all academic rules, trying to cross to the so-called "fourth dimension", trying to convey one's inner spiritual world – thus the artist sincerely represents on the canvas how the environment appears to him'.⁶⁷ Before Howard's discovery, Kulbin's early interest in the fourth dimension was known only through Kruchenykh's Ouspensky-inflected reference in his April 1913 *Declaration of the Word as Such* about escaping 'the limitations of time, space, etc.', by means of a new language: 'Here I agree with N. Kulbin, who uncovered the 4th dimension – gravity, the 5th – motion, and 6th or 7th time'.⁶⁸ The two approaches connected with Kulbin –

65 On Le Bon, Bergson, and Cubism, see Henderson, 'Editor's Introduction: II. Cubism, Futurism, and Ether Physics in the Early Twentieth Century', 449–50.

66 On Boccioni and the fourth dimension, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, at note 192.

67 See Howard, *Union of Youth*, 30.

68 Quoted in Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, at notes 76, 101.

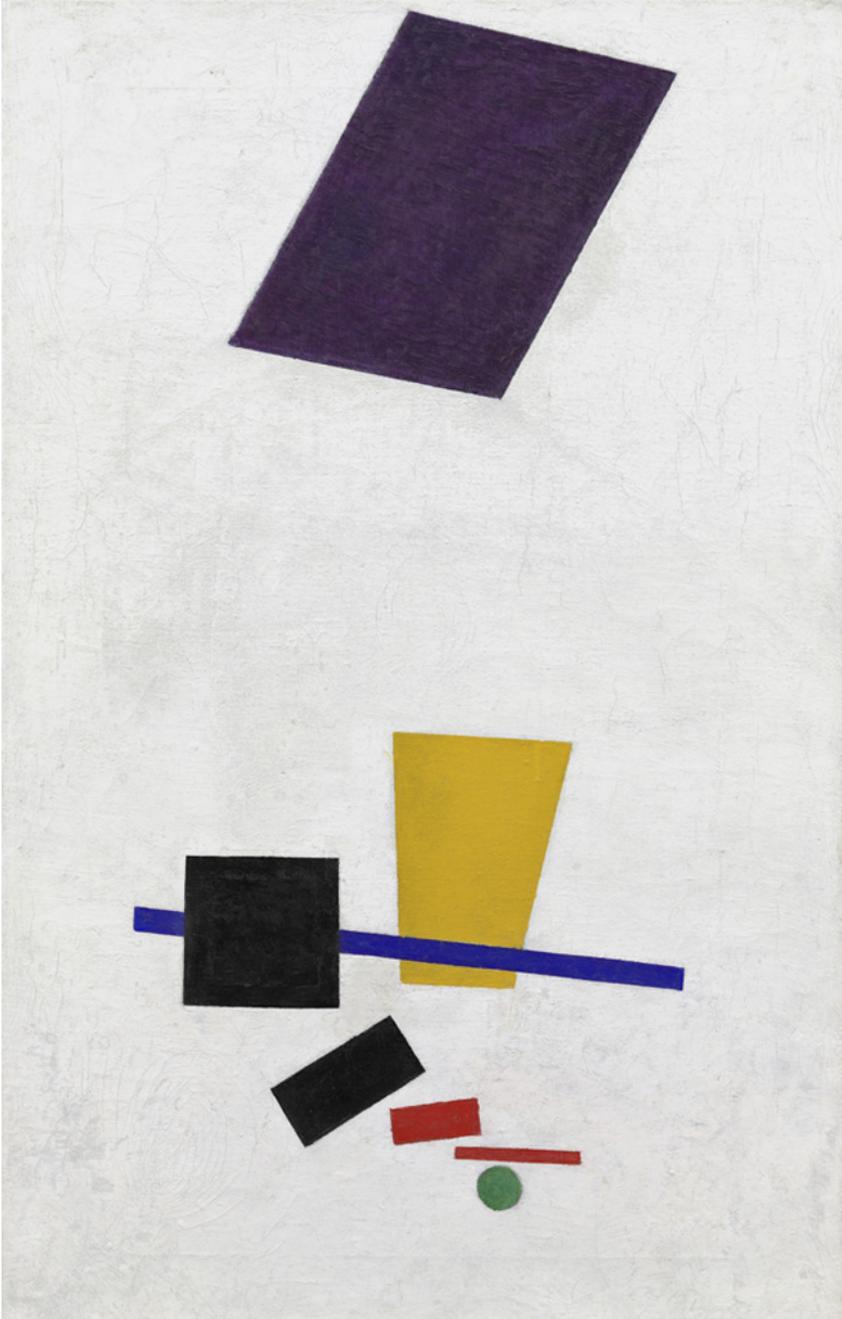


FIGURE 3.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Painterly Realism of a Football Player: Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, 1915, oil on canvas, 70.2 × 44.1 cm., The Art Institute of Chicago. PHOTO: THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO / ART RESOURCE, NY.

spiritual and semi-scientific – suggest the variety of ideas associated with the fourth dimension that were circulating in the early twentieth century – in the pioneering writings of Hinton as well as in Theosophical and spiritualist texts, which often drew upon them. This was rich fodder for Ouspensky as he composed his books in 1909 and 1911.

Kulbin's first remark reflects the milieu of occultism, nourished by science, as well as his own Symbolist-oriented interest in the artist's psyche and ability to discern a truer reality, which would be shared by Matiushin and the Union of Youth as well.⁶⁹ Kulbin, like Ouspensky, was a reader of Wundt's physiological psychology, and, as a medical doctor himself, he was particularly interested in subliminal sensation and published on the subject.⁷⁰ Given the importance of Kulbin and Wundt for the younger Avant-Garde, including Malevich, it is hardly surprising that 'subtle sensation' would also become a key issue in the young painter's art and theory. Ouspensky refers numerous times to Wundt in his writings, and his system of increasingly developed forms of knowledge presented in *Tertium Organum*—sensation, perception, concepts, and, ultimately, 'cosmic consciousness' of the fourth dimension—was grounded, at its first three levels, in Wundt's theories.⁷¹ Ouspensky then developed his theories on higher forms of consciousness, inspired by various mystical traditions and the writings of figures such as the psychologist William James and Richard Maurice Bucke, the Canadian author of *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901).⁷²

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- 69 Howard notes 'the pervasive atmosphere of science, spiritualism, and occultism in the intellectual circles of St. Petersburg' (*Union of Youth*, 5). On this topic, see note 74 below.
- 70 On Wundt's importance for Kulbin and his interest in subliminal sensation, see Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 68–71. Wünsche situates Kulbin, the Union of Youth circle, Matiushin and his wife, the poet Elena Guro, in the context of an organic world view, which included panpsychism and a belief in evolving consciousness (*Organic School of the Russian Avant-Garde*, 41–49).
- 71 Ouspensky provided an overview of 'the four forms of the manifestation of consciousness' at the back of *Tertium Organum*; see Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, chap. 8, for his initial discussion. For Ouspensky's references to Wundt, see *Tertium Organum* (1922), 41, 139. For Wundt's theories, see Wilhelm Wundt, *Principles of Physiological Psychology*, trans. Edward Bradford Titchener (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1904). See also, S. Feldman, 'Wundt's Psychology', in R. W. Rieber, ed., *Wilhelm Wundt and the Making of a Scientific Psychology* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).
- 72 For an introduction to Ouspensky's philosophy, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, section on 'Hyperspace Philosophy in Russia: Peter Demianovich Ouspensky'; see also L. D. Henderson, 'Mysticism, Romanticism, and the Fourth Dimension', in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), 219–35. Charlotte Douglas's essay broadened the context for Ouspensky and for the Avant-Garde's move 'beyond reason' to include yoga

Ouspensky was working as a journalist in St. Petersburg and reading a wide range of European occult sources when he was drawn to Theosophy in 1907. He was closely associated with the Theosophical Society from 1907 to 1914, only breaking with the group in early 1915.⁷³ Kulbin was likewise interested in Theosophy and occultism, and was also an acquaintance of Kandinsky, with whom he would have shared these interests.⁷⁴ Both Ouspensky's and Kulbin's language skills would have given them access to the scientific and occult ideas circulating in a variety of Theosophical and spiritualist journals, such as the international German spiritualist monthly *Die uebersinnliche Welt*, which regularly reported on new scientific developments.⁷⁵ Kandinsky was a reader of the *Die uebersinnliche Welt*, and the journal's science writer, Robert Blum, had published a book in 1906 on the most recent science that was relevant to spiritualism, titling it *Die vierte Dimension*.⁷⁶ Ouspensky and Kulbin may also have been acquainted through the Stray Dog Cabaret, as John Bowlt has suggested.⁷⁷ While Hinton had not connected the fourth dimension to gravity, Ouspensky

and Lodyzhenskii's writings on 'superconsciousness'; see Douglas, 'Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matiushin, and Their Circles', in *ibid.*, 185-99. Wünsche also addresses Ouspensky's philosophy in *Organic School of the Russian Avant-Garde*, 22-26.

- 73 For Ouspensky's discovery of occult literature, see, for example, his 'Introduction' to *New Model*, 1-10, where he also documents his extensive travels in Europe, Egypt, India, and Ceylon (9-10). For further background, including his father's interest in 'the problem of the Fourth Dimension', see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5. Robert Williams dates Ouspensky's membership of the Theosophical Society to 1911-14; see Williams, *Artists in Revolution: Portraits of the Avant-Garde, 1905-1925* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), 118.
- 74 On Kulbin's and Ouspensky's occult milieu in St. Petersburg, see John E. Bowlt, 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society', in Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art*, 165-83; and Edward Kasinec and Boris Kerdimun, 'Occult Literature in Russia', in *ibid.*, 361-65. On Theosophy in Russia, see Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than the Truth!* For Russian occult journals and other source materials, see Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, 414-49.
- 75 For a sampling of the content of *Die uebersinnliche Welt*, see Henderson, 'The Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism'. For Kulbin's French and German reading, see Janacek, *Zaum*, 42. Matiushin, who is central to this discussion, also read French (*ibid.*).
- 76 See Robert Blum, *Die vierte Dimension* (Stuttgart: Altmann, 1906). The fourth dimension had a long association with spiritualism through Zöllner's activities in Leipzig, where he was convinced that the medium Henry Slade was untying knots by means of the fourth dimension (see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 1). The chemist Butlerov referred to Zöllner in his spiritualist writings (Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture*, 146), and the Leipzig astronomer was a continued presence for the readers of *Die uebersinnliche Welt*. Kandinsky's several copies of the journal are preserved in the Gabriele Münter- und Johannes Eichner-Stiftung at the Lenbachhaus, Munich.
- 77 Bowlt, 'Esoteric Culture', 172.

would do so in *Tertium Organum* in 1911 and he could have been one of Kulbin's sources on that subject.⁷⁸

That Ouspensky was attuned to Theosophy and spiritualism is readily apparent from the numerous references in his two books to authors such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (Elena Petrovna Blavatskaia), Charles Webster Leadbeater, and others.⁷⁹ Both the ether and the fourth dimension were important for Leadbeater, and, along with Rudolf Steiner's lectures, his Theosophical writings (widely translated), were crucial for the international promulgation of Hinton's ideas.⁸⁰ In *The Fourth Dimension*, for example, Ouspensky wrote of the world of 'psychic phenomena' and 'thought transfer' in relation to 'fluctuations in the etherial medium', a major theme in Leadbeater's, as well as spiritualist, publications.⁸¹ Yet, Ouspensky also differentiated his own views, critiquing 'dualistic spiritism' and, ultimately, making a spatial fourth dimension the central theme of his mystical philosophy, in contrast to both Leadbeater and Steiner, for whom it was an auxiliary issue.⁸²

For Ouspensky, the 'key to the enigmas of the world' (the subtitle of *Tertium Organum*) was the existence of a four-dimensional universe, of which our world must be only a partial section.⁸³ Following Hinton, he argued that in such a section of higher-dimensional space, the sense of motion or time itself would result from an incomplete understanding of higher space. Hinton had illustrated that process in a diagram of a spiral passing through a plane or fluid film and creating the illusion for a two-dimensional being of a dot

78 For Ouspensky's mentions of gravity, including the idea that in cosmic consciousness the 'center of gravity of *everything* shall lie for man in the inner world' (331), see *Tertium Organum*, 98, 139, 331.

79 See, Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 31, 53, 121, 202, 291 (Blavatsky); 37, 134, 240 (Leadbeater); for spiritualism, see note 82.

80 On Theosophy and Leadbeater as vehicles for popularising the fourth dimension, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 1, note 75; chap. 2, note 3 and following. Leadbeater discussed Hinton's ideas, connecting 'astral vision' to the fourth dimension in *Clairvoyance* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1899), chap. 2. On Leadbeater and the ether, see Henderson, 'Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism'. For Steiner's interest in Hinton and the fourth dimension, see his lectures published as Rudolf Steiner, *The Fourth Dimension: Sacred Geometry, Alchemy, and Mathematics*, intro. David Booth (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2001).

81 See Uspenskii, *Chetvertoe izmerenie*, 39.

82 See Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 330 for 'dualistic spiritism'; and *ibid.*, 255.

83 For a useful introduction to the concept of higher-dimensional space, see Rudy Rucker, *The Fourth Dimension: Toward a Geometry of Higher Reality* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984).

moving in a circle in the plane, an image that Ouspensky reproduced in *Tertium Organum*.⁸⁴ To overcome the limits of a faulty 'psychic apparatus' in the face of the fourth dimension, Ouspensky urged his readers to escape the limits of conventional language and traditional 'three-dimensional logic' (hence his new post-Aristotelian 'organum') and to cultivate new forms of consciousness, including a 'higher intuition'.⁸⁵

Kruchenykh's development of *zaum*, his transrational or beyonsense language and Malevich's 'Alogist' or 'Transrational Realist' paintings of 1913-14, such as *An Englishman in Moscow* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) responded to Ouspensky's system of an alogical logic, as Kruchenykh noted with a direct reference to *Tertium Organum* in his 1913 essay 'New Ways of the Word'.⁸⁶ Such thinking also lies behind the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* of December 1913, the joint project of Kruchenykh, Malevich, and Matiushin, for which one of Malevich's stage designs drew on Hinton's image of the cruciform hypercube to suggest a seemingly nonsensical building with inside and outside visible simultaneously.⁸⁷ Matiushin had already responded to Ouspensky's philosophy in March 1913 in the *Union of Youth* journal, by juxtaposing passages from *Tertium Organum* with excerpts from the most recent publication on French Cubist theory by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger.⁸⁸ In making his case for the further step to the fourth state of consciousness, Ouspensky had

84 See Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 70, and the related chapter. See also Hinton, *Fourth Dimension*, 25.

85 See Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 84-85 ('psychic apparatus'); 257 ("three-dimensional logic"); 170 ('higher order of intuition'). For Ouspensky's alogical logic, see *ibid.*, chap. 21. In the original 1911 edition of *Tertium Organum: Klyuch k zagadkam mira*, Ouspensky used the term 'higher intuition', but the phrase does not appear in this form in the 1916 edition (on this change, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, note 47).

86 Kruchenykh argued that a new form of communication is possible because beyond 'sensation, perception, concept (and idea), a fourth unit, "higher intuition" is being formed' (Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, note 130, and section in chapter 5 on Malevich's Transrational Realism). On Kruchenykh and Ouspensky's relevance for Malevich, see Janacek, *Zaum*. On Kruchenykh and the Russian Avant-Garde, see Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

87 For this set design and *Victory over the Sun*, see Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 17-21; note 102 below; and Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, fig. 5.9; and the related discussion. Compton first made this connection in 'Malevich and the Fourth Dimension' (see note 1 above and note 103 below).

88 See Mikhail V. Matiushin, 'O knige Metzanzhe-Gleza "Du Cubisme"', *Soiuz molodezhi* (St. Petersburg), 3 (March 1913): 25-34; trans. Linda Henderson in Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, Appendix C, as Mikhail Matyushin, 'Of the Book by Gleizes and Metzinger *Du Cubisme*'.

emphasised the important role of emotion in higher consciousness and pointed to 'the soul of an artist' as an especially sensitive instrument for recognising 'the reflection of the noumenon in the phenomenon'.⁸⁹ 'The artist must be a *clairvoyant*', Matiushin quoted Ouspensky, 'he must see what others do not see'.⁹⁰

In hindsight, the resonances Matiushin detected between Ouspensky and Cubist theory can now be better understood against the shared cultural references provided not only by the late-nineteenth-century resurgence of idealist philosophy and interest in higher-dimensional space as well as the prevalence of Bergson in this period, but also by the focus on the invisible in popular scientific and occult sources circulating internationally. Indeed, Bergson's philosophy of flux and continuity was itself a product of a late-nineteenth-century worldview centred on the ether.⁹¹ With this in mind, we can turn to Ouspensky's writings and consider the broader context for his discussion of the fourth dimension in 1909 and 1911.

As noted earlier, ether physics and recent scientific discoveries offered Ouspensky supporting evidence in his argument for the unreality of three-dimensional existence.⁹² In *The Fourth Dimension*, he quoted, for example, from Flammarion's 1907 *Les Forces naturelles inconnues de la nature*: 'Matter is not at all what it appears to our senses, to touch or vision ... It represents one single whole with energy and is the manifestation of the motion of invisible and imponderable elements'.⁹³ With his determined anti-materialism and commitment to an absolute four-dimensional reality, however, Ouspensky believed that matter in any form was 'some sort of blindness': 'Matter is a

89 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 161-62.

90 Ouspensky, as quoted in Matyushin, 'Of the Book by Gleizes and Metzinger', in Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, Appendix C.

91 Bergson discussed nineteenth-century theories of matter, including those of Michael Faraday and Lord Kelvin, who 'supposes a perfect, continuous, homogenous and incompressible fluid, filling space: what we term an atom he makes into a vortex ring, ever whirling in this continuity'. See Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (1896); English translation, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 200-201.

92 Ouspensky purged 'The Fourth Dimension' of references to the ether for its inclusion in *A New Model of the Universe* in 1931, but they are present in the 1909 and 1914 editions of *The Fourth Dimension* and in the 1911 and 1916 editions of *Tertium Organum*. In his revised chapter, 'A New Model of the Universe', in the 1931 book, Ouspensky provided a typical account of Relativity Theory, adopting the archaic spelling of 'aether', while noting Lodge's ideas on its density, which had, in fact, been highly influential for Boccioni, among others (Ouspensky, *New Model of the Universe*, 404).

93 Flammarion, as quoted in Ouspensky, 'The Fourth Dimension', in *A New Model of the Universe*, 107 (the ellipses are Ouspensky's).

section of *something*; a non-existent imaginary something. But that, of which matter is a section, exists. This is the real, *four-dimensional* world.⁹⁴ With his view of time as an incompletely understood manifestation of higher dimensions, Ouspensky associated the rarefaction of matter with increasing rates of molecular motion: 'each finer state [of matter] contains more time and less matter than a coarser state'.⁹⁵ Although, in general, even the most rarefied form of matter or ether remained too material and three-dimensional for Ouspensky, he nonetheless provided important information on the ether. Thus, in *The Fourth Dimension*, he mentioned 'the hypothesis of the ether, which is an ultra-fine, all-pervading material and which doesn't possess many material properties'; but he also suggested the inadequacy of the current understanding of the ether: 'We considered this ether, in itself, uniform[,] and with the varied speeds and varied rhythms of its vibrations we attempted to explain all of life's phenomena'.⁹⁶

It was in Hinton's explanation of the ether in relation to the fourth dimension that Ouspensky found an acceptable interpretation of the concept, and he discussed this model in *Tertium Organum*, with ramifications for Malevich, as we shall see below. Ouspensky began by quoting from Hinton's *A New Era of Thought*, where the Englishman had elaborated on his model of a two-dimensional surface plane or film, through which three-dimensional forms pass:

A surface is nothing more nor less than the relation between two things. Two bodies touch each other. The surface is the relationship of one to the other ...

And it may well be that the laws of our universe are the surface tensions of a higher universe.

If the surface be regarded as a medium lying between bodies, then indeed it will have no weight, but be a powerful means of transmitting vibrations ... Matter would pass freely though this medium ...

Do we suppose the existence of any medium through which matter freely moves, which by its vibrations destroys the combinations of matter—some medium which is present in every vacuum however perfect, which penetrates all bodies, is weightless, and yet never can be laid hold of.

The 'substance' which possesses all these qualities is called the 'ether'.

94 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 190. For 'blindness', see *ibid.*, 277.

95 Ouspensky, 'The Fourth Dimension', in *A New Model of the Universe*, 105.

96 Uspenskii, *Chetvertoe izmerenie*, 57.

... [T]aking into consideration the ideas expressed before it would be interesting to look at the world supposing that we are not in it but on the ether; where the 'ether' is the surface of contact of two bodies of higher dimensions.⁹⁷

Ouspensky then continued in his own words:

Hinton here expresses an unusually interesting thought, and brings the idea of the 'ether' nearer the idea of time. The materialistic, or even the energetic understanding of contemporary physics of the ether is perfectly fruitless—a dead-end siding. For Hinton, the ether is not a substance but only a 'surface,' the 'boundary' of *something*. But of what? Again not that of a *substance*, but the boundary, the surface, the limit of *one form of receptivity* and the beginning of another ...

In one sentence, the walls and fences of the materialistic dead-end siding are broken down and before our thought open wide horizons of regions unexplored.⁹⁸

Responding to the Fourth Dimension and the Ether in Suprematist Painting

The Suprematist paintings that Malevich displayed at the 0.10 exhibition referred to both the fourth dimension and the second dimension: he used the title *Movement of Painterly Masses in the Fourth Dimension* for one work, and in a number of cases, added the subtitles *Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension* (Fig. 3.3) or *Colour Masses in the Second Dimension* or (*in Two Dimensions*). Works such as *Eight Red Rectangles* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) or *Suprematist Composition* (Fig. 3.4) probably belong to the latter group.⁹⁹ In interpreting the paintings that refer to the second dimension in my 1983 book, I focused on Ouspensky's recounting of Hinton's analogy of a two-dimensional world's relationship to three dimensions in order to explain how our three-dimensional world would relate to a fourth dimension. Hinton's model of a

97 Hinton, as quoted in Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 50-51. In the 1922 English translation, Ouspensky provided a footnote for this passage: 'Hinton, *A New Era of Thought*, 52, 56, 57. (ibid.).

98 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 51 (the ellipses are Ouspensky's).

99 For the catalogue list, see Drutt, *In Search of 0.10*, 228-29. For the identification of the titles with specific Suprematist paintings, see Anatoly Strigalev, 'An Excursion Around the 0.10 Exhibition', in *ibid.*, 66-70.



FIGURE 3.4 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1915, oil on canvas, 66.5 × 57 cm., Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

PHOTO: RHEINISCHES BILDARCHIV, KÖLN.

two-dimensional surface registering traces of three-dimensional forms was widely cited in this period: Ouspensky discussed it in both *The Fourth Dimension* and *Tertium Organum*, and Boucher recounted it in the 1914 translation of his *L'Essai sur l'hyperespace, Chetvertoe izmerenie*.¹⁰⁰ As I suggested then, this

100 See Hinton, *A New Era of Thought*, Part II, chaps. 1, 2; Hinton, *Fourth Dimension*, chaps. 2, 4; Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), chap. 4; and Boucher, *L'Essai sur l'hyperespace*, chap. 5.

well-known model of two-dimensional sections or traces would have been reinforced by the illustrations in Claude Bragdon's 1912 *Man the Square* and in his 1913 *A Primer of Higher Space (The Fourth Dimension)*, if they reached the Avant-Garde. Although the books were published in Rochester, New York, Bragdon had sent copies to Theosophical Society offices in Europe, and Ouspensky recorded having seen a copy of *Man the Square* in St. Petersburg.¹⁰¹ Malevich would also have had direct access to Hinton's two books in Ouspensky's translated editions, which appeared in May 1915.¹⁰²

Yet Malevich's interest in hard-edged geometric forms did not begin with such sources. He had been growing increasingly interested in geometric planes from his observation of Synthetic Cubist collage, as well as from his experience of *Victory over the Sun* in 1913, when spotlights played across the stage, highlighting segments of both his costumes and freestanding objects on the stage.¹⁰³ It was in spring 1915 that the painter developed his new style, moving from the Alogism of what he termed his 'Fevralist' style to Suprematism during those months, when he created a new set of designs for *Victory over the Sun* in May 1915, including Fig. 3.5, which is discussed further below.¹⁰⁴ The geometric language of form that emerged in his experiments that spring would have acquired particular significance in the context of Hinton, Ouspensky, Boucher and, possibly, Bragdon. Thus, I have argued that monochromatic (or primarily monochromatic) paintings such as *Suprematist Painting* (Fig. 3.4) can be read as two-dimensional sections or traces of three-dimensional objects. Their connection to hyperspace was implied and would have been further reinforced by Leadbeater's discussion (recounted by Ouspensky), of the way in which five fingertips placed on a table would be misread by a 'flatlander' as five discrete

101 For this discussion, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, note 164 and related text; and Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 'Author's Preface to the Second Edition', xv. On Bragdon, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 4, section on 'Claude Bragdon'. For Bragdon's record of his distribution of various books, see the Bragdon Family Papers at the University of Rochester Libraries.

102 See note 1 above.

103 On *Victory over the Sun*, its lighting effects, and the geometric qualities of Malevich's sets, see Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 42-47; and Christina Lodder, 'Kazimir Malevich and the Designs for *Victory over the Sun*', in Bartlett and Dodswell, *Victory over the Sun*, 179-93. For many of the documents relating to *Victory over the Sun*, see Patricia Railing, ed., *Victory Over the Sun*, 2 vols (Forest Row, East Sussex: Artists Bookworks, 2009).

104 For Malevich's development of Suprematism, see Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, including the discussion of individual images. For Malevich's so-called 'Fevralist' style of 1914-spring 1915, from which his Suprematist style emerged in May-June 1915, see Shatskikh *Black Square*, chap. 1. Shatskikh's dating of two fully developed Malevich Suprematist canvases to May 1915, however, remains controversial (*ibid.*, 43).

objects, pointing up the danger of accepting objects in a given dimension as complete.¹⁰⁵

However, in Malevich's multi-coloured Suprematist works, such as *Painterly Realism of a Football Player: Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension* (Fig. 3.3), the two-dimensional analogy clearly does not apply. Instead, planes of various colours and sizes float independently of one another in space, occasionally overlapping and uniformly creating a definite sense of movement and spatial extension. Malevich's use of the preposition 'в' ('v' in the Latin alphabet) allows these subtitles to be translated as either 'in' or 'of the fourth dimension'. Re-reading Ouspensky in the light of Hinton's commitment to the ether offers new insights into how Malevich may have understood these paintings in terms of the fourth dimension as well as the ether. Before turning to that discussion, however, it is useful to reprise other associations with the fourth-dimension that these paintings may have had for Malevich. Indeed, certain of these themes were linked not only to the fourth dimension, but also to the ether.

Both infinity/infinite vastness and freedom from specific orientation and gravity had become closely linked to the popular concept of the fourth dimension by the late nineteenth century. Infinity was a central theme in Boucher's book, and, in *Tertium Organum*, Ouspensky specifically connected a 'sensation of infinity' and vastness with the first moments of the transition to four-dimensional cosmic consciousness, as the familiar world fell away.¹⁰⁶ Malevich, likewise, referred to the space of his Suprematist paintings as 'the white, free, chasm-infinity', and his cosmic white space definitively distances his paintings from associations with the blue sky.¹⁰⁷ His canvases are also free of any specific orientation and a sense of gravity, characteristics that Hinton had asserted must be cultivated in order to enlarge one's 'space sense'.¹⁰⁸ Hinton's prediction took on new currency with the advent of the aeroplane, flying, and, especially in Russia, speculation about rocketry and travel in outer space. In 1916, Malevich described Suprematism as 'not belong[ing] solely to the earth', and he had responded specifically to this theme in paintings such as the 1915

105 See Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 37.

106 See Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 258. For Boucher and infinity, see *L'Essai sur l'hyperespace*, chap. 2.

107 Kazimir Malevich, 'Suprematizm', *Katalog desiatoi gosudarstvennoi vystavki. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919); English translation, 'Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism', in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 122.

108 See Hinton, *A New Era of Thought*, Part I, Introduction.

Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying (Museum of Modern Art, New York, see Fig. 13.3).¹⁰⁹ In the tradition of the Russian ‘cosmists’, Malevich developed a growing fascination with astronomy and the cosmos in the later 1910s and dreamed of setting his *planity* satellites in orbit, free of gravity.¹¹⁰

In fact, the ether, too, was closely identified with both infinity and the interstellar space of the cosmos. Boucher linked the ether and infinity in his four-dimensional ‘espace-temps’, as noted earlier. And Lodge in *The Ether of Space*, translated as ‘The Universal Ether’ [*Mirovoi efir*], quoted James Clerk Maxwell’s statement that ‘the vast interplanetary and interstellar regions’ of the universe are so ‘full of this wonderful medium ... that no human power can remove it from the smallest portion of space, or produce the slightest flaw in its infinite continuity’.¹¹¹

In his multi-coloured Suprematist paintings, Malevich set his planar elements in dynamic motion, employing the phenomenon that both Hinton and Ouspensky treated as a provisional means of acquiring a higher spatial understanding. These were concerns that Malevich shared with his close friends Kruchenykh and Matiushin. The poet had written in his 1913 text ‘New Ways of the Word’ that ‘the incorrect structure of sentences brings about *motion* and a new perception of the world’.¹¹² Similarly, Matiushin recorded in his diary in May 1915, ‘Only in motion does vastness reside ... When at last we shall rush

109 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin [before 23 June 1916], in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 1: 89.

110 See Charlotte Douglas, ‘Aero Art, The Planetary View: Kazimir Malevich and Lazar Khidekel’, in Regina Khidekel, ed., *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 27-33; Christina Lodder, ‘Man, Space, and the Zero of Form: Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematism and the Natural World’, in Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche, eds., *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 47-61; Christina Lodder, ‘Living in Space: Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist Architecture and the Philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov’ in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich’s Birth* (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 172-202; Christina Lodder, ‘Transfiguring Reality: Suprematism and the Aerial View’ in Mark Dorrian and Frederic Pousin, eds., *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 95-117; Shatskikh, ‘The Cosmos and the Canvas’; and George M. Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

111 Oliver Lodge, *The Ether of Space* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1909), 104-5.

112 Kruchenykh, ‘New Ways of the Word’, quoted in Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, note 134. The poet also observed that artists’ purposeful use of ‘incorrect perspective brings about a new, fourth dimension’ (*ibid.*).

rapidly past objectness we shall probably see the totality of the whole world'. Matiushin's quote had also included the comment, 'The faster you move near a thick garden lattice, the more clearly you see the general mass behind it'.¹¹³ Malevich had demonstrated his own interest in such pulsating, perceptual 'flickering' in the subtitle of his 1912 painting *The Knife Grinder: Principle of Flickering* (Yale University Art Gallery, Newhaven, CT).

A similar kind of flicker or pulsing had actually figured in Hinton's and Ouspensky's writings. In order to explain the relationship of time and motion to space, Ouspensky had argued that a multi-layered, three-dimensional form passing through a two-dimensional space would be perceived as a succession of coloured lines, possibly in motion, if the object's size changed. As Ouspensky phrased it, our limited three-dimensional spatial perception means that we, too, 'see the world as through a narrow slit', mistaking as time and motion what are actually four-dimensional spatial phenomena.¹¹⁴

He wrote:

That conception of the world which we deduce from our usual view of time makes the world appear like a continuously gushing out igneous fountain of fireworks, each spark of which flashes for a moment and disappears, *never* to appear any more. Flashes are going on continuously, following one after another, there are an infinite number of sparks, and everything together produces the impression of a flame, *though it does not exist in reality*.¹¹⁵

For Ouspensky, this 'fountain of fireworks' was a transitory illusion of true, timeless four-dimensional reality. Yet, following Hinton's view, such sparks flashing – or flickering – could be understood positively as the first signs or sections of higher dimensional forms. And the ether, as a three-dimensional 'surface of contact' or boundary of two four-dimensional spaces would be the context within which these flashes occurred, as four-dimensional forms penetrated it. It was in this very chapter of *Tertium Organum* that Ouspensky reprinted Hinton's discussion of this topic, quoted above.¹¹⁶

In *A New Era of Thought*, Hinton had explained, '[W]hen we study a higher solid, we must suppose that it passes through the aether, and that we only see that thin three-dimensional section of it which is just about to pass from

113 Mikhail Matiushin, diary entry, 29 May 1915, quoted in Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 61.

114 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 46.

115 *Ibid.*, 40-41.

116 See the passage quoted at note 98 above.

one side to the other of the aether' – or, in Malevich's case, the first planar face of a solid breaking through.¹¹⁷ Although his painting technique varied in different works, many of his canvases give the impression of coloured planes surrounded by a white field, so that the forms appear to break through the surface in the kind of 'cut' the Englishman described.¹¹⁸ According to Hinton, '[W]e have to suppose the aether broken through, only we must suppose that it runs up to the edge of the body which is penetrating it, so that we are aware of no breach of continuity'.¹¹⁹ Malevich's 'semaphores' of colour, as he termed his planes, breakthrough in just this way – like Ouspensky's 'fireworks' flickering forth before our eyes.¹²⁰

Following his 'fireworks' discussion, Ouspensky also paraphrased a passage from Wundt that is highly relevant to Malevich's Suprematist focus on discerning a subtle 'sensation' or 'feeling', as the term *oshchushchenie* has often been translated. As further support for his argument (paralleling Boucher) about the inadequacy of perception, Ouspensky wrote, 'Wundt, in one of his books, called attention to the fact that our vaunted five organs of sense are in reality just *feelers* by which we feel the world around us. We live groping about. We never see anything. We are always just feeling everything'.¹²¹ Affirming Wundt's importance, one of Malevich's best-known statements about Suprematism centres on this same issue of sensing or feeling by means of subtle sensation: '[A] blissful sense of liberating objectlessness drew me forth into the "desert", where nothing is real except feeling [sensation] ... and so feeling [sensation] became the substance of my life'.¹²²

117 Hinton, *New Era of Thought*, 59.

118 I am grateful to conservator Maria Kokkori for clarifying Malevich's differing techniques, which included occasionally painting over the white ground.

119 *Ibid.*, 60

120 For 'semaphores', see Malevich, 'Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism', in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 122.

121 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (1922), 41.

122 Kazimir Malevich, 'Suprematism', Part I of *The Non-Objective World* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Co, 1959) 68; originally published as *Die gegenstandslose Welt* as one of the Bauhausbücher in 1927. My use of 'sensation' in brackets follows Charlotte Douglas's translation of *oshchushchenie* as 'sensation' rather the more emotionally suggestive 'feeling' used in the 1959 translation (see Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 57-58). Accordingly, Malevich's description of *The Black Square* would read: 'The square = feeling [sensation], the white field = the void beyond this feeling [sensation]' (Malevich, 'Suprematism', in *Non-Objective World*, 76).

'Objectlessness' has long been recognised as the translation preferable to 'non-objectivity'; and is used in the new translation of the Russian manuscript for Malevich's Bauhaus book. See Britta Tanja Dümpelmann, 'The World as Objectlessness: A Snapshot

Malevich's one known reference to ether in the year of Suprematism's birth occurs in the 1915 stage set design for *Victory over the Sun* mentioned above (Fig. 3.5).¹²³ Halfway down the right edge, he included the phrase 'putting the ether inside', adding references elsewhere to 'helium', 'the gas is gathered', and 'blue gas', which may reflect contemporary discussions about radioactive emanations and the decay that transformed radium into helium.¹²⁴ Here, with his Suprematist style developing, Malevich's design includes geometric forms that not only 'eclipse' the Cubist-collage-like figurative elements, but also float free on the surface, as they had not done in works of 1913 and 1914. No longer creating an illogical spatial structure based on an 'incorrect perspective' of the hypercube, as he had done in 1913, he encoded links to the fourth dimension in his new formal language and sectioning.¹²⁵

'We have split the object open! We started seeing the world through to the core', Kruchenykh had declared in 'New Ways of the Word'.¹²⁶ Or, as Malevich wrote in his 1915 text *From Cubism to Suprematism* concerning the means 'to transmit purely coloured motion': '[I]t is necessary to turn directly to the painted masses as such, to look for inherent forms in them'.¹²⁷ From the rhetoric surrounding the X-ray and its penetration of the skin to the cautions of writers like Boucher and Ouspensky that we only see surfaces, this was now a style that sliced and sectioned to reveal the traces or first intimations of higher-dimensional forms, signified by planes as their essences.

of an Artistic Universe', in *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness* (Basel: Kunstmuseum, 2014), 11-59; and Kazimir Malevich, 'The World as Objectlessness', in *ibid.*, 145-200. While recognising the importance of 'sensation' and 'objectlessness' as used in the new translation, I have chosen to preserve the well-known language of the 1959 translation cited above. For the new translation, see *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, 188.

123 For this drawing of May 1915, which is one of three that Malevich made for a possible new publication of *Victory over the Sun*, see Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 49 and the related discussion.

124 I am grateful to Shatskikh for bringing this image and its notations to my attention. Troels Andersen reproduced the drawing in *Malevich* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970), 24. His source was Benedikt Livshits, *Polutorglazny strelets* [The One and a Half-Eyed Archer] (Leningrad, 1933). The drawing parallels a work in the Khardzhiev-Chaga Collection without the multiple annotations; see *Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2013), 59.

125 See note 112 above for 'incorrect perspective'.

126 Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'New Ways of the Word', in Anna Lawton, ed., *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 76.

127 Malevich, 'From Cubism to Suprematism', in Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 109; rephrased in Douglas, 'Western European Art Theory', 60.

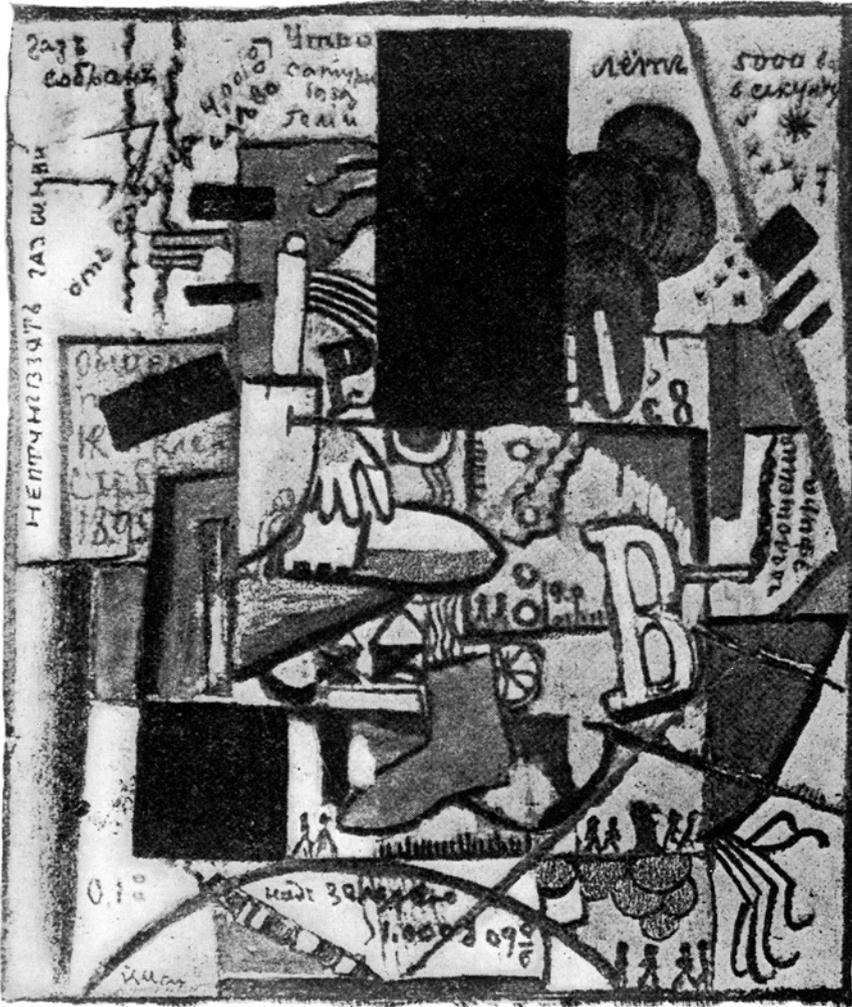


FIGURE 3.5 Kazimir Malevich, *Stage Design for Victory over the Sun*, 1915 version, gaphite on paper. Reproduced from Benedikt Livshits, *Polutorglazny strelets* (Leningrad, 1933).

Malevich's focus on the invisible had been crucial to the development of Suprematism, but his style stands in marked contrast to the appearance of Boccioni's *Soccer Player*, with its fluid edges suggesting the dematerialisation of matter into the ether (or its formation from it). Instead, Malevich communicated his ideas about higher-dimensional reality in a diagrammatic, hard-edged formal language. If Boccioni sought to create a 'window' on an invisible reality, Malevich in 1915 seems to have tried to represent the initial *experience* of four-dimensional, cosmic consciousness, the 'sensation of infinity' that Ous-

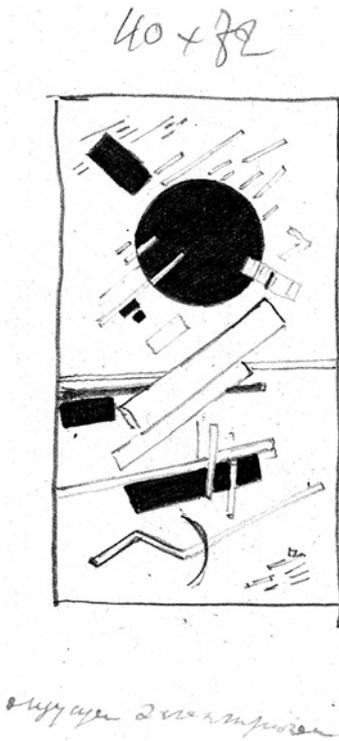


FIGURE 3.6

Kazimir Malevich, *Composition 14t* (*Suprematism: Sensation of Electric[ity]*), 1915, graphite on paper, 15.3 × 10 cm., (paper), 8.8 × 4.9 cm., (image), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

pensky had predicted. Here, higher dimensional reality is conveyed through objectless geometric ‘units’ that incorporate concepts long associated with the fourth dimension – infinity, freedom from gravity or specific orientation, and implied motion – as well as the infinite, world-filling ether via the discussions of Hinton, Ouspensky, and very likely others, such as Boucher and Lodge.¹²⁸

Liberated from traditional objects by the model of the supra-sensible realities of the new science and the fourth dimension, Malevich by 1916 could also use his new vocabulary of Suprematist forms to comment on the invisible processes of nature, as in *Composition 14t* (*Suprematism: Sensation of Electric(ity)*) (Fig. 3.6). In contrast to Boccioni’s attempt to embody the speeding electrons or other particles making up ‘matter [that] is only energy’, Malevich used his Suprematist elements to create a diagram of electrical forces within the atom (possibly as signs for revolving electrons) in the upper half of the drawing.¹²⁹ It

128 For ‘unit’, see Malevich, ‘Futurism-Suprematism’, in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935* (1990), 177.

129 For Boccioni’s quotation, see note 60 above. For Malevich’s title, see notes 40 and 61 above.

was in 1916, too, that the artist began a series of drawings on the theme of magnetism, such as *Composition 2 z (Sensation of Magnetism)*, a group to which he gave the designation 'Suprematism (The Shaping of the Magnetic Field)'.¹³⁰ In fact, magnetism is closely tied to electrons, since it is the orbits of electrons within atoms that produce the slight magnetism in every substance. Magnetic effects, however, become much stronger when the electron-produced poles of the molecules of a substance align, as in a magnetic field. That phenomenon was often illustrated in popular science books with bars or other signs with positive and negative poles, aligning themselves in response to the field, just as Malevich's forms register invisible forces drawing them together.¹³¹

In his hard-edged Suprematist canvases of 1915 and 1916 Malevich avoided the issue of the interpenetration of matter and ether, which was so central for artists like Boccioni and Kandinsky, and only began to explore such transitions actively from late 1916 to 1918. This shift is apparent in drawings such as *Suprematism: Two Intersecting Planes, Fading* of 1917 or *Suprematism: Interacting Elements, Fading* of 1917-18 (both, Khardzhiev-Chaga Collection, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) and paintings such as *Yellow Plane in Dissolution* of 1917-18 (Fig. 3.7). Now, the chiaroscuro modelling that Boccioni and Kandinsky had used to dematerialise the edges of forms comes into play in Malevich's works for a time.¹³² Such works strongly suggest the transition between material and immaterial worlds, which was understood during this period in terms of a continuum from matter to ether. Malevich's drawings, in particular, demonstrate the way in which chiaroscuro – that staple of the volumetric rendering that he had used in his earlier Cubo-Futurist works – could now have exactly the reverse effect. As he described the series, 'One side of the element begins to disintegrate evoking a sensation of definitive non-existence'.¹³³ These were obviously also works about subtle sensation, testing a threshold of the perception of 'fading away' or 'dissolution'.

130 For these drawings, see *Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde* (2013), 122-23; and Andersen, *Leporskaya Archive*, 140-43, where the phrase 'the shaping of the magnetic field' is noted on the envelope containing the drawings (ibid., 140).

131 See Robert Andrews Millikan and Henry Gordon Gale, *Practical Physics* (Boston, MA: Ginna and Co., 1922), 221, with figures typical across a range of physics books in the 1910s.

132 For these drawings and paintings, see *Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde* (2013), 122-23, 101, 103-105; and Andersen, *Leporskaya Archive*, 121-23. For Kandinsky and ether-like dematerialisation, see Henderson, 'Abstraction, the Ether, and the Fourth Dimension', 236-38.

133 See Andersen, *Leporskaya Archive*, 121. On the theme of dissolution in Malevich's painting, see also Charlotte Douglas, 'Supremus: The Dissolution of Sensation', in *Zahia Hadid and Suprematism* (Ostildern: Hatje Cantz; and Zurich: Galerie Gmurzynska, 2012), 84-89.

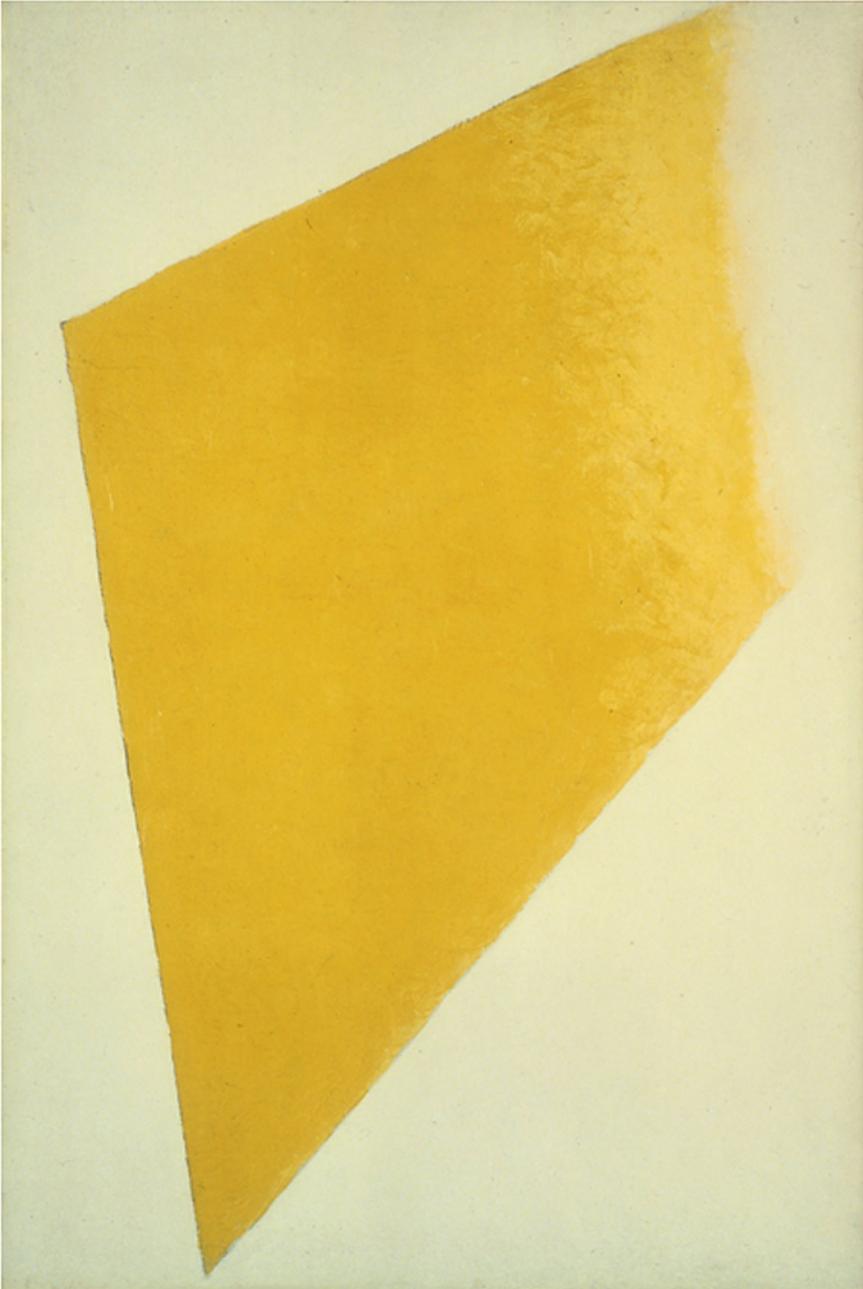


FIGURE 3.7 Kazimir Malevich, *Yellow Plane in Dissolution*, 1917-18, oil on canvas, 106 × 70.5 cm., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

PHOTO: ART RESOURCE, NY.

In his 1927 Bauhaus book, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, Malevich reproduced drawings re-made after works of the mid-1910s, including those on the themes of magnetism and fading. In addition, his remarkable *Suprematist Composition (Feeling of Wireless Telegraphy)* (Kunstmuseum, Basel) evokes the heyday of Hertzian waves and the ether, featuring Morse code-like dashes and dots moving through space among circular Suprematist forms.¹³⁴

Malevich's commitment to the theme of energy as present in science and technology remained strong in the 1920s. By the later 1910s and 1920s, however, he was also hearing more about the new Relativity Theory from associates like El Lissitzky and, as Douglas has documented, he was increasingly interested in the theories of Ernst Mach.¹³⁵ Yet one of the places the ether lived on in the 1920s was in popular radio culture, and, appropriately, Malevich chose that metaphor for the process of perception in a statement included in *The World as Objectlessness*: 'Our life is a radio station that receives waves of various sensations that are realised into one thing or another. These waves are turned on and off depending on the sensation of the person who controls the radio station'.¹³⁶

Recovering the prevalence of the ether in the international cultures of science and occultism – along with the spatial fourth dimension – allows us to understand the goals of Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde in ways that have not been possible before. Clearly, the fourth dimension was not an isolated concept during this period, but one that was very much inflected by contemporary ether physics. The X-ray's proof of the inadequacy of the human eye had made it impossible to deny the existence of higher dimensions simply because they could not be seen. Moreover, following upon the pioneering work of Hinton, popular scientific and occult publications regularly connected the fourth dimension and the ether. It was this exhilarating context (which radically redefined matter and space), that encouraged artists like Malevich to leave behind the world of objects and their superficial surface appearances. Instead, the 'clairvoyant' artist would focus on the essences of nature, giving form to various kinds of energies and seeking to evoke higher-dimensional realities, ideally expanding the sensory capabilities and consciousness of viewers in the process.

134 For this drawing, see *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, 121. For the earlier version, see Andersen, *Leporskaya Archive*, 152.

135 See Douglas, 'Mach and Malevich'. On El Lissitzky and Relativity Theory, see Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, chap. 5, section on 'The 1920s: El Lissitzky and Others'.

136 Malevich, 'Suprematism', in *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, 195.

The Path of Empirical Criticism in Russia or 'The Milky Way of Inventors'¹

Alexander Bouras

The Russian Avant-Garde inherited from Symbolism a complete rejection of naturalism (a by-product of nineteenth-century positivism), as well as the defining philosophical concepts of *fin-de siècle* European and Russian culture. Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche had developed a critical approach to reason and science, through their 'dancing in the misty divine' as Aleksei Kruchenykh put it.² For them, human existence and the universe could not be understood by reason alone, but could only be fully comprehended if irrational approaches, such as intuition, were also employed.

In response to this philosophical position, thinkers like Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius began to reconsider positivism, and developed what has been called a second positivism, also known as empirio-criticism, empirical criticism, or Machism. They argued that scientific knowledge is not absolute, but relative: science is not able to produce a completely true image of the world, but is only able to convey its sensations, signs and symbols. Empirical criticism posed the question of the connection between science and philosophy and this ensured its popularity among thinkers in both camps, influencing the thinking of Hermann von Helmholtz, Wilhelm Wundt, Heinrich Rickert, Théodule-Armand Ribot, Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann, Wilhelm Ostwald, Rudolf Steiner, Henri Poincaré, Henri Bergson, and others.

In Russia, empirical criticism became 'an intellectual fashion' amongst the younger generation. Promoted by popular and specialist journals alike, it became 'the new paradigm of a completely scientific and moral outlook', able to overcome the current 'crisis' and restore a belief in science and progress.³ Empirical criticism's influence on the art world was mainly channelled through the journal *Questions Concerning the Theory and Psychology*

1 Velimir Khlebnikov, *Truba marsian* (Moscow: Liren', 1916).

2 Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Apokalipsis v russkoi literature* (Moscow: MAF, 1922 [cover gives 1923]), 29.

3 Daniela Steila, *Nauka i revoliutsiia. Retseptsiia empiriokritsizma v russkoi literature (1877-1910)* (Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt, 2013), 122.

of Creativity [*Voprosy teorii i psikhologii tvorchestva*], edited and published by Boris Lezin in Kharkov (1907-1923). The journal became the main mouthpiece for the followers of the philosophy and linguistics of Aleksandr Potebnia, addressing issues concerning the psychology of creativity and the creative process, all of which brought it close to Machism. Among the journal's contributors were Dmitrii Ovsianiko-Kulikovskii, Petr Engelmeier, Boris Lezin, Evgenii Anchikov, Arkadii Gornfeld, Aleksandr Pogodin, Ivan Lapshin, Semyon Frank, Timofei Rainov, Henri Poincaré, Vladimir Korolenko and Mikhail Gershenzon. The publication first appeared in 1907, when the Russian intelligentsia was still confronting the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution. Social consciousness was becoming democratised, people were beginning to recognise the inevitability of revolutionary action, and numerous professional, cultural and educational organisations were being set up throughout the country. In this situation, social and artistic creativity became a central issue for intellectuals thinking about radically reconstructing social life. Empirical criticism became the subject of heated discussions among the political left. But the growing popularity of the new philosophical trend also determined its fate. In his struggle with fellow Party members, Aleksandr Bogdanov, Leonid Krasin, Anatolii Lunacharskii and others, Lenin wrote his only philosophical work, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* [*Materializm i empiriokrititsizm*], 1909, in which he characterised empirical criticism as 'a path into the quagmire',⁴ and accused its followers of being reactionaries, idealists, agnostics, and scholastics. Naturally, after the Bolsheviks came to power, Mach's followers hid their philosophical roots for fear of being persecuted as ideological enemies.

This essay will focus on the influence that Lezin's literary and psychological empiricism, in tandem with Engelmeier's technical and philosophical empirical criticism, exerted on Russian avant-garde ideas in general and on Suprematism in particular. I will mainly focus on examining the way in which these ideas affected the development of the formulations and principles of artistic culture, a process in which Kazimir Malevich played a leading role, especially as regards the notions of invention and experimentation and the role of intuition and logic in the creative process.

The Philosophy of Technology and the Work of Petr Engelmeier

Petr Klimentevich Engelmeier (1855-1942), was a multi-talented individual: he was an engineer and mechanic who promoted the motor car in Russia,

4 V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1968), xviii: 262; English translation <http://marxistphilosophy.org/LenEmpCriti.pdf>.

an inventor, a philosopher of technology and the creative process, an amateur artist, a musician, and a member of the Moscow Society for Art Photography (Moskovskoe khudozhestvenno-fotograficheskoe obshchestvo). In his writings, published in Russian and German, he analysed the creative process as it related to technology, but he also stressed the traits that it shared with the creative processes in art, science, religion and everyday life. In other words, he explored creativity as manifest in all areas of human activity. His philosophical position was based on Schopenhauer, but also embraced the ideas of Mach, whom he knew personally. In fact, Engelmeier was responsible for presenting Mach's ideas to the Russian public, especially Mach's first book, which he edited and published in Russian.

In formulating his philosophy of technology, Engelmeier devoted a lot of attention to art, including painting, and emphasised the characteristics that art and technology shared. For instance, he pointed out that both could be produced by collective work. In technology, the solution of a particular task is the result of a creative process and is always presented 'as a single specimen', before being produced in multiple copies by a collective. His theory that creativity comprised three stages also endowed art with a collective content, since the final act of actually creating the work, the materialisation of the idea (the craft or mechanical stage), could be executed in a studio, workshop, or laboratory.

Engelmeier acknowledged that there was a difference between technical and artistic activity – that technology was directed towards utility and art towards beauty.⁵ Nevertheless, he discussed the usefulness of a purely artistic product and the aesthetic qualities of a technical creation. He considered that machines, like the steam ship and the bicycle, acted as symbols of the modern world and as examples of objects that simultaneously embody beauty both in their external form and in their conception. On seeing the Eiffel Tower, he

5 Russian avant-garde artists approached this idea in various ways. Malevich, for instance, acknowledged that 'we can find beauty in any household machine', but at the same time stressed that not all elements of a utilitarian machine will create pleasant sensations, so that 'if we add what pleases us to what seems beautiful to us in a machine, then the sum of these beautiful elements will produce a work which does not resemble any object'. Malevich's statement should be considered within the context of his polemic with the Constructivists and Productivists, who didn't simply destroy the border between artistic and utilitarian activity but regarded the two activities as equal. Malevich considered that art and technology possess much in common, but that each field of activity should remain autonomous, because 'an eclectic marriage between aesthetics and a practical object' will produce 'an eclectic offspring – a telephone with peacock feathers'. See K. Malevich, 'Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost', ili vechnyi pokoi' [Suprematism. The World as Objectlessness, or Eternal Peace], 1922, ms; reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskhikh (Moscow: Gileia, 2000), III: 69-324.

remarked that people 'walking under this arch of fantastic beauty for the first time or being elevated in the mechanised lift past this metal lacework, will unintentionally receive a truly aesthetic feeling of amazement and rapture before the power of human genius'.⁶

In comparing the professional activities of the artist and the technician-inventor, Engelmeier came to the conclusion that there were 'astonishing' similarities between technical (or utilitarian) creativity and artistic creativity. He pointed out that both processes started out with the need to create a new idea and then realise that idea 'in metal, wood, stone, etc'.⁷ These parallels were completely natural and were embodied in the etymology of the word 'tekhnika' which means both technology and technique. The Greek *τέχνη* and the Latin *techna* were both used in relation to industry, commerce, craftwork, the arts, rhetoric, science, and literature, and denoted skill and the means necessary to bring a specific plan to completion. The Latin *technikus* means both 'a master of the arts' and 'a practical person'. The idea of 'art' can be applied to the creative activity of the artist as well as to the professional (both technical and craft) activity of the tailor, carpenter, shoemaker, and lawyer. In both instances, 'art' refers to a person's skill to overcome any difficulties encountered in the execution of his ideas.⁸ So, despite the diverse and wide-ranging disparities, Engelmeier concluded that there are more similarities than differences between art and technology, and that, therefore, the creative process is identical in both areas.

Engelmeier detected similar correspondences between science and art. Both convey an understanding of phenomena and facts. Despite the different methods used by each discipline to achieve their aims, very often an artistic element plays a role in scientific discoveries, and science in artistic creations. Engelmeier wrote:

When a scientist creates a new concept or a new law, he begins, like an artist, with an intuition. A hypothesis emerges. Then he develops that hypothesis, by thinking in a scientific way. But the artistic element does not disappear. Let's take ... Newton's law of universal attraction. It clearly contains both elements: the visual artistic image of the invisible but real power, acting between bodies through cosmic space, and the scientific and mental formula concerning the quantitative action of this power ...

⁶ Petr Engel'meier, 'Tekhnika kak iskusstvo', *Nauchnoe obozrenie*, 8 (1900): 1374.

⁷ P. Engel'meier, *Filosofia tekhniki* (Moscow: Levenson, 1912), 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

If the great scientific writings ... of Newton, Laplace, and Darwin are profoundly artistic, then conversely the influence of artistic works like the Bible, the Odyssey and the works of Shakespeare ... which are profoundly wise ... often teaches us that science is inadequate, and that understanding can flow directly into the innermost essence of the universe.⁹

In 1909, Engelmeier proposed a new scientific discipline '*evrologiia*'.¹⁰ This was intended to study every aspect of creativity in science, technology, art, everyday life, and religion, i.e. 'the inner content of creativity in all of its manifestations',¹¹ or, in other words, creativity 'as such'. Engelmeier drafted a general theory of creativity, consisting of what he called 'empty vessels',¹² the filling of which he proposed would be the work of specialists from various fields of human creativity. For them, 'analysing technical creativity will act as a model for their own analyses' enabling them to conduct 'similar analyses of their own fields of expertise'.¹³

For Engelmeier, creation entailed creating 'something from nothing'.¹⁴ He explained: '... we take a new theory ... a new artistic work, a virtuous new deed ... in a word, a new value created by man. This new value did not exist before: it came into being and was created from nothing'.¹⁵ He argued that human creativity was nothing more than the efficient or expedient action of energy on material. It was a result of the interaction between the artist, the work, and the viewer or consumer. Engelmeier regarded the viewer's scrutiny and interpretation of a work of art as a creative act. In other words, creativity could be non-material or immaterial – 'to read is to create'.¹⁶

Later in 1914, Engelmeier considered creativity from the point of view of psychology, concluding that creativity is 'the constructive imagination, which integrates new forms with past experience'.¹⁷ Understanding the new or the innovative occupied a complex place in Engelmeier's thinking: 'The search for new paths is the slogan of our time'.¹⁸ At the same time, he suggested that a

9 P. Engel'meier, *Tekhnicheskii itog XIX v* (Moscow: Tipografia K. A. Kaznacheeva, 1898), 60-61, 67.

10 Sometimes this is written as '*evrilogiia*'.

11 P. Engel'meier, *Teoriia tvorchestva* (St. Petersburg: Obrazovanie, 1910), 116.

12 P. Engel'meier, *Evrologiia, ili Vseobshchaia teoriia tvorchestva. Voprosy teorii i psikhologii tvorchestva* (Kharkov, 1914), v: 134.

