



# "The Architecture of the Book": El Lissitzky's Works on Paper, 1919-1937

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*“The Architecture of the Book”: El Lissitzky’s Works on Paper, 1919-1937*

A dissertation presented

by

Samuel Johnson

to

The Department of History of Art and Architecture

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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“The Architecture of the Book”: El Lissitzky’s Works on Paper, 1919-1937

**Abstract**

Although widely respected as an abstract painter, the Russian Jewish artist and architect El Lissitzky produced more works on paper than in any other medium during his twenty year career. Both a highly competent lithographer and a pioneer in the application of modernist principles to letterpress typography, Lissitzky advocated for works of art issued in “thousands of identical originals” even before the avant-garde embraced photography and film. Lissitzky also devoted more effort to theorizing what he called “the architecture of the book” than to any other single issue, publishing statements in 1919, 1923, 1927 and 1931 that demonstrate a consistency otherwise lacking from his incredibly varied career. This phrase encapsulates Lissitzky’s view of the book as a global structure uniting all the formal and technical capabilities of a culture: initially derived from Victor Hugo’s claim that Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type had replaced architecture as the universal form of popular expression, Lissitzky’s term emblemizes the expanded field of architecture in which he operated.

This dissertation approaches Lissitzky as a theorist and practitioner of this expanded architectural field. Chapters one and two outline Lissitzky’s general project, treating the lithographic portfolios in which he circulated his abstract paintings and the journals and books he designed as model structures of print’s “architecture.” Its third chapter examines the changes that Lissitzky’s experiments with photography, both in cameraless abstract compositions and multi-

negative montages, wrought on his conception of print. Rather than conceiving photography and film as exemplars of reproducibility as such, Lissitzky saw them as heralding a reorganization of existing systems of reproducible media linked by a broad cultural practice of reading. Chapter four shows how artists and printers in the USSR continued to debate these evolving practices of cultural literacy under Stalin, negotiating new technological possibilities and new political demands. As a leading figure in this debate, Lissitzky's works exemplified the contradiction between advancing technical possibilities and diminishing popular participation in public life while remaining entirely affirmative toward the regime. The dissertation's final chapter places the photographic albums Lissitzky produced in collaboration with his partner, Sophie Küppers, in relation to an emergent Stalinist patron class.

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## Glossary and Abbreviations

ASNOVA	Association of New Architects ( <i>Assotsiatsiia novykh arkhitektov</i> )
GINKhUK	State Institute of Artistic Culture ( <i>Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury</i> )
Glavlit	Chief Committee on Literary and Publishing Affairs ( <i>Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv</i> )
Glavprofobr	Chief Committee on Professional Education ( <i>Glavnoe upravlenie professional'nogo obrazovaniia</i> )
GOSBANK	State Bank of the USSR ( <i>Gosudarstvennyi bank SSSR</i> )
<i>guberniia</i>	province
GUM	State Universal Store ( <i>Gosudarstvennyi universal'nyi magazin</i> )
INKhUK	Institute of Artistic Culture ( <i>Institut khudozhesvennyi kul'tury</i> )
IZO	Department of Fine Arts ( <i>Otdel' izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv</i> )
IZOGIZ	State Fine Arts Press ( <i>Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv</i> )
Komfut	Communist-futurists ( <i>Kommunisty-futuristy</i> )
LEF	Left Front of the Arts ( <i>Levyi front iskusstva</i> )
Narkompros	People's Commissariat of Enlightenment ( <i>Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia</i> )
NEP	New Economic Policy ( <i>Novaia ekonomicheskaiia politika</i> )
NKVD	People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs ( <i>Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennykh del</i> )
OPOIAZ	Society for the Study of Poetic Language ( <i>Obshchestvo izucheniia poeticheskogo iazyka</i> )
Proletkult	Proletarian culture ( <i>Proletarskaia kul'tura</i> )
Proun	Project for the affirmation of the new ( <i>Proekt utverzhdeniia novogo</i> )

TEZhE	Higher State Perfumeries and Cosmetics Trust ( <i>Gosudarstvennyi trest vysshei parfiumerii zhirovoi i kosteobrabatyvaiushchei promyshlennosti</i> )
UNOVIS	Affirmers of the New Art ( <i>Utverditeli novogo iskusstva</i> )
VKhUTEMAS	Higher State Artistic-Technical Studios ( <i>Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnichekie masterskie</i> ), Moscow
VOKS	All-Union Society for Cultural Relations Abroad ( <i>Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi svyazi s zagranitsej</i> ), Moscow
Zaum	Transreason, or “beyondsense” ( <i>Zaum</i> ’)
<i>Zhivskul’ptarkh</i>	Collective of Painterly-sculptural-architectural Synthesis ( <i>Kollektiv zhivopisno-skul’pturno-arkhitekturnogo-sinteza</i> )

#### **Archive abbreviations**

GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation ( <i>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii</i> ), Moscow.
GRI	Special Collections and Visual Resources, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
GTG	State Tret’iakov Gallery ( <i>Gosudarstvennaia Tret’iakovskaia galereia</i> ), Moscow.
RGAE	Russian State Archive of the Economy ( <i>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki</i> ), Moscow.
RGALI	Russian State Archive of Literature and Art ( <i>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva</i> ), Moscow.



## Introduction: The Architect and the Book

Among the many pursuits for which El Lissitzky is remembered, none so consistently defined his oeuvre as printing and architecture, a coupling which occupied the artist for the duration of his career. In this respect it is fitting that Lissitzky, an architect trained at the Darmstadt Technische Hochschule prior to the First World War and at Riga Polytechnic in Moscow during the conflict, should have left us a printing plant as his sole built structure.<sup>1</sup> Identified only in 2007, the printing works that Lissitzky was contracted to design for the illustrated weekly *Ogonek* in March 1930 was badly damaged in a suspicious fire in 2008 and is currently undergoing a controversial renovation (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> At the outset of 1930, the commission must have excited Lissitzky greatly. For although he had eagerly participated in architectural competitions since his return to the USSR in 1925, the response of juries had not been much different from that of Alfred Barr, who in 1928 greeted Lissitzky's designs as "the most frankly paper architecture I have seen."<sup>3</sup> As Lissitzky worked on the *Ogonek* project that spring, the promise of a concrete accomplishment receded. With construction on the plant beginning, the building was so overburdened by the growing volume of printing it was to support that scarcely

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<sup>1</sup> Lissitzky graduated as an "engineer-architect" from Riga Polytechnic, which had relocated to Moscow during the war, on 3 June 1918. His diploma is held in RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 53, l. 1. No official record survives of Lissitzky's training at the Darmstadt Technische Hochschule, whose archives were destroyed during World War II.

<sup>2</sup> Lissitzky's contract for the building is preserved in RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 61, l. 2. I owe my knowledge of the building's current state to Elena Olshanskaia, a resident of the adjacent Zhurgaz house who participated in the historico-cultural appraisal that led to the *Ogonek* plant's inclusion in the Directory of Cultural Heritage of Moscow.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Barr, "Russian Diary, 1927-28," *October* 7 (Winter 1978): 19.

any of Lissitzky's original design survives in it. In July 1930, a frustrated Lissitzky wrote his wife Sophie that instead of housing the presses of *Ogonek* alone, "it's now going to be a printing works for 24 periodicals. So in fact, a new design has to be made, but the foundations have already been started."<sup>4</sup> But the fact that construction on Lissitzky's printing plant began amid the ruins of his initial plans is also peculiarly appropriate, for the architect himself had gone on record in support of Victor Hugo's maxim, "the book will kill the building," at the outset of his career.<sup>5</sup>

As a study of Lissitzky's works on paper, this dissertation follows the career of an architect operating in an expanded field. Architecture appears here in marginal forms—in paper architecture, the mural and the exhibition design—but only insofar as these enter into what Lissitzky once called "the architecture of the book."<sup>6</sup> Although the phrase itself comes rather late, Lissitzky's preoccupation with the book's architecture is evident in his earliest experiments. In 1917, while still a student at Riga Polytechnic, he designed and illustrated a Yiddish text entitled *Sikhes Khulin* (*Small Talk*) for the poet Moyshe Broderzon, a selection of which he printed on a scroll and placed in a wooden casket, in explicit reference to the scroll of Esther (fig. 2). Two years later, endorsing Hugo's necrology of architecture, Lissitzky affirmed that "the book is now everything," but as *Sikhes Khulin* shows, he was far from regarding book itself a stable, ahistorical form; in 1923, he proclaimed that "the printed sheet, the infinitude of the book,

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<sup>4</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 19 July 1930. Trans. Helen Aldwinckle in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 95. In August, an announcement put the estimated production of the facility at 1.5 billion page impressions per year. "Zhurnal'naia fabrika iz-va 'Ogonëk'," *Literaturnaia gazeta* no. 37 (25 August 1930): 1.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Hugo, *Notre Dame of Paris*, trans. John Sturrock (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 188.

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, Lissitzky used the phrase "arkhitektura knigi" only once: in his lecture of 8 April 1931 at the Moscow Polygraphics Institute. Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 726, sheet 12. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

must be overcome,” and in 1927 that the book might soon be “supplanted by sound recordings or talking pictures.”<sup>7</sup> Addressing an audience of printers in 1931, he introduced his 1923 design for Vladimir Mayakovsky’s book of poems, *Dlia golosa (For the Voice)*, by situating the book within a longer history of record keeping:

You know that the book used to consist of a heap of containers with clay slabs, that it was written on bark and so forth. The book was not born as it is now and that means that it will not die this way. In truth, we are seeing that in the clerical domain, where rationalization places particular demands, the book in a thick binding has been transformed into a completely different object—for example, into a folder with brackets where loose sheets are collected. Coming to the heart of the matter, a card catalogue serves as the former account book in the end.<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with the artist’s own proleptic gaze, in surveying Lissitzky’s engagement with the book we will not be dealing with a self-contained form, but a series of interlaced techniques of gathering, ordering, binding, distributing and preserving works on paper. Scroll, codex, pamphlet, portfolio, newspaper and poster were among the formats embraced by Lissitzky, and they were soon joined by an interest in the revolutionary potential of film, photography, and the technique of rotogravure printing through which celluloid would transform the production of paper periodicals.

The global view of architecture evident in Lissitzky’s phrase “the architecture of the book” can already be glimpsed in the earliest extant notes from his student years in Darmstadt. It

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<sup>7</sup> “Novaia Kul’tura,” *Shkola i revoliutsiia* nos. 24-25 (16 August 1919): 11; “Topographie der Typographie,” *Merz* 4 (July 1923): 47; “Unser Buch,” *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* (Mainz: Gutenberg Gesellschaft, 1927): 172-78. These articles have all appeared in English translations; the first by Peter Nisbet in *Experiment/Eksperiment* 1 (1995): 257-63, and the latter two by Helene Aldwinckle in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 355-360.

<sup>8</sup> “Vy znaete, chto kogda-to kniga predstavliala soboiu grudu iashchikov s kirpichami, chto ona pisalas’ na kore, i t.d. Kniga ne rodilos’ takoi, kakoi ona est’ seichas, a eto znachit, chto ona ne umret takoi. V samom dele, my vidim, chto v kontorskoi oblasti, gde ratsionalizatsiia stavit osobyie trebovaniia, kniga v tolstykh perepletakh prevratilis’ v sovershchenno inye veshchi, naprimer, v papki s zazhimami i pr., gde ukladyvaiutsia listy. Nakonets, kartoteka, po sushchestvu govoriat, iavliaetsia byvshei bukhgalterskoi knigoi.” “Poligraficheskoe oformlenie knigi,” Lecture delivered at the Moscow Polygraphics Institute, 8 April 1931. Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 726, sheet 14. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

emerges most clearly in this syllogism, recorded on August 30, 1911: “Architecture is the *art* of building. Art is the ideal of *craft*. The product of every craft is something *tangible, an object*. The product of art is *more than an object*, it is an object that includes the ideal, i.e., something besides the husk. The human being is the work of art.”<sup>9</sup> The twenty-one year old student who wrote these lines, whose portrait was taken the following year (fig. 3), was hardly expressing an idiosyncratic view. He would have agreed with the eminent sociologist Georg Simmel that “only man himself is the real object of culture,” and that this object cannot be perfected “purely through that growth from within which we call natural growth, but beyond a certain point it requires a ‘technique’.”<sup>10</sup> In keeping with the definitions of Simmel and the young Lissitzky, the chapters that follow will constitute a *Bildungsroman* of sorts, but as a study of print they will also be, as Jacques Derrida suggests a history of paper must be, “a symbolic history of projections and interpretations, a history tangled up with the invention of the human body and of hominization” and with “*being-beneath*, the submission or subjectedness of subjectivity in general.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, while this study observes many of the conventions of the monograph, it does so from a distance, telling the story of a life and the technique that shaped it.

The centrality of the book in the general process of subjectivation has long been attested by historians of modern Europe. As the *Annales* historians Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin

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<sup>9</sup> “Arkkhitektura est’ *iskusstvo* stroit’. *Iskusstvo* est’ ideal’ *remesla*. Produktom’ kazhdago *remesla* chto-to *osiazaemoe, veshch*’. Produkt *iskusstva* est’ *sveroveshch*’, est’ *veshch*’ zakliuchaiushchaia ideal’, t.e. chto-to krome oblochki. Chelovek—proizvedenie *iskusstva*.” GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 7. Published in a German translation in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky, eds., *Proun und Wolkenbügel: Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Georg Simmel, “On the Essence of Culture,” trans. D.E. Jenkinson in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, eds., *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Paper or Me, You Know... (New Speculations on a Luxury of the Poor),” in *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 43.

demonstrated over half a century ago, the printed book was among the most important factors in the consolidation of the European national languages, both through translation and the development of national literatures.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the philosophical rationalisms of the seventeenth century began to conceive presence as the self-presence of the subject, denigrating the written word as the representation of speech and transferring the locus of meaning from the traditional metaphors of ‘divine writing’ and ‘the book of nature’ into the register of voice and breath.<sup>13</sup> From the very outset of his career, Lissitzky challenged these norms by treating the book as a means of unbinding the subject, effecting its transformation through the production of a different kind of object. Already in 1920, he proposed that “if with the mouth I can sing myself, then with the book I can show myself in many guises. The signs of the book produce in us movement of a new order, other than the voice, and it must manifest and strengthen this movement.”<sup>14</sup> The object described here, which contains graphic notations of every kind, was to be the material support of an eccentric, multifarious subject. Such a book could also move beyond the confines of the nation, as Lissitzky noted on subsequent occasions. Reasserting that “language and writing are each a pattern in itself” in 1927, Lissitzky lays claim to “an advantage which the letter book has lost” in the hope that “the coming book will be a-national.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: the Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, trans. David Gerard (London: Verso, 1997). Building on Febvre and Martin’s argument, Benedict Anderson argues that “print capitalism” provided the chief means of organizing the economic interests of colonial outposts against their ruling metropolises, forging “imagined communities” that were later imported to Europe in the development of the nation-state. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 39-67.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> “Esli rtom ia mogu tol’ko vypet’ sebia to knigoi ia mogu pokazat’ sebia mnogorazno. Znaki knigi proizvodiat u nas dvizhenie novogo poriadka, chem golos i dolzhno eto dvizhenie usilit’ i vyivnit’.” *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 51. The echo of Walt Whitman here is likely intentional.

<sup>15</sup> El Lissitzky, “Our Book,” trans. Helene Aldwinckle in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 357.

It was this project that underlay Lissitzky's affirmation of the coming of a "new culture" linked with communism in his 1919 article of the same name, a stance he reiterated in his address to the International Congress of Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf in 1922.<sup>16</sup> The concept of culture to which Lissitzky appealed on these occasions reveals both the givens of the historically circumscribed subject formation with which he began and the grounds of his career-long struggle to transform them. In the mouths of an educated but politically disenfranchised bourgeoisie that affirmed itself through the written word, i.e. privately, in letters or the reflective experience of a book rather than organized public initiative, "culture" had expressed an oppositional attitude to "civilized" court society. With the rise of nation-states over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the originally social distinction encoded in the word came to signify national particularity in addition to individual intellectual achievement.<sup>17</sup> It was in these terms—the Polish *kultura*, German *Kultur* and Russian *kul'tura*—that a Jewish intelligentsia suddenly confronted with its own political agency organized itself after the February Revolution, Lissitzky among them.<sup>18</sup>

Lissitzky had contributed to the growth of this new national consciousness through his ethnographic research on the decorative programs of the Mohilev and Druya synagogues in 1916, his organization of an exhibition of Jewish art in Moscow in 1917 and his collaboration with Broderzon on *Sikhes Khulin*, but his work in the publishing houses of Kiev after 1918

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<sup>16</sup> "The New Culture," trans. Peter Nisbet in *Experiment/Eksperiment* 1 (1995): 257-63. Lissitzky's statement in Düsseldorf, "wir betrachten eine Internationale der fortschritten Künstler als eine Festung der Kämpfer für die neue Kultur," was published in *De Stijl* V no. 4 (1922): 57.

<sup>17</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* vol. 1, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 26-34. Elias's example is the German bourgeoisie.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9-22.

proved foundational.<sup>19</sup> In part, this was due to the entirely unprecedented blossoming of Yiddish-language publishing after the Revolution, with half a dozen new presses appearing in Kiev in 1918 alone. Lissitzky worked closely with two of these, as a designer and illustrator for the Folks-Farlag and in a broader organizational capacity for the Kultur-Lige. Both organizations aimed to develop the spoken tongue of Eastern European Jews as a written literary language by publishing original Yiddish literature and translations from a range of European languages, but the Kultur-Lige was something more as well. Seeking to unite the most highly developed forms of autonomous culture with educational initiatives aimed at the “Jewish-folk-masses,” the group organized theatrical events, artists’ colonies, kindergartens, schools and clubs (some with their own libraries and cinemas); it operated a central bookstore and nationwide distribution system in addition to its own press; and it quickly assumed de facto authority in all Yiddish cultural and educational matters under the provisional government of the Ukrainian People’s Republic.<sup>20</sup>

Yet even at the height of his involvement in the Jewish cultural renaissance, Lissitzky could be counted among those who resisted its exclusively national tendencies. While a majority of Jewish cultural figures rejected the use of Russian after the revolution in favor of Hebrew or Yiddish, Lissitzky could be found asking a prominent critic of Yiddish literature to “endure me in Russian.”<sup>21</sup> Neither wholly Russified nor convinced of the possibility of an autonomous Jewish national culture after the revolution, Lissitzky was instead dedicated to the development of culture beyond the framework of the nation. The Polish Jewish artist Henryk Berlewi, whom Lissitzky met in Warsaw in winter 1921-22, has suggested that the break from a national

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<sup>19</sup> Ruth Apter-Gabriel, “El Lissitzky’s Jewish Works” in Ruth Apter-Gabriel ed. *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912-1928* (The Israel Museum: Jerusalem, 1987), 101-125.

<sup>20</sup> Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 53-54 and 228.

<sup>21</sup> Moyshe Broderzon and El Lissitzky to Shmuel Niger, 1 April 1918. Quoted in Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 48.

tradition was a great internal struggle for Lissitzky, but the evidence points in the opposite direction.<sup>22</sup> Lissitzky's international education, his multilingualism, and his messianic view of the revolution all contributed to his final embrace of the avant-garde in late 1919. It was entirely in keeping with his views to affirm with Kazimir Malevich the following year that "I belong to no people and consider no tongue native, I go along the path of the supreme unity of human beings of the spirit of dynamism and the language of the future."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Lissitzky himself led the effort to recruit Malevich to teach at the Vitebsk People's Art School (*Vitebskoe vysshee narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche*), where he operated the studios of print and architecture.

Lissitzky's joint studios helped define the activities of the group he formed with Malevich in Vitebsk, UNOVIS (*Utverditeli novogo iskusstva*, Affirmers of the New Art), shortly after the vanguard painter joined the school's faculty in late 1919. In September, a few months before the formation of UNOVIS, Lissitzky wrote to Malevich of his desire to create "a model book," anticipating the set of watercolor studies for the Suprematist children's book, *Pro 2 ■■ : Suprematicheskii skaz v 6-ti postroikakh* (*Of 2 ■■ : A Suprematist Tale in 6 Constructions*), that he completed just a few months later.<sup>24</sup> But Lissitzky's children's book would remain unpublished for two years, while the publishing arm of UNOVIS that operated from the artist's Vitebsk studio circulated the group's projects under the headings "productive-utilitarian" and

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<sup>22</sup> Henryk Berlewi, "El Lissitzky in Warschau" in *El Lissitzky* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1965), 61-63.

<sup>23</sup> "Ne prinadlezhu ni k kakomu narodu i ne chitaiu nikakoi iazyk rodnym, idu po puti suprantii edinstva chelovekov dukha i iazyka bydyshchego. Uel el' el ul teka." Kazimir Malevich, "Unom I," in *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 10 (verso).

<sup>24</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 12 September 1919, trans. Kenneth MacInnes in Irina Karasik, ed., *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia, 1920s-1950s* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2000), 52.



“creative-laboratory.”<sup>25</sup> In the former category fell the almanac *UNOVIS No. 1*, assembled in spring 1921, and in the latter, the portfolio of lithographs printed the following winter, through which Lissitzky christened his new volumetric Suprematist paintings “Prouns,” a neologism now considered an acronym of ‘Project UNOVIS’ or ‘Project for the Affirmation of the New’ (*proekt utverzheniia novogo*). The model of research and development curriculum that UNOVIS pioneered in Vitebsk certainly suffered from the material difficulties wrought by Russia’s civil war, but it was the shortage of paper that hindered the development of its central product—a prototypical post-national subject fluent in both “the language of the future” and that of the communist party.

Lissitzky found the resources to continue his experimentation in Berlin, where he finally published *Of 2* ■ in 1922. Although he soon fell in with a group of errant dadaists that included Kurt Schwitters, Raoul Hausmann, Hans Richter and Theo van Doesburg, Lissitzky’s activities in Berlin continued the UNOVIS project that he himself had outlined the previous spring in Moscow. Entering into the debates over the status of construction in post-cubist art spurred by Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the III International*, Lissitzky framed the paper architecture of his Prouns as an autonomous activity with the power to initiate a sequence of utilitarian activities. All of his major projects in Germany—two books, two journals, and two exhibition designs—proceeded in accordance with the process of functionalization he outlined in Moscow. As was typical for Lissitzky however, his experimentation proceeded most confidently on the terrain of the book: none of his German works so embodies the progressive functionalization of the autonomous object as his design for Mayakovsky’s collection of verses, *For the Voice*,

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<sup>25</sup> “...ideia sozdaniia ‘soveta’ vyzvana neobkhodimost’iu nemedlennogo provedeniia v zhizn’ novykh form iskusstva, kak proizvodstvenno-utilitarnogo, tak i tvorcheski-laboratornogo.” *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG Manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 48 (verso).

which, in adapting the notched index of the filing cabinet or address book, treats the privileged ground of the subject's self-recognition as so much reference matter.

After being diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis in late 1923, Lissitzky passed an unexpected fifteen-month convalescence in Switzerland before returning to Moscow in July of 1925. This difficult time was nevertheless one of the most pivotal in his career, marking the end of his collaborative relationship with Malevich and his sudden embrace of photography and film.<sup>26</sup> Having been excluded from the positions staked out by UNOVIS, the media of photomechanical reproduction entered Lissitzky's oeuvre as an alien presence, arresting and mutating what the artist had previously regarded as an immanent developmental process. From 1925, Lissitzky abandoned the neologism 'Proun' and instead began to derive the perceptual norms of architectural viewing from the cinema, to theorize a compound photographic process he called *fotopis*, or "photo-painting," and to advocate that "montage in the book must pull it toward the film."<sup>27</sup> These three compound formations governed Lissitzky's production for the remainder of his career, encompassing some of his most celebrated projects: the para-cinematic exhibition designs of 1926 and 1929 that he called *Demonstrationsräume*, or *Demonstration spaces*; the series of photographic portraits he completed in Locarno, including the 1924 self-portrait known as *The Constructor*; and the eighteen-page photomontage concertina insert of his catalogue for the 1928 *Pressa* exhibition in Cologne.

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<sup>26</sup> Malevich accuses Lissitzky of having severed his connection to UNOVIS in a very bitter letter of 17 June 1924, reprinted in the original Russian in *Experiment/Eksperiment* vol. 5 (1999): 152-154; English trans. in *Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2002), 248. This behavior seems to have been typical of Malevich, however, and when Lissitzky returned to Leningrad in June 1925 the two greeted each other as friends; only in Lissitzky's letter to Sophie Küppers of 20 July 1925 is there a clear signal of his changing attitude to Malevich. Trans. Helene Aldwinckle in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> "Montazh v knige dolzhen pridvinut' ee k fil'me." "O metodakh oformleniia knigi." Typescript in Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 725, sheet 5. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

The persistence of these experimental hybrids is all the more striking when they are introduced into the radically destabilized social structures of a Soviet Union entering the Five-Year-Plans. Definitively ending the mixed state and private economy of the New Economic Policy, Stalin's program of crash industrialization and forced collectivization of agriculture found its social embodiments in the persecution of bourgeois specialists and wealthy peasant farmers. This phenomenon of "cultural revolution" defined the first plan period, but it represented only the latest of the continually necessary social campaigns through which Bolshevik rule renewed its legitimacy: in the absence of actual proletarian hegemony, only the impersonal organizational heroism of the party prevented Soviet society from lapsing into a network of local power blocs controlled by traditional family coalitions and charismatic leaders.<sup>28</sup> In this neo-traditional society, which preserved traditional authority by displacing it, Lissitzky could present his film-book as the model format for a proletarian author inventing "from below," albeit not without objection from some quarters. And while Lissitzky was able to implement his model at the photo-illustrated propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction*, where he was granted creative control over an entire 48-page issue in 1932, his work participated in the retrenchment of the artist's role as much as its overturning: from one angle of view, he had pioneered long-form photomontage in a print format as widely distributed and ephemeral as film itself; from another, he had raised cheap mass literature into the rarified domain of art.

Just as neo-traditional Soviet social structures stabilized the hybrid photomechanical formats that Lissitzky embraced in the wake of his collaboration with Malevich, so too did they effect his relationship with Sophie Küppers, a figure central to the development of Lissitzky's

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<sup>28</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War" in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 115-48. The definition of "charismatic impersonal" legitimation comes from Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 125.

post-UNOVIS career. As the widow of Paul Erich Küppers, the former head of the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover with whom she had two sons, the art historian Sophie Küppers (née Schneider) had become Lissitzky's patron and friend in 1923, doubling as his agent and dealer even as their relationship turned romantic. After moving to the USSR and marrying Lissitzky in early 1927, Küppers remained his partner and collaborator in many public ventures, first as a regular contributor of curatorial acumen to Lissitzky's exhibition designs and soon in large-scale photomontage efforts. As the Soviet economy shifted from a focus on industrialization to the sale and marketing of consumer goods in the mid-1930s, Lissitzky and Küppers won commissions for photographic albums that built on their work in photo-illustrated journals. The brief efflorescence of socialist swag corresponding to the planning of a state-controlled market economy resulted in two albums designed over the course of 1934, *Soviet Subtropics* and *Industry of Socialism* (the latter designed by Lissitzky alone) and a third, *Food Industry*, that occupied the couple into 1936. As paradoxical as the state commercialism that they publicized and as contradictory as the desiring gaze of the social stratum that commissioned them, these albums were nevertheless extraordinarily successful. Not only the financial remuneration, but the social capital of the albums' popular recognition enabled Lissitzky and Küppers to participate in the lifestyle of the ruling class without property that managed the Soviet party-state and, to a certain extent, to embrace its values. This success was, however, achieved on the eve of the Great Terror and in the company of its architects.

This is the arc of the present study. By identifying Lissitzky's concern with the book and the art of printing as a constant in his career, it seeks to provide a cohesive account of a body of work that has been subject to repeated division, exclusion and, occasionally, censorship. This thesis has surfaced before—once in a brief essay by the eminent Soviet scholar Nikolai

Khardzhiev and again in an important early essay by Yve-Alain Bois—but it has mostly remained on the margins of the scholarly literature on Lissitzky.<sup>29</sup> Shifting Lissitzky's concern with print to the center not only produces a more coherent picture of the artist's activities, it also reveals the extent to which his oeuvre has functioned as the proverbial exception that proves the rule in scholarship on the Russian and Soviet avant-gardes for almost half a century. While Lissitzky has rightly been regarded as one of the central figures in the interwar Soviet avant-garde, the particularity of his enduring concerns often kept him at a distance from the dominant logic of its development.

Serious study of Lissitzky began in the mid-1960s, when Sophie Küppers, living in Novosibirsk since the Second World War, combined a significant portion of the couple's correspondence with a biographical essay and a wide variety of Lissitzky's writings. Published in the GDR partly in response to the first account of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde in the West, Camilla Gray's 1962 study *The Great Experiment in Russian Art, 1863-1922*, Küppers' book remains the most complete account of Lissitzky's career, save for the absence of even a single image of Stalin from its pages.<sup>30</sup> Even in the presence of political constraints, studies in the Eastern Bloc benefited from an empirical grounding that Western scholarship would not achieve until the publication of Christina Lodder's exhaustively researched *Russian*

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<sup>29</sup> Nikolai Khardzhiev, "El' Lisitskii, konstruktor knigi," *Iskusstvo knigi* no. 3, 1958-1960 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962): 145-161. Yve-Alain Bois, "El. L. Didactiques de lecture," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* vol. 3 no. 1 (January 1976): 197-207. Translated by Christian Hubert in a slightly abridged form as "El Lissitzky: Reading Lessons," *October* 11 (Winter 1979): 113-28. My approach to this question has also been influenced by Maria Gough's essay, "Contains Graphic Material: El Lissitzky and the Topography of G," in Michael Jennings and Detlef Mertins, eds., *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film, 1923-1926* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010), 21-51.

<sup>30</sup> Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf. Erinnerungen, Briefe, Schriften* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1967). English trans., Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittal, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968). Küppers speaks in general terms of her frustrations with Gray's study in letters written to her granddaughter during her book's preparation. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *36 Letters* (Jerusalem: Alphabet, n.d.), 73-83.

*Constructivism* in 1983.<sup>31</sup> And while Lodder's study represented a tremendous advance in the understanding of constructivism—a movement she characterized as virulently communist, materialist and anti-art—it also incurred some confusion over Lissitzky. Previously regarded by many as a constructivist *tout court*, Lissitzky was now portrayed as both a source of misinformation about constructivism in his travels and a late adherent upon his return home.<sup>32</sup>

Along with Lodder's new demarcation of constructivism's borders came her contention that the movement's original utilitarian design imperative had been forfeited with its embrace of the more limited terrain of graphic design, photography and photomontage. Both aspects of Lodder's study were quickly criticized by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in an influential essay, "From *Faktura* to Factography." There, Buchloh identifies Lissitzky's activities as typical of the Soviet avant-garde as a whole, and of the "media optimism" of Walter Benjamin, as it embraced the documentary potential of photography and film. For Buchloh, Lissitzky's turn to collectively experienced forms of mass media and exhibition design in the mid-1920s constituted the "logical next step in his own work, as well as in the radical transformation of modernist aesthetics and art

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<sup>31</sup> One important exception to this trend is *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), which contained several of Lissitzky's unpublished letters as well as John Bowl's translation of Lissitzky's lecture of 1921, "Prouns: Toward the Defeat of Art." In the East, Küppers published another collection of documents, this time coedited with the couple's son Jen Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Proun und Wolkenbügel* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977). Larisa Zhadova published an essay on Lissitzky, "El' Lisitskii – teoretik vizual'noi kul'tury" in *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika (Trudy VNIITE)* 17 (1978): 55-62, and her book, *Suche und Experiment: russische und sowjetische Kunst 1910 bis 1930* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1978), later translated into English, remains a valuable resource for documents pertaining to the activities of the group Lissitzky and Malevich founded in Vitebsk in early 1920. Further essays by Wassili Rakitin and Igor Rjasanzew containing new archival research appeared in the (repetitively titled) exhibition catalogue *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf* (Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle, 1982). Lodder's own work built upon the research published in the journal of Moscow's All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics (*Vsesoiuznyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institute tekhnicheskoi estetiki*), or VNIITE.

<sup>32</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 157-58 and 225-238. The fundamentals of Lodder's position remain unchanged, as evinced by her essay "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism" in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 27-46. They have become more moderate with respect to the question of politics however, as demonstrated by her "Art into Life: International Constructivism in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2002), 172-98.

production as it had been occurring within the Soviet avant-garde since 1921,” a general trend that revealed the “naïve utopianism” it shared with Benjamin upon entering the service of totalitarian domination.<sup>33</sup>

Subsequent scholarship characterized Lissitzky’s work in accordance with either Buchloh’s view of the artist as exemplifying broader tendencies within the Soviet avant-garde or Lodder’s identification of his belatedness and eccentricity. The latter view appeared in Peter Nisbet’s 1987 exhibition of Lissitzky’s work at the Busch-Reisinger Museum and again in his dissertation on Lissitzky’s Proun years, both of which synthesized a wide variety of archival materials in an account of Lissitzky’s career whose detail and complexity remains unrivaled.<sup>34</sup> Both Nisbet’s exhibition, the first retrospective of Lissitzky’s work in the United States, and his scholarship renewed critical debates on Lissitzky. In a seminal essay, “El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility,” Yve-Alain Bois criticized the Busch-Reisinger exhibition for enacting “a certain political divestment of [Lissitzky’s] enterprise,” which he instead reinscribed into the framework provided by Buchloh. In doing so however, Bois sought to retrieve Lissitzky’s utopianism from the charge of naivety by discarding the teleological process posited by Buchloh in favor of three discontinuous periods, each only “accidentally (biographically) related” to the others: in the first, Bois placed Lissitzky’s early Jewish books; in the second, his Prouns, typography and exhibition designs of the 1920s; and in the third, the Stalinist propaganda of his later years.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “From *Faktura* to Factography,” *October* 30 (Autumn 1984): 82-119. The quoted remarks occur on pp. 103, 101 and 109, respectively.

<sup>34</sup> Nisbet, “Introduction to El Lissitzky” in *El Lissitzky: 1890-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 1987), 13-52; and Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of his Work and Thought, 1919-1927* (PhD Diss.: Yale University, 1995). Nisbet’s debt to Lodder is acknowledged in the introduction of his dissertation (especially pp. 21-25), where he characterizes Lissitzky as a late adherent to a general pattern evident in the careers of the “true” constructivists of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde.

<sup>35</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, “El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility,” *Art in America* vol. 76 no. 4 (April 1988): 165-67. It is sometimes erroneously asserted that this periodization was advanced by Nisbet, who in fact offered a schema of six

Toward the turn of the decade, a steady stream of exhibitions and publications devoted to Lissitzky eroded these positions, but no firmer ground for interpretation of the artist's oeuvre emerged.<sup>36</sup> Particularly noteworthy in this process has been the work of Aleksandra Shatskikh, beginning with her essay on UNOVIS for the catalogue of the 1992 Guggenheim exhibition, *The Great Utopia*. Shatskikh's discovery that a faction within UNOVIS had also laid claim to the mantle of constructivism implicitly challenged an assumption operative in scholarship on Lissitzky since Lodder's *Russian Constructivism*, and her subsequent account of the group's activities in Vitebsk revealed a key moment in Lissitzky's development.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Margarita Tupitsyn's attention to Lissitzky's photographic experiments, although proceeding within the framework of Buchloh's "*Faktura* to Factography," increasingly highlighted Lissitzky's distance from the strains of photomontage and factographic snapshot Buchloh emphasized, while Victor Margolin offered the first sustained reading of Lissitzky's work for *USSR in Construction*.<sup>38</sup>

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micro-periods, each about two to three years in length as a means to understand the arc of Lissitzky's career. The periodization belongs to Bois, and in fact influenced Nisbet's decision to limit his dissertation to "the Proun years."

<sup>36</sup> Norbert Nobis, ed., *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941: Retrospektive*, (Berlin: Propyläen, 1988); *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941: Architect, Painter, Photographer, Typographer* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Vanabbemuseum, 1990); Kai-Uwe Hemken, *El Lissitzky: Revolution und Avant-Garde* (Cologne: Dumont, 1990); M.A. Nemirovskaia, ed., *Lazar' Markovich Lisitskii, 1980-1941: vystavka proizvedeniia k stoletiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow: State Treťiakov Gallery, 1990). In both the Treťiakov and Vanabbemuseum retrospectives, the eminent architectural historian and head of VNIITE, Selim Khan-Magomedov solidified his view of Lissitzky as possessing an "integrating talent" as opposed to the "style-forming talent" of Malevich, Tatlin, Ladovskii or Rodchenko, a view that had earlier influenced Lodder's characterization of Lissitzky. Khan-Magomedov's long held views are summed up in his recent monograph, *Lazar' Lisitskii* (Moscow: Izd. S.E. Gordeev, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Shatskikh, "Unovis: Epicenter of a New World" trans. Jane Bobko in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 53-64. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: Zhizn' iskusstva, 1917-1922* (Moscow: Iazyk russkoi kul'tury, 2001), English trans. Catherine Foskho Tsan, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Shatskikh also contributed to the important State Treťiakov Gallery exhibition, *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia, 1920s-1950s* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, "Between *Fotopis'* and Factography" in *El Lissitzky: Experiments in Photography* (New York: Houk Friedman, 1991), 4-7; and *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet: Photography, Design, Collaboration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997).



Although more was known about Lissitzky's work than ever before, scholarship increasingly tended to portray his career as a sequence of disconnected particulars. This was a condition that Nancy Perloff aimed to rectify with a symposium on Lissitzky at the Getty Research Institute in winter 1998-99, although the results were not as she had hoped.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Aleksandr Kantsedikas and Zoia Iargina's ambitious *El' Lisitskii: fil'm zhizni, 1980-1941* reintroduced Lissitzky's oeuvre to a Russian speaking audience, assembling a lavishly illustrated chronological account of his activities and translating a wide variety of the artist's German texts into Russian for the first time.<sup>40</sup>

While it has not gone unchallenged, Yve-Alain Bois' account of Lissitzky's career continues to offer the most powerful terms with which to evaluate the artist's work.<sup>41</sup> Drawing on the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Leo Steinberg, Bois argues that the paintings, typography and exhibition designs of Lissitzky's middle period effect a two-fold critique of the sign. On the one hand, they integrate the left-to-right orientation of text with the vertical (gravitational) orientation of the figure; and on the other, they transpose the previously upright surface of the picture onto the horizontal plane of the working document. The

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<sup>39</sup> In her introduction to the proceedings of the symposium, Perloff says of the studies collected there that "a full and coherent picture does not emerge, perhaps because it is too early in the scholarship." Perloff, "The Puzzle of El Lissitzky's Artistic Identity" in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 6. Despite Perloff's reservations, the published conference proceedings contain valuable new perspectives on various aspects of Lissitzky's career by Maria Gough, Leah Dickerman, John Bowlt, Éva Forgács and Peter Nisbet.

<sup>40</sup> Aleksandr Kantsedikas and Zoia Iargina, *El' Lisitskii, fil'm zhizni, 1890-1941*. 7 vols. (Moscow: Novyi Ermitazh, "Odin," 2004). This collection also includes a selection of Lissitzky's rare and unpublished writings in Russian; unfortunately, however, inconsistent editorial practices and some questionable reconstructions of manuscript material prevent it from being a wholly reliable resource for scholars.

<sup>41</sup> The most notable example is T.J. Clark's long essay on UNOVIS in Vitebsk, "God is Not Cast Down," in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1999), 225-97. Clark's essay, which does not seek to change Bois' criteria so much as to reverse the particulars of his evaluation, is itself an elaboration of a question posed in Clark's *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 179.

latter shift, for Bois, coincides with Buchloh's transition from *faktura* to factography, but is not identical with it; on the contrary, Bois portrays this shift from vertical to horizontal orientation as an *ontological* transformation, one of whose surface effects is factography.<sup>42</sup> For Bois, as for Buchloh, the ultimate consequence of this shift is the end—or at least the sudden *impossibility*—of painting, and it is thus that both tie Lissitzky to the broader logic of the Soviet avant-garde.

But while Lissitzky was a very good painter, he was never primarily that, and painting's 'end' was never as significant an event in his career as it was in that of Malevich, Tatlin or Rodchenko, each of whom made his mark as a painter abandoning his *métier*. By contrast, Lissitzky had trained as an architect, and for him the end of painting primarily meant the possibility of renewal in architecture. Neither did his embrace of mass media production occur after the 'end' of painting. Indeed, the following prognosis occurs in Lissitzky's August 1919 essay, "The New Culture," which appeared before he truly embraced the medium:

The artist... will now be forced to set aside his old instruments, his quill pens, brushes and little palettes and take up chisel, burin, the lead army of the typecase, the rotary press. All this will then obediently begin to turn in his hands and will give birth to a work not in one copy—not a unique object for the enjoyment of the patron—but in thousands and thousands of identical originals: whosoever thirsts, he shall be satisfied.<sup>43</sup>

Only after publishing these remarks will Lissitzky take up avant-garde painting as a dead form to (as he put it) fertilize new growth in architecture; here, he speaks of the graphic artist's tools rather than the painter's. But this does not mean that Bois' powerful account of Lissitzky's critique of the sign need be abandoned. While Bois primarily draws upon Leo Steinberg's concept of "the flatbed picture plane" in characterizing the end of painting as a shift from vertical

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<sup>42</sup> Bois, "Radical Reversibility," 169-174. Although he speaks of a "paradigm shift," Bois' characterization here is closer to a Heideggerian *Ereignis*, the coming to light of an event in Being.

<sup>43</sup> El Lissitzky, "The New Culture," trans. Peter Nisbet, *Eksperiment/Experiment* 1 (1995): 261.

to horizontal axes, he also acknowledges another source: a 1917 fragment on “Painting and the Graphic Arts” in which Walter Benjamin suggests that “there are two sections through the substance of the world: the longitudinal section of painting and the transverse section of certain graphic works. The longitudinal section seems representational—it somehow contains things; the transverse section seems symbolic—it contains signs.”<sup>44</sup> Although Lissitzky embraced reports of painting’s demise as the end of representation, he did not require it for access to the symbolic and the domain of inscription. Rather, it is on this axis that Lissitzky’s career begins and, in a manner unique among the avant-garde, on which it will continue to unfold. Not that this is the sole locus of meaning within Lissitzky’s oeuvre. The artist’s complexity, his multiplicity, arise from the overlaying of two sequences—from painting to architecture, from architecture to the book—the latter of which, older and never fully dislodged, provides a strong, unifying undercurrent in the stream of his ever-changing activities.

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Painting and the Graphic Arts,” trans. Rodney Livingstone in Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 2008), 219. Bois discusses these remarks in relation to Steinberg in his essay “Piet Mondrian, *New York City*,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 14 no. 2 (Winter 1988): 273-74. He cites the latter essay in “Radical Reversibility,” 180 n. 42.

## Chapter 1 | Paper Architecture: Vitebsk and Moscow, 1919-1921

*Let there be no mistake, architecture is dead, dead beyond recall, killed by the printed book... a construction which grows and mounts in spirals without end; here is a confusion of tongues, ceaseless activity, indefatigable labor, fierce rivalry between all of mankind, the intellect's promised refuge against a second deluge, against submersion by the barbarians. This is the human race's second Tower of Babel.*

– Victor Hugo<sup>1</sup>

*You who wish to become an architect, begin by being a painter... This is what the artist can do when spending is limited. He surrounds himself with the treasures of nature, and to the milieu of shortage he offers abundance.*

– Claude-Nicolas Ledoux<sup>2</sup>

When twenty-eight year old Lazar' Markovich Lissitzky arrived in Vitebsk to take up a position at the city's first public art school, the Vitebsk People's Art School (*Vitebskoe vysshee narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche*), he was primarily known as an illustrator. In this sense, his appointment was a matter of course: like Marc Chagall, the city's Commissar of Enlightenment and founder of the school, Lissitzky had studied painting in Vitebsk as a young man, and his graphic style bore a clear affinity to that of his elder comrade. Having left Kiev in early May 1919, Lissitzky met Chagall in Petrograd and quickly accepted the latter's offer of employment.<sup>3</sup> On May 26, he was officially appointed head of the Section of Artistic Labor for

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, trans. John Sturrock (Penguin Books: New York, 1978), 199, 202.

<sup>2</sup> “Vous qui voulez devenir Architecte, commencez par être peintre... Voilà, voilà ce que peut faire l'artiste quand la dépense est limitée; il s'entoure des trésors de la nature, au milieu de la disette il offre l'abundance.” Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des mœurs, et de législation* vol. 1 (Paris: H.L. Perroneau, 1804. Facsimile edition, Nordlingen: Verlag Alfons Uhl, 1981), 113.

<sup>3</sup> Reliable information on Lissitzky's brief stay in Kiev is rare. Although we do not know precisely when he arrived, a document confirms his appointment to the Arts Commission of the Kiev Council of Worker's Deputies on 15

the Vitebsk Department of People's Education and Professor of the Studios of Applied Arts (*Masterskie prikladnykh iskusstv*) in the People's School.<sup>4</sup>

A few months later, an unsigned notice appeared in the Vitebsk *Izvestiia* alerting potential students that Lissitzky's "Studios of Graphic Arts, Printing and Architecture" would offer not just practical skills, but familiarity with "all the theoretical and historical questions relating to the studios' work."<sup>5</sup> This abandonment of the traditional 'applied arts' designation—recently criticized by advocates of production art—demonstrates Lissitzky's unique investment in print and architecture. The bond between these fields, all but invisible at the time of his appointment, would soon have far reaching consequences for both Lissitzky and the school. As the most outspoken of a contingent of young faculty, Lissitzky was instrumental in bringing Kazimir Malevich to Vitebsk in autumn 1919, and together the two artists formed a group, Affirmers of the New Art (*Utverditeli novogo iskusstva*, UNOVIS), which transformed the school's curriculum. Lissitzky adopted the pseudonym 'El' from Malevich's transrational verse and began to paint abstract architectural forms in the Suprematist idiom, but it was his ability to print what he called the "testament of Suprematism" that initially drew Malevich to Vitebsk.<sup>6</sup>

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February 1919, i.e. immediately upon the Bolsheviks taking power. RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 575, l. 1. Lissitzky's departure for Petrograd in early May and encounter with Chagall are noted in an autobiographical sketch of 1929. RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 555, l. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Lissitzky's official appointment is preserved in RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 576, l. 1. The opening of the school is recounted in Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Catherine Foskho-Tsan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 65.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase is from Lissitzky's essay, "Suprematizm mirostroenie." Translated by Helene Aldwinckle as "Suprematism in World Reconstruction" in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 330. Unfortunately, Aldwinckle's title is not true to the original, "Suprematism of World Construction," which I will use here.

The latter phrase bears a trace of the “theoretical and historical questions” that were discussed in Lissitzky’s studio prior to his first experiments in Suprematism. Central to these discussions was the close relationship between print and architecture theorized in Victor Hugo’s writings. Comparing a pre-modern “freedom of architecture” to the modern freedom of the press, Hugo divided human history into “two books, two registers, two testaments: masonry and printing.” Hugo believed that these testaments were irrevocably split by the invention of the printing press, which he saw as “the greatest event in history” since once “the human mind discovered a means of perpetuating itself which was more lasting and resistant than architecture, ...architecture became merely one art among others,” ending its reign as “the total, the sovereign, the tyrannical art.”<sup>7</sup> A direct echo of these views can be heard in Lissitzky first published statement, printed in a Vitebsk weekly in August 1919:

surely the book is now everything. In our time it has become what the cathedral with its frescoes and stained glass (colored windows) used to be, what the palaces and museums, where people went to look and learn, used to be. The book has become the monument of the present, but in contrast to the old monumental art, it itself goes to the people, and does not stand like a cathedral in one place, waiting for someone to approach. The book now expects the contemporary artist to use it so as to make this monument of the future.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of reflection on the distribution form of the artwork was still unheard of among the theorists of production art. But more than this, what Hugo’s theory provided Lissitzky was the means of practicing architecture beyond architecture: for even while recognizing that building

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<sup>7</sup> Hugo, *Notre-Dame of Paris*, 200, 196-97. For Hugo’s relation to prevailing theories of the origin of architecture, see Neil Levine, “The book and the building: Hugo’s theory of architecture and Labrouste’s Bibliotheque Saint-Genevieve” in Robin Middleton, ed., *The Beaux-Arts and nineteenth century French Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 149. As Levine points out, Hugo’s views were also extremely important for Frank Lloyd Wright.

<sup>8</sup> “Novaia Kul’tura,” *Shkola i revoliutsiia* nos. 24-25 (16 August 1919): 11. Trans. Peter Nisbet, “The New Culture,” *Eksperiment/Experiment* 1 (1995): 261.

would inevitably continue, Hugo held that architecture after Gutenberg was possible in only in and through the printed page.

Lissitzky's negative judgment of architecture was far from unusual among architects of his generation. Already in 1905, the future theorist of the Deutsche Werkbund, Hermann Muthesius had ridiculed the pompous historicist formalities of the nineteenth century's "style-architecture" from the perspective of an "art of building" aimed at reconciling craft and modern industry.<sup>9</sup> This distinction was ingrained in Lissitzky as a student at the Darmstadt Technische Hochschule before the First World War. It can be found in one of his few surviving notes from the period (an unsurprising position, considering that Darmstadt had recently been home to two of the Werkbund's founding members, Peter Behrens and Joseph Maria Olbrich).<sup>10</sup> Ten years later, writing as a representative of UNOVIS, Lissitzky could still draw on Muthesius's distinction to oppose 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? Looked at in this way, does not architecture appear to be a parasite on the healthy body of building?"<sup>11</sup> But like Muthesius and other architects of his generation, Lissitzky continued to subscribe to a traditional definition of architecture as the unity of the arts even as he criticized its present condition. In a lecture delivered the same year at the Institute of Artistic Culture (*Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury*, INKhUK), he maintained that "cohesive ages of man have always possessed a cohesive

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<sup>9</sup> Hermann Muthesius, *Style-Architecture and Building-Art: Transformations of Architecture in the Nineteenth Century and its Present Condition*. Trans. Stanford Anderson (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> "Arkhitectura est' iskusstvo stroit'." GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 7. German translation in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky, eds., *Proun und Wolkenbügel* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), 13.

<sup>11</sup> "Katastrofa arkhitektury," *IZO: Vestnik otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv N.K.P.* no. 1 (10 March 1921): 3. English trans. Helene Aldwinckle, "Catastrophe of Architecture," in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 369.

means of architectural expression, this materialized assemblage of all the arts (literature, music, the plastic arts, painting). But then fragmentation and dematerialization set in.”<sup>12</sup>

For Lissitzky, as for the other members of UNOVIS, overcoming this historical fragmentation to reinstitute the unity of architecture appeared as a real possibility at the outset of the 1920s. In the lecture just quoted, Lissitzky proclaims that “we are reaching the transition from sculpture/painting to the unity of architecture. It is in architecture that we move today, it is the central issue of modern times.”<sup>13</sup> T.J. Clark has cogently argued that this topos in UNOVIS’s discourse was rooted in the emergency mobilization of a state-controlled planned economy during the Civil War, a conflict which continued well into 1921 in the provinces.<sup>14</sup> UNOVIS’s discourse was, however, less a direct expression of support for the Soviet command economy than a call for the centralized reorganization of artists’ own institutional infrastructure, for which UNOVIS’s transformation of the Vitebsk school could serve as a model. This demand was partially fulfilled by the creation of the Higher State Artistic-Technical Workshops (*Vysshie gosudarstvennyi khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie*, VKhUTEMAS) in December 1920, which subjected the individual fiefdoms of the painters’ studios that constituted the Free State Artistic Studios to an overall reordering in line with the needs of an industrial economy. This organizational armature, which Lissitzky predicted would make the unification of the arts possible once again, was the architecture in which he moved in 1921.

Still, Lissitzky’s narrative of the transition from painting to architecture, schematized and distilled into the potent form of a slogan, elides a crucial moment of mediation. In truth, most of

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<sup>12</sup> “Proun: Toward the Defeat of Art,” trans. John Bowlt in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), 70-71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>14</sup> T.J. Clark. “God is Not Cast Down,” in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1999), 225-97.



the projects he completed in Vitebsk, a lithographic pamphlet of Malevich's essay "On the New Systems in Art" and the almanac *UNOVIS No. 1*, were produced as propaganda for architecture, rather than examples of it. Even Lissitzky's paintings, dubbed Proun, or Project for the Affirmation of the New (*Proekt utverzhdeniia novogo*), to highlight their transitory position between painting and architecture, were run through the printing press once he reached Moscow.

### I. *Tectonics*

The program of Lissitzky's Vitebsk studios emphasized the superiority of the book, but it did so on the basis of architectural principles. According to the plan Lissitzky set out in "The New Culture," the studios were organized so that "monumental, studio, decorative, applied [artists], printmakers, illustrators and so on," could work in common defiance of their specialization, aided by the principles of "tectonics—the art of bringing order, purposiveness [*tselesoobraznost*'], and rhythm to chaos [which] serves as the foundation of all the arts."<sup>15</sup> However Nietzschean his evocation of chaos,<sup>16</sup> Lissitzky's appeal to the unity of monumental and decorative art ultimately derives from the definition of tectonics given by Gottfried Semper in his magnum opus, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*. It was Semper who defined tectonics as the rhythmic articulation of frame and filling common to the textile and building arts, and structure as the integration of frame and support.<sup>17</sup> From Semper

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<sup>15</sup> Lissitzky, "The New Culture," 260. Translation modified.

<sup>16</sup> Compare Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, paragraph 109: "The total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms." Trans. Walter Kaufman, (Vintage Books: New York, 1974), 168.

<sup>17</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson, (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004), 624.

too came the thesis that tectonic structure precedes any distinction between “*movable* domestic furnishings and *immovable* building,” making it possible for structures developed for the former to exert influence on the latter.<sup>18</sup> Lissitzky’s appeal to the mobility of the book, which “itself goes to the people and does not stand like the cathedral in one place,” relies on this view of tectonics, bolstered by Hugo’s maxim, “small things overcome great ones.”<sup>19</sup>

Lissitzky’s appeal to Semper for the organizing principle of his studios did not necessarily entail an endorsement of the German architect’s classicism. Rather, his definition of architecture as the art of building suggests that his exposure to Semper was mediated by Muthesius, whose pre-Werkbund text, *Style-Architecture and Building-Art*, applauded Semper’s practical theses even while denigrating the nineteenth century’s historical pastiches.<sup>20</sup> For Muthesius, by contrast, the seeds of an emergent style could be found “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.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike architecture proper, these structures exist to serve as carriers for an extrinsic element, be it human or other cargo. And over the course of the nineteenth century, they effected a great expansion of the domain of furnishings beyond the bounds of the domestic interior. Although Muthesius viewed these tectonic structures as models for the undecorated sobriety of a new middle-class German architecture, they also determined the new rhythm of life that was celebrated in the poetry of the Italian futurists.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Hugo, *Notre-Dame of Paris*, 187-88.

<sup>20</sup> *Style-Architecture and Building-Art: Transformations of Architecture in the Nineteenth Century and its Present Condition*, trans. Stanford Anderson, (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1994), 68.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 79.

Lissitzky's classification of the book among such mobile modern structures evinces an original interpretation of tectonics, which, in addition to Muthesius, was probably informed by F.T. Marinetti's call for a "typographical revolution."<sup>22</sup> Certainly, Malevich would have heard echoes of the Italian futurist in Lissitzky's letter of September 1919, sent to the painter in Moscow barely a month after the publication of "The New Culture":

You will agree with me that while a train, auto or aero scatter our bodies in space, books dynamize thoughts in time. We must realize this and build a carriage, locomotive and aeroplane for thought—and a book in correspondence with its role. Modern depots and hangars issue their own machines, designed by an engineer using powerful and complex instruments and machines. So also should the book, created by artists, be constructed in a printing house-depot by means of linotype (type-setting press), a rotary press, photo-mechanics, etc. The result will be a body just as valuable as a picture or an aeroplane.<sup>23</sup>

At the time of writing however, Lissitzky's futurist inclinations were hardly legible in his work. Lissitzky had published a color lithographic version of the folk song sung at the Passover Seder in commemoration of the Exodus, "Khad Gadya" ("The Only Kid"), in February 1919, in Kiev, with the Kultur-Lige. He first conceived an illustrated version of "Khad Gadya" in 1917, and his early watercolors owe much to a series of drawings he had made at the Mohilev synagogue, but the version he published two years later testified to the intervening events.<sup>24</sup> By the time he brought his own version of *Khad Gadya* to realization, a shift had occurred in the overall style of

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<sup>22</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Radio Imagination—Words-in-Freedom," in *Futurism, an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2009), 143-151.

<sup>23</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 12 September 1919, trans. Kenneth MacInnes in Irina Karasik, ed., *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia, 1920s-1950s* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2000), 52.

<sup>24</sup> The iconographic differences between the 1917 watercolors and 1919 lithographs have been interpreted by Alan Birnholz as evidence of Lissitzky's messianic view of the Revolution. "El Lissitzky and the Jewish Tradition," *Studio International* vol. 186 no. 959 (October 1973): 131. This view has been bolstered by Haia Friedberg in "El Lissitzky's *Had Gadia*," *Jewish Art* vol. 12-13 (1986-87): 292-303. Birnholz's larger argument—that Lissitzky maintained a dialogue with the Jewish tradition throughout his career—has been justifiably criticized (by Bois, among others). This same pattern of seeking "hidden" Jewish characteristics throughout Lissitzky's career has reappeared more recently in Igor Dukhan, "El Lissitzky—Jewish as Universal: From Jewish Style to Pangeometry." *Ars Judaica* vol. 3 (2007): 53-72.

his illustrations and he chose to wrap the book in a prismatic cubo-futurist dust jacket visibly at odds with its traditional contents (fig. 1.1). Although the dust jacket has been linked to the influence of Malevich or Aleksandra Ekster, it is probably more accurate to see in it the reemergence of a rough-and-ready futurism Lissitzky himself had explored prior to his expedition to Mohilev (fig. 1.2).<sup>25</sup>

Although the exact origin of Lissitzky's correspondence with Malevich is still unknown, it quickly became a key factor in persuading the vanguard painter to join the Vitebsk faculty. In October, Lissitzky journeyed to Moscow to procure supplies for the school, continuing his dialogue with Malevich in person. The two likely discussed Malevich's futurist screeds against *passéist* historicism in architecture in relation to Lissitzky's tectonic focus; they may also have discussed Malevich's volumetric Suprematist canvas of 1915 (a drawing of which he had published that spring) vis-à-vis the remarks on the optical reversibility of depicted volumes in Viktor Shklovsky's latest article, "Space in Painting and Suprematism."<sup>26</sup> All this doubtlessly piqued Lissitzky's interest. Malevich in turn was likely intrigued by Lissitzky's views on the tectonics of the book, for he had a lengthy manuscript ready for publication, but no publisher willing to print it. Whatever the content of their discussions, the encounter was a success. Between October 22, when the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy approved Lissitzky's request for materials, and October 30, when he retrieved them from IZO Narkompros, Malevich

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<sup>25</sup> Ruth Apter-Gabriel, "El Lissitzky's Jewish Works" in Ruth Apter-Gabriel ed., *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912-1928* (The Israel Museum: Jerusalem, 1987), 116.

