

EL LISSITZKY

1890–1941

Catalogue for an Exhibition of
Selected Works from North American Collections,
the Sprengel Museum Hanover
and the Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle

Harvard University Art Museums
Busch-Reisinger Museum

Three Essays by El Lissitzky

Lissitzky owes much of his stature and reputation to his prolific writing. He published substantial pieces on the full range of his activities, often providing striking and succinct formulations of avant-garde tenets. Their widespread dissemination in the myriad little magazines of the 1920s and in later compendia has guaranteed them influence and respect. As Lissitzky is often valued as much for his role as a conduit of information and ideas between individuals, groups and countries as for his own creative accomplishments, both his theoretical and journalistic essays seem central to his career. Lissitzky-Küppers 1977 and 1980 collect most of these texts (though in translations and transcriptions of widely varying accuracy).¹

For this catalogue, three essays have been chosen which pertain to the major concentrations of the exhibition, and which have hitherto not been available in English. (Indeed, the first two selections have not previously been published in any Western European language.) One essay covers an aspect of Lissitzky's involvement with the Jewish revival in the years 1916–1919, the second gives a flavour of the thinking behind his *Prouns* while the third presents some of his ideas on the future of book design and typography. These translations alone cannot of course be a full substitute for reading Lissitzky's other formulations on these topics (formulations which differ greatly in style, though less in substance, from those offered here). Furthermore, there is no essay here to represent the large body of writing about matters architectural. More information on the context and history of Lissitzky's ideas is given in the introductory essay in this catalogue.

It is worth noting that the rhetoric, imagery and tone of this artist's writings are likely to be as revealing as the literal content and argument. There is little hope that a fully coherent, logical system of thought (or 'philosophy') can be derived from Lissitzky's written pronouncements. This is, of course, true of almost any artist, but perhaps especially so of Lissitzky. Such coherence would have run counter to his fundamental temperament, which happily preferred the risk and ambiguity of action to the demands of abstract ratiocination. In light of the fact that a large part of

Lissitzky's reflections on the nature of his art may be very heavily dependent on the ideas (and often the words) of others, it is maybe in the poetic aspects of his language that we should look for information about his underlying concerns.

The first article is Lissitzky's reminiscences of his study trip, probably in 1916, to the synagogue in Mohilev, first published in the Berlin journal *Milgroim* no. 3 (1923), pp. 9–13. (Lissitzky's essay also appeared in the simultaneous Hebrew edition of the same journal, *Rimon*.) Lissitzky did not give his full name in publishing this memoir, which clearly refers to a period of his life and creative interests that he considered past and problematic. He is at pains to evaluate Jewish national culture, as he experienced it at Mohilev, in terms that make sense to him after his conversion to Malevichian abstraction. He stresses the international parallels to the Jewish search for folk-art, the transmission of images and ideas across borders via printed texts (which he sees as functionally equivalent to European avant-garde art magazines), and the necessity for an unselfconscious approach to art. Otherwise, he reports on the synagogue almost entirely with reference to his current concerns for architecture, colour and creativity. Some passages read as if Lissitzky were heavily criticising himself for his involvement in an artificial revival of Jewish art.

The text published here is an extensively revised version of Louis Lozowick's manuscript translation, now in the Archives of American Art (roll 1336, frames 2398–2406). Lissitzky's drawings of the synagogue decorations, as published and captioned in the journal, are reproduced here. (The originals are in the collection of Boris and Lisa Aronson.)

Also translated from the Yiddish is the essay 'The Conquest of Art,' originally published in early 1922 in the Warsaw literary-cultural journal *Ringen* [Links] no. 10, pp. 32–34. The essay was presumably written or delivered during Lissitzky's brief stay in Warsaw on his way westwards to Berlin in late 1921, when he also designed a number of book-covers and perhaps prompted second editions of

earlier Yiddish illustrations (cf. Typ. Cat. 1922/1–3, etc.). *Ringens*, edited by Mikhail Vaykhert and Alter Katsizne, gathered a group of young and prolific Yiddish poets, writers and artists, deeply influenced by both Expressionism and the Bolshevik Revolution. They included Peretz Markish, Uri-Tsvi Gribberg, Melekh Ravitsh and Moyshe Broderzon, whose *Sikhes Khulin* Lissitzky had illustrated in 1917 (Typ. Cat. 1917/1).