13 Engel'meier, *Teoriia tvorchestva*, 67.

14 Engel'meier, *Evrologiia*, 155.

15 *Ibid.*, 157.

16 Engel'meier, *Tekhnicheskii itog XIX v.*, 64.

17 Engel'meier, *Evrologiia*, 155.

18 *Ibid.*, 133.

new form is never completely new, but emerges from the old: past experiences are analysed into their component elements and from these something new is constructed. It could, however, be debated by philosophers as to whether this new form, having absorbed the old, could actually be considered to be totally new. Citing the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, Engelmeier answered this question positively, arguing that 'a new form is more than the sum of its parts'.¹⁹ Moreover, he insisted that it is essential to promote the new against the resistance of the old, and prove, through action, its power to live and survive.

Mach's influence is particularly evident in Engelmeier's approach to the principle of economy. Citing Mach,²⁰ Engelmeier asserted that the philistine and the scholar think in identical ways. The difference is that the scholar spends less time thinking and achieves greater results, because he thinks economically. Economy in science is attained first of all through the use of the collective i.e. of somebody else's experiment undertaken for its own purpose, and secondly through the application of proven methods of reasoning. He concluded that 'science is simple, healthy and worldly thinking, systematised according to the principle of economy'.²¹ Similarly, technology employs the principle of economy, striving to attain the highest technological achievements, with the minimum of expenditure.

Engelmeier's new term '*evrologiia*' for his new scientific approach comes from the Greek word *εὐρίσκω*, meaning to find, discover, or invent. Indeed, invention became one of the core concepts of his new discipline, and later became central to the concept of 'artistic culture'. For Engelmeier, any invention was the solution to a particular problem: 'The technician confronts the task of removing a problem or achieving a positive result. The artist confronts the task of expressing his experiences. The scientist confronts the task of applying his ideas to a new experiment. Essentially, all three are confronting the task of exposing themselves, their thoughts, feelings, and images, which emanate from the subconscious depths of their souls'.²²

Engelmeier examined invention within its historical and social contexts, stressing the enormous role that invention had played in transforming various civilisations. He connected the blossoming of science and art during the Renaissance with technical inventions, such as gunpowder, the compass, the

19 Ibid., 131.

20 Engelmeier cited Ernst Mach, *Die Principien der Wärmelehre: historisch-kritisch entwickelt* (Leipzig: Barth, 1900), 2; and Ernst Makh, *Analiz oshchushchenii i otnoshenie fizicheskogo i psikhicheskogo* (Moscow: Skirmunt, 1908).

21 Engelmeier, *Evrologiia*, 143.

22 Ibid., 141.

telescope, and the printing press. Similarly, he associated the capitalist era with the invention of the machine and the development of machine production, which replaced manufacturing by hand.²³ He introduced into his studies of various fields of human activity, including art, the factor of materiality (material culture), borrowed from archaeology, as a defining characteristic of the epoch.²⁴ For Engelmeier, material culture represented a second, artificial nature, which was specifically adapted to human requirements and replaced the culture of nature.²⁵ It should be noted that endowing technology with a humanitarian content was characteristic of the thinking of the technical intelligentsia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, and it led to the notion of the culture of technology.

Central to Engelmeier's *evrologiia* was the 'theory of the three stages' which characterised inventive activity. These comprised desire (intuition), knowledge (reasoning), and skill (routine).²⁶ A similar three-stage creative process had been enunciated by the psychologist, empiricist and philosopher, Alexander Bain, and the philosopher, biologist and sociologist Herbert Spencer in the mid-nineteenth century. The first stage entailed the emergence of the idea of satisfying a concrete need, generated by a discovery, a hunch, an invention or intuition. According to Engelmeier, this involved the mental synthesis of new knowledge with past experience. Introspection characterised the method of this first stage: man tried to read the 'hieroglyph' that had developed in his mind without his conscious participation.²⁷ At this stage, a 'concept' emerged, which consisted of various 'mental elements', such as ideas, notions, judgements, images, forms and movements, tones, emotions, and desires.

The conscious elaboration of the idea comprised the second stage. On the one hand, it involved solving the initial task and, on the other, executing the idea and making it a reality. The method employed in the second stage was logic,²⁸ which was responsible for developing a plan for a specific piece of

23 Engelmeier, *Filosofia tekhniki*, 47.

24 This position is directly reflected in the Avant-Garde's theoretical discussions concerning materiality and the new art. Malevich, for instance, wrote, 'that [if] art in the stone age consisted of stone images, and in the Bronze Age comprised images in bronze ... it is evident that in the age of electricity, radio and magnetics, art will be endowed with dynamic forms'. See K. Malevich, '1/47. Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost' [1/47. Suprematism. The World as Objectlessness], 1924, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV: 192.

25 Engelmeier, *Filosofia tekhniki*, 48.

26 Engelmeier, *Teoriia tvorchestva*, 116.

27 *Ibid.*, 119.

28 *Ibid.*

work (a scheme, project or image). In art, the result of this stage was a model, a script or 'a sketch for a work of art'.²⁹

The third stage comprised the materialisation of the non-material (immaterial) idea, 'bringing it to the status of a construction'.³⁰ This is the final stage, because the creative process ends 'when the creation is actually made'.³¹ Engelmeier called this third stage, in art, technique, because it entailed the completion of the plan using the skills of the artist's craft.³² At this point, 'man engages in a struggle with the surrounding [world] and transforms it according to his own plan'.³³ The creative process delves into the subconscious, produces a reflex and is transformed into dexterity, skill, routine, flair, and craftsmanship. According to Engelmeier, reflex is a particularly important stage because 'it is only then that man is ready for action, ready to pursue his spiritual goals, and realise his ideals'.³⁴ At the same time, the reflex (repetition, habitual action) is not able to produce something new; for this, it is necessary 'to create, to invent'.³⁵ Engelmeier concluded that although creative activity encompasses the whole of human activity, it is only one of its manifestations, 'defined mainly by the fact that a certain deed is completed for the first time. Repeating the same deed is called imitation'.³⁶ Hence, '*evrologiia*', the theory of creativity, essentially developed towards a general theory of human activity, which the author called 'activism'. The result of the three stages is man's creation of a second, artificial nature, a kind of 'microcosm', called culture or civilisation, which surrounds us and in which we live.³⁷

Engelmeier's theory of creativity had an immediate impact on the formulation of the principles of artistic culture, as developed by leading avant-garde artists and theorists in the 1910s and 1920s. Mach laid the foundation for Engelmeier's inter-disciplinary approach and can help us to understand one of the reasons why the theorists of progressive art were attracted to the philosophy of technology: 'When the generally accepted ideas of one area are transferred into another area, this always revitalises that field ... enriches it and promotes its development'.³⁸ The notions of inventiveness, mastery, materiality, scientific objectivity, economy, and activism became crucial both

29 Engelmeier, *Evrologiia*, 151-152.

30 Engelmeier, *Teoriia tvorchestva*, 117.

31 Engelmeier, *Evrologiia*, 131.

32 *Ibid.*, 149.

33 Engelmeier, *Teoriia tvorchestva*, 117.

34 P. Engelmeier, *Evrologiia* (Kharkov, 1916), VII: 86.

35 *Ibid.*, 87.

36 *Ibid.*, 80.

37 Engelmeier, *Teoriia tvorchestva*, 116.

38 *Ibid.*, 3.

for avant-garde practice and for developing a new theory of art under the label of artistic culture.

Artistic Creativity and the Avant-Garde

In Russia it was only during the first decade of the twentieth century that artists and theoreticians of the new art followed the thinking of Engelmeier, Lezin and others, and actually began to consider the creative process in art, the role, form and content of art, as well as art's connection with science, philosophy, technology, and psychology.

Nikolai Kulbin was probably the first avant-garde figure to point out the need for developing a specific theory for the fine arts. He wrote, 'An eagle's wings do not operate in a disorderly way, but according to strict laws which comprise the theory of eagles'.³⁹ Kulbin's professional interest in medicine, psychology and neurology led him to explore the psychological aspects of the creative process. In 1910, Kulbin stated, in relation to the sources and nature of the new art, 'my materials mainly concern the theory of artistic creativity. I consider that this comprises three parts, which relate to the psychology of the artist, the painting, and the viewer'.⁴⁰ In his theory and practice, in his lectures in St. Petersburg 1907-8, and in his exhibited works, Kulbin elaborated these ideas and, in so doing, enunciated the basic tenets of Futurism, as Kruchenykh later acknowledged.⁴¹

From the very beginning, theory went hand in hand with avant-garde practice. At the 1907 exhibition, *The Wreath* [Στέφανος, *Venok*], which marked the real beginning of avant-garde activity, it was precisely the technical experiments of the 'explorers of new techniques'⁴² that attracted reviewers. Critics mentioned the 'crafted painting' [*remeslennaia zhivopis'*] of Aristarkh

39 Nikolai Kul'bin, 'Svobodnoe iskusstvo kak osnova zhizni. Garmonii i dissonans', in N. Kul'bin et al, eds., *Studiia impressionistov* (St. Petersburg: N. I. Butkovskoi, 1910), 9; reprinted in Vladimir Markov, ed., *Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967), 21.

In 1919, Malevich repeated Kulbin's statement: 'nothing, anywhere in the world of painting, develops unsystematically'. See K. Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost'. Ustanovlenie A* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1919); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 169.

40 Kul'bin, 'Svobodnoe iskusstvo', 13.

41 A. Kruchenykh and N. Kul'bin, *Dekalratsiia slova kak takovogo*, 1913; reprinted in V. N. Terekhin and A. P. Zimenkov, eds., *Russkii futurizm. Stikhi. Stat'i. Vospominaniia* (St. Petersburg: Poligraf, 2009), 70.

42 Andrei V. Kusanov, *Russkii avangard 1907-1932* (St. Petersburg: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996), 1: 10.

Lentulov and the new techniques, 'the rectangular strokes of pigment with a dot in the middle' of Vladimir Burliuk.⁴³ The critic A. Timofeev even discerned the birth of 'a new tendency in painting' in which 'purely technical tasks' played a central role.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, as Malevich observed, the revolution in 'the state of the arts' only really began in 1908.⁴⁵ He may have had in mind the exhibition *Contemporary Trends in Art* [*Sovremennye techeniia v iskusstve*], organised by Kulbin in St. Petersburg. Reviewers once again noted Vladimir Burliuk's technical deficiencies – 'an outrageous scribble, recalling a sign painted by a decorator'.⁴⁶ 'An enthusiasm for pictorial technique', explained the Burliuk brothers' development of 'psychological pictures' in which the painter essentially becomes an image of the viewer.⁴⁷ To achieve this, Vladimir Burliuk painted 'a human body, face and ground with squares, small circles, and similar geometric and non-geometric forms'.⁴⁸ Kulbin's 'artistic and psychological group', The Triangle, made their appearance for the first time at this exhibition. The critic K. Ldov exclaimed, 'This is the art of the future, a courageous art and an inescapable search for innovation in artistic creation'.⁴⁹ But what ideas from the psychology of creativity were capable of radically transforming the fine arts? As one critic wrote, 'the three sides of the Triangle: blue, red and yellow – symbolically express the representation, the feeling, and the will, and all together form the spirit'.⁵⁰ In this way, Kulbin's 'psychological approach to the problems of the creative process', was like Engelmeier's 'technical' approach, which underpinned his three-part theory of creativity and relied on Schopenhauer's philosophy. The fundamental idea is that the whole world of human creation comprises three basic spiritual functions, reflecting three aspects of humanity: instinct (feeling, sensation); consciousness (conception, reason, idea); and effective action (will, emanating from Kant's *ding an sich*).

A little later, in 1912, Vladimir Markov published his article, 'The Principles of the New Art'.⁵¹ In developing his 'principle of free creativity', analogous to

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 K. Malevich, 'V gosudarstve iskusstv' [In the Government of the Arts], *Anarkhiia*, 54 (9 May 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 89.

46 Krusanov, *Russkii avangard*, 1: 14.

47 Ibid., 15.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 17.

50 Ibid., 16.

51 Vladimir Markov, 'Printsipy novogo iskusstva', *Soiuz molodezhi*, 2 (April 1912): 5-15; and 3 (June 1912): 5-18.

'*vers libre*', Markov, like Kulbin, paid particular attention to the three-stage creative process, describing it now as three different expressions of the self (the 'I'). The self or 'I' is expressed by means of:

1. Intuition, which is felt 'in a religious ecstasy, at the moment of inspiration or even at normal times', as an influx of strange, as if 'from outside', unexpected ideas and experiences.⁵² At this point, 'bold leaps' and 'clear shifts of purpose' occur.⁵³ Markov argued that it was then that the creator acted as a medium or intermediary between two worlds – the earthly and the other. The idea itself chooses the creator and the form in which it is embodied. Therefore, the creator is not responsible for it, however 'stupid' or 'gaudy' it might be.⁵⁴
2. Consciousness, when the inner 'impulses' and 'promptings' ripen and, like a seed, demand an exit from the individual.⁵⁵
3. The external manifestation of the results of intuition and consciousness, i.e. the physical emergence of the work itself. Markov noted that in this phase the 'I' does not appear as a 'direct echo' of the two previous 'I's' 'because a lot is lost ... on the path to its manifestation'.⁵⁶ Also, the finished product, is affected by 'alien elements' and 'substitutes',⁵⁷ such as 'the struggle with materials', 'life experience' and 'the psychological state' of the creator.⁵⁸ Markov followed Kant's thinking about the 'second-class' nature of materials, and reduced the significance of the materialisation of the work in the third and final stage of the creative process.

Based on the idea that 'aspiring to another world is integral to human nature' and that 'man does not desire the earth, but hungers for heaven', Markov stressed that the aim of free creativity is the transmission of what could be 'truer and stronger than an echo' of those other worlds that man could only sense.⁵⁹ To attain this goal, taking into account obstacles and substitutes (as mentioned above), free creativity uses the principle of economy, i.e. 'the least expenditure of technical means'.⁶⁰

From this, we conclude that a synthesis of creation and cognition lay at the very foundation of the Avant-Garde, while the creative process, as described

52 Ibid., (June 1912): 11.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 13.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 14.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 17.

60 Ibid., 16.

by Engelmeier and others,⁶¹ became integral to generating artistic innovation, from the very first steps towards abstract art.

The February and October Revolutions of 1917 had a profound impact on Russia's social and cultural life. While the new government demanded that art should now represent the new social and political realities, artists hoped that artistic innovation and radicalism could now become integral to the new social structure. The immediate post-revolutionary period witnessed an unprecedented merging of the Avant-Garde and politics: the new artistic culture acquired government status, and investigations were conducted into the relationship between art and different disciplines such as science, social reconstruction, technology, artistic education, and cultural transformation.

Towards the end of 1918, the Moscow Department of Fine Arts within the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv – IZO, Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – Narkompros) set up an International Office (Mezhdunarodnoe biuro). Hoping to unify 'progressive fighters for art in the name of the new universal artistic culture',⁶² it launched the journal *Art International* [*Internatsional iskusstva*], devoted to the theory of contemporary art. Contributions were commissioned from the artists Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksei Morgunov, Pavel Kuznetsov, Mikhail Matiushin, and Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaia; as well as from the art critics Ivan Aksenov, Nikolai Punin, Aleksandr Toporkov, and Osip Brik, and the poets Velemir Khlebnikov, Andrei Belyi, and Viacheslav Ivanov. The inclusion in the first issue of an article by Anatolii Lunacharskii ('Art as the world's creative laboratory' – '*Iskusstvo kak tvorcheskaiia laboratoria mira*'), indicates the ambitious scale of the plans, as does Malevich, Tatlin and Morgunov's appeal to the world's progressive artists.⁶³ Unfortunately, because of economic and political difficulties, the journal was never published. Nevertheless, the International Office accepted Malevich's proposal to organise a conference 'to reconsider the former principles and methods of science and art'.⁶⁴ No such event seems to have taken place. Yet Malevich's idea seems to have taken root: under the auspices of a meeting to consider the more pragmatic topic of the museum, the principle of artistic culture became the main theme of discussion.

61 Among Russian thinkers, it is appropriate to recall Vladimir Solov'ev who in his 1880 book, *Kritiki otvlechenykh nachal*, mentioned will, reason and embodiment in relation to art and the idea of total unity. See Vladimir Solov'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1988), 1: 745; and D. V. Sarab'ianov, *Russkaia zhivopis'. Probuzhdenie pamiati* (Moscow: Iskusstvoznanie, 1998), 334.

62 Nikolai Khardzhiev, 'Internatsional iskusstva. Iz materialov po istorii sovetskogo iskusstva', *Russian Literature*, 6 (1974): 55-57.

63 *Ibid.*, 56.

64 *Ibid.*

This 'Conference Concerning Museums' was held in February 1919, and, despite its title, had an important impact on the Avant-Garde's creative activity. Nikolai Punin read a statement on behalf of IZO, announcing the principles that would direct the organisation and development of new museums. All questions connected with artistic creativity, as well as the formation, and the acquisition of contemporary works of art were to be placed in the hands of artists, because they (rather than museum professionals and scholars) were able to evaluate the quality of the works and discern new elements of artistic invention.⁶⁵ The principle of scientific objectivity and creative activism were presented as aspects of Marxism, although, in reality, the fundamental principles of 'artistic culture' do not have a Marxist origin.⁶⁶ On the contrary, the statement's emphasis on art's autonomy, and its assertion of artistic self-government and independence of all interference from the regime, society and the market indicates an allegiance to ideological trends such as Fourierist socialism, anarchist socialism, revolutionary syndicalism, anarchist individualism, and the co-operative movement.

In 1918-1919, leading avant-garde artists and theorists helped to develop the principle of artistic culture. The position of Lunacharskii, the Commissar for Enlightenment, indicates that the concept of artistic culture emerged and was developed within the Avant-Garde and was not imposed by the Party. Lunacharskii did not support the idea that the history of art was the history of innovation and invention. He considered that 'professional technical formalism'

65 'Deklaratsiia Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv i khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti Narkomprosa po voprosu o printsipakh muzeevedeniia', *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 11 (16 February 1919): 1.

66 Punin popularised the concept, but he was not alone in masking its origin by using Marxist terminology. For instance, Ivan Puni (Jean Pougny) used the term 'painterly materialism' which he defined as the general platform for all progressive trends in painting from Cézanne onwards. Puni defined 'painterly materialism' as 'the unified and principled relationship to a painting as an end in itself, as a constructive system of form and pigment', i.e. what was later called formalism. See Iv. Puni, 'Sovremennyye gruppirovki v russkom levom iskusstve', *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 19 (13 April 1919): 2-3. Contemporaries recognised such deceptive uses of Marxist terminology. The old Bolshevik, literary critic and productivist, Nikolai Chuzhak, for instance, observed, 'Using Marxist phraseology in a clever way, although not thinking in a Marxist way – N. N. Punin'. See N. F. Chuzhak, 'Pod znakom zhisnestroeniia. Opyt osoznaniia iskusstva dnia', *Lef*, 1 (1923): 28.

Boris Arvatov accused Malevich of similarly misrepresenting *The Red Square*, because while 'embodying an individualistic aesthetic,' it was 'presented as a completely socialist aesthetic'. See B. Arvatov, 'Malevich. "Bog ne skinut (Iskusstvo. Tserkov'. Fabrika)", *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*, 7 (1922): 343-344. The accusation was justified. The tactic was frequently adopted by avant-garde artists to hide their true ideology (anarchism) and their philosophical roots (empirical criticism).

was less important for art than factors like ‘inspiration’ and ‘imagination’.⁶⁷ He even criticised the principle that lay at the basis of the concept of artistic culture – the autonomy of the art work, which organically arose from the avant-garde notions concerning ‘the thing in itself’ and ‘painting as such’. Nevertheless, Lunacharskii acknowledged that the principle of artistic culture represented the general position of leftist artists and he, therefore, respected and tolerated it.

The new concept had enormous importance for artistic innovation in general, but especially for the Avant-Garde: ‘The understanding of artistic culture comprises, by virtue of the meaning of the very word culture as vigorous activity, a creative moment; creation comprises the production of the new, invention; [consequently] artistic culture is nothing other than the culture of artistic invention’.⁶⁸ Formal, stylistic and technical innovation became the criteria of aesthetic value, and so naturally museums had to be devoted to the history of artistic innovation.

Artistic culture was considered a result of the creative process, which possesses specific characteristics, such as inventiveness (innovation), skill (professionalism), and objectivity (science). It includes a range of elements, such as:

- 1) material – surface, texture [*faktura*], elasticity, density, weight and other properties of material
- 2) colour – saturation, strength, relationship to light, purity, transparency, independence and other qualities
- 3) space – volume, depth, dimension and other properties of space
- 4) time (movement) – in its spatial expression and in connection with colour, material, composition, etc
- 5) form as a result of the interaction of material, colour, space, and, in its distinctive form, composition
- 6) technique [*tekhnika*] – painting, mosaic, reliefs of various kinds, sculpture, masonry, and other artistic techniques.⁶⁹

Artistic culture, as a culture of invention, emerged only when the artist radically changed his attitude or invented in accordance with the elements listed above.⁷⁰

67 ‘Rech’ Lunacharskogo’, *Iskusstvo kommuni*, 11 (16 February 1919): 3.

68 *Ibid.*, 4.

69 ‘Polozhenie Otdela izobrazitel’nyh iskusstv i khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti NKP po voprosu “o khudozhestvennoi kul’ture”’, *Iskusstvo kommuni*, 11 (16 February 1919): 4.

70 *Ibid.*

The principles of artistic culture provided the foundation for the cultural policy of the new government. 'Artistic culture' was the subject of scientific and artistic investigations at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Inkhuk), conducted by Nikolai Tarabukin, Boris Arvatov, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Aleksandr Vesnin, Gustav Klutskis (Gustavs Klucis), Karl Ioganson (Kārlis Johansons), Nikolai Ladovskii and others, as well as underpinning the investigations of the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Gosudarstvennyi Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Ginkhuk) in Petrograd where Malevich, Tatlin, Mikhail Matiushin, Pavel Filonov, Nikolai Puni, Pavel Mansurov, Ilia Chashnik and others worked. The concept of 'artistic culture' also provided the theoretical foundation for the radical reform of artistic education and the setting up of the State Free Art Studios (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie – Svomas), the Vkhutemas (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie – Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops), and Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art). The new principles also determined the state's policy towards museums and the foundation of the museums of artistic culture, including the Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow and the Museum of Artistic Culture in Petrograd, which were run by Kandinsky, Rodchenko and Malevich.

In accordance with artistic culture, the new approach to museums emphasised creative invention, innovation, skill, and experimentation in the area of artistic techniques and materials, as well as producing new approaches to display.⁷¹ Kandinsky, for instance, proposed 'opening the doors of the artist's studio' to 'reveal' the skill and craftsmanship of artistic creation, arguing that this reflected the new social requirements and the democratisation of all areas of life.⁷² The task of the new museum was to present the most important artistic movements, like Impressionism, Cézannism, Cubism and Futurism as well as contemporary trends. In other words, the new museum was to stress formal invention, the materials and how they were used, and not the artists themselves. Maria Gough has suggested that this is based on Heinrich Wölfflin's idea of 'the history of art without names'.⁷³ I would also like to mention the influence

71 In 1913, David Burluk 'the father of Russian Futurism', observed at one of the Knave (Jack) of Diamonds debates, that the method of investigating artistic principles, rather than the content of paintings, would provide the foundation for the still-to-be-written scientific history of painting. See Benedikt Livshits, *Polutoroglazyi strelets* (Leningrad, 1933; and Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989), 361.

72 Vasilii Kandinskii, 'Muzei zhivopisnoi kul'tury', *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn'*, 2 (1920): 18.

73 Maria Gough, 'Futurist Museology', *Modernism/Modernity*, x, 2 (April 2003): 328.

of the German engineer, Alois Riedler, whom Engelmeier called 'a pillar of machine production'. Riedler taught 'intellectual culture', not chronologically, but 'as the history of culture and cultural resources'.⁷⁴ This approach relates to Kandinsky's statement that the Museum of Painterly Culture 'has the aim of presenting the stages of purely painterly achievements, painterly methods and means completely, as they are manifest in the painting of all epochs and nations'.⁷⁵

Faktura was one of the most important elements of artistic culture. While Kandinsky simply wanted to collect all significant works related to the application of *faktura*, Rodchenko intended to make *faktura* the unifying strand, replacing any chronological or thematic narrative.⁷⁶ Kandinsky's more conservative approach did not address the difference between an experiment and a work of art, or between art and non-art, but trusted that the new theory of painting, 'of which we already have a premonition', would provide the answers.⁷⁷ In contrast, Rodchenko completely rejected the traditional distinctions between an experiment and a work of art. Like Engelmeier earlier, he equated the creative process in art with that in other areas of human activity.

Creativity and Suprematism

For Malevich, the creative process related not only to artistic activity but also to the construction of the entire universe. He wrote, 'Suprematist artists ... have moved towards creation i.e. now they have become a part of the universal law of nature'.⁷⁸ This stance reflects Potebnia's view, popularised by his followers, such as Lezin, who argued, 'in actual fact, we do not know nature, but the human spirit, and cognition of the world is cognition of the 'I' [the Self], and vice-versa ... we only know as much of the external world as is reflected in us'.⁷⁹ But the 'Suprematist Mirror' was called upon to reflect not only the world's objects, but also the very essence of the universe, or at least that part that was accessible to the artist. All past experiences were diminished, forms were split

74 Alois Riedler, 'Tseli vysshikh tekhnicheskikh shkol', *Biulleten' politekhnicheskogo obshchestvo*, 3 (1901): 154.

75 Kandinskii, 'Muzei zhivopisnoi kul'tury', 19.

76 See Gough, 'Futurist Museology', 340.

77 Kandinskii, 'Muzei zhivopisnoi kul'tury', 20.

78 K. Malevich, 'Rodonachalo suprematizma' [The Birth of Suprematism], *Anarkhiia*, 81 (1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 111.

79 B. Lezin, 'Khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo kak osobyi vid ekonomii mysli', *Voprosy teorii i psikhologii tvorchestva*, 1 (1907): 308.

into their component elements, and the artist arrived at 'the zero of form'.⁸⁰ The creative method that was employed at this stage of invention and which could be labelled 'the dispersive stage', corresponds to Mikhail Bakunin's notion that 'the destructive spirit is a creative spirit'.⁸¹ Unlike Nikolai Berdiaev, for whom, Cubism and the new art represented a degeneration and destruction of the past, Malevich and the Avant-Garde saw it as a liberation of 'the T' from things and a move towards direct creation'.⁸² It was precisely in order to move 'through zero' and towards direct creation, that artists came to consider the theories of creativity discussed above. At this point, elements were synthesised and there was a move towards establishing a single foundation or primordial entity. Malevich coined the neologism '*spyleneie*' [consolidation] to describe this process. In Suprematist philosophy, the universe is characterised by an endless cycle of processes: 'In the world there are only two actions – consolidation [*spyleneie*] and dispersion [*raspylenie*]'⁸³ of a single indestructible entity, without colour and without form, that Malevich called 'nothing'.

It was not just creative necessity that made theories of creativity attractive to the Avant-Garde. As already noted, the intellectual debate following the failed 1905 Revolution possessed wider social ramifications. These were manifest in *Signposts* [*Vekhi*] of 1909, a collection of essays by Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Mikhail Gershenzon, Petr Struve, Semyon Frank, and others. The publication discussed the role of the intelligentsia, and criticised positivism, in line with the metaphysics of Mach and Avenarius. Gershenzon, for instance, advised the intelligentsia, as a first step, 'to withdraw into themselves',⁸⁴ pay attention to their inner consciousness, and 'here, in constant contact with the irrational elements of the spirit, continuously commune with the world essence, because through the will of each individual, flows the united cosmic will'.⁸⁵ It

80 K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k Suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism] (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1916); English translation, in K. S. Malevich: *Essays on Art 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 19.

81 See Nina Gourianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

82 K. Malevich, 'Vystavka professional'nogo soiuza khudozhnikov-zhivopistsev. Levaia federatsiia (molodaia fraktsiia)' [The Exhibition of the Professional Union of Artist Painters. The Leftist Federation (The Young Section)], *Anarkhiia*, 89 (20 June 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 119.

83 K. Malevich, 'Svet i tsvet' [Light and Colour], 1923, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV: 271.

84 Mikhail Gershenzon, 'Tvorcheskoe samosoznanie', *Vekhi. Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii* (Moscow, 1909), 83.

85 *Ibid.*, 82.

was precisely in this historical context that Russian society, including progressive artists, manifested a growing interest in empirical criticism and the creative process. Malevich was correct in 1918, when he wrote ironically about the Petersburg artists separating creativity from art: 'As for us Muscovites, putting on separators to distinguish creation from art: this has been done for a long time, and for many years now we have not been taking part where art flourishes like lilies in a swamp'.⁸⁶

The principle of economy played a central role in Malevich's thinking.⁸⁷ Mach and Avenarius established the principle of the 'least expenditure of power' at the basis of scientific thinking (the systematisation of facts and abstract modes of thinking are among the essential instruments for achieving economy of thought). Economy as a scientific principle was applied to various fields by their Russian followers in the pre-revolutionary period. Lezin, for instance, wrote that 'like science, art is condensed thinking [and] economical; the difference is only in the means employed and the speed of familiarisation'.⁸⁸ He explained that while science progresses slowly, religion and art, employing the same intuitive method, progress much more quickly and boldly, frequently anticipating scientific conclusions.⁸⁹ Although Lezin was thinking primarily of literature, artists would not have been indifferent to the idea of art's superiority to scientific thinking. Malevich applied the principle of economy (freely interpreted) to 'the science of painting', where it became art's 'fifth dimension'. In Suprematism's creative method, it became the foundation 'on which the forms of all the creative conditions for inventions and the arts should develop'.⁹⁰ It denoted a work of art's 'perfection and contemporaneity'.⁹¹ Malevich wrote, 'every invention, developing the movement of pictorial elements ... is valued in terms of the fifth dimension'.⁹² It formed the basis for Malevich's approach to the history of the new art and his development of the

86 K. Malevich, 'K priezdu vol'tero-terroristov iz Peterburga', *Anarkhiia*, 41 (11 April 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 73; English translation, 'On the Arrival of Voltarian Terrorists from Petersburg', in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 59.

87 See also T. Goriacheva, 'K poniatiiu ekonomii tvorchestva', in G. Kovalenko, ed., *Russkii avangard 1910-1920-kh godov v evropeiskom kontekste* (Moscow: Nauka, 2000), 263-274.

88 Lezin, 'Khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo', 275.

89 *Ibid.*, 275-6.

90 K. Malevich, 'Ustanovlenie A v iskusstve' [Resolution A in Art] in *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost'. Ustanovlenie A* [On New Systems in Art: Stasis and Speed: Resolution A] (Vitebsk, 1919); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 184; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 119.

91 Malevich, 'Ustanovlenie A v iskusstve'; Malevich *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 183; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 117.

92 *Ibid.*

sign – his theory of the additional element, which was the primordial element of each system within the new art. Of course, the principle of economy had guided him in creating *The Black Square*, from which other forms of Suprematism had developed: coloured, black and white, planar and volumetric.⁹³

Lezin linked economy with the unconscious selection of a single ‘type’ from a varied mass. For Lezin, ‘type-ism’ was one of the basic laws of creativity, without which there could be no scientific or artistic creativity. The type is associated with the accumulation of mental energy that provided an enormous power for thinking. Citing Ovsianiko-Kulikovskii, Lezin talked of ‘artistic generalisations, typical images and sources of intellectual light, from which ideas are distributed over vast areas of factual reality’.⁹⁴ In essence, the artistic type is ‘a fusion of the concrete and the abstract’.⁹⁵ The artist’s task is ‘to depict, employing one or two features, a person rather than a group of people, a face instead of faces, so that it would be minimal, eloquent’.⁹⁶ Inevitably, this recalls Malevich’s *Black Square*, as both the abstract and concrete ‘face of the new art’.⁹⁷

For Lezin, the word ‘type’ possessed great significance as a mark, a form, and a representation.⁹⁸ This could not satisfy Malevich. The product of Suprematist creative thinking was not a representation or an image, but a sensation, a sign and a symbol of the world’s essence, liberated from all figuration. Objectlessness was easy to find in the creative processes of technology. Malevich observed, ‘our time is enriched by the creativity of the technician – the technician is the true action man of our time’.⁹⁹ He considered the motor car to be one of the fundamental symbols of the modern world and argued that ‘the art of painting advanced in the wake of the contemporary technology of machines’.¹⁰⁰

93 K. Malevich, *K voprosu izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva* [*On the Question of Fine Art*] (Smolensk: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1921); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 221.

94 Lezin, ‘Khudozhestvennoe tvorcestvo’, 304.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu*; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 53; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 38.

98 Lezin, ‘Khudozhestvennoe tvorcestvo’, 301.

99 K. Malevich, ‘Gosudarstvennikam ot iskusstva’ [‘To the Officials from Art’], *Anarkhiia*, 53 (4 May 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 85.

For Malevich’s thinking about the characteristics shared by Suprematist and technical creativity, see Malevich, ‘Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost' ili vechnyi pokoi’; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 111: 69–324.

100 K. Malevich, ‘Arkhitektura kak poshchechina betono-zhelezu’ [Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete], *Anarkhiia*, 37 (6 April 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 69; English translation, in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 60.

Engelmeier stated his three-stage creative process with reference to the invention of machines in his book *Invention and Privilege: Guidance for Inventors* [*Izobreteniia i privilegii: Rukovodstvo dlia izobretatelei*] of 1897. He identified 'pure creativity' as playing the main role in the first stage of the creative process, just as Malevich did later, calling *The Black Square* 'the first step of pure creation in art'.¹⁰¹ During this first stage, the germ of an idea is born in the mind of the inventor. To clarify this idea, it is essential to 'look with an inner eye' and analyse its essential components.¹⁰² Engelmeier compared the idea to the sphinx, the image of which the constructor-inventor must discover: 'Something like a search in music begins within. The imagination runs over various mechanisms from memory, and the idea – the sphinx – notes' the appropriate forms.¹⁰³ According to Engelmeier, this work can only occur and evolve in the imagination, because 'the variation in these imagined insubstantial forms, their flexibility to change, their obedience and readiness to become one instead of another', i.e. their 'activity' is limited by paper and pencil.¹⁰⁴ Of course, at the beginning of the twentieth century, psychology emerged and identified 'activity' as a fundamental characteristic of the subconscious (intuitive) sphere. Richard von Krafft-Ebing observed that 'the subconscious spiritual life is constantly active; it transforms nervous excitement into a spiritual mood ... it develops ideas, images and so forth into thoughts, impulses and other complex psychological processes'.¹⁰⁵ Numerous scientific and artistic texts of this period relate directly, or indirectly, to the beginning of the creative process, its characteristic 'activity' or vitality embodied in the image of a seed, a nucleus, an infant, or a child.

Engelmeier stated that the free combination of forms and the selection of viable mixtures produces the idea of 'a centre of gravity'; 'this is a living embryo, which ... gives the idea a natural fulcrum'.¹⁰⁶ Malevich wrote that 'The Square ... is a living infant'.¹⁰⁷ Engelmeier continued 'Then more and more new parts quickly attach themselves to this nucleus, producing a new harmonious entity'.¹⁰⁸ Malevich observed, 'It is possible that this entity denotes the

101 Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu*; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 53; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 38.

102 P. Engelmeier, *Izobreteniia i privilegii. Rukovodstvo dlia izobretatelei* (Moscow, 1897), 19.

103 *Ibid.*, 20.

104 *Ibid.*

105 Lezin, 'Khudozhestvennoe tvorcestvo', 259.

106 Engelmeier, *Izobreteniia i privilegii*, 21.

107 Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu*; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 53; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 38.

108 Engelmeier, *Izobreteniia i privilegii*, 21.

world seed ... it is necessary to find in it the beginning or the infinity of weight. The "world seed" is created through action, as the heaviest nucleus, found in the action of eternal reasoning [and] of continuous modification of one and the same essence in different forms'.¹⁰⁹

The movement of 'the point of a pictorial nucleus',¹¹⁰ or simply a point, 'creates a line, the movement of a line – a plane, and the plane – a cube. The movement of the cube – a sphere, a point'.¹¹¹ Thus, the circle is complete, and the new-born infant has become royal. The image of the crowned infant, came to the Russian Avant-Garde from alchemy, deriving from entelechy,¹¹² and denoting an inner power, possessing both the potential aim and end result. In other words, the nucleus, the beginning of creativity, becomes the '*ding an sich*', 'the object as such', 'the original', completely autonomous object, independent of the external world. Similarly, Malevich's *Black Square* transforms the creative process in art from a means into a goal, into a non-reflective, blind and opaque form,¹¹³ becoming 'pure, self-made, self-created'.¹¹⁴ Therefore, Malevich observed that the new art, 'pursuing a purely creative path', performs in the same way as technical creativity, where the object only represents itself: 'It has nothing to do with your life, because it is in itself a living form and lives in life. The created motor-car, aeroplane, gun, building, and wood are indifferent and cold – they are unsmiling forms – to our sorrow'.¹¹⁵

Up to now, we have been examining creativity in its initial, intuitive, and subconscious stage. Malevich, however, stated that 'the square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason'.¹¹⁶ Intuition and reason

109 Malevich, 'Suprematism. Mir kak bespredmetnost' ili vechnyi pokoi'; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III: 193.

110 K. Malevich, 'Konchalovskii', 1924, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v: 261.

111 K. Malevich, 'O sud'be', c. 1924, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v: 405.

112 For Aristotle, entelechy was a vital power inherent in an entity, embodying that entity's potential, such as enabling a seed to grow. Leibniz later regarded it in more metaphysical terms: each un-extended thinking substance or monad possessed its own universe. This idea is found in Kant, Schopenhauer, and others. In 1910, Nikolai Kulbin, in his analysis of the principles of the new art, used this concept when he described harmony (to which the 'I, weary of life, aspired) as a closed spring; its power latent, but inactive. He wrote, 'The power is at rest, in a state of possibility (with potential), a potential sleeping power'. See Kul'bin, 'Svobodnoe iskusstvo', 3; Markov, *Manifesty*, 15.

113 Malevich, '1/40. Zhivopisnyi opyt' [1/40. Pictorial Experience]; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV: 46.

114 Malevich, 'Gosudarstvennikom ot iskusstva'; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 87.

115 K. Malevich, 'Cherez mnogovekovoii put' iskusstva...'; [Through the Centuries-Old Path of Art], [1916], ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v: 56.

116 Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu*; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 53; Malevich, *Essays*, I: 38.

as tools for understanding the world were popular with nineteenth-century philosophers like Kant and Schopenhauer. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the term 'intuitive reason', first coined by Aristotle, was given a religious content and used in theosophical texts,¹¹⁷ with which we may assume that Malevich was familiar.¹¹⁸ What is important for us is that the term fused two stages of the creative process – the intuitive and the logical.

Malevich also related to Engelmeier's definition of the second stage of the creative process, when the idea moves (with the help of pencil and paper) from the three-dimensional realm of the imagination into two-dimensions and is developed as the scheme or plan of a machine. Malevich explained, 'The art of painting moved away from the business of representation and arrived at planarity, at the objectless structured volume as a completely normal development of an autonomous form. In so far as the structure occupies a place not on the canvas, but in space, it must be classified as an objectless, technical-school structure.'¹¹⁹

In technology, this move into two dimensions is realised through the application of technical and scientific laws, such as those pertaining to physics, chemistry, and mathematics. Malevich considered art to be an autonomous sphere of activity, stressing that 'the paths of science are one thing, the paths of art another.'¹²⁰ Even so, he emphasised that they interacted precisely during this 'second stage', at the moment, 'when the process moved to the stage of representation,¹²¹ when the psychological state of tension begins to emit

117 D. Stranden mentioned 'a higher intuitive reason' [*vysshii intuitivnyi razum*]. See D. Stranden, 'Sem' nachal cheloveka po ucheniiu teosofii', *Vestnik teosofii*, 3 (1908): 46. Charlotte Douglas relates this term to the philosophy of Henri Bergson. See Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980).

118 For Malevich and theosophy, see Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth: A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Charlotte Douglas, 'Suprematism: The Sensible Dimension', *The Russian Review*, XXXIV, 3 (July 1975): 266-281; Susan P. Compton, 'Malevich's Suprematism – The Higher Intuition', *The Burlington Magazine*, CXVII, 881 (August 1976): 576-583, 585; Linda Dalrymple Henderson, 'The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art: Conclusion', *Leonardo*, XVII, 3 (1984): 205-210; and Tom H. Gibbons, 'Cubism and "The Fourth Dimension" in the Context of the Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Revival of Occult Idealism', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 44 (1981): 130-147.

119 Malevich, 'Mir kak bespredmetnost' ili vechnyi pokoi'; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III: 108.

120 Kazimir Malevich, 'Forma, tsvet i oshchushchenie' [Form, Colour and Sensation], *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 5 (1928): 159.

121 Here, Malevich was referring to art in general and not only to Suprematism.

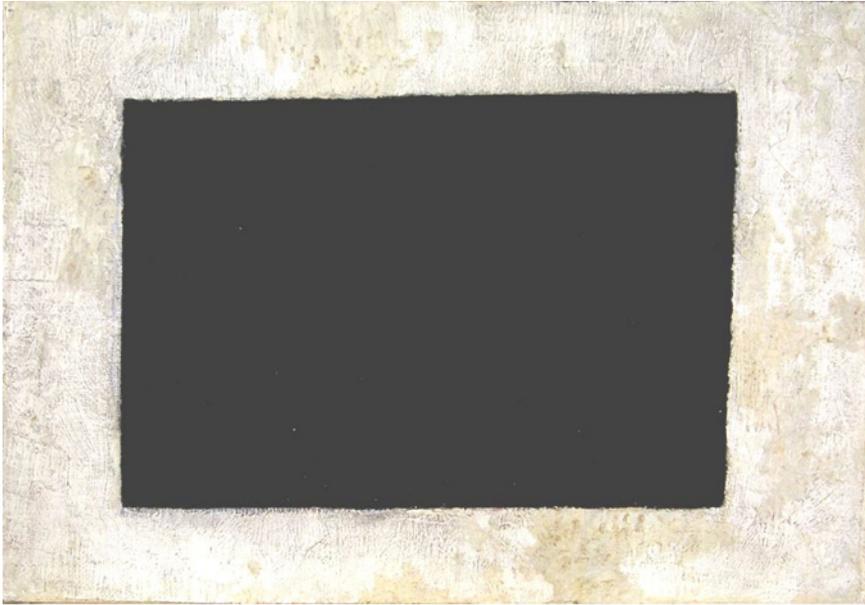


FIGURE 4.1 Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Quadrilateral*, c. 1915, oil on canvas, 17 × 24 cm., Collection G. Costakis, State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.

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an image ... the artist has to solve the question, in which of the centres of its organism to give form to the image that has emerged. The structure, *faktura*, painting, and the form of the image depends on the solution of this; the application of one or another science to the image depends on this question!¹²² To describe this relationship, Malevich used the analogy of the astronomical phenomenon of a binary star, i.e. the system of two stars, connected by gravity, moving in a restricted orbit around a common centre. In specific circumstances, these stars exchange masses, but Malevich explained that the star of art exists 'with its own logic of movement, with its own mathematics, with its own reason or irrationality'.¹²³ In this context, science acts as material, which art, with its complete freedom of action, interprets, transforms and submits to its own aims.

The theory of the creative process can also illuminate the colours of *The Black Square*. Lezin, like many psychologists, equated the conscious sphere with light, arguing that 'with distance' from this light and with an approach to

¹²² Malevich, 'Forma, tsvet i oshchushchenie', 159.

¹²³ K. Malevich, '1/46 (Eklektika)' [1/46. Eclecticism], 1924-1925, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV: 144.

the subconscious sphere, 'the image darkens more and more'.¹²⁴ Applying this idea to Malevich's painting would suggest that some kind of black prototype of the square begins to take shape in the intuitive or subconscious sphere, and then at the stage of reason and logic (consciousness), when the scientific principle of economy is applied, the form of the quadrilateral emerges, depicted within the white frame of consciousness. The technical investigation of Malevich's *Black Quadrilateral* in the Costakis Collection indicates that the artist painted the black geometric form first, and then the white ground (Fig. 4.1).¹²⁵

For Engelmeier, the creative process for designing a motor car is completed with the elaboration of the plans and not with the actual construction.¹²⁶ Likewise, 'intuitive reason' does not provide for the materialisation of the actual work. Hence, Malevich's *Black Square* did not transport him into the sphere of spatial objects; it remains in the sphere of conscious ideas, like a mathematical or scientific discovery, where the final product of the creative process is a formula, not a material object.¹²⁷ *The Black Square* is a symbol of the creative process, a '*ding an sich*', only accessible to the 'god in humanity', consisting of primordial, immaterial or 'non-material' material.

124 Lezin, 'Khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo', 258.

125 For the technical details, see Maria Kokkori, 'Russian Avant-Garde: A Historical Contextualization of Selected Paintings by Kazimir Malevich, Ivan Kliun and Liubov Popova c.1905-25' (PhD Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2007), 152-158.

126 Engelmeier, *Izobreteniia i privilegii*, 28.

127 Engelmeier, *Filosofia tekhniki*, 91-93.

Kazimir Malevich, Unovis, and the Poetics of Materiality

Maria Kokkori, Alexander Bouras and Irina Karasik

In 1921, Kazimir Malevich formulated a radically new understanding of materiality and the nature of creativity. He stated, ‘The new war on materials has been declared. Materials will be defeated by the production processes, and in the course of this war they will be transformed.’¹ From 1920 to 1922 at the Vitebsk People’s Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche) and later at the State Institute for Artistic Culture in Petrograd (Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul’tury – Ginkhuk), Malevich and the Unovis group investigated art through laboratory research, focusing on the ‘science of painting’ [*zhivopisnaia nauka*], as Malevich described it, and examining the painterly processes involved in the ‘new systems of art.’² Central to their explorations was the study of *faktura*, in both its material and immaterial aspects, fusing the two and thus challenging preconceptions about its meaning, practice, purpose, essence, and use.³

When Malevich set up Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art) in early 1920 in Vitebsk, he deliberately set out to create a

1 Kazimir Malevich, ‘Unovis’, *Iskusstvo*, 1 (Vitebsk, 1921): 9–10.

2 K. Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost’. Ustanovlenie A [On New Systems in Art. Stasis and Speed. Resolution A]* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1919); reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. Aleksandra Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 1: 153–183; English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915–1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 83–119.

3 For further discussions of *faktura*, see Vladimir Markov, *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh. Faktura* (St. Petersburg: Izdanie obshchestva khudozhnikov ‘Soiuz Molodezhi’, 1914); A. Hanse-Löve, ‘Faktura, Fakturnost’, *Russian Literature*, xvii: 1 (1985): 29–38; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, ‘From Faktura to Factography’, *October*, 30 (Fall 1984): 82–119; Maria Gough, ‘Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde’, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 36 (Fall 1999): 32–59; Maria Kokkori and Alexander Bouras, ‘Charting Modernism: Malevich’s Research Tables’, in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 164–195; A. Bouras, ‘Faktura utopii’, in ‘Khudozhestvennaia tekhnika i materialy v teorii i praktike russkogo avangarda’ (PhD Thesis, Moscow Architecture Institute, 2016); and Maria Kokkori and Alexander Bouras, ‘Metallic Factures: László Moholy-Nagy and Kazimir Malevich’, *Leonardo*, L, 3 (June 2017): 287–291.

new kind of artistic education with the broad aim of applying the principles of Suprematism to the work of designing a new world. Malevich and the Unovis collective, comprising El Lissitzky, Vera Ermolaeva, Nina Kogan, Lazar Khidekel, Nikolai Suetin, Iliia Chashnik, Lev Iudin, as well as associates Gustav Klutsis (Gustavs Klucis) and Aleksei Kruchenykh, envisaged Suprematist experiments not as concrete manifestations, but as tentative steps towards a future that they imagined to be inescapable: as radical gestures, the presence of which would encourage a leap forward. These explorations were theoretical activities that shortly came to assume a ground-breaking strength and influence over the creative energy of subsequent Avant-Gardes. The goal was the fulfillment of an unattainable promise, the advent of an all-encompassing art of form, space, *faktura*, and colour that would result in an ideal fusion between art, technology, and society. This was manifested in the artists' collective projects and publications. These included the typewritten almanac, *Unovis No. 1*, which was produced in 1920 by Malevich and Lissitzky, along with a number of their students and colleagues. This publication presented the Unovis programme of cultural reforms in a series of essays and declarations on art, art teaching, the theatre, music, and poetry.

The present essay discusses the Unovis group's engagement with material through a reading of the artists' reflections on the subject, as well as an analysis of the origins and development of Suprematist 'materials' and a consideration of the strong links between these material explorations and Aleksei Kruchenykh's poetry. These materials were not incorporated into the Suprematist palette but were discussed as abstract ideas. Ultimately, the authors aim to illuminate how the members of the Unovis collective promoted themselves as belonging to a laboratory, where both staff and students worked experimentally and speculatively to materialise modernity.

The Material Spectrum: a New Taxonomy

Lev Iudin's project at the Vitebsk People's Art School on the spectrum of materials and their transformations is a striking example of the fusion of Suprematism and substance, technological advances and utopianism, abstraction and poetry. Lev Iudin (1904-41) was a student and colleague of Malevich. He graduated in 1922 and followed Malevich to Petrograd, where he worked alongside him at Ginkhuk (Fig. 5.1). Iudin's diaries of 1921-22 record his work on Suprematism and often resemble exercise books. Iudin was very young, only 17 at the time, suggesting that all the concepts that he explored were actually formulated by Malevich. The diaries include brief summaries of several of Malevich's lectures, outlines of specific experiments, details of the school's curricula, and



FIGURE 5.1 Unovis members in the early 1920s. From left to right: Ivan Chervinka, Lazar Khidekel, Ilya Chashnik, and Lev Iudin.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE LAZAR KHIDEKEL FAMILY ARCHIVE & COLLECTION.

sketches; they reflect on the progress of his various assignments and detail his own research. There are many drawings and diagrams that elaborate Suprematist constructions and reveal his search for the necessary compositional, colour, and textural combinations. In his diaries, Iudin touched upon an astonishing number of subjects, and seemed to be engaged in proving some kind of plastic theorem formulated by his mentor. Iudin mastered concepts that were important within the Suprematist system, such as movement, weight and weightlessness, force, density, tension, and economy.

Iudin was an active member of Unovis, which he called ‘the second culture’,⁴ and was engaged on the experimental development and classification of materials (Fig. 5.2). Through his use of neologisms – ‘*suprematerial*’ [suprematerial], ‘*metallotsvet*’ [metallo-colour] and ‘*elektromaterial*’ [electromaterial]⁵ – Iudin established a verbal map, the organically-linked contours

4 Lev Iudin, Diary entry, 11 August 1921; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), II: 216.

5 Iudin, Diary entry, 18 November 1921, ms, Manuscript Department of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (Otdel rukopisei, Gosudarstvennyi Russkii Muzei – OR GRM), fond 205, dokument 1, list 11 verso.

of which generated concepts related to science and technology.⁶ According to Iudin, every material object possessed properties either of *metallotsvet* or *elektromaterial*. *Metallotsvet* denoted the sensations of colours – the property of having been deprived of materiality and being pure energy.⁷ Iudin's project highlighted the utopian potential of materials, diverting attention away from any immediate practical applications, in favour of a less defined, but undeniably richer range of associations. The invention of new words to designate this activity was critical in order to facilitate this focus on hitherto unidentified possibilities. As implied in Malevich's writings, new materials could promisingly alert viewers to the potential for fundamental transformations in their sense of space, order, movement, and physical appearance. These transformations could themselves be metaphors or even necessary preconditions for the radical restructuring of society.

Iudin's project on material taxonomy was clearly inspired by scientific ideas and methodology. He wrote:

Economy and aesthetics are becoming clear. In this case, this is the first time that I have had to consciously figure out the economy. All the drawings that I've done for the project so far were just not to the point. Here I have had to act like K. S. [Kazimir Severinovich Malevich] did. Energetically conduct a battle against any individual relations; simplify the goal, reduce it to the most typical general form, and then solve it ... I clearly sense the entire abyss between us and the old. We are innovators.⁸

In his diaries, Iudin posed questions reflecting various levels of his methodological and analytical approaches: 'the scientific method in art, what does it comprise? Is it the only possible path for an artist at the present time, or is it just a small aspect of theoretical work? The task of the scientific method. Does it help or hinder a master in his work? Its role? Is it that it connects

6 An interest in neologisms and their deployment within literary works was also central to the activities of the previous generation of Russian avant-garde poets and painters. For example, Aleksei Kruchenykh's famous manifesto of 1913 'Declaration of the Word as Such' had extolled the value of newly invented words and had advocated the freedom of the artist 'to express himself not only in a common language (concepts), but also in a personal one (the creator is an individual), as well as in a language that does not have a definite meaning (is not frozen), that is a transrational language. A common language is binding; a free language allows for more complete expression'. English translation adapted from Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through its Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 67.

7 Iudin, Diary entry, 1 December 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, II: 219.

8 Iudin, Diary entries, 26 October 1921 and 29 October 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, II: 220.

previous phenomena of painting and creates a 'psychological milieu' for the development of a new form.⁹

From 1920 to 1922, Iudin focused on clarifying the concept of material, compiling and indexing a chart of textures of the 'material spectrum' [*tablitsy stroeniia faktur material'nogo spectra*],¹⁰ in which each group of materials corresponds to a complex of sensations, relating primarily to the nature and tempo of their movement. By studying the materials and their *faktura*, Iudin hoped 'to find an idea, a connection and a meaning, and not to make an index of samples'.¹¹ He related materials to movement in time, where any change of the motion resulted in the transition of the material from one state (or group) to another. Movement occurred in the creation of the material – described by Iudin as 'collecting', 'connecting', or 'coupling' – and was followed by the sensation of its physical presence ('radiating', 'deviating', 'diffusing'), suggesting a transition or transformation from the material to the immaterial, similar to that present in the white material/colour.^{12,13} As Malevich had explained, quite in accordance with the definitions in contemporary physics, white and black were not colours, instead they were ideas coming from the future, not-yet-materialised,¹⁴ defined only by their energy: 'colour is light, light is light depending on the circumstances'.¹⁵ Regarding the immateriality of matter, Malevich explained: 'if the world is matter, then that does not mean that it is material. Material arises when an idea appears'.¹⁶

9 Iudin, Diary entry, 22 March 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, II: 234.

10 Iudin, Diary entry, 4 January 1922, OR GRM, fond 205, document 1, list 32 verso. The tables form part of Iudin's diaries.

11 Iudin, Diary entry, 4 January 1922, OR GRM, fond 205, document 1, list 32.

12 Iudin, Diary entry, 5 January 1922, OR GRM, fond 205, document 1, list 33 verso.

13 'Colour' is a visual quality and its relation to its corresponding materiality is complex. There are opposing approaches to the science and philosophy of colour, contrasting 'colour-as-in-physical-objects' with 'colour-as-in-experience'. Due to the contradictions between scientific definitions, objectivity, subjectivity, and illusion, colour cannot be directly addressed in its complete existence. See John Maund and E. Sosa, eds., *Colours: Their Nature and Representation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1995).

14 K. Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka [Suprematism: 34 Drawings]* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920), reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 187; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 125.

15 K. Malevich, '1/42. Non-Objectivity', [c. 1924], ms; English translation in *The World as Non-Objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922-25*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus, (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1976), 90-91.

16 K. Malevich, 'Formula Suprematizma' [The Formula of Suprematism], 1923, ms; English translation in *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde*, ed. John E. Bowlt and Mark Konecny (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2002), 231.

The notion of the transformation of materials from one state to another and the complexities that arise during this process – from solid masses to liquids and from liquids to gases and invisible energies – seems to have been inspired by Herbert Spencer's theory of universal evolution and dissolution. According to Spencer, evolution was a circular transformation from the imperceptible to the perceptible; any organic substance could be converted from solid to liquid and from liquid to gas and, by the elimination of heat and condensation, from a diffused and incoherent condition, to once again resume first its liquid and then its solid state.¹⁷ Thus, Spencer defined evolution as an integration of matter and the concomitant dissipation of motion, during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes transformation. The opposite of this, repeated in reverse, was dissolution. Spencer applied his theory to the life of every atom and of every aggregate, from the microscopic cell to the globe itself, and from the solar system to the universe.

Iudin divided materials into five distinctive groups: each group was associated with a complex set of qualities and sensations deriving from the nature of its movement, and described by a unique sign or symbol (Fig. 5.2). As Iudin explained, 'material is a sign of speed ... different forms of movement are the consequences of different speeds ... but what they have in common is the force that destroys materiality. The same force that in Suprematist constructions makes squares and other forms objectless'.¹⁸ Following Malevich's interpretation, Iudin further suggested that the manifestation of every idea, in any artistic system, required the correct material. He stated, 'The idea is born in the material',¹⁹ and in accordance with Malevich's teaching, he related all systems of art, from Cézanne to Suprematism, with a culture of materials. Thus, Cubism was associated with the use of plaster, sand, pasted papers, glass, wood, metal, plywood, and marble dust, whereas Futurism was related to complex, 'slippery and running' textures, and Suprematism was connected with the potentiality of materials, with materials that could not even be fully predicted.²⁰ Every system was a function of the materials through which, and only through which, the system existed; conversely, every material was appropriate to and could only be used in its own system. Thus, material was defined

17 Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (2nd edition, London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), 285, 396. Russian translation, G. Spenser, *Osnovnyi nachala* [First Principles] (St. Petersburg: Izdanie L. F. Panteleeva, 1897).

18 Iudin, Diary entry, 17 January 1922; Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 223.

19 Iudin, Diary entry, 26 December 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 220.

20 See Bouras, 'Faktura utopii'.

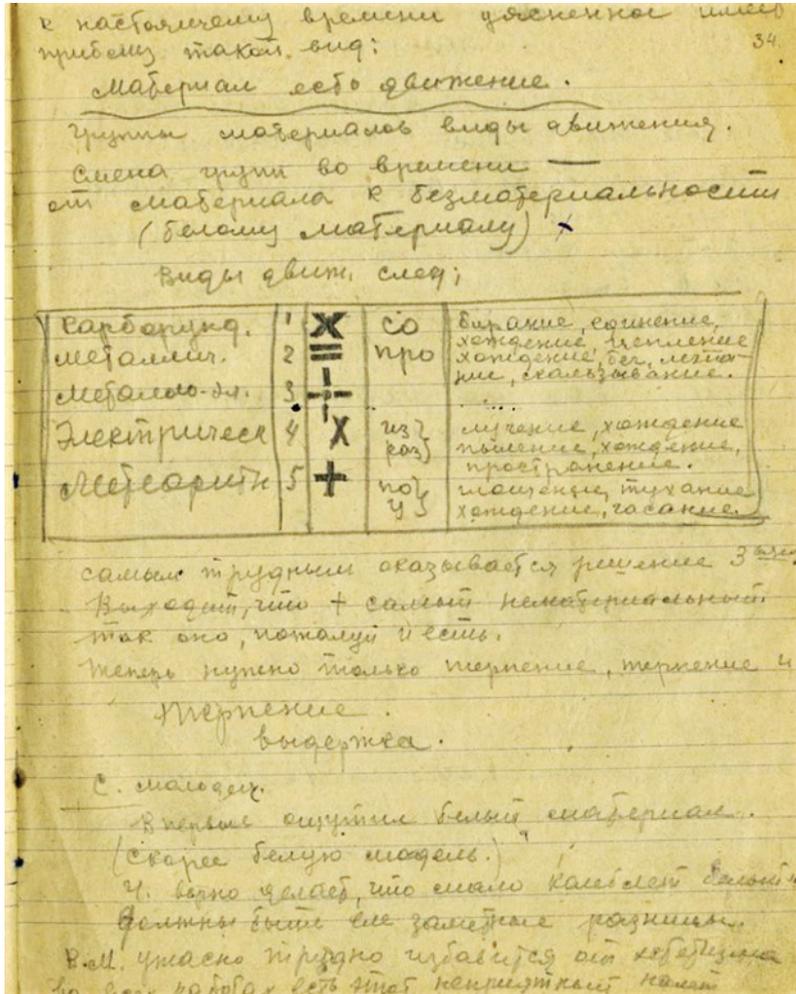


FIGURE 5.2 Lev Iudin's table showing the five groups of materials, their signs and associated movements.

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as the form, while the art system (Cézannism, Cubism, Futurism, or Suprematism) provided the content.

Iudin's project can be seen as part of the larger thrust of avant-garde culture at this time, which undertook to complicate the status of the sign in both verbal and visual representations. Lissitzky had presented the idea that artworks can be understood as 'sign systems' in two essays, published in *Unovis No. 1* in 1920, 'The Suprematism of World Construction' and 'The Communism of Work

and the Suprematism of Creativity'.²¹ He wrote, 'a living painting is an event, a *sign*. The sign is the form in which the world is understood. Thus, a portrait, a map of a hilly city sketched on paper is a single sign of a comprehensive order and system, inside the varied and multi-layered body of which we are but one element'.²² As Peter Nisbet points out Lissitzky also used a schematic illustration of a street layout of Manhattan to demonstrate the difference between the random street pattern of the earliest settlers, and the implicitly infinite grid of later expansion. The map of Manhattan was primarily introduced as part of a discussion about signs. Lissitzky argued that maps (whether of street plans, the globe, or the heavens) are abstracted representations of things with which we are already familiar. Signifier and signified are stable, even if the complex relations between them, 'the secrets', as Lissitzky put it, are underpinned only by the intricate evolution of the human brain, from its very beginnings in a microbe, through all the stages of development to its final manifestation in *homo sapiens*. Lissitzky asserted that we do not yet know the secrets of the sign created by the artist, because the intricacies of something other than the brain are not yet sufficiently developed in humanity. In other words, the referentiality and meaning of the artist's sign will become comprehensible only after humans have developed some further cognitive capacity.²³

According to Lissitzky, the artist not only uses known signs to present different phenomena, but he also has the knowledge to create new signs, plans and projects: 'with the brush the artist builds a new sign. This sign is not a form of something that already exists, and built readymade in the world – it is a sign of something new, still to be built, arriving at nature through the world of man'.²⁴ Lissitzky argued that there are two different kinds of sign, one that refers to what is already known, the other to what is not yet known:

21 L. Lisitskii, 'Kommunizm truda i suprematizm tvorchestva' [The Communism of Work and the Suprematism of Creativity], and 'Suprematizm mirostroitel'stva' [The Suprematism of World Construction], *Unovis No. 1* (Vitebsk: Unovis 1920), [sheet 11-12 and 13-15]; reprinted in 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie k faksimil'nomu izdaniuu', in *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil'noe izdanie*, ed. Tat'iana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel'stvo Skanrus, 2003), 69-70, and 70-73. For an English translation of 'Suprematizm mirostroitel'stva', see 'Suprematism in World Construction' in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 327-330.