<sup>26</sup> Malevich's article "Architecture as a Slap in the Face of Ferro-Concrete" was published in *Anarkhiia* no. 37 (6 April 1918) and reprinted in *Iskusstvo Kommuny* no. 1 (7 December 1918); English translation in K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson (George Wittenborn: New York, 1971). His drawing appeared in *Puti tvorchestva* no. 5 (May 1919): 30. Shklovsky's essay, "Space in Painting and Suprematism," appeared in *Iskusstvo* no. 8 (3 September 1919), and is published in an English translation in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (Thames and Hudson: London, 1982), 323-26.

tendered his resignation to the Moscow Free Studios, requesting that his back pay be forwarded to Vitebsk.<sup>27</sup>

The publication of Malevich's text took priority once he and Lissitzky reached Vitebsk. Within a month of their arrival, a printed version of "On the New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed" had been assembled (fig. 1.3). The booklet testifies to the limited material capabilities of the print studio and to Lissitzky's ingenuity in exploiting them: opening the volume's linoleum cut cover reveals eight lithographed sheets of drawings and text in handwritten block letters, with introductory and concluding sections in Malevich's own cursive. Absent a formal title, the cover gives top billing to a slogan, "*Let the overthrow of the old world of art be imprinted on the palms of your hands,*" while the titles of the two texts inside suggest a table of contents.<sup>28</sup> On the back cover, the publisher's information is unceremoniously broken up into a collection of phonemes by a cluster of diagonal Suprematist elements which continue the line of the main essay's subtitle, "Statics and Speed," across the booklet's unfolded spine. There was no surplus of paper in Lissitzky's studio, but this repurposing of the book's cover was likely intentional. The booklet's second title, "Resolution 'A' in Art," suggests as much, for the brief manifesto advocated replacing "aesthetic control" with "technical creativity."<sup>29</sup>

The text itself is treated in a similarly informal manner (fig. 1.4). Preparation for printing required that Malevich's essay be transcribed back-to-front onto the litho-stone manually—a defamiliarization of the written word that resulted in a number of errors, which were then effaced

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<sup>27</sup> Lissitzky's activities in Moscow are documented in RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 54, l. 1. Malevich's letter of resignation is quoted in its entirety in Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 67.

<sup>28</sup> This reading was first suggested by Shatskikh, *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Kazimir Malevich, "Resolution 'A' in Art," English trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus in Troels Anderson, ed., *Essays on Art, 1915-1933* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1971), 118.

to varying degree by the imposition of Suprematist elements. John Bowlt has astutely linked these marginalia to Malevich's interest in Aleksei Kruchenykh's third category of transrational phenomena, the "random [*naobumnoe*], (alogical, the casual, the creative outburst, the mechanical unification of words: slips of the tongue: misprints, lapsus; in part, this accommodates phonic and semantic shifts, national accent, stuttering, lispings, etc.)."<sup>30</sup> But given Malevich's limited role in the preparation of the actual printed text, we may also consider these phenomena as examples of what Lissitzky called "the illustrative nature of the text as such" in his September letter to Malevich.<sup>31</sup> The letter likely refers to Lissitzky's *Khad Gadya*, where he had keyed his illustrations to colored words within the text, binding word and image into an emblematic unity; in "On the New Systems," errata are subsumed under the emphatic function of the text's other marginalia, marking the advent of the discourse, its pauses, stresses and slips.

On the whole, "On the New Systems" effects a disruption of what Gerard Genette has called the book's paratextual apparatus. In focusing almost exclusively on "what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public," Lissitzky's design makes the booklet more akin to a printed manuscript than a traditional book.<sup>32</sup> The overall effect of the booklet is not unlike that of Malevich's *Black Square* in its original appearance as a backdrop for the futurist opera, *Victory over the Sun*: treating the conventional frames of the text as a malleable set of graphic elements in Suprematist space, the informality of Lissitzky's cover jars the reader much as the pure frame of the square must have startled the

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<sup>30</sup> Aleksei Kruchenykh, quoted in John Bowlt, "Kazimir Malevich and the Energy of Language," in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935* (Armand Hammer Museum of Art: Los Angeles, 1990), 183.

<sup>31</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 12 September 1919, in Karasik, ed. *In Malevich's Circle*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

opera-goer accustomed to the proscenium stage's perspectival view.<sup>33</sup> Malevich was pleased with the results. On the inside cover of the proofs Lissitzky gave him to correct, he wrote: "With the publication of this booklet, I salute you, Lazar' Markovich. It will be a trace of my path and the beginning of our collective movement. From you I await the clothes of constructions for those who come after the innovators."<sup>34</sup> The inscription is evidence of an already fruitful intellectual exchange between Malevich and Lissitzky.

Malevich's inscription is interesting in other respects. Although he had discussed the aesthetic adornment of utilitarian forms in "On the New Systems," the phrase "clothes of constructions" is novel. Given Lissitzky's earlier paraphrase of Semper, it is possible that the new phrase emerged from conversations between the two artists which related Semper's theory of tectonics to his *Bekleidungsprinzip*, or principle of dressing. While plainly speculative, this connection is productive. For Semper, dressing governs the division of space in "prearchitectural conditions," from thatched fencing and woven tent walls to clothing and the theatrical pomp of festivals, which would be of little interest to the historian except that "the festival apparatus—the improvised scaffold with all its splendor... is the *motive* for the *permanent* monument."<sup>35</sup> In fact, Malevich's inscription, dated 4 December 1919, coincided with the first day of the second anniversary celebration of the Vitebsk Committee for the Struggle against Unemployment, whose decorative program he and Lissitzky had agreed to design. The occasion also happened to

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<sup>33</sup> Lissitzky compares the form of the book to that of the stage in his 1926 essay, "Our Book." Trans. Helene Aldwinckle in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 359.

<sup>34</sup> "Vykhodom etoi knizhechki privetstvuiu vas, Lazar' Markovich, ona budet sledom moego puti i nachalom nashogo kolektivnogo dvizheniia, zhdu ot vas odezhd sooruzhenii, dlia tekh, kto idet po za novatorami." Object in a private collection in Greece, reproduced in *Malewitsch, Suetin, Tschaschnik* (Galerie Gmurzynska: Cologne, 1992), 120. See also the commentary by Wassili Rakitin in the same volume, 247-50.

<sup>35</sup> Semper, *Style*, 248-49. Emphasis original.

align with the scheduled renovation of the White Barracks in which the committee's offices were housed, placing Suprematism on yet another threshold.<sup>36</sup> Together, Malevich and Lissitzky designed a mural program for the barracks, while Lissitzky produced cover for the committee's brochure that marks one of his earliest forays into volumetric Suprematism. Malevich's allusion to the "collective movement" initiated by the pair is thus more concrete than it initially appears: not only were he and Lissitzky already working collaboratively, their collaboration would sow the seeds of the UNOVIS group.

Documentation of Malevich and Lissitzky's mural program exists in several forms. Along with a photograph of one of the decorated barracks, a hand-colored linocut elevation of the decorative program for all five barrack buildings appeared as an insert in the almanac *UNOVIS No. 1* in summer 1920. A watercolor sketch of one of the panels is preserved in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, along with instructions "to make six such canvases, two double and six the other way round, fourteen in all," dated 11 December 1919 and signed in Hebrew with Lissitzky's initials (fig. 1.5).<sup>37</sup> Though intended to result in a painting, the sketch itself bears a more immediate relation to the rigors of architectural drawing. Neither study nor rendition of a theme, the drawing is instead a precisely organized and scaled division of the

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<sup>36</sup> The plan to renovate the barracks is noted in Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 81. During this period Malevich and Lissitzky also completed decorations for the city's theater. Shatskikh and Peter Nisbet agree that Lissitzky's signboard, "The factory workbenches await you," was also completed for the committee's festivities, while T.J. Clark has proposed dating the board to March-July. The only available evidence in favor of Clark's highly speculative reading of the signboard is the lack of snow in the one remaining photograph of its installation, which is quite at odds with the wintry conditions shown in the photographic documentation of the White Barracks mural program. Of course, it is entirely possible that the board was painted in December and reinstalled for the "Week of the Labor Front" in spring 1920. This allowance does not, however, leave much room for Clark's attribution of a context-specific intention to the genesis of the board. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 336 n. 7; Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 238.

<sup>37</sup> "Sdelat' 6 takikh poloten i 2 dvoinykh, t.e. 1½ ar[shin] x 3 saz[en], i 6 tozhe po obratnogo napravleniia, vsego 14 kholstov. [aleph lamed] 11.12. 19." Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 715, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



plane. Measured out in old Russian cubits, the  $14.5 \times 22.2$  cm drawing accounts for the exact relation of each line, angle and arc on a surface to be executed at the scale of three by one-and-a-half *arshin* (about  $216 \times 108$  cm). As the published elevation of the complete program indicates, the canvases were to be installed on the two flanking barrack buildings above the series of black triangles and red squares punctuating the buildings' first floor. (fig. 1.6)

In its precision, the Stedelijk drawing conforms to the criteria Nelson Goodman has established for allographic, as opposed to autographic arts. Exemplified by the musical score and the architectural plan, allographic arts use notational systems to make the performance of ephemeral and/or collective activities iterative, rather than singular occurrences.<sup>38</sup> Although the extant notation for the project is incomplete, it does provide evidence of Malevich and Lissitzky's planning process. Whatever the strictures governing the completion of each individual component of the mural program, its installation seems to have allowed some improvisation, for there exists some variation between the published elevation and the photographic documentation of the completed project (fig. 1.7). The initial plan conforms to the strict symmetry of the barracks by ordering the opposed panels specified in Lissitzky's instructions around the central axis of each building, but the photographic evidence testifies to a slightly different execution. In the end, twelve panels were used rather than fourteen; and while these were originally intended to mirror the symmetrical façade of the building to which they are affixed, they were ultimately oriented in accordance with the main axis of the central barrack, such that the entire row of canvases responds to a different axis of symmetry than the elements beneath them. This transformation furnishes a counterpoint dividing the rhythm of the flanking

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<sup>38</sup> Nelson Goodman, *The Languages of Art: an Approach to the Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1968), 120-21.

barrack's middle tier of murals from that of its upper and lower ones without separating them from the overall symmetry of the existing structures.

Lissitzky's cover design for the brochure of the Committee for the Struggle against Unemployment, probably his earliest experiment with volumetric Suprematism, represents another approach to architecture (fig. 1.8). While the mural program for the White barracks required a form of drawing that was doubly instrumental—subordinated on the one hand to the symmetries of the existing structure and on the other to the organization of a rigorously ordered task based on it—Lissitzky's cover illustration imagines an array of volumes freed of the Beaux-Arts symmetries of the barracks. But even with this unbounded sense of plasticity, the perspective of the architectural plan remains unified and stable in Lissitzky's lithograph.<sup>39</sup> Only with considerable effort can the viewer tip the red face of the volume abutting the black square's right edge back and away, and the square itself downward, making of the whole a polyhedral volume floating before the picture plane; much more readily does the square serve as the ground of a set of solid volumes arrayed about it. What tension does exist in the forms arises from the tendency of the series of long verticals to reinforce the flatness of the page where they meet the freely arranged text below. The interaction of the text with adjacent forms is livelier still: the thin angled lines meeting the frame at bottom right pick up a similar pattern at bottom center in a clear echo of the year of the committee's founding ('17). This acknowledgment of a social

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<sup>39</sup> Lissitzky undoubtedly learned the technique of isometric projection as a student. As Yve-Alain Bois has discussed, the technique was the accepted form of mechanical drafting during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bois, "Metamorphoses of Axonometry" in *Het Nieuwe Bouwen: Die Nieuwe Beelding in de architectuur* (Delft: Delft University Press, 1983), 146-53. It was the sole method used to illustrate Auguste Choisy's *Histoire de architecture*, a text that Lissitzky probably knew in N.S. Kurdiukora's Russian translation, *Istoriia arkhitektury* (Moscow: Uvarovoi, 1906). Although Reyner Banham has pointed to echoes of Choisy's rationalism in Lissitzky's writings on Proun, Semper's is a more likely source of his general views; however, Choisy's book may have exerted some influence on Lissitzky's interest in axonometry, as it did for Le Corbusier around the same time. Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, second ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 194.

foundation makes the depicted volumes legible not only as plastic thought, but also as a form of inscription laden with cultural and historical significance.

The liminal, prearchitectural tasks of the festivities were not without contradictions for the Suprematist system. Malevich, who described “a pure comprehension of the value of *faktura* as such, without any need for the linear, architectural building of houses” in “On the New Systems,” probably abhorred the calculated strictures of the scaled drawings for the mural program as much as the forthright representation of architectural volumes in Lissitzky’s brochure cover.<sup>40</sup> Still, this formalist view of painting as the direct massing of material deposits made Malevich’s volumetric canvas of 1915 an aberration in his oeuvre, whose publication four years later only begged the question. Insofar as it engaged these traditionally instrumental modes of drawing Suprematism was now entering the horizon of collective activity, but its initial approach to architecture required the subordination of the autonomous value of *faktura* to the repeatable activities of manufacture, if only to gain access to the marginal spaces of existing structures. This was in fact the direction Suprematism was headed. As Aleksandra Shatskikh has pointed out, Malevich’s curriculum in Moscow had broached volumetric Suprematism only within the field of sculpture, while the “Program for a Unified Audience of Painting” drawn up in Vitebsk transferred volumetric Suprematism to the field of architecture and construction; soon, more than half of the Vitebsk students’ studio time would be devoted to instruction in these fields.<sup>41</sup>

By the time the latter program was drawn up, the UNOVIS group had already been founded. Some of the members of Lissitzky and Malevich’s studios who participated in the realization of the anniversary festivities probably also helped transform the group of cubist

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<sup>40</sup> Malevich, “On the New Systems in Art” in *Essays on Art*, 114. Translation modified.

<sup>41</sup> Shatskikh, “Leaders of UNOVIS” in Karasik, ed., *In Malevich’s Circle*, 49. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 137.

apprentices into the Young Followers of the New Art (*Molodye nasledovateli novogo iskusstva*, MOLPOSNOVIS) in mid-January, for within a week their instructors had joined the group as well.<sup>42</sup> The newly minted name of the faction was thereupon shortened to POSNOVIS, although this revised moniker would last less than a month: rankled by the connotations of the label ‘follower’, the school’s apprentices spearheaded a sort of rebranding campaign in early February, from which arose the designation ‘affirmer’ (*utverditeli*) and the new name, UNOVIS. Organizationally, UNOVIS took the political party as its model, seeking to balance military discipline with democratic participation.<sup>43</sup> As Lissitzky put it in a speech delivered that month, entitled, “UNOVIS: The Party in Art,” the group consisted of

those who previously were called ‘artists’, who previously painted ‘pictures’... Now [the ex-artist] is stepping out into life itself and building its forms. He is organizing his ranks, lining up into a party, since it is a mistake to think that the media he masters in the studios serve him in the expression of his ‘freedom’. This is an abstraction produced in interplanetary space, and not on earth.<sup>44</sup>

As a party, UNOVIS sought to be both an occupying force and an institution in its own right, a model for organizing in and a program for changing the school’s operations. The celebratory energy of its founding may have belonged to the apprentices, but UNOVIS’s organizational character remained in the hands of the studio heads, as the disciplinary precedent of the party suggests.

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<sup>42</sup> A chronological account of the group’s formation was published in the UNOVIS almanac in June; Shatskikh provides a more detailed reconstruction in *Vitebsk*, 92-108.

<sup>43</sup> Although the Bolsheviks clearly had some influence on UNOVIS, the precedent for a party formation in art comes from Marinetti, whose “Manifesto of the Italian Futurist Party” dates from early 1918. Rainey et al., *Futurism: An Anthology*, 247-251.

<sup>44</sup> “Te, kto ran’she nazvali “khudozhnikami,” kto ran’she pisal “kartiny”... Teper’ on vykhodit v zhizni sam i stroit eia formy. On organizuet svoi riady, vystraivaetsia v partiiu, ibo oshibko dumat’ chto sredstva kotorymy on ovladel v masterskikh sluzhat emu dlia vyrazheniia svoei ‘svobody’. Eto abstraktsiia proiskhodiashchaia v mezhd planetnom prostranstve, a ne na zemle.” RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 537, ll. 2-3.

The long-term goals of the group are evident in its earliest plans. In four sessions between February 27 and March 2, Malevich, Lissitzky, Ermolaeva and Nina Kogan led a Commission for the formation of a Soviet for the Affirmation of New Forms of Art (*Sovet utverzheniia novykh form iskusstva*). Although the proposed organization failed to materialize, its program indicates precisely which activities were thought to be exemplary replacements for the painting of pictures. Recognizing the “necessity of the immediate introduction into life of new forms of art, as much productive-utilitarian as creative-laboratory,” the group outlined five divisions of activity.<sup>45</sup> The first of these serves as an illuminating counterpoint to the program of Lissitzky’s studios published six months prior in “The New Culture”:

- 1) Organization of the production of projects for new forms of utilitarian constructions and for their requirements and implementation in life. 2) Elaboration of the tasks of the new architecture. 3) Creation of the new ornament (woven, printed, cast and other fabrications). 4) Projects of monumental decoration as material for the adornment of the city on days of national festivals. 5) Projects of decoration and wall-paintings for lodgings, inside and out, and their realization. 6) Creation of furniture and all things of utilitarian application. 7) Creation of a type of contemporary book and other printed achievements.<sup>46</sup>

Although this division functions as a preparation for architecture, the master discipline still appears only as an object of discussion. Like Lissitzky’s earlier studio plan, the book is grouped with other tectonic forms such as furniture and the decorative arts, which are here reconceived as productive-utilitarian conceits. The Commission did acknowledge the serious economic

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<sup>45</sup> “Komissiiia prishla k zakliucheniiu, chto ideia sozdaniia ‘soveta’ vyzvana neobkhdimost’iu nemedlennogo provedeniia v zhizn’ novykh form iskusstva, kak proizvodstvenno-utilitarnogo, tak i tvorcheski-laboratornogo.” *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 48 (verso).

<sup>46</sup> “1) Organizatsiia proizvodstva proektov novykh form utilitarnykh sooruzhenii i potrebnosti i realizatsiia ikh v zhizni. 2) Razrabotka zadanii novoi arkhitektury. 3) Sozdanie novogo ornamenta (tkanogo, nabivnogo, litogo i pr. proizvodstv). 4) Proekty monumental’nykh dekoratsii kak material dlia ukrasheniia goroda v dni narodnykh prazdnestv. 5) Proekty dekoratsii i rospisi pomeshchenii vnutri i snaruzhi i realizatsiia ikh. 6) Sozdanie mebeli i vsekh veshchei utilitarnogo naznachenii. 7) Sozdaniie tipa sovremennoi knigi i drugikh pechatnykh dostizhenii.” *Ibid.*, l. 49.

obstacles to this program, insofar as it noted that “neither today nor tomorrow will the floodgates to the borders be opened, whereupon it is necessary to await the influx of every kind of utilitarian order of objects.”<sup>47</sup> UNOVIS’s prospects were thus extremely limited from the outset.

Despite these dour prospects, in April Lissitzky and his comrades began to gather the documents of the group’s brief existence into an almanac, *UNOVIS No. 1*. Bringing together a body of texts by Malevich, Lissitzky, Kogan and Ermolaeva with evidence of their organizational efforts, performances, and sketches ranging from propaganda posters to speakers rostrums to railroad car designs, the fifty-page compendium represents the most complete document of the young collective’s program. Lissitzky’s cover for the Committee for the Struggle Against Unemployment and the White Barracks murals he designed with Malevich were both included, as was a swatch of fabric adapted from the murals—a design by Malevich printed by his student Ivan Chervinka—representing the project’s potential afterlife in mass production. Yet with its unique illustrations and hand-sewn binding, the compendium’s material form displays the same limitations that prevented UNOVIS from implementing the full breadth of its ideas. Ironically, the decision to substitute typed for manually transferred texts limited the “print run” of the publication to the number of carbon copies the school’s typewriter could penetrate—five.<sup>48</sup>

Lissitzky registered his dissatisfaction with the volume in a comment appended to its penultimate page: a programmatic statement of the full potential of the form, Lissitzky’s judgment is rendered by his title, “Notes not about this book.” Despite their negative verdict, the

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<sup>47</sup> “Komissiiia priniala vo vniianie, chto ne segodnia-zavtra otkroiutsia shliuzy k granitzam, posle chego nuzhno ozhidat’ naplyva vsiakogo roda utilitarnogo poriadka veshchei.” *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 48 (verso).

<sup>48</sup> This explanation is proposed by Shatskikh in *Vitebsk*, 120. But, as she also notes, there was a continuing paper shortage at the time.

“Notes” do describe one function of the book that the almanac could fulfill, if only as a model. Here, the totality of graphic notation, from letters to cartography, music to photography, converges in a single structure:

The book has become the many mouths of the unified human being. The timbre of the voice was broken down for it and implanted in the signs of letters, but after all we also break down the timbre of thought and sensations into graphics curved and straight, schemas and diagrams, notes, colors, constructions of art, photographs and maps... If with the mouth I can sing myself, then with the book I can show myself in many guises. The signs of the book produce in us movement of a new order other than the voice and it must manifest and strengthen this movement.<sup>49</sup>

As a compendium of activity, *UNOVIS No. 1* did serve as a monument of sorts. But the book Lissitzky desired would be smaller and more succinct, not recording activity but generating it.

This book, described in the imperative mood, remained in the future:

Construct the book as a body moving in space and time, as a dynamic relief in which every page is a surface bearing forms and with every turn a new junction and new phase of a single structure. Thus you will create... the new book in a few pages of creative sign-formation as the complete, unified novel-epic of the new image of your essence.<sup>50</sup>

More plausibly than the almanac itself, this passage referred to two of the forthcoming projects listed on the journal’s final page: a collection of Suprematist drawings by Malevich, eventually titled *34 Drawings*, and a project by Lissitzky called “Ex-picture and Supremacy of

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<sup>49</sup> “Kniga stala mnogorotnom edinogo cheloveka. Dlia nee raschlenili tembr golosa i posadili v znaki bukv no ved’ i tembr mysli i chuvstv my tozhe raschlenili v grafiki krivykh i priamikh skhemy i diagram noty kraski postroeniia iskusstva fotografii i karty... Esli rtom ia mogu tol’ko vypet’ sebia to knigoi ia mogu pokazat’ sebia mnogorazno. Znaki knigi proizvodiat u nas dvizhenie novogo poriadka, chem golos i dolzhno eto dvizhenie usilit’ i vyjavnit’.” *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 51.

<sup>50</sup> “Knigu stroite kak telo dvizhushcheesia v prostranstve i vremeni kak dinamicheskii rel’ef, v kotorom kazhdaia stranitsa—poverkhnost’ nesushchaia formy i pri kazhdom povorote novoe peresechenie i novaia faza edinogo stroia. Tak vy sozdaete...novuiu knigu v neskol’ko stranits tvorcheskogo znakoobrazovaniia kak edinyi sovershennyi roman-epopeia novogo obraza vashego sushchestva.” Ibid.

Architecture.”<sup>51</sup> By the time these projects appeared, Lissitzky had relocated to Moscow, and the architectural Suprematism of the “ex-picture” had been renamed Proun.

## II. *Contest of the Faculties*

Any paper that might have been allocated to a larger edition of the UNOVIS almanac was instead devoted to the more pressing task of propagandizing the group itself. In preparation for the All-Russia Conference of Art Teachers and Students, held in Moscow in June, the group printed a single-sheet handbill that urged art educators to “shed your prejudices, throw open the doors of your workshops and let us form a united audience for our common task.” The logic here was simple: the flyers were much less demanding in terms of material and assembly than *UNOVIS No. 1*, and a larger edition of the compendium would mean little if the group’s membership was in decline. Thus, seeking the widest possible audience, the handbill stressed the productive-utilitarian arm of the UNOVIS program:

we call not only upon those responsible for the arts, but also upon our comrades—the smiths, fitters, braziers, concrete pourers, foundry men, carpenters, machinists, aviators, stone cutters, miners, textile workers, tailors, dressmakers and all who make useful things in the world at large, so that under the common flag of UNOVIS we may together dress the earth in clothes of new shape and purpose.<sup>52</sup>

As Aleksandra Shatskikh has shown, the UNOVIS delegation arrived at the conference hopelessly late. Most of the important addresses had already been given: David Shterenberg, head of IZO Narkompros, presented on the department’s goals in art education, Wassily Kandinsky spoke on the recently formed INKhUK, and Osip Brik on the relationship of art and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., l. 52.

<sup>52</sup> The full document is reprinted in an English translation by Alexander Lieven in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 297-99.



communism. Malevich did manage to support the UNOVIS line, urging that “our studios do not need paintings, they need a plan for living organisms,” but he conveyed its obstacles even more succinctly: “give us more paper and we’ll unburden the entire New World.”<sup>53</sup>

Lissitzky was less successful in addressing the conference. During its final session he attempted to describe the “armies of creativity” that would soon replace the armies of labor, but was prevented from taking the floor.<sup>54</sup> Most likely he intended to read from a short paper, “Communism of Labor, Suprematism of Creativity,” that he had included in *UNOVIS No. 1*. In terms reminiscent of Malevich’s still-unpublished tract, “God is not Cast Down,” Lissitzky’s essay sets up a polemical opposition between the “path of creative invention” and the rule of labor, cautioning that “the commune makes labor a right and a duty of all, makes it free. This means that we ourselves become its owner... [and] consume its fruits. But thinking that we control it, will it not take possession of us? Will it not order us about? Will it not consume us and our fruits?”<sup>55</sup> As a consequence, he urges, “we must think deeply about where the sovereign, labor, is leading us since the revolutionary race is not quick.”<sup>56</sup> Opposing any reduction of science and art to modes of labor, Lissitzky affirms the centrality of invention as a practice of the sign conducted at the threshold of understanding: “we still do not see the secrets of the sign creatable by the artist because the quantity of grooves of something other than the brain have still

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<sup>53</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 148-149.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>55</sup> “Kommuna delaet trud pravom i obiazannost’iu vsekh ona delaet ego svobodnym. Eto znachit chto my sami stanovit’sia ego vladel’tsami... potrebliaem ego plody. No dumaia chto my im vladeet ne zavladeet li on nami. Ne raspriaditsia li on nami. Ne upotrebit li nas i plody nashi.” *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 11.

<sup>56</sup> “Nam neobkhodimo gluboko zadumat’sia nad tem kuda nas vedet vladeka—TRUD ibo beg revoliutsii ne skor.” *Ibid.*

insufficiently multiplied in humanity.”<sup>57</sup> While the exact sense of this formulation is obscure, it is clear enough to indicate a leading role for art within broadly defined zone of autonomous creativity at the head of the new Soviet society.

If Lissitzky’s semiotics were set in the future tense, his military metaphors were extremely current. Lev Trotsky’s proposed mobilization of conscripted labor power, viewed by many as a viable plan for rapid post-war reconstruction, seemed to offer the solution to a shortcoming within the education sector: the dearth of skilled workers. Although Narkompros opposed the premature transfer of students from general education to a specialized trade on humanistic grounds, the converging demands of the economy and the technical schools made it possible for Trotsky’s labor commission to successfully lobby for the creation of a quasi-autonomous Chief Committee on Professional Education, Glavprofobr (*Glavnoe upravlenie professional’nogo obrazovaniia*) within Narkompros, and the introduction of students to specialized trade education as early as age fourteen. By the time of the All-Union Conference of Art Teachers and Students, a Glavprofobr proposal had even managed to make “study conscription” an official policy (albeit an unenforceable one).<sup>58</sup> Although at the moment none of these policies directly affected IZO Narkompros, Lissitzky’s audience at the conference would almost certainly have understood the sloganeering of his truncated address as tactical short-term support for early technical specialization, in line with UNOVIS’s long-term strategy to institute a universal avant-garde arts education—perhaps even a compulsory one.

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<sup>57</sup> “[Trud] govorit—znanie i nauka dolzhny byt’ trudovye i iskusstvo khudozhnika dolzhny byt’ trodovye... No my eshche ne vidim tain znaka tvorimogo khudozhnikom potomu chto kolichestvo rytvn chego-to drugogo chem mozh eshche nedostatochno umnozhiilos’ v chelovechestve.” Ibid. I. 11-12.

<sup>58</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissar of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 61-64, 81.

Whatever discussion of UNOVIS's ideas did occur in Moscow likely took place in a more informal setting. Concurrently with the teachers' conference, the group staged an exhibition at the State Free Artistic Studios featuring works of the cubist studio alongside Lissitzky's new experiments in volumetric Suprematist painting.<sup>59</sup> Conference attendees who liked what they read on the UNOVIS flyer could visit the exhibition and, perhaps after engaging an UNOVIS member in conversation, leaf through *UNOVIS No. 1* to get a sense of the group's other projects, while those with more interest could obtain a copy of "On the New Systems." Ivan Gavris, a Vitebsk apprentice represented at the exhibition, had announced the general aims of the group at the conference's meeting of apprentices, encouraging those interested to "keep in constant contact" and to consider the advantages of UNOVIS as a model for their own situations.<sup>60</sup> His solicitation was in keeping with the goals outlined by the Commission for a Vitebsk Arts Council in March, which devoted one of its divisions to organizing at provincial art schools.<sup>61</sup> In using the conference to propagandize its own growth, UNOVIS was only marginally constrained by its tardiness. Some measure of its overall success in this respect can be gauged by the fact that Lissitzky seems to have returned to Vitebsk for no more than a few days during the summer of 1920; instead, he was dispatched to Orenburg directly from Moscow for the majority of August, and then on to Smolensk.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 151. Lissitzky's "Town," now in the collections of the Azerbaijan Museum of Visual Arts, Baku, was purchased at this time by the IZO Narkompros Museum Bureau.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>61</sup> *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 49.

<sup>62</sup> Narkompros approved Lissitzky to travel to Orenburg as a delegate of the Teacher's Conference on 28 June 1920. Once there, Lissitzky and Malevich helped Ivan Kudriashov organize an UNOVIS branch while enjoying a rest-cure in a resort just outside of the town for the whole of August. I.V. Smekalov, *UNOVIS v Orenburge: k istorii khudozhestvennoi zhizni rossiskoi provintsii, 1919-1921* (Orenburg: Orenburg knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2011), 65. Lissitzky's *kommandirovki* are preserved in RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 576, ll. 2-3.

In the fall, Lissitzky and Malevich again returned to Moscow. The teachers' conference had concluded by adopting two measures central to UNOVIS's interests—organizing a unified art school and making contact with artists abroad—and action upon these resolutions came swiftly.<sup>63</sup> Regarding the first objective, Narkompros approved of a plan for the reorganization of the Free Studios as the Higher Artistic-Technical Studios (*Vysshye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie*, VKhUTEMAS) on October 12.<sup>64</sup> As for the second, a draft proposal for an international conference on the topic of element and invention bearing Lissitzky's signature remains in the Nikolai Khardzhiev archive; according to Lissitzky's testimony, this proposal was broadcast internationally via wireless telegraphy after having been submitted to the International Bureau of IZO Narkompros, a body on which Malevich served.<sup>65</sup> While in the capital, Malevich and Lissitzky also gave lectures at the Paul Cézanne club, on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of October, respectively.<sup>66</sup> And although Malevich returned to Vitebsk shortly after his lecture, Lissitzky remained in Moscow: the new structures of VKhUTEMAS would not be officially implemented until late December, but a strong presence in the capital during the reorganization of the studios would certainly have been desirable. Here, UNOVIS could deploy the same tactics that it developed in Vitebsk. Writing to Malevich in December, Lissitzky reported as much

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<sup>63</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 151.

<sup>64</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1981), 112.

<sup>65</sup> Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 714. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. This document was transcribed *in toto* in Lissitzky's lecture on "The New Russian Art" in 1923 (where it's author remained uncredited), with the additional information on its international broadcast. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 337. On Malevich's membership in IZO's International Bureau, see Zhadova, *Malevich*, 56.

<sup>66</sup> Malevich's paper is mentioned by Shatskikh in Karasik, ed., *In Malevich's Circle*, 48. I discuss Lissitzky's paper below.

interest in UNOVIS as trepidation, ultimately ruling that “the printing prospects should be tempting for us, even if IZO is a rotten bouquet.”<sup>67</sup>

In coming months, Lissitzky would outline a strategy for organizing within the new structures of VKhUTEMAS. Although he was invited to join its architecture faculty early in the new year, he judged the influence of the neoclassical architects Shchusev and Zholtovskii too strong to make much headway there; instead, he proposed to Malevich that “those elements which have an attraction for us, both at the painting and the sculpture faculties, in the existing situation and frameworks, can be concentrated together and isolated in a special faculty.”<sup>68</sup> It was probably at this time that Lissitzky conceived of his radical proposal, published in March, to liquidate VKhUTEMAS’s department of architecture in favor of an interdepartmental orientation toward the building trades.<sup>69</sup> His confidence in this project was bolstered by his own developing practice. Uniting painting with architecture, Lissitzky introduced his Project for the Affirmation of the New, Proun for short, for the first time in his October address to the Cézanne club:

I have arrived at the position that easelist reality has become a completion that is not self-sufficient, but a stage of the development of my creative process. And I call this stage—*Proun*. Because those axial and chromatic bases that I realized in the easel-Proun are necessary to further sanction me in the model in actual space, in technical material... In this way, the creative act becomes a process of collective creativity, moving broadly and

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<sup>67</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 21 December 1920. Karasik, ed., *In Malevich’s Circle*, 53.

<sup>68</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 10 January 1921, *ibid.*, 54 (translation modified). Although Lissitzky conceived of Malevich as the head of this faculty, he noted that resistance to his presence at the school was stronger among leftist than traditionalist faculty members.

<sup>69</sup> “Must the art of building obtain its *raison d’être* from the art of architecture? Looked at this way, does not architecture appear to be a parasite on the healthy body of building? Does this architecture need a whole faculty in the State Artistic and Technical Studios?” “Catastrophe of Architecture,” in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 367 (translation modified).

deeply. Since one has stopped at the stage of the easel-Proun, another continues on to models and further.<sup>70</sup>

This first mention of the Proun describes something that was probably still a pedagogical experiment in transforming individual initiative into collective activity in Lissitzky's architectural studio. With the phrase, "one has stopped... another one continues," Lissitzky refers not to objects but to the agents who transform the creative act into "a process of collective creativity," joining the faculties of painting and architecture in an open collaborative unit.

Such proposals could not get far in Moscow's rapidly shifting political landscape. In the winter of 1920, the whole of Narkompros had been swept up in a political battle between the party and the autonomous proletarian cultural organization, Proletkult, founded by the old Bolshevik and sometime rival of Lenin, Aleksandr Bogdanov. In December of 1920, a Central Committee letter "On the Proletkults" written by Zinoviev appeared in *Pravda*, with the intention of clarifying certain "bourgeois tendencies" that had influenced the proletarian members of the cultural organization. The notice cautioned against the influence of "futurists, decadents, supporters of idealist philosophy hostile to Marxism and... mere idlers, renegades from the ranks of bourgeois publicists and philosophers," noting that these elements were not confined to the Proletkult organizations. "The central committee," Zinoviev lamented, "recognizes that up to the present time Narkompros itself, in the artistic sphere, displays these same intellectual trends that have been the corrupting influence in Proletkult," promising that soon the Party would "get rid of

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<sup>70</sup> "Ya prishel k polozeniiu, chto stankovaia realnost' stala ne samodovleiushchei zavershennost'iu, no etapom razvitiia moego tvorcheskogo protsesssa. I ia nazval etot etap—prounom. Potomu chto te osevye i tsvetovlye osnovy, kotorye ia realiziroval v stankovom proune, mne neobkhodimo dal'she razreshat' v deistvitel'nom prostranstve v modeli i materiale tekhnicheskome... Takim obrazom, tvorcheskii akt stanovitsia shiroko i gluboko dvizhushchimsia protsessom kollektivnogo tvorchestva. Ibo to, nad chem odin ostanovilsia v stadii stankovogo prouna, drugoi prodolzhaet v modeli i tak dal'she." Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 716. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

these bourgeois tendencies in Narkompros as well.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, by January Narkompros was slated for a wholesale reorganization, with Glavprofobr serving as one of three proposed executive arms, flanked by “organizational” and “academic” centers—but with no specified department of visual arts. Amid general furor and demands for the reinstatement of an autonomous arts sector, the Party decreed that “art, like science, must be subordinated to the general tasks of the state,” and transferred control of IZO to the Chief Committee of Political Education.<sup>72</sup>

This situation was diametrically opposed to the UNOVIS model Lissitzky proposed at the Teachers’ conference. But whether he was ignorant of the high-level political battles over Narkompros or simply believed UNOVIS to be immune to them, Lissitzky did not regard them as serious obstacles to the group’s organizational goals. Relating the complexities of the developing situation to Malevich early in the new year, Lissitzky is unperturbed:

Although Narkompros is changing the scenes and the ranks are being rearranged, the army remains the same and in the same positions. Lunacharsky enjoys complete confidence, Shterenberg has either already resigned or is resigning. IZO will no longer exist, it is still unclear what will happen. They want utter bureaucrats, with artists confined to some ‘Academic Center’. Perhaps it is for the best. In short, the studios are the centre. And so I am building my plan here... Regarding the International department and IZO in general, there is nothing to report right now, for these establishments are no longer here.<sup>73</sup>

The confidence Lunacharsky enjoyed was evidently well placed, for shortly after the restructuring of Narkompros, the Commissar resurrected the old IZO department under the authority of Glavprofobr. New and old art departments operated in parallel throughout the spring of 1921, and despite the fact that in Lissitzky’s view IZO was “now in the most critical

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Fitzpatrick, *The Commissar of Enlightenment*, 186-87. Proletkult organizations were successfully purged and reinstated of these undesirable elements.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 194.

<sup>73</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 10 January 1921. Karasik, ed., *In Malevich’s Circle*, 54.

situation,” within a few weeks he saw that its incarnation as Glavprofobr sub-department could hold “certain advantages for us.”<sup>74</sup> This assessment proved correct. Even in the absence of its international department, IZO could resume its ongoing business, and soon Lissitzky was approached by Varvara Stepanova to gather works for an exhibition abroad organized by Lunacharsky and Shterenberg. Urging Malevich to send him everything available, especially photographs of UNOVIS’s public projects, Lissitzky reported having reached a preliminary agreement with Shterenberg that would allow him to travel with the exhibition as a cultural ambassador.<sup>75</sup>

### III. *Construction*

With provisional arrangements for travel abroad in place by the end of January, Lissitzky could devote himself to the avant-garde’s more speculative internal debates. UNOVIS’s advantage seemed increasingly tenuous as the group faced artistic challenges as serious as those it was encountering in the institutional and political domain. At the *Nineteenth State Exhibition*, on view when Lissitzky arrived in Moscow, the short-lived *Zhivskul’ptarkh* collective (*Kollektiv zhivopisno-skul’pturno-arkhitekturnogo-sinteza*, Collective of Painterly-sculptural-architectural Synthesis) mounted an exhibition of works by its members, including Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Krinskii, Nikolai Ladovskii and others. More significantly, Vladimir Tatlin travelled from Petrograd to publicly unveil his *Monument to the III International* at the Cézanne club in

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<sup>74</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 22 January 1921, *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* On the exhibition itself, see Peter Nisbet, “Some Facts on the Organizational History of the van Diemen Exhibition” in *The 1<sup>st</sup> Russian Show: A Commemoration of the van Diemen Exhibition, Berlin 1922* (Annely Juda Fine Arts: London, 1983), 67-73.



mid-December.<sup>76</sup> If these events fomented the creation of the Working Group of Constructivists that spring, they were equally crucial to the place of Lissitzky's Prouns within the broader relationship of UNOVIS and Constructivism that Tatiana Goriacheva has aptly characterized as a paradox of "intersecting parallels."<sup>77</sup> For both UNOVIS and the Working Group of Constructivists, reconciling engineering construction with artistic construction, as post-cubist drawing had come to be called, was the most pressing issue of the day, one precipitated by Tatlin's *Monument*.

Lissitzky had every reason to be affected by Tatlin's reappearance. The very terms of his initial pact with Malevich—"you could take the skies, and I the earth"—were, in Nikolai Punin's recollection, originally worked out by Malevich and Tatlin.<sup>78</sup> Incorporating this division into UNOVIS was bound to prove unstable, and Lissitzky's rhetoric could sometimes sound almost anti-Malevich, even while drawing on the latter's insights (as when he denigrated of the freedom of individual artists as "an abstraction produced in interplanetary space, and not on earth").<sup>79</sup> But

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<sup>76</sup> The exact date of Tatlin's presentation at the Cézanne Club is still debated, but most scholars now agree that it took place on 13 or 14 December 1920. See Maria Gough's useful survey of the *Monument's* exhibitions in Moscow, "Model Exhibition," *October* 150 (Fall 2014): 2-26.

<sup>77</sup> Tatiana Goriacheva, "Suprematism and Constructivism: An Intersection of Parallels," in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich* (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), 67-81. Goriacheva's argument is extremely astute, although the term 'parallel' can be misleading, since the non-synchronous development of these groups is equally important.

<sup>78</sup> "As far as I remember they were always dividing the world between them... Usually Tatlin would assign himself the earth and would try to shove Malevich off into the heavens because of his non-objectivity. Malevich, who did not reject the planets, would not surrender the earth since he considered it, justifiably, to be also a planet and [one that] could also be non-objective." Quoted in Norbert Lynton, *Tatlin's Tower* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 47. Malevich quotes this same agreement back to Lissitzky in his letter of 17 June 1924: "You left the country, and that's ok, but where's your connection [with UNOVIS]? There is none... 'You could take the sky, and I the earth'. I don't recall, but I think the sky belonged to me and the earth to you and you know what happened to us: the earth disappeared and the 'sky' stayed behind." The letter is reprinted in the original Russian in *Experiment/Eksperiment* vol. 5 (1999): 152-154, and translated in *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2002), 248.

<sup>79</sup> See note 45, supra.

this tension was part of the group’s inner alchemy: Lissitzky’s second article for the UNOVIS almanac, “Suprematism of World Construction,” recognized Tatlin’s counter-reliefs as both an achievement and a hazard that only an architectural Suprematism could overcome; and Malevich’s introduction to *34 Drawings* made it known that “at the present time, Suprematism is growing, as a new architectural construction... in a link with the earth.”<sup>80</sup> Notably, Malevich intended that this essay, penned just after Tatlin’s December presentation, would be written by Lissitzky. But Lissitzky resisted Malevich’s repeated requests for an introduction, not least because, he admitted, he was busy working out “a few introductory words for the Prouns I’m publishing.”<sup>81</sup> Lissitzky had planned a publication of some kind even before Malevich’s *34 Drawings*, but Tatlin’s appearance intensified his theoretical efforts that winter: in a suite of new writings, he now sought to move beyond the previous generation’s cosmological language, developing a more rigorous theoretical and technical vocabulary. In the next few months, he wrote a short statement, “Not Worldvision—but Worldreality,” a longer essay entitled “Proun” that he delivered in a slightly modified version at INKhUK in September with the subtitle “Toward the Overthrow of Art,” and a substantial pamphlet sharing the same title as the latter.<sup>82</sup>

We now know that Lissitzky intended “Not Worldvision—but Worldreality” to serve as the “few introductory words” to the portfolio of eleven lithographs printed that winter, entitled

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<sup>80</sup> Malevich, “Suprematism. 34 Drawings,” in *Essays on Art*, 126.

<sup>81</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 10 January 1921. In Karasik, ed., *In Malevich’s Circle*, 54.

<sup>82</sup> “Ne mirovidenie—no miroreal’nost’,” typescript in RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 25, ll. 13-14; “Proun,” typescript with artist’s notations in RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 541, ll. 1-14; “Preodolenie iskusstva” manuscript in the Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 718. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. The latter has been published in *Ekspieriment/Experiment* vol. 5 (1999): 138-150, and excerpted in an English translation in *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Palace Editions: Moscow, 2002), 244-46. John Bowl’s translation of Lissitzky’s INKhUK lecture, “Proun: Toward the Defeat of Art,” made from a lost typescript, appeared in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), 59-72.

simply *Prouns*, that he mentioned to Malevich in early January. The unique version of the portfolio recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art is accompanied by a hand-drawn artist's colophon on a double-sized sheet, folded once vertically, inside of which the essay has been manually transcribed in its entirety in Russian and in an incomplete German translation (figs. 1.9-1.10).<sup>83</sup> The lithographs themselves, adapted from paintings and watercolors completed the previous year, are printed on near-uniform paper, whose slight variations in size (all hover around 44 × 33 cm, though no two share identical dimensions) are disguised by the original works' much wider range of formats—themselves preserved as frames marked out by a single pass of the litho-crayon. In addition to his attempts to secure paper of a standard size, Lissitzky's introduction of serial titling into the portfolio imparts an integral wholeness to the works, which are labeled like compounds of a single substance: *PI* is followed by *PI<sup>a</sup>* through *PI<sup>e</sup>* (although *PI<sup>b</sup>* is notably absent); then by *P2<sup>b</sup>* through *P2<sup>d</sup>*; and *P3<sup>a</sup>*, *P5<sup>a</sup>*, and *P6<sup>b</sup>*, each in isolation from any other members of the set they suggest. This new method of titling evokes nothing more than Lissitzky's call, in *UNOVIS No. 1*, for a few pages of sign formation "in which every page is a surface bearing forms and with every turn a new junction and new phase of a single structure."<sup>84</sup>

In this light, the *Prouns* portfolio appears alongside *34 Drawings* as a "creative-laboratory" counterpart to the more broadly utilitarian almanac, *UNOVIS No. 1*. Not only did the term Proun displace what was probably a provisional designation for the same collection, "Ex-Picture and Supremacy of Architecture," it also obviated an existing set of predominantly

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<sup>83</sup> A similar portfolio with a Russian colophon is in the Costakis collection, though it lacks the accompanying essay. Complete editions of the portfolio without covers are also held by the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. In light of the fact that Lissitzky had plans to travel abroad almost a year before he departed for Germany, we cannot base a chronology of production on the language of the cover sheet; it is entirely possible that both the Russian and bilingual versions of the portfolio were prepared simultaneously for different audiences.

<sup>84</sup> See note 52, *supra*.

architectural titles, as Peter Nisbet has demonstrated.<sup>85</sup> It should be noted, however, that this shift in presentation is presaged by Shklovsky's conclusion, published just before Lissitzky began to paint volumetric canvases, that "the Suprematists did for art what chemistry has done for medicine: they isolated the active factor in the remedies."<sup>86</sup> In their new setting, the Prouns are presented as elements of an almost chemical nature, with the discontinuities in their serial titling pointing to the existence of as-yet-undiscovered forms within a general periodic structure. In this sense, building on Shklovsky's insight, they presage the biomedical terms of Malevich's laboratory research at the Petrograd GINKhUK following the 1922 closure of the Vitebsk School.<sup>87</sup> They are, in Shklovsky's sense, remedies of a sort. But for what ailment?

The print that functions as the entry point in the portfolio's serial logic, *PI*, reveals something of Lissitzky's diagnosis (fig. 1.11). *PI* is titled on all four sides of its frame, an unusual gesture that invites the viewer to lay the image flat and circle round it, or to rotate the sheet itself. Lissitzky had previously published another, smaller print of this composition in *UNOVIS No. 1*, captioning it with instructions on three sides in place of a title: "It is necessary to

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<sup>85</sup> Peter Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of his Work and Thought* (PhD Diss.: Yale University, 1995), 90-94. By linking the portfolio to Lissitzky's planned publications and theoretical statements in *UNOVIS No. 1*, however, I disagree with Nisbet's claim that Lissitzky viewed the portfolio primarily as a means of self-promotion in Moscow.

<sup>86</sup> Translated in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 326. If Lissitzky hadn't read Shklovsky's essay upon its publication, he had surely read it by the time he retitled his works. He makes the same point explicitly in 1923, writing that "the Proun creator... forms *plastic elements*, which exist just like the elements of nature, such as H (hydrogen) and O (oxygen), and S (sulphur). He amalgamates these elements and obtains acids which bite into everything they touch, that is to say, they have an effect on all spheres of life. Perhaps this is a piece of laboratory work..." Trans. Nisbet in his "Introduction to Lissitzky" in *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 1987), 20.

<sup>87</sup> On this aspect of Malevich's career, see Pamela Kichurin, "Malevich as Soviet Bureaucrat: GINKhUK and the Survival of the Avant-Garde, 1923-26" in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 121-38. See also Maria Kokkori and Alexander Bouras, "Charting Modernism: Malevich's Research Tables," in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 164-69.

turn it and yourself around its axes like a planet in order to fully grasp it.”<sup>88</sup> And while the *Prouns* portfolio also positions this rotational movement as fundamental to the Proun, it does so in terms significantly differentiated from Malevich’s ‘planetary’ idiom. “Turning the Proun,” Lissitzky writes in “Not Worldvision—but Worldreality,”

we screw ourselves into space. Hitherto space has been projected onto the plane with the conventions of plans—through the Proun we move from the plane of the plan to unconditional dimensions. ...Having now set ourselves on this scaffolding, we must commence its marking. Void, chaos, anti-nature become space, i.e. order, definition, nature, when we set up the marks of a definite structure in it: co- and interrelationships. The system and scale of a marked multiplicity give space a definite tension. Changing the marked multiplicity, we change the tension of a space cultivated from one and the same void.<sup>89</sup>

Instead of an interplanetary journey, Lissitzky now narrates a passage from chaos to order that repeats the crucial features of his 1919 definition of tectonics. Embracing the “unconditional dimensions” of Suprematist space allows him to jettison any expectation of a buildable structure represented in accordance with the conventional architectural plan. Instead, the phenomenal rotation generated by the horizonless Proun recommences from first principles: the primal “marking” of spatial articulation that preexists structure.

A photograph of Lissitzky in his Vitebsk studio with the future Prouns hanging behind him suggests how the rotation emblemized by *PI* might have taken on significance for the artist (fig. 1.12). Appearing just over Lissitzky’s right shoulder, the now lost painting hangs on a

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<sup>88</sup> “On dolzhen povernut’ ee i sebia vokrug eia osi kak planetu chtoby ee vse postignut’.” *UNOVIS No. 1*, GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 13 (verso). This print is likely the basis of the lithograph in the Costakis collection featuring four impressions from the same matrix, one on each axis.

<sup>89</sup> “Vrashchaia proun, my vvinchivaem sebia v prostranstvo. Do sikh por prostranstvo proetsirovalos’ na ploskost’ uslovnost’iu planov—cherez proun my dvizhemsia iz ploskosti plana k bezuslovnosti protiazhennosti. ...Teper’ stav v prostranstve na etikh lesakh, my dolzhny nachat’ ego metu. Pustota, khaos, protivoprirodnost’ stanovitsia prostranstvom t.e. poriadkom, opredelennost’iu, prirodoi, kogda my ustanavlivaem v nem mety opredelennago stroeniia: so- i vzaimootnosheniia. Stroi i masstab otmetochnogo mnozhestva daet prostranstfu opredelennuiu napriazhennost’. Meniaia otmetochnoe mnozhestvo my meniaem napriazhennost’ prostranstva obrazovannago iz odnoi i toi –zhe pustoty.” RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 25, l. 13.

vertical axis with its forms clustered near its upper edge; flanking *PI* are two other lost paintings, *Bridge 1* at right and *Suprematism of the City* directly above.<sup>90</sup> Intentional or not, this array emphasizes the family resemblance of the three paintings, each marked by the emergence of a long volumetric element from a central cluster of volumes, as they unfurl along the circular route that Lissitzky assigned to *PI*. Indeed, when the adjacent pictures make their way into the *Prouns* portfolio, *Bridge 1* and *Suprematism of the City* are retitled *PI<sup>a</sup>* and *PI<sup>d</sup>*, respectively, as if to transmute them into the progressive phases of a single transformation. Together with the relationship suggested by their new titles, the more commonplace nature of the prints—secondary reproductions existing in multiple and therefore more apt to be manipulated, turned, and inspected from various angles—encourages such comparative analysis of each stage of *PI*'s rotation against the other elements of the series, and the series as a whole against others in the set. The form of the portfolio is especially conducive to this analytic attitude: unlike the bound pages of *34 Drawings*, its loose sheets lend themselves to rotation, reshuffling and possibly even the supplementation suggested by their discontinuous titling.

Still, the most immediately striking feature of the portfolio is its exclusion of all the “earthly” and utilitarian elements that would be expected of a publication by UNOVIS’s chief architectural ideologue. Even the attenuated architectural reference of its first series disappears from the series *P2* through *P6*. In this respect, Tatlin’s tower provided the crucial counter-example. Lissitzky had been in the audience at Tatlin’s December presentation and was by his own account the first discussant to criticize Tatlin’s claims to innovation. Shortly after the event, Lissitzky recounts how he objected that the tower’s construction was “aesthetic and artistic, and

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<sup>90</sup> The title *Bridge 1* appears on a watercolor version of the painting in the the Tret’iakov Gallery, while *Suprematism of the City* is given in *UNOVIS No. 1*. No original title for *PI* is recorded. See Peter Nisbet’s discussion of the early titles in *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 90-94.

not creative” since, contrary to Naum Gabo’s opinion, even when “dismantled... the model can stand without the spiral”.<sup>91</sup> Behind this surprising conclusion lay the project of a Smolensk speakers rostrum designed by Lissitzky’s student Ilya Chashnik, in which the diagonal stands precariously but dramatically unaided (figs. 1.13-1.14). A doubly tectonic structure insofar as it is both kinetic and shorn of compositional formalities, the rostrum offers a programmatic statement of Lissitzky’s Vitebsk architectural studio. In his article for *UNOVIS No. 1*, “Suprematism of World Construction,” published the previous spring, Lissitzky had called the diagonal the most significant expression of the age, a prescient claim that served as the impetus for the rostrum and diagnosed Tatlin’s design for the *Monument*, published that fall in a pamphlet by Nikolai Punin (fig. 1.15).<sup>92</sup> Far more iconoclastic than the lumbering behemoth of Tatlin’s *Monument*, Chashnik’s rostrum makes the absence of a similar project from the *Prouns* portfolio all the more keenly felt. Yet each contributes to UNOVIS’s drive to “isolate the active factor in the remedies,” for if the diagonal of the rostrum predicts the functional core of Tatlin’s

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<sup>91</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 21 December 1920, in Karasik, ed., *In Malevich’s Circle*, 53. Peter Nisbet adduced the basics of this interaction from circumstantial evidence before Lissitzky’s Moscow correspondence resurfaced; see his “Lissitzky’s Tatlin” in Jürgen Harten, ed. *Vladimir Tatlin: Leben, Werk, Wirkung. Ein internationales Symposium* (Cologne: Dumont, 1993), 196-203. Naum Gabo protested that the tower could never be built, as discussed by Christina Lodder, “Tatlin und Naum Gabo,” in *ibid.*, 231-41.

<sup>92</sup> While Tatlin’s drawings for the *Monument* were certainly completed before Chashnik’s rostrum, we have no precise timeline for their reception, and the available evidence suggests that the projects were completed in isolation. Tatlin’s drawings were published for the first time in Nikolai Punin’s *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala. Proekt khud. V.E. Tatlina* (Izd. Otdela izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv N.K.P.: St. Petersburg, 1920). Punin’s introduction, dated July 1920, was probably written at the end of the month, after his July 17 visit to Tatlin’s studio (see the diary entry for this date in *The Diaries of Nikolai Punin, 1904-1953*, ed. Sidney Monas and Jennifer Greene Krupala, trans. Jennifer Greene Krupala [University of Texas Press: Austin, 1999], 67). Although this suggests a late summer/early fall publication, it is more likely that the book appeared in winter 1920 in conjunction with the tower’s exhibition in Moscow, since it is only at the end of February that the pamphlet is mentioned for the first time in the central bibliographic organ, *Knizhnaia letopis’* no. 5 (1 March 1921): 18. Chashnik’s rostrum design was completed in Smolensk in summer/fall 1920. Certainly there was no tower to speak of when Lissitzky wrote “Suprematism of World Construction” in spring 1920; there he mentions only the counter-relief. Neither Lissitzky nor Chashnik probably saw the drawings until December, when they encountered the model itself.

*Monument*, *PI*'s rotation offers a prescient analysis of its rotation in purely phenomenological terms.

In its incomplete state, the *Prouns* portfolio is perhaps more akin to Aleksandr Rodchenko's unpublished pamphlet on his "Linearist" phase, which was intended to contain the artist's essay "The Line" along with illustrations of a number of the works of 1919-1920 on view at the *Nineteenth State Exhibition* (fig. 1.16). Headed by a programmatic painting of a single diagonal (now unfortunately lost) whose status is not unlike that of *PI*, Rodchenko's "Linearism" brings together frankly experimental works with designs that could conceivably be built. In a certain sense, considering Rodchenko's diagonal alongside those of Tatlin and Chashnik affords us a concise topography of the positions available within the avant-garde in autumn 1920. While the diagonal spine of Tatlin's tower surrenders the purely formal dynamism of Rodchenko's iconic canvas to the visual and structural stabilizations of its tapered spiral form, the same energy survives in the speaker's rostrum. Moreover, Rodchenko's austere formal dynamism is functionalized by the rostrum, insofar as it incorporates a mechanism designed to lift and suspend the speaker above the audience as a whole, rather than creating a hierarchy of proximity and distance within it.<sup>93</sup> The possibility of assigning a novel use to the purely formal dynamism of a gesture like Rodchenko's diagonal lies behind Lissitzky's position, expressed in his criticism that the *Monument*'s "synthesis with utilitarianism is childish fuzzy thinking" (*detskaia neprodumannost'*).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> This interpretation of the rostrum's relation to the mass comes from Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 83.

<sup>94</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 21 December 1920. Karasik, ed., *In Malevich's Circle*, 53. Translation modified.



Like Rodchenko's "Linearism," Lissitzky's *Prouns* portfolio faces the prospect of construction from within the domain of free experimentation bounded by the canvas. In "Suprematism of World Construction," Lissitzky had declared that "creativity lies beyond the boundaries of the useful and the useless," contradicting *avant la lettre* Tatlin's strategy of "combining" aesthetic and utilitarian elements in his *Monument*.<sup>95</sup> Yet, in an unpublished review of the *Zhivskul'ptarkh* section of the *Nineteenth State Exhibition*, Lissitzky recognized a similar problem in the architectural efforts by members of Rodchenko's group, noting that "what we see in the [cubist] deformation of the architects is romanticism, i.e., regression... There is no 'synthesis,' even on this plane of the unified discipline."<sup>96</sup> The circumspect attitude toward applying the accomplishments of painting into other fields concealed in this jab at the *Zhivskul'ptarkh* program reveals the same skepticism towards the potential of contemporary architecture that informed Lissitzky's early advocacy of the book. Guarding against such premature attempts at synthesis, it is the process of functionalization that Lissitzky wants to localize in the "creative-laboratory" research of the *Prouns* portfolio.

Rather than presenting concrete proposals that could be judged useful or useless, Lissitzky's portfolio offers a discourse on utility and autonomy that attempts to frame a space 'beyond' the problematic. Here Lissitzky's text broaches a matter not present within the works themselves. While space in the *Prouns* is produced by introducing marks into a void, "Not Worldvision—but Worldreality" links this primary rhythmic articulation to the circulation of

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<sup>95</sup> Lissitzky, "Suprematism of World Construction" in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 329 (translation modified). Tatlin's presentation was probably similar to the short article he published a few weeks later, which proclaimed that materials like iron and glass had made it "possible to combine purely artistic forms with utilitarian goals." "The Work Ahead of Us," in Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, ed. *Tatlin* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 239.