As an exposition of Lissitzky's view of the development of modern art and the role of his own work within that development, the essay obviously shares much with other versions of Lissitzky's writings on *Proun*. However, the ecstatic, almost expressionist air that pervades this text (appropriate for the creative climate in which it saw the light of day) distinguishes it from the more measured, more restrained later versions (notably the most quoted appearance, as edited by Max Burchartz and Theo van Doesburg for *De Stijl*).² It is probably best placed as a condensed redaction of the version presented in Moscow in autumn 1921,³ merged with some of the art-historical genealogy which was also used for Lissitzky's lecture on 'New Russian Art' (1923).

Some of the formulations have defied interpretation and no attempt has been made to mitigate the bewilderment such passages produce. The text consistently renders *Proun* as Proup (with one Prout); this has been corrected throughout.⁴

The third text is the report in *Brigada khudozhnikov* no. 4 (1931), p. 23, of El Lissitzky's contribution to a series of lectures and discussions organised by the House of the Press [Dom Pechati] in Moscow on the subject of mastering technology in the printing, paper and typographic industries.⁵ Speakers included Aleksei Gan and S. B. Telingater, among others. While this is clearly not a verbatim record of Lissitzky's remarks, it is valuable as an account of his concerns in book design and typography at the time. It is important for the stress on the cover, on asymmetry and on experimentation in general.⁶ The reference to the filmic character of the future book shows that Lissitzky was once more reviving his earlier principles, as expounded in writings on typography from the mid-twenties.⁷ In some of his subsequent typographical work of the 1930s, Lissitzky tried to reapply his notions of the book as a dynamic whole, not limited by format or tradition, but built on cinematographic and painterly considerations of changing narrative, variable textures and visual impact. That this was attempted on material that was overtly propagandistic (and Stalinist) has tended to obscure certain continuities in Lissitzky's practice.

Notes

¹ It should also be noted that these two collections are by no means complete. The present catalogue cites several uncollected essays, and others will surely emerge. More seriously, the collections include some items that are not by Lissitzky: these range from the passages copied from other authors (notably many paragraphs of the 'Thoughts on Art' from Lissitzky-Küppers 1977 p. 13f.) to the editorial for *Veshch. Objet. Gegenstand* no. 1–2, translated in Lissitzky-Küppers 1980, p. 344f. Though traditionally given to Lissitzky (who no doubt agreed with the content), this article was written by his co-editor Ilia Erenburg (Landau 1966, p. 293, n. 4). A full bibliography of Lissitzky's writings is yet to be undertaken, though Birnholz 1973a, pp. 442–446, lays the groundwork.

² *De Stijl* vol. V no. 6 (June 1922), pp. 81–85. Lissitzky-Küppers 1980, p. 347f. That van Doesburg and Burchartz (one of van Doesburg's followers in Weimar) had considerable influence on the final wording of this translation is shown by Lissitzky's letter of July 16, 1922 to van Doesburg, commenting on proposed formulations (DVR).

³ It has not been possible to locate the original manuscript for this version, presumably the text given as a lecture at Inkhuk in September 1921 and also intended for publication together with the first portfolio of lithographs. From virtually identical transcripts, it has been translated into Italian (Quilici 1967, pp. 92–103), French (Levinger 1979, pp. 197–215), German (Lissitzky-Küppers 1977, pp. 21–34) and English (Cologne 1976, pp. 59–72). Some of these versions include the claim (derived from an unclear notation on one transcript) that this lecture was read to Inkhuk in October 1924. Given Lissitzky's residence in Switzerland at that time, this is clearly a mistake. The autumn 1921 date is more likely (especially as sections of the lecture derive in large part from the writings of Oswald Spengler, which had absorbed Lissitzky in 1920–1921).

⁴ The translation is by Michael Steinlauf, Brandeis University.

⁵ The text has previously only been translated into German, in extract in Gassner 1979, pp. 213–214, and in full in Lissitzky-Küppers 1977, pp. 194–196.