22 Lisitskii, 'Kommunizm truda i suprematizm tvorchestva', [sheet 12v]; 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie', 70.

23 Peter Nisbet, 'El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of His Work and Thought, 1919-1927' (PhD Thesis, Yale University, 1995), 79-80.

24 Lisitskii, 'Kommunizm truda i suprematizm tvorchestva', [sheet 12v]; 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie', 70.

Every flat surface designed is a sign – not a mystical symbol, but a concrete sketch of reality. A sign is a form through which we express phenomena. It can originate in two ways. Firstly: by agreement as to what meaning these signs shall have ... Now the second possibility: a sign is designed, much later it is given its name, and later still its meaning becomes clear. So we do not understand the signs, the shapes, which the artist created, because man's brain has not yet reached the corresponding stage of development. Suprematism has a new criterion for evaluating everything created in plastic design. Instead of beauty, it is economy.²⁵

Lissitzky used an illustration of Mars and its canals at the end of his essay 'The Communism of Work and the Suprematism of Creativity', as part of his argument about symbols and semiotics of the unknown. In the essay's penultimate paragraph, drawings of Earth and Mars accompany the following statement: 'Here are the signs of Earth and Mars. The savage does not understand the content of the first. We do not understand the content of the other. Is it not the result of the creative activity of the inhabitants of Mars? In any case, we must reconstruct the sign of the Earth, its map, so that its form comes into correspondence with the creative growth of its humankind'.²⁶

Both Lissitzky and Iudin emphasised the metaphorical force of a Suprematist work as a sign, a map, or a mirror, as opposed to its material content.²⁷ In the context of semiotics, it is perhaps worthwhile to remember Malevich's conception of Suprematism as a 'semaphore', the system of geometric coloured shapes on rectangular grounds, which was used to communicate messages at

25 El Lissitzky, 'Neue Russische Kunst' [New Russian Art], 1922, ms, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva – RGALI), Moscow, fond 2361, opis' 1, edinitsa khraneniia 26, list 1-30; English translation in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 338-339.

26 Lisitskii, 'Kommunizm truda i suprematizm tvorchestva', [sheet 12], 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie', 73; and Nisbet, 'El Lissitzky', 175.

27 For a further analysis on the sign within linguistics and semiology, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, ILL: Open Court, 1986); and Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Noonday Press of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968). On indexes and taxonomy, see C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. II, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Raul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932). See also Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Semiology of Cubism' and Rosalind Krauss, 'The Motivation of the Sign', in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 169-195 and 261-286. See also Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1' and 'Notes on the Index: Part 2' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 196-219.

sea. In April 1919, the artist had written, 'At the present time, man's path lies through space, and Suprematism is a colour semaphore in its infinite abyss.'²⁸

Carborundum, Metallic, Metallo-Electric, Electric, and Meteoric *Faktura*

In Iudin's material spectrum, the first group of materials was associated with the substance carborundum. As he wrote: 'I'm the first to work the carborundum. It can be white too, in K. S. [Kazimir Severinovich]'s opinion.'²⁹ Carborundum is a silicon carbide (SiC). It is a crystalline material with a diamond-like tetrahedral structure, and its colour varies from a nearly clear yellow, through to pale yellow, green, and even black, depending on the amount of impurities. It is characterised by its high thermal conductivity and extreme hardness. Enriched with philosophical and technological allusions, carborundum possessed enormous importance in the early 1920s. In its natural state (natural moissanite), carborundum was first discovered in 1893 in the remains of the Canyon Diablo meteorite in Arizona by Ferdinand Henri Moissan.³⁰ Surprisingly, synthetic carborundum was first produced in 1890, three years before Moissan discovered it as a natural substance.³¹ The anachronism of this

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- 28 K. Malevich, 'Suprematizm', [Suprematism], *Katalog desiatoi Gosudarstvennoi vystavki. Besspredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919); English translation, 'Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism', in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 121.
- 29 Iudin, Diary entry, 12 January 1922; Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 223.
- 30 Henri Moissan, 'Nouvelles recherches sur la météorité de Cañon Diablo', *Comptes rendus*, 139 (1904): 773–86.
- 31 In Russia, the first silicon carbide was manufactured in 1921 at the Ural electrometallurgical plant 'Porogi'. For a further analysis on the use of carborundum and the material's historical and philosophical context, see Bouras, 'Faktura utopii'. For a further discussion on carborundum's physical and chemical properties, see: 'The manufacture of carborundum: a new industry', *Scientific American* (7 April 1894); Ch. Mabery, 'Notes on carborundum', *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, XXII (1900): 706–707; S. Di Piero, E. Gnos, B. Grobety, T. Armbruster, and S. Bernasconi, 'Rock-forming moissanite (natural α -silicon carbide)', *American Mineralogist*, 88 (2003): 1817–21; J. Kelly, 'The astrophysical nature of silicon carbide', 2001, <http://img.chem.ucl.ac.uk/www/kelly/history.htm>, cited in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* (London), CCCLIX: 1787 (2001): 1989; E. Anders and E. Zinner, 'Interstellar Grains in Primitive Meteorites: Diamond, Silicon Carbide, and Graphite', *Meteoritics*, 28 (1993): 490–514; D. D. Clayton, 'Placing the Sun and SiC Particles in Galactic Chemodynamic Evolution', *Astrophysical Journal*, 484 (1997): 67–70; and C.T. Pillinger and S.S. Russell, 'Interstellar SiC grains in Meteorites', *Journal of the Chemical Society, Faraday Transactions*, 89 (1993): 2297–2304.

invention can be read as a Suprematist narrative, suggesting both a continuity and discontinuity between past and present. Carborundum had been used in industry and technology extensively because of its physical and chemical properties – it does not melt at any known pressure and it is highly inert chemically. Initially, it was used as an abrasive in grinding, as well as in metallurgy since it remained stable at high temperatures. One of the most famous applications was in radio engineering, where carborundum was used as a signal detector.³² Nikola Tesla also used carborundum in his demonstrations of the sparks produced by high frequency electricity, which were the most spectacular demonstrations of energy in the early twentieth century, making invisible energies visible. Subsequently, his experiments laid the foundation for the present alternating current electrical supply system.

In Iudin's spectrum of materials, carborundum was associated with the sensations of 'collecting', 'joining', 'coming together', and 'linking', while its texture was described as 'radiating', 'dispersing', 'fragmenting', and 'distributing'. The sensations associated with carborundum, such as collecting [*sobiranie*] and connecting [*soedinenie*], can be considered in relation to the concepts of 'communality' and 'cathedral' [*sobornost'* and *sobor*].

The notion of unity was an important and perennial theme in Russian religious-philosophical thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.³³ Nikolai Fedorov's cosmism, for example, suggested a universal union. He preached that it was mankind's Christian duty to expand into and explore the cosmos, achieve immortality, find the atoms of our dead human ancestors, use science to resurrect them in some form, and so to populate the solar system and beyond with the whole of humankind, present and past.³⁴

32 In Malevich and Lissitzky's writings, radio was often used as a metaphor for the transmission and reception of intangible and invisible forces. Lissitzky stated: 'The centre of collective effort is the radio transmitting mast which sends out bursts of creative energy into the world. By means of it we are able to throw off the shackles that bind us to the earth and rise above it'. A few years later, Malevich added: 'our life is a radio station that receives waves of various sensations that are realised in one thing or another'. See Lisitskii, 'Suprematizm mirostroitel'stva', 14; 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. Prilozhenie', 71; Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 328. See also, Kasimir Malewitsch, *Die gegenstandlose Welt* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927); English translation in Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel / Hatje Cantz, 2014), 195.

33 Several philosophers focused on these topics, including Aleksei Khomiakov, Vladimir Soloviev, Nikolai Fedorov, Pavel Florenskii, Sergei Bulgakov, and Nikolai Berdiaev.

34 Nikolai Fedorov, 'Supramoralism or General Synthesis (Universal Union)', in Nikolai Fedorov, *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task*, ed. and trans. Elisabeth Koutaisoff and Marilyn Minto (London: Honeyglen Publishing, 1990), 105-136.

This process involved space travel and colonisation as a means of providing habitation for the resurrected beings.

The concept of community or communality [*sobornost'*] was also central to Viacheslav Ivanov's writings, which had a great influence on Malevich's philosophical thought.³⁵ Advocating *sobornost'*, Ivanov prophesied the advent of a 'new organic society', in which the artist would act as priest. In the spirit of mystical anarchism, he was committed to a 'synthesis of individualism and *sobornost'*'.³⁶ According to Ivanov, *sobornost'* was nurtured by the freedom of the individual, and it was where individuals – the 'anarchist rebellions' – could unite in communities.³⁷ At the same time, the community-based union had to be 'imbued with one supreme consciousness, one supreme idea', for in this resides 'true liberty'.³⁸ This concept clearly has affinities with Malevich's vision of Unovis as a creative collective working towards the realisation of a Suprematist worldview. The notions of individualism and *sobornost'* were also particularly relevant to the definitions of 'culture' formulated by the Suprematists and the leaders of Proletkult. While for Aleksandr Bogdanov, culture was 'the totality of the organisational methods and forms of the collective',³⁹ for Malevich, it was a creative process balanced between the individual and the collective. As Ilia Chashnik observed, when an artist 'enters the Suprematist system, he encounters entirely new sensations and states, in which the individual's initiative is greatly developed'.⁴⁰

By articulating the 'centripetal' sensations and visual properties of carborundum in a formal language – that of a sign/symbol in a diagram/table – Iudin negotiated the delimitation of Suprematism and materiality as a 'laboratory' task. The sign that represented carborundum in Iudin's table appears to have been borrowed from the descriptive language of chemistry, and it thus seems plausible to suggest that Iudin attempted to read the material (i.e. carborundum) through the lens of science and technology. Of course, we should stress that our purpose is not to suggest that Iudin's table represents some kind of technological or scientific exercise. On the contrary, his resort to technology is, we would argue, not based on reason, but on the transrational. He

35 Tat'iana Goriacheva, 'Suprematicheskii order filosofii Kazimira Malevicha: "edinolikii obraz sovershenstva"', in 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. Prilozhenie', 26-27.

36 Viacheslav Ivanov, *Rodnoe i vselenskoe* (Moscow: Leman & Sacharov, 1917) reprinted in *Rodnoe i vselenskoe*, ed. V. M. Tomachev (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Respublika, 1994), 22.

37 V. Ivanov, *Po zvezdam [By the Stars]* (St. Petersburg: Ory, 1909), 128.

38 *Ibid.*, 184-185.

39 Aleksandr Bogdanov, *O proletarskoi kul'ture. 1904-1924* (Leningrad/Moscow: Izd. tov. Kniga, 1924), 328.

40 Vasilii Rakitin, *Il'ia Chashnik. Khudozhnik novogo vremeni* (Moscow: RA / Palace Editions, 2000), 112.

presented carborundum as an idea, as a paradoxical future potentiality, and he studied the example of the crystal, its *faktura* and related sensations precisely because these cannot be obtained in painting with existing materials. It seems likely that carborundum and its chemical structure were being discussed in the literature by this time, although Iudin's sign/symbol is not a drawing of a structure, but rather a rhetorically expressive representation of the principle of Suprematist *faktura*. Since representational painting and its techniques had been abandoned, science and scientific theories became not only a source of inspiration, but acquired the role of the 'still life' in abstract art. Iudin sought out a key sign and pivotal associated sensations in order to present *faktura* as a vital, experiential entity, intimately connected with the viewer's perception of the Suprematist work of art. In this transformation of *faktura* into a 'symbolic form', the viewer rediscovered *faktura* in terms of its primary qualities: solid, horizontal, vertical, cross, weight, weightless, its colour and transparency, while also perceiving that their integrations within an aesthetic system allowed for the extraction of a world of new possibilities.

For Iudin, textures should 'be deprived of materiality, but at the same time not be pure colour energy', and, as he wrote, this would be only found in 'the property of metallo-colour'.⁴¹ In Iudin's table, metallic textures were associated with the sensation of light and were described as 'radiating', 'fragmenting', 'passing', 'running', 'flying', and 'slipping'. The metallic condition of colour was further linked to specific chemical elements: 'Scintillating Zinc, molten yellow Copper, Iron rusted in spots, white Tin sparkles, dull-brown Cast Iron'.⁴² He recorded in his diaries that the metallic spectrum was developed with reference to Fernand Léger's works. He associated the metallic sensations and the 'monotonous, smooth tension of metallic textures'⁴³ in Léger's 1914 works with the experience of the First World War.

The 'metallic spectrum' was also central to Malevich's explorations of colour and light. As he wrote in his 1919 text 'Resolution A in Art', 'To recognise light as well as colour of metallic origin, and the discovery of light rays as equivalent to the city's economic development'.⁴⁴ A few years later, he elaborated his

41 Iudin, Diary entry, 1 December 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, II: 219. The Russian phrase is 'oni dolzhny byt' lisheny', which suggests that 'deprived' might be a more appropriate translation than the 'devoid' used in *Letters*.

42 Iudin, Diary entry, 19 July 1923; Malevich, *Letters*, II: 229.

43 Iudin, 'Otryvok iz doklada o tvorchestve Fernane Lezhe' [Excerpt from the Report on the Creative Work of Fernand Léger], undated ms, OR GRM, fond 205, edinitsa khraneniia 16, list 8.

44 K. Malevich, 'Ustanovlenie A v iskusstve' [Resolution A in Art] in *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost'. Ustanovlenie A* (Vitebsk: 1919); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 183; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 118.

ideas concerning the energy of light and its refractive and reflective qualities: ‘the capital city produces a new spectrum of chromaticity, which does not prevent brightness. This special spectrum is what I would call the “metallic colour spectrum”. Technology expresses itself as a new prism, through which the light beam is refracted through the metal. Then, the beam comes from metal displacements into a special metallic conductor of light.’⁴⁵

The potential energy of materials was fundamental to the development of Suprematism. Energy, movement, economy, and material sensations were interwoven into an organic whole in Malevich’s writings. In *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, Malevich proposed a model that presents a dynamic system of action and reaction, energy and excitation, which constituted his conception of the spatial economy of painting. This model was understood as a system of interacting coordinates and forms in ‘magnetic interrelations’. According to Malevich, the magnetic forces between geometric forms – tilted, vertical or horizontal bars, which overlap or cross and are held together by the forces of attraction – create a new, dynamic, material sensation. He wrote, ‘a *metal* bar is fused with all the elements ... and carries within itself a life of perfection’,⁴⁶ thus suggesting not a particular materiality in the application of colour or its relation to the surface, but rather an energy that was able to activate the space. Later, in his Bauhaus publication of 1927, Malevich explored painting as an object, a work of painted ‘signs’, set in motion. Among these ‘signs’, he listed the ‘organic and sensual lines’, which in Suprematism were in ‘metallic tensions’.⁴⁷ By mixing metaphors, he proposed a ‘metallic material organisation’, and a ‘metallic culture of dynamic painting’. A number of drawings included in the publication referred the observer to technologically enhanced sensations, such as ‘the sensation of metallic sounds’ or ‘magnetic attractions’. In titling his drawings according to their sensual qualities – *Sensation of Metallic Noise with Strong Dynamic Tendency: Colouration of a Pale Metallic Copper Tone Scale* and *Feeling of Magnetic Attraction* – Malevich attempted to translate into objectlessness both the materials and the textures, along with the invisible, immaterial associations that these elements evoked.

The discussion about metallic *faktura* was continued in Lissitzky’s proposal for a new dynamic, Suprematist architecture, which he presented in his 1920 essay ‘The Suprematism of World Construction’:

45 K. Malevich, ‘Svet i tsvet’ [Light and Colour], 1923, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV: 239-272.

46 Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka*; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 188; Malevich, *Essays*, I: 124.

47 Malevich, *Die gegenstandlose Welt*; Kazimir Malevich: *The World as Objectlessness*, 176.

... after the archaic horizontals, the spheres of the classical and the gothic verticals of the building styles which preceded our own, we are now entering upon a fourth stage as we achieve economy and spatial diagonals ... This dynamic architecture provides us with a new theatre of life ... The new element of *faktura*, which we have brought to the fore in our painting, will be applied to the whole of the world, which we are still to build, and will transform the roughness of concrete, the smoothness of *metal*, and the reflectivity of glass into the skin of the new life.⁴⁸

The third and fourth groups of textures in Iudin's table – *metallo-electric* and *electric* respectively – refer not only to the contemporary discourse concerning the government's plan for the electrification of Russia, announced by Lenin in late 1920, but also to the notion of light as a material. Describing the *faktura* or textures as 'radiating', 'glowing', 'proceeding', 'spreading', 'dispersing', and 'diffusing', Iudin reassessed the roles of the real, the visible, and the invisible. As Malevich had already described in his 1916 letter to Mikhail Matiushin: 'The planes that I have founded on canvas give me a great deal of what artists had only imprecisely grasped before ... Here I am able to receive the current of movement itself, as if by contact with an electrical wire'.⁴⁹

In the years 1917-1922, abstract art was often described as 'laboratory art', the product of experiments into the objective qualities of materials, form, and colour. The codification of art's essential characteristics was pursued as a scientific inquiry, in order to understand painting's basic intrinsic elements: colour, line, form, and the laws governing their interactions. The most pronounced evidence of this trend was to be found in the work of the various research institutes, such as the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Inkhuk), which were committed to researching all aspects of the science of art. Set up in 1920, Inkhuk's programme stated that 'the aim of Inkhuk's work is science, the investigation of the analytical and the synthetic basic elements of the separate arts and of art as a whole'.⁵⁰ A similar spirit dominated the Unovis group. One of the central debates conducted at the Moscow Inkhuk in 1921 concerned the relative merits of composition versus construction as the basis for contemporary creative activity.

48 Lisitskii, 'Suprematizm mirostroitel'stva', [sheet 14]; 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie', 71; Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*: 328.

49 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin [before 23 June 1916]; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 90.

50 Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 79.

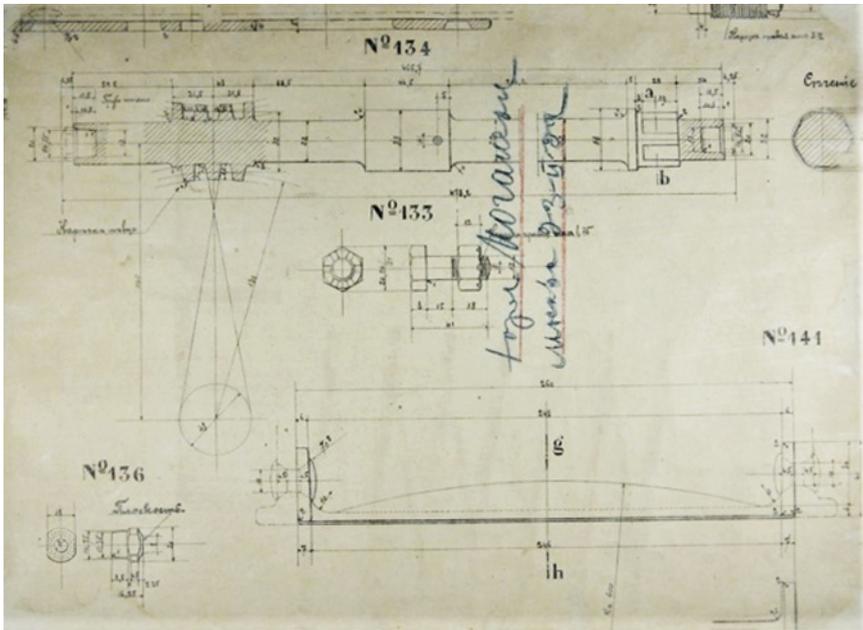


FIGURE 5.3B Karl Ioganson, *Electrical Circuit (Representation)* [*Electriceskaja tsep' (izobrazhenie)*], 1922, verso of 5.3a, paper collage and graphite on paper, 45.4 × 33.6 cm., George Costakis Collection, State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.

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Suprematism.⁵² Although the subordination of art to industry and pure utility as epitomised by productivism was anathema to Suprematist artists, Malevich had suggested an alternative way to relate art and industrial processes; through the sensations of dynamism, motion, acceleration, materiality and force.

Just as in an electrical circuit, there is a flow of energy in Iudin's material spectrum, where the materials' complexity and transrational [*zaum'*] qualities can be experienced and read as a metaphor or analogy for aspects of the utopian world of the future: dematerialised, non-hierarchical, and transformative.

The last group in Iudin's material spectrum was the 'meteoric'. Its *faktura* or textures (presented as 'devouring', 'absorbing', 'extinguishing', and 'departing'), resemble those of carborundum.⁵³ Malevich used similes and metaphors of

52 Malevich, 'Ustanovlenie A v iskusstve'; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 183; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 118.

53 Malevich described the meteoric textures as 'cosmic', while Iudin called them 'lunar'. See Iudin, Diary entry, 2 January 1922; Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 221.

meteors, fire, flames, and burning with a frequency that indicates they possessed a special meaning for him, perhaps derived from alchemy or occult writings, suggesting a tautology between the macro-cosmos and man's inner world. He wrote, 'the brain as it travelled the world burns, disappears and reappears. Through the brain, like a meteor through the atmosphere, the world will slip, light up, and go out again'.⁵⁴ In his 1922 text, 'Suprematism: The World as Objectlessness or Eternal Peace', Malevich suggested that all earthy materials have a cosmic provenance and are burnt materials. In order to animate these 'passive' materials, he proposed incorporating meteoric force (movement), which can initiate a broad spectrum of meteoric stimulations. He further attempted to restore meteoric sensations to the world of experience: 'Culture is the result of excitation and relationships: the excitation is generated by judgment and creates the forms of phenomena. Excitation so far is generated mainly from the need to devour, to absorb the phenomenon. Hence, what might be called culture is the culture of mechano-technical absorption, or biotechnical culture.'⁵⁵ In his tables, Iudin developed a system that established a network of interrelated components, where various types of *faktura* were associated with a complex of sensations, which formed a system or represented a kind of non-corporeal energy.

But why did Iudin employ the fields of electrotechnology and metallurgy to categorise Suprematist *faktura*? And what does this choice suggest with regard to painting? Iudin suggested a new system, a feeling or sensation of materials, as they are perceived or sensed, and not as they are visually recognised. Within this system of materials, which could transform into one another, *faktura* allowed the object to act not as an hermetic or fixed entity, but as a matrix open for re-signification.

The Poetics of Carborundum

There are two references in Iudin's diaries written at the end of December 1921, which indicate that he was reading Kruchenykh's poetry. Carborundum, a material of the new industrial world, was a theme in Kruchenykh's poem 'Chemical Famine: Ballads About the Carborundum Stone' [*Golod khimicheskii*:

54 Kazimir Malevich, 'Filosofia kaleidoskopa' [The Philosophy of the Kaleidoscope], 1922, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV: 48-67.

55 Kazimir Malevich, 'Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost' ili vechnyi pokoi' [Suprematism: The World as Objectlessness or Eternal Peace], 1922, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III: 225.

Ballady o kamne karborunde],^{56,57} in which the poet presented silicon carbide's two main technological applications – metal cutting and metal smelting: 'Карборунд – алмазный клац/ Солью брызжет на точиле' and 'В чем бессилен Крупновский снаряд – /Ты танцую проскользнешь!'.⁵⁸ The poem concludes with a sign, the chemical formula for carborundum (SiC) and its spelling – a *zaum'* interplay of symbols and meanings, with material and immaterial connotations: 'Перед гибелью металы... На ребре прочтут насечку/ SiC – (эс и це) ...Твой родословный Гордый знак'.

Tatiana Tolstaia-Vechorka in her essay on Kruchenykh's 'Droolings of a Black Genius' [*Stiuni chernogo geniia*] made a special reference to his poem about carborundum, referring to it as 'Kruchenykh's hymn'. She explained Kruchenykh and his *zaum'* poetry: 'This [poetry] is a black diamond drilling and spinning into infinity. In Kruchenykh's poems, there is a coexistence of nonsense and chemical formulas, personal and public thoughts, transrationality and logos, cacophony and melody. There is no exact formula for the synthesis of science and art – it is still *zaum'*, but it verges on the side of logos'.⁵⁹

The second application of carborundum, which is implied in the poem, is its use for smelting solid metals at high temperatures in industrial furnaces. This was evoked by arranging the verses into a shape reminiscent of a crucible:

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- 56 Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Golodniak* (Moscow: Tipografiia Tsit, 1922). Kruchenykh's poem may refer to the Russian famine of 1921-22, although the theme of hunger dates back to Arthur Rimbaud's poem 'Fêtes de la Faim' [Feasts of Hunger] of 1872, freely translated by David Burluik as 'Prazdnik goloda' [Feast of Hunger] in 1913. See Konstantin Bol'shakov, David Burluik, Nikolai Burluik, Vladimir Burluik, Vasilii Kamenskii, Velimir Khlebnikov, Benedikt Livshits, and Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Dokhlaia luna. Stikhi, proza, stat'i, risunki, oforty* (Moscow: Gileia, 1913). Hunger was also evident in the writings of the biocosmists: 'The mass starvation of the eternal, the hunger of the Americas — that's our base'. See Aleksandr Sviatogor, 'Radost' igraishchego zveria', *Biokosmist*, 2 (April 1922): 2.
- 57 Daniil Kharms also praised carborundum's properties, writing in his 1927 'Elizaveta Bam': 'Хвала железу – карборунду! /Оно скрепляет мостовые /и, электричеством сияя, /терзает до смерти врага!' Daniil Kharms, 'Elizaveta Bam', in V. N. Sazhin, ed., *D. Kharms: Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg: Gumanitarnoe agentstvo "Akademicheskii proekt" 1997), II: 238-69. See also Mikhail Meilakh, 'O "Elizavete Bam" Daniila Kharmsa', *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 1 (1987): 163-246.
- 58 *Zaum'* poetry is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to translate. The text has, therefore, been left in the original Russian
- 59 Tat'iana Tolstaia-Vechorka, 'Stiuni chernogo geniia' [Droolings of a Black Genius], in *Buka russkoi literatury* [*The Bogyman of Russian Literature*], (Moscow: Moskovskaia assotsiatsiia futuristov, 1923), 36-37. See also Bela Tsipuria, 'Tatiana Vechorka: A Futurist Poetess in Tbilisi, Baku and Moscow', *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies*, 5 (2015): 226-251.

...Восстань праматерь⁶⁰ чугуна
 Ревущая лахань, руда, железо
Излей из груди глин стальное молоко
Утробу шли по жирным жилам
БРЫЗНИ —
 Все выпивает он
 ГЛУШИТЕЛЬ
 Марборунд!

Through his use of a volatile mix of poetic and conventional or rational language, Kruchenykh de-contextualised semiotic material to find new meanings. This experimental approach brings technology's language into a specific moment of relationality, heterogeneity and fluidity and reifies something timeless and immaterial, replacing metaphor with literalism. Simultaneously, the poem contains several *zaum'* traits, such as paired sound repetitions with variations (*krepche/kremnia, zhurnym/zhilam, grudy/glin/glushitel'*), visually highlighted rhymes, onomatopoeia, neologisms, and words which evoke sounds and effects.

The poem was included in Kruchenykh's 1923 booklet *Texture of the Word: A Declaration [Faktura slova. Deklaratsiia]*.⁶¹ In his brief introductory essay, Kruchenykh went into particular detail, trying to establish different kinds of sound texture in words: tender, heavy, coarse, harsh, muted, dry, or moist. In addition to phonetic texture, Kruchenykh identified textures relating to syllables, rhythms, syntax, graphics, colour and sound. He also referred to textural effects and sensations such as 'euphony' [*sladkoglasie* or pleasant to the ear], 'picrophony' [*gorkoglasie* or bitter to the ear] and even 'cacophony' [*zloglasie* – a harsh mixture of sounds].⁶² As Kruchenykh explained, *zaum'* language is

60 The notions of origin, prime matter [*pramater'*] and primal element were central to Monism, a philosophical theory that influenced Kruchenykh and Malevich significantly. It provided an explanation of the physical world by suggesting that a variety of existing things derives from a single substance, which precedes its elements. Malevich named the movement from the whole to its parts as 'diffusion' [*raspylenie*], and the movement in the opposite direction, from the discrete elements to the whole, as 'fusion' [*spylenie*]. See also Annie Besant, 'Drevniaia mudrost' [Ancient Wisdom], *Vestnik Teosofii*, 2 (February 1908): 18; and Maximilian Voloshin's poem 'Gnosticheskii gimn' [Gnostic Hymn], dedicated to Viacheslav Ivanov, with a particular reference to '*pramater'* – *materiia*' [primordial matter]. See M. Voloshin, 'Gnosticheskii gimn', *Vestnik Teosofii*, 2 (February 1908): 58.

61 A. Kruchenykh, *Faktura slova. Deklaratsiia: MAF Seriia teorii*, no. 1 (Moscow: Moskovskaia assotsiatsiia futuristov, 1922)

62 Kruchenykh further focused on the use of the sound 'z', which he considered harsh and piercing, and he delighted in filling his poems with it, often substituting it for other

used when the artist wishes to create images that are not fully defined, either internally or externally.⁶³

In his 'Ballads About the Carborundum Stone', Kruchenykh verbalised what Iudin and Malevich had visualised, and *vice versa*. The words that both Kruchenykh and Iudin used appear like visual, spatial planes. Kruchenykh opened the way for what Boris Arvatov called a new 'linguistic-technology'.⁶⁴ Kruchenykh generated a sense of frantic motion, of explosion; his words convey the sensations of metal, electricity, opacity and transparency, silence and noise. At the same time, Iudin created an entire new syntax of materials, which generated new sensations, and while all these sensations operated separately, they all interacted. But what were all these materials? Perhaps they were materials 'that dreams are made on',⁶⁵ or devices for producing new ideas and concepts: quests to develop a universal language of Suprematism.

consonants in a word. He also provided a list of neologisms based on z, which he interpreted in detail, on the basis of a morphological analogy with existing words. See Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 341-342; and Gerald Janecek, *Zaum: the Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego, CA: San Diego University Press, 1996). 294-295

63 Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'Deklaratsiia zaumnogo iazyka' [Declaration of Zaum' Language], in Aleksei Kruchenykh, Grigorii Petnikov, Velimir Khlebnikov, *Zaumniki* (Moscow: EUY, 1921 [1922 on cover]), 94.

64 Boris Arvatov, 'Rechetyvorchestvo (Po povodu zaumnoi poezii)' [The Creation of Words (Concerning Zaum' Poetry)], *Lef*, 2 (1923): 91-92.

65 See Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but also Vladimir Markov's statement of 1912: 'there are times when a particular order of ideas, colours, tones and melodies simply thrust themselves upon us and we cannot escape them for, like a volcano, they need their outlet ... We cannot be responsible for these phenomena. We cannot be charged for their appearance, just as we cannot be charged for our daydreams and dreams'. See Vladimir Markov, 'Printsipy novogo iskusstva' [Principles of the New Art], *Soiuz molodezhi*, 2 (June 1912): 11-12.

Branches of Unovis in Smolensk and Orenburg

Alexander Lisov

Kazimir Malevich realised that Suprematism could only be firmly established as a substantial art movement in Russia with the support of an association of like-minded individuals. He had thought about this a long time before he arrived in Vitebsk on 5 November 1919, but he only succeeded in actually organising such an association in Vitebsk, where he established a ‘party of Suprematism’, Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art), in January–February of 1920. By the summer of that year, the Suprematists dominated the school. From the very beginning of Unovis, Malevich intended to extend the influence of his ideas beyond Vitebsk. He counted on gaining the support of art schools in other Russian cities, including Moscow, and securing the assistance of artists with whom he had already cooperated.

The author of the first brief account of the group’s origin, published in the *Unovis* almanac, was probably Ivan Gavris. At the end of May 1920, he reported that ‘during the comparatively short period of its existence, Unovis has managed to make contact with and organise Unovis in other cities’.¹ It is clear from the text that one of these branches was in Smolensk. In fact, Gavris names no other cities in which branches were established. Evidently, the possibility of setting up other branches of Unovis had been discussed from the moment of its creation in Vitebsk. In this endeavour, Malevich’s working relations with his former students at the Second State Free Art Studios (Gosudarstvennye svobodnye khudozhestvennye masterskie – Svomas) in Moscow were vital. The artist evidently worked on creating other branches of Unovis by correspondence, which unfortunately is not preserved in its entirety.² First of all,

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- 1 [I.T. Gavris], ‘Kratkaia istoriia vozniknoveniia “Unovis”’, *Unovis No. 1* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920), [sheet 44]; reprinted in ‘Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie k faksimil’nomu izdaniiu’, in *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil’noe izdanie*, ed. Tat’iana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel’stvo Skanrus, 2003), 88–90; English translation as ‘A Short History of the Origins of Unovis’, in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910–1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 305–309.
 - 2 For surviving items of correspondence, see Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 2 vols.

Malevich turned to Petr Miturich in Moscow who was close to Velimir Khlebnikov and to Grigorii Petnikov in Kharkov. It is revealing that Unovis, like the earlier Supremus group, was conceived as an alliance of innovators, not only in the field of fine arts, but also in literature, music, and the theatre.

Malevich placed great hopes on the conference at the State Free Art Studios in Moscow and on the accompanying exhibition of the Vitebsk Unovis in June 1920. The exhibition was intended to demonstrate the organisation's successes and the quality of Malevich's pedagogical system. He was not disappointed. Branches of Unovis began to be set up in Perm, Ekaterinburg, Samara, Saratov, and Odessa. A special role was played by the branches in nearby Smolensk and Orenburg, where some degree of success was achieved in developing and applying the principles of Malevich's system, and where the artist himself became directly involved in their activities.

Malevich regarded Unovis as an organisation of representatives of the most recent art trends – Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism. Among these, Suprematism was naturally the ultimate goal and was seen as the culmination of painting's evolution. He called Unovis 'a party in art', an association of like-minded creative figures, who would fight for Suprematism, its philosophy and world view. Malevich made these attitudes clear in his article entitled 'Concerning a Party in Art'.³ Yet Malevich also thought about Unovis in relation to the practical tasks of art education. He realised that, in the current situation, he needed to promote the programme of artistic training (that he had developed) in the provincial art schools and gain support there, before he would be able to introduce his approach to the capital. It would clearly not be possible for his ideas to gain immediate acceptance in the centre, since he had encountered such strong opposition from the leadership of the Moscow State Free Art Studios, as well as from the Department of Fine Arts within the People's Commissariat of Education (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv, Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – IZO Narkompros) in the person of David Shterenberg. Malevich counted on gaining the support of the student masses and like-minded artists in the provinces. He thought of his stay in Vitebsk as temporary and forced. Once he had acquired support, then his new pedagogical system would be approved and implemented throughout the new Russia. This was one of his main concerns in 1920-1921.

3 Kazimir Malevich, 'O partii v iskusstve' [Concerning a Party in Art], *Put' Unovisa*, 1 (January 1921); reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. Aleksandra Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 1: 223-230; English translation in Anna Kafetsi, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930: The G. Costakis Collection: Theory – Criticism* (Athens: Ministry of Culture, National Gallery / Alexandros Soutzos Museum; and Delphi: European Cultural Centre of Delphi, 1995), 556-558.

Speculation concerning the special role of the Vitebsk Unovis in relation to the other branches only makes sense because its director was Malevich himself, the organisation existed for a longer time than the others, and because to a large extent it realised Malevich's ideas. As the documents indicate, however, at the beginning, Malevich was not even chairman of Unovis's governing body – the Creative Committee (Tvorcheskii komitet – Tvorkom). In fact, in 1920, the chairman of the Unovis committee was Ivan Gavris. All the same, some authors consider the Vitebsk Creative Committee central.⁴

Various Unovis texts and Malevich's letters frequently assert that, even in the initial stage of its existence, the Vitebsk Unovis was supported by a number of other artistic groups. Nevertheless, these are merely declarations. The list of Unovis members in the archive of Lazar Khidekel, which is dated 14 August 1920, contains the names of 36 individuals.⁵ Let us turn our attention to the date. If one is to accept this date, then the list was compiled without Malevich's participation. He was not in Vitebsk at this time, but was on an extended trip to Orenburg together with El Lissitzky. The list of Unovis members only contains two names of individuals who were not directly connected with the Vitebsk studios – Petr Miturich and Władysław Strzemiński (Vladislav Strzheminskii) (Fig. 6.1). Moreover, certain names are missing, including, most significantly, Katarzyna Kobro (Ekaterina Kobro), Strzemiński's comrade in arms in Smolensk (Fig. 6.2). The list also doesn't mention Grigorii Petnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Ivan Kudriashev, who are named in connection with other supposed branches of Unovis. This suggests that, by the summer of 1920, Malevich may have received some support in the task of creating further branches, but that this process was not complete, and a broad discussion of the names of members in other cities had not taken place within the Vitebsk Unovis.

With regard to established branches, we should speak first and foremost about the Smolensk Unovis. The city was located close to Vitebsk. At about this time, Strzemiński, Malevich's student from the Moscow State Free Art Studios, moved to Smolensk. Their contacts in the province date from November 1919. Both contributed works to the Vitebsk show, *The First State Exhibition of Works by Local and Moscow Artists*. It is sometimes asserted that Malevich and Strzemiński took part in arranging the exhibition, but this could hardly be the

4 Tat'iana Goriacheva, 'Direktoriia novatorov UNOVIS – gruppa, ideologiia, almanakh', in 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie', 10.

5 See Vasilii Rakitin, 'Unovis as Mirror of an Epoch and as Anti-Epoch' in Kafetsi, *Russian Avant-Garde 1910–1930*, 551–2; and Lazar Markovich Khidekel, *Suprematism and Architecture. Paintings. Watercolors. Drawings* (New York: Leonard Hutton Galleries, 1995).

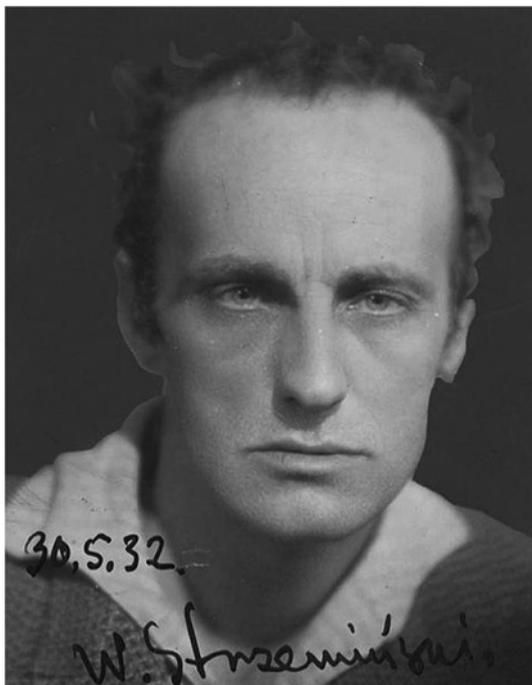


FIGURE 6.1 Władysław Strzemiński (Vladislav Strzheminskii), photograph taken c. 1932, signed 30 May 1932, private archive.

case, since preparations for the show had begun in September, before either of them had even arrived in the city. The exhibition opened on the second anniversary of the October Revolution i.e. 7 November 1919, and Malevich did not arrive in Vitebsk until 5 November 1919.⁶ In the catalogue, both Malevich and Strzemiński are described as Moscow artists.⁷ Their arrival in Vitebsk not long before the show's opening affords no grounds for suggesting that either of them took part in its preparation. In December 1919, a group of teachers and students began to gather around Malevich in the process of preparing designs for celebrating the second anniversary of the Committee Fighting Unemployment. Strzemiński may have witnessed these events.

The date of 18 April 1920 is given for the formation of the Smolensk Unovis in the chronicle 'Notes on the Unovis Movement', published in the *Unovis*

6 See Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 67.

7 *1-ia gosudarstvennaia vystavka kartin mestnykh i moskovskikh khudozhnikov* (Vitebsk: Gubernskaia tipografiia, 1919).



FIGURE 6.2 Katarzyna Kobro (Ekaterina Kobro), photograph taken c. 1918, private archive.

almanac.⁸ At that time, its members turned to their Vitebsk colleagues with a proposal for cooperation. Strzemiński and his wife Kobro were named as organisers of the Smolensk Unovis, but according to Olga Shikhireva and Tatiana Goriacheva, they were the only two members.⁹ In other cities, too, Unovis adherents were rare. Only in the Vitebsk art studios did an association of Suprematists become dominant. This explains the fact that Unovis soon ceased to exist almost everywhere.

In Smolensk, students could become familiar with Malevich's innovative system not only through explanations from their teachers, his followers, but also from the persuasive words of the master himself. Malevich visited

8 [I. T. Gavris], 'Primechaniia k dvizheniiu Unovisa', *Unovis No. 1* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920) [sheet 44 verso]; reprinted in 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie', 90-92; English translation as 'Notes on the Unovis Movement', in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 305-309.

9 See Goriacheva, 'Direktoiriia novatorov', 15; and Olga Shikhireva, 'Władysław Strzemiński', in *Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers, 1920s-1950s* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), 85-90.



FIGURE 6.3 Boris Rybchenkov, photograph taken c. 1918, private archive.

Smolensk more than once in the course of 1920. This was confirmed by Strzemiński's former student Nadezhda Khodasevich (Nadia Léger) and Boris Rybchenkov (Fig. 6.3), who had begun his teaching career in Smolensk.

From 1918 onwards, Smolensk possessed several fine art studios. The Proletkult Art Studio was the most important (Fig. 6.4) and was well supplied with artistic materials and food. It had been assigned excellent premises in the Palace of Labour, on the city's Pushkin Street. At the beginning, there were no more than 20 students. The first director of the school was the drawing teacher from the local secondary school, Sergei Shvedov. Classes were taught by artists who were committed to a variety of styles, ranging from academic approaches to Realism and Impressionism. At the Moscow exhibition of the studio in 1921, the works produced by students from the studios of Nil Iablonskii and Vladimir Shtranikh attracted some attention. One exhibition review stated: 'The Smolensk Proletkult, in contrast to that of the capital, has favoured preserving the cultural legacy of the past, displaying a respectful relationship to



FIGURE 6.4 The building of the Proletkult Art Studio in Smolensk. Photograph taken in 2015, private archive.

the traditions of realistic and academic painting, and the absence of the dominance of experimental, abstract schematised forms¹⁰

In 1920, a subdivision for art was organised within Smolensk's Provincial Department of Education. It was headed by the Petrograd art historian Sergei Shiriaev. There were four sections in the subdivision, including one for museums and another for the fine arts. Strzemiński became director of the Section of Fine Arts. His appointment was exceptionally important for Malevich and for introducing Malevich's pedagogical system. The Provincial Department of Education also created a Fine Arts' Studio, which later became the State Free Art Studios, and it was here that the Smolensk branch of Unovis was set up.

The story of the Smolensk Unovis in Aleksandra Shatskikh's book on Vitebsk, was based on the oral reminiscences of the artist Boris Rybchenkov from 1988.¹¹ One should not, however, neglect other witnesses, such as Nadezhda Khodasevich and Konstantin Dorokhov, who was one of Rybchenkov's Smolensk students.

10 Cited by E.V. Komissarova, 'Razvitie khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia na Smolenshchine v nachale 20 veka', in *Kul'tura, iskusstvo, obrazovanie: problemy i perspektivy razvitiia: materialy nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii s mezhdunarodnym uchastiem (8 fevralia 2013 g.)* (Smolensk: Smolenskii gosudarstvennyi institut iskusstv, 2013), 36.

11 Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 73-230.

Fragments of Boris Rybchenkov's memoirs have been published.¹² He studied at the Kiev Art Institute from 1915-1918 and then at the Petrograd State Free Art Studios, 1918-1919. In 1919-1921, he lived periodically in Smolensk, teaching at the Proletkult Art Studio. His memoirs describe the general characteristics of the city's artistic life and the artists teaching and working there at that time. Even before Malevich visited the city, Rybchenkov had already heard about the founder of Suprematism and his art. His source was one of Malevich's Vitebsk students, Moisei (Mikhail) Kunin, whom Rybchenko called 'a true arms bearer for the prophet of the Suprematists'.¹³ Rybchenko's recollections relate to 1920, when Kunin was an enthusiastic supporter of Suprematism. His studies were interrupted by military service, which he performed with Rybchenkov in Smolensk, working in the Political Section of the Western Front. By the time he returned to Vitebsk in 1921, Kunin had rejected Suprematism and had even publicly criticised Malevich.¹⁴

Rybchenkov came into direct contact with Malevich, thanks to Strzemiński, during one of Malevich's first trips to Smolensk. Irina Vakar dates their meeting, which is described in Rybchenkov's memoirs, to the end of June-July 1920.¹⁵ It has been suggested that it was this visit that was recorded in the well-known group photograph of Malevich with Lissitzky and others (Fig. 6.5).¹⁶ Rybchenkov's memoirs do not mention Lissitzky. Malevich probably decided to make the trip to Smolensk and Orenburg after the All-Russian Conference of Art Teachers and Students in Moscow (2-9 June 1920). If so, then he would have arrived in Smolensk around mid-July 1920. Rybchenkov wrote about this in his memoirs. At Strzemiński's request, Malevich 'patiently examined' the work of Rybchenkov and concluded that he was 'not without talent', although he added that 'he has a long way to go to achieve abstraction along the lines of Suprematism. He is completely in the Earth's gravity'.¹⁷ By this, Malevich presumably meant that his work was still fairly figurative.

12 B. F. Rybchenkov, 'Zapfront Rosta. Rasskaz-vospominanie', in *Boris Rybchenkov. Zhivopis' i grafika. Katalog vystavki* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1989), 14-22; English translation of extracts in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 207-8. See also, B. F. Rybchenkov, 'Smolensk. 1919 god', *Krai Smolenskii*, 3 (1992): 18; and B. F. Rybchenkov, 'Smolensk. 1918 god', *Krai Smolenskii*, 1 (5) (1993): 33-40.

13 Rybchenkov, 'Zapfront Rosta', 15.

14 M. Kunin, 'Ob Unovise', *Iskusstvo* (Vitebsk), 2-3 (1921): 15-16.

15 Malevich, *Letters*, II: 207, n. 1.

16 Shatskikh states that this photograph was taken in Smolensk and identifies the figure third from the right as Strzemiński (Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 160, fig. 127). This has been questioned by Igor Smekalov, who has suggested that this photograph was probably taken in Orenburg. See I. V. Smekalov, *Unovis v Orenburge. K istorii khudozhestvennoi zhizni rossiskoi provintsi. 1919-1921* (Orenburg: Orenburgskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2011).

17 Rybchenkov, 'Zapfront ROSTA', 14; English translation, Malevich, *Letters*, II: 207.



FIGURE 6.5 Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, and others, probably in Orenburg. Photograph taken in Summer 1920, private archive.

Malevich gave a lecture at the Smolensk Proletkult, entitled 'From Cézanne to Suprematism'. He was a forceful speaker and 'Using logic, historical parallels, and other rhetorical devices, he let his speech run along well-oiled lines. He spoke so reasonably and interestingly that, without saying a single word about Suprematism, he instilled in his listeners the belief that they had learned something new and necessary'.¹⁸ Even so, Rybchenkov acknowledges that Malevich was not understood by the majority of the audience.

The publication *Unovis. Bulletin of the Vitebsk Creative Committee*, No. 1, of 20 November 1920, mentions that Malevich gave another lecture in Smolensk on 21 October. This talk would almost certainly have been related to Malevich's well-known brochure *On the Question of Fine Art*, published at that time in Smolensk.¹⁹ As its subtitle, he used the Unovis slogan: 'May the overthrow of the old world of art be drawn on the palms of your hands'. This slogan also appeared in the first book that Malevich published in Vitebsk, *On New Systems*

18 Ibid., 17.

19 K. Malevich, *K voprosu izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva [On the Question of Fine Art]* (Smolensk: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1921); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 208-222.

in Art, and in other Unovis publications.²⁰ Malevich's lecture in Smolensk took place in the former home of the merchant Pavlov on Great Soviet Street, in the same building that housed Strzemiński's studio, and which remains standing today.

Nadezhda Khodasevich, who was Strzemiński's student and heard Malevich's lectures, found them entrancing.²¹ She was convinced that Strzemiński built his studies 'on the programmatic objectives of the association', and observed that 'the students lived in an atmosphere of general revolutionary upheaval'.²²

Teachers and students at the Smolensk art studios who attended Malevich's lectures were not ready to accept his ideas, but they were infected with the spirit of revolutionary experimentation. Konstantin Dorokhov recalled the efforts of his young teacher Boris Rybchenkov in Smolensk to master French Neo-Impressionism: 'These etudes, inspired by Paul Signac, amazed me ... And I was especially amazed by ... a thing, that in some way recalled the abstractionists, under the intriguing title "In search of oneself"'.²³ Dorokhov described the success of the Proletkult Art Studio at the 1920 Moscow exhibition, and the works produced in Professor Shtranikh's class, which were based on Paul Gauguin's approach, and proclaimed that 'the picture first and foremost must resemble a brightly coloured carpet'.²⁴ Dorokhov wrote: 'The works by those in the studio amazed viewers, although they were far from comprehensible', while 'Work on compositions with a subject was virtually non-existent'.²⁵ It seems from Dorokhov's descriptions that both teachers and students were attracted to innovative painting, but in a fairly unsystematic way.

Amongst the earliest records of contacts between the Suprematists in Vitebsk and Smolensk is a message from the Smolensk section of the Worker and Peasant Theatre to the Vitebsk Unovis, inviting them to produce the spectacle *Victory over the Sun* and a Suprematist ballet. This invitation came about because Strzemiński was involved in producing decorations for the city's theatre. Nadezhda Khodasevich recalled that he produced 'designs for produc-

20 K. Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost. Ustanovlenie A* [*On New Systems in Art. Stasis and Speed. Resolution A*] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1919); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 153-184; English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 83-117.

21 L. Dubenskaia, *Rasskazyyaet Nadia Lezhe* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1983), 37.

22 *Ibid.*, 30.

23 K. G. Dorokhov, *Zapiski khudozhnika* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1974), 15.

24 *Ibid.*, 17.

25 *Ibid.*



FIGURE 6.6 Władysław Strzemiński, *What Have You Done for The Front? Give Everything to Those Who Are Dying Defending You*. Political poster produced for the Smolensk Russian Telegraph Agency (Rosta), during the Polish-Soviet War, private collection.

tions with so little of the recognisable real world in them that directors ... either sent them back to their creator or redid them in their own way'.²⁶

It is important to note that the direct contacts with Malevich and his circle of artists encouraged the Smolensk Unovis to embrace ideas concerning the artistic design of the city and engage in agitational art for the masses (Fig. 6.6, 6.7). In Smolensk, Strzemiński was also active in organising the city's Museum of Contemporary Art.

In summer 1920, on the eve of Malevich and Lissitzky's trip to Smolensk and Orenburg, the Vitebsk Unovis announced a conference of practitioners of the new art to be held that November, in the town of Kozelsk, in Kaluga province. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that this meeting actually took place.

In Smolensk, Malevich's followers had begun to embrace Suprematism even before the artist's first visit to the city, but in Orenburg it was his visit that stimulated the creation of a local branch of Unovis. Igor Smekalov has provided a detailed history of the Orenburg Unovis, which not surprisingly reveals that it shares several common characteristics with the way in which the Smolensk group emerged and developed.²⁷

The organisation of the Orenburg branch of Unovis is firmly connected with the name of Ivan Kudriashev (Kudriashov), who had trained at the Stroganov School for Technical Drawing and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture

²⁶ Ibid., 16.

²⁷ Smekalov, *Unovis v Orenburge*.



FIGURE 6.7 Boris Rybchenkov, *Forward to Warsaw*, 1920. Poster produced for the Smolensk Russian Telegraph Agency (Rosta), during the Polish-Soviet War, private collection.

and Architecture. From January to October 1919, he had attended Malevich's studio at the Second State Free Art Studios in Moscow. In December 1919, the People's Commissariat of Education sent him and his wife, Nadezhda Timofeeva, who had also studied with Malevich, to the provincial city of Orenburg. Artistic life in Orenburg was very difficult and complicated, because the events of the Civil War led to frequent changes in the occupying powers, many of which only lasted a short while. This was very different to life in the cities of Vitebsk and Smolensk, which were not directly affected by the fighting, although they were located near the front line. Because of the unsettled administration and frequent changes of government in Orenburg, a small but dedicated group of local artists took the initiative in arranging exhibitions and running the art schools.

The appointment of Kudriashev and Timofeeva coincided with the organisation of the Orenburg State Free Art Studios, which were officially opened on 15 January 1920. The sculptor Beatrisa Sandomirskaia, who was head of

the People's Department of Education in Orenburg province, had been instrumental in setting up the studios. She was drawn to Cubism, and this may have been a decisive factor in allowing Malevich's pedagogical system to be implemented in the studios. Unfortunately, Sandomirskaiia only remained in Orenburg about six months, which adversely affected the completion of the organisation of the studios. The teaching staff embraced a wide variety of artistic trends, from academic approaches to Cubism and Expressionism. In this respect, the situation was very similar to that of Vitebsk and Smolensk.

A branch of Unovis was set up in the Orenburg Art Studios after the First All-Russian Conference of Art Teachers and Students in Moscow and immediately after Malevich and Lissitzky visited Orenburg. Igor Smekalov, however, predates this development, stating that, 'Kudriashchev, as a zealous follower of Malevich, began to act in Orenburg a year earlier – in December 1919' and that 'the town was more "ready" than others to realise Unovis ideas' and 'therefore the proclamation of the Orenburg branch of Unovis in 1920 should be considered not the beginning, but rather the intermediate result of the work of local Suprematists'.²⁸ This is doubtful for a number of reasons: first, from January to May 1920, the Orenburg studios were being established as a teaching venue. The teaching staff were poorly organised, and student numbers fluctuated. As a result, in September 1920, at the start of the new academic year, the studios had to publish another announcement welcoming the recruitment, selection and registration of students for all classes. Documents in the State Archive of Orenburg Province show that the local Section of Fine Arts within the Provincial Department of Education was very weak after the departure of Sandomirskaiia. Without a director, it was unable to complete the initial stage of setting up the art studios.²⁹ Even in Vitebsk, where the art school had already been in existence for a year by December 1920, and had passed through the formative stage, Malevich himself had to work very hard to organise an artistic community around himself.

Malevich and Lissitzky probably arrived in Orenburg towards the end of July 1920. The visit could not have been 'the inspection' that Smekalov described, because there was still nothing to inspect.³⁰ According to the poster, Malevich's lecture in Orenburg took place on 25 July 1920, in the 'Lux' theatre, on the subject 'The State, Society, Criticism and the New Artist Innovator', a theme that does not seem to relate to any of the artist's known texts (Fig. 6.8).

28 Ibid., 56.

29 Ibid., 74.

30 Ibid., 59.



FIGURE 6.8 Poster announcing Kazimir Malevich's Lecture 'On the Subject of the State, Society, Criticism and the New Artist Innovator', Orenburg, 1920, private collection.

Malevich and Lissitzky stayed in Orenburg throughout August, as Kudriashev's reminiscences indicate. The artists spent the time resting in the local sanatorium. The trip resulted in the formation of a creative committee for the local branch of Unovis, consisting of the artist-teachers Ivan Kudriashev, Nadezhda Timofeeva and Sergei Kalmykov. It was only in the autumn of 1920 that real work began on forming the organisation, which coincided with the strengthening of the school. At that point, Kudriashev began to receive Malevich's advice and suggestions by mail from Vitebsk.

Smekalov has correctly observed that the Orenburg artistic studios did not accept Malevich's system in its entirety, nor did they 'turn themselves' into an Unovis, as happened in Vitebsk.³¹ By autumn 1920, the Orenburg studios had acquired a firmer structure, comprising three sections, which were devoted respectively to painting, graphics, and the decorative arts. Some aspects of Malevich's system of teaching were successfully implemented. Assistant masters in the preparatory studio and two other studios studied Impressionism and Cubism, but there was no 'final stage (that is, Suprematism) in the

31 Ibid., 75.

Orenburg studio'.³² Even in the Vitebsk studios, where Malevich's pedagogical system was more fully implemented under his personal direction, only a few individuals managed to reach the Suprematist stage. Malevich's teaching programme was not comprehensively or universally adopted either in Smolensk or in Orenburg, and it clearly needed to mature and establish its niche in these cities, before Malevich could hope to achieve his aspiration of having it accepted throughout Russia.

The Orenburg Unovis only existed for a brief time – from September through December 1920. At the beginning of 1921, a split occurred in the creative committee. It happened at the time of the *First State Art Exhibition*. Artistic activity reached a peak in the city during the exhibition, which was open from 6-28 February 1921, because, at the same time as the show, a great deal of work was being done on designing the city and a municipal theatre. A dispute developed between adherents of abstraction and more conservative artistic trends. On 21 February 1921, Sergei Kalmykov gave a lecture on 'Naturalism and Abstractionism in the Fine Arts'.³³ Kalmykov was a member of Unovis and produced Suprematist works, although none of these were listed in the exhibition catalogue. He was interested in various manifestations of abstraction. Timofeeva exhibited Cubist works, and only Kudriashev exhibited works under the general title of 'Suprematism'. Thus, the exhibition revealed that the Orenburg 'leftist' artists were not entirely united in their creative commitments, while the local press enthusiastically criticised the abstract artists.

As his correspondence with Malevich indicates, in spring 1921, Kudriashev tried to keep the Orenburg Unovis going, despite a split in the creative committee.³⁴ He described the difficult situation in the school: 'the majority of teachers and students of the Orenburg GSKhM [State Free Art Studios] undoubtedly remained adherents of traditional systems of teaching and actively opposed the innovations of Unovis'.³⁵ Malevich was supportive and responded on 14 April 1921, with a plan to visit the city in the summer and rescue the situation.³⁶ Smekalov suggests that 'Malevich's second trip to Orenburg (summer 1921) could not take place. This was not because he stopped being concerned about the problem or because his interest in local adherents became

32 Ibid., 77.

33 The Russian term is *abstraktivizm*. The full title of the lecture was '*Naturalizm i abstraktivizm v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve*'.

34 See Ivan Kudriashev, letter to Unovis, 13 March 1921; reprinted alongside Malevich, letter to Kudriashev, 14 April 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 140.

35 Ibid., and Smekalov, *Unovis v Orenburge*, 121.

36 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Ivan Kudriashev, 14 April 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 139-40.

weaker. It is more likely that it was prevented by the terrible famine that raged through the province at this time.³⁷ Could famine alone really have stopped Malevich? There were clearly other factors involved. In spring-summer 1921, he was engaged in a bitter struggle with David Shterenberg, who was the head of IZO Narkompros, over official approval for his teaching programme to be introduced into the whole of Russia. Malevich was also being sharply criticised in both Moscow and Vitebsk by Narkompros, the local Department of Education, and by the Trades Union of Workers in the Arts (*Soiuz rabotnikov iskusstv – Sorabis or Rabis*). In August 1921, Malevich even spent a short time in the Vitebsk prison of the secret police, then known as the Cheka (*Chrezvychainaia komissiiia – Extraordinary Commission*). One should also add that, at the end of 1920, Lissitzky had left the city to work in Moscow.

In 1921, the government instituted a reform of all the art schools in the Russian provinces (in Vitebsk, Orenburg and elsewhere), in accordance with the scheme adopted at the Moscow *Vkhutemas* (*Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie – Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops*). In summer 1921, Kudriashev and Timofeeva left Orenburg for Moscow. Their departure marked the end of the brief existence of the Orenburg Unovis. At about this time, the Smolensk Unovis also fell apart. By the summer of 1922, many provincial art schools had been reformed or closed. It has been said that the Orenburg branch collaborated with the Vitebsk Unovis in organising the Moscow exhibition of 1921.³⁸ But this was not so much a collaboration of the two Unovis groups, as a co-operation between those few artists who had maintained contact with Malevich. On 15 March 1921, Kudriashev wrote to Malevich from Orenburg, explaining that there were now only two Suprematists in the city.³⁹ He was clearly thinking of himself and his wife Nadezhda Timofeeva, who were teachers, and was evidently reluctant to identify any of his students as members of Unovis. Yet even this statement was optimistic, since Timofeeva was not really a committed Suprematist.

Originally, Malevich had considered organising branches of Unovis in Russian art schools, and especially in Russia's provincial art schools, as a vital step towards securing the country-wide adoption of his pedagogical system, which was organically connected to his theory of the evolution of artistic forms. From the examples of the branches of Unovis considered here, it is only possible to speak about the system's influence, but not about its realisation, because the experiences of the branches of Unovis were too brief. Would it really have been

37 Smekalov, *Unovis v Orenburge*, 64.

38 Smekalov, *Unovis v Orenburge*.

39 Kudriashev, letter to Unovis, 13 March 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 140.

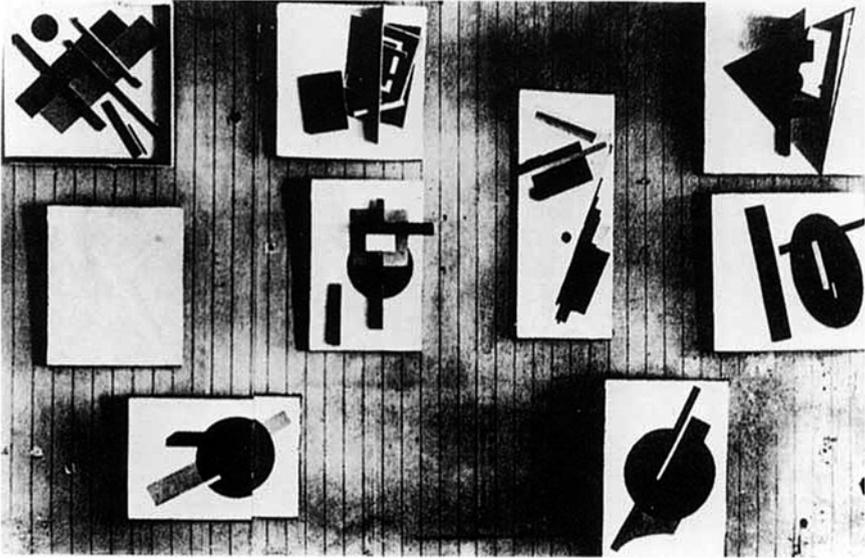


FIGURE 6.9 Installation photograph of works from the Orenburg Unovis, at the Unovis Exhibition at the Moscow Vkhutemas in 1921, private collection.