<sup>96</sup> "To chto my videm v deformatsii arkhitektorov eto romantizm, t.e. regres... 'Sinteza' net dazhe v etoi ploskosti edinoi distsipliny." RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 539, ll. 1-2.

bodies and their resistances: “Material form moves in space along definite axes: along the diagonal or spiral of the staircase, along the vertical of the elevator shaft, along horizontal rails, along the straight lines and curves of an aeroplane; for this it is shaped into a definite order—this is construction.”<sup>97</sup> Lissitzky’s word for this second articulation of space is *konstruktsiia*, the subject of debate at the time. Malevich had used *konstruktsiia* to refer to cubist drawing in “On the New Systems,” and Lissitzky’s attempt to reconcile such artistic construction with the regular movements and structures of the built environment emerged organically from his role as UNOVIS’s resident architect: indeed, Chashnik, Lissitzky’s replacement as head of the Vitebsk architecture studios, would soon graduate from the school with the title of “artist-constructivist” (*khudozhnik-konstruktivist*) alongside several of his colleagues.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, from the very first days of 1921, the INKhUK’s Working Group of Objective Analysis, which included several former members of the recently disbanded *Zhivskul’ptarkh* collective, was attempting to distinguish between artistic and technical criteria of *konstruktsiia*. While Rodchenko viewed the distinction as immaterial, others disagreed, and it continued to haunt the Working Group of Constructivists he and six other members of the group formed in mid-March.<sup>99</sup> For his part, Lissitzky followed Malevich in granting artistic construction the leading role, maintaining that

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<sup>97</sup> “Material’naia forma dvizhetsia v postranstve po opredelennym osiam: po diagonal’i ili po spirali lestnitsy, po verticali kanala lifta, po gorizontali rel’s, po priamym i krivym aeroplana, dlia etogo ona skladyvaetsia v opredelennyi poriadok—eto konstruktsiia.” RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 539, l. 14.

<sup>98</sup> The Vitebsk school produced seven “artist-constructivists” in all. For a comprehensive list of the school’s students and their degrees, see Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 318-323; *khudozhnik-konstruktivist* is given in the Russian version of Shatskikh’s book, *Vitebsk: zhizn’ iskusstva, 1917-1922* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul’tury, 2001), 246-249.

<sup>99</sup> Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 39-41.

“the construction of Suprematism moves along the lines and curves of the aeroplane, it is ahead in the new space that we are building in.”<sup>100</sup>

According to this logic, the Prouns are not *useless*, but *not-yet-useful*. Although he criticized Tatlin’s approach to the integration of utilitarian elements in an aesthetic construction, Lissitzky neither objected to the useful as such, nor sought to undo the distinction between useful and useless. Rather, in framing “the question about purposefulness [*tselesoobraznosti*],” in “Not Worldvision—but Worldreality,” Lissitzky inserts autonomy and utility into an ontology of becoming. For Lissitzky, “creativity creates a fact and it becomes an objective [*tsel’*],” while “from the objective follows utility—the allocation of the depth of quality to the breadth of quantity. Utility is justified when it multiplies the ultimate purposefulness of the order of the day.”<sup>101</sup> The sequence of creation, purpose, utility that Lissitzky outlines here would maintain a zone of autonomous experimentation as the source of “quality” innovations subsequently adapted for production in larger quantities. Some of Lissitzky’s terms are Kantian, and his subordination of individual purposes to purposefulness as such is consistent with Kant’s foundational defense of autonomous art as purposefulness without purpose, but these terms are set within a vitalist evolutionary framework that merges purposiveness with creativity.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> “Konstruksiia suprematizma dvizhetsia po priamym i krivym aero, ona vpered i v novom prostranstve my stroim v nem.” RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 539, l. 14.

<sup>101</sup> “Zdes’ stanet vopros o tselesoobraznosti... Tvorchestvo sozdaet fakt i on stanovitsia tsel’iu... Iz tseli sleduet utilitarnost’—rasverstka glubiny kachestva v shirinu kolichestva. Ona opravdana kogda umnozhaet poslednuiu stoiashchuiu v poriadke dnia tselosoobraznost’.” RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 25, l. 14.

<sup>102</sup> Not only did Lissitzky use the terms *Zweck* and *Zweckmässigkeit* in his own German translations of this essay, *tselesoobraznost’* is also the accepted Russian translation of the latter, both today and in the Russian edition of Kant’s third critique current in the 1920s, *Kritika sposobnosti suzheniia*, trans. N.M. Sokolov (St. Petersburg: Izd. Popova, 1898). Although this term is often translated as “expediency,” the technocratic ring of this word tends to obscure its place in long-standing debates over the concept of autonomy. Charlotte Douglas pointed out the close relationship between Malevich’s concept of intuition and Henri Bergson’s in her “Suprematism: The Sensible Dimension,” *The Russian Review* vol. 34 no. 3 (July 1975): 266-281. Although it would not be surprising if

It is this position that ultimately divided UNOVIS and the Working Group of Constructivists, despite their common task of reconciling an avant-garde culture of painting with the construction of a new built environment.<sup>103</sup> Given their shared goal, the consequences of this difference in ideology manifested themselves more clearly in failure than in success. Within the Working Group of Constructivists, the example of Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg is most instructive. In accordance with the constructivists' desire to merge artistic with engineering construction, the Stenberg brothers enrolled in engineering schools to learn the rigors of contemporary bridge design. As a result of their efforts, however, their sculptures were criticized by their fellows as mere representations of engineering structures.<sup>104</sup> By contrast, Lissitzky's Prouns are calculated to eliminate precisely this possibility: in a pamphlet written that spring, Lissitzky reports that the term itself was adopted "in order to be dissociated from the picture, on the one hand, and the engineer's sketch, on the other."<sup>105</sup> And yet, at the very moment the Stenbergs were enrolled in engineering courses, Lissitzky was teaching one. Rather than join the architecture faculty at VKhUTEMAS, Lissitzky opted to teach "a course on drawing for engineers and electricians," in part because, he told Malevich, "This public will, in time, be very useful to us."<sup>106</sup> If the Stenbergs' constructions appeared as an abstract artist's imitation of an

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Lissitzky had read Bergson independently, his application of something like the French vitalist's ideas is almost certainly second hand.

<sup>103</sup> Tatiana Goriacheva notes the importance of this factor in "Suprematism and Constructivism: An Intersection of Parallels," Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 70.

<sup>104</sup> Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 98. This criticism came from Karl Ioganson.

<sup>105</sup> "Chtoby otmezhevat'sia ot kartiny, s odnoi storony, i ot inzhenernogo chertezha, s drugoi, my i dali nashemu proizvozhdeniiu novoe imia—PROUN." El Lissitzky, "Preodolenie iskusstva," *Experiment/Eksperiment* vol. 5 (1999): 146.

<sup>106</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich, 22 January 1921. Karasik, ed., *In Malevich's Circle*, 55. I have not located any documentation of where Lissitzky taught this course.

engineer, Lissitzky's Prouns often resemble an engineer's fantasy of abstraction. In neither case is this accidental.

Another of Lissitzky's earliest abstract paintings, *PI<sup>c</sup>*, which hangs just to the right of *PI* in the photograph of Lissitzky's Vitebsk studio, demonstrates the engineering fantasy aspect of the Proun project. The painting, which is now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, is executed on a panel in grisaille, save for a single spot of deep blue (fig. 1.17). Its two clusters of axonometrically projected volumes—one hovering just above the picture's center, the other hugging its bottom edge—suggest a horizon just beneath the frame, although none is present in the image itself. The cropping of these low-slung forms tends to push them into the distance as the much larger forms above, built up on the flat black rectangle beneath them, loom forward illusionistically in low-relief (although the absence of a horizon makes deciding between the view from above and the view from below difficult). The painting's original title, *House above the Earth*, makes these spatial dynamics quite concrete.<sup>107</sup> Although the forms themselves are resolutely abstract, a comment in Lissitzky's unpublished Proun pamphlet, considered alongside the painting's original title, reveals his way of thinking when it was painted: noting how cities have become progressively detached from place, Lissitzky cites the airplane and the Zeppelin as structures “unmoored from the foundations of the house.”<sup>108</sup> And while the painting clearly does not represent either of these, Lissitzky does seem to have imagined his cluster of volumes as an analogous, as of yet unspecified, mobile tectonic structure.

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<sup>107</sup> This title appears on a watercolor version in the Tret'iakov Gallery, as Peter Nisbet noted in *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 69.

<sup>108</sup> “Razve Zeppelin, i novye ogromnye aeroplany—ne sniavshiesia s fundamentov doma?” “Preodolenie iskusstva,” *Experiment/Eksperiment* vol. 5 (1999): 148. These comments are in line with previous remarks by Malevich and Velimir Khlebnikov. On this aspect of Malevich's thought, see Maria Gough, “Architecture as Such” in *Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 158-62.

Very little of this content remains legible under the picture's Proun title, but the painting is incontrovertibly a picture *of* something. Partly a vestigial trace of representation within a pure modernist framework, this concession to the mimetic form of the picture has the frankly pragmatic goal of making engineers imagine their own pursuit differently: autonomously. In fact, what is most abstract in *PI<sup>c</sup>* is not its buildable volumes, but the apparent overture to the “engineer’s sketch” in the quasi-diagrammatic linear marks along its vertical margins, which seem to suspend those volumes between the opposing poles of a circuit.

The audience for whom such a representation could become useful would be a long time coming. In March, the command economy of Civil War was gradually phased out in favor of the limited free market measures of the New Economic Policy. Lissitzky's paper, “Toward the Overthrow of Art,” written that spring and delivered as a lecture at INKhUK just before his departure from Moscow in the fall, grudgingly acknowledges these reforms by appending a few words to his critique of the avant-garde's modish utilitarianism. Utility, Lissitzky reiterates,

is justified when it multiplies the ultimate purposefulness of the order of the day. But here it clashes with socioeconomic impediments. Thus, to produce earthen vases today, when we have stamped aluminum, is not utilitarian, but the socioeconomic situation still cannot overcome the earthen purposefulness of vases.<sup>109</sup>

Something of this contradiction is encoded in *PI<sup>c</sup>*—a painting of a modular flying house that entered production only as a print (fig. 1.18). Whatever mimetic lure the Proun's floating volumes might exercise in the iconographic imaginary of some future engineer, it proceeds through this lithographic reproduction and the everyday act of manual copying that produced it.

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<sup>109</sup> “[Utilitarnost’] opravdane kogda umnozhaet posledniuiu stoiashchuiu v poriadke dnia tselesoobraznost’. No zdes’ ona stalkivaetsia s sotsial’no-ekonomicheskimi prepiatstviiami. Tak proizvodit’ segodia gliniane gorlochi, kogda my imeem shtampovannyi alliumii ne utilitarno, no sotsia’lno-ekonomicheskoi sostoianie ne mozhet eshche preodolet’ glinianuiu tselesoobraznost’ gorlochei.” RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 542, l. 12. The NEP reference was first proposed by Peter Nisbet in reference to the lecture's closing words, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 112.

These conditions are acknowledged in *PI<sup>c</sup>*: in transferring the image to the stone for printing, Lissitzky ignored the inherent reversal of the printing process, copying the model onto the matrix exactly. As a result, the version of *PI<sup>c</sup>* included in the *Prouns* portfolio is reversed left-to-right, even though its title is transferred correctly. Peter Nisbet has posed the question of whether such “real reversibility” represents “an anomalous experiment or an extreme case that, in its very exceptionality, casts light on an otherwise submerged aspect of the work.”<sup>110</sup> Whether Nisbet’s question is answered in the affirmative or not, we can perhaps find in this phenomenon of reversibility Lissitzky’s acknowledgement of print’s central role in maintaining his dream of a new architecture.

Although the dominant note in Lissitzky’s remarks from the spring of 1921 is disappointment at the prospect that state-sponsored innovations in construction would slow, with time his verdict changed. In 1924, looking back on his activities in Vitebsk and Moscow from the distance of several thousand miles, the grimly pragmatic tone of compromise evident in “Toward the Overthrow of Art” has given way to a more generous interpretation of events in the light of an earlier precedent. At work on his signal architectural achievement, the horizontal skyscraper he called the *Wolkenbügel* (itself an extraordinarily improbable structure), the work of his year in Moscow now appears to Lissitzky as an entry in the tradition of paper architecture emblemized by the works of Claude Nicolas Ledoux and Étienne Louis Boullée. “The energies released after the French revolution,” Lissitzky concludes, “also tried to crystalize in

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<sup>110</sup> Peter Nisbet, “El Lissitzky in 1921: Real Reversibility?” in Craigen Bowen, Susan Dackerman and Elizabeth Mansfield, eds., *Dear Print Fan: A Festschrift for Marjorie Cohn*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), 224. Nisbet’s question is directed at another print in the portfolio, *P5<sup>a</sup>*, which has the opposite configuration: a title printed backwards despite the correct transference of the image’s original orientation. Nisbet compares the reversed title of *P5<sup>a</sup>* to a watercolor version in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection whose composition is also reversed left-to-right. The existence of a reversed composition for both *PI<sup>c</sup>* and *P5<sup>a</sup>* in different media does, I think, suggest that Lissitzky’s experimentation with the reversal of the image is intentional.

architecture. Most ideas then, as in Russia now, remained on paper, which is why they are known as ‘problems’.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> “SSSR’s Architektur,” *Das Kunstblatt* vol. 2 (Feb. 1925): 53. Trans. Helene Aldwinckle as “Architecture in the USSR” in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 369.



## Chapter 2 | The International Set: Germany, 1922-1924

*Private property alienates not only the individuality of men, but also of things.*

— Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels<sup>1</sup>

*Are not the products of art frequently the instruments of subjugation? It is necessary to struggle for the liberation of objects—only the object that is oppressed oppresses mankind.*

— El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg<sup>2</sup>

If Moscow had offered Lissitzky promising conditions for printing UNOVIS materials, Berlin must have seemed to him a place of almost decadent material abundance. In the wake of the civil war's devastation, printing in Russia had become exceedingly difficult. With even the most basic materials in short supply, most Russian publications—including a great many State financed projects—were now printed in Berlin, where the enormous émigré population supported over seventy printing houses thriving at the expense of the catastrophically inflated German Mark.<sup>3</sup> The political skepticism of the émigré intelligentsia who ran many of these enterprises was beginning to turn, and the *smenavekhovtsy*—so called for the essay collection *Smena Vekh* (*Changing Guideposts*) of 1921—now heralded the revolution as the sign of a great nation's

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<sup>1</sup> *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), 247.

<sup>2</sup> “No razve proizvedeniia iskusstva ne iavliaiutsia chasto orudiami poraboshcheniia? Nado borot'sia za osvobozhdenie veshchi—tol'ko ugnetaemaia veshch ugnetaet cheloveka.” *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand* 3 (May 1922): 21.

<sup>3</sup> There were 74 presses and about 500,000 Russians in Germany in the early 1920s. Following the German government's currency reform in December 1923, the advantageousness of this situation for the Russian presses declined sharply. See Sergei Ippolitov and Almaziia Kataeva, “*Ne mogu otorvat'sia ot Rossii*”...: *Russkie knigoizdatel'stva v Germanii v 1920-kh gg.* (Moscow: Izd. Ippolita, 2000), and the brief review by Amy Nelson in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 747-751.

renaissance. In Russia, Lev Trotsky even proposed circulating the group’s writings among the Red Army’s professional officer corps—clearly, reconciliation of the radical left and the intelligentsia was producing strange bedfellows.<sup>4</sup> Lissitzky entered into one such ambivalent relationship in Berlin when he began designing book covers for the Scythian Press, a group of Aleksandr Blok’s followers led by Andrei Bely. For their part, the Scythians facilitated the publication of a children’s book Lissitzky had designed in Vitebsk, *Pro 2 ■ : Suprematicheskii skaz v 6-ti postroikakh* (*Of 2 ■ : Suprematist tale in 6 constructions*), as well as three numbers of a trilingual journal, *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand*, that Lissitzky co-edited with Ilya Ehrenburg, before Bely identified the pair as “faces of the Antichrist.”<sup>5</sup> In short, conditions in Germany allowed Lissitzky to make the kind of “model book” that he proposed to Malevich prior to the formation of UNOVIS. To the extent that the publication of *Of 2 ■* marked Lissitzky’s resistance to the political compromises that allowed it to appear, Viktor Shklovsky’s letter to an exiled Roman Jakobson, published in the first issue of *Veshch’*, speaks for Lissitzky as well: “we are not changing guideposts. Guideposts are needed not for us, but for the wagon train.”<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, in the interval between the design and publication of *Of 2 ■* much had changed within the avant-garde itself, and Lissitzky’s residency in Berlin saw the publication of another, more radically constructivist model: a collection of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poems, *Dlia golosa* (*For the Voice*) (figs. 2.1-2.2). The distance between these two volumes can be measured in the differences in their methods of assembly: *Of 2 ■*, illustrated with half-tone

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<sup>4</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 252.

<sup>5</sup> “Krestiny ‘Veshchi,’” *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand* 3 (May 1922): 21. Lissitzky’s designs for the Scythians, which fall outside the present chapter’s purview, have been surveyed by Victor Margolin in “El Lissitzky’s Berlin Graphics,” *Voices of Revolution: Collected Essays* ed. Patricia Railing (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 184-215.

<sup>6</sup> “Vekhi ne meniaem. Vekhi nuzhny ne dlia nas, a dlia obozov.” “Pis’mo k Romanu Iakobsonu,” *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand* 1-2 (April 1922): 5.

blocks made from Lissitzky's watercolor sketches of 1920, was *postroen* (built, assembled), while *For the Voice* was produced entirely at the workbench from the materials of the printer's typecase, crediting Lissitzky as *konstruktor knigi* (constructor of the book). These terms have been linked to a distinction between a "constructive tendency" and "constructivism" respectively, and Lissitzky's transition between them has long been the subject of debate.<sup>7</sup> Only recently has it become clear that UNOVIS itself embraced this shift to constructivism, initially regarding the Working Group of Constructivists as allies in the struggle for institutional power in Moscow and graduating its members from the Vitebsk Free Studios with the title of *khudozhnik-konstruktivist* (artist-constructivist) even in Lissitzky's absence.<sup>8</sup>

Yet UNOVIS and the Working Group of Constructivists diverged almost as soon as they aligned, with one group privileging the sign and the other material in their definitions of construction. Their differences are summed up by Malevich's definition of 1923: "If the world is matter, then that does not mean that it is material. Material arises when an idea appears. The world is without ideas and Suprematism is without ideas; there is no material in either...Construction is an intellectual matter which cannot be endowed with the finite."<sup>9</sup> Part of the difficulty of situating Lissitzky's activities in Germany lies in his continuation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Christina Lodder was the first to exclude Lissitzky from "constructivism proper," although she did so partly on the basis of Stephen Bann's earlier attempt to isolate "international constructivism" as a separate phenomenon. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 225-38. Lodder reiterated this position most recently in "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism," in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 27-47.

<sup>8</sup> Tatiana Goriacheva, "Suprematism and Constructivism: An Intersection of Parallels" in *Rethinking Malevich*, ed. Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), 67-81. The Vitebsk school produced seven "artist-constructivists" in all. For a comprehensive list of the school's students and their degrees, see Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 318-323; *khudozhnik-konstruktivist* is given in the Russian version of Shatskikh's book, *Vitebsk: zhizn' iskusstva, 1917-1922* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2001), 246-249.

<sup>9</sup> Kazimir Malevich, "The Formula of Suprematism" in *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2002), 231.

abandoned constructivist strand of UNOVIS in a project that aimed to transform the practice of the sign precisely by radicalizing the material structures where it appears. Lissitzky's efforts in this respect proceeded most quickly on the terrain of the book, whose transformation in *For the Voice* served as a model for a similarly radical rethinking of the newspaper in *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* and the exhibition space in the *Prouns Space* and an unrealized room for typo-lithography in the summer of 1923.

Lissitzky's work in these domains traced an ambiguous line between Malevich's definition of construction as an intellectual activity without end and the Working Group of Constructivists' view of it as the organization of material, an ambiguity similarly present in the Russian term *ustanovka*, or "set." Used by Jakobson to refer to the hardening of perception into habit and convention, by Lissitzky to describe the transition of the Proun from painting to production, and by the productivist critic Nikolai Tarabukin to refer to the installed components of an electrical device, the term "set" crystallized a range of positions on the problematic status of an object at the moment of its production.<sup>10</sup> In each of these cases, whether the emphasis veers toward mind-set or radio-set, the word serves to clarify the problem of the object and its production on the vexed terrain of painting; but as Tarabukin's example shows, it also crossed into the domain of the economy. The two senses were linked by the architectural critic Adolf Behne's description of the emerging international mindset in a lecture delivered at Lissitzky's winter 1923-24 exhibition in Berlin:

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<sup>10</sup> I discuss the first two instances below; for Tarabukin, see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 245-149. The seminal account of the object in constructivism is Christina Kiaer's *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005). Kiaer's inclusion of Lissitzky among the key practitioners of constructivism is a most welcome departure from the strict definition of the group supported by Lodder. I will however continue to speak here of Lissitzky's constructivism as an UNOVIS variant, albeit without the connotation of belatedness that has characterized so many accounts of Lissitzky's work.

Today no nation (to say nothing of the individual) possesses art, which is to the contrary a function. What matters is that all function-carriers of full power stand on their organically given foundation—national unit and individual alike. The comparison with the European economic unit is relatively close: cooperation of the economies shows the unity of the world-economy. The nationalist mindset is a caricature. It emerges from the negation of the whole. Only affirmation of the whole, however, justifies individualization, and individualization only forms an interaction that is more than conceptual.<sup>11</sup>

The position advanced by Behne provides perhaps the most lucid account of Lissitzky's views we have, both as they pertain to UNOVIS—a group whose very name derived from the act of affirmation—and to the Constructivist International he tried to form while in Germany.

Whatever international set existed in Europe in 1922 was a remnant of dada, whose negation of the nationalist caricature Jakobson had recognized the previous year as the continent's only progressive artistic phenomenon. Indeed, the Constructivist International that Lissitzky attempted to organize the summer after his arrival in Germany found its most willing participants in figures associated with dada, be they the veteran of Zürich dada Hans Richter, or the impresario of *De Stijl* Theo van Doesburg, whose alter ego I.K. Bonset edited the dada journal *Mecano*. But these same elements would also prevent the International from coming to fruition, transforming it instead into an impromptu meeting of constructivists and dadas.

Lissitzky's constructivism was thus subjected to dada's other characteristic feature, as noted by

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<sup>11</sup> “Heute hat keine Nation (vom einzelnen ganz zu schweigen) Kunst, sondern ist Funktion. Es kommt darauf an, dass alle Funktionsträger voller Kraft auf ihrem organisch gegeben Fundament stehen--ebenso die nationale Einheit wie der Einzelne. Der Vergleich mit der europäischen Wirtschaftseinheit ist ziemlich nahe. Zusammenarbeit der Volkswirtschaften ergibt die Einheit Welt-Wirtschaft. Nationaliste Einstellung ist eine Karikatur. Sie entsteht durch Negierung des Ganzen. Nur Bejahung des Ganzen aber rechtfertigt Individualisierung, und Individualisierung nur formt ein mehr als begriffliches Zusammenwirken.” *El Lissitzky, Schau der Arbeit: 1919-1923* (Berlin: Graphisches Kabinett J.B. Neumann, 1924), n.p.

Jakobson: its commitment to the radical finitude its own existence in time.<sup>12</sup> Something of dada's commitment to ephemerality survives in Lissitzky's prophetic claim, published in *Merz* in 1923, that "the printed sheet overcomes time and space. The printed sheet, the infinitude of the book, must be overcome: THE ELECTRO-LIBRARY."<sup>13</sup> It is this radical embrace of the finite that marks Lissitzky's break from the UNOVIS constructivism he propagated during his two years in Germany, a break already predicted when he informed Malevich of the imminent publication of *Veshch'* shortly after his arrival: "This is an affirmation of the new art and if it does not become a crystallic Unovis, then I'll go it alone."<sup>14</sup> Still, this individualization would turn out to be yet another affirmation of the whole.

### I. Articulation

The first manifestations of post-dada activity to advocate for an anonymous temporary art "that did not exist before us and cannot continue after us," appeared in the "Call for an Elementarist Art," signed by Raoul Hausmann, László Moholy-Nagy, Hans Arp and Ivan Puni, and published in October of 1921.<sup>15</sup> Although it was written well before Lissitzky's arrival in Berlin, the Elementarist program made way for his appearance, circumscribing the sphere of his activities in Germany to a surprising degree. Particularly striking in this respect is the absence of

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<sup>12</sup> "Dada perceives the 'limitedness of its own existence in time'; it relativizes itself historically." Jakobson, "Letters from the West: Dada" in Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, eds., *Language in Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 38-40.

<sup>13</sup> "Der gedruckte Bogen überwindet Raum und Zeit. Der gedruckte Bogen, die Unendlichkeit der Bücher, muss überwinden werden. DIE ELEKTRO-BIBLIOTHEK." *Merz* 4 (July 1923): 47.

<sup>14</sup> El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich 25 February 1922. *Experiment/Eksperiment* vol. 5 (1999): 150-51. English translation in *Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde*, 246.

<sup>15</sup> *De Stijl* IV no. 10 (1921), 156; English translation in Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 51.

Kurt Schwitters—soon Lissitzky’s close friend and collaborator—from its signatories, for it was Hausmann and Schwitters who originally drafted the program after their *Antidada-Merz-PRÉsentismus* tour to Prague in September. “Hausmann and I are working on the manifesto at a lively pace,” Schwitters wrote to Arp upon returning to Berlin. “We probably still want to ask Puni, Vicking Eggeling [sic], Doesburg. Do you still know anyone in France? The manifesto will demand elementary art.”<sup>16</sup> Although the absence of his signature from the final document points to Hausmann as the main architect of the manifesto, Schwitters had named the schism within dada that furnished its motive in 1920, rejecting the politics of Richard Huelsenbeck’s “Husk-dada” (*Huelsendadaismus*) in favor of the core concerns of abstract art and sound poetry pursued by the “kernel-dadaists” (*Kerndadaisten*), Arp and Tristan Tzara.<sup>17</sup>

As his appeal to dada’s core concerns indicates, Schwitters understood abstraction in word and image to be integrally linked. In “Merz,” he describes how “I pasted words and sentences into poems in such a way as to produce a rhythmic design,” and then, “reversing the process, I pasted up pictures and drawings so that sentences could be read in them.”<sup>18</sup> At the time of the *Antidada* tour, Hausmann was dreaming of mechanizing these reversible processes with a device that would transliterate optical and sonic phenomena. This machine, which he would soon call the Optophone, was intended to spatialize Hausmann’s own sound poetry, which he had

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<sup>16</sup> “Hausmann und ich arbeiten lebhaft an dem Manifest. Wir wollen noch vielleicht Puni, Vicking Eggeling, Doesburg auffordern. Wissen Sie noch jemanden in Frankreich? Das Manifest wird elementare Kunst fordern.” Quoted in Hubertus Gassner, “Der Text im Kontext” in *Ivan Puni: Synthetischer Musiker*, eds. Helmut Geisert, Elisabeth Moortgat and Martina Jura (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1992), 97.

<sup>17</sup> “Merz,” *Der Ararat* Vol. 2 no. 1 (January 1921): 3-9. English trans. in in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell, second edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 57-65.

<sup>18</sup> “Merz,” *ibid.*, 62.

worked out as early as 1919 in the form poster poems (fig. 2.3).<sup>19</sup> Hausmann’s performance of these poems mimes the mechanicity of his still uninvented device. As if revving a cold engine, Hausmann pronounces a single phoneme, repeating it, adding further syllables with each subsequent repetition until the sequence is completed:

*f*  
*f m s*  
*f m s b w*  
*f m s b w t Ä z ä u*  
*f m s b w t ä z Ä U*  
*p g g*  
*p g g i f*  
*q u i y - E!*<sup>20</sup>

This reading activates two directions of transcription, reducing the poem’s phonetic component to the graphic elements of inscription, which in turn produces a purely technical sound-image in oral delivery.

More futurist than Schwitters’ collage-based procedures, Hausmann’s poetics appealed to the Elementarist program’s other absent signatory and eventual publisher, Theo van Doesburg. Doesburg himself had conceived of a purely alphabetical poetry as early 1915, and he now undertook the project in earnest under his pseudonym I.K. Bonset, who published three *Letterklankbeelden* (Lettersoundimages) in van Doesburg’s journal, *De Stijl*, in 1921. In a preface to the poems, the author reports that these works identify phonetic with plastic values in order to complete a “radical annihilation of all incidental and indefinite (ideas) values.” Like

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<sup>19</sup> On the Optophone see Marcella Lista, “Raoul Hausmann’s Optophone: ‘Universal Language’ and the Intermedia” in Leah Dickerman ed. with Matthew Wittkovsky, *The Dada Seminars* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 83-101.

<sup>20</sup> There are no known recordings of Hausmann’s poster poems from the period of their composition. The present interpretation of the manner of their performance is based on the written version of the poster poem in a letter to van Doesburg immediately prior to the Prague trip (the last line of the poem has here been changed from the poster version to recall the title of a journal Hausmann hoped to publish). Raoul Hausmann to Theo van Doesburg, undated letter. Inventory no. 82, Theo van Doesburg Archive, Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst (Van Moorsel Donation), The Hague.



Hausmann's Poster poems, in performance "the sound must be produced as mechanically as possible. The reader pronounces only the letters, in relationship to each other."<sup>21</sup> Although there were clear resonances between these practices, they were insulated by van Doesburg's pseudonymous identity; even while Hausmann and Schwitters tried to secure van Doesburg's participation in their manifesto and the latter published their writings in *De Stijl*, they remained ignorant of the Dutch painter's poetic experimentation.

But it is in Schwitters' collages of 1921 that the Elementarist program's manifest overtures to van Doesburg find their deepest resonance. In Schwitters' *Untitled (Vier Kronen)*, the neutral ground plane that had activated both the spatial play and polysemy of newspaper fragments in cubist *papiers collés* supports an assemblage of elements cut from all kinds of printed matter and squares of colored construction paper (fig. 2.4). Most of these elements are regular and geometric, doubling the ground plane's vertical orientation by setting up a strong rectilinear grid whose regularity is set in relief by the occasional exception (as with the forms dotting the large black square that anchors the composition at lower left). The result is a collage practice which retains the cubist device of setting typographical fragments in scalar disjunction, while turning away from photomontage in favor of an orderly, semiotically unified abstract pictorial space. The proximity of this space to the rigorously delimited forms of abstract painting advocated by *De Stijl* was rare among the dadas, paralleled only by the austere idiom of Hans Richter's latest film, *Rhythmus 21*. Accordingly, when Schwitters withdrew from the Elementarist program after the *Antidada* tour, van Doesburg expressed concern that he was

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<sup>21</sup> *De Stijl* IV no. 7 (July 1921): 99-102. Quoted in translation in Hannah L. Hedrick, *Theo van Doesburg: Propagandist and Practitioner of the Avant-Garde, 1909-1923* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1973), 102.

losing an important ally, asking Hausmann, “is Monsieur Schwitters now against Elementary art? Or is he not yet for the elementary *way of business*?”<sup>22</sup>

As a movement that never quite cohered, Elementarism’s fault lines are as important as its official accomplishments. Lissitzky likely encountered the group through Ivan Puni, who had preceded him as an instructor at the Vitebsk People’s Art School, and through Moholy-Nagy, whose Hungarian compatriots he had probably met in Moscow the previous summer.<sup>23</sup> It was through Moholy that Lissitzky met Hausmann, the first member of the group to make a deep impression on him.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, it was Hausmann’s optophonetic research that impressed Lissitzky. Anticipating his machine’s visual production, in 1921 Hausmann had begun a series of abstract drawings made with a straight-edge and compass called “Optophonetic Emanations” to accompany his poems (fig. 2.5). Canny send-ups of the symbolist dream of synesthetic experience, to Lissitzky these drawings probably resembled nothing so much as Rodchenko’s “linearist” works of 1920. Thus it was not van Doesburg but Lissitzky who agreed to publish Hausmann’s essay on optophonetics in the journal he was then organizing with Ilya Ehrenburg.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “Et bien je vous demande: monsieur Schwitters est il maintenant contre l’art Elementaire? ou n’est il pas encore élémentaire des *Geschäftswege*?” Theo van Doesburg to Raoul Hausmann, 26 October 1921, in *Hannah Höch: Eine Lebenscollage* Band 2, 1921-1945, 2. Abteilung, eds. Ralf Burmeister and Eckard Furlus (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie and Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1995), 33. Schwitters withdrew his name from the document in order to maintain a working relationship with Herwarth Walden, proprietor of *Der Sturm* gallery (which represented Schwitters), of whom Hausmann was a relentless critic. See his letter to Raoul Hausmann of 10 October 1922, in *ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> On Puni’s time in Vitebsk, see Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 31-35. Sándor Ek, Béla Uitz and Jolán Szilágyi attended the Third Congress of the Comintern in Moscow, and the critic Alfred Kemény was a participant in the composition/construction debates at INKhUK. Oliver Botar, “From the Avant-Garde to ‘Proletarian Art’: the Émigré Hungarian Journals *Egység* and *Askasztott Ember*, 1922-23,” *Art Journal* 52 (Spring 1993): 34-45. Kemény’s address to the INKhUK is reprinted in Hubertus Gassner, ed. *Wechselwirkungen: ungarische Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik* (Marburg: Jonas, 1986), 226-30.

<sup>24</sup> Lissitzky recalls meeting Hausmann in Moholy’s studio in a letter to Sophie Küppers of 15 September 1925. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Hausmann’s essay appears in a Russian translation *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand* 3 (May 1922): 13-14, although it is announced in the journal’s first issue.

From his perspective, the middle ground between the anarchic post-cubist typographic maelstroms of dada broadsheets and the orderly painterly space of neo-plasticism that the Elementarists were seeking was almost identical with the field cultivated by UNOVIS.

This common ground is evident most of all in Lissitzky's children's book, *Of 2* ■ , which was published around the time Lissitzky and Hausmann met. The book's opening spread provides a brief set of instructions before introducing the titular squares with the delightfully bland presentation, "Here are two squares" (*Vot dva kvadrata*) (fig. 2.6). Lissitzky's instructions, although equally bland, make the peculiarity of this book clear. Admonishing its reader, "don't read," the page offers demonstration of the habitual movement of the eye that the book will interrupt, tracing the line of absent text to the end of the line and across the diagonal path of its return, before offering a positive model. Shifting into the tactile register, Lissitzky instead instructs his reader to "TAKE

PAPERS	FOLD
POSTS	COLOR
BLOCKS	BUILD,

emphasizing the interval between the choice of object and action through the sudden absence of lines guiding the reader's eye. In its own way, the modest encounter between material and speaking subject echoes Hausmann's much more polemical staging of the same problem.<sup>26</sup>

Language too has a tactile, material character in this encounter. On the facing page, each word is a construction of syllables and each syllable a combination of sounds which can in turn be taken apart and recast spatially to operate on a graphic register, producing and interacting with forces equivalent to those operative in the image above. Nevertheless, the graphic is not

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<sup>26</sup> Hausmann stages this encounter as a means to criticize the legacies of German Idealism in his essay, "Dada ist mehr als dada" *De Stijl* IV no. 3 (March 1921): 44.

seamlessly merged with the enunciative register, as we see when examining the typographic clusters individually. In the case of the presentational *VOT*, a graphic repetition of the letter *T* doubles the indexical function of the word and activates both strokes of the letter to which it is attached; its horizontal stroke, rotated slightly, points upwards to the canted edge of the red square above, while its vertical stroke draws the eye across the page to another *T*, the final syllable of *KVADRATA*, which closes a column of type falling from that square's right corner. Taken together, the respective orientations of the two *T*s echo those of the squares, seemingly reverberating with the pictorial forces active inside the frame.

If the relegation of *VOT* to a separate axis follows both from its typographical and grammatical function of presentation, it also reveals Lissitzky's conscientiousness with regard to the innate order of spoken sound. Where *VOT* remains primarily indexical and graphic, the setting of the words *DVA KVADRATA* strives toward the verbal dimension by breaking up the word's visual gestalt into rhythmically articulated syllables reminiscent of deliberate pronunciation. From this columnar stacking of the syllables of *DVA KVADRATA* we can discern a kind of grid, composed of the pure tone of vowels as its vertical axis and the chthonic noise of the consonants as its horizontal axis: reading vertically produces a continuous voiced *AAAA*, whose progressively smaller point size produces the effect of a recession in space or diminution of force (or both), while the horizontal is articulated by the staccato eruptions of the consonant clusters *DV-*, *KV-*, *DR-*, *T-*, in a manner reminiscent of Hausmann's poster poems.

Lissitzky's page thus sets up two interleaved matrices: on the one hand, in the diagonal orientation of *VOT*, writing is reduced to the purely spatial graphic trace of the indexical gesture organizing the movement of the eye across the page; and on the other hand, in the free arrangement of the words *DVA KVADRATA*, sound is mapped onto a coordinate system of the pure

tone of the voice and the articulating noise of the consonants. In the latter respect, the page offers a graphic demonstration of the transrational *Zaum*' poetics of Aleksei Kruchenykh, whose "Declaration of the Word as Such" proposed that "consonants render everyday life [byť], nationality, weight—vowels, the opposite: A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE."<sup>27</sup> This proposition would have been ringing in Lissitzky's ears in the spring of 1920, when he designed both *Of 2* ■ and the almanac, *UNOVIS No. 1*, in which a version of the *Zaumnik*'s foundational 1913 manifesto appeared.<sup>28</sup> Following Kruchenykh, *Of 2* ■ offers neither pure universality nor pure arbitrariness, but a structure in which a fragmentary universal emerges from the contingent noise of everyday speech. A similar familiarity with the *Zaumniks* informed Roman Jakobson's initial assessment of dada's problems, which can serve as an analogue in the critical domain for the position Lissitzky would stake out vis-à-vis dada:

The already laid-bare device—no longer in sharp confrontation with the code (*à la langue*)—is vapid, it lacks flavor. The initially laid bare device is usually justified and regulated by so-called constructive laws, but, for example, the path from rhyme to assonance to a set toward any relationship between sounds leads to the announcement that a laundry list is a poetic work. Then letters in arbitrary order, randomly struck on a typewriter, are considered verses.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Declaration of the Word as Such." English translation in Lawton and Eagle, eds. *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Washington, D.C.: New Academia, 2004), 67-68.

<sup>28</sup> GTG Manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 16 (verso). In focusing my reading of the book on its formal reference to Kruchenykh's poetics, I am leaving aside the problem of its narrative reference. Attempts to read the book in this fashion (as an allegory of Red and Black in a political sense, with reference to the politicization of Suprematism) have been pursued by Alan Birnholz in *El Lissitzky*, Ph.D. Diss. (Yale University, 1973), 220; by Nisbet in "An Introduction to El Lissitzky" in *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 1987), 25; as well as by Bois in his review of the latter, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* vol. 76 no. 4 (April 1988): 168. My reading here is more akin to that of Patricia Railing in *More About Two Squares* (East Sussex: Artists Bookworks, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Jakobson, "Dada," *Language in Literature*, 40.

Lissitzky's *Of 2* ■ holds us at the moment when arbitrary sounds emerge as linguistic material from the most everyday of utterances, when the laundry list cum work of art produces both sense and nonsense, and the constructive laws of the code appear in their most basic operation.

## II. *Position Papers*

The journal that Lissitzky published in Berlin, *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand*, which ran only three numbers, was concerned with precisely these constructive laws. The unsigned editorial of its first number is explicit in this respect, affirming the existence of formal laws and advocating a “constructive art not adorning life, but organizing it” against the “negative tactics of the ‘dadaists’.”<sup>30</sup> Seeking a way forward from the nihilism of dada, the classicism of the return to order and the pure utilitarianism of constructivism's most extreme adherents, the journal's editorial position seems to have been modeled instead on that of *L'esprit nouveau*.<sup>31</sup> Not only does the inaugural issue of *Veshch'* contain an extract of Le Corbusier's writing on mass production housing, its editorial statement closes with a rhetorically potent photograph of a great ocean liner's propellers, which, echoed by the double X of its epoch-making caption, “PARTHENON AND APOLLO XX[<sup>th</sup> century],” unmistakably recalls Le Corbusier's influential series of essays on the achievements of engineering, “Eyes That Do Not See” (fig. 2.7). Of course, Le Corbusier's own position during these years drew heavily from Taylorism and defended the rationalization of production as the neutral application of objective scientific principles, raising

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<sup>30</sup> *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand* 1 (March-April 1922): 2.

<sup>31</sup> In a book written in Paris during the spring of 1921, Ehrenburg speaks favorably of both David Siquieros's *Vida Americana* and *L'esprit nouveau* as prototypes of a new style of international review integrating the arts with economic news. *Vse taki ona vertitsia* (Berlin: Helikon, 1922), 86.

the question of exactly what sort of organization *Veshch'* sought.<sup>32</sup> On these matters the editors are silent, noting only that “WE CANNOT IMAGINE A CREATION OF NEW FORMS IN ART OUTSIDE OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL FORMS.”<sup>33</sup>

Discerning Lissitzky's position in *Veshch'* is complicated by the fact that while he certainly agreed with its editorial, he most likely did not write it.<sup>34</sup> There are however significant commonalities between the editorial and a review, “Exhibitions in Russia,” which can be definitively attributed to Lissitzky. Both share a stress on method, with the editorial affirming “the triumph of the constructive method... in the new economy, in the development of industry, in the psychology of contemporaries, and in art,” and the review asserting that UNOVIS “is constructing a new method... as the basis of a new architecture in the widest sense of the concept.”<sup>35</sup> If the method itself is obscure, statements of the laws in accordance with which it operated are readily available. The most fundamental of these, set out in Malevich's “On the New Systems in Art,” holds that “whoever feels painting, sees the object to a lesser degree; and

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<sup>32</sup> Already in the 1918 Purist manifesto “After Cubism,” co-authored with Ozenfant, Le Corbusier wrote that “current evolutionary trends in work lead through utility to synthesis and order. This has been called ‘Taylorism’ and in a pejorative sense. In fact, it is only a matter of the intelligent exploitation of scientific discoveries.” English translation by John Goodman in Carol S. Eliel, *L'esprit nouveau: Purism in Paris, 1918-1925* (Los Angeles: L.A. County Museum of Art, 2001), 144. The best account of this aspect of Le Corbusier's work remains Mary McLeod, “‘Architecture or Revolution’: Taylorism, Technocracy and Social Change,” *Art Journal* vol. 43 no. 2 (Summer 1983): 132-47.

<sup>33</sup> *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand* 1 (March-April 1922): 3.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Nisbet suggested Ehrenburg as the sole author in *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Harvard Art Museums: Cambridge, 1987), 54 note 1. On the basis of style alone, barring its conceptual fuzziness, it is unlike any of Lissitzky's other writings.

<sup>35</sup> “Torzhestvo konstruktivnogo metoda... i v novoi ekonomike, i v razvitie industrii, i v psikhologii sovremennikov, i v iskusstve.” “Die ‘Unovis’... baut eine neue Methode aus... als Grundlage einer neuen Architektur im weitesten Sinne dieses Begriffes.” *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand* 1 (March-April 1922): 2, 19. Lissitzky's authorship of this review, signed “Ulen,” is confirmed by his letter to Malevich of 25 February 1922, which has been published in the original Russian in *Experiment/Eksperiment* vol. 5 (1999): 150-51, and in English translation in *Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde*, 246-47.

whoever sees the object feels less what is painterly.”<sup>36</sup> In the next issue of *Veshch'*, Velimir Khlebnikov described “the struggle of two powers, always produced in the word [that] gives language a double life: two rings of flying stars. In one creation understanding turns around sound, in another, sound around understanding.”<sup>37</sup> Both were ways of stating the problem of “the over-automatization of the object, [which] permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort,” from which Shklovsky had differentiated the operations of the poetic text in his foundational essay of 1917, “Art as Technique.”<sup>38</sup>

This same principle did appear in multiple fields, just as the *Veshch'* editorial asserted. Roman Jakobson translated Malevich’s version of the principle into the terms of contemporary psychology in his essay, “Futurism,” of 1919, writing:

The set toward nature created for painting an obligatory connection precisely of such parts which are in essence disconnected, whereas the mutual dependence of color and form was not recognized. On the contrary, a set toward pictorial expression resulted in the creative realization of the latter connection.<sup>39</sup>

Jakobson’s term “set” renders the Russian *ustanovka*, a word whose uses cluster at two opposed poles: on the side of the object, *ustanovka* means set up, assembly, apparatus, circuit, fitting, installation, alignment; on the side of the subject, purpose, aim, orientation, attitude. Jakobson uses this word to translate the German *Einstellung* (attitude or ‘mindset’ in the Anglo-American idiom), as it had recently been used to address the issue of mechanization in apperception. A

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<sup>36</sup> Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, Vol. 1. Trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus, ed. Troels Anderson (New York: George Wittenborn, 1971), 98.

<sup>37</sup> “Eta bor’ba mirov, bor’ba dvukh vlastei, vsegda proiskhodiashchaia v slove, daet dvoimiu zhizn’ iazyka: dva kruga letaiushchikh zvezd. V odnom tvorchestve razum vrashchaetsia krugom zvuka, opisivaia krugovye puti, v drugom, zvuk krugom razuma.” “O sovremennoi poezii.” *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand 2* (May 1922): 7.

<sup>38</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

<sup>39</sup> Jakobson, “Futurism” in *Language and Literature*, 29.



“set,” in this technical usage, refers to a habitual expectation or orientation toward certain types of phenomena. In 1915, the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka used the notion of *Einstellung* to argue that the psychological concept of stimulus-response must also account for the perceiver’s attitude in the experimental situation.<sup>40</sup> And in the mid-1920s, the Aleksei Gastev, construing the phenomenon of perceptual mechanization positively, advocated a “production set” that would overcome the distinction between manual and mental labor by establishing “a series of gradually developing sets [*ustanovok*], beginning with the most rudimentary movement of the person with his own hands, through the phase of the complicating of these hands with an instrument, and finally, to a complex series of the highest reflexes with the latest industrial technology.”<sup>41</sup> A sort of worker-friendly Taylorism, in other words.

However, when Jakobson speaks of a “set toward expression” or a “set toward any relationship between sounds,” as he does in his account of dada, he has in mind the use of *Einstellung* in the phenomenological psychology of Edmund Husserl.<sup>42</sup> For Husserl,

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<sup>40</sup> In his paper “Beitrage zur Psychologie der Gestalt. III. Zur Grundlegung der Wahrnehmungspsychologie,” which has been credited with founding the mature Gestalt movement. See Barry Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 263-268. The OED records 1909 as the first appearance of ‘mindset’, whose synonym ‘mental set’ also appears that year, although the canonical work on *Einstellung* in English does not appear until Abraham S. Luchins “Mechanization in Problem Solving: The Effect of *Einstellung*” in *Psychological Monographs* vol. 54 no. 6 (1942). Luchins’ experiments were themselves based on research carried out in Berlin in the 1920s, and the significance of his results was to confirm the original Gestalt hypotheses and to liberate the term from the Behaviorist connotation it had acquired (hence for Luchins, mechanization is the effect of a situation rather than an innate human tendency).

<sup>41</sup> Aleksei Gastev, “Trudovye ustanovki,” quoted in Maria Gough, “Switched On: Notes on Radio, Automata, and the Bright Red Star,” in *Building the Collective. Soviet Graphic Design 1917-1937, Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*, ed. Leah Dickerman (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 49 (translation modified). Gastev refers to a “proizvodstvennaia ustanovka” in the same essay. *Kak nado rabotat’. Prakticheskoe vvedenie v nauka organizatsii truda*. Second printing (Moscow: Ekonomika, 1972), 200. For an excellent summary of Gastev’s attempt to unify manual and mental labor, see Devin Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006): 107-119.

<sup>42</sup> Jakobson had studied Husserl’s theories of apperception at Moscow University in 1915-16 (well before he knew Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, it is worth noting) in two seminars conducted by the psychologist G.I. Chelpanov. Elmar Holenstein, *Roman Jakobson’s Approach to Language: Phenomenological Structuralism*, trans. Catherine and Tarcisus Schelbert (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 51. Juri Striedter confirmed

phenomenology effects a radical modification of the “natural attitude” towards phenomena—what Jakobson called a “set toward nature” with regard to painting—suspending the observer’s predisposition toward the object as a natural thing in order to reveal its eidetic structure within consciousness. In a famous example, Husserl succinctly summarizes the limitations of the natural attitude by describing a beautiful arabesque that suddenly reveals itself to have been composed of letters. This suspension of the object grasped as a natural thing, which Husserl called “bracketing,” marks the appearance of the *intentional object* as the ordering integration of consciousness and world:

The intentional Object, the valuable as valuable... the action as action, becomes an object seized upon only in a particular “objectifying” turn. Being turned valuingly to a thing involves, to be sure, a seizing upon the mere thing; not however the *mere* thing, but rather the *valuable* thing or the value is *the full intentional correlate of the valuing act*.<sup>43</sup>

The object is no less *real* in either of these perceptual modalities, despite the fact that the intentional object is not, strictly speaking, material. For Jakobson then, abstraction in painting and poetry required a method akin to that of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction.

The effects of this method are proclaimed by Lissitzky in his earliest writing on Proun, “Not Worldvision—but Worldreality,” where he describes the transformation of the artist in the wake of abstraction. Notably, the term “set” also appears here as a description of what Lissitzky elsewhere in the same essay calls the Proun’s “chain of completions”:

Even ‘pure painting’ will not save the picture with its non-objectivity, but here the artist begins his own self-transformation. The artist is turning from an imitator into a constructor [*sooruditelia*] of a new world of forms... Proun begins its sets [*ustanovki*] on

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Jakobson’s use of *ustanovka* as a translation of *Einstellung* in conversation with Jakobson. See his *Literary Structure, Evolution and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 270 n. 99.

<sup>43</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 76.

the surface, transfers to model spatial constructions and goes further, toward the construction of all of life's forms.<sup>44</sup>

Lissitzky's use of the term *ustanovka* here presents something of an obstacle for translation. The word's connotation of "orientation" evokes the rotational movement of the spectator around the Proun, and thus tilts toward the phenomenological; but used in the plural, it also evokes the "series of gradually developing sets" described by Gastev as constituting the ideal production set. This ambiguity hardly seems incidental, and indeed, Malevich's writings at the time of UNOVIS's formation present us with the same problem. In his revealingly titled 1919 essay, "Toward Pure Activity," Malevich asserts that "every creative form is constructed on an economic resolution, AND EVERY OBJECT IS AN ANSWER TO A RESOLVED ECONOMIC QUESTION."<sup>45</sup> *Veshch'* follows Malevich here, proceeding from "eternal laws of clarity, economy and regularity" to its injunction to "MAKE OBJECTS!"<sup>46</sup> But to all appearances, in returning from non-objectivity to the domain of the object, the transformation of the artist envisioned by Lissitzky and *Veshch'* simply reinstates the law of the "greatest economy of perceptual effort" from which Shklovsky had exempted art.

This difficulty in the journal's ideological program was ably diagnosed by the productivist critic Boris Arvatov. Reviewing the journal in the fall of 1922, Arvatov concludes that insofar as it professes a faith in some undetermined bond governing social and artistic forms, "*Veshch'* is especially symptomatic as an ideological manifesto of the artistic detachment of the

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<sup>44</sup> "I 'chistaia zhivopis' ne spaset kartiny svoei bespredmetnost'iu, no zdes' khudozhnik nachinaet sam perevoploshchat'sia. Khudozhnik iz vosproizveditelia perevoploshchaetsia v sooruditelia novogo mira form... Proun nachinaet svoi ustanovki na poverkhnosti, perekhodit k prostranstvennym modelym sooruzheniiam i idet dal'she k postroeniiu vsekh form zhizni." "Ne mirovideniie—no mireal'nost'." RGALI, fond 2361, op. 1, d. 25, ll. 13-14.

<sup>45</sup> "Vsiakaia tvocheskaia forma stroitsia na ekonomicheskom razreshenii, VSIKAIA VESHCH' EST OTVET RAZRESHENNOGO EKONOMICHESKOGO VOPROSA." *UNOVIS No. 1* GTG manuscript division, fond 76, d. 9, l. 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand* 1-2 (March-April 1922): 2-4.

most progressive contemporary intelligentsia—and precisely the technical intelligentsia—having placed before itself for the first time the problem of the organization of things.”<sup>47</sup> For Arvatov, writing in the wake of the Old Bolshevik and Proletkult founder Aleksandr Bogdanov, the term “technical intelligentsia” refers to an emergent capitalist class formation that dealt with the organization of production rather than the labor of production itself.<sup>48</sup> This class of managers controls and operates the communication and transit infrastructures of the new metropolis, and, in Arvatov’s view, “living in a world of things that it organizes but does not possess, that condition its labor, the technical intelligentsia gradually lost its former private property relation to them.” The new urban environment in which this class thrives, “where a thousand transmission apparatuses replace labor,” also “dictated forms of gesticulation, movement and activity” peculiar to the material culture of a highly developed system of production.<sup>49</sup> Choosing examples from among the journal’s articles, Arvatov lists Hausmann’s optophonetic research and Le Corbusier’s proposals for mass-production housing as signal embodiments of this organizational attitude, but the journal’s attempt to position Suprematism among these efforts he finds “opportunistic.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “*Veshch’* chrezvychaino simptomatichna, kak ideologicheskii manifest khudozhestvennogo otriada naibolee peredovoi sovremennoi intelligentsii, a imenno, intelligenstii tekhnicheskoi, v pervye vydvinuvshei pered soboi problemu organizatsii veshchei.” “*Veshch’*,” *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* vol. 7 (Sept.-Oct.1922): 342.

<sup>48</sup> Bogdanov uses this concept to reinterpret the significance of the “bourgeois” empirio-criticism of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, from which he developed his theory of tektology. As a response to Lenin’s 1909 critique, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, Bogdanov attempted to construct a sociopolitical theory of epistemology that situated the activity of intellectuals within production. See Kenneth Jensen, *Beyond Marx and Mach: Aleksandr Bogdanov’s Philosophy of Living Experience* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), 75-81. It should be noted here that Shklovsky’s principle of “the greatest economy of perceptual effort” in “Art as Technique” is in fact drawn from Richard Avenarius.

<sup>49</sup> Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),” trans. Christina Kiaer, *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 125-26. My understanding of Arvatov is deeply indebted to Kiaer’s introduction to his criticism, “Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects,” in *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 105-118.

<sup>50</sup> “*Veshch’*,” *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* vol. 7 (Sept.-Oct.1922): 342.

### III. Organization

The immediate organizational aspirations of the international avant-garde, best described by André Breton in 1922, were on the whole significantly more modest than Arvatov implies. “To consider in succession Cubism, Futurism and Dada,” Breton claims, “is to follow the ascent of an idea which has now reached a certain height and which awaits only a new impulse to continue to draw the curve which has been assigned to it.”<sup>51</sup> Breton himself had tried to find this new impulse with a March 1922 “International Congress for the Determination and Defense of the Modern Spirit” in Paris, although the event was scuttled by a group of dadas around Tristan Tzara who protested its bureaucratic character.<sup>52</sup> To a certain degree, both *Veshch'* and the Elementarist consensus holding sway in the pages of *De Stijl* shared this aspiration, but their own organizational efforts in the spring of 1922 would partake of Tzara’s tactics more than Breton’s. These dada tactics, criticized only months before in the pages of *Veshch'*, now appeared to Lissitzky as legitimate and effective options for both organizational and artistic purposes, as evidenced by the volume of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poems he designed in winter 1922-23, *Dliagolosa (For the Voice)*.

As the first issue of *Veshch'* appeared, the Düsseldorf group Junge Rheinland began to solicit participation in the “First International Art Exhibition,” which it had organized to protest

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Christopher Green, *Art in France, 1900-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>52</sup> A detailed chronology of the events surrounding the Paris congress has been compiled by Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris*, trans. Sharmila Ganguly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 233-253. Lissitzky and Ehrenburg were invited but unable to participate, as noted in *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand* 1 (March-April 1922): 5. Documents recounting the derailment of the event were printed in *De Stijl* V no. 1 (1922): 8-10.

the exclusion of young artists from that year's Grosse Kunstausstellung Düsseldorf.<sup>53</sup> Lissitzky, van Doesburg, Hausmann, Richter, Moholy, Schwitters and Puni accepted this invitation (the only notable absence from the Elementarist circle was Arp), and all but Schwitters and Moholy attended the First International Congress of Progressive Artists organized concurrently with the exhibition at the end of May. According to van Doesburg's testimony, he, Lissitzky, Richter, Werner Gräff and the architect Cornelius van Eesteren met in Weimar prior to the congress in order to coordinate their strategy, but the events at the congress itself unfolded rather unexpectedly.<sup>54</sup> On the second and final day of discussion, the group, calling itself the International Faction of Constructivists, took the floor to read a series of principled objections to the definition of "progressive" advanced at the congress; when their objections were joined by those of Hausmann, a critical mass of constructivists, futurists and dadas all walked out on the proceedings.<sup>55</sup>

Having thus secured a position on the leading edge of a current of dissent, the coalition began to gather momentum, and the week following the congress was entirely devoted preserving it. With the assistance of Lissitzky and Richter, the long overdue April number of *De Stijl* was assembled apace, offering transcriptions of statements from the congress alongside new

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<sup>53</sup> For the conditions leading up to the show and a reconstruction of its exhibits, see Bernd Finkeldy, "Die '1. Internationale Kunstausstellung in Düsseldorf 28. Mai bis 3. Juli 1922'" in *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-1927: Utopien für eine europäische Kultur* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1992), 23-30. *Veshch'* carried an announcement that its editors had been invited. *Veshch' Objet Gegenstand* 3 (May 1922): 3.

<sup>54</sup> Theo van Doesburg to Antony Kok, 6 June 1922. Reprinted in German translation in *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-1927*, 313.

<sup>55</sup> See the account in *De Stijl* V no. 4 (1922), English translation in Stephen Bann ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 58-62. Hausmann's own description of his statements at the congress differs slightly from those reported in *De Stijl*. See his letter to Hedwig Mankiewitz of 30 May 1922 in *Scharfrichter der bürgerlichen Seele. Raoul Hausmann in Berlin 1900-1933*, ed. Eva Züchner (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1998), 137.

demands. In terms reminiscent of *Veshch*, the faction now sought to overturn the “domination of the individual mindset” by defining art as one of the forms “that organizes the progress of humanity, that is, an instrument of the general work process.”<sup>56</sup> To realize this aim, the group resolved to form its own International, a task that would require immediate action, as van Doesburg stressed: “the second time round we’ll do it better... we’re working hard for the International now, which still has to materialize *before* winter. This is of the greatest significance.”<sup>57</sup> In the absence of *Veshch*, whose publisher had withdrawn support after the third number, *De Stijl* became the mouthpiece of the constructivist faction, publishing papers by van Doesburg, Richter, Moholy, and Lissitzky’s German translation of “Not Worldvision—but Worldreality” in advance of the first meeting of the Constructivist International in Weimar at the end of September.

But in hosting the September congress in Weimar the constructivist faction lay open to the same negative tactics that it had harnessed in Düsseldorf. This time, it was van Doesburg’s dual identity that furnished the movement of negation. Shortly before the Weimar congress, he had learned of the Hungarian communist party’s use of representational art to propagandize its humanist values, and, in light of the *MA* circle’s communist rhetoric, he now endeavored to distance the constructivist faction from Moholy.<sup>58</sup> To do so, he covertly orchestrated the arrival

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<sup>56</sup> “Die Kunst ist ein allgemeiner und realer Ausdruck der schöpferische Energie, die den Fortschritt der Menschheit organisiert, das heißt, sie ist Werkzeug des allgemeinen Arbeitsprocesses... Die Handlungen des Kongresses haben beweisen, daß durch die Vorherrschaft der Individuellen Einstellung eine Internationale fortschrittliche Solidarität aus den Elementen deises Kongresses nicht aufgebaut werden kann” *De Stijl* V no. 4 (1922), 63-64.

<sup>57</sup> “Das zweite Mal werden wir es besser tun... Wir arbeiten jetzt hart für die International, die noch *vor* Winter zustande kommen muß. Es ist von der größter Bedeutung.” Theo van Doesburg to Antony Kok, 6 June 1922. Reprinted in German translation in *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-1927*, 313.