⁶ Lissitzky's cover design for this very issue of the journal exemplifies some of the recommendations of his lecture. See Cat. Typ. 1931/1.

⁷ See especially the articles 'Topography of Typography' (1923) and 'typographical facts, e.g.' (1925), both translated in Lissitzky-Küppers 1980, p. 359.

The Mohilev Synagogue Reminiscences (1923)

It was sometime between 19... and 1916. By the calendar, not so very long ago, and yet it seems like ages ago.

A few pioneering Jewish artists carried their craft to the eastern border of the Pale; that is to say, they discovered that if you put pencil or charcoal to paper or brush and paint to canvas, the result was a picture. And the youth began to play the artist. Groups sprang into existence, the groups formed 'schools' and above all were – problems.

A generation of *heder* boys, whose education fell short of talmudic studies, was nonetheless saturated with the acidity of analysis.

And we, who had just barely learned how to handle pencil or brush, began to anatomize not only nature around us, but ourselves as well. Who really are we? What is our place among nations? And what is our culture? What should be the nature of our art? All this activity began in several *shtetlekh* of Lithuania, White Russia and the Ukraine, and continued on to Paris. And this movement met its end, not its beginning as we thought at the time, in Moscow at the 'First Exhibition of Jewish Artists in 1916.'

Searching for our identity, for the character of our times we attempted to look into old mirrors and tried to root ourselves in so-called "folk-art." Almost all the other nations of our time followed a similar path.

And therein you have the logical explanation of why I set out one summer to go "among the people." Ryback accompanied me.

Stories circulated about the synagogue of Mohilev and we set out in that direction. First we stopped in Kapust. We were told that the synagogue of Kapust is of the same type as that of Mohilev and that it was decorated by the same craftsman. But all we found in Kapust were heaps of cinders and some charred bricks from the foundation. A few rotting beams had been designated for the construction of a new synagogue to replace the old one that had burned down. The town in its entirety had been levelled by fire and no trace remained of its antiquities.

We continued on our journey until we arrived in Mohilev. From the distance of the Dniepr we saw a tall black structure, moderate in size, resembling a granary – a synagogue. But it appeared to be in the outskirts of town and could not be *that* synagogue. We reached the shore and headed into town. We were directed to some "beautiful" stone synagogues with boudoir lamps and freshly painted cornices and panels in the style of a provincial movie palace.

A couple of hours later we found it. The synagogue was on the shore of the Dniepr, but sat in a "basin", and was therefore hidden from view. This was truly remarkable: synagogues were always built so that they would dominate the surrounding valleys. Such was the case in Druja, in Dubrowna and other *shtetlekh*. The synagogue in its entire massiveness and in particular its roof gave the town its characteristic profile in much the same way as castles and cathedrals identified European cities.

The style of the Mohilev synagogue (simple, clearcut, I would say, classical) resembled Christian basilicas: a prominent central nave with windows on top and two low aisles to the north and south. But as distinct from Christian churches, the aisles are not open but entirely set off from the center which is reserved for men. The women's section is in the aisles; only a small aperture up high connects them with the men. This is in the old tradition. Such an aperture enabled us to view the decorations in the oldest synagogue in Germany (XIII c.) in Worms. There too the men's and women's sections are on the same level with only a small window in the wall separating the two. A woman posted at this window would follow the cantor and the other women repeated after her. A tombstone in the Worms cemetery (XIV c.) identifies such a lectress.

Galleries for women are a more recent device. Now there is a gallery for women in Mohilev too, and the aisles have new tenants. One of them is occupied by a beadle, a wood-turner who with his wood-shavings and little stove will surely set the synagogue ablaze some day. The other aisle houses a *heder*. But the character of the structure is

determined by the central nave with its the vaulted ceiling and adjoining wings with their steep roofs and tiny windows.

The synagogue is closed midday. We found the beadle who opened it for us. No – the surprise I felt was utterly different from the surprise I experienced on my first visits to the Romanesque basilicas, the Gothic chapels, or the Baroque German, Italian, and French churches. Perhaps when a child awakens in a cradle protected by netting on which insects and butterflies have settled and the whole is bathed in sunlight – perhaps his feeling might be akin to ours.