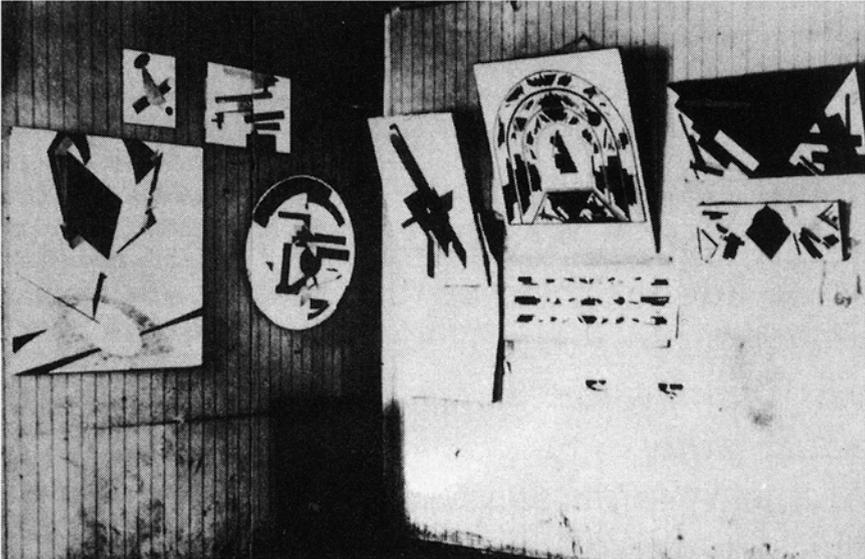


FIGURE 6.10 Installation photograph of works by El Lissitzky, Gustav Klutss, and Ivan Kudriashov (of the Orenburg branch) on display at the Unovis exhibition at the Moscow Vkhutemas in 1921, private collection.

possible to develop and implement Malevich's new approach to art teaching and secure its acceptance in such a short time? The answer to this question has to be 'No'. Of course, in the long run, the pedagogical experience might have contributed to the implementation of the system throughout Russia. Nevertheless, even in Vitebsk, during the two years of Unovis's existence, Malevich's system had not been fully realised. Both the graduation of the ten students who completed the course in 1922 and the awarding of diplomas to them were highly problematic.⁴⁰

It is even more problematic to speak about the complete implementation of 'the principle of collective creative work' in the various branches of Unovis, since this principle clearly come into conflict with the actual experience of working in individual studios.

Neither Strzemiński in Smolensk nor Kudriashev in Orenburg made any effort to develop their own creative or pedagogical theories. In their teaching, they both attempted to introduce their students to Malevich's main ideas concerning the evolution of artistic forms, as they themselves understood these.

The experience of organising branches of Unovis was necessary, but it was not sufficient to establish Suprematism as the official system of art education in Russia, nor as the goal of artistic creativity, and, much less, to establish it as a world phenomenon (Fig. 6.9, 6.10).

40 State Archive of Vitebsk Province, fond 246, opis' 1, dokument 260, list 391.

Suprematism and/or Supremacy of Architecture

Samuel Johnson

By the end of 1924, Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art) was on the verge of disbanding. In October that year, Ilia Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin, two of the remaining founding members, wrote to Malevich, asking him to relax his control over the group, so that it would truly become ‘an association based on equality of initiative’ instead of being identified solely with Malevich’s ideas. The pair insisted that they did not envision a final break from the group, in part because previous disagreements had been met by Malevich’s imperious suggestion that they consider ‘withdrawing from Unovis.’¹ Chashnik and Suetin’s proposal possesses an unhappy irony, for the name Unovis first appeared in 1920 as a solution to the issue of the master/pupil relationship within the Vitebsk People’s Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilische), replacing as it did the hierarchically inflected Posnovis (Poslediteli novogo iskusstva – Followers of the New Art). Rather than followers, Unovis strove to produce masters of the new art. By becoming architects, members of Unovis would make Suprematism into the blueprint of a future world of objects. Malevich himself christened the group by ‘placing the further development of architectural Suprematism in the hands of the young architects, in the broad sense of the word.’² Yet this utopian declaration of equality only set existing differences in relief, particularly in Malevich’s relationship to the group’s co-founder and only professionally trained architect, El Lissitzky.

In summer 1924, these differences surfaced in Malevich’s correspondence with Lissitzky. Earlier, as head of the architectural studio at the Vitebsk People’s Art School, Lissitzky had created works that functioned as ‘an interchange station between painting architecture’, which he called Prouns (Proekt

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- 1 Ilia Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin, letter to Kazimir Malevich, October 1924; English translation in Anna Kafetsi, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930: The G. Costakis Collection. Theory – Criticism* (Athens: National Gallery/Alexander Soutzos Museum; and Delphi: European Cultural Centre of Delphi, 1995), 575-576.
 - 2 K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 Risunka [Suprematism: 34 Drawings]* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), 1: 127-28.

utverzhdenniia novogo – Project for the Affirmation of the New).³ Following a year spent in Moscow, Lissitzky had decamped to Germany during the winter of 1921–22 and then to Switzerland in early 1924. There, he finally re-established contact with Malevich, who responded to his overtures with accusations of betrayal: ‘you, a constructor, have become frightened by Suprematism ... you wanted to free your personality, your ego, from what I had done, you were afraid that I would co-opt you, or that all your work would be attributed to me, and you ended up with Gan, Rodchenko, you became a constructor, not even a Prounist.’⁴ Churlish as Malevich’s remarks may be, he was right about Lissitzky’s response. Writing to his dealer and confidant Sophie Küppers several months later, Lissitzky reported on ‘two letters from Malevich ... in the second there is a photograph of the new work, BLIND ARCHITECTURE. It is a Proun.’⁵ If this shift in designation betrays a struggle for primacy, the desire was mutual. Later in their correspondence, Malevich referred to a sketch sent by Lissitzky as a ‘*dynamoplanit*’, a term that he had coined for his own architectural drawings.⁶

The tension over terminology between Lissitzky and Malevich serves as a precedent for Chashnik and Suetin’s concerns insofar as it lays bare the problem of Suprematism’s objectivity, in the double sense of its independence from its originator and its three-dimensional manifestations. Far from being the result of a superficial contest of egos, such disagreements raise fundamental questions about the identity of architectural Suprematism—if, that is, any identity is, or can be, inherent in the term. Indeed, we already find ourselves in a very crowded lexical field. On Lissitzky’s side, we have the term Proun, which replaced an earlier neologism, documented in relation to a proposed project of early 1920, ‘Ex-picture and Supremacy of Architecture.’⁷ On Malevich’s, we encounter still more coinages. The artist usually called his architectural drawings ‘planits’ [*planity*] and his models ‘architectons’ [*arkhitektony*],

3 See El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten/ Les Ismes de l'Art/ The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Munich and Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925), xi.

4 Kazimir Malevich, letter to El Lissitzky, 17 June 1924; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*, Russian edition: eds. Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 1: 168.

5 El Lissitzky, letter to Sophie Küppers, 24 October 1924, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow (RGALI), fond 3145, opis’ 1, edinitsa khraneniia 566, list 1.

6 Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 176.

7 *Ekskartina i suprematiia arkhitektury* is listed under Lissitzky’s name among the forthcoming publications in *Unovis No. 1*. See ‘Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie k faksimil’nomu izdaniuu’, in *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil’noe izdanie*, ed. Tatiana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel’stvo Skanrus, 2003), 105.

but he also referred to them as 'blind', 'sighted' and 'dynamic constructions'. It was not always clear to their creators whether this bevy of terms converged on a common object. At one point in their correspondence, Malevich claimed that Lissitzky had abandoned Suprematism when he turned away from his Prouns, but in another letter, Malevich made the apparently contradictory claim that the Prouns and Suprematism had always been distinct phenomena.⁸ This vacillation reveals a certain anxiety over the common object of architectural Suprematism and the order of precedence it assumed. Did it entail an end to painting and a recognition of the 'Supremacy of Architecture', as Lissitzky's phrase implies? Or, as a grammatical reading of the designation 'architectural Suprematism' would suggest, did it lack an object entirely, appearing as the mere instantiation in architecture of an already substantialised 'ism'? The two artists' correspondence of 1924-25 provides an unusually direct view on the unresolved questions that haunted the remaining Unovis members, but we must also look to their respective practices for answers.

By the time that Lissitzky and Malevich resumed their correspondence in the summer of 1924, both artists had completed their respective transitions to architecture, placing the relevance of Unovis's collective practice in question. Some of Lissitzky's projects suggest that the group's aims still held sway over his activities. For much of 1924, he worked on a collection of Malevich's writings in his own German translation;⁹ he also prepared (for an exhibition in Vienna) a version of a speaker's rostrum that Chashnik had executed in his Vitebsk studio, signing it 'Unovis, 1920' (Fig. 7.1, 7.2). From May until December 1924, he worked on an essay surveying architectural activities in the USSR, which was intended for publication in *L'esprit nouveau*, but which eventually appeared in *Das Kunstblatt* as 'SSSRs Architektur'.¹⁰ In the first drafts of his essay, Lissitzky portrayed himself as the first public critic of Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, recounting his role as a partisan of Unovis in the debates of the early 1920s.¹¹ Yet, when he wrote to Le Corbusier about the article, Lissitzky identified himself not as a member of Unovis, but as an associate of Asnova (Assotsiatsiia novykh arkhitektorov – Association of New Architects), a group of rationalist architects spearheaded

8 Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 176.

9 Lissitzky, letter to Küppers, 11 May 1924; English translation in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 49.

10 El Lissitzky, 'SSSRs Architektur', *Das Kunstblatt*, 1x, 2 (February 1925): 49-53; English translation in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 367-369.

11 Lissitzky's original typescript is in RGALI, fond 2361, op. 1, ed. khr. 27, ll. 1-8.



FIGURE 7.1 El Lissitzky, *Lenin Tribune*, 1924, gouache, India ink and photomontage on cardboard, 63.8 × 48 cm., State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY.

by Nikolai Ladovskii, who had asked Lissitzky to serve as their foreign representative the previous year.¹²

12 El Lissitzky, letter to Le Corbusier, 23 March 1924; reprinted in *El Lissitzky: The Experience of Totality* (Madrid: La Fabrica, 2014), 178-79. For Lissitzky's correspondence with Ladovskii, see Jen Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, eds., *El Lissitzky: Proun und Wolkenbügel. Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), 177-79.

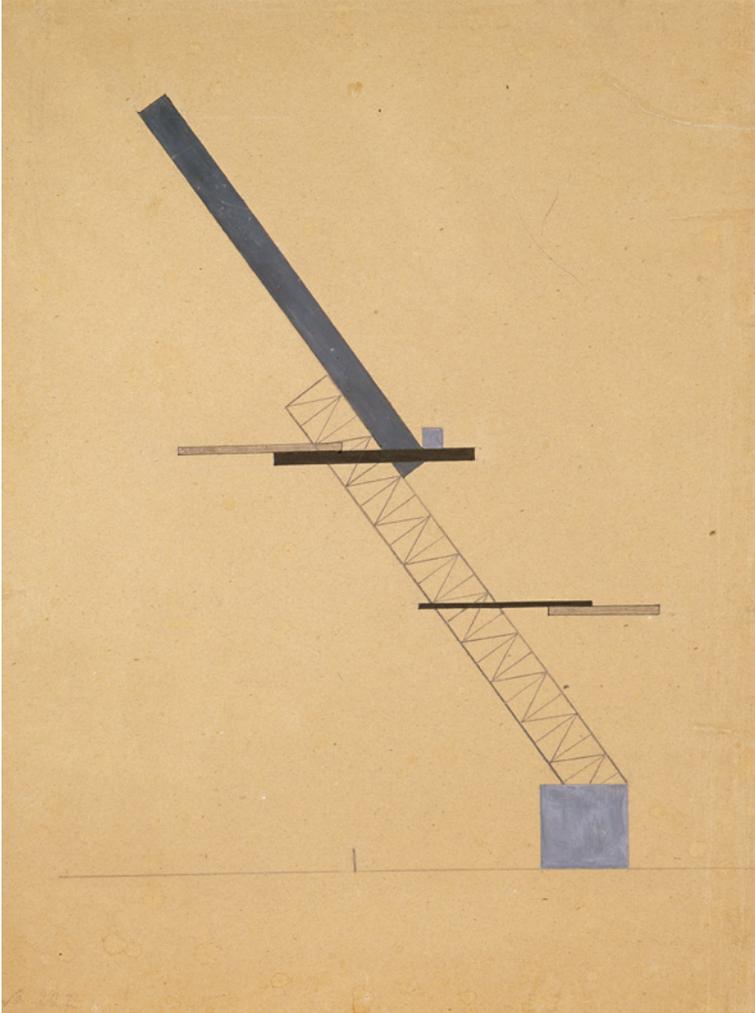


FIGURE 7.2 Ilia Chashnik, *Project for a Tribune for a Smolensk Square*, 1920, gouache, graphite and India ink on paper, 48.2 × 37.8 cm., State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY.

Another element in the correspondence between Lissitzky and Malevich was Lissitzky's own visionary architectural project, *der Wolkenbügel*. During the spring of 1924, he had begun working on a grandiose building that would come to fruition during the winter 1924-25, with the aid of the engineer Emil Roth (Fig. 7.3). Literally overturning the skyscraper as a formal concept, Lissitzky envisioned a horizontal structure held aloft on massive piers fifty metres above the city streets, as if floating. The supports of the building fairly literalise



FIGURE 7.3 El Lissitzky, *Wolkenbügel on Nikitskii Square*, ca. 1925, gelatin silver print, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE.

the artist's characterisation of the Proun as a station: one leg was to act as a link to an underground railway system, while the others would function as bus stops. From below ground, a lift or continuously circulating paternoster would take people to the building's functional spaces, which Lissitzky intended as an administrative centre. A planned series of eight *Wolkenbügel*s, each positioned at an intersection of Moscow's first or second ring road with a major arterial, would link the civic functions of government to the infrastructure of the city, while also serving as monumental signposts for pedestrian and automobile traffic. The building was to be maximally functional; indeed, while it may have been conceived as an autonomous formal exercise, the *Wolkenbügel* manifested itself almost entirely as the meeting place for a series of transport systems.¹³

13 L. Lisitskii, 'Serii neboskrebov dlia Moskv. WB1 (1923-25). Proekt El' Lisitskogo' [Series of Skyscrapers for Moscow: WB1 (1923-25). El Lissitzky's Design], *Izvestiia Asnova*, 1 (1926): [2-3]. For a detailed account of the building's development and the pivotal contributions of Emil Roth, see J. Christoph Bürkle, *El Lissitzky: Der Traum vom Wolkenbügel* (Zurich: Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, 1991).

Malevich's activities had also come to inhabit an almost exclusively architectural sphere, albeit from a position quite opposed to Lissitzky's. In 1923, Malevich had begun to construct architectural models in plaster which he called architectons and made with the aid of his students and assistants at the Petrograd Ginkhuk (Gosudarstvennyi insitut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury, State Institute of Artistic Culture). By the time he resumed his correspondence with Lissitzky, Malevich had completed fifteen such structures, on the strength of which he was allowed to serve as an instructor at the Leningrad Institute of Civil Engineers.¹⁴ Over the course of 1924, in tandem with his architectural activity, he wrote a lengthy tract devoted to the 'Ideology of Architecture' for inclusion in his magnum opus, *The World as Non-Objectivity*.¹⁵ Towards the end of the year, he adapted this text for delivery as a lecture to the Leningrad Society of Architects, mailing a copy to Lissitzky shortly afterwards.¹⁶ As its title suggests, this text is not concerned with the history and development of the discipline, but with its ideological essence, which, for Malevich, resided in freedom from the burden of weight, as distinct from all practical methods of liberation. These latter are construed so broadly as to include all exercise of reason and even movement, determined as flight from, or struggle with, resistance.

If Lissitzky's vision of architecture in 1924 betrays a fascination with the way that steel and glass can articulate a volume not determined by mass, Malevich's architectons equate the two to a surprising degree. In his concern for the integrity of the unbroken plane, Malevich transformed the architectons into windowless monads that obliterate architectural space. Refusing all relation of inside and outside, these structures strive to attain a definitive simultaneity of pure exterior and pure interior, indifferent to the flux of the world. They are, in this sense, anti-buildings.¹⁷ A rare image of an architecton relating to an existing built environment, published in the Warsaw journal *Praesens* in 1926, emphasises the absolute discontinuity between the Suprematist structure and its surroundings (Fig. 7.4). In contrast, Lissitzky presented his *Wolkenbügel* as an exactly scaled, perspectival drawing mapped almost seamlessly onto a photograph of its site, in order to reinforce the possibility of erecting the structure.

14 Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 14 August 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 170.

15 Kazimir Malevich, '1/48. The World as Non-Objectivity', in K.S. Malevich, *The World as Non-Objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922-25*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Edmund T. Little (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1976), 270-291.

16 Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 22 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 177-78.

17 See, for instance, Maria Gough, 'Architecture as Such', in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 158-63.

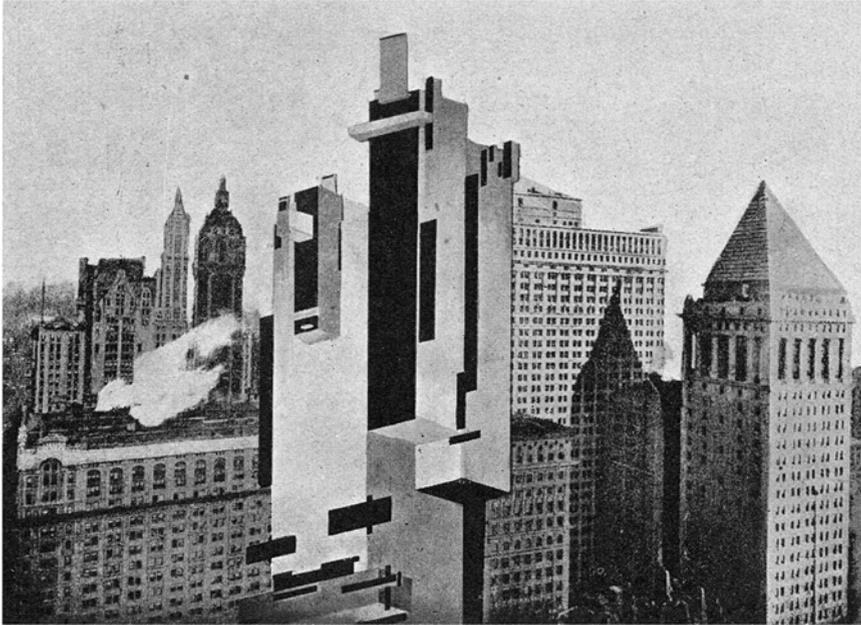


FIGURE 7.4 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Structure Among American Skyscrapers*, from *Praesens* No. 1, (1926).

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES.

In Lissitzky's montage, the photograph disappears behind its referent, rather than exposing the mechanism of the camera, as photomontage so often does. Both images turn on the radical estrangement of the buildings' horizontal and vertical axes, but their functions are opposed. Lissitzky's image allows the real, indexical referent of the photograph to seep into the superimposed drawing of the *Wolkenbügel*, while the building re-enchants the quotidian streetscape with the hypnotic power of its megastructural feat of engineering. It was exactly this effect that Malevich's rotation refused.

The commonalities here are more striking than the differences, for even where the two approaches diverge, they reveal a close kinship. Malevich acknowledged as much in his letter of 8 December 1924, where he remarked that 'although the Prouns are close to Suprematism, still their dynamic relations are not the same as Suprematism ... you have a different approach and even the chess pieces are different, although the game is chess'.¹⁸ This judgment is fair enough. Lissitzky's Prouns frequently traffic in an unreconstructed Futurist dynamism that Suprematism just as often holds in reserve. But Malevich

18 Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 176.

also closed the distance that he had asserted by calling Lissitzky's sketch a '*dynamoplanit*' in the very same sentence. By this logic, Malevich could consider a Proun to be a type of *planit*, although not a Suprematist one, even while admitting that in his own architectural studies, 'Suprematism seems to enter another sphere, perhaps, in its ideological essence'.¹⁹ This admission suggests that, by 1924, Malevich was comfortable reverting to the position of the master and treating Suprematism as a personal style, developing through his work alone. Although this view persists in the scholarly literature on Suprematism,²⁰ it has to be regarded with scepticism, for here the artist acknowledged the changeability of his own project. Unless we view such changes as proceeding teleologically, in accordance with the original essence of Suprematism (a claim Malevich himself seemed to rule out here, although he had recourse to it on other occasions), we cannot treat his example as the stable term in a comparative analysis. Rather, we are faced with a multi-agent development within a common framework. For the rules of the game, we must return to the formation of Unovis, with its dream of a truly collective endeavour undertaken by a plural subject.

Malevich affirmed the task of developing a collectively articulated architecture in the introduction to his *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, but a fuller understanding of this project can be gleaned from his other statements. Prior to the foundation of Unovis, Malevich had outlined some key terms in his 1918 article, 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete', which praises 'our ferro-concrete life' in opposition to the stagnation of a discipline steeped in Beaux-Arts traditions; describing the railway station as 'a door, a tunnel, the nervous pulse of trembling, a town's breathing', Malevich called for the erection of new buildings on the 'square fields of the revolution'.²¹ He also returned to the volumetric Suprematist canvas included in the 0.10 exhibition, publishing a lithographic version in the spring of 1919 (Fig. 7.5).

The same year, he penned a long text, *On New Systems in Art: Stasis and Speed*, which he published in Vitebsk with Lissitzky's assistance. Although this text says nothing about architecture, it returns to the theme of the railroad as an expression of the dynamism of a universal intuition opposed to economic and materialist ratiocination. Malevich's essay closes with the image of a unified network of towns, 'a supreme town ... formed as a product of the forces of

19 Ibid., 177.

20 The most pronounced example is Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010), 111: 13-110.

21 K. Malevich, 'Arkhitektura kak poshchekchina betono-zhelezu', *Anarkhiia*, 37 (6 April 1918); English translation. 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete', in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 63.

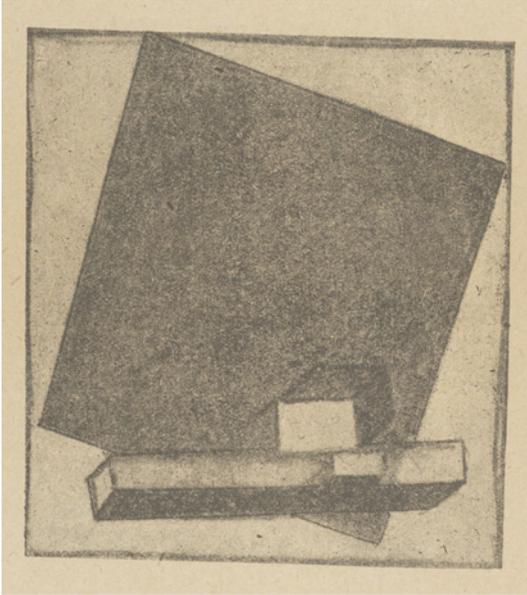


FIGURE 7.5 Kazimir Malevich, *Untitled*, from *Puti tvorchestva*, No. 5 (1919).

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HOUGHTON LIBRARY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

the towns of whole peoples', embodying the 'intuitive universal movement of energetic forces'.²² These were the salient features of Malevich's thinking when he and Lissitzky first began to collaborate: an affirmation of the Futurist dynamism of modern transit infrastructures, an interest in the tendency of urban networks toward centralisation, and a return to the volumetric possibilities of Suprematism.

The elements present in Malevich's writings circa 1919 were resolved into an architectural mode of Suprematism in the space of a few short months in Vitebsk. By March 1920, Malevich could write that 'a lot of aspects of Suprematism have become clear, in particular, when *The Black Square* grew into architecture in such forms that it was difficult to identify these forms as architecture'.²³ Although Malevich was initially less than fluent in Suprematism's new developments, Lissitzky was well equipped to discern the components of a synthesis. In an essay of 1920, 'Suprematism of World-Construction', he outlined

22 K. S. Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost'. Ustanovlenie A* [*On New Systems in Art: Stasis and Speed: Resolution A*] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 83-119.

23 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Gershenzon, 18 March 1920; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 126.

the task of creating the town, the unified creative depot, the centre of collective effort, the radio tower sending out bursts of creative activity into the world. In this, we overcome the fettered foundation of the Earth and rise above it. This is the answer to all questions of movement. This dynamic architecture creates a new theatre of life and because we are capable, at any moment, of embedding the whole town in any plan, the task of architecture—the rhythmic articulation of space and time—will be perfectly and simply fulfilled.²⁴

Even after Lissitzky's departure for Moscow, this transformation of Suprematism into a concrete proposal was practised in the architectural programme of the Vitebsk People's Art School. Malevich described the process of 'discovering the Suprematism of the World' to Ivan Kudriashev in April 1921, writing of the 'plans of a utilitarian order ... an Economic-agricultural agronomic centre, the lay-out of fields, roads, all the out-buildings ... a plan for railway stations, an aeroplane hangar, a port and so on,' which were being developed by members of Unovis.²⁵ Among the few surviving examples of architectural projects from the Vitebsk period are Lissitzky's own earliest efforts at Suprematism, dating from the winter of 1919-20, which he seems to have initially grouped under the terms 'Ex-picture and Supremacy of Architecture'. The titles Lissitzky used for these pictures before introducing the Proun concept—*Arch, Bridge, Town, House Above the Earth*—make their connection to a nascent architectural Suprematism explicit.²⁶

Lissitzky's *Town* may be his most significant contribution to the development of architectural Suprematism (Fig. 7.6). Painted in oil and sand on plywood in an extremely ascetic palette (one could call the work grisaille, save for two bars of ochre flanking a small black square in the centre), the unassuming *Town* revealed a 'Suprematism of the World' in a manner that has often gone unnoticed. In it, Lissitzky arrayed a rhythmic sequence of bars—some axonometric, others perfectly flat—along the diagonal axis of a black square placed within a white oval, the perimeter of which nearly touches the upper and lower edges of the board. Extending through the oval and meeting the cut edges of the board are three flat rectangular bars, which place the square

24 El Lissitzky, 'Suprematizm mirostroitel'stva', *Unovis No 1* (1920) [sheet 13]; reprinted in 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie k faksimil'nomu izdaniuu', 71.

25 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Ivan Kudriashev, 14 April 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 140.

26 For a discussion of Lissitzky's early titles, see Peter Nisbet, 'El Lissitzky in the Proun Years, 1919-1927: A Study of his Work and Thought' (PhD Thesis, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1995), 66-76.

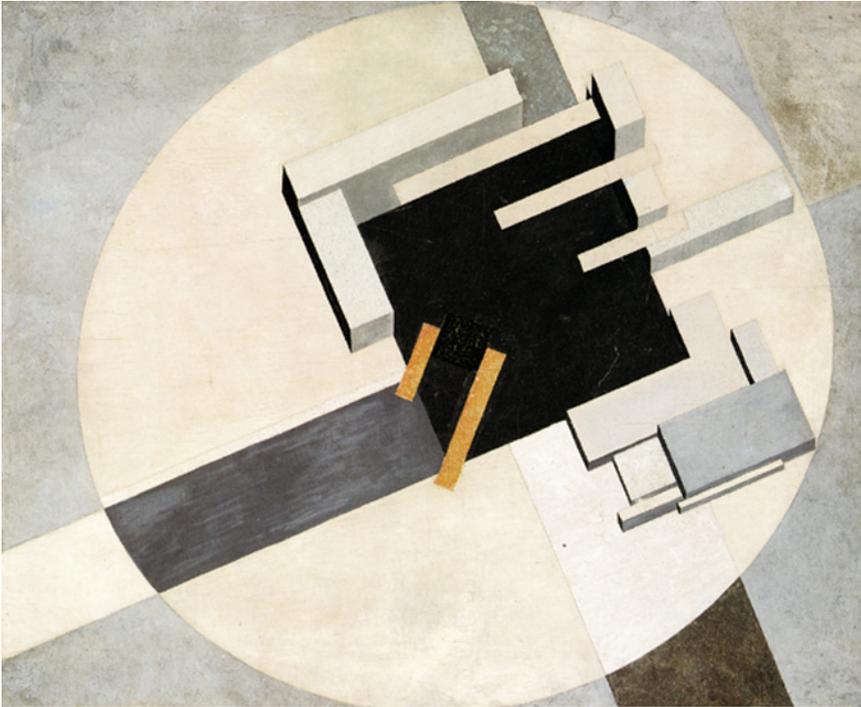


FIGURE 7.6 El Lissitzky, *Town*, 1919-20, oil and sand on plywood, 47 × 63.5 cm., State Mustafaev Azerbaijan Museum of Art, Baku.

within a grid; a light grey square contiguous to the oval replaces the missing fourth arm of the grid, overlapping the board's edges at the top right-hand corner. To be sure, the constituent elements of *Town* mostly derive from Malevich's work.

Several of Malevich's canvases of 1915, like the strikingly literal *Four Squares* (Fig. 7.7), had mapped the flat plane of canvas to its framing edges, and his few experiments with volumetric Suprematism had already introduced the parallelepiped. Still, Malevich had never combined the two. Like two horns of a dilemma, Malevich's occasional attempts to re-state the flat picture plane compositionally remained opposed to his experiments in volume, which always rely on the illusion of an infinite expanse provided by the white ground. The perceptual habits of Lissitzky's architectural training provided the essential element of his synthesis: Lissitzky regarded the flat Suprematist plane as infinitely extendable beyond its framing edges, rather than infinitely deep within them, and had no qualms about laying a sequence of volumes upon it, as upon the surface of the Earth. Rudimentary as it may seem, Malevich himself never reached this conclusion. His *Four Squares* would not yield an

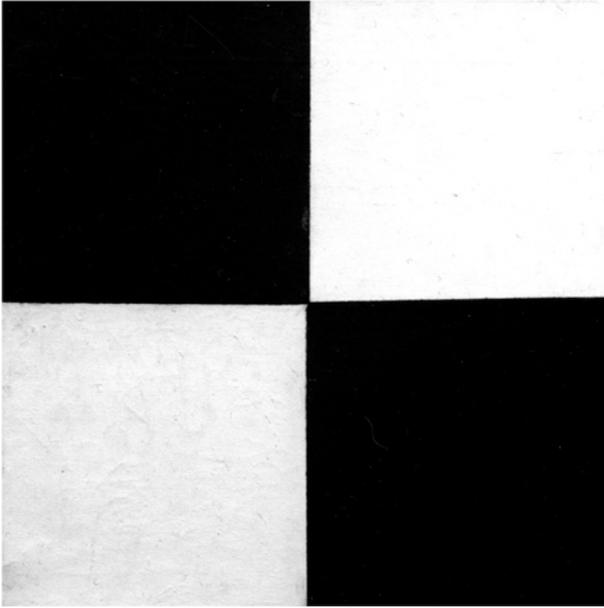


FIGURE 7.7 Kazimir Malevich, *Four Squares*, 1915, oil on canvas, 49 × 49 cm., State Radishchev Museum, Saratov.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STATE RADISHCHEV MUSEUM.

experiment like Lazar Khidekel's 1923 *Roads in the Lowlands (Canals)* without the mediation of *Town*, despite their inarguable kinship (Fig. 7.8).

Nevertheless, the accomplishments of *Town* remain exceptional within Lissitzky's oeuvre. As an aesthetic category, the so-called 'Ex-picture' traced no firm line between volumetric and architectural Suprematism, and Lissitzky increasingly tended to explore the infinite expanse of Suprematist space in a painterly idiom of his own. Perhaps for this reason, he also decided to introduce a new term for his work: Proun. Even in the first recorded use of this term, in a lecture of October 1920, Lissitzky acknowledged his errant path by admitting almost apologetically that 'it is necessary for me to further resolve those axial and chromatic foundations that I realised in the easel-Proun in actual space, in the model and in technical material'.²⁷ While his written statements continued to define the Proun as a transition from painting to architecture, Lissitzky seems to have been plagued by the suspicion that it meant the opposite. In one of the most compelling exchanges of their 1924 correspondence,

²⁷ El Lissitzky, 'Doklad o tekushchem momente' [Lecture About the Present Moment], 27 October 1920, ms; Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, inventory no. 716, sheet 2.

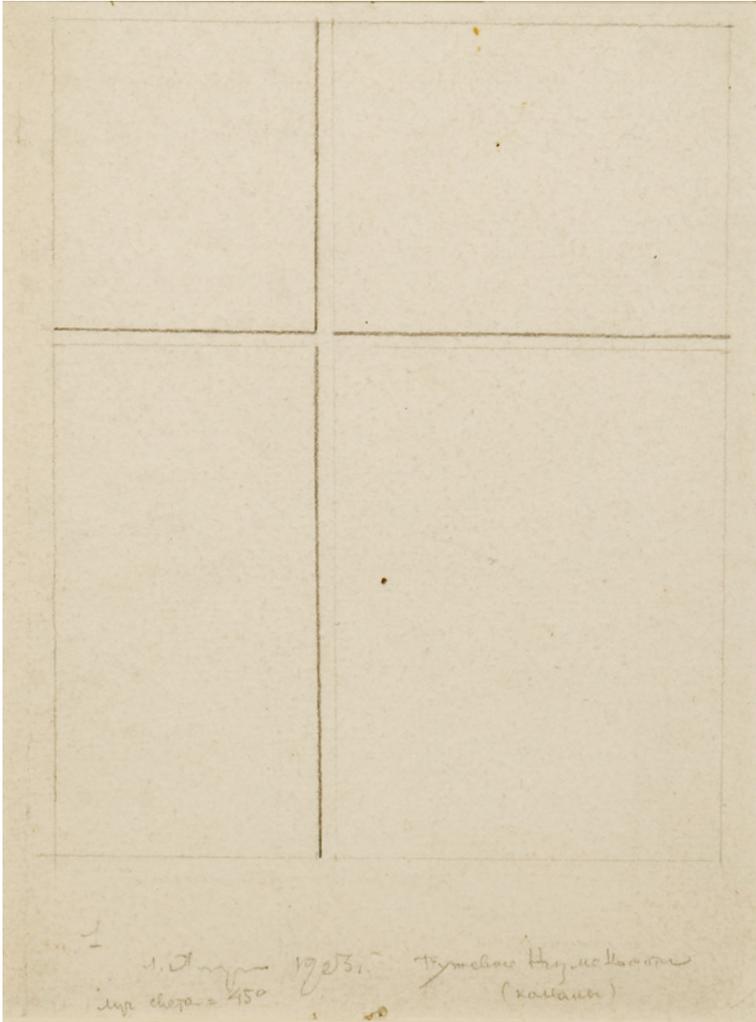


FIGURE 7.8 Lazar Khidekel, *Roads in the Lowlands (Canals): Ray of Light = 45°*, 1923, pencil on paper, 17 × 13 cm., private collection.
 PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE LAZAR KHIDEKEL FAMILY ARCHIVE & COLLECTION.

Malevich vehemently rejected Lissitzky's assertion that 'our apprentices [in Vitebsk] under my influence have moved away from architecture'.²⁸ Referring to the 'civil-engineer', Khidekel, and the 'easel painter[s]', Chashnik and Suetin,

²⁸ Malevich letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 176-177. In this letter Malevich quoted from Lissitzky's previous letter, now lost.

Malevich insisted that 'if they were under your influence, then they would arrive at good architecture'.²⁹ These disagreements, like the differences over terminology, appear to be the psychological correlative of the group's collective activity, in which the boundaries between actors are effaced while the individual conscience survives.

When he settled on his neologism, Proun, in summer or autumn 1920, Lissitzky abandoned his early architectural titles and, for a time, his foray into architectural projects. That winter, he assembled his works into a portfolio of lithographs. He grouped them into series, retitled them like chemical compounds (*P1^a* through *P1^e*, *P2^d* through *P2^e*, etc.), and confined his early, explicitly architectural compositions to his first series. One factor in this digression from architectural Suprematism was probably Viktor Shklovskii's essay, 'Space in Painting and Suprematism', which appeared just as Lissitzky took up Suprematism. Shklovskii's conclusion, that Suprematism's main contribution to the history of art was not its compositional system but its critique of representation, may have diverted Lissitzky's Prouns away from concrete architectural tasks onto the same path as Malevich's subsequent bacteriological theory of painting. Explaining the optical reversibility of depicted volumes, a phenomenon noted by Broder Christiansen and shown experimentally by Wilhelm Wundt, Shklovskii argued that 'the Suprematists did for art what chemistry has done for medicine: they isolated the active factor in the remedies'.³⁰ Language close to Shklovskii's appeared in Lissitzky's letter to Malevich of 1 July 1924, which explained their divergent approaches 'in terms of the growth of the scientific method, where one person discovered that microbes are the cause of the illness, and the next discovered the antiviral serum ... I believe that there is not only a *no* in what you created, but also a new *yes*, and I am now occupied only with the *yes*'.³¹ In Lissitzky's belated 'now', we can hear some acknowledgement of his recent return to architecture.

It was not only Lissitzky who diverged from the Unovis consensus. Together with the rise of Constructivism, Lissitzky's departure for Moscow pushed Malevich toward an increasingly phobic rejection of technology. While *On New Systems in Art* had praised the dynamism of the railway and aeroplane as manifestations of an intuition caught in a dialectic of dispersal and centralisation,

29 Ibid.

30 V. Shklovskii, 'Prostranstvo v zhivopisi i suprematizm' [Space in Painting and Suprematism] *Iskusstvo*, 8 (3 September 1919); English translation in Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 326.

31 El Lissitzky, letter to Kazimir Malevich, 1 July 1924; reprinted in Aleksandra Shatskikh, ed., *Pis'ma Kazimira Malevicha El' Lisitskomu i Nikolaiu Puninu* (Moscow: Pinakoteka, 2000), 7.

'The Ideology of Architecture' weighed 'what is more necessary, more correct ... the picture or the aeroplane?' By the time Malevich posed the question, however, he had already categorically asserted that 'technology has proved to be a mistake, for it has emerged from the unfulfilled historical, technical, mechanical intentions of the past, from the historical experience'.³² This outright rejection of history as the history of instrumental reason provided the basis for Malevich's definition of 'architecture *as such*' as freedom from all purpose. And while it constitutes a striking attempt at a purely phenomenological definition of architecture, it also invokes the authority of a transcendental realm of forms. By 1924, Malevich had claimed that 'The civil engineer does not possess an eternal basis and equilibrium, for he always depends on the changing condition of social relations, utilitarian or ideological differences; the artist is outside of this ... his 'eternally beautiful' basis *is* eternally beautiful in its equilibrium'.³³ This line of argument led Malevich to conclude that 'civic buildings are not architecture', architecture is 'the house as rest', i.e. the temple of the spirit. 'The architectural universe', he soon affirmed, 'represents the ecumenical universe, the universe without walls, windows, doors, columns, without roofs and foundations'.³⁴ This justification of Malevich's 'blind constructions', Lissitzky likely concluded, offered only the solipsistic comfort of a transcendent '*no*'.

The 'yes' that Lissitzky proposed in response remained close to the Unovis position that he represented in 1920. Whereas Malevich derived his term architecton from architectonics, Lissitzky concluded that 'nowhere is there a new architectonic culture ... At the same time, modern architects in various countries have been fighting for some decades to establish a new tectonics'.³⁵ Counting himself among them, he described his *Wolkenbügel* as a 'great tectonic task', and boasted that 'neither the French nor the Dutch can really grasp our [Soviet] tectonic volition'.³⁶ In this, Lissitzky drew on the position outlined

32 Malevich, '1/48. The World as Non-Objectivity', 276 and 274-75.

33 Ibid., 282. Emphasis as in the original.

34 These formulations appear in Malevich, '1/49. The World as Non-Objectivity', 292 and 291. It could be objected that this change in Malevich's thinking began with *God is Not Cast Down: Art, The Factory, The Church* [*Bog ne skinut. Iskusstvo, tserkov', fabrika*], which was written in Vitebsk in 1920-21 and printed in 1922. In that text, however, Malevich stressed the experience of the pulse of sensation prior to all thought, in order to show the groundlessness of economic and religious discourses. When art appears in the text, it is characterised as the harmony of rhythms, but not as *eternal* harmony.

35 El Lissitzky, 'Architecture in the USSR 1925'; English translation in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 367.

36 Bürkle, *Der Traum vom Wolkenbügel*, 34; and Lissitzky, letter to Küppers, 14 January 1925; English translation in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 57-58 (translation modified).

by the theorist of the German *Werkbund*, Hermann Muthesius, who saw the seeds of an emergent building style in ‘those modern creations that truly serve our newly established needs and that have absolutely no relation to the old formalities of architecture ... in the general tectonic realm, in our large bridges, steamships, railway cars, bicycles and the like.’³⁷ As a member of Unovis, Lissitzky had mobilised this distinction to criticise the teaching of architecture as a discrete discipline, asking polemically, ‘must the art of building obtain its *raison d’être* from the art of architecture? ... does not architecture appear to be a parasite on the healthy body of building?’³⁸ For Lissitzky, Suprematism had accomplished the final negation of all established architectural traditions, but it also affirmed new constructions and the new needs to which they were responding.

Ultimately, this is a disagreement over the grounds of architecture. For Malevich, the original architectural motive lies with the subject, and architecture is only possible as the recovery of its origin, freed from history.³⁹ Lissitzky’s view, like Muthesius’s, is closer to the empiricism of architectural historian Gottfried Semper, who stressed that ‘tectonic root forms are *much older than architecture*’ and condition its emergence.⁴⁰ From this perspective, an architecture purged of technology is a contradiction, since architecture emerges in the immobilisation of structures already in use: it has empirical *beginnings* rather than a phenomenological *origin*. It is tempting to conclude that these positions complemented one another in the formation of Unovis, but perhaps that is too utopian a view. Perhaps it is better to acknowledge that architectural Suprematism had its beginnings in Lissitzky’s early experiments and discovered its origin only later — to say that it was Malevich who finally affirmed the supremacy of Architecture in the face of mere architectural Suprematism.

37 Hermann Muthesius, *Style-Architecture and Building-Art: Transformations of Architecture in the Nineteenth Century and its Present Condition*, trans. Stanford Anderson (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 1994), 79.

38 L. Lisitskii, ‘Katastrofa arkhitektury’, *IZO: Vestnik ot dela izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv N.K.P.*, 1 (10 March 1921): 3; English translation, ‘Catastrophe of Architecture’, in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 369.

39 Thus, ‘weight lies on me rather than in nature, which is why I wish to throw it off, or move it or scatter it ... so that it does not oppress me, and therefore I wish to change it into an architectural form’. Malevich, ‘1/48. The World as Non-Objectivity’, 277.

40 Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2004), 623-24.

Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism as an Embodiment of the Infinite

Regina Khidekel

In developing Suprematism as a universal system of form making that could be extended out into the real world and used to transform it, Kazimir Malevich began to explore its volumetric potential and architectural possibilities. His first publication on the subject was his 1918 article, 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete', the title of which was based on the famous manifesto of Russian Futurism, 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste' of December 1911. In his text, Malevich acknowledged that although other art forms, notably literature and music, had found ways to define the 'word as such' and 'sound as such', architecture remained stuck in the 'tunnels of the past'.¹ He believed that Suprematism was a versatile system for organising space and form that would be able to create an authentically modern architecture and resolve the current contradictions between the new forms of art, scientific and technological progress, and those outdated eclectic practices posing as architecture which dressed buildings, such as railway stations, in historical costumes.

Malevich foresaw that the 1920s would be a decade of architectural innovations, just as the 1910s had witnessed enormous transformations in painting. The destruction wrought by the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Civil War, and the social upheavals in Europe meant that architecture had become a significant and critical force in changing the world both socially and visually. It was an opportune moment for Suprematism to become universal and aspire to unite the entire world under a global Suprematist aegis.

The next step in this trajectory was taken after Malevich arrived in Vitebsk on 5 November 1919.² Inspired by this new environment, he became the founder and leader of Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of

1 K. Malevich, 'Arkhitektura kak poshchechina betona-zhelezu', *Anarkhiia*, 37 (6 April 1918): 4; reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh, (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 1: 69; English translation, 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete', in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 60-64.

2 See Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 67.

the New Art) and announced his vision for a Suprematist architecture. Arguing that painting was now, to all intents and purposes, dead, Malevich directed his disciples and followers towards new challenges to fire their creativity and imagination.

By the time that Malevich joined the staff at the Vitebsk People's Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche), a group of students, including Lazar Khidekel, had already been studying in the Studio of Architecture and Typography. This was run by El Lissitzky, who taught technical drawing using rulers and compasses, while developing the students' cross-media spatial perception, and encouraging experiments with typography and architecture. His students became familiar with axonometric projection as a means of transforming flat drawings into three-dimensional forms; these forms then became the skeletal elements for new architectural structures and were used to generate models for buildings.

Lissitzky became committed to Suprematism and, in the course of his search for a Suprematist architecture in the early 1920s, invented the Proun (Proekt utverzhdenniia novogo – Project for the Affirmation of the New), a stereometric perception of the plane in Suprematism, utilising axonometric drawing and architectural innovations such as shifting axes, as well as multiple perspectives. Lissitzky defined the Proun as an interchange station between painting and architecture,³ but also could not resist seeing it as an entirely new art form – a fusion of painting and architectonic projections, which represented his own contribution to avant-garde developments after they had reached zero.⁴ Lissitzky's individual approach became a point of disagreement with Malevich, who defended the idea of the creative collective and was not at all interested in developing a new pictorial style, especially as he considered that conventional painting was dead.⁵ Malevich also perceived fundamental methodological differences between his own attitude towards volumetric Suprematism and Lissitzky's axonometric projections.

Malevich's small book, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* became a bible for his students, especially for Khidekel, who was involved in its printing in 1920,

3 See El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen/ Les Ismes de l'Art/ The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Munich and Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925), xi.

4 Kazimir Malevich wrote, 'I have transformed myself into the zero of form'. See K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k Suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism]* (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1916); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 19.

5 In 1920, Malevich wrote, 'There can be no talk of painting in Suprematism. Painting has long ago been outlived, and the painter himself is no more than a prejudice of the past'. See K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka [Suprematism: 34 Drawings]* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 189; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 127.

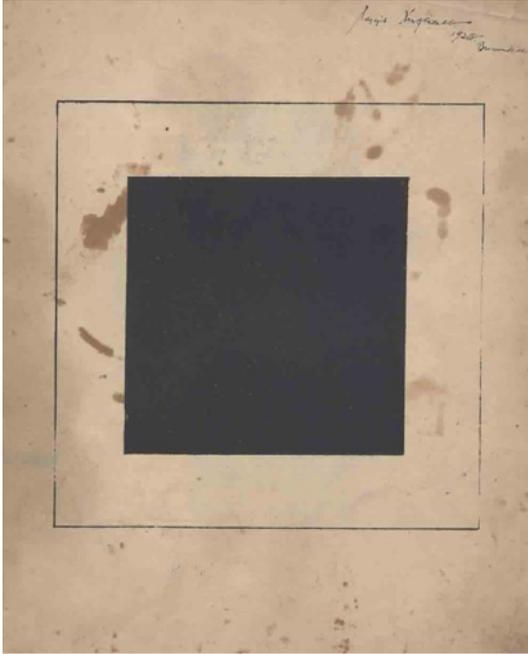


FIGURE 8.1 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920). Signed by Khidekel: 'Lazar Khidekel 1920 Vitebsk', Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

and treasured his own copy (Fig. 8.1). In this text, Malevich established the bar [*brusok*], which derived from the square and the cube, as the fundamental element for constructing Suprematist volumes. Consequently, in his charts, Khidekel frequently used the term 'utilitarian assemblages' [*utilitarnie slozheniia*],⁶ which essentially denoted the method of assembling a volume using bars. This process is similar to the procedure for creating sculpture and ultimately led to the production of the so-called 'blind architectons' [*arkhitektony*]. According to Khidekel, descriptive geometry helped him to create reliefs and multi-layered compositions on the plane, which he made during the period 1921-1922.

In mid-1920, in Lissitzky's workshop, Ilia Chashnik conceived his project for a Tribune (Fig. 7.2).⁷ The structure was initially intended to be built in Smolensk, but the design became the subject of vigorous and lengthy debates

6 Lazar Khidekel. 'Notes for an Exam', undated ms, Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

7 For details, see Vasilii Rakitin, *Ilia Chashnik. Khudozhnik novogo vremeni* (Moscow: RA / Palace Editions, 2000), 16-18.

at Unovis concerning the ‘implementation’ of Suprematism’ and the issue of taking ‘construction out into the streets’. These discussions naturally produced feelings of profound frustration in Chashnik, as he explained to Khidekel in March 1921:

I find myself in an isolated position in relation to what is happening here. Judging from your letter, the fight is just beginning. This is for the best. Although I have already formed my opinion of [Nikolai] Suetin and [Mark] Noskov.

The main thing is that you must speak out and present our position clearly, because the longer it goes on without a decision, the more difficult it will then become to abandon it, and undoubtedly it will eventually have to be abandoned. It is true that you are increasingly convinced that the work can almost be carried out and only by us, but that with us it might lead to absolute absurdity, and that it is also essential to prevent this. And, therefore, I was not wrong when I wrote to you that you are standing there as one of the revolutionary Suprematists, who will undoubtedly come to defend your statement about the Suprematist revolution, about taking constructions out into the street, as we have already talked about with them.⁸

In fact, Suprematism had already been used in the applied arts and had already been taken ‘out into the street’ in Vitebsk. Malevich himself had created Suprematist agitational art, such as his *Tribune for Orators* and his *Principle of Painting Walls (the Plane) or an Entire Room or Complete Apartment according to the System of Suprematism (Death to Wallpaper)* (1920).⁹ Nevertheless, he adamantly rejected this first three-dimensional interpretation of Suprematism by Chashnik. In addition to the general question concerning the implementation of Suprematism in architecture, as discussed within Unovis, Malevich may have rejected Chashnik’s *Tribune* because he did not consider it to be Suprematist. The skeletal iron joist was not associated with the solid Suprematist ‘bar’ nor with any of the current experiments with volumetric Suprematism, but was far more closely related to the engineering and industrial aesthetic of the Eiffel Tower, which had inspired Vladimir Tatlin’s *Model for a Monument to the Third International of 1920*.¹⁰ Both Lissitzky and Male-

8 Ilia Chashnik, letter to Lazar Khidekel, March 1921, Khidekel Archive.

9 *Kazimir Malevich in The Russian Museum* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), nos. 122 and 123

10 See Fig. 12.3.

vich criticised Tatlin's project precisely because it merely exploited Western technology.¹¹

Lissitzky valued the work that had been undertaken in Vitebsk, and, after his departure for Moscow in November 1920, maintained a correspondence with Khidekel and Chashnik: 'I am asking you to inform me about your accomplishments in words and sketches ... In order to see the big picture of something, it's necessary to have some distance from it, so that with each of my departures from Vitebsk I have been able to grasp the significance of what we're creating. The question of space and the living form of construction is on everyone's lips; I'm also confident, and I know that it's also on our tables'.¹² He did not forget his students and later, in 1924, he argued about them with Malevich who considered that they had 'moved away from architecture'.¹³ In 1925, Lissitzky visited Leningrad to see them and, as a sign of a deep affection, gave Khidekel his painting, *Synagogue Interior in Druia*, which had been inspired by his expedition with Issachar Ber Ryback to the old synagogues in Mogilev and Druia during the summer of 1916. Khidekel cherished the painting all his life.

In 1919-1920, Khidekel was simultaneously studying painting with Marc Chagall, drawing with Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, architecture and typography with El Lissitzky, and Suprematism with Malevich. For a time, Khidekel was taught by Malevich personally and was the only student in Malevich's Dynamic Studio.

Khidekel contributed to the legendary 1919 *First State Exhibition of Paintings by Local and Moscow Artists*, which also contained work by Wassily Kandinsky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova, Alexandra Exter, Lissitzky, Malevich and others.¹⁴ Khidekel's participation in *The Second Exhibition of Current-Year Work* in February 1920 brought him recognition, notably a prize 'probably for the works he had completed in Chagall's studio—a fitting epilogue to his

11 Malevich wrote 'Tatlin's tower is a fiction of Western technology'. See Kazimir Malevich, letter to El Lissitzky, 11 February 1925; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 1: 182.

12 El Lissitzky, letter to Lazar Khidekel and Ilia Chashnik, 12 November 1920, Khidekel Archive.

13 Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; in Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 176-177.

14 *1-ia Gosudarstvennaia vystavka kartin mestnykh i moskovskikh khudozhnikov. Katalog* (Vitebsk, 1919). For details of contributors, see *Vystavki sovetskogo izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva. Spravochnik. Tom 1. 1917-1932* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1965), 59.

brief yet productive period of study with the master'.¹⁵ Khidekel also showed work in all the Unovis exhibitions, which took place in Vitebsk, Moscow and Petrograd, 1920-1923.

According to Khidekel's 'Notes for an Exam', he studied Cézannism ('the geometrization of the forms of visible objects'), Cubism ('work with materials'), and Futurism ('the development of speed through the movement of objects and abstract geometric velocity'), as stages on the path towards a mastery of Suprematism.¹⁶ He then experimented with all the stages of Suprematism: Black – Colour – White – Metallic – Cosmic, consistently and simultaneously working on a variety of formal ideas, having, from his earliest work, identified his own personal style as minimalist *avant la lettre*, although he always kept his explorations within the boundaries of the Suprematist canon.

According to Tatiana Goriacheva, 'Khidekel was apparently guided by the use of an analytical method and a striving for Constructivist sharpness' and his 'explorations of the black square ... revealed the compositional potential of this most important Suprematist form'.¹⁷ Khidekel's exploration of space, concentration on a limited number of elements and colours, and his emphasis on texture became important components in developing his theory. Khidekel's sophisticated drawing technique started with multi-layered hatching strokes – an almost meditative process of overlaying pencil strokes in different directions to create a dense, opaque surface. His use of small formats intensified the inherent energy of the dynamic tensions produced by the Suprematist elements, which were defined by colour, weight, density, and their position in space. As Lev Iudin noted in his diaries: 'Khidekel's work was infused with an unexpected spark of creativity ... in particular, Khidekel's little drawings were very sharp'.¹⁸

Khidekel defined Suprematism as 'absolute objectlessness and the manifestation of the higher dynamic tension of rhythmic accumulations in the space of the white field of the canvas'.¹⁹ Although several of Malevich's students from

15 Tatiana Goriacheva, 'Research in the Plane of the Suprematist Field: Lazar Khidekel's Suprematism', in Regina Khidekel, ed., *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 16.

16 Khidekel. 'Notes for an Exam'.

17 Goriacheva, 'Research in the Plane of the Suprematist Field', 20.

18 Lev Iudin, Diary entry, 11 August 1921, Khidekel Archive.

19 Lazar Khidekel, 'Plan for Explanatory Statements to Include in a Group Tour on the New Painting', [after 12 November 1922], ms, Khidekel Archive; English translation in Irina Karasik 'Lazar Khidekel and his Role in the Development of Suprematism: Documents from the State Institute of Artistic Culture and the State Institute of Art History', *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism*, 198.

the Unovis group effectively absorbed the Suprematist system, very few managed to cross the threshold to abstraction. Khidekel did, and he went on to become, in Chashnik's words, a truly 'revolutionary Suprematist',²⁰ who developed his own Suprematist idioms and solutions.

Khidekel regarded some of his compositions, such as *Intersecting Lines* (1920); *Kinetic Elements of Suprematism: Circular Movement* (1920); and *Black Square Split by a Cross* (1920), as his contribution to the development of Suprematism and to its structural transformation.²¹ The cruciform composition he developed became the basis for future constructions. As Selim Omarovich Khan-Magomedov noted, these extremely laconic structures, built on the interaction between geometric figures, such as the square and the cross (which earlier floated freely in white space), created a new constructive morphogenesis: 'extended rectangles joined in a rigid cross-like composition ... Those new pictorial compositions, emerging in Vitebsk in the works of Malevich's pupils, can be seen as a sort of a stage in the compositional and structural preparation of planar Suprematism for its breakthrough into volume'.²²

The extremely rapid advance that Khidekel achieved in these years was a result of his profound understanding of the theory of Suprematism, which established the basis for his own artistic and architectural explorations. Khidekel realised that modern art is not only about skills, but also about thinking and conceptualising, so he began investigating the philosophical and scientific bases of art. Khidekel was a founding member of Unovis, a member of its Creative Committee (Tvorcheskii komitet – Tvorkom), and both a contributor to, and editor of, the group's publications. In fact, he contributed more articles to Unovis publications than any other member of the group.

In 1920, Khidekel and Chashnik jointly produced the hand-written, typed and lithographed journal-manifesto, *AERO: Articles and Projects* (Fig. 8.2).²³ Khidekel's version of *AERO* includes an introductory preface, his handwritten and signed statement, four of his original drawings, and two typed articles: Khidekel's 'The Canvas Serves...' [*Polotno sluzhit ...*] and Chashnik's 'The World Creative Collective' [*Vsemirnyi tvorcheskii kollektiv*].²⁴ There is no mention of Unovis, although Khidekel added the name by hand to the front page, using his distinctive calligraphy. Nevertheless, *AERO* was considered an Unovis publication and was included in the chronicle, 'Notes on the Development of Unovis'

20 Chashnik, letter to Khidekel, [March 1921], Khidekel Archive.

21 For reproductions, see *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism*, plates 28, 24, 31.

22 S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Lazar' Khidekel* (Moscow: Russkii avangard, 2010), 38-39.

23 Lazar Khidekel and Ilia Chashnik, *AERO. Stat'i i proekty* (Vitebsk, 1920), Khidekel Archive.

24 The whereabouts of Ilia Chashnik's copy of *AERO* is unknown.

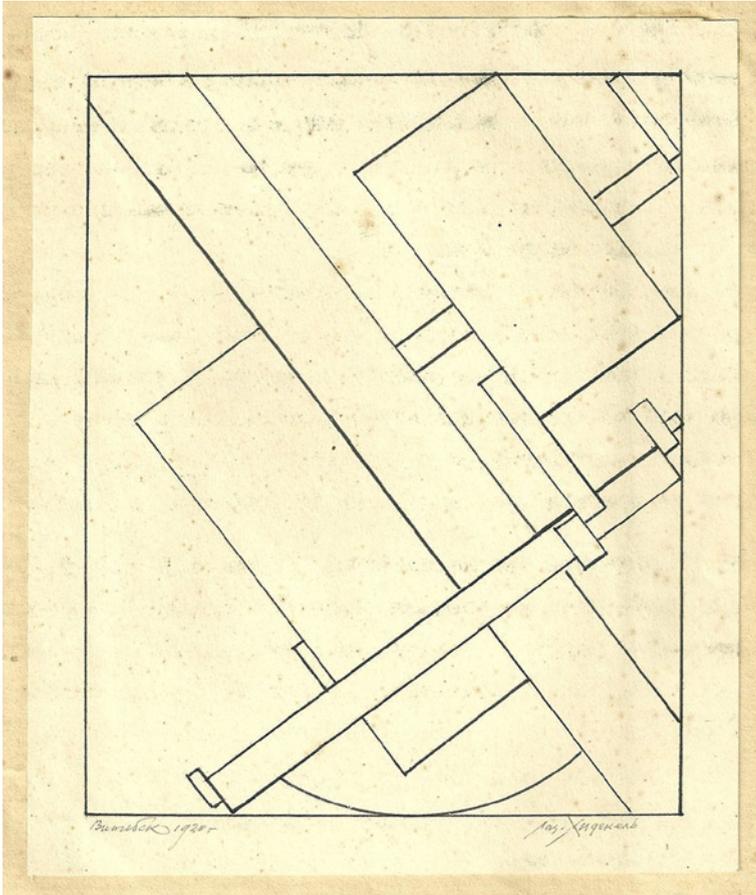


FIGURE 8.2 Lazar Khidekel, Drawing from the journal *AERO: Articles and Projects* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920), 1920, India ink on paper, 17.5 × 14.5 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection. Khidekel's composition recalls El Lissitzky's *Prouns*, such as *Proun 4B*, 1919-1920, oil on canvas, 70 × 55.5 cm., Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

in the group's leaflet, issued by the Unovis Creative Committee and dated 20 November 1920: 'The journal *AERO*, is published by Unovis, with articles and projects by Chashnik and Khidekel'.²⁵

25 See [I. T. Gavis], 'Rost Unovisa (khronika)', *Unovis. Listok Vitebskogo Tvorkoma*, 1 (20 November 1920); English translation, 'The Growth of Unovis', in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 303. The single-page leaflet also contained another article by Khidekel, 'The New Realism – Our Contemporaneity' [Novyi realizm – nasha sovremennost'].

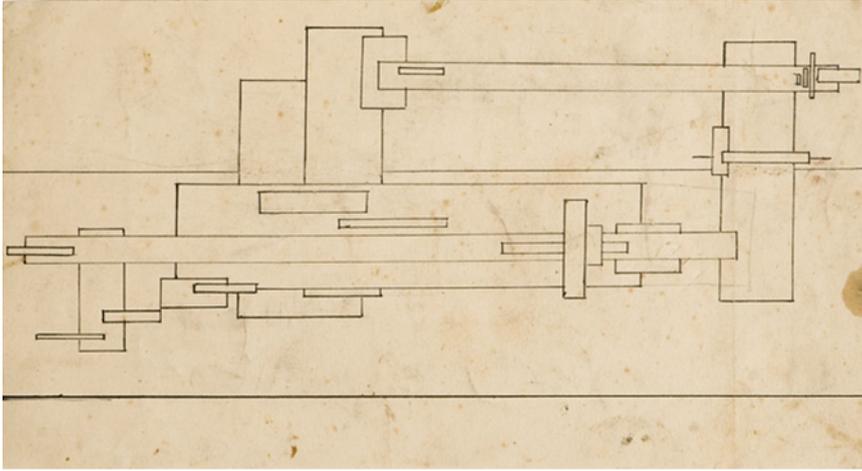


FIGURE 8.3 Lazar Khidekel, *Linear Suprematism*, 1920, India ink on paper, 22 × 12.1 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection. The Horizontal borderless composition illustrates the “utilitarian assembly” of the bars.