<sup>58</sup> Kai-Uwe Hemken, ““Muss die neue Kunst die Massen dienen?” Zur Utopie und Wirklichkeit der ‘konstruktivistischen Internationale’” in *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-27*, 62-65. See also van Doesburg’s letter to Antony Kok of 18 September 1922, in German translation in *ibid.*,

of the *Kerndadaisten*, Tzara, Schwitters and Arp, an event that disrupted the group's running debate over the hierarchy of master and student at the Bauhaus. Tzara's speech at the gathering, which proclaimed that "the true dasas have always been separated from Dada," confirmed that the only thing unifying the groups present in Weimar was the lack of a unifying concept.<sup>59</sup> The International's structure followed Tzara's distinction between dada's proper and common forms, annulling itself on principle in a paradox of self-founding that was relayed in the pages of *Mecano* in van Doesburg's half-sense: "after much ado, the first constructivist egg is laid by the international rooster. Moholy's dynamic egg simultaneously a chick."<sup>60</sup> The negation of dada's negativity yielded not synthesis but dispersion: if Dada could only be dada, the International could only be an international and Constructivism constructivism. Lissitzky, evidently delighted by dada's antiauthoritarian logic, registered his approval by lampooning the chicken-egg autogenesis of the international as a bourgeois abortion: "you have excised the belly-brain of the bourgeoisie from within."<sup>61</sup>

Two weeks after the attempted formation of a constructivist international in Weimar, the First Russian Art Exhibition opened at the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin. Mayakovsky arrived

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314. It is worth noting here that this is not the first time Moholy had proved a contentious figure among the Elementarist circle: even before the publication of the group's manifesto, Hausmann wanted to break ties with him, although Schwitters advised against this, writing "Über Moholy bin ich andere Ansicht. Ich lasse dir deine Ansicht. Aber nachdem wir ihn aufgefordert haben zu unterzeichnen, müssen wir seine Unterschrift auch unter dem Manifest stehen lassen." Kurt Schwitters to Raoul Hausmann, 10 October 1921, in *Hannah Höch: eine Lebenscollage* Band 2, 1921-1945, 2. Abteilung, 31.

<sup>59</sup> "Les vrais dasas étaient toujours séparés de Dada." "Vortrag Tzaras auf dem dadakongress in Weimar 1922," *Merz* 7 (January 1924): 69.

<sup>60</sup> "Na veel drukte wordt het eerste constructivistische ei door den internationalen haan gelegd. Het dynamische ei van Moholy tegelijk een kuiken." *Mecano* no. Red (1923): n.p.

<sup>61</sup> "Lissitzky-Moskwa sagt den dadaismus: 'Du hast von innen ausgeschnitten die Bauchgehirn der Bourgeoisie'." Ibid. Lissitzky's language here is thoroughly dada, drawing on the title of Hannah Höch's photomontage *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*.



in Berlin at this time, participating in several events related to the opening of the exhibition, including a lecture by Ivan Puni at the Haus der Kunst, over which Lissitzky and Puni came to blows.<sup>62</sup> Before Mayakovsky's return to Moscow in December, he commissioned Lissitzky to design a collection of his poems released under the imprint of the Soviet State Publishing house, GOSIZDAT.<sup>63</sup> *For the Voice*, as the volume was to be called, brought together thirteen of Mayakovsky's verses, emblemized in Lissitzky's bravura typographical frontispieces, in a compact paperback form. Like *About That*, the book designed for Mayakovsky by Aleksandr Rodchenko upon the poet's return to Moscow, *For the Voice* made significant gestures toward dada; but where Rodchenko's book demonstrates the constructivist's experiments with photomontage, Lissitzky's expands the strictly abstract idiom of Suprematism to include the various dingbats beloved of dada typographers, building on the structural demonstrations of *Of 2* ■ in order to match the intensity of a political broadsheet to the economy of a calligram.

Lissitzky's page layout for Mayakovsky's "Svolochi" ("Scum") embodies the new synthesis most convincingly. The two-page spread he designed for the poem in *For the Voice* is divided by the title, which runs vertically in a large sans serif font into and along the length of the gutter, bridging two nearly symmetrical pages (fig. 2.8). At left, three large red dots emblazoned with the names of the cosmopolitan centers London, Paris, Berlin are joined to three large red dashes by slender V-forms, which, rising rightward, fail to find the symmetrical sequence of dots that would complete the telegraphic distress signal, ••• — — — •••, *S O S*. In this

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<sup>62</sup> Ehrenburg reports the brawl in his memoirs, *Men, Years, Life, vol. 3: Truce: 1921-33*, trans. Tatania Shebunina (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1963), 20. See also the detailed analysis of Puni's lecture by Hubertus Gassner "Der Text im Kontext," in *Iwan Puni: syntetischer Musik*, 70-104.

<sup>63</sup> According to the evidence gathered by E.A. Dinershtein in his enlightening study of Mayakovsky's publishing history, the book was published without prior approval from Moscow and carried the imprimatur of GOSIZDAT on Mayakovsky's order alone. Thus, while the book was freely circulated abroad, it was not available within the USSR, even several years after its publication. Dinershtein, *Maiakovskii i kniga: iz istorii izdaniia proizvedenii poeta* (Moscow: Kniga, 1987), 82-85.

sense, Lissitzky's page builds on the reading of "Svolochi" punctuated by black squares that he had already designed for the third number of *Veshch'*, making explicit the previous version's resemblance to a constructivist telegram (fig. 2.9).<sup>64</sup> Leaving their message incomplete, each of these dashes terminates at a black skull and crossbones, while along the rightward-rising arms of the V-forms Lissitzky has set three iterations of the name Samara—the site of a horrendous famine over the winter of 1921-22, itself absent from the text of the poem but central to Lissitzky's reading of it.

The three-fold repetition of the city's name recalls the structural demonstrations of *Of 2* ■, first by printing the name with its three 'A's in double size majuscules, then uniting them into one treble 'A' alongside the consonants 'S M R', and finally as the three individual 'A's, shorn of their consonants and emerging as a pure cry. If the device is familiar from the previous book, it now functions contextually in quite a different manner, as the poem's explicit protest over the indifference of the cultured classes meets the unheard plaint of the suffering. Across the gutter, the first four lines of the poem rise diagonally, in echo of the incomplete distress call:

<i>Scum!</i>	<i>Svolochi!</i>
<i>Nailed by lines</i>	<i>Gvozdimye strokami</i>
<i>Stand mute!</i>	<i>Stoite nemy!</i>
<i>Listen to this wolfish wail</i>	<i>Slushajte etot volchii voi</i>
<i>Hardly passing as a poem!</i>	<i>Ele prikidyvaiushchiisia poemoi!</i>

Lissitzky's design capitalizes on Mayakovsky's potent opening metaphor, which, in imagining materialized poetic form, treats writing not as a neutral carrier of meaning, but as a weapon immobilizing its object. Literalizing the poem's opening self-portrait, each line of verse is emphatically underlined with a thick black bar. From the point of view of the poem, writing has

<sup>64</sup> For this version of the poem, Lissitzky set Marina Tsvetaeva's French translation, "Écoutez, canailles!" Tsvetaeva is uncredited in the journal, but her authorship of the translation is confirmed by Ehrenburg in *Men, Years, Life, vol. 2: The First Years of Revolution: 1918-21*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1962), 26.

emerged as a literary object, but Lissitzky's printing turns its attention to what he will subsequently call, in an essay of the same name, typographical facts.

Lissitzky's term evokes the Russian formalist Iurii Tynianov's similarly titled essay, "The Literary Fact," published in *LEF* one year after the publication of *For the Voice*. In this essay, Tynianov will argue for a constant flux of literary values; as marginal 'low' forms are canonized, the border between literature and everyday life shifts, locating forms now in one value system, now in another. Just as Tzara differentiates proper from common dada and finds the truth of the movement in the latter, Tynianov discovers *Zaum* ' in a variety of spheres. "Zaum' has always existed—in the language of children, of dissidents, etc.," he writes, "but only in our time has it become a literary fact. Inversely, what today is a literary fact tomorrow will become a simple fact of life and disappear from literature."<sup>65</sup> This shifting border between art and life results in a de-hierarchization of forms, with no single 'high' form retaining primacy. On the contrary, each formal construction takes not raw unworked matter as its material givens, but anonymous readymade constructions (like the speech of children and dissidents), such that the content of any construction is always another construction. In this way, constructions are positioned as terms in a series composed of both literary and non-literary forms, finding within themselves an attitude towards the social topography of use:

Every constructive principle sets up concrete connections of some form or another within these constructive series, a certain relationship of the constructive factor to what is

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<sup>65</sup> "Zaum' byla vseгда—byla v iazyke detei, sektantov i t.d., no tol'ko v nashe vremia ona stala literaturnym faktom i t.d. I naoborot, to, chto segodnia literaturnyi fakt, to na zavtra stanovitsia prostym faktom byta, ischezaet iz literatury" Iurii Tynianov, *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929; facsimile reprint, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 9. Compare with Tzara's remarks on dada at the Weimar congress: "Vous vous trompez si vous prenez dada pour une école moderne, ou même pour une réaction contre les écoles actuelles. Plusieurs de mes affirmations vous ont paru vieilles et naturelles, c'est la meilleure preuve que vous étiez dadaïstes sans le savoir et peut-être avant la naissance de Dada. ... Sans être littérateur vous pouvez être romantique, vous pouvaiez être rêveurs, las, fantasques, commerçants, maigres, transportés, vaniteux, aimables ou dada." "Vortrag Tzaras auf dem dadakongress in Weimar 1922," *Merz* 7 (January 1924): 69

subordinated. (In addition, a familiar *set* [*ustanovka*] toward this or that assignment or use of the construction may also enter into the constructive principle; the simplest example: a set toward the *enunciated* word enters into the constructive principle of oratorical speech and even of the oratorical lyric, etc.)<sup>66</sup>

In Tynianov's constructivist monism, the border between art and life is internal to every object, and each autonomous form is capable of calling up its social utility at any moment, just as every useful object can be regarded autonomously. Lissitzky attributes a similar becoming-useful to the Proun as it takes its *ustanovki* from painting to all the forms of everyday life. But the process is demonstrated for the first time in *For the Voice*, which proposes a series of instrumental mediations: from the poem's written lines to a telegraphic transcription to an absent receiver who begins the process over again. Insofar as the book incorporated an attitude toward the voice into its constructive principle, it opened onto all types of sending.

This orientation toward transmission is most visible in the book's outward form—perhaps its most renowned feature—in which the list of page numbers found in a traditional table of contents is replaced by an index system that operates through an optic-haptic interface. Unlike the more generously proportioned *Of 2* ■, whose pages proceed for the most part as individually sequenced tableaux in a manner ideal for table-top reading, *For the Voice* is constructed from a series of hand-sized die-cut pages, whose sequence of recessed notches align into a low, relief-like sculptural margin. The clearest source for this device is the thumb index of the common address book, an object which brings the book's declamatory attitude out into the

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<sup>66</sup> “Kazhdyi printsip konstruksii ustanavlivaet te ili inye konkretnye sviazi vnutri etikh konstruktivnykh riadov, to ili inoe otnoshenie konstruktivnogo faktora k podchinennym. (Pri etom v printsip konstruksii mozhnet vkhodit' i izvestnaia *ustanovka* na to ili inoe naznachenie ili upotreblenie konstruksii; prosteishii primer: v konstruktivnyi printsip oratorskoi rechi ili dazhe oratorskoi liriki vkhodit ustanovka na *proiznesennoe* slovo i t.d.)” Tynianov, *Arkhaisty i novatory*, 16.

street, providing directions for the disoriented or exchanging contacts with new acquaintances.<sup>67</sup> The address book also provides a decent analog to the scale of the book, which is perfectly fitted to a jacket pocket. But the very ubiquity of this object tends to conceal its links to the card catalogues and filing systems that presided over the growing bureaucratization of everyday life, and the rationalization of office work that was creating a growing class of white-collar workers in Berlin.<sup>68</sup> Describing *For the Voice* on a subsequent occasion, Lissitzky remembers wanting “to complete the task so the book would be an object, not like a decoration, but like an apparatus.”<sup>69</sup>

*For the Voice* may have sought its audience on the streets and in cafes, but it was an audience of clerks and telegraph operators, the mid-level functionaries of the technical intelligentsia whose attitudes were shaped by the rationalized activities of offices where the voice was overwhelmed by the quiet bustle of systems of writing. This is the audience Lissitzky addresses in “Typographical Facts”:

YOU have divided the day up into twenty-four hours. There is not another hour for extravagant effusion of feelings. The pattern of speech becomes increasingly concise, the gesture sharply imprinted. It is just the same with typography... YOU are accompanied from your first day onwards by printed paper, and your eye is superbly trained to find its way about in this specific field quickly, precisely, and without losing its way.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Lissitzky filled two such address books while in Germany, which are currently preserved with his correspondence at the GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 7.

<sup>68</sup> Frederick J. Schwartz *Blindspots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth Century Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). See also Lissitzky’s related remarks on the card catalog and the pressures of rationalization in the terrain of bookkeeping in his lecture of 1931, quoted in the introduction of the present study. Nikolai Kharzhiev archive, inventory no. 726, sheet 14. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

<sup>69</sup> “Ia khotel vypolnit’ zadanie, chtob kniga byla veshch’iu, ne kak ukrashenie, a kak pribor.” “O metodakh oformleniia kniga.” Nikolai Kharzhiev archive, inventory no. 725, l. 4. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. The typescript for this undated talk can be dated c. 1928 based on its references to *Pressa*.

<sup>70</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 355.

Once again, Lissitzky is tracing the line between autonomy and use that runs through the word *ustanovka*. For as much as his book consciously adopts an orientation toward rationalization in order to insert itself into a certain domain of use in the manner described by Tynianov, it also endorses and participates in the process of rationalization itself. Here again he approaches Gastev, who would soon turn to “the coarse language of trade letters, strange double entendres, the language of telegrams, the dialogue of business people meeting at the bank or the train station... in a word, all those words that are born in a compressed temporal and spatial situation,” as the points where the “production set” could be transformed into a “cultural set.”<sup>71</sup>

In *For the Voice*, pure Suprematism is for the most part conspicuously absent, abandoned in favor of the ironic mobilization of typographic clichés or eye-catching logo-types. But it does appear in one particularly significant location. The forms that the book takes as its models—the address book or the filing system—invariably rely on alphabetical order as a readymade schema. Such order is notably absent from *For the Voice*; instead, its navigational thumb-tabs are emblazoned with a set of Suprematist elements that evoke the material order of telegraphic transmission even as they frustrate it. The incongruity of these elements with their context is well described by Arvatov’s critique of *Veshch’* as a manifestation of the technical intelligentsia to which Suprematism remains foreign, but to describe them as opportunistic as Arvatov does would be to miss the intentional disruption of the patterns of rationalization that points the way toward changing them.

#### IV. *Demonstration*

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<sup>71</sup> “Zhestkii iazyk torgovykh pisem, chuzhdyi dvusmyslennosti, iazyk telegramm, dialog delovykh liudei pri vstrechakh v banke ili na vokzale... odnym slovom, vse slova, kotorye rozhdaiutsia v szhatoi vremenem i prostranstvom obstanovke.” “Novaia kultur’naia ustanovka” in *Kak nado rabotat’*. *Prakticheskoe vvedenie v nauka organizatsii truda*. Second printing (Moscow: Ekonomika, 1972), 97.

The start of the new year saw the publication of *Of 2* ■ in a Dutch translation and the opening of Lissitzky's first solo show in Germany, at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover—just one of several upcoming exhibition opportunities secured for him by Kurt Schwitters after the meeting of dadas and constructivists in Weimar.<sup>72</sup> Although no photographic documentation of the exhibition survives, it most likely included several new works, in addition to the lithographs and watercolors Lissitzky had carried with him from Russia; writing to van Doesburg in October, Hans Richter marveled at the new pictures Lissitzky had produced.<sup>73</sup> Whatever its contents, the show was a success: Alexander Dorner purchased a version of Lissitzky's *PI<sup>c</sup>* (*House Above the Earth*) for the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum in Hannover, and Eckart von Sydow commissioned a portfolio of lithographs for the members of the Kestner Gesellschaft.<sup>74</sup> This portfolio, the *I<sup>o</sup> Kestnermappe Proun*, was executed in tandem with Lissitzky's most important exhibition of 1923, and two of the portfolio's six lithographs are devoted to the project Lissitzky designed for the 3 × 3 meter space that the November Group had placed at his disposal for the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung in May.<sup>75</sup> Treating this exhibition as an opportunity to install a

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<sup>72</sup> "In Januar ist meine Ausstellung in Hannover (Kestner-Gesellschaft). Es ist wirklich komisch wie die Leute die zuerst so kalt waren, sich jetzt so schnell erwärmen biz zu glut... Diese ganz spekulation ist von Schwitters verschafft." El Lissitzky to Nelly van Doesburg, undated letter [fall 1922]. Inventory no. 111, Theo van Doesburg Archive, Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst (Van Moorsel Donation), The Hague. Lissitzky's book came out as a special double issue of *De Stijl* V nos. 10-11 (1922). Lissitzky also prepared a German translation of the book, but failed to find a publisher. His designs have been published in *Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde*, 318-25.

<sup>73</sup> "Bei Lissitzky war ich, hat schöne neue *Bilder!*" Hans Richter to Theo van Doesburg, October 1922, reprinted in *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-27*, 317.

<sup>74</sup> Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 34. This painting was later displayed at the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. Its current whereabouts are unknown. See Nisbet's comments in the corrigenda to his Proun inventory, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 375.

<sup>75</sup> As Cornelia Osswald-Hoffman notes in her exhaustive study of the Proun space, no documentation of the commission itself remains. *Zauber... und Zeigeräume: Raumgestalten der 20er und 30er Jahre* (Munich: Akademiker Verlag München, 2003), 228 n. 358. It should be noted however that the Novembergruppe had been in contact with the international department of IZO Narkompros since before the Treaty of Rapallo, as evidenced by the publication of the group's program in the IZO bulletin, *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn* ' 3 (March-April 1920): 16-18. Given Lissitzky's involvement with the international department, he may have functioned as a liaison upon arrival in

temporary expansion of a Proun, Lissitzky also concerned himself with the preservation and circulation of the project in print from the moment of its conception.

The multiple functions of an exhibition were very much on Lissitzky's mind during the spring of 1923. Not only was he engaged in mounting his own work at the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung, he was also scheduled to deliver a lecture on "The New Russian Art" in May, in conjunction with the installation of the van Diemen Gallery exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.<sup>76</sup> In the lecture, written concurrently with the installation of his work at the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung, Lissitzky relates how Soviet artists were "left in an intermediate space [*zwischenraum*] between studio and factory," commending the efforts of Gabo, Pevsner and Klutskis to "find other methods of demonstrating [*demonstrierung*] their work" by combining an open air exhibition with public lectures and the mass distribution of a poster-sized manifesto.<sup>77</sup> The terms used to describe this situation echo those first set out by Lissitzky, Richter and van Doesburg in their demands for a Constructivist International: "today we still stand between a society that does not need us and one that does not yet exist; therefore we consider exhibitions only as demonstrations of what we want to realize (projects, plans,

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Germany; this connection may explain the rather extraordinary circumstance of Lissitzky having been granted an entire room in the Novembergruppe's exhibition, while his colleagues all hung their works together. Lissitzky spent two weeks in Hannover printing the lithographic portfolio after traveling in the Netherlands for most of May. El Lissitzky to J.J.P. Oud, 1 August 1923. Lissitzky-Oud letters, inventory no. 1583, Stedelijk Vanabbemuseum, Eindhoven. Published in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky eds. *Proun und Wolkenbügel: Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), 121-22.

<sup>76</sup> Sophie Küppers' recollection that Lissitzky gave his lecture in Hannover on March 6 after having delivered it in Amsterdam and Berlin is erroneous (*Life, Letters, Texts*, 34). Lissitzky attempted to secure an entry visa for the Netherlands at the end of April, a process that could take up to two weeks without assistance in the Hague. El Lissitzky to J.J.P. Oud, 28 April 1923. Lissitzky-Oud letters, published in *Proun und Wolkenbügel, op. cit.*, 120-21. Lissitzky's typescript of the lecture "Neue russische Kunst" in the Nikolai Khardzhiev archive is signed and dated May 1923. Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 720. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

<sup>77</sup> "The New Russian Art: A Lecture," Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 337-338.



models) or what we have realized.”<sup>78</sup> These same criteria inform the brief article on the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung project, “Prounen Raum,” written by Lissitzky in the Netherlands in May and published alongside photos of his completed installation in the first number of *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, the journal he co-founded with Richter that summer.

Amid the *Prouns Space*'s many manifestations stands a Proun retrospectively titled *Proun GBA* (for its association with the Grosse Berliner Ausstellung), which is currently in the collection of the Gemeente Museum, The Hague (fig. 2.10).<sup>79</sup> The uncertain status of the painting is encapsulated by Lissitzky's complaint to a patron that “museum directors are convinced of the perpetual infallibility of their own spectacle lenses so that it never occurs to them to devise another method of exhibiting” what he calls “these documents of my work.”<sup>80</sup> Assigned to the surface facing the room's entrance, *Proun GBA* serves as the ground for the demonstration undertaken by Lissitzky in the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung installation, undergoing the negation specified in his *G* essay: “Space: not what one sees through the keyhole, through the open door. Space is not only there for the eyes. It is not an image.”<sup>81</sup> Lissitzky's abandonment of the painting to the spectacles of the museum directors is most directly registered by its exclusion from the *I° Kestnermappe Proun*. There, it is displaced by an unusual full-bleed print of a portion of the wall directly to its left, whose function within the portfolio lies primarily

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<sup>78</sup> “Heute stehen wir noch zwischen einer Gesellschaft, die uns nicht braucht, und einer, die noch nicht existiert; darum kommen für uns nur Ausstellungen in Betracht zur Demonstration dessen, was wir realisieren wollen (Entwürfe, Pläne, Modelle) oder was wir realisiert haben.” *De Stijl* V no. 4 (1922): 64.

<sup>79</sup> The title *Proun GBA* first appears in a checklist of Prouns that Lissitzky and Küppers drew up in 1924, currently in GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 7; reprinted in translation with commentary in Nisbet, *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 1987).

<sup>80</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 344.

<sup>81</sup> “Raum: das, was man nicht durch das Schlüsselloch ansieht, nicht durch die offene Tür. Raum ist nicht nur für die Augen da, ist kein Bild.” “Prounen Raum,” *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* no. 1 (July 1923): 4.

in communicating a sense of the installation's scale to an audience who had not experienced it in person (fig. 2.11).

When it does appear in *Proun Kestnermappe Proun*, *Proun GBA* has been fully incorporated into the space (fig. 2.12). The elements at the composition's lateral edges now continue across the joints between its surface and the adjacent walls, while a relief marking out the exact center of the wall with an asymmetrical X explicitly motions to the corners articulating the volume (to say nothing of the violent crossing out of the composition it effects).<sup>82</sup> The rising line on the right-hand wall, wrapping around the corner to overlay the large vertical band of *GBA*, has the distinct effect of propping up the center wall and thereby opening a space between it and the room's entrance, an effect redoubled by the spherical relief's gesture toward the grounding of the adjacent wall. This dramatization of the physical forces involved in raising the wall, echoed by the exhibition catalogue's inclusion of "wall" among the materials of Lissitzky's installation, is entirely unlike the accomplished and serene rectilinearity of the room's left side.<sup>83</sup> Floor and ceiling are similarly tied into these two phases of the room, with the square on the floor continuing an arc described by rectangles on the right wall and adjacent to the door, and the two perpendicular lines on the ceiling linking the cruciform arrangements of the center and left walls.

This dramatic enactment of structure is at one with the representational work performed by the axonometric view itself. Combining plan and elevation, the projection allows Lissitzky to reconcile the two sets of conceptual oppositions, uniting volume and void as much as sequence

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<sup>82</sup> Nancy Troy has shown that the corner was a site of particular investment for *De Stijl* artists, linking Lissitzky's Prounen-Raum to Piet Zwart's 1921 *Design for a Celluloid Manufacturer's Stand* at the Annual Utrecht Industrial Fair and to Vilmos Huszar's *Spatial Color Composition for an Exhibition*, which was completed with Gerrit Rietfeld for the Juryfreie Kunstschau in Berlin in Summer 1923 but never installed. Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 126-27.

<sup>83</sup> The entry reads "Lissitzky; E.L., Berlin, Prounen-Raum. Wand, Holz, Farbe." *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung 1923 im Landesausstellungsgebäude am Lehrter Bahnhof* (Berlin, 1923), 34. My reading of the space here is opposed to that of Kenneth Frampton, who sees in it an attempt to dematerialize the wall. Kenneth Frampton, "The Work and Influence of El Lissitzky," *Architect's Yearbook* 12 (1968): 253-68.

and simultaneity. The space can be grasped in its entirety from the visual center marked by the relief, with floor and ceiling integrating the sets of laterally interlinked elements that are pitted against the discrete unit of the wall. When viewed sequentially, volume and void alternate in accordance with the viewer's projective path through the work: passing leftward from entrance to exit along the diagonal of the print, the viewer pushes each surface into depth, whereupon the surfaces she has just released from her gaze spring forward again. This switching of the viewer's perceptual attitude between retention and protention of the imaginary volume matches—indeed, it is identical with—the automatic reassignment of individual planes from left- to right-handed orientations. These perceptual acts are in turn closely tied to the viewer's reassignment of above- and below-orientations to the ceiling and floor. Because these two surfaces join the room's opposing lateral walls along only two of four edges, they are similarly experienced in time, implying a virtual turning-in of the whole volume that is equally an unrolling-outward toward entrance and exit. The axonometry thus focuses both on the seams between the room's constituent components and the continuous joints and fissures binding ideation to embodied perception, positing space as an experiential unity of movement and time.<sup>84</sup>

The space of the *Kestnermappe* axonometry is very much an unconditional space, space *as such*, far from compromises of the exhibition hall; between the poles of studio and factory set out in Lissitzky's lecture on "The New Russian Art," it rests on the side of the former as the product of pure reflection. Lissitzky reports in *G* that when the design was installed the floor could not be realized "for material reasons," but this compromise seems to have been predicted. His early sketches, which lack the combination of central relief and floor treatment so integral to the projection's extremely active right side, treat the space primarily as a lateral sequence of four

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<sup>84</sup> My reading here draws on Yve-Alain Bois, "Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* vol. 76 no. 4 (April 1988): 161-81.

walls and regard the ceiling almost as an afterthought (fig. 2.13). In fact, Lissitzky did not accept so much as desire the alteration of the space, stressing in *G* that “the equilibrium I want to establish in the space must be elementary and mobile, so that it cannot be destroyed by a telephone, a piece of standardized office furniture, etc.”<sup>85</sup> These additions would certainly push the *Prouns Space* away from the reflective retreat of the studio, but they are ultimately oriented less toward the factory than the modern office. In this, they offer us an image of Lissitzky’s own Berlin studio in the negative, for it was precisely his studio’s lack of a telephone that had prevented the organizational nerve-center of the Constructivist International from being headquartered there.<sup>86</sup>

It is fitting that Lissitzky’s comments appeared alongside a photomontage reconstruction of the *Prouns Space* in *G*, whose first number Lissitzky co-edited with Richter shortly after the printing of the *P<sup>o</sup> Kestnermappe Proun*. For while most scholars agree that Lissitzky designed the paper, it was Richter’s telephone number that appeared on its masthead (fig. 2.14).<sup>87</sup> As it was

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<sup>85</sup> “Das Gleichgewicht, das ich im Raume erreichen will, muß beweglich und elementar sein, so daß es nicht durch ein Telefon, ein Stück normalisiertes Büromöbel etc. gestört werden kann” *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* no. 1 (July 1923): 4.

<sup>86</sup> “Dass du die Internat. wieder aufwärmst[?], ist schön... Centrale schlage ich vor bei mir *Eschenstr 7 Friedenau Tel. Reingau 9978*. – Da ich selbst Besitzer, Mieter des Ateliers bin und mich dort fest eingerichtet habe und dort bleiben werde, eignet sich das unter diesen Umständen besser dazu als Lissitzky’s (der sein Atelier auch nur möbliert gemietet hat kein Telefon etc) abgesehen von Sonstigem.” Hans Richter to Theo van Doesburg, October 1922. Reprinted in *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-27*, 317. Éva Forgács has argued along similar lines that Lissitzky’s repeated protestation in the *G* essay that the space is not a living room represents an attempt to distance it from a studio space, in this case that of Erich Buchholz. See her “Definitive Space: The Many Utopias of El Lissitzky’s *Proun Room*” in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed eds. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 47-77.

<sup>87</sup> The attribution of *G*’s design to Lissitzky has been advanced most recently by Maria Gough, “Contains Graphic Material: El Lissitzky and The Topography of *G*” in *G: An Avant-garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design and Film, 1923-26* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010), 21-52. Gough’s argument builds on evidence first assembled by Peter Nisbet in *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 271-80. Victor Margolin has also identified Lissitzky as the designer of *G*, although he departs from other commentators in assigning the journal’s second number to him as well. See “El Lissitzky’s Berlin Graphics in *For the Voice: Voices of Revolution: Collected Essays*, 214 n. 30. The address and telephone number on the masthead match Richter’s, as reported to van Doesburg in his letter of October 1922.

reproduced in *G*, the *Prouns Space* did away with both floor and ceiling, instead presenting the sequential unfurling of four walls in plan and panorama. The rudimentary square plan adjacent to the photomontage, which Lissitzky cross-references with numbers above the images to its left, echoes the large □ abutting the paper's titular *G*—a letter whose form Lissitzky seems to have read as a counter-clockwise arrow in accordance with his preferred viewing order for the square plan of the *Prouns Space*. Rather than assembling four pictures of individual walls as the plan might suggest, Lissitzky has photographed the room's corners, stressing the unifying character of the elements breaching them. The resulting space buckles in unexpected ways, producing an accordion-like effect by suturing together two photographs mid-wall. This suture once again enacts a certain dis- and rearticulation of the room's basis in *Proun GBA* and in doing so approximates some of the perceptual activation of the *Kestnermappe* axonometry. However, if the visual effect is akin to that of the axonometry, its production is askew: where sequence and simultaneity complemented one another in the room's conception by smoothing the joints of a given space, in reproduction the experience of simultaneity can only be produced through the interruptions of the photographic construction.<sup>88</sup>

The disjunctive experience of the photomontage version of the *Prouns Space* is repeated and reinforced in the reading experience produced by Lissitzky's overall design for *G*. As Maria Gough has demonstrated, *G*'s typography effects a dramatic repurposing of the folds of its newspaper format by running two phrases adapted from Engels and Marx, respectively, "*Just no eternal truths*" and "*Art should not explain life, but change it,*" along the inner and outer folds of the paper, incorporating a rotational motion first encountered in the *Prouns* into the experience of

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<sup>88</sup> Lissitzky later regarded this montage as a work in its own right, including it in the 1929 Werkbund exhibition, *Film und Foto*, in Stuttgart; however, its original presentation was as a contextualized piece of *G*, which was itself set to be shown as a work before the end of 1923.

reading.<sup>89</sup> This device, whose attention to the constructional particularities of the format is similar to the treatment of architectural givens in the *Prouns Space*, may have in fact been derived from the latter. But if this attitude has informed the reading space of *G*, it also points toward a further mediation. The reader would most likely first encounter the paper's adaptation of Marx's slogan after having opened pages 2-3 to discover a strip of Richter's film *Rhythmus 21* running horizontally across the masthead; with Richter's typed commentary oriented vertically, the viewer must either read from bottom to top, neck craning leftward, or turn the paper so as to comfortably scan the film from top to bottom (fig. 2.15). Righting the paper and turning to its back page, the reader could hardly fail to notice the visual rhyming of Lissitzky's *Prouns Space* with the sequential unfolding of Richter's film, as the black square with which Richter closes his filmic progression now begins the viewing of Lissitzky's room—and the paper itself—from back to front. The newspaper itself, Lissitzky seems to suggest, mediates between two analogous kinds of movement: the exhibition panorama “where one goes round and round,” and the unspooling of the film before the projector lamp.<sup>90</sup>

The summer of 1923 marked both the zenith and transformation of Lissitzky's engagement as a print designer. As *G* went to press, he was invited to prepare another room for the Juryfreie Kunstschau Berlin that autumn.<sup>91</sup> Although for financial reasons the show would not be mounted, Lissitzky's unexecuted design reveals his intention to present a “room of typo-

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<sup>89</sup> Gough, “El Lissitzky and The Topography of *G*” in *G: An Avant-garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design and Film*, 32-36.

<sup>90</sup> “In einer Ausstellung geht man rings herum. Darum soll der Raum organisiert sein, dass man durch ihn selbst veranlasst wird, in in ihm herum zu gehen.” “Prounen Raum,” *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* 1 (July 1923): 4.

<sup>91</sup> This time three of his contemporaries—Erich Buchholz, Vilmos Huszar, and Willi Baumeister—were invited as well. See Gough, “The Topography of *G*,” 27, and Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 271-80.

lithography” containing multiple copies of *Of 2* ■, *Veshch'*, *For the Voice*, *G* and the *I<sup>e</sup> Kestnermappe Proun*, as well as a second portfolio of lithographs he was then producing for the Kestner Gesellschaft. In a sense, the new space would have completed the transformation of the *Prouns Space* into a functional apparatus that Lissitzky forecasted in his *G* essay, a journey analogous to that accomplished between *Of 2* ■ and *For the Voice*. At this time, Lissitzky published eight theses on “The Topography of Typography” in *Merz* as an excerpt from a forthcoming book, which culminated in a call for the transcendence of print’s current material limitations. “The printed sheet overcomes time and space,” Lissitzky writes. “The printed sheet, the infinitude of the book, must be overcome: THE ELECTRO-LIBRARY.”<sup>92</sup> In October, *Merz* would feature a “125 Volt Heliostuction”—a photogram—by Lissitzky and Vilmos Huszar, signaling Lissitzky’s turn from typography and lithography toward new kinds of photographic experimentation (fig. 2.16).

As a farewell to the medium, Lissitzky completed one of his most accomplished efforts in pure letterpress typography: a poster for Hausmann and Schwitters’ December Dada Matinée, at which Schwitters was to perform his new *Ursonate* (fig. 2.17). The poem, a grand undertaking of long-form abstraction, opens with an homage to Hausmann’s foundational poster poems,

*Fümms bö wö tää zää Uu,*  
*pögiff,*  
*kwii Ee*

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<sup>92</sup> “Der gedruckte Bogen überwindet Raum und Zeit. Der gedruckte Bogen, die Unendlichkeit der Bücher, muss überwinden werden. DIE ELEKTRO-BIBLIOTHEK.” *Merz* 4 (July 1923): 47. Moholy-Nagy probably has Lissitzky’s unfinished book project in mind when proposes that Lissitzky submit a manuscript on typography for the new *Bauhausbücher* series, since he takes care to mention that the series can include both commissioned and already completed texts. László Moholy-Nagy to El Lissitzky, 17 April 1924. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 47. Although Lissitzky begins to gather materials for a project pertaining to typography, no writing fitting this description will appear until the essay “Unser Buch” is published in 1927.

which is then developed as a leitmotif and extended over the course of the poem in different variations of the original sequence. Rather than adopt this reference to Hausmann for his typographical material, Lissitzky focuses his attention on the poem's thirteenth and fourteenth themes, which could perhaps be judged more regular, typographically speaking, thus providing more opportunity for visual play:

*Tatta tatta tuiEe tuEe*  
*Tatta tatta tuiEe tuEe*  
*Tatta tatta tuiEe tuEe*  
*Tatta tatta tuiEe tuEe*

*Tilla lalla tilla lalla*  
*Tilla lalla tilla lalla*  
*Tilla lalla tilla lalla*  
*Tilla lalla tilla lalla*

*Tuii tuii tuii tuii*  
*Tuii tuii tuii tuii*  
*Tee tee tee tee*  
*Tee tee tee tee*

In the poster, these formal repetitions are radically condensed into a tiny square densely packed with type. Playfully, Lissitzky inserts majuscules to signal the emphatic rhythms of the fourteenth theme and stretches the returning 'tuiis' of the thirteenth along the lower margin in a much smaller point size as if to mime the chirping of a small bird or nocturnal insect. And he can hardly resist signing the form as a whole by inconspicuously inserting a single typographical stroke—less a letter than the shadow of one, printed in gray and withdrawing from the definitive black of the text—into the *Ursonate*'s fourteenth theme. This small mark imposes Lissitzky's own leitmotif on Schwitters' material, transforming *TuiEe* into *TuiEl*. The resulting syllables unmistakably echo the transrational UNOVIS hymn from which Lissitzky had adopted his new name in 1919:

*Uel el el' ul teka*



*I will follow my new path.*

The incessant activity of the past two years had taken its toll on Lissitzky, who contracted a vicious case of pneumonia during the winter of 1923. Aided by Lissitzky's unwillingness to rest, the illness quickly returned and a further examination now yielded the much more serious diagnosis of pulmonary tuberculosis.<sup>93</sup> With assistance of his new friends in Hannover, Lissitzky quickly prepared to leave Germany for a course of treatment in Switzerland early in 1924. After an initial period of settling in, he once again resumed his work in Switzerland, devoting himself to the correspondence that he had neglected during the frenetic period after his departure from the USSR—Malevich's first of all. But the long silence had strained his ties to UNOVIS, and Malevich responded to Lissitzky's renewed overtures with spiteful accusations: "Recall the year 1919 when we agreed to work on Suprematism and wanted to write a book, and now just look where you are, you Constructivist-Montagist. You wanted to emancipate your individuality, and your "I" from what I had accomplished."<sup>94</sup> Lissitzky's reply to these attacks is surprisingly sanguine. Rather than respond to Malevich directly, he opted to address an open letter to the artist in the pages of *G*. Writing in the spirit of affirmation, Lissitzky let Malevich's accusations pass unacknowledged, offering his own version of events instead:

An invention can be valued according to its distribution [*verbreitung*]. Unfortunately, in being popularized inventions are inadequately [*nicht vollwertiger*] made, and are too quickly devalued. In the same way, an inflation of the square has been created. This is only evidence for the great number of producers and the pettiness of consumers. One of my sins was to transplant the bacillus of the ■ into Central Europe. In 1922, my tale of 2 ■ appeared in Berlin in Russian and in Weimar as a double-issue of the Dutch journal

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<sup>93</sup> These events are recorded by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers in *Life, Letters, Texts*, 37.

<sup>94</sup> Kazimir Malevich to El Lissitzky, 17 June 1924, in *Experiment/Eksperiment* vol. 5 (1999): 152-154; English trans. in *Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (*op. cit.*), 248. Malevich's accusation that Lissitzky is "not even a Prounist" is clearly spurious given Lissitzky's activities in Berlin and Hannover.

*De Stijl*. What was for us of the greatest gravity and significance was here slurped down like a cup of coffee.<sup>95</sup>

The language of Lissitzky's letter is dense with allusion, all of which aims to demonstrate the inevitable entanglement of the sign with the economic cycles of production and consumption. Although it is tinged with regret, it signals not an abandonment but a transformation of Lissitzky's project. Not an emancipation of his individuality from the influence of Malevich, but an attempt to move forward on the path of production.

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<sup>95</sup> "Eine Erfindung kann man nach ihrer Verbreitung werten. Leide[r] warden erfindungen beim popularisieren nicht vollmächtiger gemacht, sondern zu schnell entwertet. So hat man auch eine Inflation des Quadrats geschaffen. Es ist nur beweis für die Grösse des Produzenten und die Kleinlichkeit der Konsumenten. Eine von meine Sünden war den ■ Bazillus nach Central-Europa zu verplanzen. 1922 ist in Berlin in russischer Sprache und in Weimer als Doppelhaft der holländischen Zeitschrift 'Styl' meine Mär von 2 ■ erschienen. Das was für uns vom grossem Ernst und Sinn war, hat man hier wie eine Tasse Kaffee ausgeschlürft." RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 568, l. 4. The letter remained unpublished.

## Chapter 3 | Not Painting: Locarno and Moscow, 1924-1929

*No longer does the object, by crossing the trajectories of its outer within the iris, project a badly inverted image on the surface. The photographer has invented a new method: he presents to space an image that exceeds it, and the air, with its clenched fists and superior intelligence, seizes it and holds it next to its heart.*

– Tristan Tzara, “Photography Upside-Down,” 1922<sup>1</sup>

*In the joke too, in invective, in misunderstanding, in all cases where an action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, the long-sought image sphere is opened, the world of universal and integral actualities, where the “best room” is missing...*

– Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 1929<sup>2</sup>

Among Lissitzky’s extant notes is a short slogan, jotted down alongside some passages transcribed from his current reading and a list of titles he had yet to acquire: “not world-knowledge, but orientation in the world.”<sup>3</sup> The phrase is a resonant one for the period after Lissitzky’s departure from Germany. Severely handicapped by his tuberculosis and seeking affordable treatment and lodging in conditions that would still allow him to work, Lissitzky relocated several times over the course of the year, living primarily on a small stipend provided by the firm of Günther Wagner in exchange for the regular design of print advertisements.

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<sup>1</sup> “Photography Upside-Down”, translated in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Aperture, 1989), 4.

<sup>2</sup> “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” trans. Edmund Jephcott in Peter Demetz, ed., *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 192.

<sup>3</sup> “Nicht Welterkenntnis sondern Orientierung in der Welt.” GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 7. Published in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky eds., *Proun und Wolkenbügel: Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), 14.

Distance strained his alliances in Germany and he turned again to his UNOVIS roots, looking to fill his bedridden days by translating Malevich's writings. But rather than achieving a therapeutic effect, this undertaking only deepened his separation from both spheres. Writing to Sophie Küppers, his dealer and increasingly his only confidant, Lissitzky summed up his overall predicament: "you can easily go mad if you don't master the foreign language and yet forget your own."<sup>4</sup> This hiatus was not only a factual contingency of Lissitzky's life situation, but also a dilemma emerging within his work, for it was quickly becoming clear to him that his engagement with contemporary painting had run its course. Responding to Küppers' query about a Paris exhibition in a letter of March 21, 1924, he writes, "I simply have no works anymore... [an exhibition] would have to have almost a retrospective character, because I do not know what I will do in the future."<sup>5</sup> By April, he was more confident, proclaiming, "I no longer imagine for a moment that I will return to painting again, even if I recover."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the new turn of phrase, "not world-knowledge, but orientation in the world," becomes significant as a revision of Lissitzky's earlier Proun slogan "Not Worldvision—but Worldreality," for it marks the shift in perspective that follows upon his final rejection of the synoptic 'worldvision' afforded by painting in favor of a 'worldreality' that was perhaps unexpectedly disorienting.

The hesitation of Lissitzky's letter to Küppers—"I do not know what I will do in the future"—is truer to the experience of any present than the prosthetic historicism typical of the debates from which the Proun emerged. And while Lissitzky certainly sought to make good on his initial narrative of the Proun as a stopping place on the way to architecture, devoting many

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<sup>4</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 6 March 1924, in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whitall (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 45. Lissitzky's translation of Malevich's essay "Lenin" appeared in *Das Kunstblatt* 10 (October 1924): 289-293.

<sup>5</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 21 March 1924, in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 2 April 1924, *ibid.*, 48.

hours to architectural competitions after his return to Moscow in June of 1925, his efforts coincided with the revaluation and broad embrace of photography by the avant-garde—a development whose effects on his project he could scarcely have foreseen in 1920. Ironically, of the two definitive works Lissitzky completed in Switzerland, his stunning design for a horizontal skyscraper and his photographic self portrait, the latter was to become the more iconic. This riddle is embedded in Lissitzky’s subsequent projects as well. Maria Gough has found that despite its concern with the architectural discourse of standardization, the cumulative effect of Lissitzky’s 1926 Dresden *Raum für konstruktive Kunst* is “para-cinematic,” an impression confirmed by Lissitzky’s use of the room’s crenellated walls as a model for his photomontage, *Runner in the City*, several years later.<sup>7</sup> Although similarities to his INKhUK lecture of 1921 have obscured this detail, Lissitzky’s major theoretical writing of 1924, “K. und Pangeometrie,” speaks neither of the Proun nor of architecture; instead, it is concerned with kinetic art, advertising and film. Of photography Lissitzky wrote precious little, and it was not until 1929 that he published an essay on the topic, which, with its strangely regressive title, “Photopainting,” seems to erase any memory of the Proun’s struggle against the medium.

Unlike its opposite, the experience of uncertainty is not a private one. It was nowhere more productive than in the practice of criticism, where impatience with the inheritance of traditional historiography infused the writings of the OPOIAZ group. In his 1926 survey of a decade of effort, Boris Eikhenbaum stressed that the formalists were striving to fashion a concept of evolution “divorced from ideas of progress and decorous succession.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, they would fashion a history of lateral shifts and displacements, in which continuity exists only as an

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Gough, “Constructivism Disoriented,” in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds., (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 89.

<sup>8</sup> Boris Eikhenbaum, “Theory of the Formal Method,” in Ladislav Matejka and Krystin Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 30.

embarrassing contingency, the exception rather than the rule. Outlining a systematic theory of evolution the following year, Iurii Tynianov proposed, “Let’s strike the teleological, goal-oriented cast, the ‘intention’ from the word ‘set’.”<sup>9</sup> In place of this teleological aim, he saw an impersonal and transhistorical norm like Saussure’s concept of *langue*, in which “the concept of a discursive function’s ‘set’ relates only to a literary series or the system of literature, but not to the individual work.”<sup>10</sup> But once progress toward a goal had been replaced by systematic synchrony, Tynianov found that “a work is correlated to a particular literary series depending on its ‘deviation’, its ‘difference’ from it, precisely by its attitude to the literary series that it separates itself from.” In other words, that difference depends on, even strengthens, a given identity—“a curious fact, from an evolutionary point of view.”<sup>11</sup>

For a generation that had clothed itself in historical necessity, history’s indifference to its ventures was a significant source of embarrassment. In his new role as founding editor of the journal *Kino-fot*, Aleksei Gan had already come out against the “so-called left front of the arts,” citing the productivists, Komfutists and Unovists as the new center of “myth creation.”<sup>12</sup> For Lissitzky, attaining of the stage of architectural praxis he foresaw as a member of UNOVIS was marked by repeated failures. By contrast, he had more success as an exhibition designer, winning commissions in Dresden in 1926 and Moscow the following year. But like Gan, it was

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<sup>9</sup> “Vycherknem teleologicheskii, tselovoi ottenok, ‘namerenie’, iz slova ‘ustanovka’.” *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929. Facsimile edition, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 43.

<sup>10</sup> “Poniatie ‘ustanovki’ rechevoi funktsii otnositsia k literaturnomu riadu, ili sisteme literatury, no ne k otdel’nomu proizvedeniiu.” *Ibid.*, 41. The invocation of Saussure occurs in “Problems in the Study of Language and Literature,” co-authored with Roman Jakobson in *Language in Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), 47-50.

<sup>11</sup> “Zdes’ eshche odin liubotynnyi, s tochki zreniia evoliutsionnoi, fakt. Sootnositsia proizvedenie po tomu ili inomu literaturnomu riadu, v zavisimosti ot ‘otstupleniia’, ot ‘diferentsii, imenno po otnosheniiu k tomu literaturnomu riadu, po kotoromu ono raznositsia.” Tynianov, *Arkhaisty i Novatory*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Aleksei Gan, “‘Levyi front’ i kinomatografiia,” *Kino-fot* 5 (10 December 1922): 1-2. As of 1923, Gan supported primarily Rodchenko and Dziga Vertov, a stance that Osip Brik would adopt several years later.

Lissitzky's work as a print designer that continued to supply his real intercourse with the world. Writing in the *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* in 1927, Lissitzky offered new narrative in place of the Proun's transition from painting to architecture. He now spoke of "the dominance, in our transitional period, of the illustrated weekly magazine," noting that "the invention of the easel painting produced great works of art, but their effectiveness has been lost. The cinema and the illustrated weekly have triumphed."<sup>13</sup> For the inventor of the Proun, this detour through film and photography could hardly be considered progress. Rather, it was a repetition occasioning a return to the problems that beset painting: image, representation, perspective and illusion.

### I. *Palpable Illusion*

Prior to his departure for Switzerland in early February 1924, Lissitzky had negotiated a contract, brokered by Sophie Küppers, with the Hannover firm of Günther Wagner, exchanging his services as an advertising designer for a monthly pension of 300 marks, a sum that secured him the regular income legally required for his residency while receiving treatment.<sup>14</sup> He had also begun a double issue of *Merz* co-authored with Kurt Schwitters, entitled *Nasci*, a Latin word for genesis or becoming. Taken together, these engagements provide a view into Lissitzky's position in an emerging avant-garde discourse on photography.

In the broadest sense, *Nasci* is a historical essay in which Lissitzky and Schwitters, through the collation of a select group of images and quotations, try to evoke the continuous development of art's means and techniques, while relegating its formal accomplishments to a

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<sup>13</sup> "Unser Buch," *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* (Mainz: Gutenberg Gesellschaft, 1927): 177. Trans. Helene Aldwinckle as "Our Book" in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 359.

<sup>14</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 37. The initial plans to receive treatment at Lugano proved optimistic, as the hospital there was overcrowded.

secondary role. “EVERY FORM IS THE HARDENED MOMENTARY IMAGE OF A PROCESS,” Lissitzky stresses in *Nasci*’s editorial, referring not only to the creation of individual works, but also that historical current animating the whole, whose unrepresentability is emblemized by the issue’s striking absence of text.<sup>15</sup> In opposition to the ubiquitous characterization of the modern as an art of the machine, he insists that “the machine has not separated us from nature. Through it we have discovered a new, hitherto unforeseen nature.” Turning the page, the reader encounters the *Black Square*, and the complement to Lissitzky’s thought: “Our effort to define the beauty of nature is and will always remain unsuccessful, since we ourselves are nature and always endeavor to reconstruct its optical appearance.”<sup>16</sup> From the outset then, *Nasci* advocates not against the machine so much as against the opposition of machine and nature, in favor of a general process in which the machine serves a gaze that forever exceeds its intended object. The machine is only an instrument of a historical process of becoming that abandons itself in the image, “only a brush, and a crude one at that.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “JEDE FORM IST DAS ERSTARRTES MOMENT-BILD EINES PROCESSES.” *Merz* 8-9 (April-July 1924): n.p. “Stiffened” better encompasses the range of uses of *erstarrte*, which may refer to a batter as well as a frightened person, but it is awkward in the present context. John Elderfield traces the roots of this rhetoric to Schwitters’ interest in Henri Bergson in his *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 131-38.

<sup>16</sup> “Die Maschine hat uns nicht von der Natur getrennt. Durch sie haben wir eine neue, vorher nicht geahnte Natur entdeckt. . . Unser Bemühen, die Schönheit der Natur festzulegen, ist und wird immer erfolglos bleiben, denn wir sind selbst Natur und immer bestrebt die optische Erscheinung der Natur umzubauen.” *Merz* 8-9 (April-July 1924), n.p. These quotes are taken from Malevich’s “On the New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed.”

<sup>17</sup> “Die Maschine ist nicht mehr als Pinsel, und sogar ein sehr primitiver.” *Ibid.* Correspondingly, the “seven fundamental forms” borrowed from the Austrian biologist Raoul Francé, which appear in the issue opposite a Proun represent a provisional, historical image of nature, one in no way fundamental for Lissitzky. Peter Nisbet makes this point when he argues that Lissitzky, in copying out passages from Francé, tried to place art outside of Francé’s “bio-mechanical” system of nature. See *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years* (PhD Diss.: Yale University, 1995), 184-87. As Nisbet also notes, an excerpt of Francé’s book, *Bios: Die Gesetze der Welt*, had been published in *Das Kunstblatt*, with an editorial comment that expressed the hope that Francé’s writings could help clarify the present artistic situation (*ibid.*, 173); it is notable that Lissitzky did not read *Bios* until *after* he and Schwitters had completed the layout for *Nasci* (see his letter of 23 March 1924 in *Life, Letters, Texts*, 47), and was thus most likely responding to the proposal of *Das Kunstblatt*. The sections quoted from Francé in *Nasci* are printed in *Das Kunstblatt* (January 1923): 8-10.



Fittingly, an essay valuing process over form closes with a Rayograph of 1922 (fig. 3.1). The technique of cameraless photography, embraced (and branded) by Man Ray the previous year, ably allegorizes *Nasci*'s account of the avant-garde, with the machine evoked only by its absence, and the image an unintended remainder. Man Ray's presence in *Nasci* indicates the importance of his example for Lissitzky's subsequent experiments in the photography. But this recognition of Man Ray's accomplishments also implies a third party, László Moholy-Nagy, who had published his own efforts in *Merz* and *Broom*, prior to Lissitzky's first experiments with the photogram the previous year. Moholy had also written a brief essay for *Broom*, "Light, a Medium of Plastic Expression," which advanced theses strikingly similar to those in *Nasci*'s editorial, namely, that "the proper utilization of the plate itself would have brought to light phenomena imperceptible to the human eye and visible only by means of the photographic apparatus."<sup>18</sup> With Moholy in view, *Nasci* conveys a discreet criticism: assimilating the Hungarian artist's theses to Malevich's and replacing his photograms with Man Ray's, Lissitzky issues a tacit rebuke that could hardly have escaped Moholy's attention.

If there is a critique in *Nasci*, rather than simple animosity, it is founded on an aporia in Lissitzky's thought that he himself had not fully resolved. *Nasci*'s final spread, pairing the Rayograph with Braque's *papier collé*, *Le Petit Eclairer*, suggests that the photogram—and perhaps Moholy's embrace of it—had reawakened the substantial difficulties Lissitzky encountered in 1921 in an unpublished pamphlet on Proun, where he explicitly acknowledges the possibility that light may serve as a medium of plastic expression:

Under conditions of absolute painting, it would be necessary not to paint the canvas with colors, but to somehow physically or chemically work its surfaces in order that they

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<sup>18</sup> "Light, a Medium of Plastic Expression," *Broom: An International Magazine of the Arts*, vol. 4 no. 4 (March 1923): 283. The quarrel between Lissitzky and Moholy over the photogram has figured in the literature on both artists, which routinely cites Lissitzky's letter to Küppers of 15 September 1925; leaving aside the matter of the 'invention' of the photogram, I will suggest here that the disagreement has another kind of significance and effect.

reflect that part of the spectrum of light falling on them whose color we need, so that we would see color just as we see it in the spectrum received through a prism.

But we proceed differently. We take the material of paints (colored earth, powders with a certain hue) and arrange them on canvas. The nature of their covering, their binding (oil, mastic, egg) gives them a certain intensity. Thus, by way of the material of paints we give equivalents of the sensations of pure color, of color as such. But the limitation of colored material by the content of tubes is a prejudice created by paint manufacturers. New artists began to introduce into their canvas for its painterly demands, for its chromatic qualities and *faktura*, paper, chalk, cement, wire, and so on, just like cinobar, ochre, Veronese green. In his struggle against aestheticism the new artist came to believe that he had found himself a way out in new material, in the material of the technical world. He felt some of the qualities peculiar to it, not only for the eye but for touch, for the hands.<sup>19</sup>

As an artifact of Lissitzky's struggle to reconcile Tatlin's sculptural assemblages with Malevich's Suprematism, this passage confirms Briony Fer's prescient claim that Suprematism effected an optical sublation of collage procedures.<sup>20</sup> This much is evident in Lissitzky's perception that "Suprematism returned primacy to a reality *palpable* through the eyes. With this, it approached illusionism and led it to the absolute."<sup>21</sup> He could no more avoid acknowledging that Suprematism had preserved tactility in its palpable illusionism than that collage and the contre-

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<sup>19</sup> "Pri absoliutnoi zhivopisi nuzhno bylo by ne raskrashivat' kholst kraskami, no kak to tak khimicheski ili fizicheski obrabatyvat' svoi poverkhnosti, chtob oni otrazhali tu chast' padaiushchego na nikh spektral'nogo lucha, tsvet kotorogo nam nuzhen. Chtob my videli tsvet tak zhe tak my ego videm v spektre poluchennom cherez prizmu. No my postupaem inache. My berem material krasok (tsvetnye zemli, orkashennye poroshki) i nakladyvaem ikh na kholst. Rad ikh nakladki, ikh zakrepleniia (maslo, klei, iatso) daet im tu ili druguiu intensivnost'. Itak my materialami krasok daem ekvivalenty oshchushchenii chistogo tsveta, tsveta kak takogo. No ogranichenie svoego tsvetogo materiala tem chto v tiubakax, eto predrassudok sozdanyi fabrikantami krasok. Novyi khudozhniki nachali vvodit' v svoi kholst dlia ego *zhivopisnykh* trebovanii, dlia ego tsvetovykh i fakturnykh kachestv takzhe kak kinobar', okhru, pal'-veronez—bumagu, mel, tsement, provoloku i pr. V svoei bor'be protiv estetizma, novyi khudozhnik uveroval, chto v novom materiale, v materiale tekhnicheskogo mira, on nashel vykhod dlia sebja. On pochustvoval v materiale kakie to ego, emu svoimstvennye kachestva, kotorye uzhe ne tol'ko dlia glaz, no dlia trogan'ia, dlia ruk." *Experiment/Eksperiment: A Journal of Russian Culture* vol. 5 (1999): 140.

<sup>20</sup> I follow Briony Fer in assuming that "collage has both a literal sense... and a metaphorical sense, which refers to the kinds of demands exerted by such intrusive effects, whether or not the technique can literally be called 'collage'." Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 26-31.

<sup>21</sup> "Suprematizm otdal pervenstvo real'nosti, oshchupyyvaemoi glazami. Etim on prishel k illiuziornosti i dovel ee do absoliuta." *Experiment/Eksperiment: A Journal of Russian Culture* vol. 5 (1999): 143 (emphasis added).

relief had exposed the arbitrariness of painting's historically and industrially determined materials. If, as Lissitzky struggles to convey, Suprematism is a sort of collage constructed from the industrial readymade of paint, then Man Ray's photograms repeat this paradox with the materials of photography, dispensing with well-ordered representational space in favor of the auratic "painterly mark" of commodity objects.<sup>22</sup>

Although Moholy showed little interest in collage before the mid-1920s, Tatlin's experiments with the technique posed an early challenge for Lissitzky. As in 1921, this difficulty manifested itself in Lissitzky's focus on theoretical matters during the spring of 1924. A planned book, variously called *I=I* and *The Amechanics of Art*, survives only as an essay, "K[unst] und Pangeometrie," that Lissitzky published in Paul Westheim and Carl Einstein's *Europa Almanach* in 1925.<sup>23</sup> As in his INKhUK lecture of 1921, "K. und Pangeometrie" treats the concept of space, joining the history of mathematics and the history of art. However, instead reflecting on Suprematism and Proun, Lissitzky now outlines four spatial modes: planimetric (flat or tiered space), perspectival (regularly receding deep space), irrational (irregular deep space) and imaginary (discontinuous space).<sup>24</sup> Still, in the context of the argument the principal function of these spatial categories is to clearly demarcate the differences between Malevich and Tatlin.

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<sup>22</sup> This is Rosalind Krauss's interpretation of the Rayograph. See "The Object Caught by the Heel" in *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 249-51. Cf. the related comments by Marcel Duchamp: "a tube of paint that an artist uses is not made by the artist; it is made by the manufacturer that makes paints. So the painter really is making a readymade *when he paints with a manufactured object* that is called paints." Quoted in Thierry de Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 163 (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> The title *I=I* is given in a letter to Küppers of 6 March 1924 (Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 45), while *Amechanics of Art* appears in the drafts of "K. und Pangeometrie" preserved in RGALI fond 2361 op. 1 d. 28, l. 9. The essay appeared in Carl Einstein and Paul Westheim, eds., *Europa Almanach* (Potsdam: Kiepenheuer, 1925), 103-113.