The walls are of solid oak wooden beams, which ring out when you knock on them. Above the walls a vaulted ceiling of wooden rafters resembled a tent whose connective seams are visible. No disguises, no frills. The work of the carpenter is in full view but the painter has done his work so skilfully with the aid of just a few simple colours, that a whole great world comes to life, blossoms forth and fills this small cube.

The entire interior space of the synagogue is decorated beginning with the backs of benches which extend along the length of the wall, up to the very top of the building. The synagogue has a square ground plan which passes into an octagonal vault closely resembling a skull-cap. The transition between the square and the octagon is achieved by triangular pendentives. The walls and the ceiling are articulated with a powerful sense of composition. This is the very opposite of the primitive; it is the product of great culture. What is its origin? On an inscription full of restrained enthusiasm, the master of this work, Segal says: "Many years have I wandered about this living world . . ."

It is told that he decorated three synagogues, in Mohilev, Kapust and Dolhinov (another place is also mentioned). When his work was complete, he fell from his scaffold and died. This is a story that every *shtetl* claims for itself; the people of Mohilev claim that he died in Mohilev, the people of Kapust that he died in Kapust, the people of Dolhinov, the same. The last two synagogues were destroyed by fire, that of Dolhinov a long time ago. My father used to tell me that he remembered having seen at Dolhinov an enormous fresco depicting the burial of Jacob, which included horses, coaches, the sons of Jacob, Egyptians, etc. We cannot verify this testimony to-day, but the story is typical in its evaluation of the painter. So great was his work that to have remained alive would have only diminished his stature. His life work done, his soul no longer had any reason to remain in his body.

The focal point of the entire decorative scheme is the vault. At the western entrance stand two gigantic lions and behind them two peacocks. The lions hold two inscribed tablets, the lower of which is dedicated to the master himself. The three north and the three south panels feature a frieze, unfolding scenes of creatures who devour and other creatures who are being devoured. On the earth below, water and in the sky above, stars burst into flowers. In the waters fish are snatched up by birds. On the ground a fox carries a bird in its mouth. A bear climbs a tree for honey. Birds carry snakes in their bills. All these running and flying animals are humans. Under their quadruped or feathered disguises they peer with human eyes. This is a striking feature of Jewish folk-art. Doesn't that lion's head in the Zodiac of the synagogue resemble the face of a rabbi?

Above the frieze an enormous ornamental plant fans out in a ring around the entire vault. Higher still there is a circle of cartouches of an oriental, I might say, a Moorish style, and within the circle an intricate rope design reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's engraving for his Academy. I recall having seen a similar design on the ceiling of a castello also attributed to da Vinci.

Lined up above that are the signs of the Zodiac, twelve compositions within circles linked together as an integral whole. This painting of the Zodiac is quite original and in some of its aspects laconic and powerful. So for example Sagittarius is represented by only two hands: one hand holds



Ship



With the Inscription of the Artist.
West Side

the bow, the other pulls taut the string. This is the "powerful arm," the "avenging hand" of the Bible. And above this at the apex of the "skull-cap" a three-headed eagle, an amalgam of the Russian and the Polish eagles.

In the east, above the Holy Ark, lions again, but here they hold up the Tablets of the Law. Suspended beneath them is a large curtain draping the Ark. On the north side of the Ark a panel depicts a bewitched city engulfed by a dragon and next to it, the Tree of Life; on the north-west side, Jerusalem and the Tree of Knowledge.

Of the triangular pendentives that mask the transition between the vault and the walls, the one on the north-west has the Behemoth, the one on the north-east, a wild goat; on the south-east, the Leviathan; on the south-west, an elephant with a saddle on its back.

On the walls, tablets with inscriptions, pictures of holy vessels from Solomon's Temple, ornaments and all manner of living creatures. The artist's treasure-trove of formal invention is inexhaustible. One can see how everything flows as from a horn of plenty and how the hand of the virtuoso never flags but maintains a steady pace of creativity. On the back of the Ark I discovered the first sketch done with a brush, which served as a basis for the entire decorative scheme and the subsequent colour organisation. This outline was drawn by a master of vast accumulated experience whose brush is completely controlled by his will.