The appearance of *AERO* coincided with Khidekel's completion of his training in Lissitzky's Studio of Architecture and Typography, and the conclusion of his first year of study with Malevich. The title *AERO* (air – as associated with air, space and aviation) reflected Khidekel's commitment to the new ‘world of space’ (as the realm of art that would include the universe) and defined his ‘ethereal vision’. The sub-title, ‘*Articles and Projects*’, indicated that his creative activity was both practical and conceptual, and that he was presenting a blueprint for a future world, supported by theoretical statements, which reveal the influence of Malevich, who sought to advance the analytical component of the creative process.

Khidekel's *AERO* images and his *Linear Suprematism* (Fig. 8.3) demonstrate a new attitude towards drawing as architectural representation, involving the spatial exploration of Suprematism's visual language. This process of translating art into the language of architecture reflected his involvement in the historical transition from planar to volumetric Suprematism, which led to the development of the first real Suprematist architectural project. Khidekel used Lissitzky's architectural training without compromising the integrity of Suprematism. In 1920, Khidekel was creating horizontally layered compositions from rectangular bars, which exemplified the principle of ‘utilitarian assembly’ (Fig. 8.3) and his progress towards developing ‘architectural Suprematism’, as stated in his ‘Notes for an Exam.’²⁶

26 Khidekel, ‘Notes for an Exam.’

In *AERO*, Khidekel articulated for the first time his view that ecology is crucial for the new architecture. He argued that architecture should not conquer nature by forcing it into a workable shape, but, on the contrary, develop new solutions, enabling humanity to exist in harmony with the natural environment. Consequently, *AERO* is regarded as the first ecological manifesto in modern art and architecture, and it was presented as such at the *Concrete Complete* exhibition of 2010.²⁷ As Ettore Robbiani explained, ‘To this day, “AERO” remains the earliest example of a manifesto combining philosophical views on art with new and futuristic architectural visions and unprecedented insights into the emerging ecological impact on civilization’.²⁸

Khidekel was passionate about the built environment. He wrote: ‘Our present spirit, and consciousness of innovative creativity building a new world in the rhythm of the present, demands a constant pursuit of perfection and the conquest of speed on a global scale, leading to an economy of means, which like truth will sweep away the world’s stagnation and chaos, producing a state of maximum dynamism’.²⁹ He focused on the concept of construction, which became a key element within the Suprematist system. It was ‘a quality that was not merely exclusive to machines’ but vital to ‘world construction’, ‘a sense of global design’ [*chuvstvo mirovoi konstruktсии*], and ‘a like-minded organism of creativity’ [*edinomyshlennii organizm tvorchestva*], which has only one goal – not to waste energy but to accumulate it on its path to ... embody the creativity of the whole human race’. Khidekel concluded: ‘Construction for creating a new life is directed not at the destruction of energy, cities, or itself, but at perfecting and conquering the world’s space and removing contradictions between human civilizations’.³⁰

For Khidekel, the Suprematist architects’ ‘interaction with surrounding nature’ had to be different from the approach adopted by ‘the artists of the past [who] perceived only the external aspect of nature’. He stressed that, ‘Together with the discovery of the internal, hidden forces of nature, a new, higher civilisation is born, in which the architecture of the future must be based on its own laws which, instead of destroying the natural environment, will enter into a beneficial and special relationship with surrounding nature’.³¹

Khidekel foresaw that modern artistic practice would fuse art, philosophy, and science, and he emphasised this in his theory and practice, consistently

27 See *Concrete Complete* (Zurich: Museum Haus Konstruktiv, 2010).

28 Ettore Gualtiero Robbiani, ‘A Utopian Vision. Lazar Khidekel – the Rediscovered Suprematist’, *AHEAD* (Zurich), 3 (2011): 38.

29 Khidekel, ‘Polotno sluzhit...’ [The Canvas Serves ...], *AERO*, unpaginated.

30 Ibid.

31 Lazar Khidekel, ‘Put’ Unovisa’ [The Path of Unovis], *AERO*, 2 (1921), Khidekel Archive.

highlighting the affinities between scientific and artistic processes. He belonged to the new category of 'scholar-artist' that Malevich advocated and promoted in 1923, when he established the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Gosudarstvennyi insitut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Ginkhuk) in Petrograd.

For Khidekel, Suprematism represented a synthesis of intuition and analytical investigation, creative imagination and exploration. It embraced revolutionary scientific developments, such as the concepts of Non-Euclidean Geometry, atomic theory, ideas relating to the infinity of the cosmos, the new understanding of energy, and the notion of expanded dimensions – the fourth dimension of time and speed (movement), and the fifth dimension of the economy of means. Khidekel's library in Vitebsk contained books by Nikolai Lobachevsky, Henri Poincaré and others, which are inscribed 'Lazar Khidekel, Vitebsk'.

In his work at Vitebsk, Khidekel mixed words and images to explore and convey the invisible energies and atomic processes of the 'hidden forces of nature'. He focused on the drawn line as a means of transmitting conceptual thinking, and sought ways of expressing speed, energy, dimensions, anti-gravity, and geometrical economy, all of which became the basis for his creative work – whether it was for actual buildings to be erected in the present or for visions of a future world. Khidekel contributed to the Suprematist transformation of drawing through his efforts to visualise the intangible – thermal energy flows, speed, sound waves, and even the 'movement of consciousness'. He considered the line to be a sign of the so-called 'infinite world line', a term coined by Hermann Minkowski to denote the path of an object in four-dimensional space-time.³²

For Khidekel, thinking about art became an important means of artistic expression in itself. He developed a special interest in creating methodological programmes and charts, which systemised his thinking and underpinned his writings and teaching programmes at Ginkhuk and the State Institute for the History of Art (Gosudarstvennyi institut istorii iskusstv – GIII.)

In 1924, Khidekel used the term 'Suprematist Order' for the first time in one of his Ginkhuk programmes. Malevich subsequently adopted the phrase to denote the whole 'Suprematist Art of Volume Construction'.³³ Khidekel's 'Description of the Premises of the Laboratory of Suprematist Architecture' provides details of the room and the materials, as well as outlining the five

32 See Hermann Minkowski, 'Raum und Zeit', *Physikalische Zeitschrift*, 10 (1909): 75-88.

33 Lazar Khidekel, 'Information on Work Completed in the Suprematist Department during the 1923-24 Semester', 1923; English translation in Karasik, 'Documents', 199.

stages entailed in working on the architectons. The process began with measuring and ‘tracing Suprematist drawings’, the forms of which could be seen in his *Horizontal Suprematist Structure* (1921),³⁴ which combines two projections: a front façade and a view from above, showing how the ‘three-dimensional structure was composed’.³⁵

In his ‘Biography’, Khidekel stated:

From 1920 to 1922, I participated in the publication of Unovis collections, contributing a series of articles on questions of art and its relationship to production. I spent the last two years at the Vitebsk Artistic and Practical Institute; in addition to coursework assignments, I was engaged with questions concerning the ties between constructive art (Cubism, the ‘relief’, Constructivism, Suprematism) and architecture. I presented my findings – work that involved not only a painterly but also an architectural content – at the *Second Unovis Exhibition* in Moscow.³⁶

Khidekel’s statement is supported by Malevich’s letter of May 1921 to the Unovis Creative Committee. This mentions Khidekel in connection with the Moscow exhibition which, Malevich insisted, ‘must conclude with the sensation of Suprematist architectural volume’ and where ‘Suprematist volume should replace the word architecture for us’.³⁷ According to his note, ‘On the exhibition of Unovis’, written a few months later, but before the show actually opened, Malevich intended to display ‘the progressive development of the system through objectless ... constructions up to projects for Suprematist structures’.³⁸ The exhibition was divided into four parts, corresponding to the various stages of this process. Khidekel’s works were shown as products of the final phase, i.e. when sensations of the economy of movement, the mutual attraction of forms, the intensity of energy, rupture and dynamism (relating to the various stages) had been completely assimilated and embodied in the creation of Suprematist volume. Khidekel spent most of 1921 developing his compositions of Suprematist cruciform plans into stratified multi-layered structures

34 For a reproduction, see *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism*, page 38.

35 Lazar Khidekel, ‘Opisanie pomeshcheniia zanimaemogo laboratoiei suprematicheskoi arkhitektury’ [Description of the Premises of the Laboratory of Suprematist Architecture], 1924, ms., Khidekel Archive; English translation in Karasik, ‘Documents’, 199–200.

36 Lazar Khidekel, ‘Biography’, 3 January 1928, ms; reprinted in Karasik, ‘Documents’, 202.

37 Kazimir Malevich, letter to the Creative Committee of Unovis (Tvorkom), 6–7 May 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 145.

38 Kazimir Malevich, ‘K vystavke Unovisa’ [On the Exhibition of Unovis], 1921, ms, Nikolai Khardzhiev Archive, Khardzhiev-Chaga Collection, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

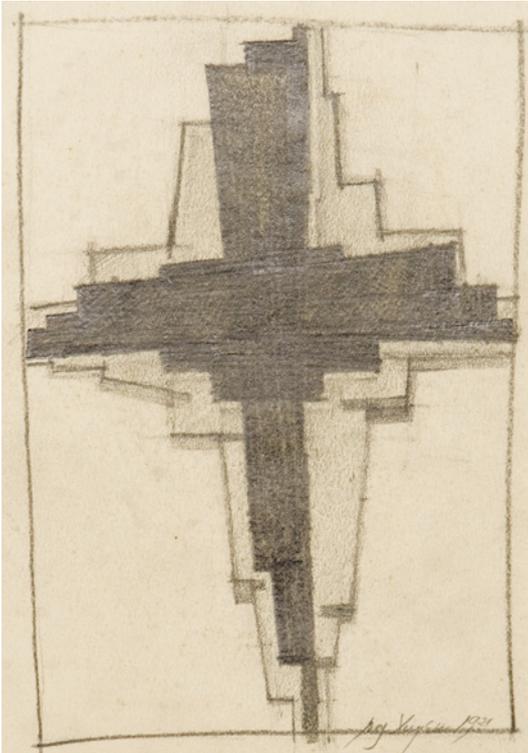


FIGURE 8.4 Lazar Khidekel, *Volumetric Exploration of the Cross: Suprematist Axonometric Drawing, [Relief]*, 1921, pencil on paper, 20.5 × 12.6 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

or collages of paper strips (Fig. 8.4). He may have shown this type of relief at the important 1921 Unovis exhibition, because, according to Khidekel, at this stage, Malevich believed that architecture would be Suprematism's crowning achievement. Malevich himself wrote, 'In this way, the entire path of the new art in all its cultural manifestations arrived at contemporary art, which is architecture.'³⁹

Malevich was also convinced that architecture would liberate humanity from gravity. Indeed, in 1924, he wrote an article 'Architecture as the Greatest Step in Liberating Humanity from Weight', subtitled 'The Aim of Life is Libera-

39 See Kazimir Malevich, 'Pis'mo v redaktsiu' [Letter to the Editors], *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 5 (1928); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 310.

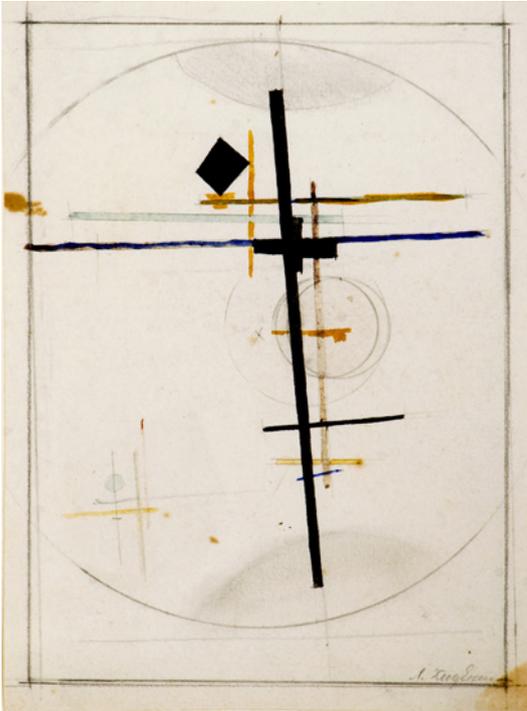


FIGURE 8.5 Lazar Khidekel. *Suprematist Composition in the Cosmos*, 1922, India ink, water-colour and pencil on paper, 16 × 12.2 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

tion from the Weight of Gravity'.⁴⁰ Consequently, Khidekel's 'cosmic drawings' explored the 'free flight' of forms. As the highest stage of Suprematism, Cosmic Suprematism became important for developing architectural forms that would overcome gravity and exist entirely in space (Fig. 8.5). The atmosphere between deep space and the earth (encompassing the troposphere, the stratosphere and mesosphere) was the ideal place for Suprematist structures, which would develop like crystals, relying on the natural law of development.

In his experiments with texture, Khidekel came to associate silver (as a colour and texture) with speed and the displacement of weight in movement. Indeed, Unovis's investigations into the tension between the energy of colour and texture had given rise to terms such as 'metallic' [*metallik*],

40 Kazimir Malevich, 'Arkhitektura kak stepen' naibol'shego osvobozhdeniia cheolveka ot vesa. Tsel' zhizni – osvobozhdenie ot vesa tiazhest', [Architecture as the Greatest Step in Liberating Humanity from Weight: The Aim of Life is Liberation from the Weight of Gravity], [1924], ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, IV: 273-285.

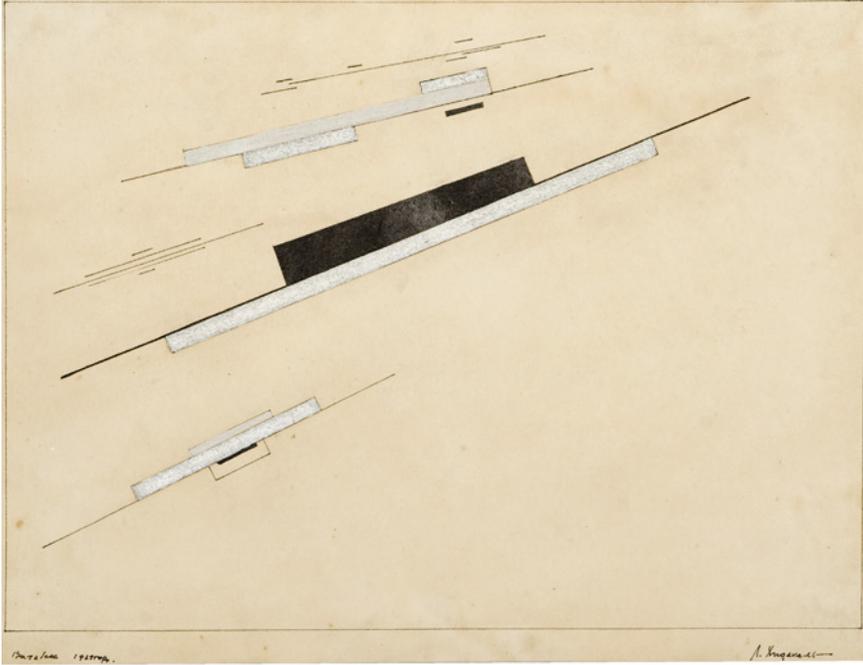


FIGURE 8.6 Lazar Khidekel, *Suprematist Space*, 1921, india ink and silver paint on paper, 15.4 × 20 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection. This is an example of Metallic Suprematism.

‘metallic colour’ [*metallicheskii tsvet*] and ‘tonal metallic state’ [*tonal’noe metallischeskoe sostoianie*].⁴¹ Silver had been selected as the property of flying structures, because, as a material and a texture, it conveyed a sensation of weightlessness [*bezvesie*] in modern architecture (Fig. 8.6).

All these considerations played a vital role in Khidekel’s explorations. Floating layered structures emerge from the clouds, while flying devices such as satellites overcome the force of gravity. As scholars have observed, his ‘work demonstrates the manner in which art and architecture become fused, making Suprematism and its element, the line, relevant to both the material and immaterial world’.⁴²

41 Lev Iudin, ‘Ot metallov k metallicheskomu tsvetu [From Metals to Metallic Colour], in Iudin, *Diaries, 1921-1922*, 61, 63-4, 66.

42 Maria Kokkori and Alexander Bouras, ‘The Suprematist Line: Kazimir Malevich and Lazar Khidekel’, in *Lazar Khidekel: Floating Worlds and Future Cities* (New York: Lazar Khidekel Society, 2013), 10.

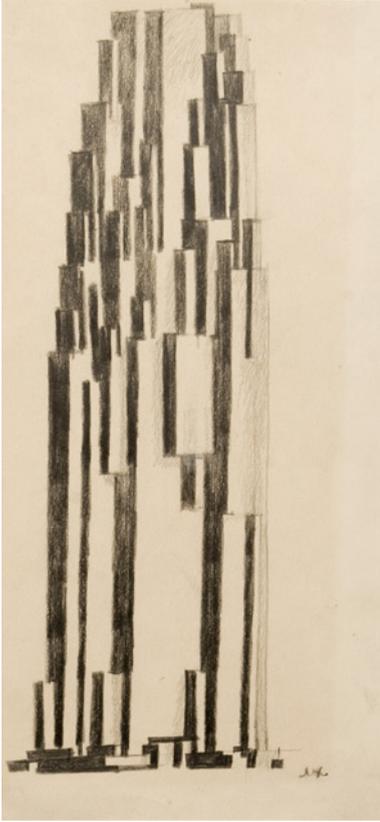


FIGURE 8.7

Lazar Khidekel, *Architecton*, 1924, pencil on paper, 21 × 13 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

In one of his charts, Khidekel defined the ‘fading of tone’⁴³ as an expression of dematerialisation, the dispersal of light, and the nebula-like atmosphere of moist air. His works of 1921-1922, like *Shadow in the Cosmos*, *Nebulas*, and *Suprematist Topography* could be classified as ‘Tonal Suprematism’,⁴⁴ conveying the process of dematerialisation, while visualising the movement of celestial bodies or the urban grid, as if viewed from the imaginary vantage point of air travel. These drawings prefigure Khidekel’s 1927 series of tonal vertical architectons – skyscrapers that are very different from Malevich’s white, blind, sculptural architectons. Khidekel’s architectons resemble, in part, the structure that Malevich inserted into his collage of the American skyline of 1926

43 Lazar Khidekel, ‘Plan raboty suprematicheskogo otdeleniia’ [Work Plan of the Suprematist Department], 1924, ms Khidekel Archive; English translation in Karasik, ‘Documents’, 199.

44 Lazar Khidekel, ‘Institut velikoi arkhitektury’ [The Institute of Great Architecture], undated ms., Khidekel Archive.



FIGURE 8.8 Lazar Khidekel. *Architecton* 1927, India ink, gouache and pencil on paper, 23.8 × 18 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

(Fig. 7.4), but instead of Malevich's black vertical planes, Khidekel envisioned tonal panels, which could easily be translated into building materials and glass (Fig. 8.7, 8.8).⁴⁵

Khidekel's 'Tonal Suprematism' also relates to post-war minimalistic monochrome painting, in which the emotional power derives from the sensual impact of colour, texture, and light. Khidekel's refined white monochrome *Roads in the Lowlands (Canals) – Ray of Light = 45°* (1923, Fig. 7.8) seems to have anticipated Lucio Fontana's works through the absence of paint and sculpting in the pure space of the ground plane.

The 'introduction of volume', which was the primary goal of Suprematist explorations in Vitebsk, was realised by Khidekel in various media – drawing, paper collages, mixed-media reliefs, and plaster models, of which only one survives – Khidekel's *Model for an Ashtray* (1922, Fig. 8.9).

45 See Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Structure Among American Skyscrapers*, reproduced in *Praesens* (Warsaw), 1 (1926). For further discussion of Malevich's architecture, see Samuel Johnson's essay in this volume.

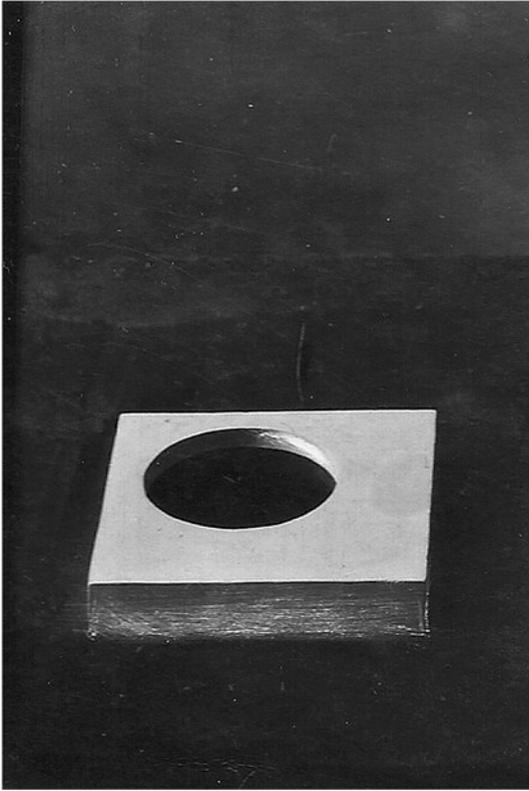


FIGURE 8.9 Lazar Khidekel, *Ashtray*, 1922, photograph of the model, Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

A type of Suprematist composition, which Malevich called ‘dissection’ [*rassechenie*], when referring to the 1921 exhibition, could be identified with Khidekel’s series ‘Black Square Split by a Cross’. The evolution of the cross-shaped structure into a three-dimensional body, illustrating the invisible energies that straighten the line despite the curvature of space (Lobachevsky), could be seen in the series ‘Suprematist Structures in the Cosmos’ of 1921, which includes the dynamic axonometric compositions *Suprematist Horizontal Architecton: Aero-Club (Axonometry)* (1922-1923, Fig. 8.10). The *Aero-Club* combines features inspired by aeroplanes and rocketry, but it is also a fully articulated project and includes detailed building plans. According to Khan-Magomedov, Khidekel’s *Aero-Club* was not only the first architecton, but it was also ‘virtually the first truly architectural composition based on Suprematism’.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Khan-Magomedov, *Lazar Khidekel*, 77.

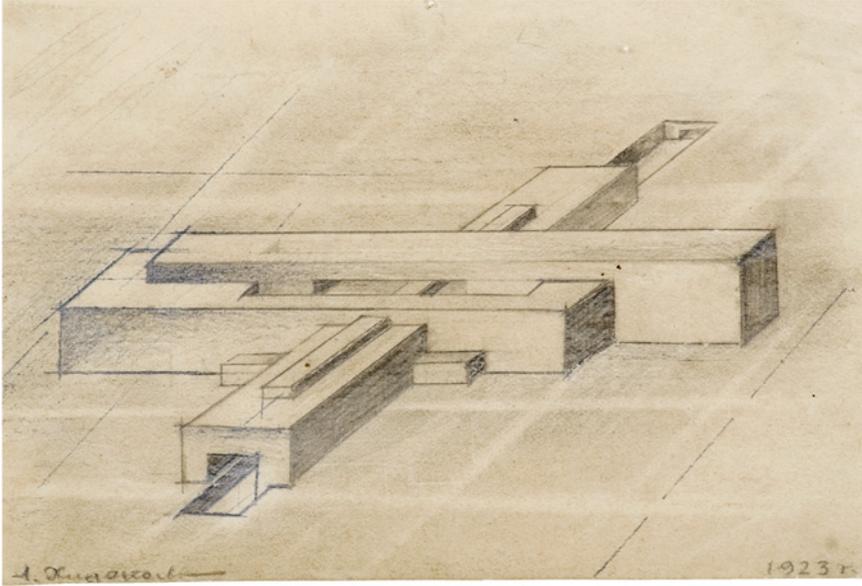


FIGURE 8.10 Lazar Khidekel. *Design for Horizontal Architecton – Aero-Club Axonometry* 1923, pencil on paper, 8.8 × 12.6 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection. The design is for a building erected over and encompassing a traffic tunnel.

Khidekel absorbed important lessons from Lissitzky and Malevich, but he developed his own understanding of the process of constructing as object-less ‘pure painterly action in nature’ (Fig. 8.11),⁴⁷ creating what he called ‘aero-visual’ or ‘aerially visual’ [*aerovidnie*] compositions. Malevich also referred to Khidekel’s works as ‘aero-visual’ in his instructions for a ‘Suprematist film’ in February 1927. He wrote: ‘We need Khidekel to create an architectural design, but if there’s not enough time, let him take a shot from [Matvei] Petin for the film crew. We need to show the entire development of volumetric Suprematism in accordance with the sensation of aerially visual [*aerovidnie*] and dynamic constructions.’⁴⁸

In 1922, after graduating from the Vitebsk Artistic and Practical Institute, Khidekel moved to Petrograd and continued working with Malevich, initially at Ginkhuk, where he ran the Architectural Studio (1923-1926) and then at GIII (1927-1929). At Ginkhuk, Khidekel became deeply involved with theoret-

47 Lazar Khidekel, ‘O zhivopisnom chistom deistvii v prirode’ [On Painterly Pure Action in Nature], c. 1920, ms; Khidekel Archive.

48 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Nikolai Suetin and Valentin Vorobev, [21-28 February 1927]; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 194.

Assuming that my only possible involvement in architecture would occur through the assimilation of the [technical] knowledge on which it is based, in 1922 I enrolled in the Department of Architecture at the Institute of Civil Engineers. I am now a student on the final course. Between the time of my arrival in Leningrad in 1922 and the present, I participated in the *Fifth-Year Exhibition* at the Academy of Arts in 1923. In 1923, I became a member of the Art and Literature Department of the literary and artistic journal *Vulcan* [*Vulkan*], published by Leningrad State University. I served as the head of tours in the Painting Department of the Russian Museum (formerly the Museum of Painterly Culture).⁵⁰

During the summers of 1923 and 1924, Khidekel worked at the Vitebsk airfield on the construction of a hangar. By 1925, he had already started exploring ideas for his futuristic Aero-City. In 1926, he caused a sensation with his student design for The Workers' Club, which was the first professionally developed Suprematist architectural project (Fig. 8.12). The presentation was spectacular – white and black façades were arranged against a background of dark blue gouache. The project was fully developed, with perspective views, façades, plans, and cross-sections, all of which exceeded the stipulations of the students' brief. Khidekel even described the facilities to be provided within the building, such as a canteen, library, reading room, and theatre, all of which were intended to promote the creation a new collective society. The project was applauded and recommended for the Museum of the Leningrad Institute of Civil Engineers, as well as receiving national and international coverage. It was reproduced in the journal *Contemporary Architecture* [*Sovremennaiia arkhitektura*],⁵¹ and displayed at the *First Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture* in Moscow in 1927, the most prestigious international show of contemporary architecture, which had been organised by the Constructivist group, the Society of Contemporary Architects (Obshchestvo sovremennykh arkitekotorov – OSA).⁵² Khidekel joined OSA and was a delegate to the first OSA conference in Moscow in 1928.⁵³ Khidekel's design also exerted a stylistic influence on architectural developments in Leningrad, and its importance continues to

50 Khidekel, 'Biography', 1928; Karasik, 'Documents', 202.

51 See *Sovremennia arkhitektura*, 6 (1927): 188.

52 See *Katalog pervoi vystavki sovremennoi arkhitektury* (Moscow, 1927), no. 182; and Alla Rosenfeld, 'Between Suprematist Utopia and Stalinist Reality', *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism*, 40.

53 Khidekel, along with Aleksandr Nikolskii and Fedor Terekhin represented the Leningrad OSA at the first OSA conference held in Moscow in 1928; Rosenfeld, 'Between Suprematist Utopia and Stalinist Reality', 45, n. 12.

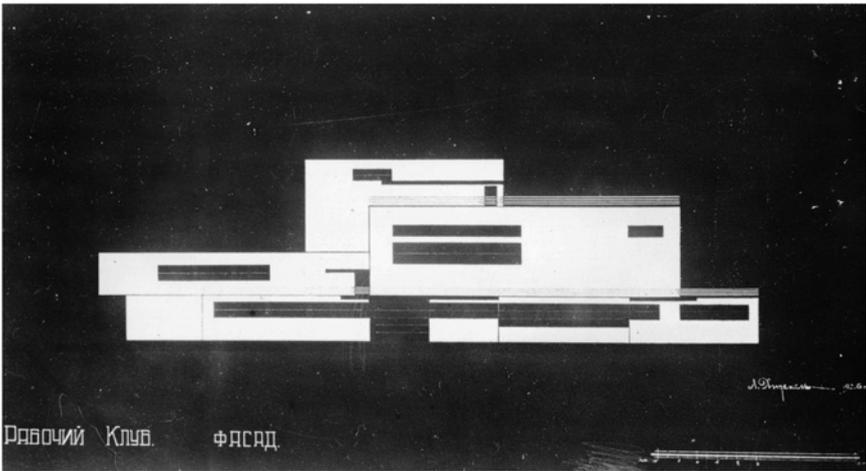
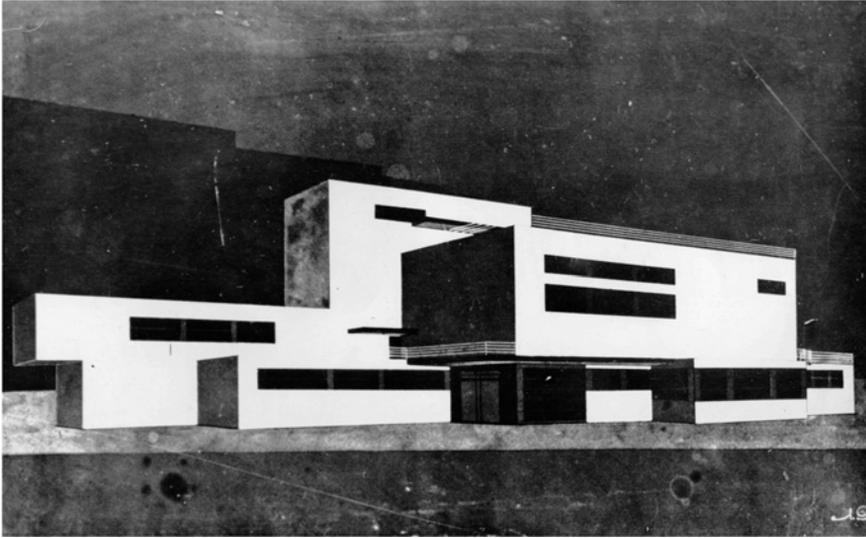


FIGURE 8.12 Lazar Khidekel, The Workers' Club, 1926, two views. Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection.

be acknowledged today. In 2011, Jonathan Willet wrote: 'Under Malevich's direction, the architect and painter Lazar Khidekel was instrumental in the shift toward an architectural Suprematism and was the first to translate the abstract model of the *Architekton* into residential complexes, offices and more.'⁵⁴

54 Jonathan Willet, 'Unmapping the City: Perspectives of Flatness', in Alfredo Cramerotti, ed., *Unmapping the City: Perspectives of Flatness* (London: Intellect Ltd., 2011), 44.

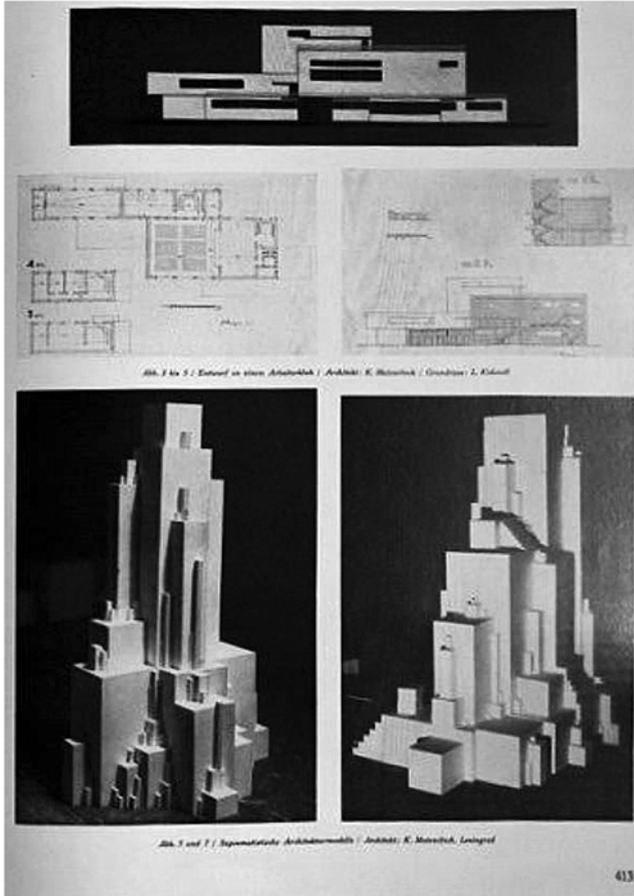


FIGURE 8.13 A page from Malevich's article, showing reproductions, which are labelled 'Suprematistische Architektur von K. Malewitsch, Leningrad', *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* (Berlin), No. 10 (1927), p. 413. This includes a façade and two ground plans of Lazar Khidekel's design for the Workers' Club.

Malevich, himself, accepted The Workers' Club as the first example of a truly dynamic Suprematist architecture. In his article, 'Suprematist Architecture', published in Germany in 1927,⁵⁵ he reproduced The Workers' Club – façade and two plans – which was placed above his own architects (Fig. 8.13). Perhaps, through the force of habit, Malevich appropriated the project, naming himself as architect and Khidekel as designer, even misspelling his name. He

55 K. Malewitsch, 'Suprematische Architektur', *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* (Berlin), 10 (1927): 413.

sent a letter of apology, but to Khidekel's deep regret, it was lost. At Malevich's request, the magazine published an apology and acknowledged Khidekel as the architect, but unfortunately the original error continues to be repeated.⁵⁶

Apparently, Malevich signed the project, described himself as an architect and presented himself as the head of the Architecture School of the Institute of Higher Education, because he wanted to promote himself as a designer in Germany. After his 1927 trip to Warsaw and Berlin, Malevich hoped to return to the West, and thought that these credentials would help him to obtain a teaching position at the Dessau Bauhaus. Nikolai Suetin seems to have shared these aspirations,⁵⁷ and even considered taking a degree in architecture in order to be eligible to teach at the Bauhaus with Malevich.

In their introduction to Malevich's article in *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, the publishers noted that the new materiality [*novaia veshchestvennost'*] had not found universal recognition in the Soviet Union. They noted, however, that the Club's 'plan and the inner spatial arrangement ... were later implanted in the model, which was created without any purpose'. In conclusion, they added: 'This project received first prize in the competition and has been recommended for execution'.⁵⁸ Clearly, they were trying to reconcile Malevich's position that Suprematist architecture should be 'purpose-free, absolute architectonics', with the fact that the project had been recommended for construction as an actual building.

In Russia, The Workers' Club influenced the development of Leningrad's avant-garde architecture. While still a student, Khidekel had collaborated with his professors, Aleksandr Nikolskii and Grigorii Simonov, introducing them to Suprematism and the principles of Suprematist architecture. Their assimilation of these ideas indicates the influence that Khidekel exerted over his colleagues and underpins the emergence of a distinctive architectural style, sometimes described as Suprematist Constructivism, which characterised Leningrad avant-garde architecture and secured Khidekel's position as one of four 'key figures of the Leningrad school', along with Nikolskii, Simonov and Noi Trotskii.⁵⁹

Malevich's ambiguous attitude to the success of Khidekel's project reflected a residual attachment to the principles of the Unovis collective. Nevertheless, Malevich's legacy of 'purpose-free, absolute architectonics' continued to

56 *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, 12 (1927): 484.

57 Vasilii Rakitin, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin* (Moscow: RA, 1998), 83.

58 Malewitsch, 'Suprematistische Architektur'.

59 Boris Kirikov, 'The Leningrad Avant-Garde and Its Legacy', *Future Anterior*, v, 1 (Summer 2008): 16-26; <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/246736>.

influence Khidekel's belief that architecture should not just be confined to constructing actual buildings, but should also entail creating forms inspired by artistic visions and conceptual thinking about the nature, meaning and mission of architecture, as well as taking into consideration the correlation between the process of drawing and representation in architecture in the broader artistic and social context, which ultimately determines the function of the architectural object. This belief governed both his work and his teaching, and it continues to be relevant today.

Khidekel continued to cooperate with Malevich, contributing extensively to the development of the 'Suprematist Art of Volume-Construction'. His architectons from 1922 to 1927 went through a significant evolution and were almost ready for implementation. Abstract geometry was expressed through a dynamic and minimalist composition of vertical 'flat-like' tonal rectangles and lightweight materiality shown in colour – with texture and the play of shadows contributing to the structure.

In 1927, Nikolskii appointed Khidekel to the Committee of Contemporary Art Industry, set up to preserve and extend Malevich's research into Suprematist architecture. While Nikolskii regarded Khidekel as both Malevich's follower and his own student, he also valued the fact that he was an artist as well as an architect. Nikolskii emphasised this latter 'fortunate quality', when he recommended Khidekel as a candidate to the governing body of GIII, stressing that he was 'a figure who could creatively unite the two camps'.⁶⁰

Khidekel pledged his allegiance to architecture in his youth, but he also continued to be an artist throughout his career. For him, architectonics [*arkhitektonika*] remained a purely artistic form, committed to exploring the dynamics of life and determining the shape of the material world as it develops in the future. At the beginning of his architectural career, Khidekel devised a series of futuristic Suprematist projects, which were technologically viable, but could not be realised in the immediate future (Fig. 8.14). These projects addressed issues of environmental sustainability and defence from natural and man-made disasters, in accordance with the Suprematist notion of an organic form-creating continuum and 'the harmonious introduction of form into natural action'.⁶¹

Khidekel's aerial and environmental vision resulted in projects for architectural structures over wild terrain, or elevated on poles, with transportation

60 Karasik, 'Documents', 197. Khidekel's archive contains a folder with papers relating to the scientific research on acoustics, optics, and perception that he conducted while employed at the Institute of Construction.

61 Malevich, *Suprematizm*. 34 *risunka*, 1; Malevich, *Essays*, I: 123.



FIGURE 8.14 Lazar Khidekel. *Sketch for a Futuristic City*, 1925, gouache, watercolour and pencil on paper, 24.9 × 29.2 cm., Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection. The horizontal structure is supported above the land on pillars.

tunnels built underground as in his first *Horizontal Architecton* (1922-1923, Fig. 8.10). He advocated flat garden roofs in the 1920s,⁶² and eco-parks in the 1960s. He placed abstract Suprematist structures within figurative landscapes, which provided a backdrop for his Suprematist designs for future cities and symbolised the preservation of life (Fig. 8.14). This quality distinguishes Khidekel's futuristic visions from those of his contemporaries, who envisaged the victory of technology over nature. Khidekel anticipated modern approaches to environmental change and the developments of the 1950-1960s, which posited a new relationship between art and nature as enunciated by numerous groups, such as Zero, Metabolism in Japan, Concrete, the Russian Dvizhenie [Movement], and Moscow-based Collective Actions. Towards the end of his life, Khidekel admitted that he had always been haunted by his 'flying structures in space' – a dream that he hoped the rest of humanity would eventually share.

62 Lazar Khidekel, 'Ploskie krishi' [Flat Roofs], *Nauka i tekhnika* (Leningrad), 18 (1928): 3-4.

‘... In our time, when it became We ...’: A Previously Unknown Essay by Kazimir Malevich

Tatiana Goriacheva

In the 1920s, Kazimir Malevich considered that it was absolutely essential for him to produce a theoretical justification for Suprematism, both as a new type of art and as a way of understanding the world. In relation to this, he considered that it was vital for him to present a clear statement of his own views concerning religion, human nature, and the concepts of perfection and utility. The need to do this became more compelling than making art. He wrote, ‘It seems that one cannot attain with a brush what can be attained with a pen. It is touselled and cannot get into the inner reaches of the brain – the pen is finer.’¹ The development of a Suprematist philosophy provided the foundation for transforming Suprematism into a comprehensive doctrine, a kind of meta-theory of the universe. Malevich diligently developed particular aspects of this theory in the series of treatises and texts that he published in Vitebsk, 1919–1922. These include *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* [*Suprematizm. 34 risunka*]; ‘Concerning “I” and the Collective’ [*O ‘ia’ i kollektive*]; ‘On the Question of Fine Art’ [*K voprosu izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva*]; ‘On Pure Action’ [*K chistomu deistviuu*]; *God is not Cast Down: Art, The Church, The Factory* [*Bog ne skinut. Iskusstvo, tserkov’, fabrika*]; ‘Production as Madness’ [*Proizvodstvo kak bezumie*] and ‘Laziness as the Real Truth about Humanity’ [*Len’ kak deistvitel’naia istina chelovechestva*]. These culminated in Malevich’s book, *Suprematism: The World as Non-Objectivity or Eternal Rest* [*Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost’ ili vechnyi nokoï*].² This book was his principal theoretical

1 K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* [*Suprematism: 34 Drawings*] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920), 3; reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), I: 188; English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), I: 127.

2 First published as the eleventh Bauhaus book, in a heavily edited German translation, as Kasimir Malewitsch, *Die gegenstandlose Welt* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927). For the new English translation of Malevich’s original Russian text, see Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina

statement, on which he worked for several years and which he completed in 1922.³

In addition to art, Malevich's writings focused on science, religion, and philosophy, as well as on social and political events. It should be noted that Malevich avoided using specialist philosophical and scientific terminology, and he often replaced such terms with words that he had invented himself, or with more traditional concepts and a more conventional vocabulary (using terms such as 'the civil community', 'the religious community', 'the economy', 'economic' etc.), all of which acquired completely new meanings in the framework of his theory.

The writings that Malevich produced in Vitebsk form a coherent and integrated corpus of treatises, which act as a series of sub-texts, each of which develops a single theme that complements and enriches the others. The majority of these texts have been published — either during the artist's lifetime or more recently. However, there are some manuscripts that are considered lost, since they are only known from references in Malevich's statements or from the lists of his works that were compiled by his students and followers. Among these is the essay, 'We as Utilitarian Perfection' [*My kak ulitarnoe sovershenstvo*]. A fragment of this text, entitled 'We' and tentatively dated to Summer or Autumn 1920, has recently been found among Nikolai Khardzhiev's papers, housed in the Russian Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow.⁴

Malevich mentioned the manuscript 'We' twice, once at the end of 1920 and then again in early 1921. In his preface to the album of lithographs, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, published in December 1920, Malevich wrote: 'I substantiated these questions in my booklet, *We as Utilitarian Perfection*'.⁵ In January 1921, Malevich wrote to the literary scholar, Mikhail Gershenzon:

I work all the time, and I think that I'm using up an awful lot of paper; it's all unfortunate: I simply can't link up the themes, each theme contains the same thing, but I can't put them together. I wrote a whole 22 pages about 'WE', then 20 pages about Creativity, and now I'm writing about

W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel / Hatje Cantz, 2014), 147-199. The original Russian text is reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), II: 55-123.

3 Kazimir Malevich, 'Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost' ili vechnyi nokoi', 1922, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III: 69-216.

4 Kazimir Malevich, 'My kak ulitarnoe sovershenstvo', [1920], ms, Russian State Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow (RGALI), fond 3145, opis' 1, delo 592, list 1-7.

5 Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka*, 4; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 189; Malevich, *Essays*, I: 127. There the title is given as 'Us – as Utilitarian Perfection'.

Production, and 'White Problems' of some kind are still looming, coming out of the white Suprematist square.⁶

The text that Malevich called 'We as Utilitarian Perfection' was never published, either as a separate booklet or as an article in one of the Vitebsk lithographic editions, but there is no doubt that the newly discovered manuscript fragment represents a draft version of this work. According to Malevich's letter to Gershenzon, he made attempts to rearrange the texts in relation to their topics, in order to make them more coherent and complete. In fact, Malevich managed to finalise the text he referred to as 'Production': his article 'Production as Madness' [*Proizvodstvo kak bezumie*] was finished in 1921. The paper on 'White Problems' was presumably included in the book, *Suprematism: The World as Non-Objectivity or Eternal Rest*. As far as the paper entitled 'We' is concerned, it seems that its publication was no longer needed because its arguments had been absorbed into Malevich's other theoretical works.

Malevich admitted, 'I simply can't link up the themes, each theme contains the same thing, but I can't put them together.'⁷ This confession identifies quite accurately the basic problem of the manuscripts that he wrote during the years 1919-1921, when he was feverishly trying to produce numerous texts. His pen simply could not keep up with his thoughts, which overwhelmed him.

Malevich wrote very quickly. He omitted necessary words, varied or repeated the same arguments in the drafts of different articles, revised essays that were already finished, and gave them new titles,⁸ frequently making insertions and additions. Many manuscripts remained unfinished. From the point of view of the classical criteria for literary and philosophical writing, his works lack narrative logic and contain a superfluity of semantic repetitions. He frequently digressed from discussing artistic problems to addressing religious

6 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Gershenzon, 1 January 1921; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 135-136.

7 Malevich, letter to Gershenzon, 1 January 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 135.

8 For instance, the article 'Concerning "I" and the Collective' [O 'Ia' i kollektive] was based on a 1919 variant entitled 'On Being' [O sushchestve].

See K. Malevich, 'O "Ia" i kollektive', *Unovis No. 1* (Vitebsk, 1920), [sheet 6-9]; reprinted in 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie k faksimil'nomu izdaniuu', in *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil'noe izdanie*, ed. Tat'iana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel'stvo Skanrus, 2003), 60-67. Also see Kazimir Malevich, 'O sushchestve', 1919, ms; English translation as 'The Being' in K. S. Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism: Unpublished Writings 1913-33*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Hoffmann (Copenhagen, Borgen, 1978), 54-72.

and philosophical issues and then just as unexpectedly returned to artistic questions. Meanings are often unclear or almost lost through awkward grammatical constructions and cobwebs of tropes. Nevertheless, these texts possess their own logic, which reflects Malevich's own distinctive thought processes. His imprecise style and excessive repetitions echo the complex way in which his thinking developed. The incomprehensibility of many formulations was sometimes the result of the fact that substantiations and justifications of the same proposition were scattered in several articles.

The text of 'We' mirrors Malevich's article, 'On the Need for a Commune of Suprematist Economists' (of December 1919),⁹ and the essay 'Concerning "I" and the Collective', published in the anthology, *Unovis No 1*, in May 1920.¹⁰ Malevich's ideas about the need for an association or a party of Suprematists were, to some extent, also presented in his article, 'Concerning a Party in Art',¹¹ written in January 1921, his treatise *God is not Cast Down*,¹² and in other texts.

Only one third of the draft of the article referred to as 'We' has survived. Malevich told Gershenzon that the text was 22 pages long, but only seven of these still exist. Nevertheless, even this fragment reveals the fact that the text entitled 'We as Utilitarian Perfection' was one of the links in the chain of the artist's argument that collective creativity must replace individualistic artistic thinking, and that collective representation is the only possible form of creative activity in the context of contemporary culture. Malevich, however, always inclined towards metaphysical justifications, even in his journalistic writings, and so projected the principles concerning the interaction between man and God onto the sphere of culture, stating:

The culture of creating Gods passed unnoticed in our time, when 'We' started [to exist]. Try as we might to overthrow the idols on the square, to throw them down from the altars, all of a sudden you look and see that one of our comrades has inconspicuously become a God. Art will make him an icon, distribute [it] among us, so that everyone may know and see the new God.¹³

9 Kazimir Malevich, 'O neobkhodimosti kommuny ekonomistov-suprematistov' [On the Need for a Commune of Suprematist Economists], 1919, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v: 166

10 See Malevich, 'O "Ia" i kollektive'.

11 K. Malevich, 'O partii v iskusstve', *Put' Unovisa 1* (January 1921).

12 K. Malevich, *Bog ne skinut. Iskusstvo, tserkov, fabrika* [*God is not Cast Down: Art, The Church, The Factory*] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1922); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 188-223.

13 Malevich, 'My kak utilitarnoe sovershenstvo', RGALI, fond 3145, opis' 1, delo 592, list 2.

Malevich described humanity's striving for dependence on idols as the individualistic system of relations between 'I' (the individual) and 'Thou' (the Divine). He regarded such social psychology to be opposed to Lucifer's love of freedom: Lucifer overthrew the gods and redeems people from the slavery of obedience, encouraging them to recognise themselves as a community. Malevich wrote: 'Now, in the name of Lucifer, all the "I"s have been taken out of the kingdom of God and into the kingdom of the unity of the "We" — into a non-divine kingdom.'¹⁴

In this new world of freedom, Malevich considered that figurative art would not only be useless — but also alien, because figurative art is only able to express personal experience and personal feelings. Malevich found an alternative to figurative art in the art of world creation. He wrote:

Then it would be surprising to see how 'We' portrays our self-portraits. The 'We' does not know the fine arts, it knows the invention of itself. From the moment that the 'I's change into 'We', all art has to be transformed into the organic action of the invention of perfection. There are no such things as glorifying poetry, representational theatre, entertaining music, or figurative art, and there is no art of the personal 'I', because 'We' are a single organism.¹⁵

'We as Utilitarian Perfection' represents the quintessence of Malevich's views concerning the role of art and the artist in contemporary society. In this text, he proclaimed his own concept of utility, advocating the right of art not to be 'useful' in the conventional sense of the word, but affirming the innate utility of the creative act, which is aimed at pure form-building and is independent of any considerations of practical application. In Malevich's frame of reference, 'utility' did not lose its connotations of practical usefulness, but the meaning of usefulness shifted to a different sphere, to one that was ideal and utopian. Essentially, it was all about strategy and tactics. The 'utilitarian', or the productive, denoted pure conceptual creativity, entailing the creation of universal aesthetic principles for a world that was still in the process of being projected. This type of creative work was opposed to contemporary art's attempts to serve the short-term needs of society. For Malevich, the strategy of directing pure creativity towards the future represented the highest degree of utilitarianism, that is its perfection. A pre-condition for achieving this was clearly a collective *entelecheia*, i.e. a collective that possessed and used the

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

vital power directing it towards self-fulfillment. Malevich wrote, 'Of course, in the non-divine kingdom there is neither God, nor angels, nor saints, i.e. those people who were the most obedient. There, "We" are unified, and "We" are not divided into Gods, prophets, or saints, and in that "We" is our perfection.'¹⁶

At the same time, the dichotomy between the individual and the collective that we find in Malevich's writings, as well as the way in which he presented it, possess rather distinctive sources and parallels. The definition of 'We', which transmitted the ambitions of the collective conquest of cultural space, came into use at end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Declarations of collective representation by an artistic or literary movement strengthened its position, giving more weight to the disparate artistic gestures of its participants, and sometimes camouflaging the actual numerical paucity of the group. The most vivid and imaginative statements on behalf of the 'We' certainly belonged to avant-garde artists and poets – above all to the Russian and Italian Futurists. Their rich style, the energy of their passionate statements, and the abundance of their striking rhetorical devices and slogans, governed by the general rules of the poetics of the manifesto as a genre — all of these features gave their manifestos the status of self-sufficient works of art.

The emphatic use of the pronoun 'We' reveals a strong need for consolidation on a common ideological platform. This self-definition mythologised the community, and created a specific and conventional intellectual space, in which the rules of the game were introduced and roles were assigned.¹⁷ Depending on the actual tasks of self-identification involved, the conceptual parameters of the 'We' could vary, so that it could denote a hermetic caste of the elect, or, on the contrary, be extended to almost universal dimensions, embracing 'the Innovators of the Whole World' (Malevich) or 'the World Union of Young People' (Velimir Khlebnikov), etc.

In addition to the announcement of particular art programmes, presentations of the 'We' featured two main themes: reconstruction of the world and a confrontation with opponents. In 1913, the Russian Futurists declared: 'We are the new people of the new life'.¹⁸ In 1923, Ilia Zdanevich recalled: 'Ten years ago, we first started painting our faces, arranging disputes, printing manifestos, and [producing] hand-written books every day. We threatened to change the

16 Ibid.

17 See Tat'iana Goriacheva, 'Utopiia v sisteme russkogo avangarda. Futurizm i suprematizm', in *Avangard v kul'ture XX veka (1900 – 1930-kh). Teoriia, istoriia, poetika. Kniga 2* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2010).

18 *Sadok Sudei II* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 2.

world, rearrange the Earth, and we praised the new spirit.¹⁹ In similar terms, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti proclaimed, 'We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! ... Why should we look back, when what we want to do is to break down the mysterious doors of the impossible?'²⁰

One type of 'We' could confront another type of 'We', either real or fictitious, or, *vice versa*, press the other 'We' to be recruited as allies and make generous advances. For example, Khlebnikov, when inviting H.G. Wells and Marinetti to join the Russian Futurists (who called themselves *budetliane*, that is 'people of the future'), introduced the latter as the Martians: 'The glorious participants of the *budetlianes*' publications have been transferred from the class of humans to the class of Martians ... The following are invited to become honorary, non-voting members of the Martian Parliament [*Duma*]: [H.G.] Wells and Marinetti.²¹ It is curious to note that this invitation was never sent to the addressees and so did not exist outside the Futurists' literary domain.

The objects of confrontation declared by the avant-garde community, who referred to themselves as 'We', were not only their adversaries, but also the art and literature of the past. Often traditions were not attacked directly, but personified as contemporary writers and artists. The notable exceptions were Aleksandr Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, whom the Russian Futurists 'threw overboard from the steamer of modernity', and Michelangelo, whose statue of David was described as a 'monstrosity' by Malevich.²² The 'We' addressed Maxim Gorky, Aleksandr Kuprin, Aleksandr Blok, Fedor Sologub, and Aleksei Remizov,²³ as well as Konstantin Somov and Boris Kustodiev.²⁴

The rhetorical strategy of these appeals was constructed differently, depending on whether the tactics being adopted were offensive or defensive. Italian Futurism was characterised by a more aggressive tone and destructive

19 Ilia Zdanevich, 'Nabrosok predisloviia', cited in Aleksandr Lavrent'ev. *Laboratoriia konstruktivizma. Opyty graficheskogo modelirovaniia* (Moscow: Grant, 2000), 36.

20 F-T Marinetti, 'Le Futurisme', *Le Figaro* (20 February 1909): 1; English translation as 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism' in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 19-24.

21 Velimir Khlebnikov, 'Truba Marsian', in Khlebnikov, *Tvoreniia* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1986), 603.

22 K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism]* (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1916); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 39; English translation, in Malevich: *Essays*, 1: 23.

23 *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu [A Slap in The Face of Public Taste]* (Moscow, 1912), 4.

24 Malevich. *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu*; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 43; Malevich, *Essays*, 27.

fury than Russian Futurism, which was generally only prepared to repulse all attacks from opponents. Thus, Marinetti wrote, 'We intend to exalt aggressive action, feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch, and the slap ... We will destroy the museums, libraries.'²⁵ In contrast, the Russian Futurists intended 'to stand on the rock of the word "we" amidst the sea of boos and outrage',²⁶ and their belligerence was rather defensive in nature: 'We have gathered together in order to arm the world against us.'²⁷ A few years later, Malevich wrote: 'We stood firm against the barrage of stinking waves from the deep see of ignorance – the criticism that was hurled at us.'²⁸

Malevich's article, 'We as Utilitarian Perfection', developed this tradition and at the same time manifested itself as part of a new phase in representing the 'We'. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, avant-garde artists frequently equated their artistic radicalism with the aspiration for revolutionary social change. Between 1920 and 1925 about thirty literary anthologies, entitled 'We', were published in various Russian cities, including Samara, Vladimir, Kharkov, Yakutsk, Moscow, Petrograd (Leningrad), Nizhny Novgorod, Kiev, and Rostov-on-Don. The 'We' acted as a personification of the spiritual revolution, which, in turn, anticipated the social revolution and therefore acquired additional justification for the confirmation of its authority. Accordingly, the pronoun 'We' was even more emphasised when it reappeared in the titles of these texts.

In 1919, Aleksei Gan worked on a play entitled 'We'.²⁹ In Spring 1920, Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art), published a lithographic leaflet with the title 'We want' [*My khotim*], in which Malevich and his comrades proclaimed: 'We must gather together like a strong hurricane to destroy the old and create the new ... we will create a new garb and meaning for the world, such as there have never been ... we shall create the new world.'³⁰

In Autumn 1920, as Ilia Chashnik was encouraging Unovis to publish this leaflet of the group's Creative Committee, Malevich was working on the article,

25 F-T Marinetti, 'Le Futurisme'; Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 21-22.

26 *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu*. 4.

27 M. Matiushin, A. Kruchenyh, K. Malevich, 'Pervy vserossiiskii s'ezd baiachei budushchego (poetov-futuristov). Zasedaniia 18 i 19 iuliia 1913 goda v Usikiro (Finlandiia)', *Za 7 dnei* (St. Petersburg), 28 (15 August 1913): 605-606; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 23.

28 K. Malevich, 'K novoi grani', *Anarkhiia*, 31 (30 March 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 66; English translation 'To the New Limit' in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 55.

29 For details see A. N. Lavrent'ev, *Aleksei Gan* (Moscow: S. E. Gordeev, 2010), 60; and Christina Lodder, 'Aleksei Gan: A Pivotal Figure in Russian Constructivism' in Aleksei Gan, *Constructivism*, ed. and trans. Christina Lodder (Barcelona: Tenov, 2013), xvi.

30 *Ot Unovisa – My khotim* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation, 'From Unovis – We Want', in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 298.

'We as Utilitarian Perfection'. The year before, Aleksei Gastev had published a collection of poems, *The Poetry of the Workers' Fight*, which begins with the words: 'We grow from iron', and features poems entitled 'We have encroached', 'We are together', 'We are everywhere', and 'We are coming'.³¹

Khlebnikov wrote of Gastev: 'He bravely envisages the time when "the gods of Hellas wake up for the atheists, the giants of thought babble childish prayers, thousands of the best poets throw themselves into the sea"; and the "We", in the columns of which Gastev's "I" is enclosed, bravely exclaims "Let it be".'³² In 1922, Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova issued a manifesto of the Constructivist group with the title 'Who we are'.³³ In the same year, Dziga Vertov published a manifesto of the filmmakers of the new formation, entitled 'We', in the first issue of the magazine, *Kino-Fot*.³⁴ Besides purely professional postulates, Vertov's manifesto featured motifs that were familiar to those who remembered the days of Futurism: 'We train the new men',³⁵ 'Our path [leads] through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man'.³⁶

Many of these popular myths and utopian scenarios mirrored a conception of the relationship between the individual and the community that was rooted in Futurism. These included ideas about the advantage of the technological world over the imperfections of the individual, as well as notions of abolishing all state borders and destroying all divisions between nations, different ethnicities and languages, in the name of the unity of mankind. In post-revolutionary Russia, these ideas were given slightly different connotations, which reflected a common ideological orientation toward the unification of the individual with the community.

In this context, the appearance of Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopian novel *We* should come as no surprise. Not only did Zamyatin react against the pervasive

31 A. K. Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara* (Petrograd: Proletkul't, 1919).

32 Velimir Khlebnikov, 'O stikhakh', in Khlebnikov, *Tvoreniia* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1986), 633.

33 Aleksei Gan, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, 'Kto my. Manifest gruppy konstruktivistov' [Who we are: Manifesto of the Constructivist Group], c. 1922, ms; English translation in Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander N. Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 143-145.

34 Dziga Vertov, 'My. Variant manifesta', *Kino-fot*, 1 (25-31 August 1922): 11-12; English translation 'We: A Version of a Manifesto', in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 69-70.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

ideas of collectivism and depersonalisation in his novel, but he also used the eloquent title *We*, which parodied the common passion for representing the 'We'. Among the opponents of collectivism was Viktor Shklovskii, who sharply criticised Proletkult in 1919 in his article 'Collective Creativity', ending with the words, 'Caring about the creation of a collective art is as useless as pleading with the Volga to flow into the Caspian Sea'.³⁷

Nevertheless, when Malevich and other avant-garde artists proclaimed community and collectivism as priorities, they were mainly exploiting the conventional ideological rhetoric, adapting it to the needs of their own creative manifestos, and transplanting it into the fabric of their own speculative theories. This first and foremost concerns Malevich, whose statements often possess a certain resemblance to revolutionary ideology, although their actual meaning is frequently in opposition to that ideology.

Malevich's writings of the early 1920s discuss various aspects of the ideas of community and collectivism. The artist understood collectivism as a restoration of those bonds that had previously been broken, a return to the lost harmony of a single universal origin, and a fusion of all individuals into a single, perfect system of world order. For Malevich, the unification of individuals in the name of the collective community was the corollary of this perfect system. Indeed, this was among his most important theories. In the domain of art, Malevich's Unovis group implemented this idea by stressing the anonymity of their creative work.

Malevich's passion for philosophising was accompanied by the need to assert and justify his leadership, and to present Unovis not merely as a group of disciples, but as an artistic association or a party, with its own strategy. Malevich argued that this task was essential for coordinating collective actions, in order to develop a contemporary culture on the basis of the most progressive systems of art — Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism. Although Unovis is sometimes not even mentioned in these texts, its leading role was obviously implied: it was Malevich who based the educational programme of Unovis on Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism.

In 1919, and later in the summer of 1922, an unsuccessful attempt was made to unite all left-wing forces, including the Suprematists and the Constructivists. On both occasions, the aspiration did not really entail an unconditional alliance or a true federation: every 'We' wanted to play a leading role. Malevich

37 V. B. Shklovskii, 'Kollektivnoe tvorchestvo', 1919; reprinted in Shklovskii, *Gamburgskii schet* (First ed. 1928; Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1990), 89.

advocated the priority of Suprematism, while Rodchenko, Stepanova, Gan,³⁸ and Vertov advocated the priority of Constructivism, although they all represented different factions of this movement. Both the Suprematists and the Constructivists continually appealed to a wide circle of associates (who presumed that they were communicating with each other), but these appeals tended to end with statements of self-affirmation. As early as December 1919, Malevich wrote in his article, 'On the Need for a Commune of Suprematist Economists': 'Therefore, I shall summon you all, not only those working in the art school, but all young people in general, to unite under the banner of the ideas of the Suprematist Economists, whose goal will be "the Overthrow of the old World of the Arts" and the restoration of new forms.'³⁹ During the winter of 1919 and the spring of 1920, the name of Malevich's party was constantly changing: 'Suprematist Economists',⁴⁰ Molposnovis, Posnovis, Unovis, but the hermetic nature of representing the 'We' remained constant. The intensity of the party's self-affirmation was typical of the Vitebsk period, and only started to decline when Malevich and some of his students moved to Petrograd and worked together at the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Ginkhuk), where the institutional circumstances and the general atmosphere of artistic life were completely different.