<sup>24</sup> On the mathematical themes of the essay, see Yve-Alain Bois, "From  $-\infty$  to 0 to  $+\infty$ : Axonometry, or El Lissitzky's Mathematical Paradigm" in *El Lissitzky* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1990), 27-33.

Replacing the opposition of vision and touch that Suprematism confounded with more complex spatial categories, Lissitzky argues that insofar as Tatlin's embrace of tactility simply inverts the tactile/optical binary, an inverted perspectival space also continues to function in his work.<sup>25</sup> The problem with this inversion is that the categorical disjunction that collage instituted between its elements is replaced by the literal space between them. Malevich's irrational space, by contrast, produces the illusion of absolute distances that can be grasped but not measured (fig. 3.2).<sup>26</sup>

The absence of the Proun from "K. und Pangeometrie" exposes the difficulty inherent in Suprematism's return to optical space. Tatlin and the problem of the haptic still emerge here, however, in displacement: instead of heralding a new era of architecture, Suprematist space now wards off the danger of kineticism exemplified by the rotating volumes of Tatlin's *Monument to the III International* and Naum Gabo's metronomic sculpture, *Space Construction C*, which "create movement through movement."<sup>27</sup> Against this literal kineticism, Lissitzky validates what Viktor Shklovsky had recently called film's "semantic motion—the sign perceived through our

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<sup>25</sup> The cubists "built from the perspective plane forward into space. The latest sequels are: the reliefs by Picasso and contre-reliefs by Tatlin." "A. and Pangeometry," trans. Helene Aldwinckle in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 349-50. On reverse perspective in Moholy-Nagy's work, see Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 21-74.

<sup>26</sup> "These distances cannot be measured by any finite measure, as can the objects in planimetric or perspectival space. The distances are irrational." "A. and Pangeometry," in Lissitzky-Küppers, 350. In other words, these 'distances' are effects of chromatic intensity that register perceptually as *signs* of distance. A peculiar disagreement between Yve-Alain Bois and Hubert Damisch on this subject is worth noting here. Bois has claimed that while "at first [Lissitzky's] very use of the term *Suprematism* might lead us to believe that he is simply describing the work of his mentor... but for a few specific exceptions, Malevich does not resort to any kind of projection for depicting the third dimension of space. His paintings are entirely planimetric." Instead, Bois suggests, Lissitzky is discussing his own Prouns, which are radically different from the 'entirely planimetric' achievements of Suprematism. Hubert Damisch, by contrast, recognizes the irrational optical depth Lissitzky finds in Suprematism, remarking that Lissitzky in fact *avoids* all discussion of axonometric projection in his account of imaginary space. See Bois, "Axonometry, or El Lissitzky's Mathematical Paradigm," in *El Lissitzky*, 27; and Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 30.

<sup>27</sup> "A. and Pangeometry," Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 352.

recognition, sketched in by us without intention [*na nem net ustanovki*].”<sup>28</sup> Chiding “my friends [who] are thinking of building new, multi-dimensional, real spaces, into which one can go for a walk without an umbrella,” Lissitzky embraces Viking Eggeling’s use of motion pictures as proof that the problem of dynamic form can be solved with “disconnected movements... [which] create the impression of a continuous movement.”<sup>29</sup> The productive visual disjunction of collage, destroyed by translation into actual space, is preserved in the intentional void of the motion-sign. But as in collage, “there now arises the task of forming *imaginary* space by means of a material object,” a kind of mobile but materially explicit illusion.<sup>30</sup>

Lissitzky’s second example of imaginary space is more illuminating, since it points directly to his current preoccupations. “The only important thing,” he claims, “was accomplished by the modern dynamic advertisement, because it developed from the immediate necessity of acting on our psyche, and not from aesthetic reminiscences.”<sup>31</sup> At the time, Lissitzky was earning his daily bread by producing advertisements for Günther Wagner’s Pelikan brand office products, and his silence on all things Proun corresponded to his growing fascination with the techniques he now applied in his commercial practice. Leah Dickerman has persuasively argued for a link between the theoretical position of “K. und Pangeometrie” and Lissitzky’s

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<sup>28</sup> “Smyslovoe dvizhenie—znak vosprinimaetsia nashim yznavaniem, doriso vyvaetsia nami, na nem net ustanovki.” *Literatura i kinematograf* (Berlin: Russkoe universal’noe izdatel’stvo, 1923), 25.

<sup>29</sup> “A. and Pangeometry,” Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 351-52. The mocking reference is almost certainly to Moholy and Alfred Kemeny’s “Dynamisch-Konstruktives Kraftsystem,” *Der Sturm* no. 12 (1922): 186.

<sup>30</sup> “A. and Pangeometry,” Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 352. The proximity of Lissitzky’s visual examples of imaginary space to the kinetic objects in real space that he criticizes lead Erwin Panofsky to dismiss the argument of “K. und Pangeometrie” in a long footnote appended to *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (New York: Zone, 1997), 153-54. Despite his poorly chosen examples, Lissitzky anticipates Panofsky’s objections when he writes that “we can change only the form of our physical space, but not its structure, its three-dimensional property. We cannot really alter the measure of curvature in our space.”

<sup>31</sup> “A. and Pangeometry,” Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 352. Translation modified.

photographic portraits, perceptively describing how, in the artist's manipulation of photographic material, "a form of tactility enters the visual field... that detaches the image from the rationalizing logic of a single viewpoint."<sup>32</sup> Although they do not figure in Dickerman's argument, Lissitzky produced a number of photographic advertisements for Pelikan just after writing "K. und Pangeometrie," and before completing a series of portraits of himself, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters.<sup>33</sup> It is in these Pelikan designs that Lissitzky resumes his experiments with the technique of the photogram, which, although it does not meet his criterion of imaginary movement, does create space—or, in Tristan Tzara's words, *exceed it*—with a material object, a perplexity which no doubt attracted him.<sup>34</sup>

The most accomplished of these experiments is a poster for Pelikan ink in which the photogram technique is admirably mobilized, both practically and in its theoretical implications for advertising (fig. 3.3). The image, composed of a Pelikan logo, a pen and bottle of ink, and the stenciled word TINTE, offers a fantasy of the commodity fetish in which the animated product names itself and produces its own image. The ink bottle's front face, flush with the plane of the printing surface, anchors it frontally so that its raking shadow suggests an irrational depth. While this dream-like distortion is quite unlike the faceted planes of cubist scaffolding, the latter is suggested by object's stenciled name, an exaggerated denotation that mimics the function of a label even as it lifts and hovers above the bottle's surface. This irrational depth allows the objects

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<sup>32</sup> Leah Dickerman, "El Lissitzky's Camera Corpus" in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 160.

<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to date individual works, but Lissitzky's letter of 16 October 1924 reports "a new idea for a photographic ink poster," giving us some idea of his activities at the time. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 53 (translation modified). By October 10 he had received Westheim's corrections for his essay. El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 10 October 1924, RGALI fond 3145, op. 1., d. 566, l. 1. The self portrait was not made until December.

<sup>34</sup> Tristan Tzara, "Photography Upside-Down", translated in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Aperture, 1989), 4.

to rise up from horizontal bed of the enlarger and play out a small scene: as the bottle sets itself upright, proudly resting on a distorted imaginary base, the neighboring pen stands, and, absent any supporting hand, inscribes the mark of its maker in a flawless shadow script. The pretext of the scene is acknowledged and heightened by Lissitzky's doubling of the image's reversal of tonal values: whereas the photogram produces a unique print that functions like a paper negative, with a dark ground that registers the absence of the object's trace, Lissitzky's TINTE photogram, re-photographed and printed from a negative to restore its 'natural' positive tonality, absents the objects' photogrammatic absence, and instead imparts to them a phantasmatic presence.

Although the image lends itself to interpretation, this did not guarantee it a friendly reception in the Pelikan offices. In fact, none of the photographic experiments Lissitzky executed in the fall of 1924 met the firm's standards for publication.<sup>35</sup> His production for Pelikan seemed to increase in proportion to the firm's dissatisfaction, a trend that made him understandably restless. By December, he wished to renegotiate his contract under more favorable conditions, for which he devised an elaborate strategy: rather than continuing to produce a seemingly endless string of designs in exchange for his monthly retainer, Lissitzky planned to make Pelikan compete for *his* services by producing a design above and beyond their current agreement on which the firm would then be required to bid.<sup>36</sup> The object in question is a relief Lissitzky built with his own capital outlay. Perhaps with intended irony, the relief inverts the structure of the rejected photograms: instead of contriving an intricate game of peek-a-boo with the absent

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<sup>35</sup> Conversation with Pelikan archivist Jürgen Dittmer, Hannover, 23 July 2013.

<sup>36</sup> "Things are going badly with Pelikan when I start giving away my works as presents. I must, however, have firm grounds for making fresh claims. Only if you can find out for me the exact scale of payment can something be done. I am now working on a new thing for these people. This is not part of my obligations. When it is finished, I will send it to you first, then you can negotiate with them." El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 1 December 1924. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 54.

commodity, Pelikan's wares—a typewriter ribbon and box of pastels—are dumbly present, fitted in a luxurious custom setting of polished wood and mirrored glass (fig. 3.4).

In his campaign for more favorable terms of employment, Lissitzky also hoped to leverage the renewal of his contract, which was set to expire at the end of the calendar year. Convinced of the plausibility of his strategy save for a single obstacle, he proposed to Küppers on December 8 that she operate as his agent during the negotiation, masking his embarrassment with a flirtatious tone: “concerning my new contract with Beindorf, I’d like to inform the [Pelikan] people that they should surrender to you, my legal representative, if you’ve got *nothing against that?*”<sup>37</sup> Küppers apparently did, for she let the comment pass, and the following week Lissitzky floated a different idea: self-representation. “Am now working on a photographic self-light-portrait,” he wrote on December 12, “a colossal idiocy [*blödismus*] if everything goes to plan.”<sup>38</sup> Two days later, he again tried to enlist Küppers to represent him.<sup>39</sup> This time Lissitzky was successful, and by the beginning of 1925 Küppers seems to have been taking meetings on his behalf with advertising firms in Berlin, pitching the very imaginary objects he had theorized in “K. und Pangeometrie”:

Would you please take with you to Berlin, for the advertising people, the following things: (1) The “Two Squares” book; (2) the Mayakovsky book; (3) original photos from Pelikan for typewriter ribbon, carbon paper and ink posters. Tell them besides, that I have a series of ideas for *mobile* and *plastic* advertising. I will also send you... a small design

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<sup>37</sup> “Wegen meinem neuen Vertrag mit Beindorf möchte ich den Leuten mitteilen das die sollen sich mit dir, meiner Rechtsvertreterin, in Verhandlungen stellen, wenn du *nichts dagegen* hast?” El Lissitzky to Sophie-Küppers, 8 December 1924, emphasis original. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 2.

<sup>38</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 12 December 1924. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 56. Translation modified.

<sup>39</sup> This time he played for sympathy: “If I were in Hannover myself, I could inundate them with designs, and get paid for some of them. But that doesn’t work when you are a long way off. They are craftier than the two of us put together and squared.” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 15 December 1924, *ibid.*, 56.



for Pelikan drawing ink; take it with you to Berlin and don't show it at Pelikan until then.<sup>40</sup>

Neither at Pelikan nor at the Berlin firms did negotiations go as planned. Although Küppers received the relief in January, it failed to elicit the desired response, and soon the firm had turned the tables on Lissitzky, awarding the design of its latest brochure to another designer and offering him only a minor role.<sup>41</sup> “Maybe I'm really over-extended,” he wrote upon receiving the news, “but I'd rather sell the holes in my socks on Kurfürstendamm to earn such money. No, I seem to have wound up on an skewed plane with my advertising romanticism.”<sup>42</sup> Lissitzky's phrase is telling: in addition to describing a mistaken course of action, *eine schiefe Ebene* is a technical term in physics and mechanics for an inclined plane, suggesting an anamorphically distorted image, not unlike a photogram.

The remaining components of what was conceived in December as a simultaneous multi-front campaign on Pelikan came to fruition in March, too late to achieve the desired effect. Lissitzky's legal negotiating powers were finally transferred to Küppers, and a badly cropped version of his “colossal idiocy” of a self portrait appeared in Mart Stam's architectural journal, *ABC*, captioned “Lissitzky's Light-Image Studio,” with the vertically aligned majuscules A B Z punning on the journal's masthead, and a British patent number in the lower-left corner (fig.

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<sup>40</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 12 January 1925, *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> “Got sei dank das der Relief ist endlich in deinem Händen und das Spiegel ist repariert.” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 15 January 1925. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 3.

<sup>42</sup> “Vielleicht bin ich wirklich überspannt, aber lieber am Kurfürstendamm die Löcher meiner Socken zu verkaufen, also so Geld zu verdienen. Nein, ich bin doch mit meiner Reklameromantik scheint [sic] auf eine schiefe Ebene geraten.” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 16 [Feb.?] 1924. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 3. See also Lissitzky's comments to Jan Tschichold, note 47 below. My thanks to Dan Hackbarth for discussing this translation with me.

3.5).<sup>43</sup> The image is shot through with all the distorted and frustrated impulses of the winter in Locarno: first of all ambition, arrogance and calculation, but also doubt, absurdity and disappointment.<sup>44</sup> Above all, it is ambivalent, for the deadpan caption is not only a ruse: it is as much a parody of Lissitzky's current dilemma as an instrument designed to pry him out of it. The venture it named was real insofar as speculation is real under capitalism. And while Pelikan continued to frustrate Lissitzky's efforts to change the terms of their relationship, his speculation still documented the artist's own re-functionalization. This is probably the purpose the published portrait served for Jan Tschichold, to whom Lissitzky sent the issue of *ABC* in question at the end of March, and who first called the self-portrait *The Constructor*.<sup>45</sup>

The portrait itself is no simple document (fig. 3.6). The version in the collection of the State Tret'iakov Gallery, which Lissitzky probably made in order to re-photograph,<sup>46</sup> combines

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<sup>43</sup> Lissitzky probably left a copy of his self-portrait with Stam when he visited him in Thun on Christmas day, 1924, a trip noted in his letter to of Küppers of 24 December 1924. On March 15 he sent the following note to Küppers: "Hiermit bevollmächtige ich Frau Dr. Sophie Küppers Verkäufe für mich zu tätigen und alle Geldangelegenheiten für mich zu erladigen [sic]. [signed] El Lissitzky." GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 3. For the origins of the British patent, see Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 334-35.

<sup>44</sup> No doubt in reaction to the previous trend of treating the self portrait as an unproblematic image of a self-possessed rational subject, recent commentaries by Peter Nisbet, Leah Dickerman and Paul Galvez, have all emphasized the darker, more melancholic notes of the picture. See Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, *op. cit.*, 325; Dickerman, "El Lissitzky's Camera Corpus," *op. cit.*; and Galvez, "Self-Portrait of the Artist as Monkey-Hand," *October* 93 (Summer 2000), 109-37. Only Galvez has reflected relationship between the self portrait and Lissitzky's Pelikan work, but in my view his conclusion that "the conundrum posed in the self-portrait... is how to rescue art from its own instrumentalization" (128) does not adequately account for Lissitzky's enthusiastic embrace of advertising. To the contrary, Lissitzky wanted *more* advertising work, so he could control the terms on which he instrumentalized his art.

<sup>45</sup> Lissitzky to Jan Tschichold, 28 March 1925. Jan Tschichold papers, GRI special collections, item 930030, box 3, folder 1. Lissitzky offered the following apologia re: Pelikan: "Was meine Arbeit für Günther Wagner anbetrifft, so ist leider das was ich für wirklich vertvoll halte überhaupt nicht ausgeführt. Sie wissen wie schwer ist es bei alten Firmen mit neuem durchzudringen, aber ich hoffe mindestens dass ich den Nachkommenden den Weg etwas geebnet habe." Tschichold first contacted Lissitzky on 19 January 1925 about an article on constructivist typography he planned to write; over the course of the next several months, Lissitzky sent him several examples of his work, including an actual print of the self portrait, which he mailed from Moscow on July 22. The title *The Constructor* appears for the first time in Tschichold's essay "Über El Lissitzky" in *Imprimatur. Ein Jahrbuch für Bücherfreunde*, vol. 3 (1932): 97-112.

<sup>46</sup> This is Dickerman's suggestion in "El Lissitzky's Camera Corpus," *Situating El Lissitzky*, 171-72 n. 1.

multiple exposures with bits of white cardboard and a circular section added in pen and ink. In formal terms, the image resumes Lissitzky's experiments in the production of *trompe l'oeil* effects with photographic means. Now however, spatial shuttling between depth and surface is achieved less through the text neatly sequestered at upper left than through the superimposition of semi-transparent masses—in this case, in a proto-surrealist touch, the artist's own body parts. Here, the gridded millimeter paper on which Lissitzky's hand rests lies flush with the picture plane, overlaying the right side of the artist's face, which it alternately pushes back into space and flattens onto the grid that maps it. The same relationship pushes the hand up over the picture plane. The artfully contrived union of hand and eye, anchored so securely by the alignment of the thumb and bridge of the nose that the severed wrist entirely disappears, continuously labors at the impossible task of pulling the hand back beneath the grid it rests on. In the end, the opposite occurs: the eye is raised up from 'behind' the gridded plane into the recess of the palm and thoroughly severed from the face. It is this formal dismemberment of the facial gestalt that makes viewing Lissitzky's features on a single plane so difficult—much more so than the slight three-quarter profile. For the same reason, the left side of the artist's face, although more conventionally naturalistic in its freedom from the grid, appears strangely uncanny.

Although the picture has resisted iconographical interpretation, Peter Nisbet's suggestion that it functions as a visual rehearsal of the UNOVIS slogan, *let the overthrow of the old world of art be imprinted on the palms of your hands*, is compelling.<sup>47</sup> Lissitzky had devoted a considerable amount of time to Malevich's thought over the course of 1924, and I have argued here that the mutually imbricated issues of material and space embedded in the contest between Suprematism and the contre-relief partly decided photography's possibilities for him. Still, those

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<sup>47</sup> Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 321.

terms had become increasingly remote by the end of 1924. Lissitzky's attempt to transform himself into an ad-man proceeded on terms beyond his control, but he succeeded nonetheless. Just as the notice for his services was appearing in *ABC*, he finally managed to sell one of the component elements of his self portrait to Pelikan, initiating an exchange that indicates in the most direct manner the relationship of the commodity to the artist's severed eye (fig. 3.7).<sup>48</sup>

## II. *The Architect at the Pictures*

Lissitzky returned to the USSR at the end of June, and within two weeks of his arrival he had met with Nikolai Ladovskii, the leading member of the Association of New Architects (*Assotsiatsiia novykh arkhitektov*, hereafter ASNOVA), a group he joined while abroad. Shortly after Lissitzky settled in Locarno, Ladovskii apprised him of ASNOVA's struggles to win over students in the face of opposition from "LEF, in the person of Brik, Rodchenko, Lavinskii, Vesnin and Popova, who are leading the attack on the second division of the architectural department of VKhUTEMAS, the basic course and the managing body, where ASNOVA has strengthened its position."<sup>49</sup> In order to overcome this opposition, Ladovskii resolved, "ASNOVA must appear in the press. Unfortunately, we are poor in literary forces. We need your

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<sup>48</sup> Although this work is sometimes dated to 1924, Lissitzky refers to it as one of "the two last things I did in Brione" in an undated letter that can be placed with certainty to October-November 1925 by the content of the letter and Lissitzky's Arbat address. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1 folder 3. Lissitzky was in Brione during the second half of March 1925 (see for example his letters in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 59).

<sup>49</sup> "Neobkhodimost' bol'shoi idelolgicheskoi rabote vyzyvaetsiia eshche i drugoi zadachei ASNOVA – zavoevanie proletarskoi molodezhi Rabfaka i VKhUTEMAS'a. Etom vopros nam v oppositsiiu stal LEF, v litse Brika, Rodchenko, Lavinskogo, Vesnina i Popovoi, kotoryi vedut ataku na 2oe Otdelenie Arkh-faka VKhUTEMAS, osnovnoe otdelenie i Pravlenie, gde ASNOVA ukrepila svoi pozitsii." Nikolai Ladovskii to El Lissitzky, 23 February 1924. RGALI fond 2361 op. 1 d. 59, ll. 9-10. The German translation in Jen Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers eds. *Proun und Wolkenbügel* omits this passage (177).

help.”<sup>50</sup> This relationship was mutually beneficial: in Locarno, Lissitzky funneled ASNOVA’s designs to Mart Stam for publication in *ABC*, and upon returning to Moscow, Ladovskii secured him a position on the architecture faculty at VKhUTEMAS, where ASNOVA’s members held sway. But Lissitzky seems to have misunderstood the role that the group’s initial request implied for him: having finally met with Ladovskii in person in Moscow, he reported to Küppers that “we have resolved upon publishing a periodical,” sardonically adding a weary parenthetical, “(yet another that I’m founding).”<sup>51</sup>

His perspective brightened when it was decided that the journal’s first number be devoted to the problem of the skyscraper, a sympathetic setting for the architectural project he had brought to completion over the winter in Switzerland and named *die Wolkenbügel* (Cloud-Hanger), a play on the German word for skyscraper, *Wolkenkratzer* (literally, cloudscraper) steered in the direction of Arp’s 1920 collection of verses, *die Wolkenpumpe* (The Cloud-Pump). Seeing that it would feature both his architecture and typography, Lissitzky decided the journal could become “my visiting card for Moscow.”<sup>52</sup> The confidence his new architectural affiliation inspired also granted him some distance from the old battles he had relived while abroad.<sup>53</sup> In its final form, *Isvestiia ASNOVA* would testify to this hard won distance, retaining something of the precarious violence of dada typography, and even repeating *G*’s creative realignment of the printed page: a skyscraper paired with an up-ended orthodox bell-tower occupies the journal’s

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<sup>50</sup> “ASNOVA nuzhno vystupat’ v pechati. K sozhaleniiu my bedny literaturnymi silami. Nuzhna vasha pomoshch’.” RGALI fond 2361 op. 1 d. 59, ll. 9-10.

<sup>51</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 1 July 1925. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 64.

<sup>52</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 9 July 1925, *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> “A lot of things are becoming clear to me here, when I see how Tatlin has stuck perversely and obstinately to his designs for economical cooking stoves... and Malevich, in his fine calligraphy... is in competition with the whole of science and philosophy.” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 20 July 1925, *ibid.*, 65.

upper-right corner, bordered by an ironical inverted caption (“Non-periodical Publication”) and an impressive roster of foreign representatives running vertically up the page (fig.3.8).<sup>54</sup> That Lissitzky continued to be sought as a print designer is unsurprising; even if *Isvestiia ASNOVA* served only as means of securing a position in a specifically architectural discourse, it ranks among his most powerful designs. Technocratic yet addled, it draws an improbable intensity from materials that are austere despite their poverty.

The same frisson that kept Lissitzky in demand as a print designer in Moscow condemned his architectural conceits to obscurity. Although he hesitated to accept the offer of employment from VKhUTEMAS, preferring to live by commissions alone, he fared poorly in competitions. Near the end of summer he renewed his contract with Pelikan to finance his ventures, but the conditions imposed by juries confounded him, and his Pelikan correspondence met with interference at customs.<sup>55</sup> In mid-December, having lost six pounds and a number of competitions, he accepted the new constraints with grim optimism: “I took the work too seriously... I haven’t really failed, I have learned how one has to proceed when doing competitions. This is not free art, my dear.”<sup>56</sup> The following week he accepted the offer of regular employment on the woodworking faculty at VKhUTEMAS, where he began teaching in January, and by spring he had secured second prize for a competition design made in

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<sup>54</sup> The list reads: “Germany: Adolf Behne; France: Le Corbusier; Holland: Mart Stam; America: Lönberg Holm; Switzerland: Emil Root; Chekhoslovakia: Karel Teige; Yugoslavia: Liubomir Mitsich; Japan: Murayama.”

<sup>55</sup> “Mit Beindorf habe ich interesse in Beziehung zu bleiben wegen Arbeit für Pelikan. Ich kann das von hierher auch so schnell ausführen wie aus Orselina-Brione. Bedingungen überlasse ich dir... Ich werde einverstanden sein mit die vorigen.” Although this letter is undated, both its address and its content place it at the end of the summer. In a passage omitted from the published version of his letter of 18 December 1925, Lissitzky complains that a Pelikan package didn’t make it through customs. GRI special collections, item 950076 box 1, folder 4.

<sup>56</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 8 December 1925. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 72.

collaboration with Ladovskii.<sup>57</sup> That his architecture grew more legible through Ladovskii's sobering presence is evidenced by *Izvestiia ASNOVA* as well. If the *Wolkenbügel*'s subterranean reference to Arp holds a remnant of the "lunatic force" that Lissitzky envisioned for the Proun in 1921, the building assumes the comparatively tame function of a beacon in its *ASNOVA* presentation, where it is called simply *WBI*.<sup>58</sup> Reducing it to a series of schematic marks (fig. 3.9), Lissitzky shows that the building's multiple aspects "make orientation in the city by way of this structure perfectly clear."<sup>59</sup>

This presentation may account for Lissitzky's revision of the Proun slogan, from 'not worldvision but worldreality' to 'not worldknowledge but orientation in the world', but the shift in strategy becomes truly legible only when considered in conjunction with Ladovskii's "Structural Foundations of a Theory of Architecture," an essay that shares the page with Lissitzky's *Wolkenbügel*. Here, Ladovskii defines architecture as the use of motifs that "serve man's sovereign technical demand to orient himself in space."<sup>60</sup> For Ladovskii, if a building is to serve this orienting function, the architect must closely attend to the real conditions of viewing. Thus, "the architect's work on the geometrical expressivity of form, which we always perceive in perspective, consists in *approximating the image receivable from the perception of a real*

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<sup>57</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 30 January and 23 May 1925, *ibid.*, 72-4.

<sup>58</sup> El Lissitzky, "Prouns: Toward the Defeat of Art," trans. John Bowlt in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), 71. The *Wolkenbügel* was originally to have been in competition with the kinetic volumes of Tatlin's Tower, but by the time the work was theorized, its intended function had been reversed. See Lissitzky's letter to Küppers of 14 January 1925, where the building "stands on three legs and oscillates." Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 57.

<sup>59</sup> "Takaia kharakteristika delaet orientirovku po etim sooruzheniiam v gorode sovershenno iasnoi." *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 3.

<sup>60</sup> "V arkhitekturnom otnoshenii eti "motivy" dolzhny byt' ratsional'ny i sluzhit' vysshei tekhnicheskoi potrebnosti cheloveka *orientirovat'sia v postranstve*." *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis original.

*perspective to the image given in projections.*”<sup>61</sup> While this attention to architectural anamorphosis placed Ladovskii in a distinguished lineage extending to the renaissance, he also incorporated a fact of modern urban experience that made his position particularly amenable to the Proun: movement.<sup>62</sup> Giving an example of conditions for a perspectival projection, Ladovskii stipulates a viewpoint 1.6 meters high at a distance of 30 meters, moving at a speed not faster than 15 meters per second (about 35 miles per hour)—a viewer, in other words, who is riding in a bus or tram.<sup>63</sup>

According to Ladovskii’s theory, the architect has two ways to provide orienting motifs to a mobile viewer. The most desirable would be to inscribe the higher technicity of the sign into the structure of the building itself, unifying architecture and engineering like the *Wolkenbügel* had done. But “where this is not permitted, the architectural construction (element-signals) is created through relief articulation of the form’s surface, as the most technically simple and economic medium of execution.”<sup>64</sup> While Lissitzky’s *Wolkenbügel* could illustrate Ladovskii’s definition of architecture as the total union of structure and signage, it lacked this sort of pragmatic approach to situational constraints. ASNOVA had devoted much time and consideration to the latter, however, and the group’s celebration of the *Wolkenbügel* was likely

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<sup>61</sup> “Rabota arkhitekatora nad geometricheskoi vyrazitel’nos’iu formy, kotoruii my vseгда vosprinimaem v perspektive, zakliuchaetsia v priblizhenii obraza poluchaemogo ot vospriiatiiia real’noi perspektivy k obrazu, dannomu v proektsiiakh... Mozhno li dostupit’, chtoby arkhitekotor stroia formu ne znal kak ee budet vosprinimat’ zritel’? Takoe dopushchenie oznachalo by polnuio bezprintsipnost’ i nevozmozhnost’ kakogo by to ni bylo masterstvo vo oblasti geometricheskij vyrazitelnosti.” Ibid., 3-4. Emphasis original.

<sup>62</sup> On the history of anamorphosis see Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Anamorphoses, ou Thaumaturgus Opticus* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), 7-14.

<sup>63</sup> *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 4.

<sup>64</sup> “Tam, gde ona [tekhnicheskaia konstruktsiia] mozhet byt’ ispol’zovana polnost’iu sozdaetsia sintez tekhniki i arkhitektury, gde etogo nel’zia, tam arkhitekturnaia konstruktsiia (elementy-priznaki) sozdaetsia rel’efnymi chleneniiami poverkhnosti formy, kak naibolee tekhnicheskii prostym i ekonomnym sredstvom ispolneniia.” Ibid., 4.



matched on Lissitzky's end by an admiration for the studies of planar articulation, like those of Vladimir Krinskii, that informed their buildings' surface treatment (fig. 3.10).

The overlap between Lissitzky's and ASNOVA's concerns also ensured them a common opponent. Ladovskii's essay on "Structural Foundations," dating to 1920, informed his rejection of Brik's productivist program in the InKhuK debates in December 1921, when painting was banned from the institute: "Brik rejoices when the artist aspires to engineering," Ladovskii taunted, countering, "what does he bring there? ... don't answer that I bring engineering to engineering."<sup>65</sup> The resistance to Ladovskii's architectural propaedeutics within VKhUTEMAS, about which he already expressed serious concern in spring 1923, culminated in a public denunciation by a VKhUTEMAS student in the pages of *LEF* the following year, entitled "Left Metaphysics." Dismissing Ladovskii's concern with the viewer's orientation and the perspectival distortions of normal viewing, the student concluded that "a serious new push toward production architecture, away from painterly-aesthetic savoring of angles, volumes and space is unavoidable."<sup>66</sup> It was in anticipation of this rallying opposition that Ladovskii had initially sought Lissitzky's assistance, and *Izvestiia ASNOVA* represents the group's most concerted effort to define itself against the productivist resistance.

Fulfilling his brief, Lissitzky contributed a polemical photomontage for the journal's final page that was intended to answer definitively the charge of 'painterly' architecture by forcefully reasserting the autonomy of what remained for him the master discipline: "*Man is the measure of*

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<sup>65</sup> "Brik raduetsia, kogda khudozhnik stremit'sia k inzheneru... chto chelovek prineset tuda?... On znat' dolzhen, chto on prineset v inzheneru, a ne davat' otveta, chto v inzheneru ia prinesu inzheneru." Quoted in Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Ratsionalizm (Ratsio-arkhitektura) "Formalizm"* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 132.

<sup>66</sup> "Neobkhodim novyi, ser'eznyi sdvig v storonu proizvodstvennoi arkhitektury ot estetno-zhvopis'nogo smakovaniia uglov, ob'emov i prostranstva." *Lef* 4 (August-December 1924): 220. The same example introduced by the students to show the impractical biases of the curriculum was reproduced in *ABC* no. 3-4 (1925): 3.

*all tailors... but measure Architecture with Architecture.*<sup>67</sup> (fig. 3.11) The slogan is a good one, corralling the paradox of dada cat-call borrowed from Arp into a bewildering tautological imperative.<sup>68</sup> Alongside this slogan, Lissitzky assembled a compact visual argument consisting of two (surprisingly exact) visual analogies, two oblique-angle photographs and a clipping of two hands holding a pattern for a boy's vest. The comparisons do much of the work here: the first pairs a ziggurat-style skyscraper with the Monument to Tsar Aleksandr III, formerly located on the grounds of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, and the second a Demag loading bridge alongside the skeleton of a horse. The horse, decapitated by Lissitzky's cut to more closely approximate the lumbering crudity of the German industrial structure, also bears the displaced memory of the imperial monument's fate: a ceremonial beheading later featured in Sergei Eisenstein's film, *October*. Against this aimless construction, the pair of oblique-angle photos posit a new subject for an architecture deprived of a sovereign center—one anonymously circulating in the streets. Beyond this linear argument, the page as a whole takes on a rebus-like quality, with typographical exaggerations reinforcing the displacements that animate the interaction of the images: the enlarged crossed strokes of the letter 'X' (*kh*) in the phrase 'all tailors' (*vsekh portnykh*) mimes the censorial function of the monument's ritual beheading, linking the 'centered' ziggurat at left to the headless industrial behemoth below, while the double 'A' of the slogan's conclusion, printed in the same font as the final 'A' of ASNOVA on the journal's masthead, condenses the task of the entire discipline's self measurement into the program of a single group.

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<sup>67</sup> "Chelovek mera vsekh portnykh... a arkhitekturu mer'te arkhitekturoi." *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 8.

<sup>68</sup> The slogan is cited in "A. and Pangeometry" where it is dated to the first dada fair; Lissitzky may have known Arp's text "The Measure of All Things" from his time in Switzerland, but the latter was not published until after WWII, and the possible editorial changes made since then make definitive attribution hazardous. See Arp, *On My Way: Poetry and Essays 1912-1947*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948), 35.

Measure was indeed at the heart of the matter, but rather than doubling back on itself to found its own law, in measure ASNOVA's architecture was drawn outside itself—and nowhere more visibly than in the pronouncement of autonomy. Lissitzky's montage, begun in mid-September, was based less on 'Architecture' than on its appearance within the German press. Noting his delight with a particular image culled from some clippings mailed to him by Küppers, Lissitzky recorded his desire for a new method:

I made use of... the skyscraper in strongly foreshortened perspective. I'm now introducing a sort of Feuilleton of images into our journal, captioned by some sentences that express an idea in this optical way. Until now we have spoken too solemnly, quasi-scientifically in our press, or quipped *Variété-Dada*. Now I'd like to come to the point filmically [*filmartig*].<sup>69</sup>

In its published form, the image Lissitzky specifies is captioned: "learn to see what is in front of your eyes," beneath which are provided some "instructions for use: throw back your head, lift the page and look up from below, then you'll see."<sup>70</sup> Like Lissitzky's other adaptations of Proun rhetoric, this injunction now refers to the anamorphoses of urban viewing that Ladovskii wanted to master. Here, they rely on the specifically photographic properties prized by Moholy, namely, that "the photographic apparatus reproduces the purely optical picture (distortion, bad drawing, foreshortening)" which viewers habitually correct.<sup>71</sup> If architecture was to re-habituate its audience, correcting distortions of which it nevertheless remained unconscious, it would be forced to employ photography as its secretary.

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<sup>69</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 15 September 1925. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 68. Translation modified.

<sup>70</sup> "Sposob upotrebleniia: Zaprokin'te golovu, podnimate list i smotrite snizu vverx, togda uvidite." *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 8.

<sup>71</sup> Moholy-Nagy, "Light: A Medium of Plastic Expression," *Broom* (March 1923): 284.

The same problem appeared in Ladovskii's more ambitiously modern injunction that students plot the perceivability of their designs for the perspective of a mobile subject. Lissitzky contributed a possible solution here as well, drawing on his interest in Viking Eggeling's production of imaginary space through film. At the same time that he began working out his photo-feuilleton, Lissitzky penned a brief article commemorating the recently deceased filmmaker, which would be printed in *Izvestiia ASNOVA* on a vertical orientation, much like the *G* presentation of Richter's *Rhythmus 21*. Adjacent to this article appears a small notice, likely co-authored by Lissitzky and Ladovskii, affirming that "the work of the late Eggeling is especially valuable for us: he investigated the laws of spatial articulation and movement, i.e. the foundations of tectonics. He realized this with a new optical instrument: cinema. With this, he opened the path to a whole series of new possibilities even in the field of architectural education."<sup>72</sup> It is difficult to imagine a more effective means of demonstrating the optical distortions of mobile architectural perception to the skeptical student body of VKhUTEMAS than the film camera—a prospect that surely motivated Lissitzky's desire "to buy a small movie camera and crank some architecture" during his travels that summer.<sup>73</sup> More importantly, however, this evaluation of Eggeling draws on the terms that Ladovskii's theory prescribed for conditions in which the orienting function of architecture is confined to the relief articulation of element-signals on a surface: in each case movement is counter-balanced by spatial articulation, as if the mobile architectural subject could encounter the onrushing city from a position stabilized by its quasi-filmic faces.

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<sup>72</sup> "Rabota pokoinogo Eggelinga osobo tsenna nam: on izuchal zakony prostranstvennogo chleneniia i dvizhenii, t.e. osnovy tektoniki. On eto realizoval novym opticheskim instrumentom—kino. Etim on otkryl put' tselomu riaku novykh vosmozhnostei takzhe i v oblasti arkhitektornogo vospitaniia." *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 7.

<sup>73</sup> "Ich möchte ein kleinen Kinoapparat kaufen und Architektur kurbeln." El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 6 March 1926. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 4.

The tectonic homology between the experience of a time-based planar object and the mobile experience of a static one seems to have been deliberately heightened by Lissitzky, who in his eulogy to Eggeling recounts an intriguing (and possibly apocryphal) proposal to the late filmmaker: “I pointed out the necessity of introducing a third coordinate—depth. Of relating to the light of the projection apparatus not only as medium, but as material.”<sup>74</sup> Lissitzky’s proposal recalls the spatial problems outlined in “K. und Pangeometrie,” where Eggeling’s example provided a path from Suprematism’s illusion of palpable depth toward the imaginary space of film and advertising. If this vision could be supported by Ladovskii’s theoretical project, it also furthered his plans to institute a “Psychotechnical Laboratory of Architecture” that would place the young science of psychotechnics, already exploited by “the representatives of the mass industrial and commercial enterprises of America for the selection of office employees, merchants in the field of advertising and pedagogues in the registration and determination of their students’ abilities,” at the service of architecture.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Ladovskii’s proposal was first made public in the pages of *Izvestiia ASNOVA*, with Lissitzky’s eulogy to Eggeling literally set in its margins, and the filmmaker’s work acknowledged only insofar as his experiments with new optical instruments had pedagogical significance in the group’s “scientific concenter.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> “My sobiralis’ vmesete vziatsia za odnu rabotu. Ia ukazyval na neobxodimost’ vvedeniia tret’ei koordinaty—glubiny. Na otnoshenie k svety proektiruiushchego apparata ne tol’ko kak k sredstvu, no kak k materialu.” *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 7.

<sup>75</sup> “Sredi liudei dela pervymi pribegli k eia pomoshchi predstaviteli krupnykh industrial’nykh i torgovykh predpriiatii Ameriki pri otbore sluzhashchikh, dalee kommertsanty v oblasti reklamy, zatem pedagogi pri prieme I opredelenii sposobnosti uchashchikhsia,” Ibid. Anatole Senkevitch Jr. has provided a detailed account of Ladovskii’s reliance upon the theories and experiments of Hugo Münsterberg, a psychologist at the University of Freiburg who organized a laboratory at Harvard University in 1892 at the invitation of William James. See his “Aspects of Spatial Form and Perceptual Psychology in the Doctrine of the Rationalist Movement in Soviet Architecture in the 1920s,” *VIA* 6 (1983): 79-115.

<sup>76</sup> *Izvestiia ASNOVA* 1 (1926): 7.

Although Lissitzky had found fruitful interlocutors within the group, consigning his energy to ASNOVA's power struggles within VKhUTEMAS did little for his productivity. In late January 1926, clearly frustrated with his situation in Moscow, he engaged Küppers in a plan to win a commission for the Internationale Kunstausstellung in Dresden. Rather than submit an individual work to the exhibit, he preferred to design a room, as he had done for the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung in 1923.<sup>77</sup> The extent to which the possibility of creating an architectural space that would act directly on the viewer's psyche like film or advertising occupied Lissitzky can be seen in his initial approach to the project. Writing in February to Küppers, who was working to secure him the commission, Lissitzky anxiously inquired about the constraints of the exhibition space, describing his plans for a demonstration in which light was to figure as material rather than medium:

I am thinking of having the daylight stream in through colored filters, so that the impression produced by the pictures also changes at intervals. For this purpose it would be good to create artificial lighting in the room... Then I am thinking the walls should not be used for the crucifixion of the pictures. We will introduce quite different principles from those hitherto employed in exhibitions and museums.<sup>78</sup>

As the final design would show, the principles in question had already been outlined in *Izvestiia ASNOVA*: the mobile spectator, the articulated surface of 'element-signals' and projected light as material. Together, these factors produced a space that Maria Gough has aptly characterized as "para-cinematic," steeped in the logic of standardization but everywhere exceeding it.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 30 January 1926. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 73. On the details of the commission, see Maria Gough "Constructivism Disoriented," in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 81-88.

<sup>78</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 8 February 1926. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 74. The effects of colored light is among those listed by Lissitzky in his initial catalogue of effects contributing to the construction of imaginary space.

<sup>79</sup> Gough, "Constructivism Disoriented" in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 89.

The latter quality was embodied for Lissitzky by Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, a text he reviewed for *Stroitel'naia promyshlennost'* (*Building Industry*) in the early months of 1926 while pursuing the Dresden commission. Lissitzky's impressions of *Amerika*, a book rich in oblique views of skyscrapers and documentation of American advertising, betray his hopes for *Izvestiia ASNOVA*: "A first flip through the album grips us like a dramatic film," he wrote, specifying that "in order to understand some of the photographs you must lift the book over your head and turn it."<sup>80</sup> Lissitzky seems to have been especially struck by the first image in *Amerika's* section on advertising. A jittery double exposure of Broadway by night whose pulsating rhythms transformed the built environment into an ambient background only graspable between waves of distraction, the image is captioned with Mendelsohn's description of the perceptual haze engulfing the street:

Uncanny. The contours of the houses are wiped out. But in consciousness they rise again, chase after one another, run over themselves. It is the foil for the blazing letters, the rocket-fire of moving light-advertisements, emerging and submerging, vanishing and flaring over the thousands of cars and the vortex of human desire.<sup>81</sup>

Echoing Mendelsohn's commentary in his review, Lissitzky describes how in the photograph "light-advertisements turn the street into an uncanny theater," ruminating, it would appear, on the

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<sup>80</sup> "Pervoe zhe perelistyvanie zakhvatyvaet nas, kak dramaticheskii fil'm... Knigu nuzhno podnimat' nad golovoi i vrashchat', chtoby poniat' nekotoryi fotografii." Typescript in RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 540, l. 21. Mendelsohn, who visited Lissitzky in Moscow in November 1925, may have brought Lissitzky a copy of the album, which was to be published in Germany early the next year (Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 71). In his review he criticized *Amerika* for presenting "only that American extract that currently rules Europe," and for seeking the country's 'soul' there. An English translation of the review has been published in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, 221-26. Lissitzky had begun his photo-feuilleton prior to Mendelsohn's arrival.

<sup>81</sup> "Unheimlich. Die Konturen der Häuser sind ausgewischt. Aber im Bewußtsein steigen sie noch, laufen einander nach, überrennen sich. Das ist die Folie für Flammenschriften, das Raketenfeuer der beweglichen Lichtreklame, auf- und untertauchend, verschwindend und ausbrechend über die Tausenden von Autos und dem Lustwirbel der Menschen" Mendelsohn, *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (Berlin: R. Mosse, 1926. Facsimile edition, Braunschweig: Vieweg & Sohn, 1991), 44. The image itself was not taken by Mendelsohn, but by Knud Lönberg-Holm.

effect he wanted to achieve in the Dresden space, which he had begun to think of as “a kind of showcase, or a stage.”<sup>82</sup>

Lissitzky’s affairs encountered a number of delays in the spring of 1926: both his review of Mendelsohn’s album and *Izvestiia ASNOVA* were held up at the printers; specifications for the Dresden commission were slow in coming; and, although Narkompros had cleared him to travel internationally by April 23, he still had trouble securing a Russian passport for several weeks.<sup>83</sup> Amid the confusion, *Izvestiia ASNOVA* was abandoned to the censors, who found its photo-feuilleton inflammatory, and, insisting on the removal of the monument to Aleksandr III, rendered its filmic argument incomprehensible.<sup>84</sup> Things were not looking much better for travel abroad. On May 10, he wrote despairingly to Küppers, “I have no idea how I am going to get the room finished now... with us the attitude to time is just awful—they treat a day as if it were just a minute.”<sup>85</sup> Arriving in Germany only at the end of May, Lissitzky had little more than a month to install his design.

In spite of the odds, the room opened punctually (fig. 3.12). Colored light was incorporated by stretching three strips of muslin over the ceiling: one raw, one yellow and one blue (only the latter visible in installation photographs). The perforated sheet-metal grills

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<sup>82</sup> “Svetovaia reklama prevrashchaet ulitsu v zhutkii teatr.” RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 540, l. 25. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 74. See also on this latter point, Maria Gough’s “Constructivism Disoriented,” where the metaphor of the stage is related to Bertolt Brecht’s use of montage.

<sup>83</sup> The minutes of ASNOVA’s meeting of March 5, 1926 list *Izvestiia ASNOVA* and Lissitzky’s article for *Stroitel’naia promyshlennost’* as forthcoming. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 59, ll. 11-13. Lissitzky’s *komandirovka* to Germany, Czechoslovakia and the Netherlands is in RGALI fond 2361 op. 1, d. 54, l. 2. On the finalization of Lissitzky’s commission, which was still uncertain as late as May 5, see Gough, “Constructivism Disoriented,” in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 88.

<sup>84</sup> This episode was conveyed to Khan-Magomedov by the architect Ivan Lamtsov, a student at VKhUTEMAS who assisted Lissitzky with the journal’s production. Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Lazar’ Lisitskii* (Moscow: S.E. Gordeev, 2011), 242.

<sup>85</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 10 May 1926. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 76.



mounted on vertical runners at each of the room's corners could be manually raised or lowered to cover the exhibited works, offering a stroboscopic glimpse of the works they glide past. A similar effect is produced by the room's vertical slats as the viewer strides through the space; not only do the narrow intervals between them approximate the optical flicker of a slow cinematic tracking shot, in which the illusion of filmic movement unravels into the violent dis- and re-articulation of continuous space that it truly is, they also break up the coloristic unity of the wall into a set of interlaced gradients. The vertical bands, painted black on one side, white on the other and gray on their face, dissolve the abstract unity of the wall-plane into concrete, phenomenologically differentiated directions extending out from the pole of the viewer's body: looking left, the plane offers its lightest aspect, looking right, its darkest. The room's luminous mirroring of the existing orientation of the body is, however, redundant, making available to perception information that the viewer already has—in a sense *is*—and thus locating her objectively with an uncanny intelligence not usually attributed to objects.

While Lissitzky described it as having “the best optics,” the space seems instead “to have annulled the whole opposition of optical and tactile,” as Yve-Alain Bois has suggested, providing a thrill for the exhibition's many visitors.<sup>86</sup> The responses of the German public gathered by Kai-Uwe Hemken register Lissitzky's success in achieving the variety of effects with which he had been preoccupied: in the *Prager Presse* it was called a “curiosity”; in *Schlesische Zeitung*, “half operating theater, half padded cell”; and the *Kölnische Zeitung*'s critic concluded that “there may be madness, but there is certainly method.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> “La grand paradox et la richesse de cette réalisation de Lissitzky... est d'avoir en quelque sort annulé l'opposition entre tactilité et opticalité.” Yve-Alain Bois, “Exposition: esthétique de la distraction, espace de démonstration,” *Les Cahier du Musée d'Art Moderne* 29 (Autumn 1989): 75.

<sup>87</sup> Hemken, “Pan-Europe and German Art: El Lissitzky at the 1926 Internationale Kunstausstellung in Dresden,” in *El Lissitzky* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1990), 47-48. Because Hemken interprets Lissitzky's room as

### III. *Photo-painting*

After Dresden, Lissitzky spent the summer traveling: in the Netherlands, he visited Mart Stam, J.J.P. Oud and Cornelius van Eesteren; in Hannover, he reunited with Kurt Schwitters and Alexander Dorner, who commissioned a new version of his Dresden project for permanent installation at the Hannover Provinzialmuseum.<sup>88</sup> He no doubt perused Moholy-Nagy's book, *Painting Photography Film*, news of whose publication the previous fall had moved him to unearth his old issues of *Broom* and to reaffirm to Küppers that "the painterly value of the discovery [of the photogram] is something completely created by Man Ray. Look at the work. The light is stripped to the point of perversity."<sup>89</sup> Upon first hand inspection, any number of the book's details would have confirmed that Moholy had borrowed liberally, and not only from Man Ray: for the most part its typography, but also the very terms of its argument, which used the concepts of objective, non-objective and absolute painting "to clarify the relationship of photography to recent painting" were adopted from Lissitzky.<sup>90</sup> In the fall, Lissitzky returned to Moscow, and, perhaps because his travels did not bring him to Poland, sent a copy of his

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a demonstration of internationalism in the hostile atmosphere of national competition, he interprets these critical responses as expressions of skepticism.

<sup>88</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 81-82.

<sup>89</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 15 September 1925, *ibid.*, 67 (translation corrected). Lissitzky refers only to images published in *Broom*, suggesting that he Küppers had told him about the book, but not sent it.

<sup>90</sup> "Zunächst ist es notwendig, das Verhältnis der *Photographie* zu der *Malerei* der Jetztzeit zu klären." *Malerei Photographie Film* (München: Albert Langen, 1925), 5.

photographic self-portrait to the Warsaw architect Szymon Syrkus, inscribed in typewritten capital letters, “SELBSTPORTRÄT. PHOTOMALEREI.”<sup>91</sup>

Either while abroad or shortly after his return to Moscow, Lissitzky took up the self-portrait’s technique of “photo-painting” in a new work based on the double exposure of Times Square signage that had so captivated him in Mendelsohn’s *Amerika* (fig. 3.13). Having inserted a hurdler into this incongruous environment, Lissitzky showed the image alongside some of his architectural drawings as an *Experiment for a Fresco for a Sports Club* at the “4 Arts” exhibition in November, where, he told Ilya Chashnik, “I look like a Martian amongst all the setting and rising suns.”<sup>92</sup> Lissitzky’s absolute otherness no doubt arose from his unusual interests in both architecture and photography, which would be united early the next year when he agreed to design an exhibition that the Moscow printers’ union had organized to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the revolution. There, in keeping with his current interests, Lissitzky was charged with constructing the exhibition’s displays and co-organizing the department of photography and photo-mechanics.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> This print is now in the collection of the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (inventory no. 1571). The inscription is typed on a small square of paper affixed to the front of the print, and although the ink is almost entirely effaced, the typed impression of the words makes them legible in raking light. Lissitzky’s use of this German version of the term clarifies the meaning of his Russian neologism *photopis*, which so far has resisted translation (Nisbet, for example, preferred to leave the term untranslated or to translate it simply as “photography”). *Photomalerei* is also the title given to the self portrait in Traugott Schalcher’s essay on Lissitzky in *Gebrauchsgraphik* no. 12 (1928): 49.

<sup>92</sup> El Lissitzky to Ilya Chashnik, 6 November 1926, RGALI fond 3145, op. 1 d. 571. Trans. John Bowlt in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), 75-76. Peter Nisbet first suggested that the photomontage Lissitzky subsequently exhibited under the title *Rekord* was shown at the “4 Arts” society exhibition in November 1926 under this name. His identification has been bolstered by Maria Gough, who also provides an account of the sports club project itself. Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 329 n. 46. Maria Gough, “Lissitzky on Broadway,” <http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Gough.pdf>, accessed 1 February 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Proceedings of the Committee of the Production Graphics Exhibition, 9 February 1927. RGAE fond 8053, op. 1, d. 21, l. 27. Although the details of this commission are obscure, Lissitzky is among those present at the earliest meetings of its planning committee. The members received the very modest salary of 50 rubles per month for their troubles, suggesting that Lissitzky also resumed teaching at VKhUTEMAS. *Ibid.*, l. 21.

Lissitzky's work on the All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition—a title that appeared in June with the exhibition's recognition by central authorities—occupied him for the better part of the year.<sup>94</sup> Already in February, the planners expected the show to be too large for the spaces available to them and hoped to rent the vacant pavilion of the 1923 Agricultural Exhibition, whose Krimskii Val address promised abundant square footage.<sup>95</sup> Despite its initially ambitious scale, the exhibition expanded to include sections devoted to the materials of printing, the history of writing and a showcase for the latest press equipment, which required the intervention of the State Trade Commission in order to import equipment from abroad.<sup>96</sup> All this considerably complicated the task of the designer, and although he was relieved of his obligations to the photo-mechanics section on April 27, Lissitzky struggled to meet his deadlines for the exhibition design.<sup>97</sup> It is tempting to attribute these difficulties to his ailing health, but the evidence suggests that other members of the committee encountered similar problems, meeting the exhibition's outsize ambitions through collective bricolage. This is true of the exhibition catalogue, whose

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<sup>94</sup> On May 24 the exhibition committee agreed to seek legal assistance in gaining All-Union status with the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy, VSNKh. RGAE fond 8053, op. 1, d. 21, l. 9. The documentary evidence allows us to accept Margarita Tupitsyn's assertion that the exhibition was "sanctioned and controlled by high-ranking government officials" only with significant qualifications. Tupitsyn appears to have based her judgment on the exhibition bulletin, which excerpts a portion of VSNKh's June 24 decision to grant All-Union status and corresponding funds. *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 26. In light of the evidence presented here, this inclusion appears to be a manifestation of pride in achieving the sanction (to say nothing of funds) of such a high level committee, rather than the top-down order Tupitsyn implies.

<sup>95</sup> Organizational Proceedings of the Artistic Council of the Production Graphics Exhibition, 12 February 1927. RGAE fond 8053, op. 1, d. 21, ll. 52 and 26.

<sup>96</sup> These sections were proposed by A.I. Kondrat'ev at a meeting of the printers union of the Moscow *guberniia* on February 24. RGAE fond 8053, op. 1, d. 23, l. 14. GOSTORG approved the exhibition committee's appeal for import licensing on April 19, and requested that a committee member from the exhibition's foreign division be assigned to assist in the coordination of its activities with GOSTORG's own exhibition committee. *Ibid.*, l. 5. This section opened later than the exhibition's main pavilion.

<sup>97</sup> RGAE fond 8053, op. 1, d. 21, l. 21. Lissitzky was asked to submit his designs by May 2, but gave his report only on May 15, after which all exhibition departments were asked to reduce the quantity of exhibits; two weeks later, he requested permission to employ an assistant. *Ibid.*, ll. 17, 11, 7.

design was originally assigned to one N.I. Piskarev, but which Lissitzky took over late in the process, enlisting his student Solomon Telingater as typographer and preparing a variation on his 1923 Mayakovsky book that substituted pamphlets coded by size and color for the thumb-tabs of old.<sup>98</sup> Although Lissitzky's catalogue design shows him in something of a holding pattern, his exhibits testify to the ambition of his original aims for the exhibition.

When the show opened in August, Lissitzky contributed nine photographic works, several of which are visible in an installation shot taken for the catalog (fig. 3.14). Appearing at a distance on one of Lissitzky's spare but elegant stands, some of the works can nevertheless be positively identified in the photograph: a large print of his portrait of Arp, a print of his self portrait and a double portrait with Vilmos Huszar, as well as his new work for the sports club, now called *Record*, are all clearly recognizable. In addition to these, the exhibition catalog lists Lissitzky's portrait of Schwitters (fig. 3.15) along with several unidentified works: two photograms, titled "Architect's Equipment" and "Typesetter's Equipment"; "Negative-Positive," and "Theatrical Project."<sup>99</sup> All of these are classed as photo-painting.

Although for the moment the designation "photo-painting" remains opaque, the works grouped under the term do converge around some common problems. With a hybrid technique akin to that of Lissitzky's self-portrait, *Record* combines the basic cutting procedure of photomontage with other darkroom techniques. While the cut visible around the sprinter's right

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<sup>98</sup> Piskarev is assigned the catalogue on March 13, and presents a maquette May 19. Ibid., ll. 25, 20, 10. Contrary to any appearance of frailty, Lissitzky's capacity for work seems to have been exemplary, and when the show closed he was chosen to design the diploma honoring its exemplary exhibits as well. RGAE fond 8053, op. 1, d. 23, l. 3. Gustav Klutis received such a diploma for his work in the category of photomontage, which has been published in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutis and Valentina Kulagina: Photography and Montage after Constructivism* (New York: Steidl, International Center of Photography, 2004), 176.

<sup>99</sup> Tupitsyn hazards several guesses as to the identity of these images, which vary in plausibility, in *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 27-28. The one extant installation shot simply does not provide enough information to make further attributions, however, and until additional evidence comes to light it seems more prudent to acknowledge the current limits of scholarship.

calf registers as a material trace of the thickness of paper, it is at odds with the porosity of the figure it bounds, whose body is everywhere permeated by the confusion of the scene. At a purely technical level, cutting out the figure to photograph him in isolation resolves an issue that plagues Lissitzky's portrait of Schwitters: in printing too many negatives onto a single sheet, the print loses tonal range, and correspondingly, legibility.<sup>100</sup> Here, the cut eliminates optical 'noise' from the image so that the same noise may operate on the thematic level, foregrounding the discrete steps of the printing process and the intervals between them. This occurs most clearly in the disjunction between the apparent solidity of the hurdler's shadow, which belongs entirely to one photographic system, and the translucency of his body, which traverses the border of another. More to the point, however, is that they may be grasped simultaneously, and that the image's component parts occupy independent spaces, even while appearing to touch. As in Lissitzky's self-portrait, the spatial principles worked out in collage are preserved here through very different means and materials.

A further clue to the significance of the designation is contained in Lissitzky's catalogue essay, which positions photo-painting as a significant step toward overcoming readymade materials in production graphics, albeit in fairly broad terms:

Photomontage, at the stage in which it is found today, uses readymade snapshots as elements from which it composes a single whole. The next stage of the development is photo-painting, which, in distinction from painting, paints its product with light directly on sensitive paper using negatives from a camera or the direct action of a beam of light encountering objects of varying transparency, depending on its task.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Given the context of painting (or at least a discourse related to it), it is worth pointing out that this is precisely the fault Gauguin found in Seurat, whose rationalized light he viewed as "imprisoned in a uniform mold." *The Writings of a Savage*, ed. Daniel Guérin, trans. Eleanor Levieux (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 144.

<sup>101</sup> "Foto-montazh v toi stadii, v kotoroi on nakhoditsiia sevodniia, pol'zuetsia gotovymi fotosnimkami, kak elementami, iz kotorogo on sostavliaet odno tseloe. Sleduiushchei stadii razvitiia iavliaetsia fotopis', kotoraiia v otlichie ot zhivopisi, pishet svoe proizvedenie neposredstvenno na chuvstvitel'noi bumage svetom, pol'zuias' v zavisimosti ot zadanie negativami, poluchennymi posredstvom fotoapparata, ili neposredstvom vozdeistviem

Of course, the criterion that one may now paint with either objects or camera negatives does little to isolate precisely what constitutes painting here. The author's insistence on procedures executed in the darkroom makes it possible to conceive of the painterly aspect being shifted to those practices, like dodging and burning, that distinguish the print from the negative. But the definition itself gives us little to go on: it is obscure not just because it is too catholic, but because it insists only on painting's survival by *differing from itself*.