The general colour scheme is pearly-amber with scattered red brick flecks. It lives and breathes according to the prevailing light. The windows are high in all the four walls. As the sun moves round hour after hour, it casts a continually changing light on the decoration, which is particularly striking on the ascending portion of the vault. This endows the whole with a continuously varying play.

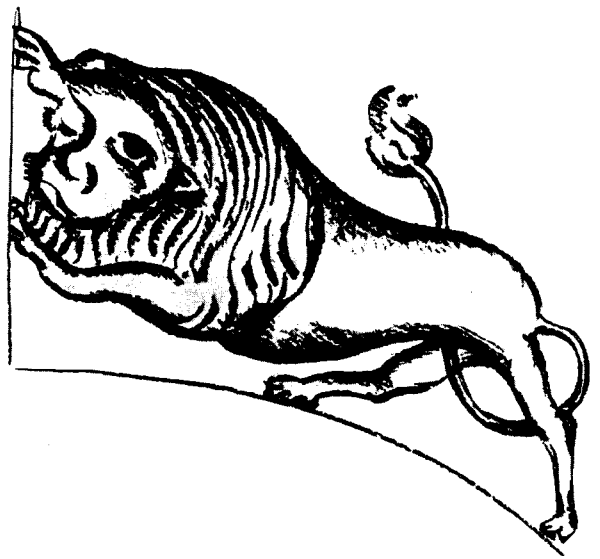


Despite its transparency the painting is quite dense. Ochre, lead white, vermillion, green give the impression of weight, though less noticeably in the cooler tones of blue and violet.

But what is the origin of this spring? Where did this cloud drink to pour forth such a wonderful rain?

Let the scholars flounder as they navigate the sea of art history. I can only cite the following from my own field of observation. Every synagogue always had a small library. The cases hold some of the oldest editions of the Talmud and other religious texts, each with frontispieces, decorative devices and tailpieces. These few pages fulfilled the same function in their time as illustrated journals do in our own day: they familiarised everyone with the art trends of the period. I once saw a tombstone with the following bas-relief: a bear standing on his hind legs holding a flowering acanthus ornament. In a heap of loose pages from Amsterdam editions of the 16th and 17th centuries, preserved (in a *genizah*) in the Druja synagogue, I saw a drawing of this very motif. There can be no doubt that the sculptor of that bas-relief borrowed from that same tailpiece.

Another example: the carving and entire composition of the many tiered Arks will be found in the Renaissance and Baroque frontispieces of Jewish religious texts. These



Lion

frontispieces served as models for the Jewish carver just as the works of Villon and Palladio served the architects.

There still remains the question of the national character of these paintings. We leave that to the psychologists and the ethnographers. We want to point out



View of Worms, North East Side

however that the kinship of the work, displayed so generously on the walls and the ceiling of the Mohilev synagogue, with the contemporary styles employed by other nations should force us to give serious thought to the matter. The Italian Fiaroventi built the Uspensky Cathedral inside the Kremlin while his compatriot Aloisio built the Kremlin itself. It was the Phoenician Hyram who built the Temple of Solomon. Such examples are endless.

Today, when the mark of a cultured people is its printed literature, magazines, newspapers, its own theatre, art, music, etc., we too may be considered a cultured people. All that we lack is a distinguished genealogy. If that is the sole reason that we crawl back through our past and if this explains our concern with "folk-creativity," then it were better to do without such culture. Not necessary.

And today when the technique of reproduction is so highly developed and the presses work with such speed, if this trend gains wide dissemination and infects some would-be artists who pick up this once genuine folk-expression and take to stylising, it, and powdering it, and splitting it into bits and pieces and then present this hodge-podge as a new art and culture – then it were better to do without such culture. Not necessary.

That which is called art is created when one is least conscious of creating it. Only then does it remain a monument of culture. Today art is being created by those who fight against it.

To us the living dog is more precious than the dead lion. We know that when the dog dies he becomes a lion.

Lion. A Zodiacal Sign



The Conquest of Art (1922)

"All art is mortal, not just individual works, but art in its totality. A day will come when a portrait by Rembrandt will wither – the painted canvas will be whole, but the eye which responds to that very language of forms will vanish."

Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*

"We leave behind us rainbows of our traces, in the awareness of new floods."

I

Mouldering minds with blind eyes stand amidst the storm which rages around modern art, and cry: "The world of beauty is going under! The world of beauty is going under!" What they see in modern art seems wild and absurd to them. But why don't they judge so charitably the doings of modern science, of modern technology – for here the revolutions are more profound, more powerful! They want to encompass and comprehend the results of a thousand-year growth in one second, and if the artist requires an effort of two or three seconds, then a savage outcry and agitation begins, and dead dogs and living lions rush together into a single heap.

To all those who wish to respond to the new art, we say that it is not enough to stare at it with one's eyes; one's whole head must be turned in a *different* direction. *Cézanne* led the artist out of the life-cinema, where he had sat by a little crevice, searched out moon-love [and] roses, leavened with his own temperament and baked little pictures. They would then be exhibited and later sold to become icons of sentimental feeling for sympathetic bachelors, mild young ladies, upstanding fathers and genteel mothers. *Cézanne* discovered the essence of the painter, the man through whom a stream of colours flow, who channels this seething river and gives it form. *Cézanne* approached the canvas like a field which one tears open, fertilizes, sows, and then cultivates one's painterly fruit. True, *Cézanne* still believed in the art enshrouded by museum roofs, but with his creation he himself freed us from it. And we saw him standing by his work-bench with a stream of burning colour in him, with a heart that beat in time, with hand poised to move the brush – but at the moment when the fruit should have dropped from

his creative womb, the dead water of reason would flood him, and the still-born would be marinated in the little picture. This is where the green faces came from, the red trees and black clouds. The painter who had to give his colour, would use objects as canvasses, like mannequins, and hang upon them what rushed out of him. *Cézanne* too still painted *still-lives*, landscapes and people, but for him they were already only canvasses. The colour which runs through his skies, waters, lawns and faces is his.

II

Cubism began to shatter the foundations, began to shatter the *object*. The bottle was made in order to be drunk from. If the painter paints it, then we can't drink from the painted bottle. That is, the painter must have something different than the bottle. But what? Its colour, the quality of its material (texture), its form; and it is precisely *all this* that can be much more acutely expressed in paint when one assembles on the canvas all these elements not in the order required for drinking, but in that required for the picture, for its life, for painting. A world had been shattered. Its elements, gathered together, had begun to be assembled into a new painterly edifice of the straight, the curved, planes, extension, colour and textures. Painting had come into its own. The canvas became a symphony of *all* contrasts and a harmony of instruments, wood, brass, strings, of drums, bells and cymbals. The painter realised that he was terribly constrained by the paint manufacturer with the enslavement of his cubes [sic], that *every material has its painterly quality* and these must be brought directly onto the canvas. Thus labels, pieces of newspaper, bits of sand, chalk and so on appeared on the canvas. *The image as such began to be annihilated.*

III

Painting creates its own realm for its world. On the path to infinity from the Gothic, it has created its golden banner: Renaissance, perspective, impressionism, quivering paint-specks.

Cubism began to turn from the depth to the surface of the canvas and create its composition up against our eye. Tatlin in Russia walked this path. He began to create from material (wood, tin, cardboard) an artistic composition emerging in front of the plane of the canvas or board. But this was a localized-painterly approach [ortik-molerischer tsugang] for the eye, highlighted only by the tactile sense. The painter's unmediated working of the material *impregnated him with new goals*, he began to relate critically to his place in the creative collective and realised that the engineer, for example, was ahead of him; he discovers, he

creates the new in nature, but the artist – only what already exists. The artists, who had begun working with materials and raised edifices of cubist construction, believed they were creators, discoverers, materialists, that is, modern people. But they failed to notice that they remained old-fashioned romantics, because their approach to the material was the same as to paint, the *beauty* side, the aesthetic side. And just then, in Western Europe, where they had only heard about us, where they had still seen nothing of what had been created over the past seven years, they labelled this pure painterly movement with the name "instant art" [momentne kunst – surely an error for "machine art" – Ed.], a term we don't know how to understand; art which competes with machines, or describes machines, or builds machines. But regardless – on the path of conquest over art, this is one of the most significant milestones.