The 'utilitarian perfection' embraced by Malevich and his followers was never implemented to the extent that they had initially envisaged. The global social and aesthetic problems may not have resolved themselves as the group wished, but there were compensations in the vibrant and palpable artistic process that had been achieved and in the significant impact that the art of Malevich and Unovis had made on Soviet culture and aesthetic consciousness.

38 It was Gan who initiated the consolidation of avant-garde forces, but he also seems to have had no intention of building relations between the Suprematists and the Constructivists based on parity.

39 Malevich, 'O neobkhodimosti kommuny ekonomistov-suprematistov'; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v: 166.

40 In early 1920, Malevich announced that he was forming 'a party of Suprematist economists in art'. See Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, [21 January 1920]; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 123.

'A thing of quality defies being produced in quantity': Suprematist Porcelain and Its Afterlife in Leningrad Design

Yulia Karpova

'If every form is an expression of purely utilitarian perfection, then surely a Suprematist form also represents the signs of a force that has been recognised – the effective force of utilitarian perfection in the coming concrete world', wrote Kazimir Malevich in his famous book *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, published in Vitebsk in 1920.¹ Later, in the same text, he explained that 'the utilitarian perfection' of Suprematist forms was beyond the immediate needs of the earthly world. Instead, it foresaw the 'technical organisms of the Suprematist world to come'.² Is this the voice of Malevich the designer? Can this statement be read as the prolegomena to a broad-sweeping design programme?

Suprematism's contribution to twentieth-century design has been acknowledged and analysed by several scholars.³ Larissa Zhadova, the author of the first comprehensive monograph about Malevich, used the concept 'Design Art' to characterise the entry of Suprematism into three-dimensional space. This was, she explained, 'an attempt to create a new universal system of art based on painting',⁴ which, like Constructivism, reflected 'the wish of modern man for an integrated and harmonious world'.⁵ Analysing a range of Suprematist

1 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* [*Suprematism: 34 Drawings*] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 123. Translation adapted by the author.

2 *Ibid.*, 1: 124. Translation adapted by the author.

3 For studies of Suprematist design, see, for instance, Larissa A. Zhadova, 'The Step into Volumes and Space', in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 73-116; Charlotte Douglas, 'Suprematist Embroidered Ornament', *Art Journal*, LIV, 1 (1995): 42-45; S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina* (Moscow: Galart, 1995); and Vasilii Rakitin, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin* (Moscow: RA, 1998).

4 Zhadova, *Malevich*, 85.

5 *Ibid.*, 109.

designs – from handbags to town planning – Zhadova showed that Suprematism was quite close to its ‘rival’ Constructivism in its vision of a perfectly planned material environment. For Zhadova, the main difference was Suprematism’s emphasis on art, rather than engineering. She concluded that even though most Suprematist designs remained on the drawing board, they are valuable in so far as they constitute an attempt at ‘integrating the most diverse fields of human activity.’⁶ The outstanding scholar of Russian avant-garde architecture and design, Selim Khan-Magomedov, was sceptical about the philosophical and theoretical value of Malevich’s writings. He characterised Suprematism as a ‘project of specific stylistics for the world’, but argued that from its very beginning, it ‘contained a style-constituting kernel with general stylistic tendencies, even though it was conceived within painting.’⁷ This ‘stylistic kernel’ was developed in two ways – as décor (super-graphics and colour, according to Khan-Magomedov’s classification) and as volumetric forms – and was realised in various areas of design activity, including textiles, street decorations for the revolutionary festivals, furniture, graphics, interiors, exhibitions, and architectural models.

Sharing these scholars’ vision of Suprematism as a model for universal design, I shall focus on the Suprematist approach to the material object [*veshch*’]. As is well known, the key concept of Malevich’s radically new art was non-objectivity or objectlessness, which implies transcendence over the world of everyday useful objects. Even though he vehemently rejected the depiction of ‘object [*veshcheykh*] forms’ on a canvas, Malevich was concerned with the way Suprematist artists related to actual objects. In his 1919 article for the catalogue of the *Tenth State Exhibition: Objectless Creation and Suprematism*, he explained: ‘At one of its stages, Suprematism is a purely philosophical movement based on the cognition of colour, while at another stage it appears as a form that can be applied and produce a new type of Suprematist decoration.’⁸ Here, Malevich was not suggesting that Suprematism should be downgraded to creating mere ornament. Instead of ‘catering to philistine taste’, Malevich argued that this decoration would ‘appear on objects as the transformation or embodiment of space, removing an object’s integrity from [the viewer’s]

6 Ibid.

7 S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i arkhitektura (problemy formoobrazovaniia)* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 15–16. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Russian are by the author.

8 K. Malevich, ‘Suprematizm’, *Katalog desiatoi gosudarstvennoi vystavki. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919); reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh, (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 1: 151; English translation as ‘Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism’, in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 121–122.

consciousness.⁹ The idea of decoration as transforming or disintegrating conventional forms appears in various design projects of the Vitebsk Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art), and in those produced at the Petrograd State Institute for Artistic Culture (Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Ginkhuk). Nevertheless, I would argue that this function of decoration was most vividly implemented in porcelain – the only sphere in which the Suprematists established a long-term connection with the industrial production of objects. The State Porcelain Factory in Petrograd (subsequently Leningrad) became the locus of the embodiment and evolution of Suprematist ideas starting from the era of the New Economic Policy or NEP right up to the late 1930s. Moreover, the Suprematist legacy left an impact on the factory's artistic production, which could be discerned during the gradual rehabilitation of the Avant-Garde in the 1960s-1990s.

My article has two aims – to examine the application of Suprematist principles to concrete objects and to show the continuity between avant-garde design work and designs produced during the period of late socialism. I shall begin by discussing the initial temporal context and institutional setting for the emergence of Suprematist porcelain and will then go on to explore the Suprematist approach to material objects as embodied in several porcelain designs. This will be followed by an investigation of the Post-Suprematist changes in porcelain design during the 1930s and late 1940s, and, finally, an assessment of the Suprematist legacy in Leningrad porcelain design of the 1960s-1980s.

Initial Setting: The State Porcelain Factory in 1923

The story of Suprematist porcelain began in 1923, when Malevich and his two students from Unovis, Nikolai Suetin and Ilia Chashnik, began working at the State Porcelain Factory in Petrograd, which had formerly been the Imperial Porcelain Factory. By the early 1920s, the nationalised factory had already achieved some prominence in manufacturing what is famously known as 'revolutionary porcelain' or 'agitational porcelain'. Traditionally a precious material for the upper classes, during the Civil War, porcelain turned out to be a convenient propaganda medium because of an institutional arrangement. In March 1919, control of the Porcelain Factory was transferred from the People's Commissariat for Agriculture to the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – Narkompros). According to the Nationalisation Decree of June 1918, the factory's task was to develop the artistic

9 Ibid.

aspects of the state porcelain and glass industries, elaborate new production techniques, and thus respond to the needs of the Russian art industry.¹⁰ The factory had to change from being the supplier of luxury dinnerware to the Imperial court and the aristocracy to becoming a 'supplier to all people'.¹¹ The more immediate task of the Soviet government was to disseminate revolutionary ideas in accordance with the Plan of Monumental Propaganda, launched by the Soviet government in the spring of 1918.¹² Whereas paper and other materials were in short supply during the Civil War, the factory had a large stock of blank porcelain, which had been produced during the Imperial period, and was at the 'biscuit' stage (the so-called *bel'e* or white phase), all ready to be painted.

Naturally, new artists and technical specialists were gradually appointed to replace the former personnel. The factory's director, Petr Vaulin, recruited the graphic artist Sergei Chekhonin, who was a member of the World of Art group, which had developed its own sophisticated version of artistic synthesis in the early 1900s.¹³ As art director, Chekhonin guided and inevitably influenced the stylistic development of porcelain decoration. Although one of the factory's painters, Elena Danko, identified what she called the 'Chekhonin style',¹⁴ agitational porcelain was, in fact, quite eclectic. It employed refined linear drawings and calligraphy, adapted from the World of Art, as well as Cubist and abstract motifs introduced by avant-garde, 'leftist' artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, David Shterenberg, Natan Altman, Ksenia Boguslavskaja, Ivan Puni and others, whom Chekhonin invited to work with the factory's own professional artists. The 'agitational porcelain' that was produced frequently featured Soviet emblems and stylised figurative images, including portraits of Soviet leaders, especially Lenin. The factory's administration did not aspire to stylistic unity but aimed at (in the words of a 1919 exhibition catalogue),

10 I. A. Pronina et al, *Sovetskoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo. Materialy i dokumenty, 1917-1932. Farfor. Faians. Steklo* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), 58.

11 E. F. Gollerbakh, *Farfor gosudarstvennogo farforovogo zavoda. Grafika I. Rerberga i S. Chekhonina* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Sredi kollektionerov, 1922), 9.

12 For the Plan of Monumental Propaganda, see Christina Lodder, 'Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda', in eds., Matthew Colledge and Brandon Taylor, *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 16-32.

13 On this group's cross-disciplinary activities, see Anna Winestein, 'Quiet Revolutionaries: The 'Mir Iskusstva' Movement and Russian Design', *Journal of Design History*, XXI, 4 (Winter 2008): 315-333.

14 Elena Dan'ko, 'Novoe Petrogradskogo farforovogo zavoda', *Khudozhestvennyi trud*, 4 (1923): 17-18.

'stimulating the people's genuine creative powers'.¹⁵ In fact, the factory did become a supplier to the masses, but it supplied propaganda rather than useful artefacts that might improve people's daily lives. Painting by hand could only produce limited editions, which were shown at exhibitions, used as gifts for native and foreign delegates attending various congresses, and were exported, since porcelain was an important source of obtaining much needed foreign currency.¹⁶

In late 1922, Nikolai Punin, the art critic and famous advocate of the Avant-Garde, who replaced Chekhonin as art director, invited Suetin to work at the factory. Chashnik also joined the staff, and even Malevich submitted several of his designs without being an actual employee.¹⁷ This event is often perceived as a turning point in the factory's history. More broadly, it can be considered one of the factors inaugurating a new stage in the development of Soviet design. By this time, the everyday material environment had become a subject of considerable public interest. Leon Trotsky's essays on the problems of everyday life [*byt*] generated a great deal of discussion. The essays had first appeared in the newspaper *Pravda*, and were subsequently published as a collection. In particular, Trotsky stressed the conservative and spontaneous character of *byt*, which, he argued, hindered the development of proletarian consciousness and, therefore, had to be overcome through cultural education.¹⁸ In March and April 1923, the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences (Rossiiskaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk – RAKhN) convened the *First All-Russian Exhibition of Artistic Industry* [*Pervaia Vserossiiskaia khudozhestvenno-promyshelennaia vystavka*], which was intended to unite all organisations concerned with artistic production in the Soviet Union, suggest improvements, and explore opportunities for export.¹⁹ The exhibition was harshly criticised by the Constructivists and Productivists, who, as Christina Kiaer has demonstrated, were committed to creating socialist objects and counteracting the petty-bourgeois tastes that were being fostered by the market economy of NEP.²⁰ In 1923, in

15 See *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Products from the State Porcelain Factory, the National Peterhof Grinding Factory and Smalt Workshop* (Petrograd: Dom Miatleva, August-October 1919), 8; and Tamara Kudryavtseva, *Circling the Square: Avant-Garde Porcelain from Revolutionary Russia* (London: Fontanka, 2004), 16. Translation adjusted.

16 Kudryavtseva, *Circling the Square*, 25-28.

17 Rakitin, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin*, 52.

18 Lev' Trotskii, 'Chtoby perestroit' byt, nuzhno poznat' ego' [In Order to Reconstruct Everyday Life, it is Necessary to Understand it], in *Voprosy byta* (Moscow: Krasnaia Nov', 1923), 25.

19 A. I. Kondratiev, 'Rossiiskaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk', *Iskusstvo* 1 (1923): 439-41.

20 Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).

the first issue of the journal *Lef – The Left Front of the Arts* [*Lef – Levyi front iskusstv*], the critic and theoretician Nikolai Tarabukin argued that the exhibition epitomised the wrong approach to reforming artistic production: instead of developing new production methods, it applied a new subject matter to old forms and resorted to antiquated techniques of decorating. Chekhonin was the main target, and Tarabukin disdainfully described his decorative style as ‘little strokes’ [*mazochki*].²¹ The article highlighted the need to create material objects that would be appropriate to the new socialist society. The problem of developing such items provoked a famous response from the Constructivists in 1923, when Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova produced bold and original textile designs for Moscow’s First Textile Printing Factory.²² Suprematist porcelain was another powerful response; the path having been prepared by the experiments in embroidery design that had been produced in the 1910s for the Verbovka workshop²³ and then by various types of design work undertaken at Unovis after 1919. A fine and fragile material, porcelain happened to be the early experimental ground for Malevich’s vision of a utilitarian yet sublime Suprematist world.

Suprematist Objects and Suprematist Materiality

During their initial cooperation with the State Porcelain factory, the Suprematists produced a whole range of bold original designs. They worked in two directions, as noted by Khan-Magomedov: decoration and form-making. The first direction answered the need to use the porcelain forms that the factory had inherited from the pre-revolutionary period. Malevich was not interested in designing compositions specifically for dinnerware. Instead, he submitted his drawings to be reproduced on porcelain by the factory’s painters. The factory’s archive preserves two such drawings: one is based on the 1916 painting *Dynamic Suprematism* (Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Fig. 10.1), and the other was developed from one of the illustrations in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*,

21 Nikolai Tarabukin, ‘Pervaia Vserossiiskaia khudozhestvenno-promyshelennaia vystavka’, *Lef*, 1 (1923): 250–251.

22 Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 89–142. On Constructivist textile design, see also Iulia Tulovskii, *Tekstil avangarda. Risunki dlia tkani* (Ekaterinburg: Tatlin, 2016); and Christina Lodder, ‘Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design’, *Tate Papers*, 14 (Autumn 2010), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/liubov-popova-from-painting-to-textile-design.htm>.

23 See Douglas, ‘Suprematist Embroidered Ornament’; and Julia Tulovsky’s article in this volume.



FIGURE 10.1 Kazimir Malevich (pattern design), A. N. Kudriavtsev (painting), 'Dynamic Composition' Plate, 1923, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.

published in 1920 in Vitebsk.²⁴ The painter A. N. Kudriavtsev transferred both compositions to the wells of plates and outlined them, keeping Malevich's thin rectangular frames. These are eloquent examples of the conflict between the utility of a tangible object for everyday use and the Suprematist notion of utility, described by Malevich as removed from the Earth and foreshadowing the future world. According to the art historian, Tamara Kudriavtseva, this

24 The drawing for Malevich's plate design 'Dynamic Composition', is reproduced in Kudriavtseva, *Circling the Square*, 58. For the other drawing submitted to the factory, see Malevich, *Suprematism. 34 risunka*, [20]; reproduced in Donald Karshan, *Malevich: The Graphic Work 1913-1930: A Print Catalogue Raisonné* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1975), no. 53. This image closely resembles the painting *Airplane Flying (Suprematist Composition)*, 1915, oil on canvas, 58.1 × 48.3 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York. See Fig. 13.3.

actually represented a continuation of the factory's nineteenth-century practice of copying paintings onto porcelain, although now the practice was based on avant-garde, objectless painted compositions.²⁵

This opinion was refuted by Khan-Magomedov, who interpreted Suprematist graphics as a self-sufficient, artistic and ornamental system, which relates to the form, while retaining its compositional autonomy.²⁶ He argued that this approach allows for the preservation of the inherent logic of both artistic systems: that concerning the 'architectonic' as well as that relating to 'the colour, the decorative and the graphic'. Disturbed by the disparity between the volumetric form and the flat decoration of an object, the viewer is forced to make a mental effort to unite them. Consequently, 'this internal tension activates and sharpens the perception of an image, producing a special effect, which was never achieved in objects in historical styles, where the applied decoration is in traditional harmony with the volumetric and spatial composition'.²⁷

It can be further argued that the nineteenth-century practice of reproducing paintings on porcelain was still about harmonising the decorative and tectonic systems. Illusory figurative compositions were adjusted to the wells of plates or the surfaces of vases, while the lips of plates or surrounding elements of dinnerware were often gilded and covered with ornament, thereby transforming such borders into lavish frames. In contrast, Malevich's thinly-framed Suprematist compositions ignore the curvatures of the conventional porcelain forms and thus make them more evident: the object does not frame the picture but stands out against it. The object is affected by a relationship identified by Branislav Jakovljevic: 'the [thin] frame does not protect the painting from its milieu, but the other way around. By framing the picture in, the world frames itself out'.²⁸

Unlike Malevich, Suetin and Chashnik actually painted directly onto the porcelain. Their patterns, although designed specifically for porcelain, resemble or closely repeat their Suprematist easel paintings and were applied to objects possessing widely different shapes and functions. These compositions are always singular: repeating them as ornamental modules would destroy the autonomy of the graphics and thus, also, of the forms, thereby deadening the viewer's perception. In some cases, however, the décor assumes a structuring role. For example, Chashnik frequently accentuated the rims of plates or the

25 Kudryavtseva, *Circling the Square*, 34.

26 Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i arkhitektura*, 237.

27 *Ibid.*, 185.

28 Branislav Jakovljevic, 'Unframe Malevich! – Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism', *Art Journal*, LXIII, 3 (Fall 2004): 28.



FIGURE 10.2 Ilia Chashnik (pattern design), Plate from the 'Black Ribbon' Dinner Service, 1923, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.

edges of dinnerware with broad black or red rims – which at the same time serve as solid frames for his Suprematist compositions (Fig. 10.2).²⁹

In the case of Suetin's cup-and-saucer set 'Black and White', the Suprematist pattern is as elementary as the iconic *Black Square*, yet without 'the hierarchical ordering of foreground and background', as Jakovlevich writes.³⁰ The vertical division into black and white organises and structures the objects' forms, emphasising their symmetry and simplicity, and anticipating Soviet minimalist design of the 1960s (Fig. 10.3).

Another way of looking at the relationship between form and decoration in Suprematist porcelain is by considering the nature of the material. White

29 Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematism i arhitektura*, 237, 244.

30 Jakovljevic, 'Unframe Malevich!', 21.



FIGURE 10.3 Nikolai Suetin (pattern design 'Black and White'), Cup and Saucer, 1923, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.

porcelain offered a cosmic background for Suprematist forms, in the same way as the white ground of the canvas did. Indeed, white porcelain might have been even more effective. As Elena Ivanova observed, 'Shining with glaze and reflecting the light, the white pottery seemed to evoke the sensation of endless cosmic space even better than the white texture of the canvas.'³¹ Porcelain's whiteness and shine evoke the Suprematist concept of the 'white abyss'. The perceived immateriality or trans-materiality of Suprematist porcelain stems, paradoxically, from its sensuous qualities. Yet the qualities of porcelain – its fragility and plasticity – enter into conflict with the Suprematist cult of eternity, which adds to the impact and power of Suprematist dinnerware.

31 Elena Ivanova, 'Nikolai Suetin's Porcelain', in Elena V. Basner, et al, *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates. Students. Followers in Russia 1920s-1950s* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), 142.



FIGURE 10.4 Kazimir Malevich, Teapot, 1923, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.

More importantly for Malevich was the development of new porcelain forms. The most famous example of these is his Teapot (Fig. 10.4), in which the tension is not between ornament and form, but between the round and rectangular shapes: 'the faceted front part of the teapot, which looks as though it had been drawn out of the cylindrical body, cuts edgewise into the succulent curvature of the spout'.³² Unlike the ceramics developed in the mid-1920s by Vladimir Tatlin and Aleksei Filippov at the Moscow Vkhutemas (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie – Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops), Malevich's Teapot does not perform its function well and is not effective as a useful object. It could not, therefore, be used for the actual reorganisation of everyday life. It is difficult to produce, and its lid does not fit properly, although this small fault was corrected in later manufacturing.³³ The Teapot, however, demonstrates more than the artist's 'contempt

32 Zhadova, *Malevich*, 106.

33 Inna Solomonovna Olevskaia, Interview with the author, recorded 21 February 2014, in St. Petersburg.

for utilitarian application'.³⁴ Malevich's approach to form-making echoes Viktor Shklovskii's notion of defamiliarisation [*ostranenie*].³⁵ Composed of geometric shapes, the Teapot makes the user highly conscious of the process of making and pouring tea – a process that is otherwise almost automatic. In this way, Malevich's Teapot helps to overcome the unconscious habits of everyday life, which Trotsky identified as one of the main obstacles to social progress. By the same token, Malevich's famous half-cup represents a deconstruction, or, more precisely, a dissection of a banal, everyday object. Suetin's remarkable contribution to Suprematist design comprises his two variations for an ink-stand, each of which consists of porcelain bars, a cube, and, in one case, a vertical disk. In these instances, Suetin's designs seem to have been inspired by his architectonic models.³⁶

Like so-called revolutionary or agitational porcelain, Suprematist porcelain was remote from the everyday life of the workers, but very attractive as an item for export and for display at international exhibitions. Pondering the social role of Suprematist porcelain, Vasilii Rakitin observed, 'But what kind of way of life was there in 1923 – after the demolition of the way of life of the old-time aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, after the demolition of any way of life at all during the Civil War? Was it the way of life of the new bourgeoisie, the Nepmen, the proletariat, or the new *nomenklatura* [elite]?'³⁷ Controversially, he asserted that Suprematist dinnerware was actually 'elitist' and as unsuitable for mass production as the 'op-art' fabrics of Popova and Stepanova: in both cases, the object could only really be appreciated, admired, and enjoyed by the privileged, sophisticated consumers, and exhibition audiences.³⁸ To support his argument, Rakitin cited Suetin's note on a 1927 drawing: 'A thing of quality defies being produced in quantity'.³⁹ I would suggest, however, that the unique and limited-edition Suprematist dinnerware was not merely a luxury commodity with a modernist touch. Instead, through its inner tensions – between the conventional forms and the innovative ornament, between the traditional idea of dinnerware and the new counter-intuitive forms,

34 Kudryavtseva, *Circling the Square*, 34.

35 See Viktor Shklovskii, 'Iskusstvo kak tekhnika' [Art as Technique], in *O teorii prozy* (Moscow: Krug, 1925), 7–20.

36 Ivanova, 'Nikolai Suetin's Porcelain', 143; and Rakitin, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin*, 59.

37 Vasily Rakitin, 'The innovators' system offered a way of developing the system. Or about "red" and "white" porcelain', in *Nikolai Suetin. 1897-1954*, trans. Kenneth MacInnes (St. Petersburg: RA / Palace Editions, 2008), 28.

38 Ibid.

39 Nikolai Suetin, inscription on an untitled drawing, 26 June 1967, private archive; quoted by Rakitin, 'A thing of quality defies being produced in quantity', in *Nikolai Suetin*, 43.

and between the perceived 'cosmic whiteness' and the physical fragility of the material – it offered an escape from the conservatism and passivity of contemporary everyday life, as well as providing a glimpse into the future world of objects.

Nikolai Suetin's Post-Suprematist Porcelain

In accordance with the economic reforms of 1922, the Soviet state stopped financing the First State Porcelain Factory, which now had to become self-supporting. In order to counteract the resulting losses, the administration had to cut artistic personnel and focus on producing technical porcelain. From 1924 onwards, Chashnik and Suetin were no longer factory employees, although they continued to undertake commissions.⁴⁰ Ultimately, however, Suetin enjoyed a long career at the factory, which in 1925 became answerable to the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy and was renamed after the eighteenth-century polymath Mikhail Lomonosov. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Suetin became a prolific designer of patterns and forms for porcelain, and in 1932 he became the head of the newly created art laboratory at the Lomonosov Factory.⁴¹

There were two major factors that inspired Suetin's work during this period: firstly, the practice of Suprematist architectonic modelling, with which he was actively involved, as Malevich's assistant at Ginkhuk and later at the State Institute of Art History (Gosudarstvennyi institut istorii ikusstv – GIHI); and secondly, his growing interest in nature as a source for artistic images.

In the first instance, Suetin used his experience with vertical architects [*arkhitektorny*] or experimental architectural models to design a new form of vase, which he called a Sueton (Fig. 10.5). The Suetons closely resemble designs for vases and ashtrays that were being produced by another outstanding student of Malevich, the architect Lazar Khidekel, as early as 1923-1924.⁴² Probably, this borrowing was not perceived as plagiarism, but, rather, the result of the shared creative experience at Ginkhuk. Suetin's 1930 Ink-Stand combines round and rectangular shapes, like Malevich's Teapot, yet here they are not juxtaposed but harmonised, as if flowing into one another. Art historians often compare this object to the white-stone medieval churches of Pskov,

40 Kudryavtseva, *Circling the Square*, 23.

41 See illustrations in *Nikolai Suetin 1897-1954*, 208-251.

42 Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematism i arkhitektura*, 237, 244. Unfortunately, no items of porcelain seem to have been made to Khidekel's designs.



FIGURE 10.5 Nikolai Suetin, 'Architecton' Vase, 1932-33, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.
PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.

which Suetin actually visited in 1929.⁴³ The Ink-Stand's coloured variant was obviously inspired by Suetin's experience of working with architectural polychromy: in 1926-27, he and Chashnik, worked on the colour schemes for some

43 Rakitin, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin*, 148.



FIGURE 10.6 Nikolai Suetin (form and pattern design), Ink-Stand, 1930, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TERE BENIN.

new buildings being designed in the studio of the Leningrad architect Aleksandr Nikolskii (Fig. 10.6).⁴⁴ The Sueton vases and the 'Pskov Church' Ink-Stand function in three ways: as experimental architectural models, as utilitarian objects with a concrete function, and also, potentially, as 'fashionable' decorations for a table or a glass case.⁴⁵

In the second instance, Suetin sought a way to bring Suprematism closer to reality, tangible matter, nature, and human needs. As early as 1922, he wrote in his diary, 'Suprematism is an abstraction. It is unprecedented and colossal in the sphere of thought, but it transcends time. It lacks [contact with] the earth and the human element is lacking' [*ν nem net zemli i khochetsia*

44 Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematism i arkhitektura*, 250-251.

45 Suprematist architectural experiments also influenced porcelain decoration. Around 1930 Suetin painted colourful axonometric compositions, resembling Malevich's architectural drawings of planits [*planity*], on cups, saucers and plates.



FIGURE 10.7 Nikolai Suetin (painting), 'Agricultural Town' Service, 1931, porcelain, on the form 'Narkompros' by Sergei Chekhonin, 1923, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.

chelovecheskogo].⁴⁶ By the late 1920s, this belief led Suetin to study nature and agricultural work as sources for his art and design. His new forms for porcelain became smooth and, in a way, 'organic'. His 1929 jug, for instance, combines an architecton-type vertical profile with an almost biomorphic shape, while his oval vases of the early 1930s recall the schematic faces of peasant women from his painterly 'peasant series'. Motifs from this series were also translated into a number of porcelain ornaments. At this time, Suetin was exploring a range of intermediary options between figuration and abstraction. For example, the decoration on the service 'Agricultural Town' [*Agrograd*] (Fig. 10.7), compositionally echoes Malevich's Post-Suprematist paintings, especially the famous *Red Cavalry* of 1928-1932 (State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg). Like

46 Nikolai Suetin, Diary entry, 5 October 1922, private archive, quoted by Natalia Kozyreva, 'Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin', in *In Malevich's Circle*, 140. Translation adapted. For the Russian text, see Natalia Kozyreva, 'Nikolai Mikhailovich Sutein', in Elena V. Basner, et al, *V krughe Malevicha: soratniki, ucheniki, nasledovateli v Rossii 1920-kh – 1950-kh godov* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), 140.

the painting, the 'Agricultural Town' design focuses on a politically relevant topic (in this case, collectivisation), and was, as Rakitin suggested, a response to current official demands.⁴⁷ Yet the design also demonstrates Suetin's mastery of proportions, which was admired by all his students. Here, the ornament does not conflict with the form, but structures it.

In the 1930s, even when the precepts of Socialist Realism dominated Soviet visual arts, Suetin managed to include Suprematist elements in the factory's production.⁴⁸ After surviving the siege of Leningrad and designing *The Heroic Defence of Leningrad* exhibition in 1944, Suetin resumed working at the Lomonosov Factory, which had been evacuated to Western Siberia during the Second World War. The last decade of Suetin's work as the factory's art director (he died in 1954) was marked by a new wave of Stalin's repressions and a renewed campaign against formalism. Suetin had to be very cautious, and Suprematist experiments were now unthinkable. Nevertheless, Suetin's 1949 sketch for a monumental vase to be given to Stalin for his 70th birthday, contains a pedestal that closely resembles an architecton.⁴⁹ Although he had to abandon Suprematism in his designs, Suetin remained true to the approach that Malevich had developed at Ginkhuk. Like his teacher, Suetin treated each student as an individual, urging everyone to develop his or her own distinctive talent and insisting that 'everyone is a genius'.⁵⁰ His teaching provided a link with the 1920s, at a time when the very word 'Suprematism' could not be spoken. Fortunately, the situation began to change soon after Suetin's death.

Suprematist Echoes in Late Socialism

Nikita Khrushchev's Thaw witnessed the gradual rehabilitation of the Avant-Garde. Historians of architecture and design, such as Larissa Zhadova and Selim Khan-Magomedov, were especially interested in presenting Suprematism as a valuable legacy, although they did this very cautiously. In 1964, Suetin was the first Suprematist to be mentioned in an officially approved publication, as

47 Rakitin, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin*, 152.

48 Suetin even used volumetric Suprematist elements in his columns for the interior of the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*, in Paris. See illustrations in *Nikolai Suetin 1897-1954*, 70-78.

49 See *Nikolai Suetin 1897-1954*, 198-199.

50 Ivan Rizninch, 'Vospominaniia o N. M. Suetine' [Reminiscences of N. M. Suetin], 10 November 1982, ms; cited in Rakitin, *Nikolai Mikhailovich Suetin*, 155.

an outstanding 'mentor of artists'.⁵¹ Anna Leporskaia replaced Suetin as the leading instructor at the Lomonosov Factory and worked there as a porcelain artist until her death in 1983. She had studied with Malevich at Ginkhuk and had been Suetin's partner. According to one of her students, she remained loyal to the precepts of both men.⁵² In 1971, Leporskaia recalled:

High demands as to the form, the precision of the smallest relationships, which was perfectly mastered by K. S. Malevich and his only [true] pupil, N. M. Suetin, became for me a really wonderful discovery. Working with them gave me a sense of the basic origins of the plasticity of any form, its development like a living natural element, flower or plant, and 'a tiny bit' ['chut'-chut'] of understanding of this magic, which can either create amazing harmony in an object, or make it ugly. In working on form in porcelain, it is clear that neither function nor technology should destroy the main principle – the harmony of the object.⁵³

This idea of a naturally developed and 'organic' form was realised in the smooth circular shapes of vases and dinner services.⁵⁴ Working like a sculptor,⁵⁵ Leporskaia tended to leave them white. They were then produced in limited editions and decorated by her colleagues. For example, in 1963, the porcelain painter Nina Slavina designed a geometric ornament for Leporskaia's service 'Flowers and Leaves' (Fig. 10.8). This recalls certain minimalistic patterns by Suetin and Khidekel from 1923, but the image is figurative or, rather, thematic: it represents a game of chess.

In the 1960s, combinations of geometric elements and stylised figurative images, in achromatic as well as saturated colours, became popular among

51 B. Alekseev, 'Suetin – vospitatel' khudozhikov', *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, 11 (November 1964): 19-23.

52 Olevskaia, Interview, 2014; and Olga Leonidovna Nekrasova-Karateeva, Interview with the author, recorded 17 March 2014, in St. Petersburg.

53 'Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia', in *Khudozhniki ob iskusstve keramiki. 1954-1964* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 148.

54 This dinner set also resembles the works of the prominent Hungarian-born artist Eva Zeisel, who, between her Bauhaus experience and her long-term career in the United States, worked for the Lomonosov Factory with Suetin in 1932-1934. It is highly likely that Suetin's 'organic' vases were inspired by Zeisel.

55 Until the mid-1960s, the Lomonosov Factory's employees were divided into the 'sculptors', who designed the forms, and the 'painters', who decorated these forms. There were, however, a few exceptions, like Suetin himself. See Marina Tikhomirova, *Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1970), 80.



FIGURE 10.8 Anna Leporskaia (the form), Nina Slavina (the pattern), 'Chess' Service, 1963, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.

painters at the Lomonosov Factory. Apart from Slavina, the most enthusiastic producers of such designs were Eduard Krimmer (another of Malevich's students from Ginkhuk), and the younger artists Vladimir Semenov and Nina Pavlova. This was not a direct tribute to Suprematist porcelain, which, according to the factory artist Inna Olevskaia, was still hidden in storage and barely accessible even in the 1970s. Despite this, Olevskaia believes that it was Suetin's and Leporskaia's excellent mastery of proportions, as it was communicated to younger artists, that provided a subtle link back to Suprematism.⁵⁶

56 Olevskaia, Interview, 2014. In addition, from 1969 to mid-1970s Leporskaia gave seminars in her home to a small group of young ceramic artists, fresh graduates of the Vera Mukhina School for Art and Industry, which was not affiliated to the Lomonosov Factory. According to two of the participants, Leporskaia taught them painting using the same methodology that Malevich had used at Ginkhuk: moving from Impressionism through Cézannism and Cubism to Suprematism. Unfortunately, the resulting Suprematist studies are not preserved. The students also read Malevich's texts. This semi-clandestine 'Academy' (as Leporskaia called it) was part of an artistic circle, also attended by Nina Suetina and Irina Punina (daughters of Nikolai Suetin and Nikolai Punin), and some-

When Leporskaia started working as a porcelain painter in the late 1960s, she often produced variations on Post-Suprematist compositions, colourful horizontal friezes, reminiscent of Suetin's 'Agricultural Town'. However, it was the white porcelain for which she became celebrated. Leporskaia's dinnerware was reproduced for sale only with decorations, whereas her white vases garnered awards at exhibitions – both domestic and international. Her 1978 personal exhibition at the Leningrad Union of Artists was a landmark event for Soviet decorative artists. The exhibition's designer Leonid Liak arranged pedestals covered with bright blue fabric. This setting highlighted the whiteness, shine and architectonic clarity of Leporskaia's undecorated objects and made them look strikingly similar to architects. The central wall, which was also covered with blue fabric, featured three white frames, with vases arranged in front of them – in effect, presenting utilitarian objects as if they were easel paintings. In this way, Liak demonstrated the ambiguity and flexibility of the divide *between* art and design. When she reviewed this exhibition, Zhadova suggested that Leporskaia's works were significant not as individual objects, but as elements of an organic whole: 'White porcelain, with its semi-transparent structure and with its intrinsic spatiality, was especially advantageous for the development of a new concept of the environment'.⁵⁷ This echoed the ambitions of Malevich and the Unovis group to create 'a utilitarian and dynamically spiritual world of objects'.⁵⁸

In the late 1970s, Leporskaia's exhibition alone resonated with the still half-prohibited Suprematism. During the following decade, Suprematist artworks became increasingly visible for the Soviet public, starting with the landmark exhibition *Moscow-Paris* [*Moskva-Parizh*], held at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, in Moscow in 1981. Leningrad porcelain artists, who had hitherto only learnt about the Avant-Garde from journals and Leporskaia, were now able for the very first time to see actual examples of Suprematist porcelain from the 1920s. This particular recovery of the avant-garde heritage owed a great deal to the efforts of Tamara Kudriavtseva, then curator of the porcelain collection at the State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad.⁵⁹ Malevich's Teapot made a particularly strong impression. Subsequently, the young artist Mikhail

times by the art historian Evgenii Kovtun. See Nekrasova-Karateeva, Interview, 2014; and Natalia Malevskaia-Malevich, Interview with the author, recorded 18 March 2014, in St. Petersburg.

57 Larisa Zhadova, 'Belyi farfor Anny Leporskoi', *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, 6 (June 1979): 42.

58 *Ot Unovisa – my khotim* [*From Unovis – We Want*] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 298.

59 Olevskaia, Interview, 2014.

Sorokin designed several objects that synthesised classical and Suprematist forms. Apparently, he was less interested in continuing Malevich's bold experiments than in developing artistic images with allusions to St. Petersburg's architecture and various periods in the Porcelain Factory's history.⁶⁰ Olevskaia, too, started developing rectangular elements in her dining sets of the late 1980s. In 2003, she was the first porcelain artist to create a Post-Suprematist decorative scheme for Malevich's Teapot, and confessed that it was a highly responsible and stressful task. In her three versions for the decoration, she used large-scale Suprematist forms (the cross, rectangle and triangle) and, in one instance, a portrait of Malevich. This experience inspired Olevskaia to use rectangular elements in her own designs, like the 2003 service 'Blank Notebook' (Fig. 10.9).

A different approach to the legacy of Suprematist porcelain was adopted by the Leningrad architect Mark Khidekel, who is the son of Lazar Khidekel. In the late 1980s, Mark Khidekel started working on a series of 'Architectural Dishes', employing the principles of Suprematist form-making that he had elaborated in his architectural designs of the 1960s – 1980s. He realised his designs at the Lomonosov Factory, and then in the United States, after emigrating in 1993. His dishes include Lazar Khidekel's models of architectonic vases (also, as shown above, repeated by Suetin) and demonstrate a great diversity of forms, based on the harmonic relationships between round and rectangular modules. Mark Khidekel's dishes are neither decorative nor utilitarian, but architectonic models, complementing his Suprematist tea-sets, which also act as small-scale models of a Suprematist environment (Fig. 10.10).⁶¹

Epilogue: Suprematist Porcelain in the Age of Global Commodification

For Malevich, designing porcelain acted as preparation for creating a perfectly harmonised earthly and cosmic environment. Despite this, Suprematist

60 Some of Sorokin's works are on permanent display at the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, and some can be seen in the catalogue, N. S. Petrova, *Leningradskii farforovyi zavod imeni M. V. Lomonosova. 1944-2004, Vol. 2* (Moscow and St. Petersburg: Global View, 2006-2007), 544-553.

61 I would like to thank Dr Regina Khidekel for bringing Mark Khidekel's porcelain designs to my attention and providing valuable visual and factual information. On Mark Khidekel's work, see the article on the Russian American Cultural Center website: <http://www.russianamericanculture.com/lazar-khidekel-society/lazar-khidekel-brand/>.



FIGURE 10.9 Inna Olevskaia (form and pattern), 'Blank Notebook' Service, 2003-4, porcelain, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.
PHOTOGRAPH © THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY VLADIMIR TEREHENIN.



FIGURE 10.10 Mark Khidekel, *Architectural Dishes*, 1994, porcelain, private collection.
COPYRIGHT MARK KHIDEKEL.

porcelain acquired its own significance as a standard of artistic quality in the context of a planned economy that prioritised quantity. In dramatic historical circumstances, Suprematist porcelain objects underwent several transformations and, in this way, lost their original sharpness and their power to defamiliarise the habitual. By the end of the socialist era, they had become modern classics, akin to Picasso's ceramics – but also commodities, albeit rather expensive ones. Today, Suprematist objects are copied in large editions, in what is once again called the Imperial Porcelain Factory. These copies are always on sale in the factory's shop, next to the copies of royal dinner sets. Anyone can purchase a Malevich Teapot for about 700 US dollars, or even order it online. The development of 3D printing technology will allow cheaper reproductions of Suprematist designs. Will such pseudo-porcelain objects represent a corruption of Malevich's dream of utilitarian perfection or its ultimate realisation?

Acknowledgments

Research for this article was made possible by a grant from the Malevich Society. The author wishes to thank the Society, as well as Nina Suetina, Inna Olevskaia, Natalia Petrova and Sergei Rudakov for supplying valuable information, and Irina Denischenko for her useful suggestions.

Suprematist Textiles

Julia Tulovsky

This paper¹ examines the involvement of Suprematism in textile design during the 1910s and 1920s,² but it is also part of a larger research project, which is concerned with exploring the area of avant-garde textile design in general and its importance for the development of abstract art.

Textiles played an important role in the emergence and development of abstract art, both in theory and in practice. Theoretical writings based on textiles provided the ideological background for artists to break with figuration and representation in their painting. Indeed, the analysis of textiles formed the basis for numerous writings on art-historical methodology and art theory by Gottfried Semper, Alois Riegl and Wilhelm Worringer, as well as inspiring treatises by Charles Blanc, the formalist theories of the early Boston thinkers Denman Ross and Ernest Fenollosa, and theories about colour relationships by Michel Chevreul.³

Textiles were also instrumental in the move toward abstraction in practical terms. On an artist's way to abstraction, the 'lesser' arts, particularly textiles, often acted as a useful laboratory for the articulation of new ideas, offering a field for experimentation that was free from ideological considerations and from that sense of creative responsibility, which is often associated with painting. In the early twentieth century, a number of European artists, such as those associated with the Vienna Secession, Maurice Denis and Sonia Delaunay in France, and members of the Bloomsbury group in England, turned

1 Throughout, I am indebted to the editorial suggestions of Sarah Pollack.

2 Important publications on the topic include Charlotte Douglas, 'The Art of Pure Design: The Move to Abstraction in Russian and English Art and Textiles', in Rosalind Blakesley and Susan Reid, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture and Decorative Arts* (Dekalb IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 86–111; Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus* (Moscow: Tri Kvadrata, 2009); English version as Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012); and Iulia Tulovskii, *Tekstil' avangarda. Risunki dlia tkani* [Avant-Garde Textiles: Fabric Designs] (Ekaterinburg: Tatlin, 2016).

3 For a more detailed summary of textile-based, theoretical writings, see the introduction to Tulovskii, *Tekstil' avangarda*, 11–17.

to the design of utilitarian objects in general and textiles in particular. For instance, in 1913, Bloomsbury artists produced five abstract fabric designs, based on drawings by Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant. These designs were created by reducing and schematising elements of their figurative art, and so served as experiments in abstract form, and acted as catalysts for the move to abstraction in their painting.⁴

In Russia, the first involvement of avant-garde artists with utilitarian objects took place in 1915, in the area of textiles. The artist Natalia Davydova, in collaboration with Alexandra Exter, produced innovative embroidery designs and commissioned them from other avant-garde artists, such as Ksenia Boguslavskaja, Ivan Puni, Georgii Iakulov, and Kazimir Malevich. The actual pieces of embroidery based on these sketches were then executed in workshops in the Ukrainian villages of Skoptsy and Verbovka. Subsequently, these designs were displayed at the *Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art: Embroidery and Carpets from Artists' Designs*, which opened on 6 November 1915 at the Lemercier [Lemers'e] Gallery in the centre of Moscow.⁵

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this event. Not only was it the first Russian exhibition of functional objects based on innovative designs by avant-garde artists, but it was also the first public display of Kazimir Malevich's new abstract style of Suprematism.⁶

The catalogue for the exhibition lists three works by Malevich: No. 90 and 91 are designs for scarves, and No. 92 is a design for a cushion. These works were prominently displayed in the main hall, which ensured that they received equally prominent coverage in the press. In the photograph published in the weekly newspaper *Sparks [Iskry]* on 15 November 1915, all three Suprematist works are clearly visible. Two are in the centre of the photograph, on either side of the cushion, and the third is hanging on the wall to the right. It is clear from the photograph that Malevich's works are not textiles or embroideries, but actually independent Suprematist compositions (comprising paint on canvas), exhibited in the context of applied-art objects (Fig. 11.1).

As Aleksandra Shatskikh pointed out in her book *Malevich and the Supremus Society*, the exhibit to the left of the cushion in the photograph is similar to the Suprematist painting of 1916 from The Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. The work in the middle, to the right of the cushion, corresponds

4 Douglas, 'The Art of Pure Design', 91-93.

5 See *Katalog vystavki sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva. Vyshivki i kovry po eskizam khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Galereia Lemers'e, 1915).

6 The question of the importance of textiles for the emergence of Suprematism was first addressed by Charlotte Douglas, 'Bespredmetnost' i dekorativnost', *Voprosy iskusstvovedeniia*, 2-3 (1993): 96-106.



FIGURE 11.1 Photograph of the exhibition *Modern Decorative Art: Embroidery and Carpets from Artist' Designs* at the Lemerrier Gallery, Moscow, 1915. Reproduced in *Iskry* (Moscow), No. 45 (15 November 1915), p. 8.

to *Suprematism. No. 18*, and the third design hanging on the wall is an earlier version of *Suprematist Composition with a cross* (Fig. 11.2-11.4).⁷

Modern Decorative Art took place six weeks before the legendary *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaiia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol' desiati')*], which opened in Petrograd on 19 December 1915. From this, two questions naturally arise. The first of these is why did Malevich choose to present his newly invented style of Suprematism for the first time at the *Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art*, rather than wait and launch it at the fine-art, avant-garde exhibition 0.10? Secondly, did textile design exert any influence on the inception and development of Suprematism, in the same way that it encouraged other European artists to move toward abstraction?

Today, it is well established that Malevich arrived at his abstract, non-objective or objectless style of Suprematism in the late spring and early summer of 1915, while reworking the designs for the 1913 opera *Victory over the Sun*.⁸

7 Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus*, 100-101; and Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 88-93.

8 See K. S. Malevich, 'Pis'ma k M.V. Matiushinu', ed. E. F. Kovtun, *Ezhgodnik Rukopisnogo ot-dela Pushkinskogo doma na 1974 god* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 177-195; and Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980).



FIGURE 11.2 Kazimir Malevich, *Untitled (Compact Magnetic Cluster)*, 1916, oil on canvas, 53 × 53 cm., Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

By October 1915, Suprematism had already emerged as a fully articulated and well-developed pictorial system with a distinct conceptual paradigm, which Malevich presented to Alexandra Exter during her visit to his studio that month.⁹ It was almost certainly Exter who introduced Malevich to Natalia Davydova, the organiser of the *Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art*. Malevich probably received his invitation to participate in the show quite late, almost certainly in October 1915, only a few weeks before the exhibition opening, so there would have been no time to execute his designs. This would explain why Malevich showed Suprematist easel paintings rather than executed embroideries at the *Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art*.¹⁰

⁹ Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus*, 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

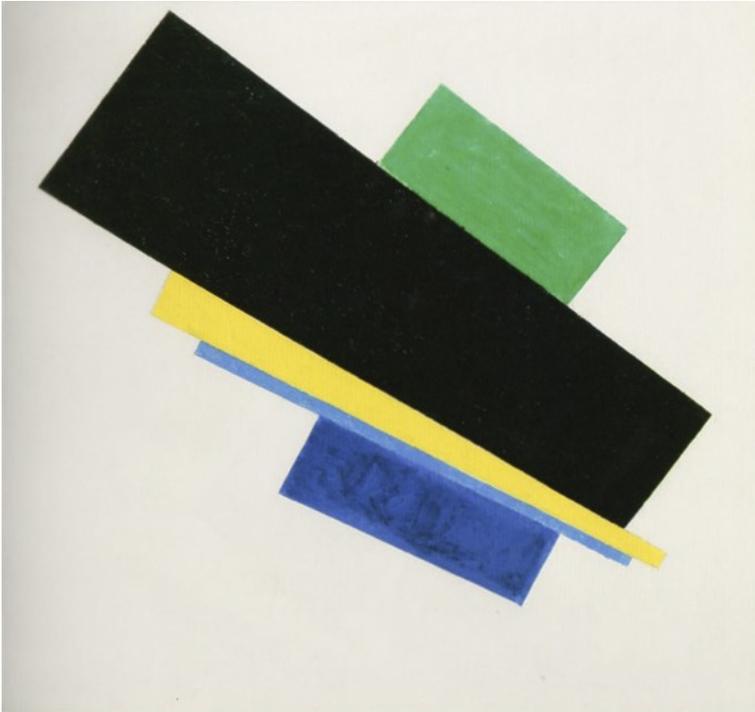


FIGURE 11.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism No. 18*, 1915, oil on canvas, 53.3 × 53.3 cm., private collection.

Malevich's decision to exhibit Suprematist projects in the context of an exhibition of applied art may also be explained by the fact that he conceived Suprematism as a universal visual system, which was not confined to painting, but embraced all the arts, including sculpture, theatrical design and music. Perhaps his acquaintance with Davydova, who had ambitious plans for the future dissemination of innovative applied art in the everyday world, gave Malevich an additional incentive to participate in this initiative. In a postcard to his friend Mikhail Matiushin, he announced, 'A great treasure trove [the treasure being Davydova – JT] is being dug up, and as soon as the war ends, we will be on the crest of a wave ... London—Paris—America have already been selected by this Treasure Trove, I think this should be enough for us.'¹¹ Davydova's impressive plans, however, were postponed by the outbreak of the First World War, and then were completely abandoned in the wake of the October

11 Kazimir Malevich, postcard to Mikhail Matiushin, 5 November 1915; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmund, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 1: 72.

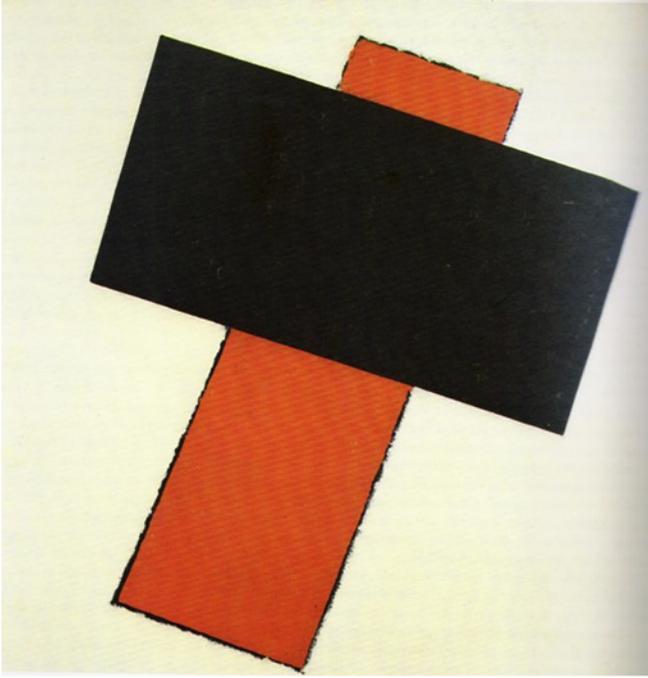


FIGURE 11.4 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1919-1920, oil on canvas, 8.3 × 80.3 cm., private collection.

Revolution of 1917. Despite this, in 1915, Malevich, with his refined innovator's intuition, did not miss the opportunity to be represented in the very first Russian exhibition of works that were concerned with translating innovative and radical visual forms from works of art into objects of everyday use – something that opened endless possibilities for the wider promotion and dissemination of his ideas.

I will allow myself to speculate that Malevich's participation in Davydova's show might have also been influenced by his youthful partiality for textiles. His memoirs indicate that as a teenager he liked to knit and sew. He wrote: 'My mother also liked to embroider and to do lacework. She taught me this art, and I also embroidered and knitted with a crochet hook.'¹²

12 See K. Malevich, 'Glavy iz abtobiografii khudozhnika', in N. I. Khardzhiev, *Stat'i ob avangarde v dvykh tomakh*, eds. Rudolf Duganov, Iurii Arpishkin, and Andrei Sarabianov (Moscow: RA, 1997), 1: 114; English translation in John E. Bowlt and Mark Konecny eds., *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2002), 159.

From the perspective of history, we might further suggest that Malevich's decision to exhibit Suprematist paintings as projects for items of applied art testifies to his bold inner freedom as an artist, and corresponds to his disregard for the traditional hierarchy of art. Yet, within his immediate context, this gesture might have had a negative impact on the wider dissemination of his new style.

Malevich's colleagues, especially the Moscow-based artists, such as Nadezhda Udaltsova and Liubov Popova, who later became ardent disciples of Suprematism, did not immediately recognise the potential of the new style and initially considered its minimalistic simplicity to be 'dilettante' and 'decorative'.¹³ As Shatskikh has demonstrated, the tension among the participants of the 0.10 exhibition, which was initially explained by critics and artists alike as owing to inter-personal issues, was in fact based purely on artistic considerations: the refined Cubist artists were perplexed by the 'decorative', even 'childish' qualities of Suprematist art, which they felt damaged notions of artistic skill and so undermined their status as artists and their dignity as 'professionals of painting'.¹⁴

Nevertheless, it was actually through embroidery that these very same Cubist artists came to understand and embrace Suprematism over the course of the next two years. In 1916 and 1917, a number of avant-garde artists, such as Olga Rozanova, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Liubov Popova and Vera Pestel, also became involved in the production of embroidery designs for the Verbovka workshops.

Udaltsova described her initial involvement with Verbovka, embroidery and Suprematism in her diary. On 10 October 1916, she wrote: 'I am invited ... to the embroidery society. A drawing costs 20 roubles. I can give them five drawings a month. But if they accept all of them, I could make ten a month, or even more. I could give up painting for three months and only make money'.¹⁵ A month later, on 29 November 1916, she confessed: 'I am unexpectedly fascinated by the decorative drawings and Malevich ... The embroideries came out quite nicely and I earned 230 roubles'.¹⁶ In fact, all of Udaltsova's non-objective Suprematist compositions are derived from her projects for the Verbovka embroidery workshop (Fig. 11.5).

13 Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus*, 104.

14 Ibid.

15 N. Udaltsova, *Dnevnik russkoi kubistki. Dnevnik, stat'i, vospominaniia*, eds. E.A. Drevina and V. I. Rakitin (Moscow: RA, 1994), 29.

16 Ibid., 30.



FIGURE 11.5 Nadezhda Udaltsova, *Suprematist Composition*, 1916, gouache on paper, 64 × 44.5 cm., Collection George Costakis, State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.

© THE STATE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, THESSALONIKI.

Popova also seems to have been encouraged to begin creating Suprematist easel paintings through her design work for Verbovka and her involvement in the activities of the Supremus Society.¹⁷ Her Verbovka designs are based on the constructive relationship of form and colours, which she continued to explore in her series of Suprematist-inspired canvases, which she called *Painterly*

¹⁷ Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus*, 174-179.

Achitechtonics [zhivopisnaia arkhitektonika] Popova's experience of producing designs for Verbovka represented her first involvement with applied art and acted as an important precedent for her work in textile design under the aegis of Constructivism, six years later.¹⁸ In addition to Udaltsova and Popova, Verbovka provided a forum for experimentation for other artists, including Puni, Rozanova and Exter. Their collaboration with the workshop exerted an enormous influence on their easel painting, and stimulated them to develop new approaches to non-objective forms (Fig. 11.6, 11.7).¹⁹

In December 1917, the second and final Verbovka exhibition opened at the Mikhailova Salon, Moscow. The exhibition contained around 400 works, all of which were based on the objectless style of Suprematism.²⁰ While the first Verbovka exhibition of 1915 witnessed the inaugural manifestation of Suprematism, the second Verbovka exhibition of 1917 was the most representative display of the new style, in terms of the sheer number of items on show. For a long time, there were no known images from this exhibition, until Charlotte Douglas discovered by chance, in a second-hand book shop in New York City, negatives of photographs that the American photographer Oliver Saylor had taken during his trip to Moscow in 1917 (Fig. 11.8, 11.9).²¹

The eagerness with which Russian avant-garde artists used Suprematism for their embroidery designs prompts the question: Why did these artists, who actually practised other styles of painting, choose Suprematism for their applied art? It is highly probable that Suprematism, with its clarity, minimal visual schemes, brightness of colour, and fresh contemporaneity of forms stood out advantageously in comparison to, for instance, the complexity of Cubism's stylistic devices. Suprematist decoration turned useful items into emblematic art objects. It may have been precisely this emblematic quality that attracted the artists who were designing for the Verbovka workshops.

The potential of Suprematist textile design was further explored after the October Revolution of 1917, when the issue of designing items for everyday use came to the fore. The building of the 'new world' that the Bolsheviks

18 See, for example, Dmitri V. Sarabianov and Natalia L. Adaskina, *Popova* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); Tulovskii, *Tekstil avantgarda*; and Christina Lodder, 'Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design', *Tate Papers*, 14 (Autumn 2010), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/liubov-popova-from-painting-to-textile-design.htm>.

19 For a more detailed discussion of the role that Suprematism played in these artists' move to abstraction, see Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus*, 169-171.

20 See *Katalog 2-i vystavki sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva* (Moscow, 1917).

21 Charlotte Douglas, 'Oliver Saylor in Russia', *Pinakothek* (Moscow), XXI-XXIII, 1-2 (2006): 284-287. For attempts to attribute the various works in Saylor's exhibition photographs, see Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich i obshchestvo Supremus*, 292.

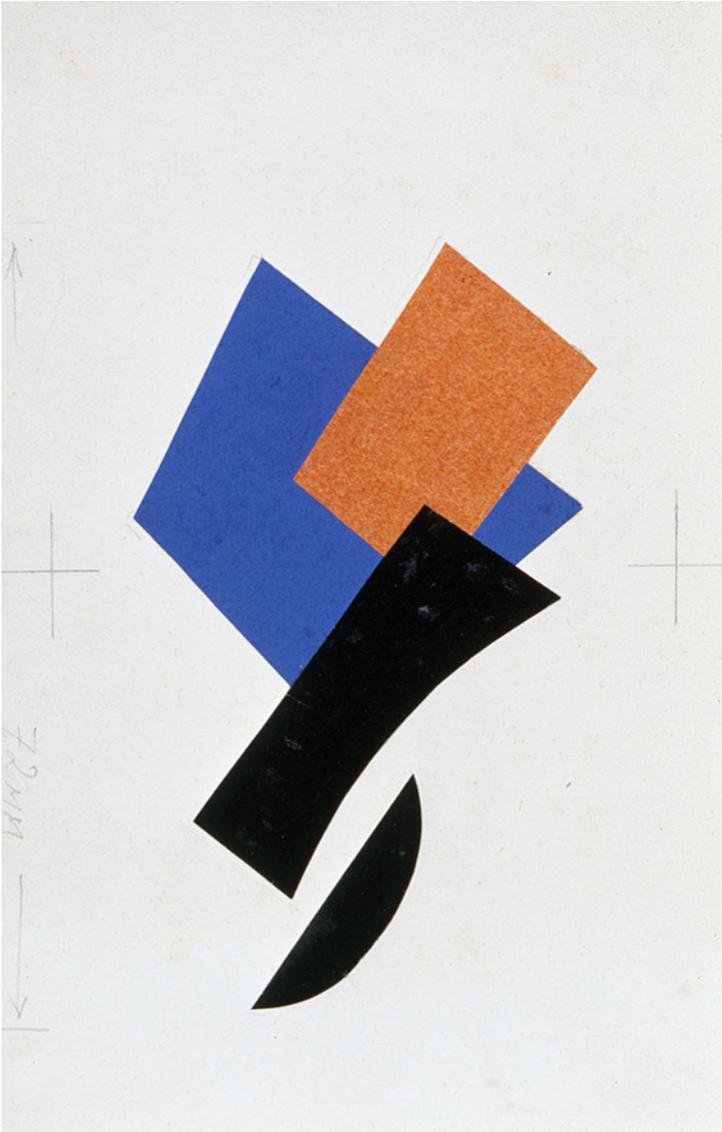


FIGURE 11.6 Liubov Popova, *Sketch for Embroidery for the Verbovka Workshop*, 1917, collage on paper, 12.2 × 18.8 cm., Museum Tsaritsyno, Moscow.

proclaimed, mandated and inspired the broader artistic task of designing a completely new environment for the new proletarian state.

In tandem with these new creative perspectives, a network of State Free Art Studios (*Svobodnye gosudarstvennyye khudozhestvennyye masterskie* – *Svomas*) was set up in October 1918, under the auspices of the Fine Art Department within the Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Otdel izobrazitel'nykh*



FIGURE 11.7 Liubov Popova, *Sketch for Embroidery for the Verbovka Workshop*, 1917, gouache and lacquer on paper, 31 × 21.2 cm., private collection.

iskusstv, Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – IZO Narkompros). Malevich taught at the Moscow Svomas, where, among other activities, he headed the textile department, together with Udaltsova.²² Several of Malevich's textile designs survive from that period (Fig. 11.10, 11.11).

22 S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina* (Moscow: Galart, 1995), 276.

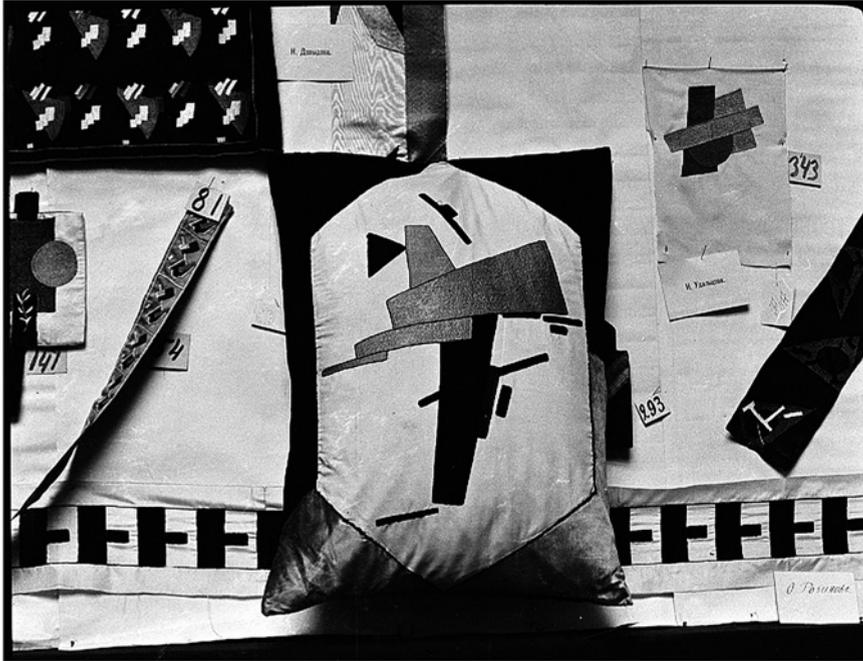


FIGURE 11.8 Oliver Saylor, Photograph of the second Verbovka exhibition, 1917, private collection, New York. This shows a cushion produced to Malevich's design.