By 1927 any appeal to painting was bound to have a revanchist flavor, especially when speaking of photography. The previous year, Osip Brik had argued in *Sovetskoe foto* that photography could be enlisted in the struggle to end painting, a project whose dire status Boris Arvatov assessed in the first number of *Novyi lef* with a bluntly titled essay on "Why the Easel Picture Didn't Die."<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, in an article published that spring in the *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, Lissitzky himself had affirmed that "the easel picture produced great works of art, but their effectiveness has been lost. The cinema and the illustrated weeklies have triumphed."<sup>103</sup> His position was thus extremely tenuous: to embrace painting at home not only seemed to contradict the position he took in Germany, it also threatened to confirm the substance of the productivist critiques leveled against ASNOVA. Nevertheless, even within LEF it was felt that Brik's posturing in the burgeoning field of photography and film "reeks of provocation and

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svetogo lucha, vstrechaiushchego po doroge k bumage veshchi razlichnoi prozrachnosti" "Khudozhnik v proizvodstve," *Vsesoiuznaia poligraficheskaia vystavka, putevoditel'*, (Moscow: Mospoligraf, 1927), 7.

<sup>102</sup> Osip Brik, "Foto-kadr protiv kartiny," *Sovetskoe foto* 2 (1926): 40-42. English trans. John Bowl, "The Photograph versus the Painting" in Christopher Philips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, 213-18. Boris Arvatov, "Pochemu ne umerla stankovaia kartina," *Novyi lef* 1 (1927): 38-41.

<sup>103</sup> "Our Book," trans. Helene Aldwinckle in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 359.

speculation,” and Arvatov’s recognition that productivism had failed may have presented Lissitzky the chance to reconsider the logic of painting’s persistence.<sup>104</sup>

The title of Lissitzky’s essay, “The Artist in Production,” suggests that he intended such a reconsideration, cultivating under the term ‘photo-painting’ a counter-discourse that foregrounds the *indirect* relation between the technical means and discursive regularities of art rather than one that sets up polemical oppositions with questionable long-term diagnostic power:

If artists demonstrated only technical devices, their situation before the productivists would be extremely critical. Of course, the strength of the [production graphics] department lies on another plane: in *form* and in the interaction that defines form: in the use of *material*. The reproductive process itself is presupposed by the division of the free sketch. Here our best masters show how many instruments and materials are at the service of the graphic artist today. But most importantly, what we see is the diversification of devices worked out by contemporary artists *for the construction of artistic discourse*. This can be designated the grammar and syntax of artistic expression.<sup>105</sup>

Painting, then, is not a set of technical devices bounded by a medium so much as a set of syntactical regularities produced and sustained by a certain way of using material. Opposing photography to it on the basis of their technical limitations grants an illusory unity to both and

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<sup>104</sup> Varvara Stepanova records this view of Brik’s overtures to Dziga Vertov in her diary entry of 12 November 1927: “Why Osia arranged a meeting with the *kinocs* is completely incomprehensible. I understood that it was done with the aim of pulling the *kinocs* into LEF, but the word ‘LEF’ was not even mentioned... For LEF the *kinocs* are too Left-wing a group; they have not been recognized yet, and therefore they might compromise LEF. And this disparity between LEF conversations about newsreel and non-fiction film and their support of the more Right-wing workers in this field already reeks of provocation and speculation.” English translation in Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Gemonia: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), 281. The “right-wing” producer implied here is none other than Sergei Eisenstein.

<sup>105</sup> “Esli by khudozhniki demonstirovali tol’ko tekhnicheskie priemy, to polozhenie ikh pered proizvodstvennikami bylo by ves’ma kriticheskoe. Sila otdela, konechno, lezhit v drugoi ploskosti: v *forme* i v toi vzaimodeistvuiushchei, kotoraiia opredeliaet formu: v ispol’zovanii *materiala*. Samim reproduktsionnym processam, predposlan razdel svobodnogo risunka. Zdes’ nashi luchshie мастера pokazivaiut, kak mnogo instrumentov i materialov sevodnia k uslugam risoval’shchika. No glavnoe, chto my vidim—eto mnogoobrazie priemov, razrabotannykh sovremennymi khudozhnikammi *dlia postroeniia khudozhestvennoi rechi*. Eto možhno nazvat’ grammatikoi i sintaksom khudozhestvennoi vyrazitel’nosti.” *Vsesoiuznaia poligraficheskaia vystavka, putevoditel’*, (Moscow: Mospoligraf, 1927), 4, emphasis original. The phrase ‘division of the free sketch’ refers to a section of the exhibition and should not be taken to indicate that reproduction ‘divides’ the drawing compositionally; rather, that the drawing is meant for a certain type of reproduction from its inception.



obscures the subtler and more pressing issue of the translatability of devices across media. *Pace* Brik, photography makes the continuation of painting possible: the syntactical continuities between them displace only the primacy of the canvas. As collage and photomontage already proved, it is also possible to eschew paint itself, and ‘paint’ with the materials furnished by the process of reproduction, even while leaving painting’s discursive function in effect.

Lissitzky’s argument returns to a set of concepts elaborated by the OPOIAZ formalists, bringing his position close to the one Viktor Shklovsky was still defending in 1927. In its fourth issue, *Novyi lef* printed a report on a public debate in which Marxist critics accused OPOIAZ of having imported neo-Kantian notions into its analyses. Pointing out that material factors alone do not account for an artwork’s continuing effectiveness in a diversity of contexts, Shklovsky

tried to demonstrate that the genesis of a thing—the elucidation of its origin, doesn’t clarify the dialectic of the thing and the mechanisms of its use, that it’s comparatively easy to show the relation of some phenomenon of art with its epoch and very difficult to explain the fact of the survival of a phenomenon and the conditions that created it, and the fact of a change in its function.<sup>106</sup>

For Shklovsky, the case in which both context and form remain constant serves to isolate variability of the object’s function, allowing it to display both relative autonomy and the multiplicity of uses arising from the latter. Conceding to the Marxists that the origins of a form may reflect the social conditions of its birth, Shklovsky stressed the paradoxes of its survival.

Speaking after Shklovsky, Iurii Tynianov also affirmed that the most pressing task of contemporary criticism is to account for “change in the concept of literature and change in the

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<sup>106</sup> “Тов. Шкловский пытался также доказать, что genesis veshchi—vyiasnenie ee proiskhozhdeniia ne ob’iasniaet dialektiku veshchi i mekhanizmy ego primeneniia, chto sravnitel’no legko pokazat’ sviaz’ kokogo-nibud’ iavleniia iskusstva s ego epokhi i ochen’ trudno ob’iasnit’ fakt perezhivaniia etogo iavleniia i tekh uslovii, kotorye ego sozdali i fakt izmeneniia ego funktsii.” “Disput o formal’nom metode,” *Novyi LEF* 4 (1927): 45.

function of artistic devices.”<sup>107</sup> Given these remarks, Tynianov may have already been working on the major essay, “On Literary Evolution,” that he published that year. There, he attempts to explain the lag between changes in social, economic and cultural forms by defining literature as a system of functions whose momentary aspect is governed by a dominant value:

The evolution of literature, as of other cultural systems, does not coincide either in tempo or in character (in view of the specificity of the material that it treats) with the systems with which it is interrelated. The evolution of the constructive function occurs quickly. The evolution of the literary function—from epoch to epoch... Seeing that a system is not the equitable interaction of all elements, but presupposes the advancement of a group of elements (‘the dominant’) and the deformation of the remainder, a work enters into literature and assumes its literary function precisely through this dominant.”<sup>108</sup>

Substituting ‘painterly’ for ‘literary’ in this passage allows us to see what is at stake in Lissitzky’s paradoxical affirmation of painting. Isolating the numerous structural possibilities available to an artist at a given time (in the present case, photomontage, photogram, snapshot, etc.) from the work’s painterly function makes it possible to pinpoint the latter’s dominant, i.e. *normative*, function, whose univocity effaces differences in structure. Because a particular work is only legible as a term in a series, it is subject to the inertia of the whole: this is why, having discarded the element of intentionality, Tynianov stresses that “the concept of a discursive function’s ‘set’ relates to a literary series or to the system of literature, but not to the individual

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<sup>107</sup> “Osnovnym zadaniem iskusstvovedeniia seichas, po mneniiu t[ovarishch’] Tynianov, iavliaetsia izuchenie izmeneniia poniatia o literature i izmeneniia funktsii khudozhestvennykh priemov. “Disput o formal’nom metode,” *Novyi LEF* 4 (1927): 46.

<sup>108</sup> “Evoliutsiia literatury, kak i drugikh kul’turnykh riadov, ne sovpadaet ni po tempu, ni po kharakteru (v vidu spetsifichnosti materiala, kotorym ona oruduet) s riadami, s kotorymi ona sootnesena. Evoliutsiia konstruktivnoi funktsii sovershaetsia bystro. Evoliutsiia literaturnoi funktsii—ot epokhi k epokhe... V vidu togo, chto sistema ne est’ ravnopravnoe vzaimodeistvie vsekh elementov, a predpolagaet vydvynutost’ gruppy elementov (‘dominanta’) i deformatsiiu ostal’nykh, proizvedenie vkhodit v literaturu, priobretaet svoiu literaturnuiu funktsiiu imenno etoi dominantoi.” Tynianov, *Arkhaisty i novatory*, 40-41.

work.”<sup>109</sup> In this view, photographs must enter into chains of images dominated by the discourse of painting, especially if they wish to differentiate themselves from it.

Another two years would pass before Lissitzky finally affirmed, in an essay on “Photo-painting,” that “the language of photography is not the language of painting.”<sup>110</sup> By this time he was regularly employed as an exhibition designer by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations Abroad (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi svyazi s zagranitsy*, VOKS), for whom he had recently shepherded the *Pressa* exhibition in Cologne to great acclaim. In 1929, Lissitzky was far from appearing as an ex-painter polemicizing against his *métier*. But his support of photo-painting seems even more puzzling now: he confirms that “photography possesses properties not available to painting. These lie in the photographic material itself and it is essential for us to develop them,” but only, strangely, “in order to make photography truly into an art, into photo-painting.”<sup>111</sup> Photography’s material specificity, it would appear, requires of it a certain discursive impropriety: to come into its own it must become another, using means not available to painting to effect a mutation of painting’s normative function, rather than simply abolishing it.

Lissitzky’s essay on photo-painting was occasioned by his return to his 1924 portrait of Schwitters, a brazenly politicized variation of which he had recently brought out as an exhibition poster for the Zürich Kunstgewerbemuseum (fig. 3.16). His appeal to portraiture as the essay’s chief example supports this connection: recounting how different uses of the negative may fulfill or distort the painterly conventions of the genre, Lissitzky relates how, “for example, I can, from

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<sup>109</sup> “Poniatie ‘ustanovki’ rechevoi funktsii otnositsia k literaturnomu riadu, ili sisteme literatury, no ne k ot del’nomu proizvedeniiu.” *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>110</sup> El Lissitzky, “*Fotopis’*.” *Sovetskoe foto* no. 10 (15 May 1929): 11. Trans. Peter Nisbet as “Photography” in *El Lissitzky* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1990), 70.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* Translation modified.

a negative, print a portrait as a full characteristic of the given face, but I can strengthen certain features (I elongate the skull), achieve a second accompanying image, include a series of objects which have productive associations.”<sup>112</sup> These techniques, which isolate the trait proper to the portrait, are prevalent in both Lissitzky’s self-portrait and his portrait of Schwitters, which incorporated bits of *Merz* typography along with some of Schwitters’ Pelikan advertisements. A similar associative linkage occurs in the Zürich poster, whose bottom half is occupied by a photograph of Lissitzky’s stands for the Printing Trades exhibition, suggesting that in some sense the poster portrays the audience of Lissitzky’s exhibitions.

But in what sense may this image be considered a portrait? And why return to the genre now? Some of the Zürich poster’s features can be clarified by referring to the circumstances of the commission. Such is the case with the poster’s violent juxtaposition of the letters *USSR*, emblazoned in red across its subjects foreheads, with the antiquated nationalism of the exhibition’s *Russian* designation. We have every reason to believe that this rather discomfiting feature of the image was meant as a joke at the expense of the Kunstgewerbemuseum’s director, who, to the annoyance of all parties involved, insisted on a poster design from Lissitzky but refused VOKS’s request to exchange his exhibition’s Russian title for an international Soviet one.<sup>113</sup> Other aspects of the work can be accounted for by considering it within the series of

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> The director of the Zürich Kunstgewerbemuseum, Alfred Altherr, hoped to secure a large audience for his exhibition by securing poster design from Lissitzky. He tried for some time to contact Lissitzky directly about the matter with little success, finally writing to David Shterenberg on February 1 to lament the failure of his attempts. On February 19, having evidently heard about Herr Lissitzky’s silence for some time, the VOKS liaison in Switzerland requested that Comrade Lissitzky please respond to Altherr’s request. Only on March 3 did VOKS confirm to Altherr that they had managed to secure Lissitzky’s agreement, with one minor concession: “Yesterday we had a debate with Prof. Lissitzky. Although he is not quite up to the job, he has nevertheless promised to design us a poster, as you wish. Please allow a small correction to be carried out in the wording of this poster and “Exhibition of the USSR” to be put in the place of “Russian exhibition,” as this exhibition will reflect the artistic activity of all republics belonging to the Union (for example, the Ukrainian Republic will also be represented).”

simultaneous portraits inaugurated by Anton Guilio Bragaglia in 1912 (fig. 3.17). Like the simultaneous poem, this form of futurist dynamism flourished in dadaist and constructivist circles in the 1920s: in addition to Lissitzky's portraits of Arp and Schwitters, Aleksandr Rodchenko tried his hand at the genre, and Moholy-Nagy illustrated several examples in *Painting Photography Film*—one of Hannah Höch and another culled from a feature in *Hackebeils Illustrierte*, entitled “Portraits as they Shouldn't Be.”<sup>114</sup> Moholy's caption for the anonymous portraits he found in the popular press is especially apt: “surreality, utopia and joke, organizable by joining and overlapping projection (Here is the new wit!).”<sup>115</sup> Lissitzky had used his self-portrait of 1924 as a similar kind of utopian joke, and it is certainly possible that the conduct of the Swiss museum director would have reminded him of his ordeal at Pelikan.

In fact, relating the poster to Lissitzky's 1924 self portrait reveals the extent to which it exceeds the precedent of futurist dynamism. Printed by the Zürich firm Fretz Brothers, the published edition of the poster has been heavily retouched, suturing the precisely layered translucent planes of the two optimistic young faces into a massive unity. Having in a sense passed through Bragaglia's photodynamism to uncanny stasis of the self-portrait, Lissitzky's poster suggests common source for the entire series of simultaneous portraits to which it belongs: a tricephalous representation of the trinity (fig. 3.18). Widespread in medieval miniatures and almanacs but banned by Papal bull in 1628 for its resemblance to Janus and Cerberus, the

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Although Altherr's response is not documented, the poster itself provides some idea of the outcome of the exchange. GARF fond 5823, op. 11, d. 54, ll. 40, 61, 107.

<sup>114</sup> According to Eleanor Hight, Moholy was editing the book's proofs on 19 May 1925, when Eggeling died. *Moholy-Nagy: Photography and Film in Weimar Germany* (Wellesley: Wellesley College Museum, 1985), 29. The feature “Porträts, wie sie nicht sein sollen,” appeared in *Hackebeils Illustrierte* on May 28.

<sup>115</sup> “Durch Zusammenfügen und Aufeinander-und Nebeneinander-projizieren organisierbare Überrealität, Utopie und Scherz (hier ist der neue Witz!)” László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei Photographie Film*. München: Albert Langen, 1925.

tricephalous image was revered into the 19<sup>th</sup> century in some areas of the Tyrolese Alps.<sup>116</sup>

Could Lissitzky have encountered one of these surviving representations in Switzerland? What about Schwitters or Arp? It seems plausible, at least, and it is hard to believe that any of the three would have failed to bring the image to the attention of the others, or that Lissitzky could have ignored its potential effect on a Swiss audience. It may be even asked whether the Schwitters portrait already evokes this source, for is there not an element of rapture in his strangely fixed gaze and open mouth?<sup>117</sup> Or, what amounts to the same question turned back on itself: Is the poster's admittedly terrifying effect simply the result of its resort to futurism as a State style?

For Shklovsky and Tynianov, however, the question of systemic function should take precedent over that of sources. Indeed, Tynianov goes so far as to suggest that the problem of origins may be an *effect* of the system, which “embraces not only works of art which are close to each other in time but also works which are drawn into the orbit of the system from foreign literatures or previous epochs.”<sup>118</sup> And differences here are important: the apparently seamless homogeneity of the finished poster still allows the viewer to shift the focal point of her gaze from one face to the next much like the walls in Lissitzky's axonometric projection of the *Prouns Space*, with the valence of the central eye shifting between left and right as the viewer reassigns it to different faces. In this sense, the Zürich poster proves that the simultaneous portrait merely

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<sup>116</sup> See R. Pettazzoni, “The Pagan Origins of the Three-Headed Representation of the Christian Trinity,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* vol. 9 (1946): 151. The topic is obscure, but see also Alfred Hackel, *Die Trinität in der Kunst. Eine ikonographische Untersuchung* (Berlin: Verlag Reuther und Reichard, 1931), 98-117.

<sup>117</sup> Focusing on Lissitzky's use of a toy parrot as a metaphor of recitation and the typographic arrow and question mark near Schwitters' ear, Peter Nisbet points out that “an iconographic reading of the Schwitters portrait could relate almost everything [depicted in it] to Schwitters' famous performances of his ‘nonsense’ poems, the *Ursonate*.” Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years*, 309. My aim here is to enrich Nisbet's reading with material that, while incontestably relevant from an iconographic perspective, operates outside of those methodological limits.

<sup>118</sup> Roman Jakobson and Iurii Tynianov, “Problems in the Study of Language and Literature,” in Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), 48.

depicts a *continuous identity* in time. Breaking that continuity through the simultaneous co-presence of different faces within a single gestalt—with gender functioning as the sign of difference—pushes the poster onto the terrain of wonders, leaving it stranded between the carnival and the mystic trance. In this sense, the Zürich poster exposes a series of differential transformations that operate beyond the conventional limits of the portrait function.

Still, these questions of identity and difference are not idle, and Tynianov challenges us to repeat them with each work, reconstructing the series into which they are inserted, which in turn injects unintended functions into them. They arise again when Lissitzky returns to *Record*, cutting it into vertical strips and extending them at regular intervals, as if to approximate the cinematic flicker of his Dresden room (fig. 3.19). Around the time Lissitzky revised the picture, Sigfried Giedion visited the second iteration of his *Demonstrationsraum* at the Hannover Provinzialmuseum, and found himself confronted with similar, apparently systemic resonances:

One can still see today, in farmers' houses in Catholic regions, icons made out of painted glass strips which alternately join together and dissolve for the passing viewer. Lissitzky has incorporated—perhaps unconsciously—the baroque tradition and translated it into abstraction.<sup>119</sup>

Had Lissitzky read Giedion's review before he returned to *Record*? Was he perhaps familiar with the genre of images Giedion refers to—the so-called 'turning pictures' that frequently also function as a memento mori, painted on one side of their pleated surface with a portrait, and the other with a death's head?<sup>120</sup> (fig. 3.10) The questions are again the same, and we are faced with

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<sup>119</sup> "Man kann heute noch in katholischen Gegenden an veilen Bauernhäusern Heiligenbilder aus bemalten gläsernen Lamellen sehen, die sich für den vorübergehenden Beschauer abwechselnd zusammenfügen und zersetzen. Lissitzky nimmt—vielleicht unbewusst—die barocke Tradition auf und übersetzt sie ins Abstrakte." Sigfried Giedion, "Lebendiges Museum," *Der Cicerone* vol. 4 (1929): 105.

<sup>120</sup> See Allan Shickman "'Turning Pictures' in Shakespeare's England." *The Art Bulletin* vol. 59 no. 1 (Mar., 1977): 67-70.

the problem of correlating and differentiating the function of the interstices within Lissitzky's para-cinematic experiments and those of the anamorphosis, from which the object appears to look back.

The translations of photo-painting, to borrow Giedion's word, place photography in relation to those moments in the history of painting in which it became clear that "photography cannot be reduced to getting into focus and releasing the shutter," even before the advent of the medium.<sup>121</sup> Photography, Lissitzky seems to suggest, may assume functions which are in excess of the naturalistic representational schema that partisans of the snapshot such as Brik believed to be the common basis of the two media. The question of photo-painting lies elsewhere: if the representational function of painting had indeed been assumed by photography, could the latter also be made to assume that residuum abandoned by naturalism, which was perhaps always its basis? Could photography return its audience to the experience of desire and envy, shame and ecstasy without the trappings of myth? Surely one had at least to try.

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<sup>121</sup> El Lissitzky, "Photography," 70.



## Chapter 4 | Getting out of the Kitchen: Moscow and Skhodnia, 1928-1933

*The artist of the epoch of proletarian dictatorship regards himself not as a solitary artist passively reflecting reality, but as an active fighter on the ideological front of the proletarian revolution who organizes the psyche of the masses and enables the formation of a new everyday life with his work.*

– Declaration of the *October* group, 1928<sup>1</sup>

*The word design doesn't exactly define the creative content of our work. I venture to think that the work on the "image" for an issue of the journal... is no less rigorous than on other pictures. And the social resonance is no less broad.*

– El Lissitzky on *USSR in Construction*, 1939<sup>2</sup>

In January of 1927, Sophie Küppers moved to Moscow. Having arranged for her sons to board temporarily in Germany, she closed the distance that had separated her from Lissitzky for the duration of their three year romance. By her own account, the couple's marriage was registered on January 27, not two weeks after her arrival.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, this was not the impulsive decision of young lovers, but the reasoned action of sober adult minds. Nor does it seem that the ceremony was treated as much more than a simple legal acknowledgement of their decision to hold their lives and affairs in common. Of course, with the ratification of the USSR's new

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<sup>1</sup> "Khudozhnik epokhi proletarskoi diktatury rassmatrivaet sebia ne kak odinogo artista, passivno otograzhaiushchego deistvitel'nost', a kak aktivnogo bortsu na ideologicheskome fronte proletarskoi revoliutsii, kotoryi svoei rabotoi organizuet psikhiku mass i sposobstvuet oformleniiu novogo byta." "Novoe ob'edinenie khudozhestvennogo truda v Moskve, Deklaratsiia" *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 3 (1928): 74.

<sup>2</sup> "Slovo oformlenie sovershenno ne opredeliaet vse tvorcheskoe sodержanie nashei raboty. Ia smeiu dumat', chto rabota nad 'obrazom' No. zhurnala... ne menee naprazhennaia, chem nad drugoi kartinoi. I obshchestvennyi resonans ne menee shirok." Biografiia L.M. Lisitskogo, RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 556, l. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 82.

marriage law the month of Küppers' arrival, this legal formality was all the Soviet state required. Riding a wave of libertarian legal theory that looked toward the withering away of marriage, with its roots in the institutions of private property and inheritance, as an inevitability akin to the withering away of the state, the new law expanded the marriage bond to include a range of hitherto improper domestic liaisons, requiring only a common household, joint upbringing of children, and the expression of marital relations before a witness.<sup>4</sup> With the couple's financial livelihood already closely intertwined, it was a shared address that enabled Lissitzky's shift to a new legal status, with all the responsibilities it required.

In itself, the address was no simple matter. Lissitzky had mostly been staying at his brother's dacha since returning to the USSR, filling a short term vacancy in Moscow every now and again to ease the commute to the city, but failing to secure a long term residence. In reasonably good health, this instability mostly affected his work: he confided to Küppers on Nov. 5, 1925 that "my one and only desire is to build my own little house, so that I can arrange everything I need for my work in it."<sup>5</sup> The housing question was clearly implicated in the couple's plans, and when Küppers raised the matter again, Lissitzky related his desire for a private home to the recently proposed marriage law: "the problem of a house on an estate is the problem of the family... [which] can't be solved with us yet either. It's the same thing with the new marriage law which has just fallen through and is now being debated throughout the whole

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 234-36. The new marriage law essentially codified the legal practice that had been current since 1922, when the Soviet courts began to recognize the claims of mistresses whose maternal and domestic labor granted them a *de facto* claim to their partners' earnings equal to or in excess of their legal counterparts. It nonetheless remained more conservative than many of its supporters had hoped.

<sup>5</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 70.

country.”<sup>6</sup> Lissitzky and Küppers’ plans for a shared life would depend on the forms available to them in the Soviet Union, and there was still much resistance to the new law in the countryside, where the traditional collective property of the peasant farm still held sway, impeding the implementation of a law designed for an industrial society of individual wage earners.<sup>7</sup> To Lissitzky, the debate over the marriage law would have made the petty-bourgeois nature of his desire for a private domicile painfully clear. So, as if recognizing its uneven development, he related his desire to the unrealized collective and to the family as a social impediment, implying that its particular form would, like marriage itself, soon wither away.

The apparent nonchalance of Lissitzky’s remarks on the fate of private life is belied by their echo in his notes on the collectivization of art around this time. On two pages of undated jottings, he sketches a vision of the present under the sign of the “kitchen”:

we live in a field of forces that arises between two poles, – a society that destroys itself, and + a working community that constructs itself. But in the society today what is at stake is the solution of the kitchen question... Only after the solution of the kitchen question (this we term communism) will work arise (this we term constructivism). We have no idea what kind of forms and what kind of construction it will accomplish, but the power that will move it has already been born and moves us.<sup>8</sup>

On the verso of this sheet, Lissitzky proposes three broad historical phases: “emergence of human society/until communism (solution of kitchen)/beginning of work,” indicating with an

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>7</sup> Commonly held property meant that alimony payments affected the income of the entire family, rather than just members of the couple concerned. Goldman, *Women, the State, Revolution*, 251.

<sup>8</sup> “Wir leben in einem Kraftfeld das entsteht zwischen 2 polen – einer Gesellschaft die sich destruktiviert [sic] und + einer Arbeitsgemein[schaft] die sich konstruiert. Aber heute in der Gesellschaft geht es um die Lösung der Küchenfrage. ... Nur nach der Lösung der Küchenfrage (das nennen wir Kommunismus) wird entstehen die Arbeit (das nennen wir Konstruktivismus). Wir haben keine Ahnung was für Formen und was für Bau er vollbringen wird, aber die Kraft die ihr bewegen wird ist schon geboren und sie bewegt uns.” GRI special collections item 950076, box 1 folder 7. Notably, there are still allusions to the Proun on this sheet. The presence of the Proun and the similarity of Lissitzky’s rhetoric in his letter of 8 September 1925 suggest that the fragment is also from autumn 1925.

arrow, “we stand in between, here; we want to get out of the kitchen.”<sup>9</sup> Formulated in these terms, Lissitzky’s “kitchen” question testifies to his attitude toward the transitional period of NEP, ironizing the comforts of home and hearth and designating the private sphere as the site of the struggle against bourgeois society.<sup>10</sup> The idea was not limited to the Soviet case, either; it crops up again in his correspondence with Küppers in reference to Hannover, a usage broad enough to suggest that Lissitzky still considered Soviet developments to be closely tied to international ones.<sup>11</sup> The phrase would not last, but its relevance would only grow with the implementation of a planned economy under the policy of Socialism in One Country.

During the first Five-Year-Plan, Lissitzky’s work was predominantly public. In his work on the Cologne exhibition, *Pressa*, he developed a powerful idiom of extended photomontage sequences and renewed his engagement with that monument of the public sphere, the book. His new form found patronage within a party that was turning inward, ridding itself of internal opposition and celebrating the achievements of its elite—and ultimately Josef Stalin—in the realization of the Five-Year-Plan. But rather than succumbing to the “sheer adulation of totalitarian power,” as Benjamin Buchloh suggests, Lissitzky found the contradictions of his own desire for the collective reflected in the official society of the party apparatus.<sup>12</sup> According to

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<sup>9</sup> “Entschein [sic] der Mensch. Gesellsch./Bis zum Komm. (Lösung der Küche)/Anfang der Arbeit. Wir stehen zwischen hier, wir wollen raus der Küche.” Ibid. “Entschein” is probably Lissitzky jumbling *erscheinung* and *entstehung*.

<sup>10</sup> Christina Kiaer has shown that this was a significant component of the constructivist project during NEP. See her foundational discussion of the gendering of everyday life in *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 41-87.

<sup>11</sup> In his letter of 8 September 1925 the phrase was used to assuage Küppers’ doubts about the viability of constructivism: “from our point of view you are right, but what do we see? We ourselves are standing in the field of action and are therefore egocentric. Hannover is really the kitchen, you see. It boils down to this—whether art is taking an active part or merely ‘reflecting’.” Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “From *Faktura* to Factography,” *October* 30 (Autumn 1984): 114. Buchloh argues that factography tips into a mode of totalitarian domination, leaving only the question of when this occurs. In this

political theorist Kenneth Jowitt, the Bolshevik party legitimized itself by combining charisma with bureaucratic discipline in an impersonal *party charisma*, which suspends the charismatic power, familial, and material interests of its members in the pursuit of social transformation.<sup>13</sup> The cult of Stalin functioned similarly. If Stalin could appear in the press after 1935 as the “father of the great socialist family of peoples,” it is because he decided whether the “bigwigs” and “family circles” maintaining heteronomous order in factories and provincial party organizations should be replaced.<sup>14</sup> And while Stalin’s image functioned as a displacement of traditional authority, the party tended to mix public and private interests in a manner that Jowitt calls “neo-traditional.”

Although he was never a party member, a similar comingling of private matters with public occurred in Lissitzky’s work. With the birth of a son in October 1930, he became a father in the same way he had become a husband in 1927: provisionally, in the hope that such roles would be utterly transformed in the building of socialism. This suspension of traditional authority also affected his authorial status, a position that Roland Barthes long ago identified as

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chapter, I follow a generation of revisionist historians of the Soviet Union in abandoning the totalitarian framework. For a review of the paradigm’s historiography and some recent comparative studies of the German and Soviet systems, see *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, eds. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> “Lenin took the fundamentally conflicting notions of personal heroism and organizational impersonalism and recast them in the form of an organizational hero, the Party. What distinguishes the ‘party of a new type’ is the enmeshment of modern features (e.g., the emphasis on empirical investigation, discussion and individual efficacy) and traditional features (e.g., the definition of Party membership as a corporate, exclusive, superior status embracing the whole of a person) in a novel form of charismatic organization. That novelty expresses itself in the conception of the Party as an amalgam of bureaucratic discipline and charismatic correctness.” Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 125.

<sup>14</sup> *Pravda*, June 13, 1936, quoted in Graeme Gill, “The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union.” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 10 no. 2 (April 1980): 171. Gill’s *Origins of the Stalinist Political System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) provides a politico-institutional history consistent with the legitimation-type theorized by Jowitt, with particular attention to the problem of ‘familiness’ in provincial party organizations (see in particular, “The Reformed Oligarchy, 1930-34,” pp. 201-259). The dynamic of “family circles” and “bigwigs” in industrial enterprises is discussed in Hiroaki Kuromiya, “*Edinonachalie* and the Soviet Industrial Manager, 1928-1937,” *Soviet Studies* vol. 36 no. 2 (1984): 185-204.

having “the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child.”<sup>15</sup> Not that Lissitzky’s work for the Party should be understood as readerly texts; instead, they are poised between authorship and bureaucratic authorization. Similarly, alongside Lissitzky’s photographic propaganda of the 1930s, there grew a body of work bearing an uneasy relationship to family portraiture, trafficking in tropes suited to the heroic mobilization of collectivity on a slightly smaller scale.

### I. *International Review*

Lissitzky’s designs for the 1928 International Press Exhibition in Cologne (*Pressa*), comprising the exhibit’s groundplan, central star installation, transmission belts and photofrieze, are widely acknowledged as the zenith of his production (fig. 4.1). The recipient of high praise from contemporaries, *Pressa* continues to find confirmation among art historians. Benjamin Buchloh finds that Lissitzky’s design overcomes “the traditional limitations of the avant-garde practice of photomontage and reconstitutes it within the necessary conditions of simultaneous collective reception” of film and architecture, initiating a paradigmatic shift away from the governing criteria of modernism; in a more traditionally liberal vein, Leah Dickerman sees in it “a new kind of transparency of a public order... unhindered access to and distribution of information”; while T.J. Clark considers it “the finest of all modernist ‘installations’... unabashedly propaganda about propaganda, meant to confirm the West’s worst fears.”<sup>16</sup> While these assessments clearly contradict one another, they also converge around a common core. The

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<sup>15</sup> “The Death of the Author,” *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang: New York, 1977), 145.

<sup>16</sup> Buchloh, “*Faktura*,” 108; Dickerman, “El Lissitzky’s Camera Corpus” in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 171; Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 283.

trend may be summed up with Clark's maxim, "the better a Bolshevik El Lissitzky was, the better his art," for it must be stressed that the contradictions in *Pressa's* reception reside in the Bolshevik regime, in which, according to Jowitt, "(modern) elements of publicity are enmeshed with and subordinated to (charismatic-traditional) elements of secrecy."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps no single aspect of the multifaceted pavilion better encapsulates this contradiction than Lissitzky's catalogue, whose eighteen-page photomontage concertina insert mediates an entire spectrum of formal, technological and situational demands (fig. 4.2).

An institutional account of the exhibition makes the complexity of this book especially clear, since the political situation of its organizational sponsor, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations Abroad (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnykh svyazi s zagranitsej*, VOKS), demonstrates the volatility of the Soviet 'public sphere' at a crucial historical moment. As a bridge between the hybrid public of the USSR and the liberal bourgeois public spheres of the West, VOKS registered the tensions between the two systems more acutely than other institutions, down to its very form: one of the few non-governmental organizations in the USSR, VOKS was itself modeled on the foreign Friends' Societies that cropped up in England and Germany to facilitate diplomatic recognition of the new Soviet state.<sup>18</sup> Devoted to strengthening international exchanges between cultural and scientific lights and thus dealing primarily with the intelligentsia, VOKS assumed an "externally public [*obshchestvennyi*] character," in the words of its founder, Ol'ga Kameneva, favoring the party-state's progressive aspect by reflecting the

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<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Farewell*, 283. Jowitt, *New World Disorder*, 136. Jowitt specifies that "while they extend political activity to previously excluded social forces [Leninist regimes] oppose the emergence of an autonomous public realm."

<sup>18</sup> Michael David-Fox, "From Illusory 'Society' to Intellectual 'Public': VOKS, International Travel and Party: Intelligentsia Relations in the Interwar Period" in *Contemporary European History* vol. 11 no. 1 (Feb. 2002): 23-24. For this reason, it was valuable for *perestroika* era reconstructions of a history of Soviet civil society; see N.V. Kiseleva, *Iz istorii bor'by sovetskoi obshchestvennosti za proryv kul'turnoi blokady SSSR (VOKS: seredina 20-kh—nachalo 30-kh godov)* (Rostov-na-Donu: Izdatel'stvo Rostovskogo Universiteta, 1991).

public form of its bourgeois counterparts.<sup>19</sup> By Kameneva's count, the society was in continuous contact with 2,657 correspondents in 604 offices in 62 countries in 1928.<sup>20</sup> As such, it was the primary channel through which the foreign intelligentsia experienced the USSR; to cite only the most proximate example, it was at VOKS that Lissitzky met Alfred Barr, on January 3, 1928—just a few days after he was awarded the *Pressa* commission.<sup>21</sup>

Plans for the Soviet *Pressa* pavilion had, however, begun a full five months before Lissitzky was brought on board. The exhibition committee included Kameneva; the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky; the head of the State Publishing House (GIZ), Artem Khalatov; and editor of *Krasnaia Pechat'* (*Red Press*), Mikhail Gus, among others.<sup>22</sup> In July 1927, the group had agreed that the exhibition should convey the specificity of the Soviet press by highlighting innovations like wall newspapers and the worker-correspondent movement while providing a history of the press in Russia. Soon, VOKS enlisted the office of the Soviet trade delegation in Berlin to negotiate a lease in the new exhibition spaces on the eastern banks of the Rhine.<sup>23</sup> Inserting an unsolicited *nota bene* into a letter of Sept. 24, the German office advised Moscow to “reduce to the minimum possible number the usual type of

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<sup>19</sup> David-Fox, “VOKS,” 24.

<sup>20</sup> O.D. Kamaneva, “Cultural Rapprochement: The U.S.S.R. Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries,” *Pacific Affairs* vol. 1 no. 5 (Oct. 1928): 8.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred H. Barr, Jr. “Russian Diary, 1927-28,” *October* 7 (Winter 1978): 19. A VOKS committee formally invited Lissitzky to lead the exhibition design in its meeting of Dec. 28, along with Isaak Rabinovich, who had worked on the design of the 1925 Decorative Arts Exposition in Paris, but as of Dec. 30, Lissitzky is the sole artist referred to in the protocols of the planning meetings. GARF fond 5283, o. 11. d. 35, ll. 25-26. The brief presence of Rabinovich was first noted by Igor V. Rjasantsev, “El Lissitzky und die ‘Pressa’ in Köln, 1928” in *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf* (Halle: Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, 1982), 73. According to Rjasanzew, this marked the first time a single artist had led a large international exhibition design.

<sup>22</sup> GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 34 ll. 2-4.

<sup>23</sup> GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 38 ll. 181, 185, 190.



diagrams and even photography, since all the reports we're getting and even the catalogues of newly organized exhibitions testify to the fatigue of visitors and the failure of similar exhibitions."<sup>24</sup> This remark sparked a dialogue between Moscow and Berlin that stretched into late November, when the German office received a copy of the exhibition plan. Seeing that their diagnosis of audience expectations had not fully registered, the delegation rattled off two forceful letters, reiterating that "if we want to succeed in Cologne and not end up the boring ones, we have to embark on the path of the German *Pressa* exhibits in the most decisive manner."<sup>25</sup> For this, they advised the installation of a small film projector and a loudspeaker playing Soviet radio as well as phonograph recordings in multiple languages.<sup>26</sup>

The contours of the *Pressa* commission were thus clearly established by the time Lissitzky received it at the end of December, and they were exceptionally well suited to his interests and experience. Already at the All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition, Lissitzky had paired his faith in photomechanical processes as the future of the press with the task of exhibition design. For *Pressa*, he not only acted as designer of the exhibition and catalogue, he also staked out new terrain as liaison to Sovkino and *de facto* film curator for the exhibits requested by Berlin.<sup>27</sup> With the firm deadline of the exhibition's May opening approaching and Lissitzky

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<sup>24</sup> "Vam umenshit' do vozmozhnosti minimuma chislo diagrami obychnogo tipa, a takzhe i fotografii, tak kak vse postupaiushchie k nam svedeniia, a takzhe i prospekty vnov' organizuemykh vystavok konstatiruiut utomlenie posetitelei i neuspekhn podobnykh vystavok." Ibid., l. 182.

<sup>25</sup> "Esli my khotim imet' v Kel'ne uspekhn i ne okazat'sia skuchnymi, to my dolzhni samym reshitel'nym obrazom vstupit' na put', na kotoryi vstupila takzhe Germaniia pri podgotovke svoego uchastiia v vystavke *Pressa*." Ibid., l. 193. The trade commission also advised limiting the use of Russian language newspapers as exhibits, and focusing the exhibits on the decade since the revolution.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., l. 194.

<sup>27</sup> Khalatov had confirmed to Berlin that VOKS was beginning negotiations with Sovkino on Dec. 21. GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 38, l. 197; Lissitzky was assigned the task on December 30. GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 35, l. 26.

wearing at least two hats, the coming months demanded intensive preparations. Lissitzky submitted a preliminary design proposal on January 10, but there was little he could do without exact specifications from the site, and it was clear that he would have to visit Cologne to complete his design.<sup>28</sup> On January 16, he was given three days to submit a film program to Sovkino for consideration; his hastily compiled three page document, stressing the desirability of screening Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Eye*, was approved by VOKS on January 19 and discussed with studio representatives at Sovkino and Mezhrabpom-Rus ten days later.<sup>29</sup> In the meantime he had been cleared to travel to Cologne, but not, the film committee specified, before inspecting the private screens that the studios had made available for use.<sup>30</sup> The exhibition's filmic component was thus firmly established before the beginning of February, when Lissitzky set off for Cologne to engage the exhibition design in earnest.<sup>31</sup>

While Lissitzky was attending to the needs of the German public abroad, VOKS was subject to the requirements of its own public at home, undergoing a Worker and Peasant's

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<sup>28</sup> GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 35, l. 28.

<sup>29</sup> Two copies of this document exist: one typed and one handwritten copy signed by Lissitzky. GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 35, ll. 151, 157-59; for VOKS's approval, see l. 37. It is significant not only for being among the earliest documents of Lissitzky's developing relationship with Vertov, but also because Vertov's is the only proper name mentioned in it. In discussion of the document with the studios, not only are more specific films proposed, these are, pointedly, those of Vertov's current rivals, Esfir Shub and Sergei Eisenstein (*ibid.*, ll. 163-64). Shub's example in particular was widely used in the press to criticize Vertov's incorporation of 'played' material into his films. *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, ed. Yuri Tsivian (Gemona: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), 272-78.

<sup>30</sup> This was to be done during the week of January 30. GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 35, ll. 163-64. The exact date on which Lissitzky's *komandirovka* to Cologne was approved is unclear. Khalatov had requested site specs from Berlin on Dec. 31 and Lissitzky's early proposal was likely based on the response sent on Jan. 5; the Berlin delegation was aware of Lissitzky's trip by Jan. 20, but it was not approved by VOKS until Jan. 24. GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 38, ll. 211, 218, 222, and *ibid.*, d. 35, l. 43.

<sup>31</sup> He was approved to travel abroad as of Feb. 9. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 54, l. 3. On Feb. 11, Khalatov wrote to Berlin about a transfer of \$513.47 (American) into a German account for use by Lissitzky and Gus, who was travelling with him, specifying that the two had departed the previous day. GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 38, l. 232.

Commission (*Rabkrin*) review in February that would recommend Kameneva's removal.<sup>32</sup> To members of the society, this could hardly have come as a shock. Kameneva's proximity to the leaders of the United Opposition—Lev Trotsky was her brother and Lev Kamenev her husband—inevitably subjected her to political scrutiny. Both Trotsky and Kamenev had been removed from the Politburo in July 1926 in the wake of their public opposition to Stalin's manipulation of the powers of the Party Secretariat, and by mid-1927 their rhetoric had reached a fever pitch, alleging “the most extreme usurpation of the supreme rights of the party.”<sup>33</sup> It is thus unsurprising to find Kameneva in similar straits, facing dwindling state support and proposing at public meetings that VOKS “must switch over to the public [*obshchestvennost'*] and in the full sense of the word become a civil [*obshchestvennuiu*] organization.”<sup>34</sup> With Trotsky's expulsion from the Central Committee and the capitulation of the opposition at the fifteenth party congress in December, Kameneva's cozy relationship to the intelligentsia made VOKS extremely vulnerable to criticism.

It is difficult to imagine that these circumstances escaped Lissitzky's attention when he returned from Cologne at the end of February, especially since he himself seems to have been something of a Trotskyist. In Switzerland, he had penned an open letter to Malevich for publication in *G*, instructing Hans Richter to forward copies to Lunacharsky and Trotsky; and later, upon resuming his post at VKhUTEMAS, he wrote to Küppers that “here we must live up

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<sup>32</sup> Kameneva remained in office at VOKS until summer 1929; see Ludmilla Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 113. Between 1923 and '34, *Rabkrin* was merged with the party's highest control organ, the Central Control Commission.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Robert V. Daniels, “The Left Opposition as Alternative to Stalinism,” *Slavic Review* vol. 50 no. 2 (Summer 1991): 282. On Trotsky and Kamenev's removal from the Politburo and the growing power of the Secretariat under Stalin, see Gill, *Origins*, 155-58.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in David-Fox, “VOKS,” 26.

to everything like Trotsky: if necessary—war, and if necessary—economy. Thus: ‘Art and Technology: a New Unity’,” pairing Trotsky’s example with the Bauhaus slogan coined by Walter Gropius.<sup>35</sup> The latter is as good a capsule definition of Lissitzky’s views as we are likely to find: an aesthetic variant of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, equally dependent upon and committed to fostering international developments.<sup>36</sup> This commitment was still intact in January when Lissitzky met Barr, to whom he stressed his relationship with the Bauhaus.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it is possible that Lissitzky saw *Pressa* and the association with VOKS as the best way to maintain an international presence, since, when faced with the increasing difficulty of international travel prior to his installation of the Dresden *Demonstrationsraum* in 1926, it was from Kameneva that he sought assistance.<sup>38</sup> And now, with Küppers in Moscow and her sons still boarding in Germany, the ability to travel internationally had a special urgency.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> El Lissitzky to Hans Richter, 2 October 1924. RGALI fond 3145, op. 1, d. 569, l. 1. “Überhaupt wir müssen hier als Trotzki alles erfüllen [sic]: wenn nötig—Krieg, und wenn nötig—Wirtschaft. Also: ‘Kunst & Technik: eine neue Einheit.’” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 24 September 1925. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1 folder 3.

<sup>36</sup> Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution was formulated in his 1905 essay “The Balance and the Prospects—Moving Forces of the Revolution” as an argument that the proletariat could occupy the leading role in what was commonly assumed to be a bourgeois revolution; the caveat of this optimistic and iconoclastic prediction was that “without the direct state support of the European proletariat, the working class in Russia will not be able to remain in power and transform its temporary rule into a stable and prolonged socialist dictatorship.” Quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed, Trotsky: 1879-1921* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 158. A realistic concession in 1905, Permanent Revolution became a contentious position in the mid-’20s with Stalin’s introduction of the doctrine of Socialism in One Country. On the latter, see E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country, 1924-26*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 36-52.

<sup>37</sup> Barr, “Diary,” 19. Barr records that Lissitzky mentioned Gropius by name.

<sup>38</sup> “Ich war heute bei Frau Kamenew und man wird alles in Bewegung setzen um mir die Reiseerlaubnis zu kriegen.” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 5 May 1926. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1 folder 4. Küppers removed the reference to Kameneva from the version of this letter published in *Life, Letters, Texts*, 75. According to the data gathered by David-Fox, 1926 saw a sudden spike in the difficulty of obtaining permission for international travel through Narkompros: 58 of its applications that year were rejected, compared to 18 the previous year. “VOKS,” 19.

<sup>39</sup> Küppers stresses her separation from her sons in her commentary in *Life, Letters, Texts*, 82.

While Lissitzky certainly registered the changing political situation at home, he was of necessity focused on the looming deadline of *Pressa*'s May opening. On February 27, in his first report to VOKS since his return, he pointed out that some countries were spending huge sums on the construction of their exhibits and recommended doubling the current design budget; he stressed immediate organizational concerns as well, noting "the brief period remaining before the opening of the exhibition, and nevertheless the preparation of our exhibits is delayed." Despite having brought paper, celluloid, paints and photo-paper with him from Cologne, he reports, "I left about 30 sketches of models that can't be completed here because of their complexity in the exhibition office, and aside from that I left about 60% of the drawings for the interior equipment of our pavilion."<sup>40</sup> The implication was clear: while some exhibits could be assembled in Moscow, Lissitzky would have to return to Cologne to supervise construction and installation on-site. In response, the organizational committee proposed that he assemble a "great cadre of artists" for the immediate work, and return to Cologne on April 5.<sup>41</sup> The next evening, Lissitzky and several other members of the committee visited the State General Store, GUM, sizing it up as a temporary installation space; within a week he was granted permission to access the space with a team of twelve artists for two days in mid-March.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Ja obrashchaiu vnimanie na ostavshiisia korotkii srok do otkrytiia vystavki, a izgotovlenie eksponatov u nas vse zhe zaderzhivaetsia... Mnoiu v Kel'ne zakuplena chast' materialov dlia izgotovleniia eksponatov (bumaga, tselluloid, kraski, fotobumaga). Mnoiu ostavleno v Biuro Vystavok okolo 30 eskizov dlia modeli, kotorye po svoei slozhnosti ne mogut byt' ispolnemy u nas, krome togo mnoiu ostavleno dlia izgotovleniia okolo 60% chertezhi, dlia vnutrennego oborudovaniia nashego pavi'l'ona. Ia chitaiu, chto summa, otopushchennaia na khudozhestvennoe oformlenie, t.e. summa v razmere... marok dolzhna byt' udvoena." GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 35, ll. 48-49.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 39, ll. 96, 100. Since a number of Lissitzky's collaborators on the installation were associated with VKhUTEMAS, either as students or faculty, it is likely these constituted the core design group, and that the ballooning of this number to over forty artists represented the needs of installation later on. See the brief discussion by Rjasantsev, "El Lissitzky und die 'Pressa'," 74-75.

With the planning trip behind him, Lissitzky's designs began to take shape. Some sense of the pavilion's possibilities was already evident in his first report to the organizational committee. Recounting a conversation with the supervisory committee in Cologne, Lissitzky noted that the Germans were unable to agree on a plan for the building's exterior that would respect the architecture, whereas he had had immediate success. Strikingly, he proposes designing "something on the outside of our pavilion that will stand out... It will be necessary to use our cinema extensively even here, for the external side of our pavilion."<sup>43</sup> Lissitzky's drawings suggest that he followed through on this proposal. His elevation of the building's western façade includes a small quadrilateral cut from a photograph of workers reading (fig. 4.3); poised atop the building about half-way up a towering flag stand and flanked by a massive hammer and sickle, this montage element probably represents a foreshortened cinema screen, tilted forward to loom over spectators on the ground; in his southern elevation sketch, the same element is a square.

The real work would have to wait until Cologne, however. When he left Moscow on April 6, Lissitzky carried with him only plans and sketches along with two models and a map of the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup> These would prove nearly useless, as even the new budget could not support the construction of his ambitious designs. Writing to Küppers, who had travelled with him from Moscow but would not arrive in Cologne until after the installation, he complains that the German vendors are "all crazy and think we're swimming in money. I got an offer for the external construction (flag stands, USSR and main frontage)—49,000M. That's no typo. For the

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<sup>43</sup> "Snaruzhi nashogo pavid'ona neobkhodimo budet sdelat' chto to takoe, chtoby my mogli vydelaetsia... nemtsy dolgo ne soglashilas', boias' narusheniia ikh arkhitekturnogo stilia, no i zdes' my dostigli soglasheniia. Neobkhodimo budet shiroko ispol'zovat' nashe kino zdes' zhe dlia naruzhnoi storony pavid'ona." GARF fond 5283, op. 11, d. 35, ll. 48-49.

<sup>44</sup> RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 54, l. 4.

transmissions—*10,210M*. I almost have to make new designs. I have to haggle and make deals.”<sup>45</sup> Economizing, he reduced the cost of the transmission belts by almost half but cut their number only by a third.<sup>46</sup> Although the pavilion’s small indoor cinema could survive, its flag stands and accompanying outdoor screen would have to be abandoned completely.<sup>47</sup> It is thus partly by chance that the “much talked about photofrieze,” which suspended a large scale photomontage on a net of strings in front of a slogan-covered wall, occupied such a large share of visitors’ attention.<sup>48</sup>

If the compromised exhibits struck Lissitzky as “basically theatrical décor,” he was nevertheless able to exploit their staginess by inserting a “typographical kino-show” into his exhibition catalogue (fig. 4.4).<sup>49</sup> Having already remarked upon the interrelated backwardness of theater and book design—the former with its perspectival proscenium, the latter with its “jacket,

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<sup>45</sup> “Alles ist verrückt und glaubt dass wir im Geld schwimmen. Ich habe erhalte eine Offerte für den Aussenaufbau (Fahnenständer und U.d.S.S.R. und der Hauptfront)—*49.500m*. Es ist kein Druckfehler. Für die Transmissionen—*10.210m*. Ich muss fast neue Entwürfe machen. Muss handeln und Geschäfte machen.” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 14 April 1928. GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 4.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. This letter was composed over the course of several days.

<sup>47</sup> The cinema seems not to have been ready in time for the opening, judging by the fact that it was not listed in the floor plans published in the bulletin, which was printed in time for the opening, but was included in the full catalog, assembled somewhat later.

<sup>48</sup> This splenetic epithet belongs to Gustav Klutssis, writing to Valentina Kulagina on 11 June 1928. Reprinted in translation in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutssis and Valentina Kulagina: Photography and Montage after Constructivism* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2000), 179. Tupitsyn has argued that the photofrieze has little in common with Lissitzky’s previous work and questioned the extent of his authorship on this basis in *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1999), 34-37. Her criticisms are valid only with respect to the arrangement of the photographs themselves, which Lissitzky almost certainly left to Sergei Sen’kin, and not the mode of installation, which is quite consistent with the use of relief in the *Demonstrationsräume*.

<sup>49</sup> El Lissitzky to J.J.P. Oud, 12 December 1928. Jen Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, eds., *Proun und Wolkenbügel* (Dresden: VEB Verlage der Kunst, 1977), 135-36. Mikhail Gus, ed., *Katalog des Sowet-Pavilions auf der internationalen Presse-Ausstellung Köln, 1928* (Köln: M. Dumont Schauberg, 1928), 16.

spine and pages 1, 2, 3”—in his 1927 essay “Our Book,”<sup>50</sup> Lissitzky used the *Pressa* catalogue to advance a new model, subjecting book and theatrical display to the logic of cinema. Where designs like *For the Voice* play with the possibility of non-sequential reading inherent in the form of the index, the *Pressa* catalogue fairly enforces it. Relegating the exposition of the 300 years of Russian press history traversed by the pavilion’s 226 exhibits to the back of the book, Lissitzky insures that they too become an index whose reading must be intercut with careful inspection of the montage insert, the visual logic of which usurps the text’s expository privilege. While each photographic fragment of the kino-show is tagged with a red number indicating the exhibit’s place in the sequence of the index, they nevertheless unfold higgledy-piggledy from left to right—164, 116a, 116, 70, 114, 126, 125, and so forth—in parodic defiance of traditional reading order. Still, the co-presence of these two conflicting modes of reading in the book is partly a compromise. Lissitzky later reported that “the book was made in a hurry,” and while “I wanted to give it the character of a folder—a business-like thing, ... this did not totally come off.”<sup>51</sup> Lissitzky’s own doubts notwithstanding, 95 of the book’s 111 pages have been reduced to reference material.

If there remains a certain amount of conflict in the mode of reading, at the level of the image the montage is extremely legible. Lenin, lurching dramatically rightward while speaking from a rostrum, stands above the pavilion’s “Lenin corner,” a form of memorial that became popular after the party-leader’s death in 1924. Lenin leans on a balustrade, cap in hand, and through a well-placed cut, on the Kremlin’s northeast wall, which bounds a packed Red Square in which the Soviet *Pressa* pavilion has also appears. One of Lenin’s slogans, printed in red

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<sup>50</sup> “Our Book,” trans. Helene Aldwinckle in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 359.

<sup>51</sup> “Posledniaia rabota—katalog nashei vystavka v Kel’ne. Delalas’ kniga naspekh. Ia khotel ei pridat’ kharakter papki—delovaia veshch’ ... Eto ne sovsem udalos’ vpolnit.” “O metodakh oformleniia knigi.” Undated typescript. Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 725, sheet 5. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



block letters—*the newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and agitator, but also a collective organizer*—issues from his mouth into the ears of a pair of reporters scribbling exhortations that crawl towards a map of Soviet Union’s presses. Two abrupt cuts link Lissitzky’s transmission belts (their number restored through an expert jump cut) with a group of readers, and suddenly we are inside the pavilion, carried through exhibit after exhibit demonstrating the function of the Soviet press until we exit into the night, viewing the blazing lights of the exposition grounds from Cologne’s old center on the far side of the Rhine.

The centrality of Lenin’s words in the montage, far from an arbitrary choice on Lissitzky’s part, expresses an important aspect of his commission. Although the slogan derives from an essay published by Lenin in 1902, entitled “Where to Begin,” by the mid-1920s it served as the rallying cry for a movement that Matthew Lenoe has called “mass journalism.”<sup>52</sup> A press strategy designed to streamline the production process by covering socialist competition and publishing factory production reviews, mass journalism was developed in the NEP years by provincial journalists and worker correspondents writing for small factory circulars and single-sheet wall newspapers. But in October 1927, a Central Committee resolution endorsed these practices as a model for the Soviet press as a whole, with editors at central press organs now directed to focus less on policy discussions, financial and economic news—the enlightenment function typical of the bourgeois press—than on ideology and the party line, making way for the mass denunciation of bureaucrats and factory bosses in the party’s self-criticism campaign in the spring of 1928.<sup>53</sup> The pages that preface Lissitzky’s kino-show boast of the USSR’s 50,000 wall

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<sup>52</sup> Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 104.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-49. The CC resolution was published in *Zhurnalists* no. 11 (1927): 54-55. In Soviet terms, the new strategy represented a shift from propaganda to agitation.

newspapers and 400,000 worker and peasant correspondents, foregrounding their role in the press as a “safeguard against bureaucratic degeneracy.”<sup>54</sup>

This reference to mass journalism is carried over into the kino-show on a formal level as well. Lissitzky had already noted in his 1927 essay “The Artist in Production,” how “the force of [photomontage’s] expressivity infected workers’ and Komsomol art circles and exerted a great influence on wall newspapers.”<sup>55</sup> The photomontaged wall newspaper, exemplified by the organ *Fotoglaz (Photo-eye)*, seems to have served as Lissitzky’s model for the *Pressa* insert (fig. 4.5). The paper’s amateurish combination of decontextualized silhouetted groups and uncropped snapshots, so uncharacteristic of Lissitzky’s previous photographic work, is preserved in his kino-show, where fragments are cut together with a subtle eye for continuity and visual rhythm. The Vertovian resonance of *Fotoglaz* must have appealed to Lissitzky as he sought a way to demonstrate the primitive and unfamiliar form of the wall newspaper to a German audience hungry for media spectacle: the filmic analogy could conceal the handicraft character of the wall newspaper with a veneer of technological progress even as it enticed readers of the catalogue to engage in process of reading that was radically refigured by montage. They were thus privy to a revolutionary experience recounted by Lissitzky in “Our Book” when he described how “the traditional book was torn into separate pages, enlarged a hundred times, colored for greater

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<sup>54</sup> *Katalog des Sowet-Pavilions*, 14-15.

<sup>55</sup> “Na pochve sotsial’nykh potrebnosti nashei epokhei i ovladeniia khudozhnikom novoi tekhniki u nas v gody revoliutsii rodilsia i rastsvel foto-montazh... sila ego vyrazitel’nosti zarazila rabochie i komsomol’skie IZO-kruzhki i okazala bol’shoe vliianie na stengazety.” “Khudozhnik v proizvodstve” in *Vsesoiuznaia poligraficheskaia vystavka putevoditel’* (Moscow: Mospoligraf, 1927), 7. On the relationship between photography and the worker correspondent movement, see Erika Wolf’s excellent summary account, “From Worker to Proletarian Photography” in *The Worker Photography Movement (1926-1939), Essays and Documents* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte and Reina Sofia, 2011), 32-51.

intensity, and brought into the street as a poster... to be read out and elucidated from close up.”<sup>56</sup>

The concertina insert, whose folds may be alternately turned like individual pages or loosed from their binding in a grand cascade, dramatizes this process again and again.

As *Pressa* opened its doors to the public, the model of media spectacle and militancy toward bureaucratic malfeasance that it propagandized unfolded in the Soviet press, where the Shakhty wreckers’ trial made headlines throughout the summer.<sup>57</sup> The trial, in which fifty Russian engineers and three German specialists stood accused of industrial sabotage carried out in secret collusion with the exiled former owners of a Caucasian mining operation, produced convictions for forty-nine defendants, including one German. The politics of the affair, if not the particulars of its outcome, were determined in advance of the trial, with Stalin musing that “Classes exist, international capital exists, and it cannot calmly watch the development of the country which is building socialism... it is trying, and will try in the future to weaken our economic power by means of invisible economic intervention.”<sup>58</sup> Together with the spring’s self-criticism campaign, for which it provided ample fodder, the Shakhty affair inaugurated the period of intensified class struggle that Shiela Fitzpatrick has called the “cultural revolution.” As the party mobilized against the “wavering” of its right-deviation, the utility of the intelligentsia’s political neutrality evaporated, and with it, the NEP era’s tolerant cultural policies.<sup>59</sup> Politically and aesthetically, the *Pressa* catalogue was a harbinger of the coming Five-Year-Plan.