IV

In 1913 in Petersburg Kazimir *Malevich* exhibited a black square. A black square painted on white canvas. This was the foundation of *Suprematism*. What kind of world-view, of world-conception found its expression in *Suprematism*? The bearer of colourful whirlwinds, the artist – the painter cleared out of his winged path all the bases of things on which he had previously hung his colours. He gave colour independence, he made the painting *objectless* [onzah-klekh]. He went out to pure creation. The *Suprematists* said: as the flower, which is clearly coloured [and] distinctly defined, [which] mimics nothing and describes nothing except itself, grows out of the earth, so must the painting blossom out of the artist. The painting must not be a *reproduction*, but a *work*. The modernity of *Suprematism*, in distinction to *objectless* art (*Kandinsky's*, *Abstrakte Malerei* in Germany, *simultaneism* in France) emerged in its organisation and in its new painterly expression of space. *Suprematism* brought to its end the path to infinity, which went through perspective. It broke through the blue arch of heaven and escaped into white boundlessness. The *Suprematist* coloured masses swim like planets in white cosmic space. But thereby it raised the illusoriness of the painting to the maximum. It established in the place of beauty a different measure – economy.

V

Malevich believed that with the square he had taken painting to the end of its path, brought it to zero. But when we explored our subsequent works, we said: yes, the path of painterly culture has, narrowing, come to the square, but on the far side a new culture begins to blossom. Yes, we hail the

bold one who hurled himself into the abyss in order to rise from the dead in a new form. Yes, if the painterly line used to descend as . . . 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 until 0, then on the far side begins a new line 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, . . . and we realised that the new painting which grows out of us is no longer a picture. It describes nothing, but it *constructs* extensions, planes, lines for the purpose of creating a system of *new composition* of the real world. To this new edifice we gave a new name – *Proun*.

The name *Proun* signified for us that station on the path of creation of the new form which grows out of the earth which is fertilized with the dead bodies of the picture and the artist. The picture fell apart together with the old world which had created it for itself. The new world will not need little pictures. If it needs a mirror, it has the photograph and the cinema. In the new world the creator known as “artist” will *create* the world itself, and not *describe it*. *Proun* – this is the path which we will take to the *new composition*. If now science and the engineer arrive to create their *realities* through *mathematical tables*, through the design of *projects*, we don’t consider this the one categorical path. We believe more in the creative *intuition* which creates its own method and system *outside* mathematics and *outside* designs, but according to laws which are just as *organic* as the growth of the flower. *Proun* does not compose, but *constructs*. This is a fundamental *contrast* to the picture. *Composition* is a *discussion* in a given *plane* with many *variations*; *construction* is a confirmation of *one* for a given *necessity*. *Proun* does not have one axis which is perpendicular to the horizon, as in the picture. It is *constructed* and brought into balance in space, and as a structure one must walk around it to glance at it from below and explore it from above. The canvas has entered into motion. *Proun* is created from *material*, and not from any *aesthetic*. From the richest goldmine of colour we have taken the very purest vein of subjective [sic] quality. Yellow, green, blue – these are the blondes, brunettes and auburns in the spectrum. We don’t need the *individual*, but the *universal*. We have taken our colour from the range of black to white. And the contrast or agreement of two blacks, or two whites, or two between-black-and-whites, serves us as a contrast or agreement of two materials, like granite and wood, or iron and cement. Thus colour for us has become the *barometer of the material*.

VI

In exactly the same way as religion was conquered, just so do we now struggle with our new accomplishments for the conquest of art.

Far behind us is the time of the hunter who chased and trapped the beast, – he described it. Just as far behind us is

the time of the cultivator, the shepherd, who sat by his oven and *abstracted* nature, – he beautified it. We live in an epoch of reinforced concrete, a dynamic epoch, we don’t describe and we don’t beautify, we race and *create*. We leave behind on the one side the artist with his picture, and on the other the engineer with his project and go out to create in space and in time the elements of the first, second and third dimensions, in order to grow with all of nature according to the law of the world. And we are the steps of our movement, which is just as independent and just as incomprehensible as the path of the lunatic for whom all step aside in shame.