In 1919, for the first time, Malevich also began to conceptualise the use of Suprematism for applied art in his theoretical writings. In the catalogue for the *Tenth State Exhibition*, he wrote: 'Suprematism, on the one hand, has a purely philosophical, cognitive movement through colour. On the other, as a form, it can be applied to objects to create a new style of Suprematist decoration. But it also can appear on objects, as the transformation or embodiment of space, disintegrating the very notion of these objects in [the viewer's] consciousness.'²³ In other words, Suprematism not only replaced traditional decoration with the nuclei of Suprematist ornamentation, but in doing this it also transformed these items and objects into elements of a Suprematist cosmos.

Later, in 1919, Malevich accepted an invitation to teach at the Vitebsk People's Art School (*Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche*). There

23 K. Malevich, 'Suprematizm', in *Katalog desiatoi gosudarstvennoi vystavki. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919), 18; English translation, as 'Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism', in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 1: 121. Translation adjusted.

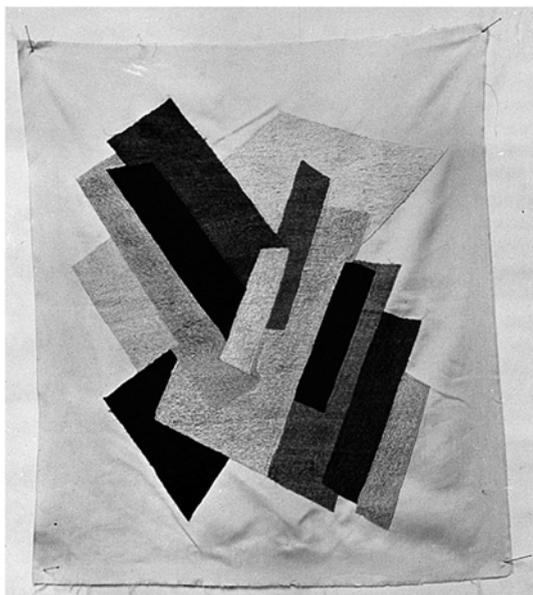


FIGURE 11.9 Nadezhda Udaltsova, *Suprematist Embroidery*. An exhibit from the second Verbovka exhibition, 1917.

PHOTOGRAPH BY OLIVER SAYLER, PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK.

he inspired the foundation of Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art), and further developed Suprematism’s design potential with the help of his students. Among other projects, the group devoted their attention to textile design. The first Suprematist fabric printed in the Vitebsk workshop was also reproduced in the *Unovis* almanac.²⁴ This is the only known example of a Suprematist textile design that was actually realised as printed cloth (Fig. 11.12).

In the 1920s, Malevich’s students Ilia Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin produced a number of Suprematist textile designs. Their initial interest in this area seems to have been awakened during the Vitebsk period, but they later continued creating Suprematist fabric designs parallel to their production of Suprematist porcelain in Petrograd (subsequently Leningrad). In fact, the patterns created in Vitebsk were often adapted from Malevich’s easel paintings. For example, one of Suetin’s designs, which dates from 1921, possesses strong

24 *Unovis No. 1* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920), [sheet 42 verso], State Tretyakov Gallery, Manuscript Department, fond 76, no. 9; reprinted in *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil'noe izdanie*, ed. Tat'iana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel'stvo Skanrus, 2003), [sheet 42 verso].

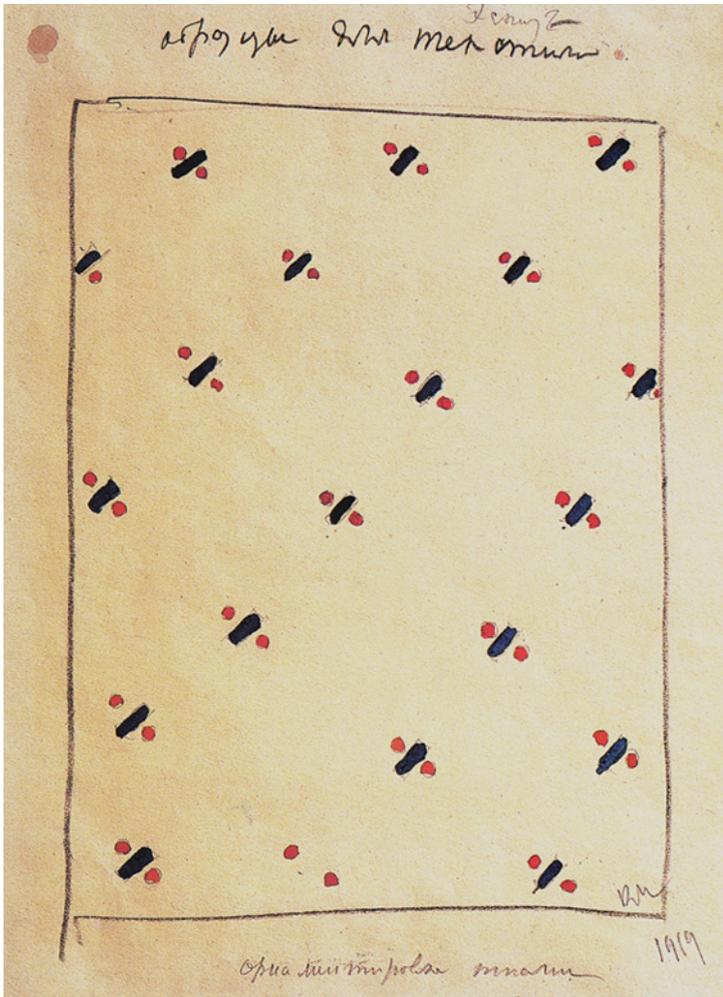


FIGURE 11.10 Kazimir Malevich, *Textile Design No. 10*, 1919, watercolour and pencil on paper, 35.8 × 27.1 cm., State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

affinities with Malevich's oil painting from 1915, *Eight Red Rectangles* (Fig. 11.13). Another of Suetin's designs, which is based on the combination of a pale pink triangle with a black circle and some smaller forms, resembles Malevich's *Dynamic Suprematism* (*Supremus 57*), 1916, Tate Modern, London (Fig. 11.14).

In the late 1920s, the formal components of the textile designs created by Chashnik (and to a lesser extent those produced by Suetin) became more interdependent and constructively connected, while the colours tended to become more gentle and sometimes subdued. It is possible that these later designs were influenced by Constructivist approaches to fabric design. Alterna-

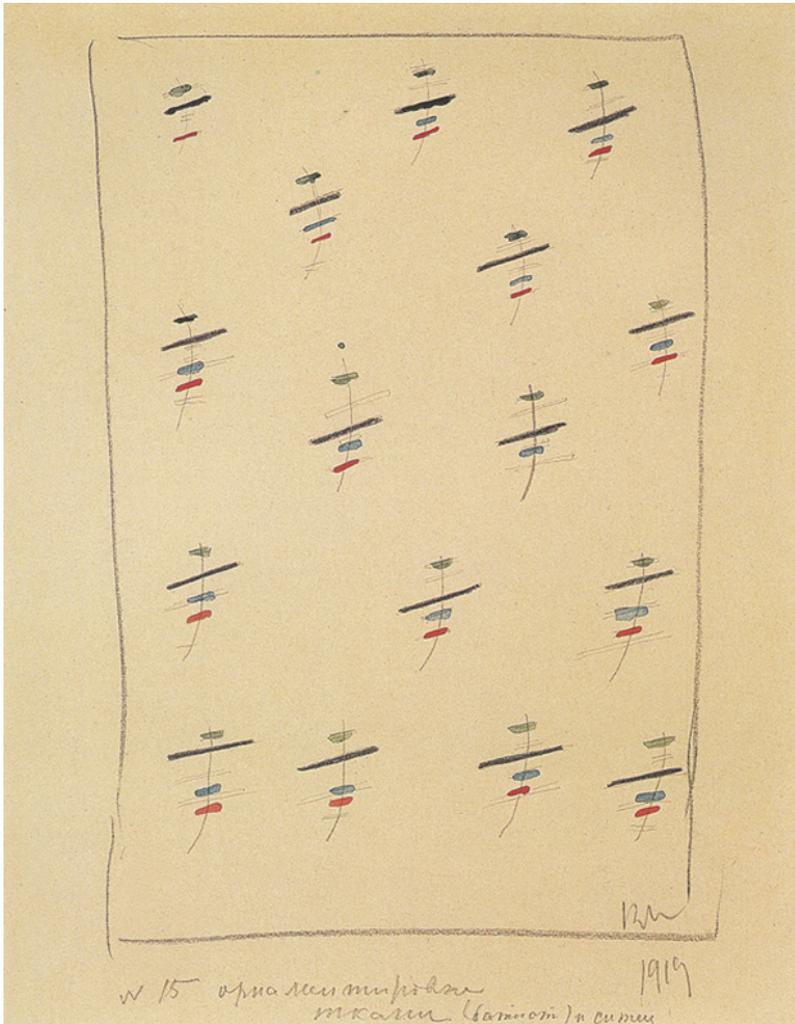


FIGURE 11.11 Kazimir Malevich, *Textile Design No. 15*, 1919, watercolour and pencil on paper, 35.6 × 27 cm., State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

tively, this change may have been inherent in the very logic of the development of Suprematist textile patterns, in that the freed geometric elements, hovering in white nothingness, later acquired a more rigorous order (Fig. 11.15, 11.16).

The years 1923-24 marked a new stage in Russian avant-garde textile design, which was characterised by an approach in which the basic geometric elements became organised into tight, interlocking entities. This more mathematical and rational approach emerged under the auspices of Constructivism. In 1923, Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova responded to an advertisement

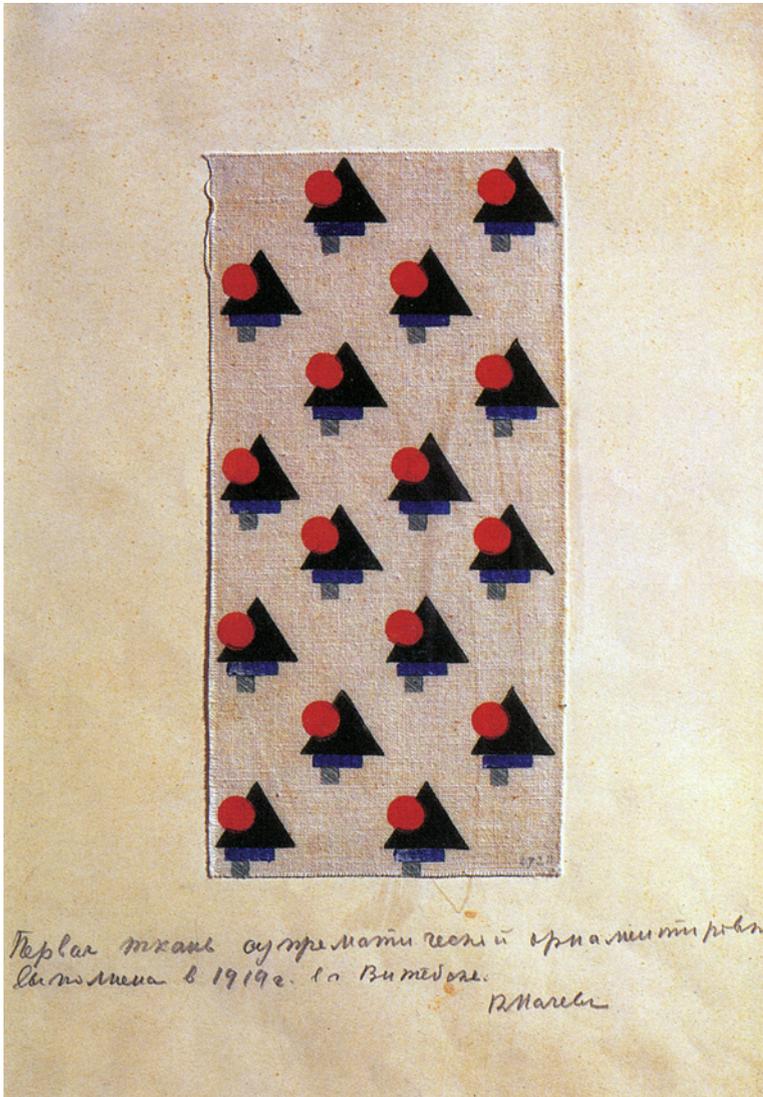


FIGURE 11.12 Kazimir Malevich, *First Suprematist Fabric*, 1919, printed fabric glued onto paper, ink and gouache, 20 × 9.6 cm., (fabric); 33.8 × 24 cm., (paper), State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. The fabric was actually printed by Ivan Chervinka.

in the newspaper *Pravda*, and went to work for Moscow's First Textile Printing Factory.²⁵ In the designs that they devised for mass production, they employed the same basic geometric elements that had earlier been established

25 A. Abramova, 'Oдна iz pervykh', *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, 9 (1963): 19.

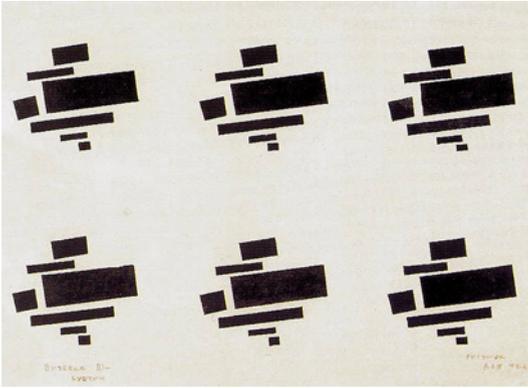


FIGURE 11.13 Nikolai Suetin, *Suprematist Forms. Textile Design*, 1921, ink on paper, 23.4 × 32.4 cm., private collection.

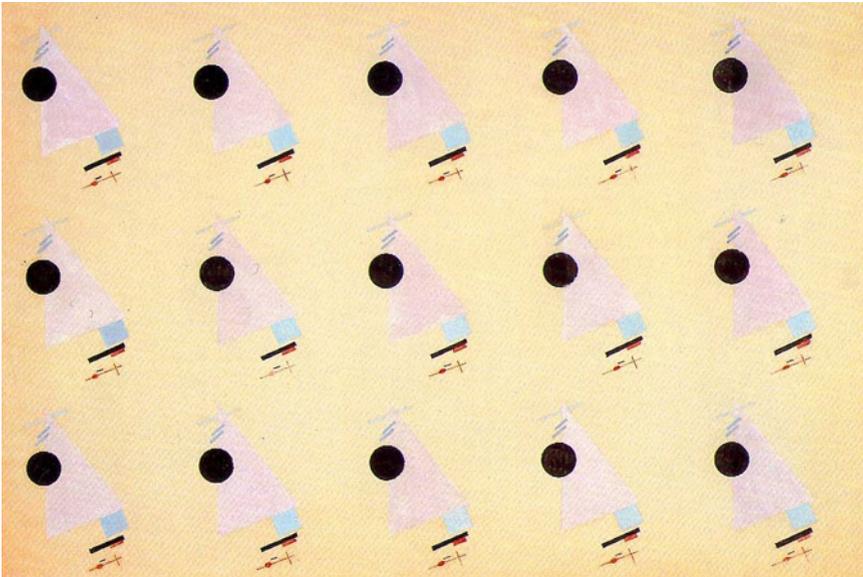


FIGURE 11.14 Nikolai Suetin, *Suprematist Forms. Textile Design*, 1921-1922, gouache and water-colour on paper, 27 × 40 cm., private collection.

as the artistic vocabulary of Suprematism, but they now combined them into strict patterns, which were created in accordance with one of the main postulates of Constructivism, namely that the design of an object should relate to its construction: in this case, the warp and weft of the woven fabric.²⁶ Stepanova

26 Tuloovskii, *Tekstil avantgarda*, 33 ff.



FIGURE 11.15 Ilia Chashnik, *Textile Design*, 1920s, gouache and watercolour on paper, 14.8 × 14 cm., private collection.

made the relationship between the design and the structure of the cloth explicit in 1928 when she wrote: ‘The artist’s whole attention should be focused on the processing and colouring of the fabric, and on developing new types of fabric ... Like everything else, the pattern will be subjected to the standard requirements for the fabric and will ultimately be expressed through the fabric’s structure.’²⁷

As was the case with the Suprematist designs for the Verbovka workshop, Constructivist textiles also served as a laboratory for innovative ideas and prompted the artists to create new forms and devices. These forms and de-

27 V.F. Stepanova, ‘Ot kostiuma k rusunku tkani’, *Vechernaia Moskva* (29 February 1928); English translation in Alexander Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova: A Constructivist Life*, trans. Wendy Salmond (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 180.



FIGURE 11.16 Ilia Chashnik, *Textile Design*, 1925-1927, watercolour on paper, 32.4 × 47.1 cm., State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

vices anticipated key features that emerged in painting several decades later, in particular in movements such as Op Art and Minimalism of 1950-60.²⁸

The interrelations between textiles and various approaches to abstraction constitute one of the most fascinating themes in the history of art during the twentieth century. This paper is but a brief summary of the symbiotic relationship of the textile medium and one of the most important art movements of that period – Suprematism. Although textiles did not play such an important role in the formation of Suprematism as they did in the development of some other abstract styles, they certainly served as mediators for stimulating an understanding of the movement and attracting artists to it. In turn, Suprematism helped prepare the ground for further innovations and achievements in the realm of avant-garde textiles.

28 Tulovskii, *Tekstil avantgarda*, 33 ff.

Suprematism: A Shortcut into the Future: The Reception of Malevich by Polish and Hungarian Artists during the Inter-War Period

Éva Forgács

When considering the reception and influence of Kazimir Malevich in some of the cultures of Eastern and Central Europe, we need to keep in mind that artistic styles and concepts are rarely absorbed into other cultures with their original forms, intentions or meanings completely intact. One of the reasons for their mutations is that the original context within which they developed cannot be transferred in its entirety. Removed from the historical and social fabric of their time and place, they enter another environment, where they will inevitably be seen and interpreted in different terms. The Hungarian theorist and artist Leo Popper (1886-1911), one of the most original thinkers of his time and a very close friend of the young Georg Lukács, left us, among other sketchy writings on aesthetics, a half-page text, entitled ‘The Theory of Misunderstanding’, which he produced towards the end of his short life.¹ He wrote:

One cannot know another man intimately, and cannot understand what the other person wants, and it is even more impossible to understand a previous age (because we cannot ‘go there’). If, however, one adapts something from someone else, or from another era, one does it falsely, misunderstanding it – and preparing a further concatenation of misunderstandings. Thus, the engine driving the development of the arts is misunderstanding.²

Although Popper was making a casual observation, rather than articulating a fully formulated argument, he was not alone in attributing importance to this phenomenon in relation to the art scene in Eastern and Central Europe during

1 Leo Popper was a trained musician, artist, art critic and thinker, who died at the age of 25, from tuberculosis.

2 Leo Popper: ‘Félreértési elmélet’ [Theorem of Misunderstanding], in L. Popper, *Esszék és kritikák* [Essays and Reviews] (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1983), 116-117. Author’s translation.

the early years of the twentieth century. The idiosyncratic and multi-talented Polish artist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885-1939) also tackled this issue in an essay entitled 'The New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstanding Arising Therefrom'.³ He argued that it is not possible to find truth in philosophy, and the concept of the metaphysical is disappearing from society, which is increasingly prey to self-styled rulers. He was prescient in describing the mass society that was becoming a reality soon after he wrote his essay, and he thought that the falling apart of the once supposedly homogenous process of artistic creation, which led to the misunderstanding of artworks, was part and parcel of the changes in modern society.

In addition to the local prehistories of modernism and the Avant-Gardes in Poland and Hungary respectively, another important aspect that relates to the assimilation of Malevich's ideas in these countries is the time lapse. Malevich developed Suprematism during the early years of the First World War, and this context inevitably shaped his futuristic visions styled as Suprematism. The Central Europeans, however, only acquired information about his work after the conflict was over, when concepts of the future were heavily coloured, both pessimistically and optimistically, by experiences of the war. In her excellent book on Olga Rozanova, Nina Gourianova observes that for the Russian Avant-Garde, war was 'more a metaphor than a subject' and that 'The concept was bound up with the idea of innovation and the destruction of the old forms and aesthetics for the sake of a new creativity'.⁴ Nevertheless, the actual cataclysm of the war shook these artists profoundly. Aaron J. Cohen observes that the war changed the position of the Russian avant-garde artists, 'as an overarching public mobilization brought together antagonistic artistic milieus. Radical artists joined the country's culture of war ... At the same time the war destabilized the avant-garde's pre-war public culture and unleashed a scramble to find a new basis to justify radical art'.⁵

Cohen argues that the emergence of non-objective art was part of this latter development, as part of the process of the artists' proclaiming 'their contributions to Russian culture inside a mobilized civil society'.⁶

3 Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, 'Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia' [New Forms in Painting and the Misunderstanding Arising Therefrom], 1919; trans. Daniel Gerould, in Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, with LACMA, 2002), 245-251.

4 Nina Gourianova, *Exploring Color. Olga Rozanova and the Early Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1918*, trans. Charles Rougle (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000), 71.

5 Aaron J. Cohen: *Imagining the Unimaginable. World War, Modern Art, and the Politics of Public Culture in Russia, 1914-1917* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 115.

6 Ibid.

The First World War changed the world fundamentally, both in and beyond Russia. Thirteen new countries appeared on the map of Central and Eastern Europe as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was disassembled, the Ottoman Empire was partitioned, and Soviet Russia relinquished the Baltic countries, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. Beside these political and geographic changes, it was impossible to ignore the horrific reality of the war and what it had revealed about human nature. At the same time, it had fuelled visions of a better, supra-national future among the international Avant-Garde, who hoped to avoid in the future the kinds of national conflicts that had led to the recent carnage. The visions of the post-war Avant-Garde were undoubtedly utopian. Witkiewicz, for one, dismissed them as deeply delusional as soon as they appeared: 'Today's liberals see the future of the broad masses through the prism of their own present psychology',⁷ he wrote, implying that the liberals were projecting their own attitudes onto the masses, and misunderstanding everything that originated from the psychology of others. Not surprisingly, in the post-1918 world, the supra-national motifs of Suprematism's geometric abstraction resonated in Eastern and Central Europe as more programmatically international and political than Malevich had ever intended them to be. Kállai called it a 'collective art',⁸ and, in his review of Malevich's 1927 Berlin exhibition, underlined the parallel between Malevich's Suprematist abstraction and his architectural imagination, which he saw as practical as the West European architecture of the time.⁹ Until about the mid-1920s, both Suprematism and Constructivism were seen as projections of an imminent collective, communist future in the West.¹⁰

Suprematism was not the only artistic development to be harnessed and adapted to local circumstances, the results of a totally different culture and history. Futurism had undergone a similar adjustment. In Russia, for instance, Futurism lacked the nationalist and military overtones that it had possessed in Italy, its place of origin.¹¹ Similarly, in Hungary, Futurism did not refer to the

7 Witkiewicz, 'Nowe formy'; *Between Worlds*, 248.

8 Ernő Kállai, 'Konstruktivismus' [Constructivism], *Ma*, VIII, 7-8 (1 May 1923).

9 Ernst Kállai, 'Kazimir Malewitsch', *Das Kunstblatt* (July 1927): 264-266.

10 For more detailed discussion, see Tatiana Goriacheva, 'Suprematism and Constructivism: An Intersection of Parallels', in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), 67-8; and Éva Forgács, 'Malevich and Western Modernism', in *Rethinking Malevich*, 237-253.

11 'We Russians... must overcome Futurism both in life and in art ... by going deeper, by moving into another dimension, the dimension of depth rather than the surface, through knowledge, not abstract ... but of life, knowledge of being', Olga Rozanova, letter to Aleksei Khruchenykh, cited in Gourianova, *Exploring Color*, 74.

anticipation of a coming modernised age, but was a word used to describe any kind of modernist art or literature that was incomprehensible to the general public. As the writer István Vas recalled, the term was 'indiscriminately used for everything new and crazy'.¹² Likewise, the Hungarian version of Cubism ignored the restrained tonalities of the French originals as well as their references to urban life, only adopting the fragmentation of forms, while using bold, intense colours. In tandem with such aesthetic transformations, artistic terminology also underwent a metamorphosis. Words such as 'plane' and 'space' took on different meanings in different conceptual systems, depending on whether they referred to abstract or figurative imagery. El Lissitzky ranked space higher than a flat picture plane,¹³ while Władysław Strzemiński declared that the 'plane should be the only constructional element of the picture' in his Unism manifesto.¹⁴

Like Futurism and other artistic concepts and styles, Suprematism occupied a different cultural space in Eastern and Central Europe than it did in its country of origin. Malevich's objectless works of 1915 were rooted in a context that included the Cubo-Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*; exchanges with Mikhail Matiushin, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov; rivalry with Vladimir Tatlin; a painterly dialogue with Olga Rozanova; and a compulsion towards self-promotion that was fostered by the highly competitive Russian art world of the mid-1910s. Ilia Repin and Russian Realist and historical painters were much farther away from this art world than their equivalents were from progressive artists in Eastern and Central Europe. By the mid-1910s, the Russian Avant-Garde was no longer engaging in debates to oppose such obsolete styles, whereas in Hungary, for example, one of the early programmatic points of modern painting was to reject and disregard stuffy Realism and stale historicism.¹⁵ The most vocal opponent of it was painter Károly Kernstok, who founded the modernist group The Seekers in 1909 (re-named The Eight in 1910). He gave a programmatic talk titled 'Investigative Art' in 1910, lampooning the not so remote past when 'sights and delights accompanied the ... paintings

12 See István Vas's autobiographical novel, *Nehéz szerelem* [*Hard love*] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1972), 308; and Béla Balázs, 'Futuristák' [Futurists], *Nyugat*, 1 (1912): 645-647. Author's translation.

13 El Lissitzky, 'K. und Pangeometrie', in Paul Westheim and Carl Einstein, eds., *Europa Almanach* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenhauer Verlag, 1925), 103.

14 Władysław Strzemiński, *Unizm w malarstwie* [*Unism in Painting*] (Warsaw, 1928); trans. Wanda Kemp-Welch, in *Between Worlds*, 655

15 See, for example, Károly Kernstok's lecture delivered to the Galileo Circle in Budapest on 9 January 1910; published as Kernstok, 'Kutató művészet' [Investigative Art], *Nyugat*, 1 (1910): 95-99, trans. John Bártki, in *Between Worlds*, 121-125.

depicting Gypsies, peasants, and great festive assemblies and processions in traditional ceremonial garb.¹⁶

The actual level of information about Suprematism and other innovative artistic trends in Russia also differed from country to country in Eastern and Central Europe. While Polish artists, some of whom had actually studied with Malevich, acquired first-hand knowledge about Suprematism, Hungarians learned about both the artist and his work via Berlin. The art critic and communist theorist Alfréd Kemény had visited Russia and given a talk at the Moscow Inkhuk (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Institute of Artistic Culture) in December 1920. He had engaged in a debate about the 'technical naturalism' that he had observed during his stay, before returning to Berlin and telling his colleagues about Russian developments.¹⁷ The Hungarian avant-garde group in Viennese exile between 1920-1926 learned about the new Russian art directly from Konstantin Umanskii, whom they invited to give an illustrated slide talk in November 1920.¹⁸ As is well known, Germany, Russia, and Eastern and Central Europe were politically and culturally interconnected in many ways throughout the inter-war era. Exhibitions and publications, originating from Germany, which presented the new Russian art, influenced the Eastern-European reception of the Russian Avant-Garde.

Malevich and Suprematism in Poland

Malevich had the closest ties to Poland of all the countries in Eastern and Central Europe. Because of his family background and personal contacts,¹⁹ Polish artists regarded him as a fellow countryman, who just happened to be living in Russia. The leading Polish Constructivists Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952) and his wife Katarzyna Kobro (Ekaterina Kobro, 1898-1951)²⁰ had both studied

16 Ibid., 125.

17 Oliver Botar, 'Constructivism, International Constructivism, and the Hungarian Emigration', *The Hungarian Avant-Garde 1914-1933* (Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut / The William Benton Museum of Art, 1987), 95.

18 An announcement of the event was published in *Ma*, VI, 3 (1 January 1921); Béla Uitz's detailed account 'Jegyzetek a Ma orosz estélyéhez' [Notes to *Ma*'s Russian Evening] was published in *Ma*, VI, 4 (15 February 1921): 52.

19 Malevich's brothers Antoni, Bolesław, and Stanisław Malewicz lived in Warsaw, but, according to Andrzej Turowski, he was not close to them. For more details, see Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: Rekonstrukcje i Symulacje* (Cracow: Universitas, 2002), 190-192.

20 Kobro was born in Moscow, of Russian, Latvian, and German extraction.

with Malevich and others at Moscow's State Free Art Studios (Gosudarstvennye svobodnye khudozhestvennye masterskie – Svomas) in 1918 and belonged to the Smolensk branch of Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art). Until about 1921, they were the only artists outside Russia who had first-hand experience of Malevich's work and ideas. After the couple moved to Poland in 1922, Strzemiński published 'Notes on Russian Art' in the Polish journal *Switch-Points* [*Zwrotnica*]. The editors of the journal appended a note, stating:

The author of the following article recently came back from Russia, where he took an active part in artistic movements. In the letter addressed to our editorial board, he asks for help to bring Mr. Malevich, our countryman and one of the leading artists in the Russian art world, to Poland. We draw the matter to the attention of the Department of Culture and Art.²¹

Indeed, in 1922, Strzemiński declared that Malevich was 'a giant', whose development had been 'blocked by Lunacharsky', who had failed to recognise true artistic value. Instead, the Commissar of Enlightenment had supported the Productivists, whom Strzemiński criticised for having 'no idea about the efforts that have led to Cubist and Suprematist developments'.²²

In inter-war Poland, unlike Soviet Russia, positions adopted towards progressive art were theoretical, rather than practical. They indicated the situation of avant-garde artists in relation to the group dynamics of the Polish progressive art scene, but they did not have any political relevance in the Second Polish Republic.²³ While progressive artists did not adopt a stance of militant opposition – regained Polish independence made everyone enthusiastically patriotic – they were marginalised by both the public and officialdom. Mainstream art in Poland consisted of Neo-Classicism and Neo-Realism, both of which, as Irena Kossowska observes, 'resulted from a rejection of the self-referential experimentation with non-representational and abstract form manifest in modernism, and a denunciation of the intellectual speculation

21 Władysław Strzemiński, 'O sztuce rosyjskiej – notatki' [Notes on Russian Art], *Zwrotnica*, 3, (1922); translation adapted from Wanda Kemp-Welch in *Between Worlds*, 272-280; this quote, 272.

22 Strzemiński, 'O sztuce rosyjskiej – notatki'; *Between Worlds*, 279.

23 The Second Polish Republic was also called The Commonwealth of Poland, or *Rzeczpospolita Polska*.

typical of the Avant-Garde'.²⁴ This was a general trend, which accompanied and went in parallel with a thriving international Avant-Garde during the first half of the 1920s. This anti-modernist development prompted Benjamin Buchloh to note that just 'after the Readymade and *The Black Square*' audiences were craving 'the restoration of the visual codes of recognizability'.²⁵ Suprematism, therefore, reached the small minority of avant-garde artists in Eastern and Central Europe, at a time when these were working in the shadow of the increasingly mainstream trends of Neo-Realism and Neo-Classicism. Buchloh also pointed to the First World War as a watershed, stating, 'The first major breakdown of the modernist idiom in twentieth-century painting occurs at the beginning of the First World War, signalled by the end of Cubism and Futurism and the abandonment of critical ideals by the very artists who had initiated those movements'.²⁶ Malevich's work, reaching Eastern and Central Europe in the wake of the War, resonated as a continuation of the pre-war Avant-Garde's critical stance of opposition.

Strzemiński's 'Notes on Russian Art' was controversial from the very beginning. The rampant anti-Russian and anti-Soviet feeling in Poland made any article about Russian culture provocative. The author, therefore, stressed Malevich's Polish ethnicity, by pointing out that he 'is not the first pre-eminent Pole in Russian art'.²⁷ Of course, Strzemiński's unequivocal admiration for Malevich had changed by 1924, when he founded the *Blok* Circle and journal with Kobro, Henryk Stażewski (1894-1988), Mieczysław Szczuka (1898-1927), Teresa Żarnower (1895-1950), and others. Typically, these self-confessed 'Cubists, Suprematists and Constructivists' blurred the boundaries between these various aesthetic trends, although the group became increasingly committed to Constructivism. In the first issue of *Blok* in March 1924, Stażewski already identified what he called 'Post-Suprematism' and the 'bankruptcy of Suprematism', maintaining that since the latter's emergence 'A new notion of beauty is

24 Irena Kossowska, 'Introduction: Reframing Tradition – Art in Central and Eastern Europe between the two World Wars', in Kossowska, ed., *Reinterpreting the Past: Traditionalist Artistic trends in Central and Eastern Europe of the 1920s and 1930s* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2010), 10.

25 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting', *October*, 6 (Spring 1981): 39-68; reprinted in Marcia Tucker, ed., *Art After Modernism* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 107.

26 Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority', 110.

27 Strzemiński, 'O sztuce rosyjskiej – notatki'; *Between Worlds*, 275. The Russian artists cited are Vladimir Orlovsky and Mikhail Vrubel.

born – *the beauty of utilitarianism*'.²⁸ *Blok* started to criticise Malevich in harsh terms, deliberately skewing the arguments in its favour, by using the editors' and contributors' own definition of the terms of the debate. 'Suprematism did not define the concept of shape in painting',²⁹ Strzemiński stated, and he reproached Malevich for misunderstanding the relations 'between art and technology, art and astronomy, and art and [geometry]'.³⁰ By this time, Strzemiński was developing his own rigorous concept of 'absolute painting', which he asserted had to be absolutely flat and avoid any interaction between the forms – a system that he fully elaborated in his manifesto, *Unism in Painting*, which was published in 1928.³¹

Strzemiński's *Unism* was indebted to Malevich; the author acknowledged that 'The introduction of the plane into the picture, several years ahead of all the other modern movements, was the contribution of Suprematism'.³² Then, however, the text declares that dynamism in painting (also a feature of Suprematism), and every tension between the pictorial components are *baroque* – which is clearly intended to be a highly derogatory term here. The text stresses that every dualism has to be eliminated in painting and 'be replaced by the Unist conception'.³³ For Strzemiński, the solidity and integrity of the painting, which are its unique values, could only be guaranteed by absolute flatness. The painting must be free from every kind of contrast and must move 'from the baroque drama to the mystical conception of the picture as uniform and flat'.³⁴ Both Malevich and Mondrian were rejected because they failed to achieve the ethereal level of perfect balance – a sort of *Zen* – that Strzemiński demanded.

When Malevich arrived in Warsaw in March 1927, on his way to Berlin, he received a mixed reception. On the one hand, he was enthusiastically welcomed and celebrated by some Polish artists, who organised an exhibition of his works and arranged a festive banquet in his honour. Tadeusz Peiper, for instance, greeted him warmly and expressed the hope that he could become a permanent member of the Polish art world, stating: 'Polish artists are

28 Henryk Stażewski, 'O suprematisme w malarstwie' [Concerning Suprematism in Painting], *Blok*, 1 (8 March 1924); trans. Wanda Kemp-Welch, as 'Untitled Statements on Suprematism and Painting', in *Between Worlds*, 492-493, these quotes, 492.

29 Władysław Strzemiński, 'B=2', *Blok*, 8/9 (1924); trans. Wanda Kemp-Welch in *Between Worlds*, 497-503; this quote, 501

30 Strzemiński, 'B=2'; *Between Worlds*, 501.

31 Strzemiński, *Unizm w malarstwie*; *Between Worlds*, 649-657.

32 *Ibid.*, 655.

33 *Ibid.*, 653.

34 *Ibid.*, 657.



FIGURE 12.1 Kazimir Malevich with members of the Polish art world, at the Banquet held in his honour, during his exhibition at the Polonia Hotel, Warsaw, 25 March 1927. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN.

overcome with melancholy at the thought that the Pole Malevich is not here working at their side [because] our artistic life is not exactly rich with artists of his calibre. We miss Malevich ... Malevich should not just visit us!³⁵ As Turowski relates, Malevich first of all met members of the *Praesens* group, including Henryk Stażewski, Helena and Szymon Syrkus, as well as Strzebiński and Kobro:

Malevich's exhibition in Warsaw was held at the Polish Arts Club ... in the Polonia Hotel, where the club took up the entire first floor ... The Polonia occupied an important place on the social, cultural and political map of the capital. Its position, beyond the traditional city centre and in direct proximity to the international railway station, bestowed a certain prestige.³⁶

An improvised exhibition of Malevich's paintings was arranged in the large club room of the hotel (Fig. 12.1). The show lasted for a week, during which a

35 Tadeusz Peiper, 'Malewicz w Polsce' [Malevich in Poland], *Zwrotnica*, 11 (1927); trans. Wanda Kemp-Welch, in *Between Worlds*, 664.

36 Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie*, 196, 199, 202.

festive banquet was held to welcome and celebrate the painter. Subsequently, a large number of reviews and articles on Malevich appeared in the Polish press.³⁷

Despite the adulation, Malevich was sharply criticised by some artists and critics, including Szczuka, who attacked him in an article entitled 'The Funeral of Suprematism'.³⁸ Szczuka pointed to the many strong modernists in Poland who had come a long way since they had admired Malevich. He stressed that, 'Malevich's exhibition is a little too late for our country',³⁹ and explained that 'Kazimir Malevich is the founder of Eastern-European Suprematism' which, he emphasised, has failed to achieve 'complete flatness' such as dictated by Unism. Szczuka admitted that complete flatness is 'an unattainable objective', but, short of this achievement, Suprematism has ended up being merely a form of 'abstract museum painting'.⁴⁰ 'Eastern-European Suprematism' lacks dynamism, while, disturbingly, it features 'a certain literary character, resulting from the juxtaposition of abstract shapes, thrown onto an unrelated background'.⁴¹ In other words, the painter (i.e. Malevich) failed to keep the picture non-referential. It is, in Strzemiński's terms, *baroque*. More profoundly detaching himself and all true Polish modernists from Malevich, Szczuka asserted that 'the characteristic feature of Malevich's psychology is an abhorrence of the word "construction", applied to works of art. He is a Romantic who loves painterly means for their own sake.'⁴²

This last statement marks a turning point in the Polish interpretation of Malevich's work as well as indicating a fundamental change within the Polish Avant-Garde, which was now firmly committed to utilitarianism. The earlier fascination with Malevich's cosmic abstraction was turning into contempt for 'Art for art's sake, served up by the artist priest ... [and] Mystical and theological speculations in which Malevich attempted to contain his conception of art'.⁴³ Szczuka's rant has more to do with the change in the Polish Avant-Garde than with Malevich's art and philosophy and, precisely because of this, it vividly conveys the sharp tone that characterised Polish avant-garde discourse of the late 1920s. The multitude of views expressed in the numerous articles implies a serious and informed discussion of the future possibilities for the visual arts. Unism was not the only authoritative voice in the debate.

37 See a list of the publications in Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie*, 206.

38 Mieczysław Szczuka, 'Pozgonne suprematyzmu' [The Funeral of Suprematism], *Dzwignia*, 2-3 (1927); trans. Wanda Kemp-Welch, in *Between Worlds*, 664-666.

39 Szczuka, 'Pozgonne suprematyzmu'; *Between Worlds*, 665.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 666.

43 Ibid.

Malevich's Suprematism and its concepts functioned as bouncing boards for various artistic ideas – perfectionist, absolutist – and for those who dismissed him as imperfect or obsolete. Yet whatever standpoint artists adopted, both Malevich's theory and practice remained constant points of reference.

The Hungarian Artists' Response to Suprematism

In contrast to the Polish art scene, the generation of Hungarian modernists who came of age in the late 1920s discovered Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde indirectly and often by chance, through sources and information, some of which had been mediated by Lajos Kassák's journals, *Today* [*Ma*], Budapest 1916-1919, Vienna 1920-1925, *Document* [*Dokumentum*], 1926-1927, and *Work* [*Munka*], 1928-1939. Every article about the Russian Avant-Garde and every reproduction of their works that came via Vienna or Berlin inevitably possessed strong political overtones in Hungary, after the short-lived Communist Republic was defeated in 1919 and the country became staunchly right-wing and nationalist. The Russian Avant-Garde was summarily dismissed as communist, so that every bit of news about it resonated with socialists, young people, and anyone who sympathised with radical objectives in politics or art. In 1928, some students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest formed a group called The Young Progressives. It included Lajos Vajda (1908-1941), Dezső Korniss (1908-1984), Béla Veszelszky (1905-1977), György Kepes (1906-2001), Sándor Trauner (1906-1993), Béla Hegedüs (1910-1940), and Ernő Schubert (1903-1960), all of whom had attempted to reconcile their own ideas with the dynamics of a loosely understood Russian Constructivism and the visual and thematic freedom of French Surrealism. The former inspired geometric compositions, the latter photomontages. Of course, these artists had all been children in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time when Malevich had launched Suprematism. They were outsiders, who did not accept the officially encouraged, conservative and Catholic Neo-Classicism that dominated Hungarian art at this time. The group's first public exhibition in 1928 at the Budapest Hall of Arts caused a scandal, and a committee was set up to investigate the students' politically unacceptable interest in abstraction in general and their enthusiasm for the Soviet-Russian version in particular. As a result of the committee's findings, the students were expelled from the Academy of Fine Arts along with their professors who were held responsible for the group's works. Thereupon, the young artists joined the avant-garde *Work* [*Munka*] circle of Lajos Kassák, who had returned to Hungary from his Viennese exile in 1926.

Kassák and his publications proved to be a treasure trove of information about Malevich and his Russian colleagues. He had seen and reviewed the *First Russian Art Exhibition* (1922) in Berlin and, as mentioned above, had invited Konstantin Umanskii to give an illustrated talk about the Russian Avant-Garde in Vienna,⁴⁴ where Malevich's work was briefly characterised as 'the most abstract geometry, the purest negation of material'. Kassák was also in personal contact with Lissitzky, who designed a cover for *Today* [*Ma*].⁴⁵ Reproductions of Lissitzky's works were also published in the journal, as well as in *The Book of New Artists* [*Új művészek könyve*], a visual compilation of art works and technical objects, edited by Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy in Vienna in 1922.⁴⁶

The issues of *Ma* published during Kassák's exile in Vienna were more or less systematically smuggled into Hungary by his wife Jolán Simon. They provided news about artistic innovations that were otherwise completely inaccessible. The Young Progressives, in all probability, first learnt about Malevich from Kassák's publications.

It was not known until his retrospective in 2009 at the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest that Lajos Vajda had been extremely keen to acquaint himself with the writings and ideas of Malevich and Lissitzky. A manuscript in Vajda's handwriting was displayed for the first time at this exhibition, although the source was not identified (Fig. 12.2). It turned out to be a handwritten copy that Vajda had made of Malevich and Lissitzky's texts that had been published in the 1925 *Europa Almanach*, entitled respectively, 'Kazimir Malevich / Suprematism (from the Writings 1915-20)' ['K. Malewitsch / Suprematismus (aus den Schriften 1915-20)],⁴⁷ and Lissitzky's 'A. and Pangeometry' ['K. und Pangeometrie' – 'K' standing for 'Kunst', or art].

Vajda must have thought that these texts were very important because he carefully copied both articles, without skipping a word, and made sketches of the images. He had probably borrowed the book and wanted to own these articles in full before returning the volume. Subsequently, Vajda produced paintings akin to those created by the Russian Avant-Garde. His 1928 *Abstract Composition* in charcoal on paper (Fig. 12.3) reflects his interest in Russian Constructivism's geometric rigour, but it also conveys a dreamy vision, which appears to have been inspired by Paul Klee. The fact that Vajda read and copied

44 See Note 18.

45 Lissitzky designed the cover of *Ma*, vii, 8 (August 1922).

46 The book was published by Julius Fischer Verlag, Vienna.

47 'K. Malewitsch / Suprematismus (Aus den Schriften 1915-20)', in Paul Westheim and Carl Einstein, eds., *Europa Almanach* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenhauer Verlag, 1925), 142-144; and El Lissitzky, 'K. und Pangeometrie', in *Europa Almanach* 103-113.

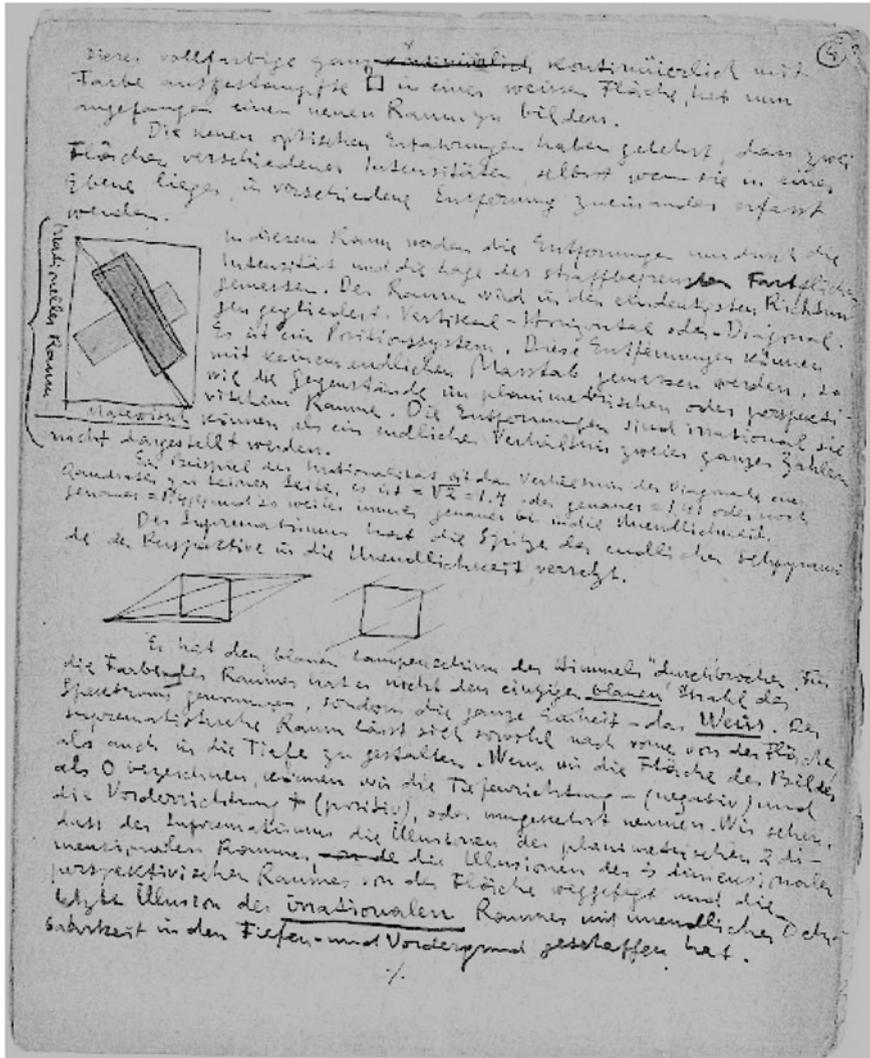


FIGURE 12.2 Lajos Vajda, Handwritten copy of Malevich article from the *Europa Almanach*, c. 1928, private collection, Budapest.

Malevich and Lissitzky's articles suggests that he did not have access to many other sources of information and, therefore, did not possess a very profound or detailed understanding of creative developments in Russia. Rather than sorting out the various trends, groups, styles, and individual approaches, he formed a fairly general understanding of the Russian Avant-Garde's achievements. In this respect, he mirrors the way in which Soviet and Russian art generally tended to be received in the West. In two 1928 paintings, entitled

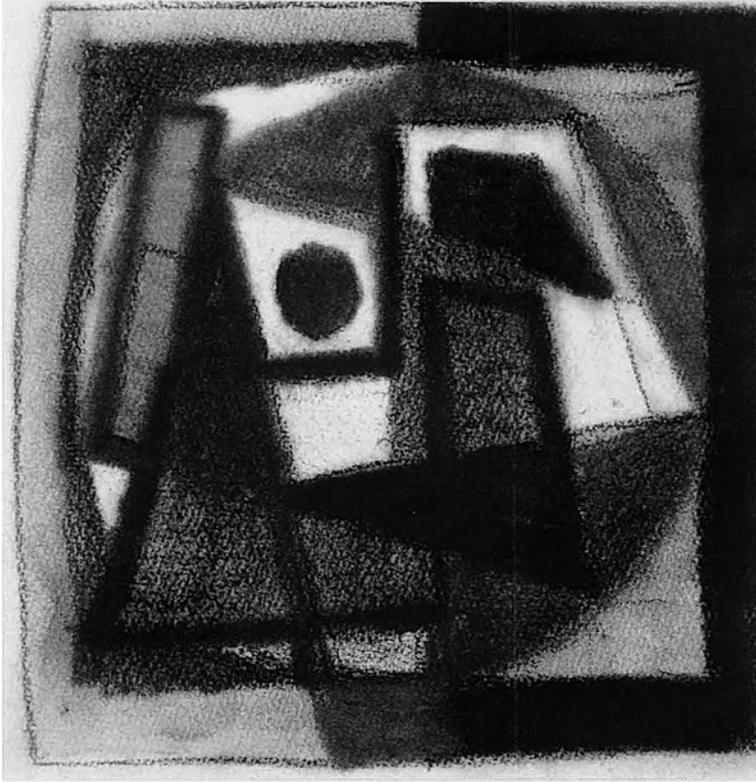


FIGURE 12.3 Lajos Vajda, *Abstract Composition*, 1928, charcoal on paper, 19 × 19 cm., private collection.

Film and *Fics* (pronounced as 'Fich'), Vajda combined Cubist, Constructivist, and Suprematist motifs with what he considered to be the most progressive medium of modern expression – film. In *Film* (Fig. 12.4), he replicated the Russian word for film (фильм), but he made the mistake of omitting the 'soft sign', probably because he knew Serbian but apparently not Russian. Appropriately, *Film* includes Suprematist motifs such as a circle, half-circles, and rectangular shapes; while *Fics* features rectangles, the segment of an arch, a circle, a guitar-shape and rectangular forms fragmented in a Cubist manner. Neither of these Russian-inspired pictures displays any real knowledge of the formal language of Suprematism, but they do suggest that Vajda was adopting and combining various motifs from a wide range of Russian avant-garde art.

It is not absolutely clear how the Malevich article – a medley of excerpts from the artist's writings – came to be printed in the *Europa Almanach*, and thus how it fell into the hands of many artists in Eastern and Central Europe. Certainly, there is no evidence whatsoever that Malevich submitted the text,



FIGURE 12.4 Lajos Vajda, *Film*, 1928, charcoal and watercolour on paper, 48.69 × 56.8 cm., private collection.

saw it or edited it prior to publication. The aphoristic statements were clearly taken from some of his writings that Lissitzky had translated into German with the help of Sophie Küppers.⁴⁸ In fact, the publication of such a collection of excerpts had actually been suggested by Theo van Doesburg in his reader's report of 1924 concerning Lissitzky's proposal for a volume of Malevich's writings, which had probably been submitted to the same Gustav Kiepenhauer Verlag that published the *Europa Almanach*.⁴⁹ Scrutinising the history of how Van Doesburg killed the planned volume of Malevich's writings, and the role

48 See the many letters concerning this work that El Lissitzky wrote to Sophie Küppers, mostly in 1924 and early 1925, in the Archives of the Getty Research Institute, Box 950076, F 1-F 3. For example, on 4 February 1924, Lissitzky wrote about translating Malevich's writings: 'Mit Malewitsch ist noch viel zu tun aber es wird schon werden' [There is still a lot to do about Malevich but it will soon be done]; On 25 March 1925, he thanked Sophie for correcting his translation drafts and complained that Malevich's faulty Russian complicated his work of translating.

49 Theo van Doesburg's reader's report, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Dokumentatie, The Hague.

that his conflict-ridden relationship with Lissitzky may have played in it, is beyond the frames of the present paper.⁵⁰ Suffice it to quote from Van Doesburg's report:

The contents [of Malevich's writings] are mostly vague, murky, and without any consequence on the development of thinking. The ideas are, inasmuch as they are enveloped in romantic-symbolist phraseology, neither new, nor important, and they are full of contradictions ... Maybe a short article of 3, or at most 4 pages could be put together out of the whole in an aphoristic format.⁵¹

The published few pages in 'an aphoristic format' are exactly what Vajda found in the *Europa Almanach*, which was co-edited by Paul Westheim, who had also published Lissitzky's translation of Malevich's article on Lenin in his journal *Das Kunstblatt* in 1924,⁵² also issued by the Gustav Kiepenhauer Verlag. In this way, the edited excerpts from Malevich's essays – most likely put together by Lissitzky – were able to find their way into the anthology, which also included Lissitzky's essay.

In contrast to the Polish art scene, where an aesthetic of perfectionist abstraction was unfolding amidst a number of other trends, there was a lot of uncertainty in Hungary about the possibilities of painting and the direction that it should take in the late 1920s. Politically-charged geometric abstraction was not even on the agenda of Kassák's leftist *Work* [*Munka*] circle, which most of the Young Progressives had joined. Vajda was also active as a member of the Recital Choir, which performed socially-progressive poems, exploiting the compelling effect of orchestrated human voices. The Young Progressives, however, soon found themselves in conflict with Kassák who wanted an ideologically homogenous group and did not tolerate any kind of dissent. He considered abstract painting, for example, to be elitist and incomprehensible to the working class, so replaced it with socially-committed photography,

50 Lissitzky and Van Doesburg's relationship was complicated. They were close friends until c. 1923, when they quarreled, and were reconciled only when Lissitzky informed van Doesburg about his illness in 1924. For details, see Kai-Uwe Hemken, *El Lissitzky. Revolution und Avantgarde* (Cologne: DuMont, 1990), and Lissitzky's letters to his wife in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helen Aldwinckle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 331, 332. See also Linda S. Boersma, 'Malevich, Lissitzky, Van Doesburg: Suprematism', in *Rethinking Malevich*, 223-236.

51 Van Doesburg's report, as in Note 49.

52 Kasimir Malewitsch, 'Lenin. Aus dem Buch "Über das Ungegenständliche"', *Das Kunstblatt*, 10 (1924): 289-293, trans. El Lissitzky.

founding the 'Socio-Photo Movement'. Authoritarian and rather dogmatic, he demanded more political and aesthetic loyalty than the young artists were willing to give. Unlike Strzebiński, Kassák was not a purist, but he did demand social consciousness in art and a comprehensible visual language. He did not champion utilitarianism, although he was close to Proletkult (The Proletarian Culture Movement), which promoted culture among the masses and considered that art should perform a socially and politically educative role. In Kassák's group, Proletkult was championed by Béla Uitz, who visited the Soviet Union in 1921 and later moved there. Nevertheless, Kassák maintained his conviction that art should make some concessions to audiences who were not educated enough to understand modern forms of expression.⁵³ The Russian-inspired paintings of Vajda did not quite fit into this increasingly populist and, at the same time, classicist left-wing style. Kassák was a socialist rather than a communist, and he wanted to control the group's artistic and political orientation. In contrast to Poland, in Hungary, the art world did not offer a wide range of alternative avant-garde circles and directions, so that Vajda and the other Young Progressives had nowhere to go outside the circle of the *Work* [*Munka*] journal. By 1930, every member of the Young Progressives had left Hungary, without either fully assimilating Suprematism or formulating a substantial critique of its theory and practice.

Geometric Abstraction as a Shortcut into the Future

While Malevich had constructed a lineage from 'Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism' in 1915, achieving a closure of the previous era with the radical *Black Square* as the 'zero of form',⁵⁴ many Eastern and Central Europeans' primary understanding of Suprematism and geometric abstraction in general

53 In this respect, Kassák was more consistent in words than deeds. His public presentations had changed enormously in Budapest in 1919. After his 1926 return to Hungary from Vienna, he increasingly adjusted to his working-class audiences, simplifying the language and style of his journal *Work* [*Munka*] and the performing activities of his circle. For more details, see Éva Forgács, 'The Avant-Garde in Hungary and Its Audience', in Tsukasa Kodera, ed., *Modernism and Central- and East European Art & Culture* (Osaka: Osaka University/ The 21st Century COE Program, 2007).

54 Kazimir Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k Suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [*From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism*] (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1916); English translation, in K. S. Malevich: *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen Forlag, 1968), 1: 19.

was defined by the fact that this visual language was not tied to the historical style of any one particular culture. Adapting such a modern visual expression appeared to ensure a rapid integration into a newly emerging internationalism. In this respect, Suprematism was regarded, just like any other version of abstraction, as a shortcut to a utopian future, which artists believed was imminent – at least until about the mid-1920s. As the Hungarian art critic Ernő Kállai observed in 1926:

It seemed that [abstraction] would fit immediately, without the detour of evolution through national traditions, into the overall artistic framework of the longed-for new, collective world. For artists coming from the uncertain peripheries of this emerging international Europe, this was bound to seem an extraordinary opportunity: the utopian prospects that [abstraction] presented to the Eastern temperament, with its unfailing capacity for enthusiasm and overactive imagination, had the force of a new Revelation.⁵⁵

Many works and writings by Eastern and Central European artists from the early 1920s prove that Kállai was right. The international Avant-Garde's discourse clearly anticipated a new art for a new historical era – a new art that would use a visual language identical to or close to that of Suprematism. El Lissitzky's *Tale of Two Squares* 'constructed' (in his words) earlier but only published in *De Stijl* in 1922, addresses children, the citizens of that new international republic.

Shift in Focus 1927

In his review of Malevich's 1927 Berlin exhibition, which formed part of the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung*, Kállai offered a more detailed analysis of Suprematism.⁵⁶ The text surveys Malevich's career from Post-Impressionism, through Cubism and Cubo-Futurism to Suprematism, considering the latter to be 'Intensely personal and unique, organically fusing West-European elements with original and ancient Russian ones'.⁵⁷ Kállai identified a continuity between the religiosity of Malevich's early primitivist works and the visionary, cosmic 'enthusiasm' of his Suprematist imagery, which for Kállai anticipated

55 Ernő Kállai: *Új magyar piktúra* [*New Hungarian Painting*] (Budapest: Amicus, 1926), 181.

56 Ernst Kállai, 'Kasimir Malewitsch', *Das Kunstblatt* (July 1927): 264-266.

57 Ibid.

an entirely new understanding of the Universe. He attributed the change to the new perspectives generated in the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917. He argued that from contemplating the mystery of nature, Malevich was propelled into the 'trans-natural world of dynamism and unimpeded freedom'.⁵⁸

At the time of writing his review, Kállai was living in Berlin and was fully acquainted with the German and international art scenes, which were both amply represented in the city. His understanding and interpretation of Malevich was also influenced by his concept of Hungarian and, more broadly, Eastern and Central European art of the late 1920s. Unlike Szczuka in Warsaw, Kállai did not condemn Malevich for his abstract idiom, but he was much less enthusiastic about it than about some of his other painterly attainments. Although sensitive to the religious, confessional, and utopian dimensions of Malevich's art, Kállai ended up appreciating Suprematism for its bravura in creating a sense of space in painting by minimising its formal elements. It would not be correct to say that Kállai misunderstood Suprematism, but his emphasis on Malevich's professional achievements rather than on his visionary power reflects the post-utopian moment of the inter-war period, when wit and the inventive use of painterly elements carried more weight than the universal anticipation of an emerging new world.

58 Ibid., 265.

Conflicting Approaches to Creativity? Suprematism and Constructivism

Christina Lodder

We tend to think of Suprematism and Constructivism as being diametrically opposed in their approach to the work of art and the process of creativity. In part, this is because of the overt animosity that existed between Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, who are regarded as the leaders of these two movements. This enmity has usually been regarded as the result of the long-standing rivalry between the two artists, which had been strengthened by the competitive atmosphere that characterised the pre-revolutionary Russian art world.¹ By the early 1920s, personal antagonisms had been reinforced by several crucial and substantial creative and theoretical differences, some of which pre-dated the Revolution, although many had appeared with particular intensity after the emergence of Constructivism in March 1921.

Constructivism's emphasis on industry, technology, utility, and Communism seemed completely at odds with Suprematism's more explicitly aesthetic, spiritual and metaphysical content. In 1924, Malevich stressed, 'those who know Suprematism and Constructivism will not confuse these two phenomena'.² He was particularly opposed to the importance that the Constructivists gave to technology and utility. For Malevich, Constructivism represented the 'academicism of technology',³ and its focus on objects of practical necessity

1 For a penetrating analysis of the relationship between Malevich and Tatlin, see Charlotte Douglas, 'Tatlin and Malewitsch: Geschichte und Theorie 1914-1915 / Tatlin i Malevich: istoriia i teoriia 1914-1915', in Jürgen Harten, ed., *Vladimir Tatlin: Leben, Werk, Wirkung. Eine internationales Symposium* (Cologne: Dumont Buchverlag, 1983), 210-218 (German) and 430-437 (Russian). See also Christina Lodder 'Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich: A Creative Dialogue' in *Tatlin: New Art for a New World: International Symposium* (Basel: The Museum Tinguely, 2013), 243-247.

2 Kazimir Malevich, 'Zapiski ob arkhitektury' [Notes on Architecture], 1924, ms; English translation in K. S. Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism: Unpublished Writings 1913-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Hoffmann (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1978), 109.

3 Kazimir Malevich, letter to the Dutch Artists, 7 September 1921; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 153.

was completely antithetical to the spiritual ambitions of Suprematism. He insisted that 'utilitarian functions have one role in life, the functions of art a different one'.⁴ For the Constructivists, Suprematism seemed too much concerned with art itself, rather than concentrating on reconstructing the external world. It seemed to ignore communist ideology, and the demands of industry, engineering, science, and technology in favour of aesthetics.

While acknowledging this incontrovertible opposition in terms of creative outlook, I would like to suggest that the Suprematists and Constructivists also shared certain fundamental values and principles in their approaches to the creative process and the nature of artistic form. I shall argue that these shared values, which were rooted in the pre-revolutionary period, continued throughout the existence of the two movements in the 1920s.⁵ While their common commitment to using their artistic skill to reconstruct and reconfigure physical reality may have been stimulated by the October Revolution, other concerns, such as their dedication to creative invention and their steadfast involvement in exploring the elements of artistic culture, such as space, material, form, colour, *faktura* [texture], and technique, have their origin in the 1910s when Suprematist painting first emerged and constructed sculpture developed (on the basis of which the more ideologically and industrially charged Constructivism was later formulated in March 1921).

Indeed, although Constructivism as a term and set of creative principles only materialised in 1921, Suprematism and constructed sculpture developed in close proximity in the 1910s. Suprematism as a pictorial style appeared in early summer 1915, when Malevich painted the first Suprematist composition, and it became public knowledge in November and December 1915 (Fig. 13.1).⁶

4 Kazimir Malevich, 'Maliarstvo v problemi arkhitekury', *Nova generatsiia*, 2 (Kharkov / Kharkiv, 1928): 116-124; English translation, as 'Painting and the Problem of Architecture', in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 11: 11.