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<sup>56</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 358. Translation modified.

<sup>57</sup> On the Shakhty affair, see Kendall Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 69-94. The phenomenon of the show trial in the Soviet press, is treated by Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses*, 78-83.

<sup>58</sup> Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin*, 87-88.

<sup>59</sup> Fitzpatrick, “The Soft Line on Culture and Its Enemies” and “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 91-149.

## II. *The Father as Producer*

The new political situation did not affect Lissitzky's productivity in the least. Indeed, the party's sudden leftward lurch toward crash industrialization in the first five year plan, formally adopted in spring of 1929, probably met with his approval. He secured a string of major exhibition designs in 1929-30, all of which benefited from Küppers' skills: she curated the Soviet section of the Stuttgart exhibition, *Film und Foto*, and a small folk art exhibition included in the Leipzig International Fur Trade Exhibition; she also produced photomontages for both the latter and the Dresden International Hygiene Exhibition, a nearly incomprehensible space that made good on *Pressa's* promise by plastering every available surface with printed matter (fig. 4.6).<sup>60</sup> This reorganization of the couple's production around the household, optimistically conceived as a kind of collective, was qualitatively transformed by the birth of their son in October 1930. Henceforth, Lissitzky worked exclusively in the USSR. Domestic matters made travel abroad prohibitively complex and exposed him to the demands of a new public. At the same time, major print projects for the State Fine Arts Publishing House, IZOGIZ, replaced exhibition design as Lissitzky's chief occupation, which in turn renewed his attention to the theoretical problems of photomontage and the book.

For stalwarts of the old avant-garde, neither public withdrawal nor continuing activism could mollify the critics energized by the climate of cultural revolution. Hesitatingly, Lissitzky had tried both. Despite not having signed the *October* group's 1928 manifesto, he joined the

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<sup>60</sup> Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 93. Although none of Küppers' contributions to these exhibitions has yet been identified, her letter to Edith Tschichold of 26 September 1930 suggests that her works were included in both Leipzig and Dresden; she notes: "I have done some more montages and enjoyed working on them [i.e. the exhibitions] very much." Perloff and Reed, eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute), 251.

group the following year and exhibited with them in the summer of 1930—perhaps at the request of Solomon Telingater, with whom he was censured for “barefaced [*neprikrytnogo*] formalism and aestheticism.”<sup>61</sup> Of course, such criticism was central to *October*’s own program: drafted during the 1928 self-criticism campaign, it proposed “a mindset [*ustanovka*] that compels the artist to continually work on himself” and a federation of artists’ societies.<sup>62</sup> By 1931 such a federation had been formed and a two-color, Telingater-designed journal, *Brigade of Artists*, printed in its name. In the words of its inaugural editorial, “*Brigade of Artists* establishes workers’ control over the production of the spatial arts. [It] welcomes an art of struggle and rancor.”<sup>63</sup> Workers’ control, a synonym of self-criticism, took the form of a comprehensive review the federation’s member groups by *Komsomolskaia Pravda*’s arts brigade. And while *Komsomolskaia Pravda* reported “a whole series of manifestations of formalism in *October*’s art practice (polygraphics section, photo section),” it conceded that “attacks by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois critics on *October* calling it formalist, [or] harmful for the proletariat of the organization, are essentially cover for the philistine art practice of right petty-bourgeois artists who must be unmasked.”<sup>64</sup> In this critical economy, attacks from left and right were often feints legible only from below.

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<sup>61</sup> Lissitzky’s design of *For the Voice* is singled out for its failings. *Iskusstvo v massy* 7 (1930): 12. For *October* signatories, see the original publication of the group’s manifesto in *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 3 (1928): 73.

<sup>62</sup> “Eta ustanovka zastavliaet ego postoianno rabotat’ nad samim saboi.” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 3 (1928): 74.

<sup>63</sup> “*Brigada khudozhnikov ustanovit rabochii kontrol’ nad proizvodstvom prostranstvennykh iskusstv. Brigada khudozhnikov privetstvuet iskusstvo borby i nenavisti.*” *Brigada khudozhnikov* 1 (1931): 2.

<sup>64</sup> “My takzhe otmechaem tselyi riad proiavlenii formalizma v khudozhestvennoi praktiki ‘*Oktiabria*’ (poligrafichseksiia, fotoseksiia). V to zhe vremia my otmechaem, chto napadki burzhuaznoi i melkoburzhuaznoi kritiki na ‘*Oktiabr*’, nazyvaiushchei ego formalisticheskoi, vrednoi dlia proletariata organizatsiei, iavliaiutsia po sushchestvu prikrytiem meshchanskoi khudozhestvennoi praktiki pravvykh melkoburzhuaznykh khudozhnikov, kotoruiu neobkhodimo razoblachit’.” *Ibid.*, 11.

The same dynamics were on display in April of that year, when Lissitzky presented a paper on the future of the book at the Moscow Polygraphics Institute, a remnant of the recently dismantled VKhUTEMAS/VKhUTEIN system still occupying the institution's old address.<sup>65</sup> The remarkable fifty-page transcript of the event preserved in the Nikolai Khardzhiev archive records both Lissitzky's position and the heated debate it provoked. Showcasing *For the Voice* and the *Pressa* catalogue as evidence that "we now make a book that we construct, like a film," Lissitzky proposed devoting an entire experimental polygraphics center to efforts consistent with his own.<sup>66</sup> In line with his other recent outings, Lissitzky's proposal was met with accusations of formalism, luxury, and in a pointedly domestic idiom, bourgeois coziness.

To understand these criticisms, we must review several of the lecture's arguments. Although based on insights into the transformation of the page wrought by film and illustrated weeklies dating from "Our Book," Lissitzky now incorporates reflections on reading as a social relation and the division of the writer's labor into his position:

The most fundamental thing distinguishing the contemporary book from the so-called old book is that the old book was constructed for reading left to right and top to bottom, whereas we see not only the left or right page but the whole center spread when opening a book. Formerly, the book—if I may put it this way—was built for reading, for the ear; in the very beginning the book was a rarity, and indeed, people were semi-literate and a book was usually read aloud. Now this situation has changed, and the process of hearing the book has turned into a process of scanning the book, that is, the book has become a unity of acoustics and optics. Registration of this fact leads to the construction of a book in which the author must be a polygraphist, i.e., when he sees the book as it will look in

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<sup>65</sup> VKhUTEMAS, rechristened VKhUTEIN in 1928 under the stewardship of *October* member Pavel Novitskii, was dismantled in 1930 and its functions transferred to the Moscow Architectural Institute, Moscow Textile Institute, Moscow Polygraphics Institute and the Academy of Arts, among others. Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1983), 114. Firsthand accounts by students and general information on the Polygraphics Institute can be found in *My iz MPI: Moskovskii poligraficheskii institut* (Moscow: Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet pechati, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> "My delaem seichas knigu, kotoruiu my stroim, kak fil'm." Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 726, sheet 17. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

the printer's view; and contrariwise, the technical editor must be an author, i.e., he can present the material with which the author of a given book wanted to relate a particular thing so that the reader receives a determinate impression. And from this we get a new book. More and more, one meets with examples of what I'm talking about in illustrated journals. Often in the weeklies a caption becomes, as it were, the illustration of the image. In a journal a shock worker is pictured and beneath him there is a small caption. This is the presentation of a certain kind of content, as the sum of image and caption.<sup>67</sup>

In this view, the content of the new book is the montage of image and text; to this content corresponds the division of labor between the author and the technical editor who shapes its presentation.

A related emphasis on the division of labor in book production can be found in Sergei Tret'iakov's writings at the time. In 1929, Tret'iakov had proclaimed that "collectivizing the labor of the book is a progressive process" that must proceed through the restructuring of the publishing house itself.<sup>68</sup> Lissitzky's account of the overlapping functions of author and technical editor also poses the challenge of obviating private interests in book production, but, unlike Tret'iakov, Lissitzky's 'formalism' is inseparable from his grasp of the social relations supported by the book. Tret'iakov escapes individualism through participation in the life of the material—what he called *operativism*—while Lissitzky tries to incite formal invention from below,

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<sup>67</sup> "Samoe osnovnoe, chto otlichaet segodniashnuiu knigu ot t.n. staroi knigi, eto to, chto staraia kniga stroilas' dlia chteniia sleva napravo i sverkhu vniz. No my s vami, raskryvaia knigu, vidim ne tol'ko pravuiu ili levuiu stranitsu, no i ves' rasvorot. Ran'she kniga, esli možno tak vyrazit'sia, stroilas' dlia chteniia, dlia ukha, v samom nachale kniga byla redkost', da i liudi byli malogramotny i obychno knigu chitali vslukh. Teper' eto sostanie izmenilos', i protsess slushaniia knigi prevratilsia v protsess smotreniia, t.e. kniga stala edinstvom iz akustiki i optiki. Uchet etogo fakta vedet k postroeniiu knigi, v kotoroi avtor dolzhen byt' poligrafistom, t.e., kogda on vidit, kak ona budet vygliadet' v pechatnom vide, i, naoborot, tekhnicheskii redaktor dolzhen byt' avtorom, t.e. on možhet material, kotorym khotel rasskazat' avtor dannoi knigi o toi ili o drugoi veshchi, podat' tak, chtoby chital' poluchil opredelennoe vpechatlenie. A otsiuda my poluchaem novuiu knigu. Premery togo, chto ia govoriu, vse bol'she i bol'she vstrechaiutsia v illiustrirovannykh zhurnalakh. I chasto v ezhenedel'nikakh podpis' stanovitsia kak-by illiustratsiei k izobrazheniiu. V zhurnale izobrazhen udarnik i pod nim nebol'shaia podpis'. Eto est' podacha kakogo-to sodержaniia, kak summy izobrazheniia i podpis'i." Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 726, sheets 10-11. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

<sup>68</sup> "The literary *artel* can and must make the book... [but] if the physiognomy of our publishing houses doesn't change, the *artel* will remain just a many-headed private enterprise." Sergei Tret'iakov, "To be Continued," trans. Devin Fore, *October* 118 (Fall 2006): 53-54.

capitalizing on post-Shakhty tensions by likening the technical editor to a specialist wrecking the author's work. "Amateur production is not just a slogan, but has deep content," Lissitzky avers:

A specialist is great for work flow, but moves an outside person to the fore. If I may introduce one more example: contemporary photography. In the last three to four years, photography has made a great stride forward, and all of this was created not by specialists but by amateur photographers. In the field of book design... it can be shown how in polygraphic development the achievements of separate individuals, perceived externally, have been distorted, [and] at the same time, how invention from below will always essentially be the labor of a certain field; but this is possible only when everything that is made on this plane is actually approached with daring and revolutionary verve.<sup>69</sup>

If such a program recalls the one advanced a few years later in Walter Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer," it is not only because both respond to Tret'iakov's challenge.<sup>70</sup> For Lissitzky, as for Tret'iakov and Benjamin, the press was the medium in which the traces of social transformation become manifest. At its core, Lissitzky's model of transformed authorship theorizes the transference of the radically anti-bureaucratic wall newspaper from factory to publishing house, a proposal first advanced by the *Pressa* catalogue.

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<sup>69</sup> "I samodeiatel'nost' ne prosto lozung, no eto imeet glubokoe sodержanie... Spets khorosh dlia tekushchei raboty, no dvigaet vpered postoronnie chelovek. Mozhno privesti i eshche odin primer, sovremennuiu fotografiiu. Fotografiia za poslednie 3-4 goda sdelala bol'shie shagi vpered, i vse eto sozdano ne spetsialistami, a liubiteliami-fotografami. V oblasti oformleniia knigi... na poligraficheskom razvitii mozhno pokazat', kak dostizheniia otdelnykh lits, vneshne vospriniaty, byli izvrashcheny, v to vremia, kak izobretenie snizu vseгда budet po sushchestvu raboty dannoi oblasti, no eto vozmozhno tol'ko v tom sluchae, kogda v samom dele revoliutsionno i smelo podoidut ko vsemu tomu, chto delaetsia v etoi ploskosti." Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 726, sheets 17-18. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

<sup>70</sup> Lissitzky's positions cited here predict the central theses of Benjamin's essay to a surprising degree: "What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value. But we will make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography. Here too, therefore, technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress. In other words, only by transcending specialization in the process of intellectual production—a specialization that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order—can one make this production politically useful; and the barriers imposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces that they were set up to divide." "The Author as Producer" in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge and London: Harvard Belknap, 2008), 87. The fact that Lissitzky had become close to Tret'iakov by the end of the twenties should not lead us to assume a unidirectional influence. Tret'iakov's most frequently cited remarks on montage, quite similar Lissitzky's formulations here, appear in the 1936 monograph on John Heartfield he co-authored with Telingater, *Dzhon Khartfil'd: Monografiia* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1936), while Lissitzky had noted the change in function of image and caption in "Our Book."



In a prepared response to Lissitzky's paper, Telingater emphasizes the political efficacy of Lissitzky's latent formalism. Bracing for criticism, he opens with an anecdote in which a worker is simultaneously schooled in basic literacy and Marxist theory, reading but ultimately failing to summarize a political primer: "Obviously too much attention was expended on the mechanics of reading, while he failed to penetrate the content," he concludes; "Have no doubt: if the necessary places in that sentence had been activated, he could have engraved it in his memory."<sup>71</sup> Boris Elkin, another *October* member, rebuts Telingater's artful response by proclaiming that Lissitzky's experimental polygraphics center, what Elkin calls "his kitchen[,] leads to a richly furnished apartment... Who needs this? The working class loves nice things, but now we need agitational literature." Sternly, he advises Lissitzky, "I personally detect in this a bourgeois attitude, and not a fellow traveller, not striving for union with the working class."<sup>72</sup> One audience member notes the absurdity of the debate, given the preponderance of *October* members; another sides with Elkin: "who among you would presume to 'activate' Stalin? We will approach this differently when author and technical editor have to work in complete contact." This comment triggers a murmur in the auditorium, and another, unnamed speaker—probably Lissitzky—interjects: "Really I proposed something else."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Lissitzky had only spoken in support of invention from below, but the symmetry of author and editor inherent in his

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<sup>71</sup> "Slushatel' chasto ne mozhet otvetit' na vopros rukovotidelia. Ochevidno, slishkom mnogo vnimanie bylo zatracheno im mekhanike chteniia, a v sodержaniiia on ne vnik. Ne podlezhit somnenniui, chto esli-by v etom absatsе byli aktivisirovani nyzhnye mesta, on smog-by zapechatlet' ikh svoei pamiati." Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 726, sheet 25. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Telingater is careful to distinguish this approach from the 'neutrality' of the 'optical hygiene' approach—a clear allusion to Moholy-Nagy.

<sup>72</sup> "Kukhnia ego vedet k bogato obstavlennoi kvartire... Dlia kogo eto nuzhno. Rabochii klass liubit khoroshie veshchi, no nam nuzhna na seichas agitatsionnaia literatura... Ia lichno usmatrivaiu v etom burzhuaznuiu ustanovku, a ne poputnicheskuiu, ne stremiashchuiusia k soiuзу s rabochim klassom, ne zhelaiushchuiu priblizit' svoe tvorchestvo k rabochemu klassu, a, immeno, k burzhuazii." Ibid., sheets 28-29.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., sheets 36, 40.

proposal had problematic connotations in a situations where the author's power outweighed the editor's.

Following Telingater's response, Lissitzky offers a final word. Turning Elkin's domesticating insult on its head and ultimately confirming the audience's impatience with the public airing of *October's* private squabbles, Lissitzky insists that his listeners

aren't leaving with a package of readymade recipes... We are all working on the construction of a socialist foundation and to so simply determine who is bourgeois and who a fellow-traveller, etc., using devices of a demagogic order, is prohibited... Here somebody unmasked another—this is a family matter, but essentially I would like it if, insofar as there is someone somewhere working on a more correct book design and on these questions generally, he should present a paper.<sup>74</sup>

The voice of Lissitzky's response is that of the patriarch: naming and enforcing prohibitions, chastising youthful excess and protectively muting conflict by keeping it in the family.

Apparently, this attitude was common enough, for when an abridged transcript of Lissitzky's paper was published in *Brigade of Artists* at the end of the month, with a cover by Lissitzky, its controversial positions had been excised, along with any trace of the dispute.<sup>75</sup>

Lissitzky's grasp of the possibilities of montage can be seen in his cover illustration for the issue of *Brigade of Artists* in which his talk appeared (fig. 4.7). Its composition is very simple: a team of workers labors in the distance while a pair of clasped hands emblazoned with the numbers 518 and 1040 occupy the immediate foreground. Inscrutable today, these numbers would have been immediately intelligible to almost every Soviet citizen as the third-year plan

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<sup>74</sup> “Vy posle ego [moego doklada] ne ukhodite s paketom gotovykh retseptov... My rabotaem vse nad stroikoi sotsialisticheskogo fundamenta, i tak prosto opredeliat', kto burzhui, a kto poputchik, i t.d., priemami demagogicheskogo poriadka nel'zia... Tut kto-to razoblachal drug druga, eto delo semeinoe, no po sushchestvu ia khotel-by, chtoby poskol'ku est' kto-to i gde-to, kto rabotaet had bolee pravil'nym oformleniem knigi i voobshche had etimi voprosami, to on dolzhen vystupit' s dokladom.” Ibid., sheets 46-47.

<sup>75</sup> *Brigada Khudozhnikov* no. 4 (1931): 23. An English translation of this heavily edited document was published in Peter Nisbet's 1987 exhibition catalogue as one of “Three Essays by El Lissitzky” in *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard Art Museums, 1987), 61-62.

targets for factories and machine-tractor stations.<sup>76</sup> The hands to which they correspond, left and right of one body, interpellate the viewer's own body as support for the 'arms' of the plan, offering a potent demonstration of the total content of image and caption that Lissitzky described in his talk. Joining the abstract plan targets into an embodied unity, the double signification of the hands activates the image's foreground/background relation, enlisting the viewer in a gesture cheering the workers who fulfill the targets. Then again, when read otherwise it is the targets themselves that applaud the labor that fulfills them. The set of possible of interpretations expands yet again when we consider that Lissitzky's background image is drawn from Vertov's *The Eleventh Year*: the hands may now alternately belong to a cinema-goer cheering the screen or to the plan-targets of the revolution's fourteenth year celebrating the labor of the eleventh.<sup>77</sup>

Just as Lissitzky's author-polygraphist theory drew on the model of the worker-correspondent, his *Brigade of Artists* cover adapts a device that appeared for the first time in his *Pressa* insert (fig. 4.8). Here, a pair of disembodied hands holds a newspaper whose text also reveals the image of a face, presenting the newspaper as the reflection of the worker-correspondent who contributes to its production. The unproblematic directness of this portrayal of the worker's self-recognition nevertheless points toward the contradictions and ideological closure of the *Brigade of Artists* cover: celebrating the enlightened worker as a check on management, the "kino-show" depicts him as embodying both the labor power and rationality that are realized in the closed representational circuit of the plan. And yet, drawn together in a

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<sup>76</sup> The page-one headline of *Pravda* on 1 April 1931 blared: "WE ARE ENTERING THE SECOND QUARTER OF THE DECISIVE YEAR OF THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN. IN BOLSHIEVIK TEMPO LET'S ACHIEVE THE TIMELY LAUNCH OF 518 NEW FACTORIES, LET'S BUILD 1040 MACHINE-TRACTOR STATIONS, LET'S EXPAND THE CONSTRUCTION OF STATE- AND COLLECTIVE FARMS."

<sup>77</sup> The source image was identified by Peter Nisbet in the corrigenda to his catalogue raisonné of Lissitzky's print works. *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years* (Ph.D. Diss.: Yale University, 1995), 383.

gesture of praise, the hands in the image are themselves neither at work nor engaged in the production of critical discourse. Repeating Elkin's question, we might ask to what extent this image represents an artist "striving for union with the working class." Is the gaze structuring the *Brigade of Artists* cover still that of the worker-correspondent?

Given the centrality of montage to Lissitzky's vision of the author-polygraphist, it is appropriate that the theory was itself a montage of sorts, grafting factory politics onto publishing conditions. And despite his audience's palpable anxiety at the prospect of applying this model to the Stalinist text, Lissitzky's proposal was likely based on it—in particular, on Stalin's speech to the All-Union Congress of Factory Managers of February 4, 1931. Overshadowed by the authority of bourgeois specialists, Bolshevik 'managers' were more accurately characterized as amateurs, entirely ignorant of the potential sabotage taking place on their watch. Accordingly, Stalin sought to inculcate

a new mindset [*ustanovku*] corresponding to the contemporary period: interfere in everything. If you are a the director of a factory, interfere in every matter, penetrate everything, pass over nothing, study and study again. It's time for Bolsheviks themselves to become specialists. Technology in the period of reconstruction decides everything. And a manager who doesn't want to learn technology, who doesn't want to master technology—this is a joke, not a manager. They say it is hard to master technology. Not so! There are no fortresses that the Bolsheviks could not take.<sup>78</sup>

Down to its closing slogan, Stalin's speech was adapted from his address to the Central Committee of April 1928—his first significant remarks on the Shakhty arrests.<sup>79</sup> In its original

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<sup>78</sup> "Pora usvoit' druguiu, novuiu, sootvetsvuiushchuiu nyneshnemu periodu ustanovku: vmeshivat'sia vo vse. Esli ty direktor zavoda—vmeshivaesia vo vse dela, vnikai vo vse, ne upuskai nichego, uchis' i eshche raz uchis'. Bol'sheviki dolzhny ovladet' tekhnikai. Pora bol'sheviki samim stat' spetsialistami. Tekhnika v period rekonstruktskii reshaet vse. I khoziaistvennik, ne zhelaiushchii izuchat' tekhniku, ne zhelaiushchii ovladet' tekhnikai,—eto anekdot, a ne khoziaistvennik. Govoriat, chto trudno ovladet' tekhnikai. Neverno! Net takikh krepostei, kotorykh bol'sheviki ne mogli by vziat'." I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 13 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1951), 41. The speech was published in *Pravda* on 5 February 1931.

<sup>79</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 153.

setting, the ideal of the red specialist inaugurated by Stalin's remarks was intended to replace the *troika* of Bolshevik manager, bourgeois specialist and union representative that presided over the management of soviet industrial enterprises with the one-man management of a red specialist. It is this figure, a concrete embodiment of both planning and labor power, that most closely approximates the perspective of Lissitzky's proposal and the gaze of his photomontage.

But as Lissitzky's audience at the Polygraphics Institute understood, his adaptation of these factory relations to the roles of author and technical editor was highly unstable, and likely a defensive posture. The author-polygraphist model Lissitzky advanced would have created exchanges and redundancies of skill between producers and editors in order to eliminate alibis for inferior product, effecting the same accountability in the presses that the party line introduced in the factory. Yet, when criticized for advocating a policy of managerial interference and workers' control within the publishing house, Lissitzky applied the very tactic that program was meant to obviate. Often criticized for justifying unmet targets with a shell game of "collective responsibility" among its members, the *troika* was derided as a "family circle" for mutual protections it offered.<sup>80</sup> Opposing familial protections in factories and presses, Lissitzky nevertheless adopted a paternalistic tone with his critics. The double standard was clear, and although he sought shelter within the collective, Lissitzky's position was far from certain.

In fact, *Pressa* had ushered Lissitzky into the sort of patronage network that *October* vehemently rejected. Having weathered the change of leadership at VOKS, his relationship with the organization led to a series of exhibition contracts, and close contact with leading editors and press directors at *Pressa* left him well placed for the high-profile book and magazine designs that

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<sup>80</sup> Hiroaki Kuromiya, "Edinonachalie and the Soviet Industrial Manager," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 1984): 197.

would occupy him after 1932. Such projects were demanding and lucrative in equal measure: the International Hygiene Exhibition, which we may take as a guide for both the Leipzig Fur Trade Exhibition and *Pressa*, netted Lissitzky four times the annual earnings of an average worker.<sup>81</sup> A few months after signing on for the Dresden exhibition, he was named architect of the *Ogonek* printworks, a commission likely supported by his contacts within the publishing world.<sup>82</sup> Already operating as chief architect of Moscow's Park of Culture and Leisure, within a few months Lissitzky had secured enough additional work to provide income for the next two years.<sup>83</sup> Demand for his services was maintained by his record of success, not by connections alone. But much of Lissitzky's activity was privately motivated, and this flurry of activity in early 1930 almost certainly represented preparations for Küppers pregnancy. Elkin's quip that Lissitzky's experimental program led to a nicely furnished bourgeois home was thus extremely cutting, and Lissitzky's paternalistic reply probably quite damning, to some in the audience at least.

Of course, the apparent stability—even affluence—that Lissitzky and Küppers had achieved by 1930 afforded them little security in the tumultuous shift to a planned economy. Stalin's twin policies of forced collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization had plunged the Soviet economy into free fall: mass arrests of kulaks and widespread peasant resistance decimated food production, while excess investment in never-to-be-completed

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<sup>81</sup> There are no extant contracts for *Pressa* or the Fur Trade exhibition; the Hygiene exhibition paid 4,500 rubles, 1500 of which on completion. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 3-4. The average annual income of industrial and transport workers in 1930 was 1,035 and 1,063 rubles respectively. *Handbook of the Soviet Union* (New York: American-Russian Chamber of Commerce, 1936), 513.

<sup>82</sup> Lissitzky's contract for the building is dated March 1, 1930; though much compromised in its design and badly preserved today, it is his only extant structure. Both the Hygiene and Fur Trade exhibitions were nailed down in January. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 3-4 and d. 61, l. 1-2.

<sup>83</sup> Although Küppers reports that Lissitzky received the commission to design the Moscow Park of Culture and Leisure after their return from Dresden in the fall, on March 19 the organization granted "leave to the architect of the Park of Culture and Leisure Comrade Lissitzky in view of his *komandirovka* abroad." RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 61, l. 3. I have not been able to locate a contract for this project.

construction projects tied up already-scarce resources and inflated production costs.<sup>84</sup> In response, the state issued a torrent of paper currency, which depleted the value of the ruble and caused hoarding and speculation in silver coinage.<sup>85</sup> Küppers described the ordeal of a typical shopping day to Edith Tschichold in September 1930, just a few weeks before she gave birth:

Groceries, if you can get them illegally, are appallingly expensive: 400 grams of butter for 10 rubles, 400 grams of meat 3.50 rubles, 1 kilogram of sugar 10 rubles, and so on. All other materials, household articles, etc., are not to be had at all. So every trifle that you need turns into a major *événement* and takes such a toll in terms of time that one resigns oneself to making due with the bare minimum... The crowds in those stores that still have a few bits and pieces are a danger to life and limb. So I must content myself with what I have and discover how to make new things out of what is there to hand. For the little one we bought the essentials in Germany. But the parcel is probably going to arrive too late, and for the moment I have to improvise everything.<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, their situation was better than most. The work abroad had shielded them from shortages, and the birth of a son distracted them from the combative cultural climate. As Küppers confessed to Edith Tschichold, “Because both of us regard this as a great blessing, as a way to break free from our intellectual confinement and really live, we now find that we endure all the difficulties that life places in our way more easily.”<sup>87</sup> The intellectual confinement was real, as we have seen. But where Küppers could imply that a rich private life compensated for the material and intellectual poverty of existence in the USSR, Lissitzky’s desire to “get out of the kitchen” made his embrace of family life more complex.

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<sup>84</sup> Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle*, trans. Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 8. For kulak arrest quotas, see Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, trans. Vadim A. Staklo (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>85</sup> According to Khlevniuk, the divergence of values between paper and hard currencies was so extreme as to produce entirely separate economies for each. *Master of the House*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> Sophie Küppers to Edith Tschichold, Sept. 26, 1930, in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 249-50.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

His anxieties come to the fore in the photographic birth announcement he sent to the Tschicholds just a few days after Küppers' return from the hospital, in which the swaddled infant lies on a stack of photomontages (fig. 4.9).<sup>88</sup> The image directly beneath the child was produced for the Dresden Hygiene exhibition, where it served as part of the photo-frieze guiding visitors into the exhibition. In accordance with its architectural installation, the montage transposes the worm's-eye perspective of a photograph by Dmitri Debabov, culled from the first issue of *USSR in Construction*, onto an identically structured image of a beaming standard bearer (fig. 4.10).<sup>89</sup> Iconographically, this personification of industry is gendered progressively, mapping an enlightened, public-minded female worker onto the stereotypically masculine sphere of heavy industry. The figure embodies the future of domestic life sketched out in Lissitzky's 1929 text, *Russia: the Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union*: "cooking should be transferred to from the private single kitchen into the communal cooking laboratory; the main meal should be consumed in public eating establishments; and the rearing of children should become the responsibility of the kindergarten or the school."<sup>90</sup> Inserting 'klein el'—the child still bearing only his father's name—into this utopian composition, Lissitzky activates its gendered iconography by way of its worm's-eye view: laid flat on the table-top, the low angle of the photofresco translates into a proud and protective gaze from above even as it preserves the

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<sup>88</sup> The postcard-sized image was probably included in his letter of 23 October 1930, which notes that Küppers has just arrived home. Jan Tschichold papers, GRI special collections item 930030, box 3, folder 1. Characteristically, Lissitzky's letter speaks only of work and mentions no material difficulties.

<sup>89</sup> Because an early version of this image has been exhibited numerous times as a study for *USSR in Construction*, it is necessary to note here that the text 'СССР на строке' is visible in Lissitzky's studies for the montage only because he has not fully removed it from his source material.

<sup>90</sup> *Russia: an Architecture for World Revolution*, trans. Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 36.



heroizing view from below. Inverting the structure of bourgeois discourse, Lissitzky derives the private perspective from the public.<sup>91</sup>

### III. *Normalization*

By the end of the year, Küppers' had retrieved her sons from Germany and the family moved out of Moscow. Having vacationed in the summer of 1931 near a group of carpenters employed by the Park of Culture and Leisure, the couple was able to trade their Moscow address for a little house on four acres of land in Skhodnia, about thirty kilometers from the city. In Küppers' recollection, "the grounds were covered with tall pine and birch trees, had a little bath house, a vegetable garden with a pond, a cool cellar, and a well. Lissitzky built a large bedroom-cum-workroom onto the two existing rooms" and ran electric current to the house from a nearby factory.<sup>92</sup> Lissitzky's guilty fantasy—a home with space for family and work—had been realized. Whatever its charm, the chief attraction of the idyll was probably its garden. Economic conditions continued to deteriorate in the months after the birth of their son, and in January 1931

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<sup>91</sup> Jürgen Habermas's account of the bourgeois experience remains definitive: "As a privatized individual, the bourgeois was two things in one: owner of goods and persons and one human being among others, i.e., *bourgeois* and *homme*. This ambivalence of the private sphere was also a feature of the public sphere, depending on whether privatized human beings in their capacity as individuals communicated through critical debate in the world of letters, about experiences of their subjectivity or whether private people in their capacity as owners of commodities communicated through the rational-critical debate in the political realm, concerning the regulation of their private sphere. The circles of persons who made up the two forms of public were not even completely congruent. Women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere than the owners of private property and family heads themselves. Yet in the educated classes the one form of public sphere was considered to be identical with the other; in the self-understanding of public opinion the public sphere appeared as one and indivisible. As soon as privatized individuals in their capacity as human beings ceased to communicate merely about their subjectivity but rather in their capacity as property-owners desired to influence public power in their common interest, the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm." *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 55-56.

<sup>92</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 96-97. Küppers reports that the exchange came about by chance, but the circumstances strongly suggest routine *blat*.

centralized distribution of ration cards for party members and industrial workers was introduced.<sup>93</sup> Despite powerful connections, Lissitzky was neither. As a “free professional,” he could still purchase food through socialist co-ops, albeit at prohibitively high prices.<sup>94</sup> But in all likelihood, the labor of growing a portion of the family’s food was preferable to the struggle of procuring it illegally, as Küppers reports they had already been forced to do.

In 1932, large scale photographic experiments again became Lissitzky’s chief occupation. By the end of April he had signed contracts for two high-profile print designs celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the revolution: a special issue of *USSR in Construction* devoted to the completion of the Dniepr hydroelectric dam, and a book tentatively titled *15 Years of October*.<sup>95</sup> The long commute from Skhodnia must have played some part in Lissitzky’s changing tack, but the new projects required little financial sacrifice: *15 Years of October* paid him 4000 rubles and *USSR in Construction* half that—in other words, the book earned him only slightly less than an exhibition and the journal more (by the same amount) than the *Ogonek* building. Their financial advantages notwithstanding, the stipulations of the two contracts evince the many battles still to be fought in the field of book design. Where IZOGIZ held Lissitzky responsible for the cover, front- and back-matter, and the mounting of illustrations and “ornamental” pages of *15 Years of October*, with all photographic materials to be supplied by the publisher, *USSR in Construction*

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<sup>93</sup> For an account of the social distinctions and labor incentives encoded in the ration system, see Elena Osokina, *Za fasadom “stalinskogo izobiliiia”: Raspredelenie i rynek v snabzhenii naseleniia v gody industrializatsii, 1927-1941* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998), 89-100. Informal rationing had been present since 1929.

<sup>94</sup> And this only where the State held a monopoly. Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917-1953* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 167.

<sup>95</sup> A portion of Lissitzky’s pay from *USSR in Construction* was to finance a trip to the Dniepr dam site. Prior to accepting these commissions, Lissitzky had been contracted to design the All-Union Aviation Exhibition; that job paid 2000 rubles per month, but was later cancelled. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 6-9.

offered co-authorship of the issue's plan and full control over its forty-eight pages of montage.<sup>96</sup> This unheard-of arrangement demonstrates that the experimental authorship Lissitzky championed for the book was indeed possible, if only in the illustrated magazines from which it was derived.

In addition to the generic appeal of working on problems of long-form montage, these projects held out the promise of the technical fulfillment for Lissitzky's goal of making a book like a film. With its inaugural issue of December 1929, *USSR in Construction* introduced Soviet printing to rotogravure technology. In contrast to all previous modes of typesetting, in rotogravure printing text and image are mounted in the form of positives on celluloid or cellophane (for image or text, respectively) by a compositor and art-director working jointly at a light-table, before engraved stereotypes can be ordered.<sup>97</sup> Although *USSR in Construction* had yet to take full advantage of rotogravure's revolutionary potential, Lissitzky's prognoses for the future of print had been based on his awareness of the technique since 1926-27. He had noted the mutual imbrication of the technology's potential for social and aesthetic disruption, but this chance to experiment with the magazine as a form was untimely, and only one of these potentials would be fulfilled. Indeed, Lissitzky only accepted the opportunity to work at *USSR in Construction* because, he later told Tschichold, it was "something I could more easily do from home."<sup>98</sup> Three days after Lissitzky signed his contract with *USSR in Construction*, the Politburo dissolved all arts societies in the USSR. Citing "the danger that these organizations will transform from *being a means* of the greatest possible mobilization of [truly] Soviet writers and

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<sup>96</sup> RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 8-9.

<sup>97</sup> Here I follow the description of the process provided in Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy, *VU: The Story of a Magazine*, trans. Ruth Sharman (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 9-11.

<sup>98</sup> El Lissitzky to Jan Tschichold, 29 September 1932, *Situating El Lissitzky*, 257.

artists around the tasks of socialist construction into a means for cultivating exclusive circles,” the decision resolved Lissitzky’s one remaining “family” matter.<sup>99</sup> His experimental authorship program ratified—at least contractually—he was now solely responsible for its outcome.

Of the two projects Lissitzky produced in 1932, *USSR in Construction* appeared first and displayed the fruits of his full commitment, evidenced by the inclusion of three signed photomontages. This traditional mode of attribution—Lissitzky’s montages are signed within the frame, rather than outside of it, and he is credited as “artist” in the issue’s back matter—was a first for the magazine.<sup>100</sup> Although the issue’s portrayal of the Dniepr hydroelectric station’s completion as fulfillment of Lenin’s electrification plan had been decided in advance, Lissitzky’s contract afforded him other privileges, perhaps even the choice of the photographer Max Al’pert as his collaborator. In spite of Al’pert’s co-authorship, it is Lissitzky’s work that takes pride of place: in addition to the hallmarks of his previous designs, the magazine’s introductory montage bears his signature (fig. 4.11). An enormous banner mounted on the dam occupying most of the page creates a frame between the its supports and the top of the dam, into which Lissitzky has inserted another image of cropped hands, this time at the dam’s controls. Broken above by a knob and below by the knuckle of a hand, the frame is subordinated to the haptic workspace it bounds. Less an evocation of the heroism of labor than an illusionistic hierarchization of the different types of representation within the montage, the scale and apparent three-dimensionality of these hands echoes that of the readers own hands holding the magazine, even without a clear orientation toward her body.

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<sup>99</sup> Resolution of the TsK VKP (b) Politburo “On restructuring literary and arts organizations.” Emphasis and interpolation original. English translation in Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Soviet Culture and Power: a History in Documents, 1917-1953* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 152.

<sup>100</sup> Victor Margolin noted this shift in his foundational study, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 172.

Narrative relationships among the issue's principal characters are also shown primarily through montage, as a comparison of two subsequent spreads shows. Lissitzky and Al'pert frame Dneprostroi as a conflict between Bolshevik vision and Western doubt by focusing on Lenin's electrification plan and its critique by H.G. Wells, while presenting Stalin as Lenin's executor and humble heir.<sup>101</sup> In the issue's first full spread, a contemplative Lenin seated in darkness behind a desk strewn with papers and a copy of his electrification plan faces Wells, a comically small man clutching an oversized page of his 1920 book, *Russia in the Shadows*. The two are divided by a triangular segment of power lines, which, bounded by a hard cut at left and a dissolve at right, represents Lenin's vision with conventional cinematic means (fig. 4.12). A later spread replaces Lenin's portrait with Stalin's, his vision of power lines with the blaze of floodlights from the fully operational dam, and Wells with an anonymous hand throwing the switch that lights the night sky (fig. 4.13). Here, the hard cut dividing vision from doubt has disappeared and freely circulating light instantaneously sutures all components of the image.<sup>102</sup> The floodlights trace a diagonal path from the dam behind Stalin to the hand engaging its power, which is itself partly reflected in the steel plate whose polished surface bathes Stalin in a soft light. The material basis of this reflection, steel—*stal'* in Russian—thus provides an occasion for

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<sup>101</sup> This framing had been seen in other periodicals, as noted by Erika Wolf, "*USSR in Construction*": *From Avant-Garde to Socialist Realist Practice* (PhD Diss.: University of Michigan, 1999), 196. The actual facts of the project were obviously much more complex than current ideological norms or the magazine format would allow; among the most significant distortions and omissions of the issue's narrative are the origins of the Dniepr dam project in Imperial Russia and the later involvement of Trotsky in its leadership—in effect, the portrayal of Lenin as the dam's source and Stalin as its product were entirely fictional. By contrast, the project's use of Western equipment and consulting remains evident in the presence of English text on machinery in several of the issue's photos. For details on the dam's history and construction, see Anne Dickason Rassweiler, *The Generation of Power: the History of Dneprostroi* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>102</sup> Sabine Kriebel argues in her recent book, *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), that the German monteur's work for AIZ is best understood via the film-theoretical concept of "suture," which creates a naturalistic whole from discrete fragments. My use of the term here is consistent with Kriebel's.

an intricate iconography of Stalin's adopted name. Lissitzky's signature, inserted vertically at bottom left, runs along the axis of the hand's reflection.

The last page of the issue shares the structure of the first, organically incorporating text by reproducing a slogan on a banner, swapping a photo of a mass demonstration for cropped hands and masking the cut between its two levels with the word "Bolsheviks" (fig. 4.14). Here, the caption is produced from within the image by enlarging the banner raised by the masses shown below. The slogan Lissitzky has chosen for this final montage, *there are no fortresses that the Bolsheviks could not take*, is taken from Stalin's February 4, 1931 speech to Bolshevik managers—the very same speech that influenced his proposal for a hybrid author-polygraphist model. That the montage generates its slogan from below is consistent with both the ideological content of the speech and Lissitzky's own views, but by the time Lissitzky made this montage the party line to which the slogan referred had softened significantly: in his "Six Conditions" speech of June 1931, Stalin had rolled back the policy of persecuting bourgeois specialists, promising greater compensation for skilled labor in order to reconcile with the non-party intelligentsia.<sup>103</sup> Despite the change in policy, the slogan survived in official discourse, celebrating Soviet technological mastery, absent the tone of class antagonism. Without the risk of unmasking that Lissitzky had faced in 1931, the slogan could now function as a congratulatory reference to the artist's own technical experimentation within the magazine and the party's embrace of it.

*15 Years of October* yielded no such complexities, only a collection of hastily assembled montages of uneven quality. Although conceived on the model of *USSR in Construction's* international market, with captions in four languages and a print run of 25,000 to match, the

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<sup>103</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 166.

book was not printed on the magazine's high-quality rotogravure presses, but with half-tone blocks in a cheaper two-color process. In spite of his contractual limitations, Lissitzky did manage to insert some of his own material: *Pressa* and the International Hygiene Exhibition appear in the book, as does a montage based on the Vertov still from his *Brigade of Artists* cover. Having fulfilled his contract, Lissitzky confessed to Tschichold that quantity had not transmuted into quality: "I am snowed under with work, so that by the time I finish something (and it all has to be done in a tearing hurry) I am unable to see what is there. We fought against "art," we spat on its altar—and we got what we wanted."<sup>104</sup> Of the book's numerous montages, Lissitzky's finest effort shares elements with the opening and closing images of his Dneprostroi project: a statue of Lenin, buoyed by a cheering mass and backed by billowing clouds, points to a map of his electrification plan atop the dam (fig. 4.15). Lissitzky's signature at bottom right—its sole occurrence in the book—suggests that the montage was originally intended for *USSR in Construction*. Meanwhile, the book succumbed to the problem foreseen by Lissitzky's critics: delayed in order to include Stalin's speech on "The Results of the Five-Year-Plan," it was published in 1933 under the title *The USSR Builds Socialism* (fig. 4.16), with Stalin's speech set in tight blocks of text, free of typographical activation.<sup>105</sup>

While in many respects Lissitzky's projects of 1932 followed the script of his lecture at the Moscow Polygraphics Institute the previous year, two documents from Spring 1933 show how time had affected his initial assessment of the situation in the presses. The first is a letter from Mikhail Khalatov to Maxim Gorky reporting an editorial meeting at *USSR in Construction*

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<sup>104</sup> El Lissitzky to Jan Tschichold, 29 September 1932, in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 257.

<sup>105</sup> A note on the book's title page indicates that the book was completed in August 1932. In his letter to Tschichold, Lissitzky still refers to the book as *15 Years of October*, indicating that the decision to delay production was made after the project was completed.

that assessed Lissitzky and Al'pert's Dneprostoi issue along with an issue that Lissitzky had designed with the photographer Simen Fridliand in February 1933. "According to the general opinion of the editorial board," Khalatov writes, "their design is, without argument, successful, but we declared it necessary not to overuse photomontage, in order that the magazine not lose its simplicity and naturalness."<sup>106</sup> The second text, published alongside a blandly positive review of the same two issues of the magazine in *Proletarskoe foto*, furnishes the view from below. The writer is Fridliand, fresh off of his collaboration with Lissitzky:

Changed working conditions at *USSR in Construction* already demanded from the photo-reporter not just first-class qualifications as a photographer, nor just the ability to organize a shot well. These qualities are only the (necessary, of course) armature of the photo-reporter, who already appears here in a series of cases in the capacity of *author* of the issue. The latter circumstance is all the more important if we recall the usual artisanal docility of the photo-reporter working according to the editor's exact specs.<sup>107</sup>

Although Lissitzky's name is dropped here in favor of Fridliand's fellow photographer Al'pert, the mark of his presence at the magazine is clear. This is true perhaps nowhere more than in the photographer's demand for prominent author credits—to which his editors reply, "And just what do you think the editors do? Nothing?"<sup>108</sup> Championed by Lissitzky as the principal technique of an emergent form of authorship, photomontage had entered the journal's lexicon without fundamentally altering its power structure.

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<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Erika Wolf, "When Photographs Speak, To Whom Do They Talk? The Origins and Audience of *SSSR na stroike*" *Left History* vol. 6 no. 2 (2000): 73.

<sup>107</sup> "Izmenivshiesia uslovia raboty v *SSSR na stroike* potreboval ot fotoreportera uzhe ne tol'ko pervoklassnoi kvalifikatsii fotografa i ne tol'ko umeniia khorosho organizovat' s'emku. Ukazannye dva kachestva iavliautsia tol'ko (neobkhodim konechno) vooruzheniem fotoreportera, vystupaiushchim zdes' v riade sluchaev uzhe v kachestve *avtora* nomera. Eto poslednee obstoiatel'stvo iavliaetsia tem bolee vazhnym, esli my pripomnym obychnuiu remeslennuiu pokornost' fotoreportera, rabotaiushchego po tochnoi ukazke redaktora." S. Fridliand, "Zametki o tvorcheskoi praktike," *Proletarskoe foto*, no. 3 (May-June 1933): 26.

<sup>108</sup> "A chto zhe, redaktsiia, po vashemu mneniuiu, nichego ne delaet?" *Ibid.*, 27.



In part, this development represents a historical accident and a missed opportunity. Had Lissitzky not commenced working at *USSR in Construction* only after moving out of Moscow, had Stalin not eased the party line on class conflict and dissolved the arts groups that heightened those pressures on Lissitzky, his work for the magazine would surely have produced different results. Certainly there are glimpses of this potential in the Dneprostoi issue, which contains some of Lissitzky's most compelling montages. Focusing on it, however, obscures the extent to which Lissitzky weathered the cultural revolution of the first Five-Year-Plan by adopting the perspective of the working class, and in doing so contributed to the anxious bluster of what Sheila Fitzpatrick has called the period's pseudo-proletarian elements.<sup>109</sup> Admittedly, this could be called a survival tactic, and the frequency of Lissitzky's involvement with the regime's domestic propaganda operations did increase in proportion to the slackening of militancy toward members of the intelligentsia. But his enthusiasm for the building of socialism under a planned economy was genuine, as were his views on the emergent structures of socialist cultural production. To Lissitzky, this adoption of the view from below corresponded to the birth of a genuinely proletarian culture, one component of which was his own self-transformation. That this process of self-transformation coincided with, even enabled, the realization of Lissitzky's lingering desire for the comforts of private life remained a source of ambivalence for him. And in this, he was not alone.

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<sup>109</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 141.

## Chapter 5 | Abundance and Survival, 1934-1937

*...the division of labor, which was originally nothing but the division of labor in the sexual act, then the division of labor which develops spontaneously or “naturally” by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g. physical strength), needs, accidents, etc., etc.*

–Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

*Aufhebung is very precisely the relation of copulation to sexual difference.*

– Jacques Derrida<sup>2</sup>

By 1934, the model of collective-household production that Lissitzky and Küppers had worked out at the end of the twenties had become an explicit, perhaps even a marketable, feature of their services. Working behind the scenes for years, in 1934 Küppers had received co-author credits on three issues of *USSR in Construction* and on an album, *Soviet Subtropics*, published as a special issue of *Ogonek* at the turn of the year. The appearance of *Soviet Subtropics*, which promoted tea, fruit, and fiber crops used in the production of imitation silk, dovetailed with a shift in the planning strategy of Soviet economists. Pivoting from the first Five-Year-Plan’s exclusive focus on the build-up of heavy industry, the second plan saw equally intensive investment in the USSR’s miniscule consumer goods sector. Not only had the years of famine wrought by economic mismanagement produced an incalculable reserve of unmet demand, a new Soviet elite had begun to coalesce amidst the economic and political chaos of the plans.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx with Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 111.

With this shift to consumption, growing class differentiations exacerbated gendered ones: retail strategists increasingly sought out female consumers and, just as significantly, female workers, who were assumed to be more tactful and less political than their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

While the trend toward *embourgeoisement* promised to empower working class wives, such transformation was frequently discouraged by elite women for interfering with the productivity of working class husbands. As Sheila Fitzpatrick puts it, “the family was one realm in which Stalinist discourse continued to differentiate by class.”<sup>4</sup> With women of the Soviet elite increasingly devoting themselves to social causes and the overall maintenance of good taste, the working partnership of the Lissitzky-Küppers household looked stranger by the day. Still, in the midst of this change the couple stayed true to their progressively conceived union. The fact that the Soviet system had produced an elite stratum of party and government functionaries mattered less to Lissitzky than that his relationship to it fostered equality and autonomy in his partnership with Küppers. And yet, he increasingly characterized the couple’s marriage in cosmopolitan terms. The importance of their union’s international character in upholding Lissitzky’s favorable attitude toward the Bolshevik party-state can be glimpsed in the complex pattern of identification and disidentification with the official *mentalité* encoded in his boast that he and Küppers, “with our European ways have expectations of a different level, and the main thing, of necessities and possibilities of which *one has a sense* that with our material situation are completely within

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<sup>3</sup> Women were considered less prone to abuses of power and wrecking. Amy E. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Becoming Cultured” in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 235

reach.”<sup>5</sup> This wholly imaginary sense of possibility is now commonly identified with Socialist Realism as a general worldview, but in Lissitzky’s case it was blended with cosmopolitan disgust at Russian backwardness.<sup>6</sup>

When the daily compromises of life under existing socialism threatened to appear in his work, Lissitzky’s expressions of contempt could be especially acute. In this respect, 1935 was a bad year. Working remotely during the summer while receiving treatment for his tuberculosis in Georgia, Lissitzky’s situation recalled his time in Locarno a decade before, save for the fact that Küppers was now his wife and long-time collaborator. Part work log, part office drama, the letters Lissitzky and Küppers exchanged between June and September 1935 trace the fault lines of sex and class undergirding their shared relationship to the Soviet publishing industry as they struggle to assemble an album devoted to the new Soviet Food Industry.<sup>7</sup> These challenging and revealing letters expose the same gendering of everyday life in Lissitzky’s discourse that Christina Kiaer has analyzed in constructivism. Lissitzky’s support for the first Five-Year-Plan as a way to “get out of the kitchen,” demonstrates the gendered pattern of his discourse, but such value structures can be found even in the manuscript version of his essay, “Not Worldvision— but Worldreality,” which affirms that “Proun is masculine, active, dynamic. Painting is feminine,

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<sup>5</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 22 July 1935, emphasis original. English trans. Kenneth Kronenburg in Margarita Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky, Beyond the Abstract Cabinet: Photography, Design, Collaboration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 216.

<sup>6</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko even finds this hitherto purely aesthetic criteria in the foundational works of Stalinist political economy. *The Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 2-6.

<sup>7</sup> Lissitzky and Küppers’ 1935 correspondence has been published in its original German in two incomplete versions: the first by Jen Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers in *Proun und Wolkenbügel* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977) and the second by Margarita Tupitsyn in *El Lissitzky, Jenseits der Abstraktion: Fotografie, Design, Kooperation* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1999). The full correspondence is preserved in GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folders 4-5. Although the selection of published letters remains partial, the English edition of *Jenseits der Abstraktion, Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, has the virtue of providing the first English translation of the letters.

passive, static.”<sup>8</sup> Even after the demise of the Proun these categorical divisions continued to inform Lissitzky’s uncompromising attitude to his own activities. With the *Food Industry* project nearing total collapse at the end of summer and Küppers taking on a more active role in the design, Lissitzky was content to abandon the album as a failure and meet the consumption economy with rigid passivity.

Even with his own production compromised—by what he saw as incompetence rather than repression—Lissitzky continued to follow developments of Western modernism. He read James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in the fall of 1935 while working on *Food Industry*, and, given the book’s notorious complexity, he may still have been at it in April 1936, when Maxim Gorky’s condemnation of formalism, and of Joyce in particular, was published in *Pravda*.<sup>9</sup> Although they incorporated elements of both formalism and Socialist Realism, the photographic albums Lissitzky completed in the late 1930s belong wholly to neither. The ‘European’ feeling of distance from Soviet society that he and Küppers enjoyed allowed them a privately ironic attitude, but their keen awareness of the artifice of official discourse only strengthened Lissitzky’s sense of socialism’s possibilities. The result was neither private resistance nor the restless innovation of the international avant-garde, but a plainly affirmative Soviet modernism, rooted in patronage rather than market speculation.

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<sup>8</sup> “Proun myzhestven—kartina zhenstvenna. On aktiven—ona passivna. On dinamichen—ona statichna.” “Ne Mirovidenie—no miroreal’nost’,” manuscript for artist’s colophon of *Prouns* portfolio, 1920-21. Item no. 591.2013.3, Museum of Modern Art, New York. On the problem of the gendering of everyday life in constructivism, see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 41-87.

<sup>9</sup> In his Letter of 23 August 1935, Lissitzky asks Küppers to bring his copy of *Ulysses* to Abastuman, noting that he has only just started it. GRI special collections item 950076, box 1 folder 5. Gorky’s article “On Formalism” was published in *Pravda* on 9 April 1936. See the discussion of its role in the anti-formalism campaign in Fitzpatrick, “The *Lady Macbeth* Affair,” *The Cultural Front*, 199.

The hybridity of Lissitzky's work developed with and in the *embourgeoisement* of Soviet society, which proceeded according to its own complex and contradictory logic. According to Marxist theory, after all, common ownership of the means of production would do away with bourgeois propriety and the family's institutional function as a conduit for inherited property. As Jacques Derrida has shown through a close reading of Hegel, the bond between property and propriety within the family relied on the stabilizing sublimation of desire in the monogamous bond of marriage. Derrida notes that by defining marriage as the medium of a love that "sacrifices itself... on the altar of enjoyment in order not to destroy (itself), itself and the other, one in the other, one for the other," Hegel distinguishes the institution from concubinage, with its characteristic aversion to the repression of destructive "natural pressures."<sup>10</sup> As the ethical foundation of bourgeois society, this process of sublimating or repressing desire also provides the basis for the state itself. It is fitting, then, that Kenneth Jowitt characterizes the neo-traditionalism of Bolshevik regimes as possessing "an elite ownership pattern more analogous to concubinage than to either marriage or celibacy."<sup>11</sup> As a ruling class without property, the Soviet elite reserved the right to enjoyment even while seeking to model and enforce increasingly bourgeois standards of taste for the working class.

Ensnared in this contradiction through his ties to the Soviet patron class, Lissitzky himself embraced the occasional impropriety, as his correspondence of 1935 reveals. Although it was not without consequence for his marriage, Lissitzky's acceptance among high-level functionaries of the Party-State secured his family the protection of some of the USSR's most powerful figures. Uneasy with this economy of favor, Küppers pressured Lissitzky to maintain

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<sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Glas*, 123-24.

<sup>11</sup> Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 146.

independence by cultivating a wide range of patrons, a strategy that guided the couple through the unspeakable terror of the following years.

### I. *Producing for Consumption*

In his address to the XVII Party Congress in January 1934, dubbed the Congress of the Victors for its celebration of the first Five-Year-Plan's accomplishments, Stalin sought to clarify a widespread misconception of its goals. Reminding those who had cheered the introduction of rations as the advent of a moneyless economy that the second plan would eliminate them, he emphasized that "goods are produced in the last resort not for production but for consumption."<sup>12</sup> At the time, Stalin had hoped that rations would end along with the second Five-Year-Plan in 1938, but by the end of the year he abruptly changed course. Although more moderate, the second plan was still ambitious, and failure to meet its targets created significant budget shortfalls. Determined to tame the inflation that rations held at bay, GOSBANK advised a slackening of price controls that would allow the open sale of certain commodities to absorb the excess demand bubbling up in extra-legal markets as revenue.<sup>13</sup> The success of the strategy was immediately evident, and by October Stalin had decided to risk ending bread rations at the close of 1934. In November he told the Central Committee plenum that

to expand commercial exchange, to expand Soviet commerce, to strengthen the cash economy—these are the main reasons we are undertaking this reform... Money will start to circulate; money will come into fashion, which hasn't been the case for some time.

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Oleg Khlevniuk and R.W. Davies, "The End of Rationing in the Soviet Union, 1934-35," *Europe and Asia Studies*, vol. 51 no. 4 (June 1999): 564.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 563-64.

The value of the ruble will become more stable, undoubtedly, and strengthening the ruble means strengthening all of our planning and financial accountability.<sup>14</sup>

Hardly a return to *laissez-faire* economics, the reintroduction of money as the central instrument of the economy was part of a seismic shift towards a planned mass consumption sector.

In this sense, Lissitzky's design for the album *Industry of Socialism*, which went to press in the final days of 1934, represents the last gasp of heavy industry's exclusive claim to Soviet capital (fig. 5.1). With the end of rations in view, the publication also serves as a transitional object whose incredibly high standard of production—one would not be mistaken to call it luxurious—already points the way to the consumption of production. Lissitzky himself set the precedent for such a transition: the luxury edition of *USSR in Construction*, originally produced for circulation among foreign investors, was first introduced to a domestic audience with a special issue published for the Congress of the Victors, entitled *The Four Bolshevik Victories*, designed by Lissitzky and Sergei Tret'iakov.<sup>15</sup> Previously, connecting Soviet industry with capital had been the chief function of *USSR in Construction*. Its editor in chief, Giorgii Piatakov, was also the head of GOSBANK at the time of the journal's founding; overseeing all the financial aspects of Soviet foreign trade, he frequently purchased whole print runs of *USSR in Construction*'s foreign luxury edition.<sup>16</sup> Piatakov also served as deputy to the Commissar of Heavy Industry, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, with whose office he could closely coordinate the

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Oleg Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and his Inner Circle*, trans. Nora Seligman Fvoro, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 115-116.

<sup>15</sup> Erika Wolf, "When Photographs Speak, To Whom Do They Talk? The Origins and Audience of *SSSR na stroike*," *Left History* vol. 6 no. 2 (2000): 71. The issue was wrapped in a special cover made from the fabric of a parachute. On this aspect of the design, see Peter Nisbet, "El Lissitzky circa 1935: Two Propaganda Projects Reconsidered" in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 217-23.

<sup>16</sup> Wolf, "When Photographs Speak," 63.



editorial decisions of the magazine.<sup>17</sup> But as Soviet industry faced the necessity of cultivating a domestic lobby under the second Five-Year-Plan, both *USSR in Construction* and the Commissariat of Heavy Industry itself turned from courting foreign capital to the political capital of the new Soviet elite. And perhaps unsurprisingly, given his distinguished tenure at *USSR in Construction*, both turned to the same designer.

Lissitzky's design for the *Industry of Socialism* commission was linked with the VII Congress of the Soviets in much the same way as *The Four Bolshevik Victories* was linked to the Congress of the Victors. Materially too, *Industry of Socialism* recalls Lissitzky's work at *USSR in Construction*. His concept for the overall design, a set of six numbered booklets inserted into a custom slip cover, makes the final product of *Industry of Socialism* less like a book than a collection of limited edition journals. Although indicative of Lissitzky's preference for the more ephemeral form of the periodical, the album also recalls his original intention that the *Pressa* catalogue have "the character of a folder—a business-like thing," a plan that unfortunately "did not totally come off."<sup>18</sup> In addition to the fact that both projects gathered a set of images and documents in a form intended to evoke the busy schedule of the conference goer, they also targeted the same stratum of functionaries and technicians within the intelligentsia—the chief difference being that *Pressa* addressed a foreign intelligentsia on the eve of the first Five-Year-Plan, and *Industry of Socialism* a domestic one in its aftermath. As a consequence, the gritty portrayal of a press system ready to foment a great industrialization campaign gives way to the triumphant representation of Soviet industry as an accomplished fact. Still, after an overview

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<sup>17</sup> Oleg Khlevniuk, *In Stalin's Shadow: The Career of "Sergo" Ordzhonikidze*, trans. David J. Nordlander (Armonk: N.E. Sharpe, 1995), 92.