Do Not Separate Form from Content! (1931)

The next evening was devoted to Comrade *Lissitzky’s* lecture on the *DESIGN OF THE BOOK*.

The book, Comrade Lissitzky declared, is one of the documents of the culture of a given epoch. However, before it is read, it should create a certain impression. One should work on the quality of that impression.

Until the revolution, the cultivated, precious book for the elite, the “World of Art” circle, was in vogue, with its vignettes, head-pieces, richly decorated titles, elizabethan typefaces, its vellum and ivory-coloured paper.

Then there appeared the constructive book – black lines, circles, squares, photographs.

Today, the form of the book is *by no means determined solely by the sensibilities of taste*. Our formula is:

For whom + why + what = how

Technology offers the most colossal possibilities for design. Earlier, all illustrations were done as woodcuts. Now photomechanical methods are not only simplifying and shortening the process, they are also more persuasive and evident. The palette of the typographer has become significantly richer.

Mechanical typesetting seems to set difficult limits, but in fact allows us to achieve high quality. *It is in the area of children’s books that we have accomplished most*. Here we have found the form that corresponds to the content. The book is made active.

A few incidental words about standardisation. At our book exhibitions, the question of what, whither, why and for whom is not clear. Every book attempts to shout down its neighbour. Standardisation is not just necessary for dimensions but also for types. Standardisation as the selection of the best, the most essential. But the principle of "something unlike anything else" is only meaningful for laboratory work.

The old book was constructed for the ear, for silent reading, from left to right, from top to bottom. Now the book is a unity of acoustics and optics. This gives rise to a system of constructing a book, under which the author is an expert in printing technology and the technical editor must be an author. *The book must be the unified work of the author and the designer.* As long as this is not the case, splendid exteriors will constantly be produced for unimportant contents, and vice-versa.

Fundamental for the architecture of the book as a whole is *the typeface. Almost nothing is being done about this.* In Germany, a new typeface appeared virtually every week until the Depression. We, however, always have the same ones – academic, elizabethan, heavy, grotesque. The last is the simplest and therefore has the strangest name.

But we are in a peculiarly valuable position. We have peoples who until the Revolution had no written language of their own. Here we could find new ways.

The first external, formal sign of a book is the façade (cover – dustjacket). The dustjacket is essentially the book's poster, its advertisement. Under it lies the cover, then the title page. This could all be unified if one had good quality transparent material, then the title page could replace the cover. In the West they have such a material – Cellon (like Celluloid, but not flammable).

Once upon a time the book was a pile of boxes with clay fragments or bits of tree-bark. Now in the office sector, rationalisation is replacing the book with the card file, i. e. a box with cards. This principle could also be applied in publishing. For example: the poems of a still-living poet are being published. They are printed on cards, and every new poem he writes can easily be added. Comrade Lissitzky has seen a French typographic journal held together by a spiral spring, from which each page could be removed. Already in 1922 [sic], Lissitzky himself published 13 poems by Mayakovsky for the voice, where he used the principle of the index and every page was removable.

The next characteristic of the book, after the title page, is the page opening. Earlier one learnt: a page opening is a symmetrical thing, the margins likewise, the numbering, everything arranged around the axis of the book, according

to specific proportions. All these things are very relative. Now we often place a wide left margin on the left-hand page, and only paginate on odd-numbered pages.

The design of the book is beginning slowly to move from the type-set to the "assembled" [iz nabornoi v "monternuiu"], i. e. we are printing in photogravure, as with magazines; type and photo only have value as montage elements, with which the printed image is achieved through the photochemical process. With this, accentuations are achieved not only by the size of the typeface, but also by the degree of its blackness.

We are approaching the book constructed like a film: plot, development, highpoints, dénouement.

We need greater inventiveness, independence, experimentation. We must encourage experiments, even when they appear very bold at first glance. New suggestions are rarely accepted by everyone immediately. In order to create the world's cheapest automobile, Ford spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on tests.

Every invention must be tested. For experiments a special printing plant would be necessary.