5 For an excellent discussion of the relationship between Suprematism and Constructivism which focuses on the evolution of terminological and theoretical distinctions, see Tatiana Goriacheva, 'Suprematism and Constructivism: An Intersection of Parallels' in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 67-81.

6 Malevich showed three Suprematist canvases at *The Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art. Embroidery and Carpets from Artists' Designs* [Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva. Vyshivki i kovry po eskizam khudozhnikov] (Moscow: Galereia Lemers'e, 1915), which opened on 6 November 1915, several weeks before Malevich showed thirty-nine Suprematist paintings at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0,10 (Zero-Ten)* [Poslednaia futuristicheskaiia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol'-desiat')] (Petrograd: Khudozhestvennoe Biuro N. E. Dobuchinnoi, 19 November 1915 – 19 January 1916). See Julia Tulovsky's essay in this volume.

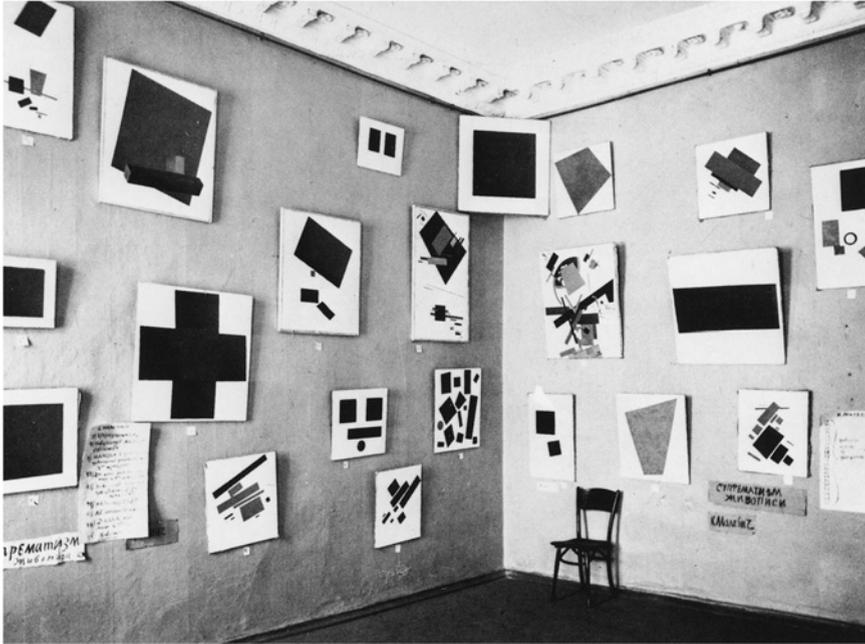


FIGURE 13.1 The display of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist canvases at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, December 1915 – January 1916, Petrograd.

A year earlier, in 1914, Tatlin had produced his first reliefs, and subsequently he and other artists made constructed sculptures, which lay the formal basis for Constructivism.

Both Suprematist painting and constructed sculpture (what might be called Proto-Constructivism), had been stimulated by the inventions of Cubism, but both went beyond Cubism, in rejecting figurative subject matter and embracing what Malevich called 'objectless art' [*bespredmetnoe iskusstvo*]. As Malevich acknowledged in 1915, 'Through the destruction of the object, Cubism [moves] towards pure painting.'⁷ Malevich had worked through Cubism to Suprematism via Cubo-Futurism and Alogism from 1912 onwards. Tatlin, however, had not engaged with Cubist painting, but had first been stimulated to create reliefs when he encountered the Cubist constructions of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, during his visit to Paris in spring 1914. Following his return to Moscow, Tatlin began producing 'synthetic-static compositions' and

7 K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm [From Cubism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism]* (Petrograd: L. Ia. Ginzburg, 1916), 10; English translation in Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1980), 107-110; quote, 109.

'pictorial reliefs', which he presented to the Moscow public for the first time in his studio, 10-14 May that year.⁸ These constructed works rapidly became less figurative and moved beyond the frame and the base, becoming objectless assemblages of real materials built up in space and fully integrating space into their centre, focusing on the nature of the materials, their inter-relationships and their dynamic interaction with their immediate spatial environment.

Given their mutual origins in Cubism, it is not surprising that, in the pre-revolutionary period, strong affinities existed between Suprematist painting and constructed sculpture, between the pictorial and the sculptural, between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional explorations of abstract form. These affinities were based on a shared approach to artistic invention and to the work of art as a constructed material entity – a *ding an sich*, which involved a common interest in exploring the potential of the medium, the nature of artistic elements and how each distinct feature operated in relation to each other and within the whole. This general avant-garde approach came to be called 'artistic culture' and was later defined and formulated in more detail in an important statement produced in 1919 when avant-garde artists were working together in the Department of Fine Arts within the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv, Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – IZO, Narkompros). This statement defined the essential qualities of artistic culture as follows:

- 1) material – surface, texture [*faktura*], elasticity, density, weight and other properties of material
- 2) colour – saturation, strength, relationship to light, purity, transparency, independence and other qualities
- 3) space – volume, depth, dimension and other properties of space
- 4) time (movement) – in its spatial expression and in connection with colour, material, composition, etc
- 5) form as a result of the interaction of material, colour, space, and, in its distinctive form, composition
- 6) technique [*tekhnika*] – painting, mosaic, reliefs of various kinds, sculpture, masonry, and other artistic techniques.⁹

In effect, this statement on artistic culture summed up the creative values of the pre-revolutionary Avant-Garde and is as relevant to Suprematist painting

8 *Vystavka sintezo-statichnykh kompozitsii (Pervaia vystavka zhivopisnykh rel'efov)* (Moscow: Studio No. 3, at 37 Ostozhenka, 10-14 May 1914). See Anatolii Strigalev and Jürgen Harten, eds., *Vladimir Tatlin: Retrospektive* (Dusseldorf: Kunsthalle, 1993), 400.

9 'Polozhenie Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv i khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti NKP po voprosu "o khudozhestvennoi kul'ture"', *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 11 (16 February 1919): 4.

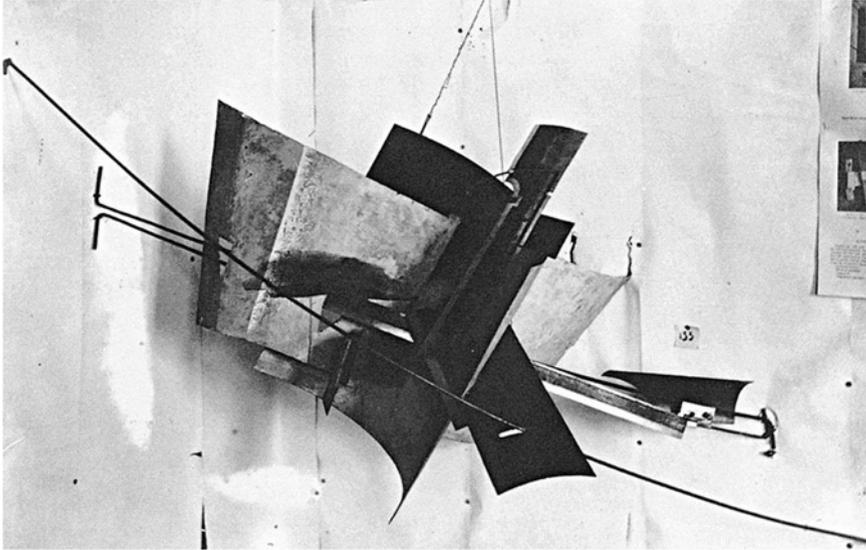


FIGURE 13.2 Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief*, 1915, paint, wire, wood and various metals, Lost. Presumed destroyed.

as it is to constructed sculpture. Both creative approaches emphasised the materiality of the art object, its existence as an independent and autonomous phenomenon, an object complete unto itself, distinct from the everyday world.

Material, texture or *faktura* were fundamental to both idioms. This emphasis is perhaps more immediately evident in Tatlin's reliefs, which were made of 'wood, metals, glass, plaster, cardboard, gesso, tar', each possessing a different texture, such as the smooth and cold shiny surface of the metal and the rough warm graining of the wood. The effects of various tones, colours and textures, were enhanced with 'putty, gloss paints, steam, sprinkled with dust, and other means'.¹⁰ This is evident in *Corner Counter Relief*, where the light metals contrast with darker components, and the shading reinforces the shape of the billowing forms, intensifying the work's material and spatial presence (Fig. 13.2). The texture of the ragged edges of the metal indicates how the artist cut and

10 Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin (Petrograd: Zhurnal dlia vsekh, 1915), 3; reproduced in Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, ed., *Tatlin* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), plate 125; English translation, *ibid.*, 331. The text of Tatlin's 1915 brochure was apparently written by Nadezhda Udaltsova, see Vasilii Rakitin, 'Nadezhda Udaltsova', in John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt eds., *Amazons of the Avant-Garde: Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova* (London: Royal Academy, 1999), 273.

shaped the metal, evoking the physical process of creation. The inherent tones of the materials employed serve to enhance the complexity of the structure and the identity of the discrete components, intensifying the work's spatial impact.

Although it is perhaps less obvious, *faktura* is equally central to Suprematist painting.¹¹ Malevich stated, '*Faktura* is the body of colour',¹² and stressed that '*Faktura* is the essence of painting'.¹³ Malevich's explorations of *faktura* focused on the nature of the pigment, its viscosity, thickness, manner of application (thinly or thickly), the nature of the brush strokes, and the variety of pictorial textures created within the painting as a whole. In *Airplane Flying* of 1915 (Fig. 13.3, 13.4), *faktura* intensifies the quality of the forms. The scumbling painting technique that Malevich used for the grounds contrasts with the more smoothly painted elements of the composition. Sometimes there are gaps around the forms which reveal pencil marks or bare sized canvas – a different texture to that of the ground and the shapes themselves. Occasionally, the colour defining the form overlaps the white ground, creating a lighter border to the shape, adding vibrancy to its presence on the canvas.

Malevich had insisted that 'Colour and texture in paintings are ends in themselves. They are the essence of painting'.¹⁴ His subtle orchestrations of texture enhance the effects of the various tones, saturations and intensities of colour that he employed to produce sensations of dynamism and space within the composition. He admitted, 'the power of space in painting depends on *faktura*'.¹⁵ Whereas constructed sculptures exploit actual space as a material component and directly interact with their spatial environment, Suprematist paintings evoke sensations of space and movement, creating pictorial equivalents for them by means of the white ground, the variations in texture, colour, and tonal density of the pictorial elements, the asymmetrical qualities of the composition, and the irregular articulation and slight distortion of the forms

11 This concern continued in Suprematism during the post-revolutionary period, when *faktura* became a means of expressing less material ideas. For a fascinating discussion of this aspect of post-revolutionary Suprematism, see the essay by Maria Kokkori, Alexander Bouras and Irina Karasik in this volume.

12 Kazimir Malevich, 'Supremus. Kubizm i futurizm' [Supremus: Cubism and Futurism], c. December 1916, ms; reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. Aleksandra Shatskikh, (Moscow: Gileia, 2004), v: 40-53; English translation in Patricia Railing, ed., *Malevich Writes: A Theory of Creativity: Cubism to Suprematism* (Forest Row: Artists Bookworks, 2014), 66-82, quote, 75.

13 Ibid.

14 K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism] (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1916); English translation in Malevich: *Essays*, 1: 25.

15 Malevich, 'Supremus. Kubizm i futurizm'; Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 75.

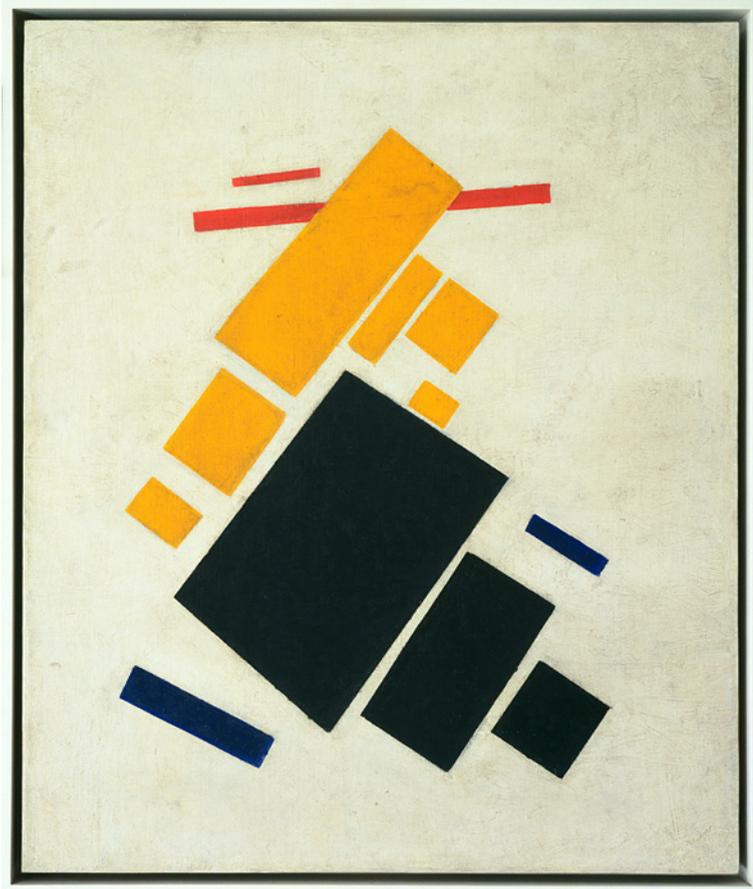


FIGURE 13.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1915, oil on canvas, 57.3 × 47.3 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
© PHOTO SCALA, FLORENCE.

in relation to the plane, which imply motion and twisting in space as well as movement between the forms. Malevich deliberately chose the colour white for his grounds, explaining that ‘The blue colour of the sky has been defeated by the Suprematist system, has been broken through and entered white, as the true, real conception of infinity’.¹⁶ In *Airplane Flying* of 1915 (Fig. 13.4), all the elements are organised along a diagonal, indicating movement across

16 K. Malevich, ‘Suprematizm’, *Katalog desiatoi gosudarstvennoi vystavki. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 151; English translation as ‘Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism’, in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 121.



FIGURE 13.4 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1915, oil on canvas, 57.3 × 47.3 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Details.
© PHOTO SCALA, FLORENCE.

the plane, while the subtle differences in tonalities and textures between the various yellow shapes suggest that they exist in different spatial planes, implying movement. The paler yellow shapes give the impression that they have receded slightly or exist in deeper space, while the brighter colours advance.

In contrast, Tatlin used actual space as a material component of his sculptures, which inherently create a dynamic relationship with space. *Corner Counter Relief* of 1915 (Fig. 13.2), for instance, is built up in space around a core structure and is liberated from the plane, the frame, the wall, the floor, and gravity. Slung across the corners of the room, it appears to float effortlessly in its own spatial environment, interacting dynamically with it. Tatlin explained that he was concerned to explore ‘the manifestations of material as such and its consequences – movement, tension, and their inter-relationship’.¹⁷ Dynamism was also inherent in the way the configuration changed with different angles of viewing, in the juxtapositions of the material components and in the overall effect it produced. One contemporary critic even observed that the *Corner Counter-Relief* (Fig. 13.2), resembled ‘Something like an aeroplane in full flight’.¹⁸

Despite the shared interest in space, dynamism and *faktura*, which resulted in an intensive exploration of the potential of the medium (whether sculpture or painting), there were important differences, even at this stage. In 1915, Malevich had hung his *Black Square* across the corners of a room, alluding to the role of the icon in the domestic Russian Orthodox interior, and imbuing his image with a metaphysical resonance (Fig. 13.1). He called *The Black Square* ‘the icon of my time’.¹⁹ At the same time, he affixed titles to his work explicitly referencing the fourth dimension, for example, *Boy with a Knapsack: Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension*.²⁰ He explained, Suprematism is ‘a purely painterly trend that is two-dimensional as a painterly plane’, while ‘the fourth dimension ... is time in the painterly movement of colour in space’.²¹

17 Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin; Zhadova, *Tatlin*, 331.

18 A. Rostislavov, ‘O vystvke futuristov’, *Rech’* (January 1916); reproduced in Hermann Berninger and Jean-Albert Cartier, *Pougny: Jean Pougny (Iwan Puni) 1892–1956: Catalogue de l’œuvre, Tome 1: Les Années de l’avant-garde, Russie–Berlin, 1910–1923* (Tübingen: Editions Ernst Wasmuth; and Paris: Office du Livre, 1972), 62.

19 Kazimir Malevich, letter to Alexandre Benois, May 1916; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 85.

Irina Vakar has suggested that Benois’s response may actually have prompted Malevich to think about the icon in relation to *The Black Square*, and that he may not have originally intended to make this connection. See Irina Vakar, *Kazimir Malevich. Chernyi kvadrat* (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery, 2015), 28–33.

20 Kazimir Malevich, *Painterly Realism. Boy with a Knapsack – Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension* [*Zhivopisnyi realizm, malchik c rantsem – krasochnyii massy v 4-m izmerenii*], 1915, oil on canvas, 71.1 × 44.4 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York.

21 Malevich, ‘Kubizm’ [Cubism], c.1917, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v: 60–63; English translation in Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 91–94; quote, 94.

Tatlin's works seem remote from such notions, being emphatically 'constructed of earthly material facts'.²² Yet the use of found objects, bearing the marks of human use and possessing their own history, also introduced a notion of time into the works. Moreover, the *Corner Counter-Reliefs*, hung across the corners of the room, also recalled the position of icons in a Russian Orthodox domestic interior, invoking a higher state of consciousness, a spiritual reality and a metaphysical truth. The *Corner Counter-Relief* (Fig. 13.2) billows out towards the observer, inferring sensations of material, movement and absolute space. As the spectator moves in an arc across the corner, the relief reveals different aspects of its form, inviting a viewing process that itself unfolds over time. Perhaps in these various ways, Tatlin may also have been referring to the nexus of ideas connected with the fourth dimension.

Such affinities became less evident during the revolutionary period, when the approaches adopted by the Suprematists and the future Constructivists began to diverge more markedly, although they continued to share certain fundamental creative values. Of course, Malevich, Tatlin and their entourages, like other avant-garde artists, responded positively to the October Revolution of 1917. They joined IZO Narkompros, where they became involved in running the artistic life of the country, organising museums, art schools, artistic publications, producing decorations for the revolutionary festivals, designing propaganda posters and devising programmes for revolutionary events. They also became inspired by visions of building a new world – visions that did not necessarily correspond to those of the Bolsheviks themselves.

From the beginning, Malevich had considered Suprematist elements to be integral ingredients of an entire new system which would be able to function within every medium of creativity – painting, sculpture, poetry and music.²³ In November 1915, he had initiated Suprematism's move into the wider world of more practical activity when he exhibited three paintings at the exhibition *Modern Decorative Art: Embroidery and Carpets from Artists' Designs*, in Moscow.²⁴ Subsequently, in the aftermath of 1917, Malevich came to consider that Suprematist elements provided the foundation for a future formal style, which could provide the basis for a systematisation of art, architecture and design.²⁵ Malevich insisted that 'art must become the content of life, since only

22 Norbert Lynton, *Tatlin's Tower: Monument to Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 51.

23 For a fascinating examination of this aspect of early Suprematism, see Charlotte Douglas's essay in this volume.

24 *Katalog vystavki sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva. Vyshivki i kovry po eskizam khudozhnikov*. For more details, see Julia Tulovsky's essay in this volume.

25 Douglas, 'Tatlin i Malevich', 436

then can life be beautiful',²⁶ and explained, 'We wish to build the world up according to an objectless system, departing further and further from the object, like the cosmos's creation of nature.'²⁷ The role of the artist and of art was no longer simply to reflect reality, but to create it. Hence Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art), set up in Vitebsk in early 1920, was committed to extending Suprematism into all realms of human life, including architecture.²⁸ Unovis declared, 'Our workshops no longer paint pictures, they construct the forms of life.'²⁹ The group envisaged and wanted to create 'a utilitarian and dynamically spiritual world of objects.'³⁰ This involved a range of activities. Later Lissitzky recalled: 'In Vitebsk ... for a factory festival, Malevich and I painted fifteen hundred square metres of canvas, designed three buildings, and built a stage in the civic theatre for a ceremonial session of the factory committee.'³¹ Members of Unovis, as individuals and as part of a team, devised schemes for decorating the exteriors and interiors of buildings, developed designs for posters, books, ration cards, clothes, textiles, and later ceramics, furniture and buildings.³² In 1920, Malevich observed that 'at the present time, Suprematism is growing, as a new architectural construction in space and time.'³³

Suprematism and constructed sculpture moved into architecture around the same time. In 1920, Tatlin created his *Model for a Monument to the Third International* (Fig. 13.5) and Malevich's student Ilia Chashnik in Vitebsk devised

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- 26 Malevich, 'Maliarstvo v problemi arkhitekury'; Malevich, *Essays*, 11: 18.
- 27 Kazimir Malevich, letter to the Dutch Artists, 12 February 1922; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, 1: 151-155, where it is printed alongside an earlier draft.
- 28 For an illuminating discussion of Suprematist architecture, see Samuel Johnson's essay in this volume. See also, for example, Tatiana Mikhienko, 'The Suprematist Column – A Monument to Non-Objective Art', in Matthew Drutt, ed., *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2003), 79-87; Christina Lodder, 'Living in Space: Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist Architecture and the Philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov' in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich, 172-202*; and Maria Gough, 'Architecture as Such', in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 158-163.
- 29 *Ot Unovisa – my khotim* [From Unovis – We Want] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 298.
- 30 *Ot Uovisa – my khotim*; Zhadova, *Malevich*, 298.
- 31 El Lissitzky, 'New Russian Art: A Lecture, 1922', in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 338.
- 32 For the discussion of some of these areas of Unovis design, please see the essays by Yulia Karpova, Regina Khidekel, Samuel Johnson and Julia Tulovsky in this volume.
- 33 K. Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 126.

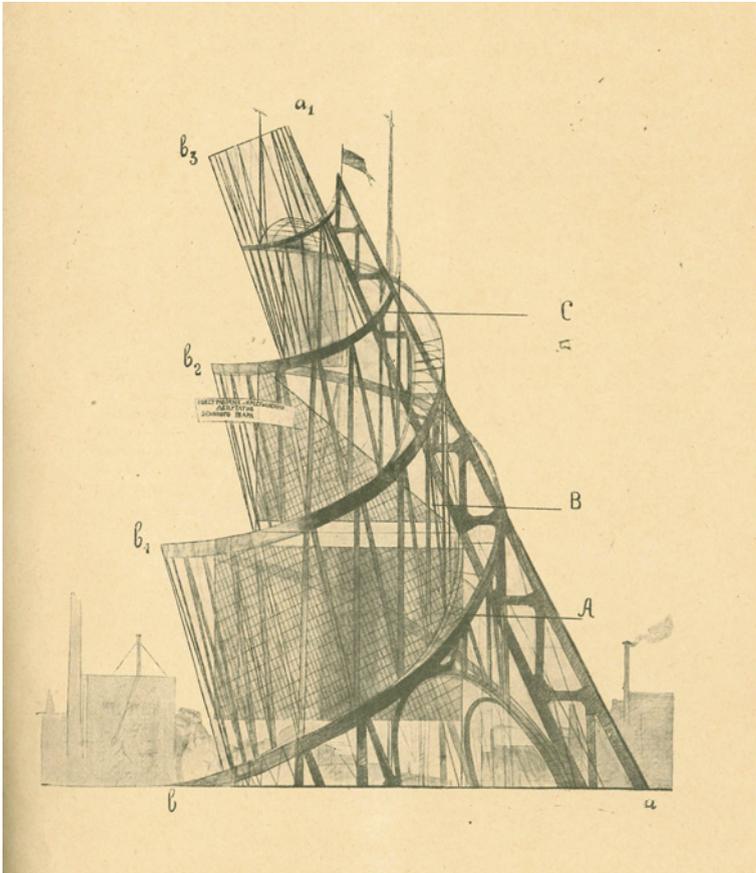


FIGURE 13.5 Vladimir Tatlin, *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, 1920, wood, metal and wire, c. 5 metres high, Lost, presumed destroyed. Drawing from Nikolai Punin, *Pamiatnik III internatsionala* (Petrograd: Izdanie Otdela Izobrazitel'nykh Iskusstv, N. K. P., 1920).

a speaker's tribune for Smolensk (Fig. 13.6). The two projects mark the point of greatest affinity between emergent Constructivism and post-revolutionary Suprematism. In Chashnik's project, the girder construction creates an emphatic aura of industrial utility as it soars upwards at a dramatic angle, while the cube at its base emphatically links the structure to pictorial Suprematism and its seminal image *The Black Square*. Likewise, the skeletal structure of Tatlin's monument supported several large geometric bodies (a cylinder – originally intended to be a cube, a pyramid and a hemisphere) which also seem to allude to the geometric language of Suprematism. Both Tatlin and Chashnik's projects are indebted to the I and T beam structures of contemporary engineering and both designs express the precision of the machine and

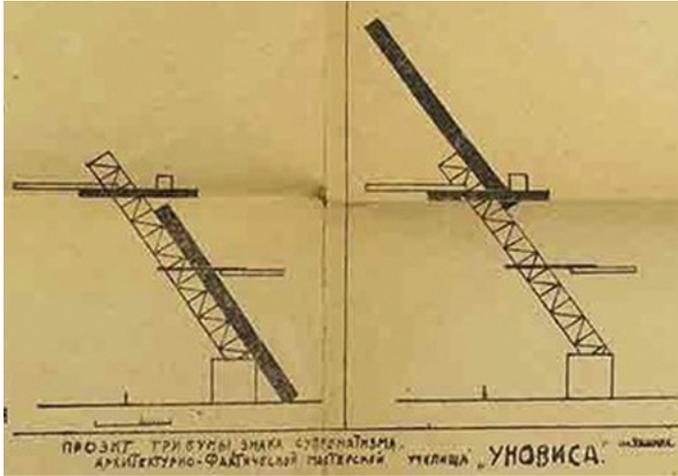


FIGURE 13.6 Iliia Chashnik, *Project for a Tribune for a Smolensk Square*, 1920, as reproduced in *Unovis. Listok Vitebskogo Tvorkoma*, No. 1 (20 November 1920).

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE LAZAR KHIDEKEL FAMILY ARCHIVE & COLLECTION.

combine it with an explicitly ideological function. Chashnik's design was for a speaker's platform, Tatlin's Tower was to act as a centre for the Comintern (The Third Communist International), which was dedicated to promoting socialism and world revolution. Although both Chashnik and Tatlin emphasised the role of art in their designs, Tatlin also stressed the superiority of technology and functionality: the banner that he displayed with his monument in Petrograd, stressed the role of politics, utility, and technology, calling on engineers to invent new forms.³⁴ Malevich disapproved of Tatlin's Tower and seems to have equally disliked the celebration of technology in Chashnik's design, which had been produced in El Lissitzky's studio at the Vitebsk People's Art School.³⁵ This point of Suprematism's convergence with Constructivism has to be attributed

34 See photographs of the installation of the *Model for the Monument to the Third International* in November 1920, as reproduced, for instance, in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, fig. 177. A banner in the background is unclear but seems to contain the message: 'Engineers and Bridge Builders make the calculations for the invention of a new form' [*Inzhinery-Mostoviki delaiete raschet izobretaniia [?] novoi formy*]. Tatlin's Tower was displayed in the Mosaics Studio of the former Imperial Academy of Arts, which was the Petrograd State Free Art Studios in 1920. Today the school is called the St. Petersburg Institute for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, but is still located in the Academy's former premises on Vasili Island in St. Petersburg.

35 Iliia Chashnik, letter to Lazar Khidekel, March 1921, Lazar Khidekel Family Archive & Collection. Władysław Strzemiński was enthusiastic about Chashnik's tribune and wanted to

to Lissitzky, who had received a technical and architectural training in Germany before the First World War.³⁶ The incident also revealed the seeds of future discord between Lissitzky and Malevich.³⁷

The importance of industry and technology to the survival of the workers' state and the construction of a communist future had stimulated a re-evaluation of art's social role and had led to the formulation of the concept of production art by the theorists attached to the newspaper *Art of the Commune* [*Iskusstvo kommuny*]. These theorists argued that artistic creation should be more closely related to the needs of industry, society and the realisation of a future communist collective. While the future Constructivists embraced this notion, Malevich seems to have become more immersed in the mystical elements of his approach. In 1918, he wrote 'The field of colour must be annihilated, i.e. it must transform itself into white', explaining that 'white ... points to my transformation in time'.³⁸ The *White on White* paintings of 1918 epitomise the 'philosophical sublime'.³⁹

Towards the end of 1920, as soon as the Bolsheviks were assured of victory in the Civil War, they began to exert control over art and culture. The gov-

see it erected on Smolensk's Red Square in November 1920, as part of the city's decorations marking the anniversary of the Revolution. Strzemiński issued an official invitation to Chashnik on 23 October 1920. See Vasilii Rakitin, *Il'ia Chashnik. Khudozhnik novogo vremeni* (Moscow: RA / Palace Editions, 2000), 16.

Two drawings of Chashnik's project were published in *Unovis. Listok Vitebskogo Tvorkoma*, 1 (20 November 1920), where they accompanied several articles, including Khidekel, 'The New Realism – Our Contemporaneity' [Novyi realizm – nasha sovremenost'], and Nina Kogan, 'On Graphics' [O grafike].

36 Elements of Lissitzky's practice from the very beginning possessed parallels with the early work produced by the Constructivists. Even in his early Proun paintings, Lissitzky intensified the *faktura* of his compositions by employing a variety of real materials in combination with compositional structures inspired by Malevich's Suprematism, although often with a three-dimensional resonance, which was missing in Malevich's works. See, for instance, Lissitzky, *Proun 19D*, 1920–1921, gesso, oil, varnish, crayon, coloured papers, sandpaper, graph paper, cardboard, metallic paint and metal foil on plywood, 97.5 × 97.2 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In 1922, in Germany, Lissitzky adopted a position that straddled Suprematism and Constructivism. On the one hand, he began to use the term Constructivism, and became a founding member of the International Faction of Constructivists. On the other, he gave his own meaning to the term, so that it combined a respect for technology and a desire to participate in rebuilding the world with a continued commitment to creating works of art. This stance became typical of International Constructivism.

37 For a more detailed exploration of the relationship between Malevich and Lissitzky in terms of their architectural visions, see Samuel Johnson's essay in this volume.

38 Kazimir Malevich, untitled, c. 1918, ms; English translation in Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 118.
39 Charlotte Douglas, *Malevich* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 24.

ernment purged IZO of avant-garde elements and began to emphasise official requirements and use financial and administrative controls to promote an accessible figurative art that could act as effective propaganda for the regime. At the same time, the New Economic Policy (NEP), instituted by Lenin in early 1921, restored small-scale private enterprise. Having run the show prior to this, avant-garde artists of all persuasions (including both Suprematist painters and artists who had been producing constructed sculptures) now had to adapt to a very different situation.

The Working Group of Constructivists (along with its programme written by Aleksei Gan in March 1921) can be seen as a response to these new conditions. The Constructivists rejected art as a self-contained activity, and declared, 'Death to Art'. They wanted to relegate their purely artistic explorations to the role of 'laboratory work', and to extend their experiments with manipulating three-dimensional abstract forms into the real environment by participating in the industrial manufacture of useful objects. They called the new type of activity that they envisaged 'intellectual production', proclaiming that their ideological foundation was 'scientific Communism, built on the theory of historical materialism'. Their ultimate goal was 'the communistic expression of material structures', which they hoped to attain by organising their material according to the three principles of *tektonika* ('tectonics', or the socially and politically appropriate use of industrial material), *construction* (the organisation of this material for a given purpose) and *faktura* (the conscious handling and manipulation of it). In other words, the Constructivists wanted to use their artistic skills not to create art works for the delectation of the privileged individual, but to design everyday objects, which could be used by the masses. In this way, they hoped to participate in the building of a new communist society in Russia.⁴⁰

The programme introduced several new terms: the word 'Constructivist', which denoted the new kind of creative figure; the concept of 'intellectual and material production' which conveyed a new type of creative activity (corresponding to what we today call design); the notion of 'the communist expression of material structures', which indicated the new type of product

40 See 'Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists of Inkhuk' in S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 290.

The programme was published in 1922 in A. Gan 'Front khudozhestvennogo truda. Materialy k Vserossiiskoi konferentsii levykh v iskusstve. Konstruktivisty', *Ermitazh*, 13 (1922): 3. The essential approach was elaborated in Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver', 1922). For an English translation, see Aleksei Gan, *Constructivism*, ed. and trans. Christina Lodder (Barcelona: Tenov, 2013).

that was to result from this new approach to creative activity; and the principle of 'tectonics', which went hand in hand with *faktura* and construction.

The terms *faktura* and construction had a long-established currency in Russian artistic discourse, but tectonics [*tektonika*] was completely new. In *Constructivism*, Gan wrote that 'The word 'tectonics' is taken from geology, where it is used to define the eruptions coming from the Earth's core'.⁴¹ Just as a volcano could suddenly destroy its existing surroundings and transform them completely, so tectonics could revolutionise reality. The Constructivists' programme made the ideological connotations explicit: 'Tectonics or the tectonic style is organically smelted and forged from the qualities of Communism itself on the one hand, and from the purposeful use of industrial material on the other'.⁴²

In contrast, *faktura* was a pre-revolutionary term, introduced by David Burliuk in 1912 as the Russian equivalent for the French term *facture*, denoting the texture of the painted surface.⁴³ As discussed above, Malevich had used it with this meaning in his statements, while his paintings exemplified the importance of the technique in conveying sensations of spatial tension and dynamism. In 1914, Vladimir Markov (Voldemārs Matvejs) had explored the practical and philosophical ramifications of *faktura* in relation to sculpture, architecture, and icon painting, as well as nature and the machine.⁴⁴ His concepts relate directly to Tatlin's counter-reliefs, and to the *Monument to the Third International*, where the smoothness and strength of metal was to express not merely the individual sensibilities of the artist, but also the power and might of the collective will of the industrial proletariat, while glass was to convey the transparency and accessibility of the new form of government for all.⁴⁵ In many ways, the Constructivists' definition of *faktura*, as 'the conscious choice of material and its appropriate utilisation without interrupting the dynamics of construction or limiting its tectonics', corresponded

41 Gan, *Konstruktivizm*, 61.

42 'Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists'; Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, 290.

43 See David Burliuk, 'Kubizm' and 'Faktura' in *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (Moscow, 1912), 95-101, and 102-110; English translation of 'Cubism' in John E. Bowl, ed., and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 70-77.

44 Vladimir Markov, *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh. Faktura* (St. Petersburg: Izdanie obshchestva khudozhnikov 'Souiz Molodezhi', 1914).

45 See, for instance, Nikolai Punin, *Pamiatnik III internatsionala* (Petrograd: Izdanie Otdela Izobrazitel'nykh Iskusstv, N. K. P., 1920); and Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 65.

directly to the practical example of Tatlin's monument and the identification between the proletariat and the machine that it celebrated.⁴⁶ In fact, for the Constructivists, material became almost synonymous with *faktura* and largely supplanted it. Tatlin announced his 'culture of materials', but Malevich emphatically rejected it, asserting, 'Suprematism's attitude to materials is directly opposed to the agitation that is now growing in favour of the culture of materials'.⁴⁷ He insisted that Suprematism was concerned with 'producing the image through the utilitarian perfections of economic necessity', and 'The elaboration of the surfaces of materials is the psychosis of contemporary artists'.⁴⁸

The Constructivists also gave a slightly different meaning to the term 'construction' [*konstruktsiia*]. The word had first appeared in Russian artistic discourse after the Parisian Cubists referred to construction in Cubist painting in 1912: 'To compose, to construct, to design, reduces itself to this: to determine by our own activity the dynamism of form'.⁴⁹ That same year, Markov adopted the term 'constructiveness' or 'constructivity' [*konstruktivnost'*] to denote the rational, logical aspect of art.⁵⁰ Malevich was clearly in line with these ideas when he praised Cubist construction, and wrote that 'painterly essence emerged from constructiveness [*konstruktivnost'*] i.e. it arrived at the general constructive [*konstruktivnyi*] art of structures [*sooruzheniia*]'.⁵¹ Yet from being a general characteristic of form making, 'construction' came to denote a completely new approach to that process. During the Composition/Construction debates within the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Inkhuk) in the winter and early spring of 1920-1921, Aleksandr Rodchenko concluded that: 'All new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering and move towards organisation and construction'

46 'Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists', Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, 290.

47 Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka*; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 126.

48 Ibid.

49 See Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *Du 'Cubisme'* (Paris: Eugène Figuière, 1912); English translation in Edward Fry, *Cubism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 107. Two Russian translations of *Du 'Cubisme'* were published in 1913.

50 Vladimir Markov, 'Printsipy novogo iskusstva', *Soiuz molodezhi* (St. Petersburg), no. 1, April 1912, pp. 5-14, and no. 2, June 1912, pp. 5-18; English translation in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 25-38.

51 Kazimir Malevich, 'Kubizm, razrushitel' idei veshchi', c. 1918, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v: 275; English translation, as 'Cubism Destroys the Idea of the Object', in Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 113.



FIGURE 13.7 Installation photograph of the Constructivist exhibits at the Obmokhu Exhibition, Moscow, May 1921.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE RODCHENKO-STEPANOVA ARCHIVE, MOSCOW.

and ‘real construction is utilitarian necessity’.⁵² Later Malevich dated the emergence of Constructivism back to the moment when Cubist construction moved from the canvas into three dimensions.⁵³ Nevertheless, as Tatiana Goriacheva points out, Malevich continued to use the terms ‘construction’, ‘constructiveness’, ‘constructivity’, and ‘constructive’ within the context of Suprematism and Unovis, after 1921, to a large extent retaining the meanings that he had given to these terms previously, so that construction still denoted perfected, pure form.⁵⁴

In May 1921, the Constructivists launched their new approach by showing a range of three-dimensional works at the Moscow exhibition of the Obmokhu (Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov – Society of Young Artists), a fact that serves to highlight the strong link between pre- and post-revolutionary constructed sculpture and the new movement of Constructivism (Fig. 13.7). Alek-

52 See ‘Protokol zasedaniia Inkhuka’, 1 January 1921 and 21 January 1921, ms, Rodchenko-Stepanova archive, Moscow.

53 Malevich, ‘Maliarstvo v problemi arkhitekury’; Malevich, *Essays*, II: 10–11.

54 Goriacheva, ‘Suprematism and Constructivism’, 69–70.

sandr Rodchenko, Karl Ioganson (Kārlis Johansons), Konstantin Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothes, Georgii and Vladimir, all showed constructions that had been assembled from various materials: metal, wood, wood painted to emulate metal, and glass. Tatlin had described iron and glass as 'the materials of modern classicism'.⁵⁵ The resonance and *faktura* of metal and glass expressed modernity, epitomising the machine, technology, and the grandiose structures of contemporary engineering, effectively announcing the construction of a new world, in line with the vision of a future communist utopia. The Constructivists' works imitated the precision and clarity of industrial materials. There were no ragged edges, no sense of the artist's individual touch. Instead, these materials were smooth, machine tooled, and their *faktura* possessed an impersonal or collective ethos.

Similarly, all the constructions exhibited in May 1921 used space as an integral and, indeed, a major component of the overall structure. The configurations were based on mathematics and engineering, and the components employed were more precise than those that Tatlin had used, and often defined space rather than merely incorporating it or existing within it. Rodchenko's series of geometric hanging structures literally moved from the two-dimensional plane into three-dimensional space. The shape (whether for the ellipse, circle, hexagon, triangle or square) had been cut concentrically from a sheet of plywood and then the individual shapes had been rotated and positioned in space (Fig. 13.8). Dynamism was inherent in the process of construction, but the works were also suspended from the ceiling, where they moved constantly (within very limited parameters) in accordance with the ambient motion of the atmosphere. The effect was enhanced by the aluminium paint applied to the wood, which gave the illusion of metal, but also acted as a reflective surface, dematerialising the object further.

Some of these constructions, notably those by Rodchenko, combined the geometry pioneered by Suprematism (now systematised, regularised and rationalised) with concerns for defining space, as well as an interest in material, mathematics, geometric form, and the process of constructing forms in three-dimensional space. Although Rodchenko was a founding member of the Working Group of Constructivists, he had earlier experimented with Malevich's approach and had produced objectless paintings with white grounds, which possess strong affinities with Suprematism, such as *Objectless Composition*

55 V. E. Tatlin, T. Shapiro, I. Meerzon, and P. Vinogradov, 'Nasha predstoiashaia rabota', *VIII s'ezd sovetov. Ezhednevnyi biulleten' s'ezda VTsIK*, 13 (1 January 1921): 11; English translation in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, 239.



FIGURE 13.8 Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Spatial Constructon No. 12, Oval within an Oval or Ellipse*, 1920-1921, plywood, aluminium paint and wire, 61 × 83.7 × 47 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE RODCHENKO-STEPANOVA ARCHIVE, MOSCOW.

No. 58 / Suprematism, 1918.⁵⁶ In 1919, Rodchenko had written the 'Manifesto of the Suprematist and Objectless Painters', for the *Tenth State Exhibition: Objectless Creation and Suprematism*.⁵⁷ He had also painted a series of *Black on Black* paintings as a challenge to Malevich's *White on White* works, and had announced the end of painting with three canvases in the three primary

56 Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Objectless Composition No. 58 / Suprematism* [*Bespredmetnaia kompozitsiia No. 58 / Suprematizm*], 1918, oil on canvas, 73 × 50 cm., Nizhni Novgorod State Museum; reproduced in A. L. Lavrent'ev, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (Moscow: S. E. Gordeev, 2011), 66, fig. 14.

57 Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Iz manifesta suprematistov i bespredmetnikov' [From the Manifesto of Suprematists and Non-Objective Painters], 1919, ms, Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow; English translation in Aleksander Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander N. Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2005), 85.

colours – red yellow and blue.⁵⁸ It could be argued that his Suprematist experience was reflected in works like *Ellipse*, where the geometric forms of Suprematism had been translated into skeletal three-dimensional structures, while the white grounds of Suprematist painting, denoting space, had been transformed into real space (Fig. 13.8). The inherent dynamism of Malevich's paintings had been transmuted into actual dynamism, inherent in the process of construction and in the way the objects moved with the air currents. Malevich's weightless forms floating in the white space of the canvas had been transformed into material constructions hanging in space and shifting slightly with the ambient breeze. These affinities with Suprematism are reinforced by the fact that Rodchenko called this series of spatial constructions 'Planes Reflecting Light' [*Ploskosti otrazhaiushchie svet*].⁵⁹

Despite these similarities and possible connections, the Suprematists and Constructivists approached design differently. Lissitzky, as a Suprematist sympathetic to science and technology, observed that the Constructivists worked 'in material and space', while the designers of Unovis worked 'in material and on a plane'. He stressed that 'They are opposed to each other in their concepts of the practicality and utility of created things'. For Lissitzky, some Constructivists mistakenly 'went as far as a complete disavowal of art and, in their urge to be inventors, devoted their energies to pure technology'. In contrast, 'Unovis distinguished between the concept of functionality, meaning the necessity for the creation of new forms, and the question of direct serviceableness'. Nevertheless, he observed that 'Both groups strove after one and the same result – the creation of real things and architecture'.⁶⁰

Certainly, alongside their design work, Malevich and his Suprematist followers retained a strong and explicit belief in the role of art. In 1920, Malevich had declared, 'There can be no talk of painting in Suprematism. Painting has long ago been outlived, and the painter himself is no more than a prejudice of the past'.⁶¹ Painting had been abandoned, but art and Suprematist principles remained crucial to Suprematist design. Malevich believed in 'Suprematism

58 Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Smooth Colour' *Triptych: Pure Red Colour; Pure Yellow Colour; Pure Blue Colour* [*Triptikh 'Gladkii tsvet', Chisty krasnyi, chisty zheltyi i chisty sinii tsvet*], 1921, oil on canvas, 62.5 × 52.7 cm., Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow; reproduced in Lavrent'ev, *Rodchenko*, 146-147, fig. 9-11.

59 Lavrent'ev, *Rodchenko*, 392, caption for figs. 28-32.

60 All the quotes in this paragraph are taken from Lissitzky, 'New Russian Art: A Lecture, 1922', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 336.

61 Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka*; Malevich, *Essays*, I: 27.

as the concept of a new world system',⁶² and was adamant that 'art plays an enormous role in the building of life'.⁶³ Malevich criticised the Constructivist approach precisely because it prioritised non-aesthetic factors: function, utility, material, politics, economics and industry over form. He especially disliked the way in which the Constructivists elevated utility above art.⁶⁴ For Malevich, art was 'an activity free from all economical, practical and religious ideologies',⁶⁵ and 'utilitarianism imposed on art renders it useless'.⁶⁶ He argued not only that art was superior, but that it was actually an important factor in the creation of objects of utility. He stated, 'Utilitarian form is not created without the participation of aesthetic action',⁶⁷ and 'strictly speaking, there is not one thing with a purely utilitarian aspect'.⁶⁸ For Malevich, pure conceptual creativity was in, and of, itself utilitarian. He insisted that 'Suprematist forms, as abstraction [objectlessness], have achieved utilitarian perfection'.⁶⁹

Malevich's belief in the supreme role of art and Suprematism underpinned all his design activity, including his explorations of architectural composition with a series of plaster models that he called 'architectons' [*arkhitektony*]. A year after he started making these, he wrote 'The architect is by nature always abstract, but life sets him the task to build his abstract forms and situate them in such a way that useful space for life may be created amidst them ... I understand architecture as an activity outside all utilitarianism, a non-objective architecture, consequently possessing its own ideology, different from that of other ideas'.⁷⁰ This approach produced models like *Architecton Alpha*, without the usual details concerning function, placement of windows or doors, ground plans, descriptions of interior space or construction details.⁷¹

62 Ilia Chashnik, 'The Suprematist Method', 1922, ms; English translation in Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 315.

63 Kazimir Malevich, 'Suprematizm', c. 1927, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 11: 105-123; English translation in Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism*, 144-156, quote 149.

64 For a discussion of the Suprematist notion of utility, see the essay by Tatiana Goriacheva in this volume.

65 Malevich, 'Zapiski ob arkhitekture'; Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism*, 102.

66 Malevich, 'Suprematizm' (c. 1927); Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism*, 154.

67 K. Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost. Ustanovlenie A [On New Systems in Art. Stasis and Speed. Resolution A]* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1919); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 83.

68 Malevich, 'Suprematizm', (c. 1927); Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism*, 149.

69 Malevich, *Suprematizm. 34 risunka*; Malevich *Essays*, 1: 124.

70 Malevich, 'Zapiski ob arkhitekture'; Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism*, 102.

71 Kazimir Malevich, *Architecton Alpha [Arkhitekton 'Alfa']*, 1923, plaster, 31.5 × 80.5 × 34, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

The smooth white surfaces of the model possess some visual resemblance to a Constructivist building, such as Moscow's Narkomfin building of 1928-1932, but this was designed by the Constructivist architects, Moisei Ginzburg and Ignatii Milinis, whose approach was the antithesis of Malevich's. They had developed and applied what they called the functional method, which was based on analysing the precise nature of all the different practical functions that the building had to perform, along with structural, political and social factors. This detailed analysis determined the spatial flow of the building, the allocation of interior spaces, as well as the overall external massing.⁷²

In tandem with the architectons, Malevich devised 'planits' [*planity*], residences for individuals that were located in space, rather than on the ground. From the very beginning, Malevich had related Suprematism to cosmic space and had written in 1916, 'Suprematism ... begins a new era beyond the boundaries of the earth.'⁷³ As well as epitomising this spatial dimension of Suprematism, the *planity* also reflected the post-revolutionary notion that space, in the sense of freedom from the Earth's gravity, could also act as a powerful metaphor for social and personal liberation. This idea was common to both the *planity* and Tatlin's air bicycle (*The Letalin*) of 1929-1932, which was also intended to liberate the individual from gravity and enable them to move freely through space.

Despite Malevich's vehement opposition to Constructivism on principle, certain elements that were fundamental to Suprematism can be detected in Constructivist design. This is not surprising since many artists had actually experimented with Suprematist ideas before becoming committed to Constructivism. Rodchenko was among this number. As indicated above, the hanging constructions that he exhibited in 1921 possessed some affinities with Suprematism, and in 1925, he applied the experience of this 'laboratory work' to designing various items of furniture for the Workers' Club, manufactured in Paris for the *International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art* [*Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*] (Fig. 13.9). All the items of furniture had been devised to perform various functions that related to the Club's events and activities. The table, for instance, could be extended for making posters, while the flaps could also be lowered to act as supports for books when the occupants wished to read. All items were space-saving, so were frequently collapsible or multifunctional. They were based on a commitment to utility, hygiene, and economy of materials, but the designs

72 See S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Moisei Ginzburg* (Moscow: Arkhitekura S, 2007), 80-86.

73 Malevich, 'Supremus. Kubizm i futurizm'; Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 76.



FIGURE 13.9 Aleksandr Rodchenko, The Workers' Club, Paris, 1925.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE RODCHENKO-STEPANOVA ARCHIVE,
MOSCOW.

also epitomised an inventive approach to the manipulation of the shapes used to perform a specific function and they exploited the same kind of geometric form that had been pioneered by Malevich in 1915. For example, the chair consisted of strictly semi-circular and rectilinear components: the semi-circular seat and the upper ring for the arms were supported by three rectilinear uprights and three elongated cuboid elements at floor level. The design also employed grey along with the colour code of the Revolution – red and black in conjunction with white – a combination that was also rooted in Suprematism.⁷⁴

The principle of economy was enshrined in the Workers' Club. Rodchenko explained that his design had been determined by several factors, including 'economy in the use of the floor surface [and] economy of the space an object

74 In 1920, for instance, Malevich wrote, 'The three squares of Suprematism represent the establishment of definite types of ... world building ... the black one as the sign of economy, the red one as the signal for revolution, and the white one as pure action' (*Suprematism: 34 Drawings*; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 126-127).

occupies for maximum capacity and use'.⁷⁵ Yet the principle of economy was also valued by the Suprematists. For Malevich, the 'Suprematist surface of the Square as the absolute expression of modernity' meant that it had to 'serve as the basis for the economic extension of life's action', and he declared 'Economy to be the new fifth dimension, which evaluates and defines the Modernity of the Arts and Creative Works'.⁷⁶ Clearly, Malevich regarded economy as a creative principle, while Rodchenko and his colleagues attached it firmly to functionality, the machine and industrial production. With these variations, the principle operated in all areas of Suprematist and Constructivist design. For example, both groups used the forms of Euclidean geometry in their textile designs, creating configurations of a few forms and colours, but while these Suprematist arrangements floated against white grounds, the Constructivists related their patterns closely to the manufacturing process and the structure of the fabric, creating interlocking formations that related to the warp and weft of the cloth.⁷⁷

Official demands for a figurative art that could operate effectively as propaganda intensified with the end of NEP, the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan and the Collectivisation of Agriculture in 1928-9. Artists allied with Constructivism, such as Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, who had been working in typography, photography and photomontage during the 1920s, harnessed these skills to produce propaganda, creating inventive photographic layouts for magazines such as *USSR in Construction* [*SSSR na stroike*]. Gustav Klutsis (Gustavs Klucis), in particular, produced numerous propaganda posters that manipulated photographic images. Earlier, he had studied with Malevich, visited Vitebsk, and was affiliated with Unovis, despite studying and then working at the Moscow Vkhutemas (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie – Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops). In 1920, he had produced works like *Axonometric Painting*, which was based on one of Malevich's compositions reproduced in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (Fig. 13.10). Klutsis had subsequently become allied with the Constructivists in 1922, when he designed a series of agitational stands for the Third Congress of the Comintern and the Fifth Anniversary of the Revolution. In posters like *Under the Banner of Lenin for Socialist Construction of 1929* (Fig. 13.11), he used diagonal compositional principles, reminiscent of his

75 Varst, 'Rabochii klub. Konstruktivist A. M. Rodcenko', *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 1 (1926): 36.

76 Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve*; Malevich, *Essays*, 1: 83.

77 For more details and reproductions of designs, see the essay by Julia Tulovsky in this volume.

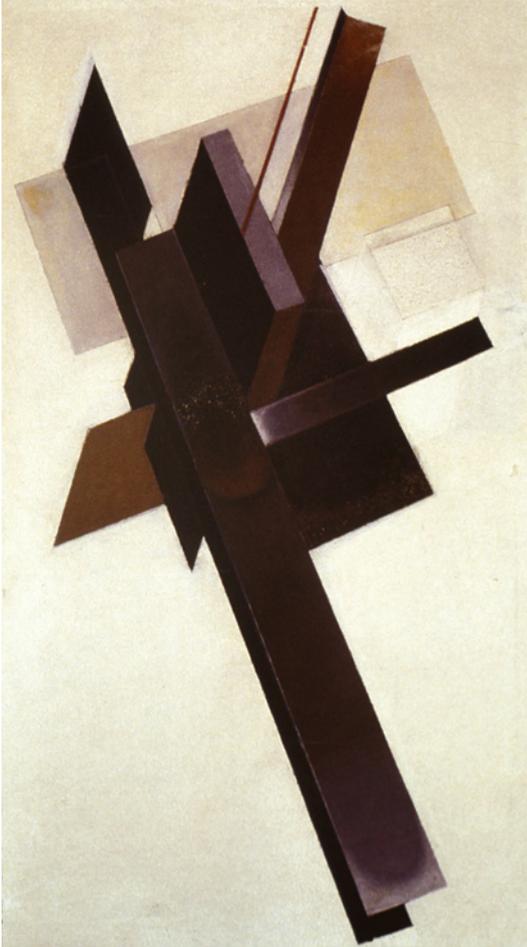


FIGURE 13.10 Gustav Klutsis, *Axonometric Painting* [*Aksonometricheskaia zhivopis'*], 1920, oil and mixed media on canvas, 96 × 57 cm., State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Suprematist painting, to convey a sense of dynamism, and he orchestrated the ground using the texture of the photographs, translucent and transparent planes, colour and various tonalities to reinforce the ideological message, giving the abstract idea a strikingly visual reality. In this poster, Klutsis used principles and techniques developed in his explorations of pictorial Suprematism within a more explicitly Constructivist framework of propaganda in the service of the state. An erstwhile Suprematist like Lissitzky also used photographic material to document and celebrate the achievements of the Five-Year Plans in the journal *USSR in Construction* and in his designs for international exhibitions, which projected a positive image of the Soviet Union to the world. In all these works, the artists continued to employ – albeit in a muted form –



FIGURE 13.11 Gustav Klutis, *Under the Banner of Lenin for Socialist Construction*, 1929, lithograph.

some of the compositional and formal principles derived from their previous experiments with Suprematism, objectless painting and constructed sculpture. Despite the Constructivists' emphatic rhetoric of utility, their designs of the 1920s demonstrated essentially the same type of commitment to exploring *faktura*, space, spatial dynamism, and technique that had underpinned their earlier explorations.

In the late 1920s, in response to the virulence of the officially-supported criticism directed against notions of formalism, both Suprematists and Constructivists returned to a measure of figuration. Malevich's late paintings such

as his *Self Portrait* are matched by Tatlin's still lives, while the more functional porcelain designs of Nikolai Suetin⁷⁸ complement the more realistic and ideologically pragmatic content of the photographic work of Constructivists like Rodchenko and Stepanova.

The evidence of underlying affinities, which were masked by the rhetoric and realities of the art world, can also be found in the personal connections that straddled the evident creative divides, such as the long-lasting relationship between Malevich and Aleksei Gan, the ideologue of Constructivism who often supported Malevich and Suprematism. The friendship went back to 1918, when Gan was editor of the art section in the anarchist newspaper *Anarchy* [*Anarkhiia*] and published several of Malevich's articles.⁷⁹ Malevich and Gan had also written a manifesto together, 'The Tasks of Art and the Role of Art's Suppressors'.⁸⁰ For Gan, Malevich was 'a great and eminent figure'.⁸¹ In 1920, Gan organised and collected the works for Malevich's Moscow exhibition, wrote a small essay and produced wall texts for the show.⁸² In recognition of their association, Malevich made Gan an honorary member of Unovis, although Gan apparently declined to become involved.⁸³ Subsequently, Malevich calmly wondered how Gan would define 'constructive art' now that he had founded the Constructivists.⁸⁴

78 For details concerning Suprematist porcelain design, see the essay by Yulia Karpova in this volume.

79 The articles that Malevich wrote for *Anarchy* [*Anarkhiia*] are reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 61-125.

80 Al. Gan, A. Morgunov and K. Malevich, 'Zadachi iskusstva i rol' dushitelei iskusstva' [The Tasks of Art and the Role of Art's Suppressors], *Anarkhiia*, 25 (23 March 1918): 4; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 49-50.

81 As reported in Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhnet zhit' bez chuda. Pis'ma. Poeticheskie opyty. Zapiski khudozhnitsy*, ed. O. V. Melnikov (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Sfera, 1994), 65.

82 See A. A. Sidorov, 'Khudozhestvennye vystavki' [Art Exhibitions], *Tvorchestvo*, 2-4 (1920): 34; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 518.

The exhibition was *The Sixteenth State Exhibition: Solo Exhibition of K. Malevich: His Path from Impressionism to Suprematism* [16-aia gos[udarstvennaia] vystavka: Personal'naia vystavka K. Malevicha: Ego put' ot impressionizma k suprematizmu], which opened in Moscow on 25 March 1920.

83 Stepanova, *Chelovek*, 109.

84 Kazimir Malevich, 'Suprematizm kak Unovisskoe dokazatel'stvo' [Suprematism as Unovis Proof], late 1921 – early 1922, ms; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 195-199; English translation in Anna Kafetsi, ed., *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930: The G. Costakis Collection: Theory – Criticism* (Athens: Ministry of Culture, National Gallery / Alexandros Soutzos Museum; and Delphi: European Cultural Centre of Delphi, 1996), 571. The text was written for a collection of articles entitled *From Representation to Construction* [*Ot izobrazheniia k konstruktсии*], planned by the Moscow InkhuK.

Even when Malevich became vehemently critical of Constructivism, he seems to have retained a relationship with Gan and stored some works in Gan's Moscow studio when he was moving from Vitebsk to Petrograd in 1922.⁸⁵ There seem to have been some problems that summer, concerning the planned conference of left-wing artists and the return of Malevich's paintings.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, despite this, Gan remained loyal to his old comrade and, in the late 1920s, when Malevich was being attacked for his formalism, Gan supported him by publishing his texts in the Constructivist journal, *Contemporary Architecture* [*Sovremennaia arkhitektura*].⁸⁷ He also wrote about Malevich in the magazine. Although he acknowledged that the artist's 'three-dimensional Suprematist compositions ... have no concrete or social value', Gan praised Malevich's work and stressed that 'the novelty, purity and originality of abstract Suprematist compositions will undoubtedly cultivate a new psychology of the perception of volumetric and spatial masses'.⁸⁸ Even later, in 1929, when Malevich's large retrospective opened at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow to relative silence in the Soviet press, Gan reviewed it positively, emphasising the way in which Malevich was exploring 'the language of painting' in his work and pursuing his task with honesty and dedication.⁸⁹ The ideologue of Constructivism continued to offer some support to the leader of Suprematism, expressing admiration for Malevich's formal explorations and his experimentation with form and space, while completely ignoring his mystical ideas.

It is precisely Gan's appreciation of Malevich's consistent commitment to creative innovation, experimentation, and an intense investigation of the essential nature of form and technique, that indicates the values that Constructivism and Suprematism shared. Constructivists did not mention art in their rhetoric of utility and ideology, but a respect for, and engagement with, formal innovation clearly underpinned their work.

As this indicates, the relationship between Suprematism and Constructivism is not as clear cut as one would like it to be. It is, in fact, highly com-

85 A. I. Konopleva, 'Aleksii Mikhailovich Gan', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 49 (2006): 212-221.

86 For details, see Tatiana Goriacheva, 'Aleksii Gan i Kazimir Malevich', in *Arkhiv N I. Khardzhieva. Russkii Avangard: Materialy i dokumenty iz sobraniia RGALI* (Moscow: Defi, 2017), I: 160-221.

87 Kazimir Malevich, 'Forma, tsvet i oshchushchenie' [Form, Colour and Sensation], *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 5 (1928): 157-159; English translation in *Architectural Design* (London), v: 5/6 (1989): 45-47

88 See Aleksii Gan, 'Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche' [Note on Kazimir Malevich], *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 3 (1927): 104, 106; reprinted in Malevich, *Letters*, 11: 539-541; English translation in *Architectural Design*, v: 5/6 (1989): 35-36.

89 Alexej Gan, 'Kasimir Malevitsch', *Moskauer Rundschau* (24 November 1929).

plicated and fraught with ambiguities. In many ways, both groups shared elements of a formal language and the underlying premises on which that language was based. There were strong aesthetic and sometimes even visual continuities between the languages of Constructivism and Suprematism. Both groups were interested in space, *faktura* and in the fundamental building blocks of artistic form and material. Not surprisingly, therefore, allegiances were somewhat fluid: Rodchenko had experimented with Suprematist forms before formulating and embracing a Constructivist position; Klutis had also moved from one group to the other; while Lissitzky clearly shared a respect for technology, Communism and photography with his Constructivist colleagues. Both groups had moved into architecture and design and both embraced elements of utopian thinking. The groups had much in common, despite the Constructivists' rhetorical rejection of the value of art, their emphasis on utility, functionality, materiality, and industry, their enthusiasm for Communism and the specific requirements of constructing a new communist society and environment, including their engagement with communist propaganda, and their attachment to photography – which Malevich despised.

Unfortunately, the atmosphere of internecine strife between competing artistic groups in the 1920s obscured the deeper and enduring affinities between the two movements in terms of their consistent avant-garde commitment to aesthetic experimentation and to the principles of 'artistic culture'. Ultimately this attachment to exploration, invention, and innovation in relationship to the essential qualities of the work of art came to be known, somewhat derogatorily, as formalism. But until formalism was banned, those fundamental precepts developed by Malevich and Suprematism continued to echo in the work of the Constructivists as well as in the productions of the Suprematists. Ultimately, in their approach to the creative process, the Suprematists and the Constructivists had much more in common than they were willing to acknowledge, especially while they were competing for resources and recognition.

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