<sup>18</sup> "Posledniaia rabota—katalog nashei vystavka v Kel'ne. Delalas' kniga naspekh. Ia khotel ei pridat' kharakter papki—delovaia veshch'... Eto ne sovsem udalos' vpolnit." "O metodakh oformleniia knigi." Undated typescript. Nikolai Khardzhiev archive, inventory no. 725, sheet 5. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

provided by *Industry of Socialism*'s first booklet, *The New Face of the USSR*, and two others devoted to metallurgy and heavy machinery, the album's fourth booklet, *Onward and Upward!*, showcases experimental technologies in need of continuing investment: not only streetcars and airplanes, but office equipment, telephones, a small format camera called *FED* marketed as the Soviet Leica, new sound film technologies—even the cathode ray tubes of television, the press of the future.

Both the material luxury and the visuality of this mediated future are approximated by Lissitzky's album. The liberal use of tinted inks, half-sheets, pull-out panoramas, die-cut frames (often through multiple pages), and translucent onion-skin paper printed with text and images makes the experience of leafing through *Industry of Socialism* into an interactive user-generated montage. The album's first booklet, *The New Face of the USSR*, engages with filmic viewing in novel ways that still hew to the precedent of *Pressa*. As in the *Pressa* catalogue (and a great many others), it is Lenin who provides the vision of industrialization carried out under the plan. *The New Face of the USSR* opens with an image of Lenin's mausoleum on Red Square, above which the text *VII Congress of the Soviets of the USSR* is printed in metallic gold ink on a translucent half-sheet; pulling back this sheet reveals an immense industrial installation, photographed at an oblique angle and printed in blue, looming like a vision over the mausoleum and the Kremlin behind it (figs. 5.2-5.3). Later in the album, we find the other half of this translucent half-sheet: printed with a visual chart in the *Izostat* style<sup>19</sup> showing the current over-

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<sup>19</sup> *Izostat* is the abbreviated name of an institute founded in November 1931 in Moscow (*Vsesoiuznyi institut izobrazitel'noi statistiki sovetskogo stroitel'stva i khoziaistva*), by the Vienna Circle logical positivist Otto Neurath that was devoted to the development of his Isotype method of pictorial statistics. For a history of the institute, see Emma Mins, "Picturing Soviet Progress, *Izostat* 1931-34" in Christopher Burke, Eric Kindel and Sue Walker, eds., *Isotype; Design and Contexts, 1925-1971* (London: Hyphen Press, 2013), 257-81. Lissitzky had met Neurath in Vienna after the installation of *Pressa*, and according to Küppers, may have had some hand in facilitating Neurath's relationship with Moscow. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helen Aldwinckle (Greenwich: New York Graphics Society, 1968), 86. As Mins notes, Neurath initiated contact with VOKS in

fulfillment of projections made under NEP, the sheet is paired with a half-size booklet containing a transcript of Ordzhonikidze's address to the congress; turning the half-sheet, we now find a photograph of a massive crowd printed on the reverse of a folded concertina insert, which, when unfolded, reveals Ordzhonikidze himself, speech in hand, abutting a montage of industrial plants over a map of the USSR bounded by two Red Army guards (figs. 5.4-5.5). While the reliance on the *Pressa* catalogue's "kino-show" is clear, Lissitzky now allows the reader to peruse the full text of Ordzhonikidze's address, switching between text and image at will.

Although at the level of content the project's appeal to Lissitzky is clear, the album is far from a purely futurist gesture. In accordance with the official policy of inclusivity following the dissolution of Soviet arts societies in 1932, it contains several color reproductions of paintings (both oil and watercolor) completed at factories. And in keeping with the tastes of its clientele within the Commissariat of Heavy Industry, it includes many, many pages—sometimes scores at a time—devoted to nothing but naturalistic portrait studies in pencil. No matter how much they might enjoy Lissitzky's futurist and factographic fantasies, the managers of Soviet industry still preferred to have their own likenesses made by hand.

In early February 1935, Lissitzky's design for *Industry of Socialism* won praise from Ordzhonikidze himself. Pleased by the success of the album, the Commissar dictated a note of thanks and had it distributed among the many teams of printers, editors and designers it had taken to bring Lissitzky's ambitious labyrinthine design to press. Careful not to leave anyone out, Ordzhonikidze expressed "gratitude for the preparation and publication of the album in an exceptionally short period and [for] the extraordinarily high quality of its content," noting "the exemplary shock-work" of the print shops and singling out "the workers of the artistic-literary

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autumn of 1929, a fact which would seem to support Küppers' claim. The *Izostat* institute closed at the end of 1934, though production of statistics in the Isotype style continued through the late 1930s.

design and the organization of the album's publication—comrades Abramskii, Lissitzky, Amstislavskii, [and] Litvak” by name.<sup>20</sup> The performance had indeed been impressive: an edition of 10,000 had been printed and assembled in the record breaking time of three months.<sup>21</sup> If the scale of production and the rush printing are any indication, the task of propagandizing the continuing importance of heavy industry in the transition to high-tech consumer production at the end of the second Five-Year-Plan was an urgent one.

Appealing as this vision may have been, a special edition of the photo-illustrated journal *Ogonek* completed by Lissitzky and Küppers at the end of 1934, entitled *Soviet Subtropics*, provides a better indication of the Soviet Union's actual transition to a consumption economy (fig. 5.6).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the few months separating the publication *Industry of Socialism* and *Soviet Subtropics* makes the two albums an illuminating study in contrast. *Soviet Subtropics* celebrated the productivity of the USSR's warmer southern climes, prominently featuring the head of the Bolsheviks' Transcaucasian Regional Committee, Lavrentii Beria, then a rising star within the party.<sup>23</sup> In stark contrast to the high-tech urban modernity envisioned by *Industry of Socialism*,

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<sup>20</sup> “Za podgotovku i vypusk al'boma v iskluchitel'no kratkii srok i chrezvychaino vysokoe ego kachestvo po sodержaniuu blagodarnost'... Rabotnikam po literaturno-khudozhestvennomu oformleniiu i organizatsii vypuska al'boma—T.T. Abramskomuu, Lisitskomuu, Amstislavskomuu, Litvaku... dlia primirovaniia udarno-rabotavshikh po podgotovke, oformleniiu i vypusku al'boma rabotnikov ‘Stroim’, ‘Z.I.’ tipografiia filian masterskoi IZOGIZ'a...” RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 61, l. 4. The album was published through the journals *Stroim* and *Za industrializatsii*.

<sup>21</sup> A note inside the album's cover indicates that materials were in press from October to December 1934. Although no contract for the project survives, we must assume that Lissitzky worked on the design for much of the year. Two variants of the cover are known; both are reproduced in Mikhail Karasik, *Paradnaia kniga strany sovetov* (Moscow: Kontakt-Kul'tura, 2007), 117.

<sup>22</sup> According to the album's back matter, it was sent to press on 20 September 1934. It was advertised as for sale in *Literaturnaia gazeta* no. 170 (December 20) 1934: 4. Notably, the ad refers to the album as the work of Lissitzky alone, whereas the album itself credits “El and Es Lissitzky.” I return to this tension below.

<sup>23</sup> There is no extant contract for the project, but its general editor, Mikhail Kol'tsov, was among those responsible for the initial organization of *USSR in Construction*, as Wolf notes. “When Photographs Speak,” 57. Lissitzky met Beria only at the end of 1935, but Kol'tsov had hired him as architect of the *Ogonek* printworks in 1930.

*Soviet Subtropics* offered a glimpse of the sun-soaked good life, showcasing the region's abundance of tea, citrus fruits, wine, tobacco, rubber and ramie—a plant-based fiber used in the manufacture of imitation silks—as well as its modern health resorts (figs. 5.7-5.8). Where the former emphasized the new in the form of construction, the latter sold itself on the enduring value of cultivation. Taken together, they provide a fuller picture of the Soviet economy desired by party elites than either considered separately: here, exertion and recuperation, production and consumption, strike a natural balance in which each finds its proper place. But while *Industry of Socialism* proffers a future of sensory overload, *Soviet Subtropics* promises the large scale cultivation of comforts that in the past had been the property of the few. With the sudden end of rationing at the close of 1934, it was the latter that took the lead. For whatever market existed in the USSR in 1934 was for the products—specifically the food—shown in *Soviet Subtropics*.

On the first day of 1935, some 13,500 new bread shops offered a reported thirty-five varieties of bread; staffed with smartly dressed clerks, the shops were equipped with sharp knives, working scales and, most surprisingly, clearly marked prices.<sup>24</sup> The new look of Soviet consumption was not invented overnight, but expanded from a network of state stores that, since 1931, carried luxury goods at prices that could recoup the lost NEP tax levy under the slogan of “cultured trade.” Although “cultured trade” emerged quietly, expansion of the state commercial network into the off-ration food market had begun in mid-1933, aided by a gradual reduction of the gap between commercial and ration prices.<sup>25</sup> Preparations notwithstanding, the mass market

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<sup>24</sup> Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices and Consumption* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 207. Hessler's willingness to depart from the euphemistically neutral “culture of shortage” paradigm prevalent in Soviet Studies and to instead frame her study as an investigation of markets and trade under conditions of systemic poverty makes her book uniquely valuable.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-201. Both commercial and ration prices were state controlled, and their convergence in no way represented the reappearance of an unfettered price mechanism.

emerged in a violent convulsion. Breadlines formed in the countryside as workers deserted their posts, forming throngs so turbulent that several would-be customers suffocated in them, and shortages plagued some locations into summer.<sup>26</sup> In at least one respect, however, the rollout had been a magnificent success: Stalin chafed at its parasitic implications, insisting on a pay raise for workers who lost the protection of rations, but the revenue generated by the sale of grain, bread and flour in its first year on the open market grew by almost 300% to represent over a third of the overall budget.<sup>27</sup> Although the ration system found some defenders, handsomely compensated professionals like Lissitzky and Küppers now had more places to dispose of their income. “Cultured trade” had become the slogan of the second plan almost by accident.

As the end of rationing was planned, the People’s Commissariat of Provisioning, once responsible for administering rations, was split in two: the former Commissar of Provisioning, Anastas Mikoian, would now control the new Soviet Food Industry and work in tandem with a new Commissariat of Trade.<sup>28</sup> This tremendous shift in the balance of the Soviet economy called for some formal recognition, and by summer Lissitzky and Küppers were almost ready to put the finishing touches on an album celebrating the accomplishments of Mikoian and the new Soviet Food Industry, to be published by IZOGIZ in the fall. Given the success of *Industry of Socialism* and the couple’s experience treating similar subject matter in *Soviet Subtropics*, the *Food Industry* commission was hardly unexpected. Unlike *Industry of Socialism* however, *Food Industry* would not find an easy path to production. Although it was well underway by summer, the album was still incomplete in June, when Lissitzky left Skhodnia for a rest cure in Georgia.

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<sup>26</sup> Khlevniuk and Davies, “The End of Rationing,” 579.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 575, 582-83.

<sup>28</sup> Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin’s Russia* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 7.

## II. *Parasitism*

Thanks to Lissitzky and Küppers' correspondence that summer, we know more about the production of *Food Industry* than any of Lissitzky's other albums. As the working documents of an active design team, these letters provide a snapshot of the Soviet publishing world's inner workings during the second Five-Year-Plan. Insofar as these co-workers also happened to be husband and wife, the letters represent an especially rich document of the dynamics of class and gender in the workplace, with of all the attendant desires and anxieties fueled by them.

The *Food Industry* project's division of labor is outlined in Lissitzky's first letters, along with a strategy to fully exploit it. The album's slipcase and cover design, binding, choice of paper and printing technique were to be decided by Küppers and Lissitzky, who would also create "frames" for the book's individual sections; IZOGIZ staff would provide maps, diagrams, and text for "intermission" scenarios; finally, a contract and publication date could be formalized, and the book's frames filled with stock images chosen by the press.<sup>29</sup> Judging by the content of these early letters, in its first stages the design of *Food Industry* hewed fairly closely to the precedent of *Industry of Socialism*, with a cloth-covered slipcase holding six individual booklets.<sup>30</sup> Although an informal publication date had already been arranged, Lissitzky judged that *Food Industry* "could be published sooner, but for that to happen, everything must be prepared at the same time."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 16 June 1935, trans. Kenneth Kronenburg in *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> Lissitzky mentions having prepared "six dummies for the title pages of the individual parts" in his letter of 6 July 1935. *Ibid.*, 209. His detailed plans for a slipcase are lucidly discussed by Peter Nisbet in "El Lissitzky circa 1935: Two Propaganda Projects Reconsidered" in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 211-28.

<sup>31</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 16 June 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 206. It is notable that the design process had begun prior to the drafting of a formal contract; whether this type of speculative production was

If *Food Industry*'s design was similar to that of *Industry of Socialism*, Lissitzky's desired production schedule was probably modeled on the latter as well. In this, he seems to have been too ambitious. He was wrapping up his designs for the title pages of individual sections by the first week of July, but foot-dragging at IZOGIZ and Küppers' own fastidiousness slowed the process. Soon, he was ready to compromise: "we have already created enough that is extraordinary for this album," he writes, adding that the album "is supposed to be finished on 20 July but it won't be 'finished' by 20 July 1937 either."<sup>32</sup> The following week, he was willing to accept a completion date of August 10 and to foist responsibility onto the staff at the press. "The main thing," according to Lissitzky, is

that the errors are of an editorial sort. The positive thing is Narkom (don't forget that Mikoian is not an average Narkom but rather a member of the Politburo) and therefore the content is somewhat secure, politically as well. I don't think that in reality changes will result because the material is *exhausted*... What is to be added as sections or the realization of what exists is the most important to me; the entire structure must not be destroyed. But the *main thing* is that it is not our fault, and we don't want to finish our thing later than the 2<sup>nd</sup> (say the 10<sup>th</sup>) of August. That is why a final layout of the album must be done immediately with Who, How, What.<sup>33</sup>

Such editorial friction was scarcely different from the kind Lissitzky had theorized within the perspective of working class authorship during the cultural revolution of the first Five-Year-Plan.

What had changed since the end of the cultural revolution was Lissitzky's angle on the editorial struggle and the tactics he was willing to pursue to overcome it. Not only had the regime's embrace of the intelligentsia attenuated the need for "invention from below," the

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common earlier, whether Lissitzky's design was in competition with others, or whether it was enabled by his privileged relationship to the editorial staff by 1935 we do not know, but his apparent influence over publication dates would suggest the latter as the most likely scenario.

<sup>32</sup> Lissitzky discusses title pages in his letter of July 6 and his frustrations on July 10, *ibid.*, 209-210.

<sup>33</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 16 July 1935, *ibid.*, 212. Emphasis original.



economic pivot toward the retail sector and corresponding drive to feminize the consumer experience challenged the implicitly masculine heroism of Lissitzky's earlier position: workplace tensions were now of a different sort. In negotiating a new publication date, Küppers had to navigate meetings with both Mikoian and the album's chief editor, Sergei Ingulov. Lissitzky's response to her positive news makes his new angle clear. Elated, he wrote to

congratulate you about your success with Narkom. I am very happy that you got yourself into the highest atmosphere; you probably have had the same impression, namely that there they think more simply and directly and that there is more agreement with our views than with the little people with whom one is forced to prepare work. Right that you want to associate with Ingulov. So, on with the Album. And I congratulate you that young (and of course handsome) men find you young and beautiful.<sup>34</sup>

To Lissitzky, it was now practically a foregone conclusion that the party elite must be cultivated as patrons by any means necessary. In a previous letter, he had registered his frustration "with previous albums that when they are done they become a good milk cow from which others get the cream."<sup>35</sup> If a little flirtation could keep the little people with whom he had to compete from skimming the cream, then so much the worse for them.

As this patronizing episode demonstrates, the status of Küppers' labor was far from simple. In addition to regendering the economy along traditional lines, the sudden shift to a "cultured trade" paradigm during the second Five-Year-Plan exposed the socioeconomic hierarchies maintained by the Soviet system. While working class women increasingly sold their affective labor in the retail sector, the women of the elite performed it in the exercise of taste. For most women of official society, this meant incorporating cultural activities into family life while observing high standards of fashion and hygiene, but for more ambitious ones, it meant a career

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 2 July 1935, *ibid.*, 208.

suited to their role in society: running the cosmetics firm TEZhE for Polina Molotova, or serving as an editor at *USSR in Construction* for Evgeniia Ezhova.<sup>36</sup> In a certain sense, Küppers' partnership with her husband corresponded to this model. But Lissitzky's own desires for his wife were never so clear as when he confessed, "I want to see you well dressed like you always were. I want to be proud of you, your taste."<sup>37</sup> This status fit Küppers uncomfortably: unquestionably more cosmopolitan than most women of the Soviet elite, she was well qualified to construct the image they sought to embody; nevertheless, she remained their social inferior and, in the case of Ezhova, experienced this power disparity directly. The reality of Küppers' situation is more accurately conveyed by Lissitzky's anxious joke that he could "rest easy, because I know my family is secure and I can quietly become an outright 100% (now I'm only 75%) parasite and exploiter of my chattel woman."<sup>38</sup> Küppers was, both partners knew, doing the majority of the work for *Food Industry*—a fact to which Lissitzky nevertheless displayed considerable resistance.

Tensions over Küppers' labor had been latent in the couple's correspondence since Lissitzky's first letter from Tblisi, where he planned to arrange the details of his treatment in

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<sup>36</sup> On the charitable work of upper-class Soviet women, see Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 231-32; on TEZhE, Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade*, 205. The term "affective labor" comes from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who define it as "labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion." *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 108. Silvia Federici has criticized Hardt and Negri's concept as merely paying "lip service" to the question of gender, and more specifically, of the central role of women's domestic labor in the process of value production, in "The Reproduction of Labor Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution," *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 96. What I have to say about Küppers' labor here largely accords with the feminist critique outlined by Federici.

<sup>37</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 1 August 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 218.

<sup>38</sup> "Ich kann dann mich ruhig zur Ruhe legen, denn ich weiss meine Familie ist gesichert und ich kann ganz ruhig ein vollständiger 100% (jetzt bin ich nur 75%) Parasit und Exploitor meiner leibeigenen Frau werden." El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 28 June 1935. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky, eds., *Proun und Wolkenbügel* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), 162.

Abastumani, some 300 kilometers to the west. This was same the territory publicized by *Soviet Subtropics* and thanks to the album Lissitzky's negotiations had gone surprisingly well: "They were very nice... I will have a room for myself, better food, etc. Everything for free and can stay longer. *Subtropics* brings dividends!"<sup>39</sup> To Küppers, the remark surely seemed tone deaf, but this inequity would be resolved by the end of summer. Despite her husband's impatience, she intended for *Food Industry* to secure her a similar period of leisure, and for her careful and diplomatic work to win Mikoian's respect.

Lissitzky embraced his wife's leadership grudgingly, preferring that she abandon *Food Industry* to the editors—"it would be best to liquidate it," he wrote at one point—and join him in Georgia immediately.<sup>40</sup> Although he could offer her no lodgings, as late as August 10 he still urged her to buy a new dress, depart with three or four thousand rubles, and "bring a *Subtropics*. People here know it and praise it. That can be your business card."<sup>41</sup> Saddled with three boys and the incomplete album, Küppers justifiably resisted this plan (if one can call it that). But to Lissitzky, fetishizing the couple's formal equality, Küppers' double burden was immaterial:

it is not that I need you as my 'bed-nanny' for my pleasure. I cannot imagine that I will live here long-term only for myself and recover and you without vacation, without a free hour. Particularly now that we can afford things and when the boys are big. One can surely let the mother's breast alone a bit (they are certainly well cared for, perhaps better than I am here at the sanitarium) and the littlest one is already so big that he can be brought along. Please understand me, Sophie: I am here with a sick conscience because I am your eternal exploiter.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 7 June 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 205.

<sup>40</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 1 August 1935, *ibid.*, 218.

<sup>41</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 10 August 1935, *ibid.*, 220.

<sup>42</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 22 July 1935, *ibid.*, 216.

Repeated a second time, this last remark is no longer a joke. With Lissitzky in the leading role, his wife's labor—artistic, maternal, sexual—could remain invisible and the equality of their partnership untroubled. Absent that, his privilege stood out in stark contrast, revealing him as the leisured consumer he desired her to be.

The emergence of what Kenneth Jowitt has named Soviet neo-traditionalism, a “mix of private and official prerequisites and possessions, tenure of political position, physical security, and privileged stable access to careers,” complicated Lissitzky's efforts to occupy the role of producer.<sup>43</sup> Despite the fashion for money that Stalin encouraged with the consumption economy, property in the Soviet Union remained a public affair. This fact alone made Küppers' skepticism toward her husband's proposal that she set off for Georgia with a suitcase full of cash and a copy of *Subtropics* eminently rational: money could buy petty commodities, but accommodations had to be got by other means. Of course, Lissitzky had already tried these. In early July, he had asked Küppers to “go to *USSR in Construction*, ask about my pay and speak with Ezhova about whether they will come to Abastuman this summer as well. If that were the case, we would be well taken care of with you and Bubka as far as [an] apartment.”<sup>44</sup> An innocent request at the time, the incident assumed new importance at the end of August when an IZOGIZ editor who had worked on *Industry of Socialism* gossiped about Ezhova's special affection for Lissitzky, revealing the basis of the favor. Told of the episode by Küppers, Lissitzky backpedals before admitting responsibility: “I can't imagine what Litvak blabbered about. I met the woman three to five times and always in the company of several people. I also

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<sup>43</sup> Jowitt, *New World Disorder*, 147.

<sup>44</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 2 July 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 207.

don't know where she recommends me everywhere [sic] as a special favorite. When did I become M'sieur Pompadour."<sup>45</sup> In comparing himself to Louis XV's cherished courtesan, Lissitzky must have wanted his unexpected gender reversal to rule out the possibility of misconduct—a kind of witty *reductio ad absurdum*. But like any joke, this one is built on an excess of signification. With its combustible blend of castration anxiety and courtly intrigue, it is an utterance meaningful only within a Soviet system counterpoising modern market elements to neo-traditional political ones.

A certain level of discomfort with Küppers' labor clearly informed Lissitzky's willingness to exploit a neo-traditional system whose "preferred direction is toward an elite pattern of socioeconomic 'concubinage', not the 'methodical rational acquisition' of either goods or votes."<sup>46</sup> To him, the apparent irrationality of his own actions was in keeping with existing practices, while his wife's methodical work concealed a perverse core. For understandable reasons, Küppers believed the opposite, and Lissitzky soon conceded. A few days after admitting a certain amount of illicit conduct, he left Abastuman for Tblisi, since to stay on, "I would have had to turn to Ezhova... and I particularly didn't want to because of your last letters."<sup>47</sup> Independently of her husband, Küppers had secured herself a period of rest in exchange for work on an upcoming Food Industry exhibition.<sup>48</sup> Lissitzky eagerly agreed to these arrangements, confessing, "I'm no good at making jokes, but... I want to do what you say because I am more

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<sup>45</sup> Later in the same letter he admitted that "you chose a bungler for a husband, my poor wife, good for only one thing—skirt chasing." El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 29 August 1935, *ibid.*, 221.

<sup>46</sup> Jowitt, *New World Disorder*, 145.

<sup>47</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 3 September 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 223.

<sup>48</sup> This exhibition would not occur until 1939, when it opened as a subsection of an exhibition devoted to heavy industry. The extent of Küppers' participation is not known. On these exhibitions, see Susan E. Reid, "All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s," *Slavic Review*, vol. 57, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 133-173.

and more convinced of your wisdom and trust my own ‘cleverness’ less and less.”<sup>49</sup> A few days later, Küppers telegraphed that she would depart for Mazesta, a mineral spring just outside of Sochi, in October. “I will be able to free you from the album immediately,” Lissitzky volunteered, cheerily. “I am very fond of this form (exchange); it means we’re getting no gift. And if this is really also provided with a personal signature from Mikoian, it is a genuine thing.”<sup>50</sup> With the market principle ascendant, Lissitzky could relieve his wife of her work, freeing her to enjoy the lifestyle he desired for them both. The equality of the partnership was restored.

Küppers’ departure for Mazesta entailed Lissitzky’s renewed control over *Food Industry* and the victory of his preferred tactics of negotiation. Having insisted throughout the summer that the couple’s best option would be to let the in-house staff at IZOGIZ bungle the project, Lissitzky seems to have done just that, for by December the album had indeed been liquidated. When Mikoian appeared before the Central Committee to deliver a speech on the accomplishments of the Soviet Food Industry at the end of December, there was no album to speak of, only a portfolio of fifty-eight unbound pages and the text of Mikoian’s speech.<sup>51</sup> Even if it was partly a stopgap measure, the portfolio, *Food Industry: Pages from the Album* that appeared in early 1936 was still a luxurious thing produced in a limited edition of 1500 copies.

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<sup>49</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 3 September 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 224.

<sup>50</sup> “Ich werde Dich gleich von dem Album befreien können... Diese Form (Tausch) ist mir sehr lieb, das heißt wir kriegen kein Geschenk. Und wenn das wirklich noch mit einer persönlichen Unterschrift von Mikoian versehen ist, ist es eine ernste Sache.” El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 9 September 1935. *Proun und Wolkenbügel*, 176. The reference to Küppers’ departure date appears in the original letter in GRI special collections, item 950076, box 1, folder 5.

<sup>51</sup> Publication information in the volume indicates that it went to press on December 25, three days after Mikoian’s address to the Central Committee Plenum, and appeared on 12 January 1936. Küppers records that this edition of the album was presented to the Central Committee of the Politburo in *Life, Letters, Texts*, 98. Multiple variants of this version of the album exist. A version with different end papers than the copy held by the Harvard Art Museums is illustrated in Mikhail Karasik, *Paradnaia kniga strany sovetov* (Moscow: Kontakt-Kul’tura, 2007), 148.

The portfolio itself was dressed in gray silk inset with an enameled metal name plate (fig. 5.8); inside, Mikoian's speech, elegantly set in blue and black text but cheaply bound with metal staples, is tied to the protective case with a fine silk cord. The pages themselves are similarly contradictory: illustrations essentially no different from magazine pages are mounted on a thick high quality paper with letterpress captions, perhaps with the expectation that the recipient of the album—given the small print run, probably a food industry functionary of some rank—could frame and hang his favorites in the office waiting room.

While the cover probably belongs to Lissitzky alone, Küppers' own labor is represented within the portfolio, where it stands ambivalently alongside other images of women's work. She is granted author credits for a single image: a simple two-part montage of sunflowers juxtaposing the flower's natural beauty and optimism with its status as raw material for the production of oil (fig. 5.9). But what is the status of her authorship? Consider two further pages from the portfolio. The first shows one of the high-end "cultured trade" outlets of central Moscow, a chandeliered art-deco palace so overtly luxurious it almost transcends its own kitsch, piled high with canned goods sold by a smartly dressed salesgirl (fig. 5.10). The second shows the process and product of soap manufacture at Molotova's cosmetics combine, TEZhE, where a working class woman stamps soaps that are packaged and sold under the image of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa (fig. 5.11). The major contradictions of Soviet women under the second Five-Year-Plan are represented here: the woman of the elite with the power to control production markets hygienic goods through the aristocratic cachet of art and feminine poise, while the female worker manufactures the image she is told to live up to. Where does Küppers' work fall? Is it that of the salesgirl, factory worker or elite entrepreneur? In various ways, she must perform aspects of all three. Navigating meetings with editors and politicians, she comports herself as a woman of the

elite, while in the production of images she is at once retail clerk and worker: although she is free to construct the image she considers most flattering to the product, the close kinship between her montage and that of Molotova's TEZhE soap factory lays bare the standardized production of the album's contents.

### III. *Ezhovshchina*

Although Lissitzky judged his wife's "wisdom" more reliable than his own "cleverness," courting powerful patrons remained essential to the couple's survival in the late 1930s. Even while assenting to Küppers' plea for independence from Ezhova, Lissitzky cultivated other equally powerful connections in the Caucasus. Having come into contact with Lavrentii Beria, who proposed the idea of an album devoted to Georgia, Lissitzky reported to Küppers that

he remembered that I was the artist who was at Abastuman (also because of *Subtropics*), and stated, "if you do a good job for us, we will put you up in Abastuman for a year"... I write this to show you that we are independent of the protection that is unappealing to you, and we can get it ourselves here. You know that I try to have many alternatives—there is one here too.<sup>52</sup>

These alternatives remained closely intertwined, however, and Ezhova's continued to be an important position. Spinning Beria's suggestion as an issue of *USSR in Construction*, Lissitzky presented a mock-up of the issue to Beria's assistant late that summer and signed a contract with the journal, countersigned by Ezhova, immediately upon returning to Moscow.<sup>53</sup> When his illness required a minor surgery the following year, it was most likely Ezhova, whose husband

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<sup>52</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 3 September 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 223. Translation modified.

<sup>53</sup> The contract is dated 26 September 1935. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1 d. 55, l. 13. The mock-up was prepared with Max Al'pert, who was also in Abastuman over the summer.



also suffered from tuberculosis, who arranged the best available care for Lissitzky.<sup>54</sup> By the end of 1935, Lissitzky and Küppers could rely on protection from Ezhova, Beria or Mikoian; and while Lissitzky considered it clever to tie himself to the upwardly mobile Ezhov and Beria, it was probably wiser to stay close to Mikoian, the only Old Bolshevik on the Central Committee to survive the Terror orchestrated by Stalin and conducted by Ezhov and Beria themselves.

Although the Georgia issue of *USSR in Construction* was approved in September, Lissitzky and Küppers were still far from fulfilling their obligations to Mikoian for *Food Industry*. In addition to the preliminary portfolio rushed out that winter, a cohesive version of the album still needed to be assembled. Most of the contents of the final version were sent to press in the summer of 1936, with the album itself appearing in November.<sup>55</sup> Combining a range of high-quality papers and printing techniques, from color photolithography to rotogravure to letterpress, the final version of *Food Industry* exploits the translucence of onion-skin paper in a manner first seen in *Industry of Socialism* and logotypes like those of *Soviet Subtropics*, now embossed on its front cover (fig. 5.12). In the final album, the slipcase and six-section structure Lissitzky and Küppers had worked out the previous year has been discarded in favor of a point-by-point correspondence to the text of Mikoian's "Report on the Food Industry," delivered to the Central Executive Committee on January 16.<sup>56</sup> In a revealing departure from his December address to the

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<sup>54</sup> In Küppers' account in *Life, Letters, Texts*, this favorable treatment was secured by "the editorial department of *USSR [in Construction]*" (99). She uses the same euphemism to elide Ezhova's name in the published version of Lissitzky's letter of 3 September 1935 in *Proun und Wolkenbügel*, 175. On Nikolai Ezhov's tuberculosis, see Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner: People's Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895-1940* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2002), 15.

<sup>55</sup> Information on the publication schedule is included in the album's back matter. Notice of its publication in conjunction with the VIII Extraordinary Congress of the Soviets appeared in *Izvestiia* no. 274 (November 27), 1936: 6. The album appeared in an edition of 6000.

<sup>56</sup> The full text of Mikoian's speech was published in *Pravda* no. 22 (January 22), 1936: 2-5, and on January 26 *Izvestiia* ran a discussion. By March, the speech had been translated into English for publication abroad as A.I. Mikoyan, *The Soviet Food Industry* (Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R.: Moscow,

Central Committee, Mikoian concludes his January report by insisting on the necessity of stimulating demand for new Food Industry products with “advertising—Soviet advertising, of course, not capitalist advertising, not blaring and deceptive advertising.”<sup>57</sup> Building a constituency for such enlightened advertising was most likely among the chief aims of the album.

The opening sequence of the album demonstrates the new ceremonial style that Victor Margolin has identified in Lissitzky’s work after 1935.<sup>58</sup> A standard double-bust of Lenin and Stalin accompanied by quotes from both leaders opens the album, followed by ten flags inset with cameo photos of Politburo members and a more intimate double portrait of Mikoian and Stalin in camera. The album begins in earnest, however, only with its first full spread: a photograph of Mikoian delivering his report before the Central Executive Committee (fig. 5.13), accompanied by two lengthy captions:

You workers remember better than anyone how our party propagandists all too often agonized, explaining to the workers why there was not enough bread, sugar, meat; why no tobacco, no papers. As for myself, I must say that I found it not only hard to explain, but harder still to provide all of these. It is much easier now to explain why there has begun to be lots of bread, lots of butter, lots of sugar.

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1936). My reading of the album’s contents does not support Peter Nisbet’s claim that the album has twelve sections, each corresponding to a logotype printed on its cover. In fact, the album has fifteen sections that correspond quite closely to the sixteen sections of Mikoian’s report. A few discrepancies between the structure of Mikoian’s report and the album’s content do occur, but the album remains true to the report’s content. See Nisbet, “El Lissitzky circa 1935,” *Situating El Lissitzky*, 217.

<sup>57</sup> A.I. Mikoyan, *The Soviet Food Industry* (Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R.: Moscow, 1936), 72

<sup>58</sup> Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 196. Notably, in this connection Margolin refers to Lissitzky’s design for the *USSR in Construction* issue devoted to Georgia.

Work in the USSR is a duty for every able-bodied citizen, according to the principle: “whoever does not work shall not eat.” In the USSR, the socialist principle is being realized: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work.”<sup>59</sup>

The first voice is Mikoian’s, transitioning from Commissar of Provisioning to Commissar of the Food Industry, and recognizing past errors of theory and practice insofar as they have been corrected; the second voice is that of the law, in the form of the recently introduced Soviet constitution, establishing the bond between labor and consumption through an unacknowledged substitution of St. Paul for Marx’s maxim, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” These captions are printed on a folded leaf covering half of the right-hand page, which, when opened, reveals the entirety of the hall (fig. 5.14). In the center of this participatory *démontage*, a film camera trained on Mikoian in the immediate right-hand foreground blocks the aisle and with it the viewer’s path into the wide-angle shot’s plunging deep space. Located within the fold, which runs between lens and chamber of the apparatus, the camera functions as both documentary and disciplinary device, promising both the transparency and accountability of state authority in complete accordance with its double caption.

Given *Food Industry*’s reliance on Mikoian’s report for its final structure, this *démontage* also functions as a table of contents. Compared with Lissitzky’s previous investment in montage and his experimentation with the form of the book’s index in *Pressa* and *Industry of Socialism*, this substitution of the report for Lissitzky and Küppers’ own original framework demonstrates a deliberate withdrawal of authorship. In one sense, this act is staged as the explicit absence of the propagandist’s techniques, with neither artist nor editor mediating between the reader and the

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<sup>59</sup> “Vy rabochie, luchshe vsekh pomnite, kak nashi partiinye propagandisty ran’she chasten’ko muchilis’, ob’iasniaia rabochim, pochemu nekhvataet khleba, sakhara, miasa; pochemu net makhorki, net papiros. Pro sebia ia dolzhen skazat’ cho mne bylo trudno ne tol’ko ob’iasniat’, no eshche trudnee snabzhat’ vsem etim. Kuda legche teper’ ob’iasniat’, pochemu stalo mnogo khleba, mnogo masla, mnogo sakhara. Trud v SSSR iavliaetsia obiazannost’iu kazhdogo sposobnogo k trudu grazhdanina po printsipu: “kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est’.” V SSSR osushchestvlietsia printsip sotsializma: “ot kazhdogo po ego sposobnostiam, kazhdomu—po ego trudu.” *Pishchevaia industriia* (Narkompishcheprom, OGIZ, IZOGIZ: Moscow, 1936), n.p.

Commissar's report of abundantly available goods; in another, it functions as a *précis* of editorial interference and the album's essential non-development over two years of work. Faced with editorial resistance in July, Lissitzky had already foreseen such an outcome, sarcastically miming the self-congratulatory cant of the editors to Küppers: "they will say: 'the editorial office has done a colossal job!!!"<sup>60</sup> From this perspective, the camera operator, with his device running automatically and his back turned to the scene, can almost appear as an object of ridicule. Juxtaposed to the man seated behind him, craning forward with hands cupped to ears, the technologically grounded inattention of the camera operator is even more pronounced. The irony of this juxtaposition was probably not lost on Lissitzky, for in the end *Food Industry* adhered to his ideal of a book constructed like a film to an almost perverse degree.

This explicit withdrawal of authorship recalls the sense of distance from official discourse that Lissitzky cultivated when it contradicted his own vision of socialism's possibilities, but the two cannot be related without acknowledging the mediation of ongoing political developments. The distancing mechanism that allowed Lissitzky to mock the self-satisfied mediocrity of his editors in July, which reappears in his haughty dissatisfaction with his accommodations in Abastuman on the basis of "our European ways" later that month, was also occasionally directed at Ezhova and her husband, whose outsize stature could let "people consider them 'Dear Lord God'" and turn Lissitzky into "M'sieur Pompadour."<sup>61</sup> Clearly, Lissitzky had reason to put some distance between himself and Ezhova, but these remarks are unique for other reasons. Since early 1935, Nikolai Ezhov had been a key instrument in Stalin's

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<sup>60</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 2 July 1935, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, 208.

<sup>61</sup> El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 2 July and 22 July 1935, *ibid.*, 208 and 216.

consolidation of dictatorial powers.<sup>62</sup> Leading the investigation into the December 1934 murder of Leningrad party chief Sergei Kirov, he cast shade on the NKVD by rooting out the very conspiracy suspected by Stalin and arresting former opposition leaders Grigorii Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev.<sup>63</sup> Embarrassingly, this investigation also revealed what David Brandenberger has called “an entire subculture of dissembling and political joke telling, a good portion of which assaulted party leaders,” in forms ranging from harmless jabs at Stalin’s supposed genius to the more provocative deciphering of the acronym SSSR as “Shoot Stalin, Save Russia.”<sup>64</sup> The private jokes that populate Lissitzky’s correspondence during the summer of 1935, harmless as they may be, belong to a culture of dissenting humor that was now being stamped out by a regime desperately trying to reassert control through repression.

Indeed, by the time *Food Industry* went to press in summer 1936, the political situation was radically different. Although the Kirov case was quickly closed, Stalin ordered it reopened in early 1936. Interrogated again in prison, this time with Ezhov’s supervision, Zinoviev and Kamenev confessed to their participation in a conspiracy to murder Stalin directed from abroad by Trotsky.<sup>65</sup> In June 1936, public treason trials were arranged for sixteen former oppositionists; a letter penned by Ezhov and edited by Stalin was circulated to all party organs in advance of the trial, denouncing the counterrevolutionary activity of a so-called united center:

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<sup>62</sup> In the wake of high-level personnel reassignments in early 1935, “the powerful post of Central Committee second secretary—Stalin’s deputy within the party—was essentially eliminated” and its responsibilities redistributed among several secretaries; this shift coincided with the strengthening of three recently promoted cadres: Yezhov, Zhdanov and Krushchev. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, 141.

<sup>63</sup> J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 146-7. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, 189.

<sup>64</sup> David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 61-62.

<sup>65</sup> Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 247-49.

Now, when it has been proven that the Trotskyist-Zinovievist monsters unite in their struggle against Soviet power all of the most embittered and sworn enemies of the workers of our country—spies, provocateurs, saboteurs, White Guards, kulaks, and so on, when all distinctions between these elements on the one hand, and the Trotskyists and Zinovievists, on the other hand, have been effaced—all party organizations, all party members must come to understand that the vigilance of Communists is necessary in every area and in every situation.

The indelible mark of every Bolshevik in the current situation ought to be his ability to recognize and identify the enemies of the party, no matter how well they may have camouflaged their identity.<sup>66</sup>

In August, Kameney, Zinoviev and the other fourteen defendants were convicted of treason and executed. At the end of September, Ezhov was appointed head of NKVD.<sup>67</sup>

The mass operations coinciding with Ezhov's tenure at the head of the NKVD, known as the *Ezhovshchina* (literally, "the Ezhov regime"), have proven problematic for historiographical representation. The exact motive, scale, pattern of victimization, and even Ezhov's own precise role in the *Ezhovshchina* continue to be debated, although the overall picture is becoming clearer.<sup>68</sup> Upon taking over the NKVD, Ezhov intensified the repression aimed at former oppositionists. Arrests rippled through the Commissariat of Heavy Industry, reaching even the highest levels with the expulsion from the party and arrest of Giorgi Piatakov, deputy to the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 274-77.

<sup>68</sup> J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning, eds. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), presents a range of views, as does the recent collection, *The Anatomy of Terror: Political Violence under Stalin*, edited by James Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Getty's conviction that chaotic, elemental and unplanned elements constituted a significant factor in the Terror shaped his controversial *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), a view since moderated by his *Road to Terror*. Getty has also attempted to restore a certain amount of agency to Ezhov in a political biography, co-authored by Oleg V. Naumov, *Yezhov: The Rise of Stalin's Iron Fist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008). This perspective has been roundly criticized by Khlevniuk's *Master of the House*, which stresses Stalin's continuous involvement in planning the purges from above as a preparation for imminent war. Such emphasis on the elimination of a so-called "Fifth column" has been rejected in turn by Sheila Fitzpatrick, who, I note below, stresses instead the "logic of revolution" and refers to Jacobin precedent.

Commissar and chief editor of *USSR in Construction*, in early September. Just days after these events, Piatakov's boss, the Commissar of Heavy Industry Sergo Ordzhonikidze, wrote to Stalin:

Nerves in the party now are taking quite a thrashing: people don't know whether or not they can trust this or that former Trotskyite, Zinovievite. There are quite a few of them in the party. Some people think that we should toss them all out of the party, but that is not wise and should not be done; instead we should take a good look, figure out what's what—our people don't always have enough patience and skill.<sup>69</sup>

Ordzhonikidze's plea for moderation fell on deaf ears. In January, Piatakov was the chief defendant in a second show trial with the same outcome as the first. The following March, the Politburo ordered the arrest of any military officer previously expelled from the party for political reasons; a few months later, eight of the most senior officers of the Red Army were arrested on charges of treason and espionage on behalf of Germany and Japan.<sup>70</sup> At the June 1937 Plenum of Central Committee, Ezhov reported having uncovered the "Center of Centers."<sup>71</sup>

Initially focused on stamping out opposition within the party and military, violent repression now expanded vertiginously to engulf the civilian population. In connection with new operations against victims of the regime and national populations deemed to be suspicious, the emergency decree enacted after the Kirov murder sanctioning trials without the participation of the accused and the immediate administration of death sentences without appeal was revived. In July 1937, the NKVD issued arrest quotas by region and district, dividing those subject to arrest from those facing immediate execution.<sup>72</sup> These quotas were over-fulfilled: 385,000 "former kulaks" were shot, followed by 111,000 Poles, 42,000 Germans and many, many others. Not

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Khlevniuk, *Master of the House*, 154. Ordzhonikidze committed suicide shortly after Piatakov's arrest.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 444.

<sup>71</sup> Jansen and Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner*, 75-77.

<sup>72</sup> The full text of order No. 00447 is reprinted in translation in Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 473-80.

until fall of 1938 were there signs of normalization: Beria was appointed Ezhov's chief deputy at the NKVD, Ezhov's appointment transferred to head of water transport, and investigation of "NKVD abuses" ordered by the Politburo.<sup>73</sup> Under Beria's watch, individuals close to Ezhov began to be arrested, including his wife's close friend and co-worker at *USSR in Construction*, Zinaida Koriman; suddenly out of favor, Ezhov retreated from view and his wife sought treatment for nervous depression.<sup>74</sup> He tendered his resignation at the end of November and was arrested the following April; 700,000 people had been shot and 1.5 million arrested under his order.<sup>75</sup>

At the height of the Terror, the chaos resulting from violence directed at the population and at the regime itself precipitated a breakdown of the party-state's self-representation. The state censorship bureau, Glavlit, headed since 1935 by *Food Industry's* chief editor Sergei Ingulov, controlled what could come to press, while also remaining responsible for printed matter that was already in circulation. This meant recalling books so that text and images subject to censorship could be blacked out and distributing a list of banned materials to provincial presses, bookstores and libraries, accompanied by the proviso that "any portrait, statement or mention of any of the above-listed individuals is subject to seizure, whether photographic, lithographic, done in oil on wood, canvas or fabric; embossed on medals or tokens; or contained in photomontages or negatives on glass or celluloid."<sup>76</sup> With 70,000 libraries and reading rooms

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<sup>73</sup> Getty and Naumov, *Yezhov*, 9-12.

<sup>74</sup> Jansen and Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner*, 168. Ezhova died of an intentional drug overdose shortly after.

<sup>75</sup> Getty and Naumov, *Yezhov*, 10-12. Under Beria, NKVD repression continued under legal channels.

<sup>76</sup> Ingulov's rise to the head of Glavlit is noted by Herman Ermolaev in *Censorship in Soviet Literature, 1917-1991* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 56. Glavlit's legal language is quoted in Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis, op. cit.*, 148. Brandenberger notes that Lissitzky's 1934 album *Workers and Peasants Red Army* was withdrawn from circulation after the purge of the Red Army.



to regulate amidst wave after wave of purges, Glavlit soon lost control of the officially sanctioned image: not only did local officials preemptively purge their collections of anything they regarded as suspicious, Glavlit's own bulletin tried to regulate circulation through a list of arrested authors rather than an analysis of ideological content, unwittingly disseminating partial facsimiles of the purge lists in the process. In December 1937, Glavlit itself was purged, and Ingulov arrested.<sup>77</sup>

In the context of such rampant destruction, the *Food Industry* album's claim to transparency and veracity became decidedly more ambivalent. I suggested above that Lissitzky may have initially viewed the album's opening *démontage* as something of a private joke, but by the time the work was in circulation such an attitude was surely impossible. As the copy of the album in the collection of the Harvard University Libraries testifies, *Food Industry* was also subject to the intervention of the censor's mark. By the time the reader encounters the film camera recording Mikoian's address to the Central Executive Committee, she has already paged through the album's ruined ceremonial prologue, witnessing the Terror's effects on the highest rungs of the party (fig. 5.14). A two page spread later in the album encapsulates the extreme dissonance of the period's violent repression and discourse of plenty. At one time, the image showed Mikoian, Nikita Krushchev and Natalia Sats celebrating the success of a marketing venture created by Sats that used Pushkin's poems on the packaging of chocolates.<sup>78</sup> On the facing page, an abundance of sweets tumbling toward the viewer seems to overflow the page. Sats's face is blacked out, subjected to the regime's imposed repetition and redistribution of

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 149-50. Ingulov's arrest and execution the following year is recorded in Ludmilla Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-1940* (London: Routledge, 2007), 207.

<sup>78</sup> Sats was director of the Moscow Children's Theater and wife of the Commissar of Trade, Israel Veitser. On the marketing scheme, see Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 46.

violence at the level of the image (fig. 5.15). Had Lissitzky possessed a copy of his work, he himself would have been forced to enact this ritual disfiguration.

That Lissitzky and Küppers survived the ordeal of the Terror calls for some comment. The extraordinary contingency of Lissitzky's connection to two consecutive heads of the NKVD prior to their appointments, although clearly not without significance, does not by itself account for this fact. No one short of Stalin was wholly immune to the effects of the Terror, though each was exposed differently. The most brutal repression by far was meted out to the peasantry, but among the intelligentsia, journalists were more vulnerable than artists.<sup>79</sup> A missing page in Lissitzky's correspondence with Küppers from the summer of 1935 testifies to the instability of this distinction, itself subjected to much pressure by the avant-garde over the course of the 1920s, and to the politically volatile afterlife of the couple's work on *Food Industry*. On June 28, 1935 he wrote to Küppers,

I'm sitting in the deck chair and have considered your order to do the Lenin intermission volume. Once again, I have no idea what or how many photos you have, but I believe that what I'm proposing can hold the material. Only in the process an idea (with Stalin) that the editors [missing manuscript material] possible that everything should have something fresher.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> J. Arch Getty and William Chase, "Patterns of repression among the Soviet elite in the late 1930s: A biographical approach" in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, 225-47. Getty and Chase analyze 898 members of the elite for whom sufficient background information is available; of their sample, 47.6% of those employed in journalism were purged, as compared with 60.6% in economic administration and 12% in the "creative intelligentsia" (238). By contrast, the data presented in Sheila Fitzpatrick's essay on "The impact of the Great Purges on Soviet elites" in the same volume, which does not separate journalists from the creative intelligentsia, shows a 17% rate of disappearance (253). The different samples and methods of these papers should be born in mind when considering this comparison of their findings.

<sup>80</sup> "Sitze im Liegestuhle und habe überlegt dein Auftrag: das Lenin antrakt Heft zu machen. Wieder habe ich keine Ahnung was und wieviel Fotos du dazu hast, aber ich glaube das was ich vorschlage kann das Material fassen. Nur ist dabei eine Idee (mit Stalin) die die Redaktion...sehr das möglich alles soll etwas frischeres haben." El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, 28 June 1935. GRI special collections item 950076, box 1, folder 5. This letter has been published in an abridged form in *Proun und Wolkenbügel*, 144-62.

The absence at the heart of this letter constitutes a final horizon for interpreting Lissitzky's work, for it sets in relief the sheer fact of the existing evidence's survival. The countless questions that can be raised regarding the status of this breach—what is lost, whether it's destruction was intentional, at what point it occurred, what effect it has on our ability to interpret the remaining correspondence in relation to this or that patron or to official discourse as a whole—cannot be answered without effacing the boundaries of the archive itself. For interpretation, such questions are intractable; in them, interpretation itself runs aground.

Writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Hegel called death amid the Terror “the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.”<sup>81</sup> Yet in Hegel's account, wisdom prevails over terror: in death, the abstract form of self-consciousness recognizes its true universality, aligning individual and universal in the birth of a moral subject. Were this not the case, Hegel conjectured, the terror itself, and the meaningless, abstract form of death produced by it, would necessarily recur.<sup>82</sup> It has been suggested, provocatively but perhaps not unreasonably, that the Stalinist Terror was itself such a repetition.<sup>83</sup>

Still, in the absence of the wisdom that Hegel saw born of suffering, the problem of survival remains. That Lissitzky lived to die from a disease he had endured since 1923 is a fact that must be acknowledged by any account of the artist's life and work. Writing the first biography of her late husband in the mid-1960s, Küppers herself noted only that Lissitzky passed the latter part of 1936 in the hospital, recovering from an operation, which, as I suggested above,

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<sup>81</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 360.

<sup>82</sup> “Spirit would have to traverse anew and continually repeat this cycle of necessity if the result were only the complete interpenetration of self-consciousness and substance.” *Ibid.*, 361-62.

<sup>83</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 167.

was probably arranged by Ezhova. “After initially successful attempts to extract the pus from his chest cavity through hollow needles,” Küppers recounts,

this treatment had to be abandoned when a high fever set in again. It was essential to insert a tube between his ribs which would drain the pus out of his body. This, however, meant that Lissitzky carried a wound with which he had to live and work for the remainder of his life.<sup>84</sup>

Like much of Küppers’ text, this trope remains firmly within the conventions of socialist realism. As Lilya Kaganovsky has shown, the discourse of socialist realist heroism “produces a mangled or mutilated (male) body as frequently as it produces a hyperbolically healthy and strong Stalinist man.”<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, Küppers use of it here possesses an explicitly allegorical dimension, in which Lissitzky’s body stands not just for Soviet masculinity but for the social body at large. In this sense, it testifies to the trauma of the Terror and the shame of survival that both Lissitzky and Küppers carried with them, a wound that would and perhaps should not close.

The photographic albums Lissitzky and Küppers produced under the second Five-Year-Plan represent the height of the couple’s optimistic collaboration with the Stalin regime. Like the social relations that made them possible, the albums themselves were utterly unprecedented: a new kind of luxury object that remains absolutely banal, tied to a vision of future abundance that nevertheless commemorates only the occasion of its production. The albums Lissitzky and Küppers produced during these years were an exclusively domestic product, developing with the managerial class of the Soviet elite and seeking to satisfy its tastes, but they emerged from the international standards Lissitzky had helped to institute at *USSR in Construction*. This class continued to grow more secure in its dominance even after the Great Terror and the production

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<sup>84</sup> Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, 99.

<sup>85</sup> Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man was Unmade: Cultural Subjectivity and Male Fantasy under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 22.

of commemorative photographic albums continued apace, but Lissitzky and Küppers no longer participated in its collective dream in the same fashion. Their community—the artists, writers, directors and filmmakers who they called friends—was destroyed in the Terror by the patrons who offered them protection. Although Lissitzky continued to work for the Food Industry itself, designing advertisements for its products on at least two occasions, *Food Industry* represents the last ambitious print project of his career.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Two contracts with *Soiuzpishchepromreklam* (Union Food Industry Advertising) dated 1939, one for a mural devoted to ketchup and the other for advertising stands, are preserved among Lissitzky's papers. RGALI fond 2361, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 27-28 and 31-32.

## Conclusion

This study has attempted to show that attending to El Lissitzky's print production grants the artist's career a consistency and legibility that it has long been regarded as lacking. In both word and deed, Lissitzky's engagement with a range of techniques and formats of printed matter was manifest and enduring. This domain of activity is not a curiosity in the artist's oeuvre, as it can seem if Lissitzky is esteemed primarily as a painter, nor does it become one if he is treated as an architect. Rather, print provided Lissitzky the ability to practice architecture by other means when material resources were lacking and to expand the architect's vocation and audience when they were available. To say that Lissitzky's career has consistency is not to deny its continual contact with, and occasional subjection to, external factors. In fact, from the point of view of architecture, which in many respects remained Lissitzky's constant preoccupation in the two most active decades of his career, print itself represented an external factor and at the same time a condition of possibility. Neither print nor its effects can be judged uniform, as a cursory review of the many techniques and formats of printed matter with which Lissitzky was engaged shows. In spite of this innate multiplicity, two notable forces have structured the developments presented in the preceding chapters.

The first factor is photomechanical reproduction, in the form of photography and film. These technologies have long been recognized within the field of art history as pivotal in the transformation of the avant-garde during the 1920s, a view largely borne out by this study. Early

in the decade, photography and film were recognized by Lissitzky and others as enabling the avant-garde's activities by relieving the pressures of naturalism and representation, thereby accelerating the process of free experimentation with purely plastic means.<sup>1</sup> Embraced voluntarily, these media also supported the continuation of the same experimental activities previously developed in painting, albeit not without the intervention of certain peculiarities of the material. Following the precedent of photomontage, avant-garde photography developed either the medium's mechanized production of reality-fragments, as Rodchenko and others did in turning to the snapshot, or its plastic potential and manipulability, as Lissitzky did, following Anton Giulio Bragaglia and Man Ray. The struggle against representation in photography continued in the terms developed in painting, although unlike painting, in which representation was manifested through skilled construction, photography presented representation as material, with the two never completely separable. Thus, while the shift to photomechanical reproduction has been convincingly interpreted as both a terminus and a logical development within the avant-garde, this study has argued that it effected a displacement and mutation of a set of devices rooted in both discursive and material bases. The nonsynchronous transformation of this heterogeneous foundation reveals itself in the patterns of splitting, doubling and repeating that occur in both specific works and the discourse surrounding them: for Rodchenko this took the form of an appeal to "easel photography," for Lissitzky, to "photo-painting."<sup>2</sup>

The second factor is the state. Both directly and indirectly, the Soviet state's developing power to regulate public education, the press, and the economy, and to legally exercise violence, shaped the arc of Lissitzky's career. The publishing activities of UNOVIS, whose heterogeneous

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<sup>1</sup> El Lissitzky, "Preodolenie iskusstva," *Eksperiment/Experiment* vol. 5 (1999): 139.

<sup>2</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Predosterezhenie," *Novyi lef* 11 (1928): 36-37. Trans. John Bowlt as "A Caution" in Christopher Philips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Aperture, 1989), 264-66.

and improvised materials bear a certain likeness to the *samizdat* of the post-WWII period, nevertheless took place in a political environment that lacked a centralized censorship body. Similarly, the Prouns' attempt to redirect the energies of avant-garde painting into architecture unfolded in a context in which the licensing of architects was no longer regulated by the state.<sup>3</sup> As a member of UNOVIS, Lissitzky's positions on the Bolshevik regime and Marxist thinking in general were eccentric yet affirmative: he could openly criticize the labor theory of value from a left-utopian position, as long as he did so as a gesture of solidarity with the project of communism. After the institution of the censorship organ Glavlit in 1922 and its circulation of a bulletin on unofficial publications to party leaders from 1923, pamphleteering of the kind UNOVIS engaged in became impossible.<sup>4</sup> Lissitzky was working abroad by this time, but the same relationship reappears in *For the Voice*—a book published under the imprint of the State Publishing House on the whim of its author, and for that reason unavailable in the USSR for years after its publication. When Lissitzky returned to the Soviet Union, official censorship was fully operational, as he learned when his photomontage for *Izvestiia ASNOVA*—hardly a dissenting utterance, but certainly a cryptic one—was prevented from going to press in its intended form. Such explicit censorship only occurred at one other moment in Lissitzky's career: at the height of the Great Terror. In the intervening decade, Lissitzky worked primarily on official commissions, merging his own perspective with that of the state.

The coincidence of organized state violence and open censorship in the Soviet Union that came to a head in the Great Terror has furnished us with an enduring image of totalitarianism, and of twentieth century state power more generally, as a purely repressive phenomenon.

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<sup>3</sup> El Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, trans. Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Finkel, *On the Ideological Front: The Russian Intelligentsia and the Making of the Soviet Public Sphere* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 148-49.



Historians of the Soviet Union have challenged the binary opposition of freedom and repression on the basis of Michel Foucault's critique of "the repressive hypothesis," tracing the myriad ways in which Soviet power accommodated and shaped a population that it never fully controlled.<sup>5</sup> The Bolsheviks employed violent repression as a normal means of governance in a manner whose particularity must be acknowledged, but they also produced a modern welfare state akin to those of the West.<sup>6</sup> And as in the West, Soviet censorship was a formative rather than purely repressive phenomenon. It encompassed a range of functions, from self-imposed or social regulation to the state's tutelary or repressive actions, distinctions between which were not always clear.<sup>7</sup> Lissitzky's 1931 lecture at the Moscow Polygraphics Institute was built on a careful adaptation of the party line, but still provoked intense disagreement in an audience anticipating punitive action from the Bolshevik party-state. By the time of this dispute, Lissitzky's success in high-profile exhibition designs executed on state commissions had proven his facility with official language, and he was confident enough in his understanding to correct the misprision of his audience. Indeed, this study has argued that Lissitzky's fluency in the official idiom, far from extinguishing his private life, allowed it to flourish. The censor, with whom Lissitzky worked side by side in his final years, must be regarded as a productive rather than a repressive agent within the artist's oeuvre from 1928 onward.

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis occurs in his *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990). His concept of power has been developed in a Soviet context by Stephen Kotkin, *The Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The project of state building has been identified by Yorham Gorlizki and Hans Mommsen as a principal feature distinguishing Bolshevik and Nazi regimes in their contribution to Sheila Fitzpatrick and Michael Geyer, eds. *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 41-87.

<sup>7</sup> On the problems of censorship in the wake of Foucault's critique of repression, see Robert C. Post, ed., *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998).

At the intersection of the social, technological and material factors brought together in this study lies not a consciousness but the pattern of its empirical modifications that constitute a mindset or attitude. The overall set of these modifications includes the operation of bracketing from which the phenomenological subject of pure consciousness emerges, but the latter remains only one possibility (if a highly refined one) among others and bound to them by its inevitable return to language and the lifeworld. As the subject of this study, Lissitzky appears less as a center than a fugitive presence in a field of subjectification, emerging most clearly in frustrations, recalibrations, failures, jokes and unfulfilled projects. The aim of the preceding chapters has been to track that subject in its production by attending to its perennial support, paper. This has entailed not only a sustained examination of the artist's considerable printed oeuvre, but also a parallel account of the archive of letters, written after 1923 primarily to his partner Sophie Küppers, through whose labor Lissitzky's voice has been produced.

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